

What They Look For:  
Navigating A New Publishing World  
by  
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## Introduction

This project covers a myriad of topics, ranging from the new and emerging world of self-publishing to the relationship between the author and the reader in contemporary literature. I begin the research portion with a historical analysis of the publishing industry, moving from the integration of Penguin Classics and paperbacks into the American cultural lexicon after World War II into the mass digitization and corporatization marking the turn of the twenty-first century. The dissemination of and access to text steadily rises as literature heads into the contemporary moment, computer-based data and e-readers replacing physical, tangible paper and book covers. “Readers” now become “users” within a virtual landscape, and many feel detached from the text that they could once open and hold while others champion e-readers as the way forward for publishing. The second chapter discusses the rapid influx of self-published authors and novels in the past decade and the logistical, as well as cultural, advantages and disadvantages to a system that now rivals the traditional corporate publishing model. With such ease of access to online publishing, the readers of books become “history’s masters” within the role of writer, editor, *and* publisher of their own material. The third chapter concludes my research with a look at contemporary literature and its postmodernist conceptions of a desired lack of uniformity in genre or authorial entity that both support and further complicate the recent shift toward independent publishing and control. My final chapter reports on interviews I conduct with a diverse array of people involved in the publishing industry to gain their unique perspectives and advice on my own novel as I look forward toward my career as a writer. Throughout my research, I uncover some surprising aspects of the publishing industry itself as well as a deep look into my own journey as an aspiring author as I talk with a self-published author, a

traditionally published professor, and an editor for a large publishing conglomerate in Simon & Schuster.

Publishing encompasses much more than an affirmed covenant between the reader and the author: it involves a whole assortment of editorial, critical, and economic conditions that highlight how intricate the inner workings of written material can be. Yes, I discuss the integral and ever-morphing reader-writer relationship at length here, yet echoes of the surrounding cultural and societal implications behind such a changing dynamic fascinate me, and I saw an exploration into many of those moving pieces as necessary. Reading and writing have not only blended into one another, but, paradoxically, they have also occupied entirely separate cultural spaces to be further identified and analyzed. The current literary moment places the reader at the top of the proverbial hierarchy with entry to all steps of the publishing process at the push of a button, while the “author” label exists as a narrative voice silently floating among a sea of others, flowing within a modern cultural bloodstream marked by diversity and a rebellion against set labels and genres. Such a new and uncharted domain attracts and excites many, while others grow wary of its nebulosity. Through my research and interviews, I aim to successfully traverse and conceptualize such elaborate terrain, tracing the arc of literature and publishing while contemplating my own writing along the way.

## Chapter 1: A Brief History

Written material has been published for more than five thousand years, and, over the course of human history, this process has seen countless changes. The throes of technological innovation catapulted the American publishing industry into previously uncharted territory during the twentieth century, driving the gradual development from widely distributed and easily marketed Penguin books to the emergence of e-books in the mid-2000's. In order to effectively track such strides in the sharing of information through written works, we must first dissect the various ways in which critical attitudes toward the dissemination of publishing rights, literary marketing, and the general landscape of literary distribution have advanced alongside technology over time. The mass corporatization of the novel and an emphasis on the widespread diffusion of text throughout the globe precludes a similar circumstance of the digital revolution and outlines a constant trend within the growth of publishing throughout the last one hundred years: the process of publishing and the modes by which corporations and individuals produce written works always become cheaper, faster, and easier to access as time moves forward

Over a century ago, issues concerning the globalization of the international book market and new modes of translation across continents drew the attention of such notable authors as Mark Twain, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Joseph Conrad, and Walt Whitman. Though the 1880's seem distant from our world today, clear parallels between the past and the present emerge when discussing the debate between those who wish to limit the dissemination of publishing capabilities and those who desire to expand it even further. According to Eva Hemmungs Wirtén's "Globalization" chapter of *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Book* (which holds a bevy of information regarding the development of publishing technology within the United States), "the views on international copyright were divided in the United States. Those in favour

spoke of fairness and emphasized how cheap imports hurt the chances of developing an American literature and contributed to the import of foreign ideas. Those against...championed the dissemination of texts to the benefit of the reading public” (Raven 352). Translation and copyright across countries still act as key vehicles by which authors can increase the range of their readership on a global scale, yet even before the widespread commercialization of publishing in America, prominent authors and literary critics within the age of naturalism and realism debated over the increased distribution of their books. Many viewed the globalization of the literary market as potential corruption of a somewhat unified “American literature” or “literary culture” during this period in history, the crossing of national lines alienating prominent authors from their original works. Nevertheless, this copyright movement drove forward into the first twenty years of the twentieth century and gave writers a chance to reach broader audiences than ever before. Wirten later identifies another anomaly that would establish the conglomeration of corporate entities within the publishing world and ensure rapid economic success for both publishers and authors.

Penguin Books was originally founded in London in 1935 by Sir Allen Lane and his brothers, their company taking off due in part to the previously instituted international copyright laws half a century prior. However, their model for the publication of written works encompassed a different set of fundamental ideas that would forever change the production of literature. After World War II (during which Penguin gained some notoriety for their popular pamphlets on rationing food), the Penguin Classics series offered consumers a diverse array of accessible and recognizable titles, ranging from those within the traditional literary canon to popular bestsellers of the time. Wirten extrapolates, “Costing no more than a packet of cigarettes, cheap Penguins were available outside traditional retailers, and cleverly designed to ensure

instant recognition by readers. What had arrived was a branded book. The colour-coded Penguin or Puffin or Pelican immediately told consumers that they could expect very affordable, high-quality content” (Raven 354). The accurately coined “paperback revolution” embodied the aim of the original Penguin company - a never-before-seen breakthrough in mass consumerism for publishing that made international copyright laws look miniscule. Because of such an innovation, the paperback itself became “ubiquitous,” the “branded book” providing authors, editors, and publishers with greater numbers of individual sales than previously believed possible. Now, the pervading “literary culture” championed by American authors took the form of bright colors and simple printing designs known within the United Kingdom and United States alike. Not only had the publishing experience shifted dramatically, but the perception of the industry itself “transformed.” Once regarded as a small, content-oriented practice, the publication of novels ballooned into an economically commodified and marketable international network.

Though a few overseas branches of firms like Longman and Macmillan cropped up around the turn of the twentieth century, the rapidly expanding global market took hold of the publishing industry in the 1940’s and never relented. Now a facet of the intricate “corporate sector” and “adopt[ing] the practices of publicity and marketing characteristic of monopoly capital,” publishing houses like Penguin exchanged their “love of books” for their “love of profits” (Raven 355). Many economists conceived of the book as a “highly adaptable commodity,” and as the Penguin Classics series became more popular within the general American consciousness, the need for the company to expand beyond their modest inception arose. From the 1960’s to the early twenty-first century, many publishers within the United States undertook a gradual process of corporatization, benefitting from their newly defined capitalistic model and the proven profitability of accessible and cheap books of the paperback

revolution. According to Wirten, “the buying of textbook publishers by companies with little or no previous experience of publishing” initiated the integration of publishers into “larger media conglomerates,” continuing with “media corporations buying independent trade publishers,” and concluding with the “buying-out of competitors and, increasingly, the buying-into of the supply chains of the full-blown media corporations” (Raven 356). Media conglomerates are traditionally defined as larger organizations containing companies with mass media campaigns, publishing houses overseeing the marketing and distribution of major titles under their legal and administrative “umbrellas.” Such an enormous shift within the integral structure of the publishing industry (turning family-run businesses into huge transnational corporate entities) completely altered the public’s, as well as the author’s, conception of the book. Just as international copyright laws and translation divided authors sixty years prior, this marketing and media boom prompted a wide amalgamation of responses, including science fiction writer Michael Moorcock, who stated, “The book trade invented literary prizes to stimulate sales, not to reward merit” (Goodreads.com). His sentiment echoed the disillusionment experienced by many figures within the literary world, again casting the once collective and unified conception of “literary culture” into shadow. In Penguin’s inaugural year of 1935, philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin also expressed his concern that “mass market and commodity capitalism would sever the ties between the author and the public, mapping out a new territory in which the reader was about to turn into writer at any moment” (Raven 360). Not only did this prediction come to fruition over twenty-five years later, but the blending of the reader and the writer outlines an important evolution in the complex publishing scene we see today, originating from corporatization, rapid technological advancement, and the ever-increasing dissemination of access to the publication of written works.



The 1960's not only saw a massive overhaul of the publishing industry, but a new machine began to redefine the book itself and even further crystallized Walter Benjamin's original hypothesis. The Xerox photocopier allowed anyone to become the author and publisher of written documents, and the divide between the capabilities of the reader and of the disseminator of information shrunk considerably when one could circumvent the "traditional functions of print culture" (Raven 361). In several ways, the photocopier itself acted as a precursor to the age of digitization ranging from the 1980's to the mid-1990's. By then, an exciting and revolutionary technology forever altered the public's level of access to information and books: the Internet. Accompanied by UNESCO's push for looser international copyright laws in 1995 and other Open Access movements like Access to Knowledge (A2K), the Internet fostered a higher tier for the dissemination of text. As the result of yet another publishing upheaval in the twentieth century, the issues associated with international copyright conventions and modes of translation in the 1880's gained relevance once again. During the mid-2000's, when a program in which one could search for and access books already listed within the public domain hit the market called Google Search Book, "Librarians and academics pointed out the dangers of having such massive digitization being controlled by a corporation and argued that the whole project reeked of cultural imperialism" (Raven 368). Many American authors' ire today, too, lies in China, the biggest pirate of copyrighted information in the world. Such instances appear as recurring problems emanating from the interconnectedness between the invention of new technology and the corporatization and "media machinery" of the publishing industry. Just as critics of the original copyright movement feared the implications of globalization and authors' separation from their original works, the phrase "cultural imperialism" derives itself from the treating of books as marketable commodities, an approach now adopted by major

corporate players in the digitization age. Though we will discuss the exact definition of literary “culture” at length later within this project, many believe the “culture” of authorship is threatened by this combination of media conglomerates and the Internet. By the 2000’s, the spread of books due to their conversion into accessible online formats reached a previously unfathomable height, while, in 2015, Penguin Random House acted as the “corporate umbrella for over a hundred publishing houses in nineteen countries” (Raven 356). Some view digitized “Open Access” and its integral relationship to corporate globalization as a threat to the “culture,” while others see such movements as worthy causes in bridging the “digital gap” in informational knowledge between socio-economic classes. Despite such a contrast in perspective, the imminent reality that publishing itself has undertaken multiple extensive reformations within the past one hundred years and access to books is ubiquitous prompts fascinating questions regarding where the industry stands in relation to technology today and how one can navigate such a dynamic environment.

The final section of *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Book* titled “Books Transformed” by Jeffrey Schnapp covers a wide range of topics concerning technology’s interrelation with the publishing industry and contemporary book formats, designs, and modes of reader interaction. Within this analysis appears another bold yet accurate prediction for the future of books in French symbolist poet Stephane Mallarme, who saw the first arrival of the newspaper as “a phantasmagoria composed of fleeting fast-paced illusions produced by means of state-of-the-art electrified media machinery” (Raven 371). History once again asserts a recurring phenomenon, digitization marred by a similar type of criticism - one that attacks the nature of its “media machinery,” like the newspaper over 140 years ago. Schnapp depicts the transformation from the formatting of words on paper to electronic devices like tablets and smartphones,

matching America's changing consumption of books in the twenty-first century. He cites a modern reliance on "simultaneity, accelerated cadences, and overabundance of distractions and sensory stimuli," later characterizing a contemporary wave of literary appreciation, with the ultimate objective "to bridge the gulf between literature and life through a faster, freer, more compact, and attention-grabbing mode of bookish communication, a mode better suited to the requirements of the era of popular sovereignty—an era in which the multitudes were history's masters" (Raven 379). James L. Van Roekel echoes this sentiment even before the widespread popularity of tablets and reading devices in his 2003 book review for *Digital Creativity: Techniques for Digital Media and the Internet* by Bruce Wands, in which he denotes the novel as a tool for creators looking to pave their own ways through digital media and states, "With new media, broadcasters think in terms of user, as opposed to viewer, while still maintaining the concept of mass audience." He further extrapolates, "[New media forms] give content creators a varied and increasingly simplified set of tools to enable content to reach a much wider audience," yet clarifies that "many who are broadcasting this content, primarily over the Internet, may not have formal training" (Van Roekel 357). Here, both Schnapp and Van Roekel agree with Walter Benjamin's assessment of the blending of "writer" and "reader" or "user" due to the digitization of the "media machinery" by which works are published and consumed online. "History's masters," who proved to be the buyers of easily accessible paperbacks and mass-marketed literary material in the 1940's, have now shifted into the digital sphere, becoming interactive consumer "users" as opposed to the more passive consumer "readers" or "viewers." The "popular sovereignty" described here ushered in a whole new market of publishing, the seismic cultural shift running alongside the progression of paperbacks and the growing industry of corporate publishing magnates. The "sovereignty" with which "users" access information at the

touch of a finger appears greater and wider than in any other time throughout the history of publishing because of such groundbreaking technological advancements, especially in the field of media and marketed publishing. The digitization of written works could be described as the late stage of that rapid development in publishing dissemination, the digital and media-based “user” becoming almost synonymous with the “creator” of such progressive technological achievements because of Van Roekel’s outline of the remarkable ease with which people can create, publish, and automatically spread their work online.

Schnapp, within a few of his closing statements regarding where digital publishing and dissemination is now as well as its trajectory into the future, highlights some fundamental characteristics of the the Internet and technological age that shed more light on his and Mallarme’s aforementioned conceptions of what the average consumer (or user) desires today. Schnapp states that consumers “read strategically, equating specific genres of textual information with specific devices: long forms with e-readers; news and messaging with smartphones; magazines with tablets.” He then explores the still ongoing debate between those who bolster the progression of books into the digital world as a positive development in the publishing industry and those who reject the digitization (and, therefore, dissemination and globalization) of books and wish to return to the tangibility of traditional, “analogue” books. Schnapp presents the general implications behind the latter’s pushback against technological publishing: “even as he travels the world with eyes fastened upon his cellphone, homo digitalis harbours longings for more encompassing sensory experiences. Books that are not mere neutral conveyors of data; books that deliver local, situated experiences of touch, smell, and sight; books that are oversize or undersize, too slick or too rough” (Raven 390-1). The digital revolution attracts dissension from people looking to keep a “local” and “sensory” grasp on their reading experiences, just as

realist and naturalist authors of the 1880's fought the globalization of publishing rights and opposers of the paperback revolution resisted the massive corporatization and "cultural" disintegration of publishing houses. Such striking parallels display that no matter the specific circumstances of the medium through which it progresses, expansion of publishing capabilities runs constant through time. The rapid development of technology experienced within the past twenty years, especially within the field of online publishing and e-readership, even further augments the great strides in the growth of the publishing industry seen after World War II and into the 1960's. Now, dissemination of written works and information is at an all-time high, publishing innovations stacking onto one another and creating an exponential swell of readerly, authorial, editorial, and critical communities and niches.

International copyright, Penguin's paperback revolution, and the digitization of books in the Internet age all present major turning points within the grand arc of the story of publishing advancement that spans three centuries, yet what does this mean for the publishing landscape today and in what particular ways has the Internet fundamentally shifted this scene for readers and writers? In order to expound upon the "communities" and "niches" that arose from individuals' love for literature and storytelling, we must discuss one phenomenon that epitomizes the changes in literary "culture" taking the Internet by storm within the past decade: online self-publishing. Within our analysis, ties between the chronicled aspects of publishing progression and questions regarding the direction of the "culture" of published writing become clearer when focusing on the contributing factors to the widespread and astonishing success of self-publishing during the growth of the e-book market. Schnapp summarizes this trend when he states, "The very data trails created by this buzz of readerly and writerly activity become an integral feature of the lives of books, hovering about them in something that might be described as a socio-

electrostatic field” (Raven 390). The “socio-electrostatic field” owes its generation to the consequential shifts in economic evolution and cultural evaluation outlined here.

Commodification, corporatization, and digitization of original literature create a reconstructed publishing industry with unprecedented, easy access to information and online tools for self-publishing split billions of different ways across the globe. The new normal transcends publishing itself, leaving a confounding, ever-decreasing distinction between the success of mass-market publishing conglomerates and self-published, individual authors.

## Chapter 2: Digital Evolution and Self-Publishing

*The Book Business: What Everyone Needs to Know* by Mike Shatzkin and Robert P.

Riger provides detailed insight into the economic side of publishing and why the Internet and technological advancements have completely shifted the publishing industry within the last thirteen years. Riger and Shatzkin outline the traditional publishing routes for authors and the growing avenues through which creators can disseminate their work within particular literary markets. From the corporate development of Penguin Random House to Amazon and its complete domination over the online self-publishing scene, this book provides a new perspective on why, from an economic and practical standpoint, digital self-publishing and bookmaking have become incredibly popular today. It also presents key background for the development of a peculiar form of niche online platforms that cater to specific audiences while highlighting important discrepancies between “traditional” and “non-traditional” publishing. The new landscape unfolds as complex and interconnected webs of relationships between writers, authors, critics, and publishers cover the entirety of the modern publishing industry, casting it into an ever-increasingly fragmented and nebulous future.

*The Book Business* first describes the many choices that authors make when deciding their *traditional* contractual relationships with publishers, editors, and book vendors or stores. Though online corporations and self-publishing mediums like Amazon have shifted the publishing market dynamic, several constants still hold true within the publishing process. An author usually acquires an agent incentivized through commission to promote their individual manuscripts to publishing houses, then an editor acts as “the project’s advocate within the house: first to get it signed and then to get it properly published.” Once officially signed and published, the standard procedure for a first-time fiction author follows: “perhaps the entire manuscript—

would be required upfront for a house to make a purchase commitment so that they can see how strong the writing is throughout, how characters develop, and where the story goes” (Riger and Shatzkin 30-1). Larger publishing companies pay higher royalties (or the amount of money the company gives to the author for each sale of their book) than smaller houses, and, due to the invention of the on-demand ink-jet printer, printing houses can print titles according to the demand of that particular market with little waste of unused copies, offsetting the higher amount of money required to print each book (or unit cost). One of the major, revolutionary effects of the Internet on publishing companies comes in their recent ability to conduct meticulous market or “audience” research on modern consumers of literature. Riger and Shatzkin explain, “For a couple hundred dollars in effort, publishers can get very useful data on audience sizing and segmentation, how accessible these potential buyers are online, and what search terms and hash tags you’d have to optimize to reach the audience” (Riger and Shatzkin 52). Publishers, through certain methods of digital marketing investigation, can accurately predict where to find their target consumers and what types of books those consumers search for and purchase on the Internet. This breakthrough in digital technology helps publishers cultivate direct, intimate relationships with their buyers and allows their marketing departments to continue fine-tuning data-based branding while attracting readers to new titles they enjoy. Such technologically sophisticated practices mark an unprecedented intersection between media-driven corporate publishing entities and the tracking system inherent within the digitization of market information. Economic and coordinational synergy between new technology and media conglomerates both online and within the publishing industry has reached an all-time height. Additionally, through such exhaustive online inquiry, publishers identify a curious yet useful



trend in literary consumption that intertwines with the growing rates of self-publishing across the Internet: genre-based micro-groups.

Riger and Shatzkin subsequently expand upon their assertion regarding “reader-based niche markets and communities,” stating that “For the first time, publishers are looking at market divisions that are more granular than the books they publish” (Riger and Shatzkin 55). They connect these increasingly specific niches with the rise of e-books and the reality of the current industry: “not only are books more diverse in number; they are also more diverse in topic and character, and they are created for many different reasons... [Jeff Bezos] saw that the vast selection that might appeal to any consumer constituted a severe challenge to stores with limited shelf and presentation space” (Riger and Shatzkin 24). Consumer-operated “search tools” using online databases and catalogues for books (as opposed to the previously mentioned research algorithms in the hands of larger publishing corporations) revolutionized the shopping experience and undermined the traditional modes of in-store browsing, the reader now embodying the title of “history’s masters” within the digital realm. When e-books first came onto the publishing scene, “consumer publishing business b[ore] most resemblance to the paperback revolution and its impact on mainstream editions... and the ability to increasingly source and deliver books to specific audience niches” (Riger and Shatzkin 73). The authors discuss the reader-based niche markets and communities that appeared online as a direct result of this e-book explosion, allowing Amazon to release the Kindle in November of 2007. Their comparison of this rapid progression to that of the paperback revolution is unsurprising within the context of this project because of the numerous parallels already observed between the commodified book boom of the 1940’s and 1960’s and the digitization of written information beginning in the 1990’s. However, instead of viewing books as cheap, color-coded commodities found in

bookstores and libraries throughout the country, the new generation of Kindle and e-book users consider books as transferable, accessible bits of data to be browsed for and purchased exclusively online.

Two peculiar examples of the merging between traditional publishing and new media technology both involve libraries and the roles they play for independent authors looking to use online creative writing tools and more familiar modes of spreading their work simultaneously. A chapter from Bob Nardini's book *Self-Publishing and Collection Development: Opportunities and Challenges for Libraries* discusses the complex relationship between authors, publishers, vendors, and libraries and the potential hurdles that present themselves when considering libraries' acquisition of self-published works. He pinpoints the issues that traditional vendors face in adapting to online self-publishing tools like Amazon and Ingram because of their lack of sophistication in "vetting" titles for quality. Nardini states, "Vendors would need to develop new routines to monitor Web sites and blogs and to constantly find new ones, to follow certain review sources, to keep up with Twitter and Facebook and Pinterest, perhaps to develop relationships with authors and author groups." The author later adds, "The trick for vendors will be to prevent normal operating procedures, and traditional attitudes, from getting in the way of good self-published books coming to the attention of their customers" (Nardini 69-77). In independent writers' attempts to market to local libraries and network across reading audiences, the old world of publishing emerges in the form of library vendors, which summarizes the ever-present gap between "print culture" and the underpinnings of digitization. Within the same book, author Tom Bruno presents some potential solutions for libraries assessing this digital dilemma. As a self-published author, he recalls the rise of e-books in the mid-2000's, claiming that "when Amazon, Smashwords, and other platforms for self-publication became available, there was a critical mass

of authors out there who were just disenchanted enough with the traditional publishing scene that taking the self-publishing plunge no longer seemed to be an act of artistic suicide.” In his prognosis for the issues plaguing library vendors looking to evaluate self-published titles, he surmises, “once an author has self-published his or her work on a platform such as Smashwords, the book would then be vetted by a group of volunteer ‘citizen acquisition editors,’ who would follow established guidelines for editing and content to add the book to the library catalog.” To Bruno, it is important to “build new systems of publisher relations, acquisitions, and workflow... it is incumbent on librarians to begin to think about how they will collect, curate, and support a future library ecosystem of independent and self-published authors, as this future has already arrived.” (Bruno 127-38). Nardini and Bruno both agree that libraries present avenues for self-publishing that utilize creative independence and localized “print culture” more effectively through modernization and a larger workforce for vendors. If the paperback revolution produced a bevy of literary consumers searching for particular titles by genre or author, then the “Amazon age” allows book perusers to create their *own* customized libraries of niche titles they can buy and read at the click of a button (to the chagrin of many aforementioned traditional libraries). Our focus in niche reading and authorial communities pairs well with the growing market of online self-publishing, but in order to establish what that market entails, we must first explore its origins as a result of the aforementioned e-book boom.

The age of the digital book within the last decade, according to *The Book Business*, mirrors more than one essential facet of the paperback revolution. Though both the e-book and the paperback revolution impacted the expansion of markets to a wider swath of consumers with specific, genre-based inclinations, they also fundamentally altered the pricing and royalties of titles. Because of lower prices for paperback titles after World War II, buying power fell into the

hands of the average consumer. Similarly, unlike Palm, MS Reader, and Sony, Amazon started selling Kindle e-books at a sharp discount from traditionally printed books, their competitive pricing model one of the main reasons for their early domination over the market. The company bought e-books at fifty percent of the traditional publisher-suggested price, thus cutting the price significantly for Amazon's growing market of e-book consumers. Independent authors also began flooding the competitive landscape for e-book publishing, even undercutting Amazon's prices at as low as ninety-nine cents per title. As a result of such aggressive price discounting, the large-scale, traditional publishing corporations' share of the e-book market appears to have diminished since agency pricing began (Riger and Shatzkin 87). Amazon's ambitious (and successful) drive to provide authors and readers alike with cheaper modes of online publishing through the digital development of e-books and "search tools" like Kindle, in addition to the increasing number of independent (or "indie") authors willing to publish their works digitally at a fraction of the traditional cost, highlights one major distinction between the paperback revolution and the e-book boom. At first glance, especially when e-books were first introduced into the marketplace, one might assume that the widespread popularity of online publishing products because of the dissemination of information on the Internet serves as a direct response to the corporate structures that have controlled the publishing industry since the 1960's. Though many "indie" authors and small digital publishers may uphold this sentiment, it became clear that as Amazon grew into a self-publishing magnate dominating the global e-book market and acting as the "only commercially significant e-book subscription service," (Riger and Shatzkin 102) those same conglomerates like Penguin and Hachette negotiated with Amazon for better marketing and audience attention. Amazon presents an interesting internal dichotomy as both a "disruptive force" that creates opportunities for "non-traditional," self-publishing authors and yet

another medium through which corporations can advertise their titles to an even wider range of readers on the Internet. However, one certainty within Amazon's publishing model lies in its utter supremacy over the online e-book scene and the influence it holds within the so-called "self-publishing revolution."

Because of the exponential growth of the e-book market within the past decade, there are several key economic and administrative indicators that depict the level of volume self-publishing produces, even in the beginning of the Amazon Kindle craze. With almost a complete monopoly over the "nontraditional" publishing market (which includes all the books that do not fall under the "umbrellas" of the large corporations), Amazon kickstarted a massive influx of independent titles because their system made it "economically feasible for self-published authors to sell their books directly to a global audience" (Riger and Shatzkin 104). This method of mass digital production on a global scale, however, was hardly unintended by Amazon as a corporate entity; their entire model relied upon the "maximum possible variety of offerings, expressed both as numbers of titles and as numbers of formats for each title" (Riger and Shatzkin 116). The Kindle served as just the beginning for the e-book explosion seen today, and the fact that the system itself was specifically designed to produce all "possible variety of offerings" encapsulates the ultimate aim of the independent publishing industry and its guiding, ever-present conglomerate in Amazon. Dissemination of access to and publication of written information, particularly in the form of original literary creations, reached an even higher pinnacle with the growth of the e-book market. However, many digital books possess no physical tracking marker through supply chains, and online retailers like Amazon, Apple, and Barnes & Noble do not require ISBN numbers for those titles. As a direct result, the invention of the mass market e-book dismantled the "previous industry methodology for estimating the unreported portion of all book

sales.” Riger and Shatzkin go on to explain that “By 2016, the industry’s ability to track digital book sales had degenerated to the point where nearly two-thirds of consumer e-book purchases in the US weren’t being counted in industry statistics... the now-hundreds of millions of annual e-book sales by self-published authors and other nontraditional providers... were going unreported” (Riger and Shatzkin 104-5). The lack of statistical accuracy during this period in the boom of self-publishing capability suggests that self-published and “nontraditional” novels took up an even larger percentage of the global publishing market than initially estimated. This may imply that the potential for independent authors and publishers to rival corporate strongholds existing for at least forty years longer than the publicly accessible Internet could be greater than first believed, which would shift the very nature of publishing itself and speak volumes about the new extent of control in the hands of the independent authors and their readers.

As the result of independent writers and authors severely undercutting traditional publishers’ prices for books alongside Amazon’s efforts to provide as many services for those authors as possible, an online market with swaths of self-published titles that people were neither capable of quantifying nor critically evaluating sprang up. The market for self-publishing, due to technological advancements and changes in the publishing process, grew even further from there. Amateur authors could now write their material, procure an editor from one of the e-book platforms at a fraction of the cost provided by a traditional publishing company, and digitally post their titles for wide consumption in no time. Because there were multiple other electronic platforms hitting the scene, and companies like Ingram allowed the distribution of self-published titles across both digital and print booksellers throughout the globe, “hundreds of thousands of titles a year were being made available through that path, bypassing the entire publishing establishment” (Riger and Shatzkin 123). Later, once this industry had already expanded

exponentially, closer attention was paid to its underpinning qualities that allowed better statistical analysis of the market as a whole. The United States nontraditional consumer book market sold 300 million units and hit \$1.25 billion in sales in 2016, and a “staggering” fifty-four percent of “all trade e-book sales units could be published by ‘nontraditional’ sources within five years of the nontraditional sources’ first real appearance in sales tracking” (Riger and Shatzkin 146). In other words, the relative rapidity for the sales of nontraditional titles after first being introduced into the market by “nontraditional sources” like CreateSpace and Amazon’s Kindle Direct Publishing was unrivaled on such a massive scale. Additionally, within the trade book market, including the “traditional” sources of publishing capabilities like Penguin/Random House, nontraditional titles made up almost a quarter of *total sales*. That number signifies an immense and still growing portion of book sales in the world, and solidifies self-publishing as an incontrovertible economic and literary force within the publishing industry. The inner workings of “indie” publishing as well as the staggering amount of unit sales produced within a newly catalogued and recorded five-year span signifies a great deal about the typical e-book “user” today and the ever-increasing level of control that individual authors possess over the publishing process.

To further express the monumental development in self-publishing due to online publication and marketing tools that companies like Amazon and Ingram have established within the last decade and the potential for an even bigger share of the previously unrecorded “indie” market, Riger and Shatzkin delve into more specific instances of ease and accessibility for both writers and readers in the digital landscape. Though independent and online titles take up the aforementioned quarter of total American book sales, that statistic gives only a general insight into the massive capital revenue for the digital industry within that category. The astonishing

figure of 300 million copies sold and \$1.25 billion in overall revenue for “nontraditional” titles in 2016 paints an intriguing picture of the readerly dedication to the “self-publishing revolution” and the intuitive mode of publishing that Amazon offers. The low cost of production, editing, marketing, and spread across online readers as well as the collaboration between Ingram and Amazon to give, for example, “a one-book indie publisher... a full suite of services: printing, calling on all the bookstores, and fulfillment of print and digital content around the world” (Riger and Shatzkin 162) makes self-publishing almost ubiquitous, especially compared to the arduous publishing process of the twentieth century. With an ever-growing Ingram securing Amazon’s untread sections of the global marketplace, the Internet has produced a redesigned corporate publishing entity - one that places creative freedom, modes of advertisement, and royalties for each copy sold (Amazon’s reaching up to seventy percent) in the hands of the author. With such control over the publishing of their original work, authors are now capable of cultivating followings of digital e-book readers with meticulous literary tastes and interests.

The original aim of Jeff Bezos in the diversity and number of titles sold within Amazon’s shop encapsulates the remarkable granularity with which readers consume their online books on such an unparalleled scale. The simplicity of creating, editing, publishing, and disseminating books today gives audiences the freedom to choose from hundreds of thousands of novels each year and, as a direct consequence of such freedom, those who gravitate toward particular authors and genres can build whole blogs, forums, and review sites around their written material of interest or for further discussion. Kindle Direct Publishing’s motto, “Take Control with Self-Publishing” echoes Van Roekel’s comments on the “multitudes” becoming “history’s masters.” The idea that writer and reader became almost synonymous with one another during the consumer-based commodification of the book now takes shape in the form of niche communities



and markets directly offering literary discussion and detailed feedback for the author. Such an immediate online link joining writers with their reading constituents creates tiny microcosms of genre- and author-based fascination erupting throughout the Internet, in which authors “taking control” of their work translates into the hyper-individuation of publisher-consumer relations. Riger and Shatzkin summarize this phenomenon: “Smaller publishers have always tended to specialize by subject, which is an inherent advantage in the age of internet marketing. Direct consumer relationships theoretically make it possible to expand beyond books to sell other things to the same audiences” (Riger and Shatzkin 166). The fact that those “other things” sold to niche consumers do not include original literary material epitomizes “Internet marketing” and the new avenues through which online corporations like Amazon continue to grow their share over the online publishing industry. Yes, these “direct consumer relationships” can benefit independent authors and publishers by connecting them to their reading base, but the issues regarding the corporatization and media conglomeration of the publishing industry presented by critics citing a “cultural imperialism” occurring within the literary world still remain. Amazon allows historically easy access to publishing tools thanks to the digitization of written information, but does this level of dissemination and division in niche readership, all under an overarching and powerful Amazon, signify the dangerous combination of corporate control and globalization foreseen by authors and critics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? One could make arguments both for Amazon’s catalyzation of the self-publishing industry as a positive force for otherwise unheard creative voices and its domination over the online publishing scene as detrimental to the values of individualism and artistic autonomy it claims to endorse.

The mass market of book publishing from the “Big Five” corporations, alongside the growth of e-books and online self-publishing, has created a unique dynamic between authors,

publishers, and readers. Here, Riger and Shatzkin pinpoint an essential analysis of the implications behind this new market and these figures: “consumers spent real money—to buy and read untold pages of books written and uploaded directly into the cultural bloodstream with no judgment, mediation, review, or pitching by the traditional keepers of the gate” (Riger and Shatzkin 149). Within a cultural context of such huge numbers for self-publishing, readers seem to desire titles that do not follow the usual and predetermined avenues of publication, and the “cultural bloodstream,” as well as the overall economy of the publishing industry, no longer requires higher critical evaluation of books. Readers “review” the titles themselves, cutting out what is now seen as the proverbial middleman in scholarly literary analysis. A natural progression from this idea appears in the distinction between the practical, numerical and economic shift in the publishing industry due to technological development and the cultural impact that such dissemination of self-publishing and lack of evaluative mediation has on contemporary literature. Some, including prominent economists within the book market, view the “mushrooming” of self-publishing as advantageous for unvetted authors who want to “get immediate feedback from this new pool of consumers with a demonstrated willingness to sample and then read ‘unbranded’ material. The filter from the publishing elite, and from booksellers is gone” (Riger and Shatzkin 150). However, on the opposite end of the discussion, the lack of evaluation could prove to be detrimental to the overall cultural “bloodstream” traditionally fueled by highly regarded and critically acclaimed titles. With no system in place, such oversaturation and decentralization of the publishing market may, in fact, hurt authors who feel that the “deck is stacked against them.” For example, the romance genre has disproportionately captured the self-publishing scene, as opposed to titles categorized into African American literature. Romance sold one hundred and fifty-six million copies compared to African American literature’s twelve

million, and e-books comprised ninety-six percent of those romance copies (fifty-five percent of which were “independently published”) (Riger and Shatzkin 151). With such a huge discrepancy between two conventionally disparate genres in terms of contemporary critical appeal, one wonders whether the overwhelming influence in unit sales from Internet-based and self-published titles takes valuable money and attention away from genres like African American studies and multiculturalism. If big-name, traditional publishers do take a chance on one of these “indie” authors, they see great promise in their ability to craft stories that will sell well to the mass market, but what about the vast majority of authors lost within the mountainous “slush” of the Internet?

Scholars Simon Carolan and Christine Evaine, in their article for *Publishing Research Quarterly* titled “Self-publishing: Opportunities and Threats in a New Age of Mass Culture,” cite the “democratisation of information” as a direct result of globalized digitization, stating, “Until the self-publishing industry develops professionally recognisable labels of distinction, the readers will remain in the dark” (Carolan and Evaine 292). History’s turn from authors, publishers, and critics to readers encompasses all facets of the traditional reading experience, including criticism in online forums and marketplaces. Schnapp from *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Book* notes that “Vast virtual communities of readers assemble routinely on sites such as Goodreads.com to share opinions and suggested further readings. Buyer ratings systems encroach upon many of the functions once performed by critics and bestseller lists” (Raven 389). The widespread dissemination of the wants of readers and genre-based literary consumption due to the Internet’s ability to spread digital information easily across niche communities ensures that the author-reader relationship is so individualized that the two have merged within the contemporary landscape. This complex dynamic can create a digitized literary landscape in

which the quality of writing content is reduced in order to serve the genre-happy masses of readers-turned-authors. In other words, inaccuracy regarding not only the *quantity* of “indie” books published each year, but also the *quality* of those titles, form a nebulous system whose economic and literary development over the former half of the 2010’s proceeded largely unchecked. The digital landscape now encounters a similar dilemma to that of the traditional libraries and their vendors when attempting to cater to self-published writers: how can a balance be achieved between the allure of autonomous artistic independence and the reality of the overall publishing industry as an economically controlled entity dictated by the literary value and mass appeal of a “filtered” novel? The immense power of the Internet may play an important role in the answer to this question. With so many self-published, unscrutinized books and compartmentalized subjects of readerly interest floating around the digital sphere, any previously conceived cultural or academic standard for evaluation disintegrates within a traditional critical context. In their aforementioned article for *Publishing Research Quarterly*, Simon Carolan and Christine Evaine describe this anxiety within writers and readers: “Faced with the oceans of books that are available, the actors of the publishing process, including the readers, are finding it increasingly difficult to find their way” (Carolan and Evaine 286). Without critical networks of evaluation, authors’ literary brilliance is lost amongst the hordes of romantic genre fiction. The cultural framework of literature itself has been forever changed by the new wave of e-books and self-published, unfiltered titles.

Such a proverbial disruption within the history of publication created by Amazon and the rise of the e-book presents both an oversaturated digital void of unvetted titles and an opportunity for unique, innovative voices and experiences in literary excellence to flourish and grow within “print culture” and “Internet culture.” Renowned literary critic Aarthi Vadde, like

Bruno, Roedel, Riger, and Shatzkin, states that self-published authors can “game the system” through such pleasure-driven “popular artifacts as the blog, fan fiction, poetry, tribute videos, or sampled musical compositions” by “exert[ing] transformative pressure on august institutions of literature, from the publishing house to professional authorship to reviewing culture” (Vadde 27). The specialization of genre readership, along with all the devices listed in Vadde’s analysis, gives the new online market even greater agency within publishing. Blogs and fan fiction act as exemplary archetypes for the kind of power that stems from the new “culture” - not the purely literary one depicted by realist and naturalist authors in the first half of the twentieth century, but the fluid, self-governing one of online forums, chatrooms, and feedback sites. Yes, the “mass amateurization” and “democratization of information” seen within digital publishing appear disconcerting to those wishing to assess these multitudes of titles for their literary qualities and idiosyncrasies, but Vadde’s depiction of the “transformative pressure” that artists exert on “august institutions of literature” exemplifies what she defines as a digital “gift-giving” culture, in which online communities of self-published and freely shared art encourages users’ “common sense of purpose.” In the “gift-giving” economy, as opposed to the market economy (which she states threatens the delicate “erotic bonds” that give artists pleasure), “collective autonomy” leads to “expertise being distributed throughout the group rather than being concentrated in one individual,” in turn manifesting “digital spaces as sites of institutionalized and self-organized creativity” and fundamentally altering traditional authorial categories like “authorship, autonomy, the canon, the novel, and the work of art itself” (Vadde 31-6). Vadde postulates within her closing remarks that literary scholars must further understand and research the ways in which these self-published “creative works absorb audiences into their worlds and compel those audiences to extend those worlds in the form of fan fiction, unorthodox redistribution, and other

kinds of collaborative invention” (Vadde 48). The new system bases itself around community and a shared belief in the creative world as a feasible alternative gateway for artists to freely share their ideas without the influence of the “market economy” on a title’s popularity. Vadde, and many literary critics like her, argue that this “gift-giving” virtue within the “digital literary sphere” emerges as a major force apart from and, in some ways, acting against traditional publishers and their institutional stronghold on the publishing economy. Though these communities do not yet encompass the level of institutionalization and organization of corporate conglomerates (somewhat because of the hyper-niche and genre-based inviduation and subsequent scattering of readerly interest across the aforementioned blogs and forums), they represent an artistic ideal that rattles the long-established regime in place.

The future of authorship depends upon the model for self-publishing and the ways in which new and up-and-coming authors can develop their own work. The introduction of a kind of network in which the self-published titles are subjected to an array of scholarly analysis would aid the muddled and oversaturated online market and provide some clarity for readers, critics, and fellow authors alike in determining the titles with the most potential for literary significance and cultural influence. This critical screening system would not necessarily look for “higher-brow” literature amongst the slush pile, but it could find the writing that offers potential for quality works above the rest, or even a mass market, best-selling formula. For example, in *The Bestseller Code: Anatomy of the Blockbuster Novel* by Jodie Archer and Matthew L. Jockers, the authors devise a computer algorithm that, solely based off of the words in a novel, can predict whether it was a *New York Times* bestseller from the likes of Patterson, King, or Steele with mass appeal and popularity. Again, such a sophisticated and useful system beautifully displays the intercorrelation between advanced technology and easier access to scores of information and

distinctive titles. The unprecedented capabilities and sheer power of computer programs today alongside the globalized digitization of popular novels (mostly in the form of e-books) allow literary analysts like Archer and Jockers to further understand what makes certain books appeal to and reach wider audiences than others. However, a new but similarly structured and computer-based apparatus like the one depicted by Tom Bruno for digital library vendors would require separate, less creatively confining criteria for success and interest than Archer's and Jockers' model that transcend self-published genre or even fiction itself. Evaluating the content of an unfathomable number of growing self-published works online encapsulates a difficult endeavor, but the idea of filtering the expanse of the Internet into a network that not only sees value within Vadde's definition of the "market economy," but also appreciates the individual experiences and unique displays of artistic excellence that make contemporary literature so irresistible, seems increasingly possible as mechanizational innovation continues forward.

Before delving into the potential literary causes for the splintering of publishing capabilities and that fledgling industry's massive success through the Internet, some additional glimpses into the future for self-publishing present themselves in the form of media conglomerates discussed within the first chapter. Amazon's marketing ploy, the idea that "you are in control" when using one of their many easily operative and accessible online tools, attracts many independent artists willing to take the low-cost plunge into the industry itself. However, Amazon offers a multitude of different platforms for the same goal, and other tools produced by competing companies make up another section of this "gift-giving" marketplace. Many may draw parallels between the development of the self-produced online music industry and the self-publishing scene because of their similar shift of autonomous capability from larger corporate entities to individual artists and creators. The Internet serves as a catalyst for their respective

historically transformative periods of growth, but, in many ways, the music industry utilizes online niche markets and consumers much more strategically than independent networks of authors. Musicians and self-producers congregate onto SoundCloud and YouTube to share their content with listeners, which have become centralized hubs for up-and-coming singers, rappers, instrumentalists, and producers without major labels or contracts to disseminate their material to the public. Unlike self-publishers, these musicians can post onto well-known, marketable platforms that act as forms of social media to boost their brands and promote their unique musical styles. Though it does not necessarily have to be as much of an online powerhouse as YouTube or even SoundCloud, a popular and consolidated site that allows fellow self-published writers to freely share and market their content to one another would promote creative work to both a niche audience and a wider constituency of consumers who break down the barrier of genre-based readership. Such a site would contrast other platforms because it would solely focus on self-published titles (unlike Tumblr) and give authors the chance to post onto a kind of digital hub or focal point (unlike Amazon's many splintered and ambiguous service options like Kindle Direct Publishing). Other potential features for the platform could include comment sections for creators to share and review fellow artists' content as well as unobtrusive moderators. Such a system, though not addressing the major "filtering" problems for self-published titles, aids in attracting a diverse array of authors and marketing opportunities into a focused, central space while still allowing specific readership interests and genre factions to thrive. As I will reveal within my interviews, the integration of the Internet and its utility for publishers into the "print culture" first observed within the development of international copyright can, and, to some extent, already has, allowed for a kind of hybridization between both markets and their audiences; printed publishing and digitization (both orchestrated in technological development



throughout their respective histories) are not mutually exclusive, their shared “cultural” and social literary trajectories casting the vast and ever-changing tapestry of publishing.

The technological innovation of the Internet and its extraneous advertising avenues like social media have resulted in the development of e-books and the unprecedented online self-publishing industry now taking up a significant portion of the international publication market. Digitization, through Amazon’s rolling out of Kindle and other self-publishing tools, facilitated an extreme shift in power from large, traditional corporations to independent creators, publishers, and whole niche groups of genre- and author-based readership. Though this rapid development has dramatically changed the overall publishing landscape, and there are multiple possibilities for further growth in both the future scope of artistic autonomy and dynamic evaluation for self-publishing, the widespread dissemination of original, independent written works online is hardly spontaneous. The course of contemporary literature’s characterizing themes and trends corresponds with this dissemination, the Internet acting as a major technological boost for the postmodern movement - one that prioritizes individual experience over any overarching oneness in literary message. Within the next chapter, I will explore the underlying justification for this assertion and why modern literature mirrors the qualities and ultimate aims of the digital age.

### Chapter 3: Death of the One

The contemporary period of literary history (unofficially marked as 1970 to present-day) comprises so many genres and subgenres of interest and experience that the period itself is characterized by its diversity in titles and authors. Here, Amazon's directive for the "maximum possible variety of offerings, expressed both as numbers of titles and as numbers of formats for each title" holds true, but not solely within a technological or marketing context. The research guide *Contemporary Literature, 1970-Present* by Kathryn West and Linda Trinh Moser delves into the trends and surrounding cultural, critical, and socio-political circumstances that define the past 50 years of literature. Detailed descriptions of the movements and amalgamation of styles and topics throughout all of this postmodernist era parallel the shifts seen within the publishing industry, but West's and Moser's dissection of the exact anatomy of the "contemporary" mindset provides a sturdy, research-backed antecedent for this argument. *Contemporary Literature* stands as a deep well of factual evidence that supports many of my claims regarding the breakdown of particular linguistic barriers and dichotomies that circumscribed the traditional tenets of so-called literary "culture." In this section, I look to uncover the reasons behind the trends I have analyzed within my historical, political, and technological interpretations of the publishing industry's development over time. The overarching tendency for publishing to expand and propagate to larger bases of consumers, readers, and authors (whether in the form of global copyright, corporate conglomeration, or digitization of written information and means of self-publishing) begins with the contemporary study of literature and the intricate lenses through which this new wave perceives and rethinks the written narrative itself.

The contemporary period takes on a disparate form from its preceding literary movements in several key aspects, but its initial aesthetic quality comes in the variety of topic

and theme with which authors relay their respective stories. *Contemporary Literature* extensively covers common themes characterizing the period like African American Literature, postmodernism, feminism, the environment, globalization and multiculturalism, the Native American Renaissance, and antiwar Literature. Moser and West define the new wave by its “diversity, proliferation, and fluidity.” They go on to claim, “Works from 1970 onward represent many styles, themes, and modes of delivery. Voices from across the spectrum of American experience offer perspectives not often - or ever - heard in earlier eras of American literature” (Moser and West 3). These literary themes and genres splinter off in an indescribable number of directions, yet Moser and West provide a comprehensive list of just some of the fictional subgenres that these titles embody: “the thriller, the detective story, the myth saga, the science-fiction and speculative novel, fantasy, romance, the realistic psychological novel” (Moser and West 129-30) and so on. They claim that such multiplicity causes a certain difficulty in identifying any one genre as particularly “dominant,” yet a commonality between “new” titles of the past half century appears in authors’ heightened willingness to experiment with the previously conceived and established parameters for literature. Some examples Moser and West provide include the combining of two distinct fictional forms in novels like Richard Brautigan’s *The Hawkline Monster: A Gothic Western* (a 1974 narrative that plays with the blending of Southern Gothic and the Western) and the blurring of fiction and nonfiction like Philip Roth’s *My Life As A Man* (which both recounts the life of a real Jewish writer and parodies a character from one of Roth’s previous novels) and E. L. Doctorow’s saga of quasi-historical fiction. The critically and culturally renowned literary classic *Beloved* reimagines Margaret Garner’s attempted escape from slavery in 1856, encapsulating the new heights such an inventive contemporary trope can achieve.

The resurgence of the short story and the poem, as well as a greater emphasis on cultural identity and sexuality in the lives of immigrants and other marginalized groups, suggests an exclusively contemporary phenomenon that Moser and West refer to: the “postconfessional” narrative. Though they reference it within the context of modern poetry, the term itself could apply to the entirety of the postmodern literary field, the writing depicted as “non-autobiographical” and continuing the “emphasis of individual experience and expression of the confessional poetry of previous decades” (Moser and West 6). “Confessional” literature began in the 1950’s and 1960’s and emphasized the “I” within personal accounts of trauma, death, relationships, or any number of human emotional events, while “postconfessional” removes the direct link between the “I” and reality, further clouding the distinction between nonfiction and “non-autobiographical” stories. The author emerges as a medium of individual experience and storytelling while reworking the traditional preconceptions of first-person affective description. This pattern transcends literary form and genre, bleeding into all facets of creative work from Broadway productions displaying acts of social and environmental justice to the invention of “creative nonfiction,” another mixing of realism and fiction in journalism from writers like Joan Didion and John McPhee that uses “multiple points of view... close observation; and extensive use of dialogue” (Moser and West 7). All of these artists, ranging from authors looking to extrapolate on profound and transcendent occurrences of the past through literature to journalists giving “color” to historical events and personal experiences, aimed to provide audiences with a more “accessible” comprehension of reality. Through written information and text, the individual would no longer take the shape of the author, but it would exist within the world of the narrative itself. The variety of “I” accounts in contemporary writing, ironically, denotes an even more immediate, “accessible” bridge of shared human understanding from the reader to the narrator.

Novels, shorts stories, and poems look to hit an even deeper chord with their audiences than ever before.

Within that compositional accessibility, Moser and West believe that new postmodern lenses for the dissection of the inner structures of text contribute to the perpetually expanding dissemination of the novel in all facets of creative writing and the production of books. Critical analysis of text has shifted alongside the style, themes, and medium of that text within the past fifty years. “Structuralism” constitutes a contemporary form of literary study in which the examination of written work disregards any external “cultural” or authorial factors and concentrates on the text in itself. Though structuralism represents a similar philosophy to New Criticism (a formalist movement popular in the 1950’s pertaining to close reading of poetry that also looked at text as a self-contained unit), Moser and West identify a few key discrepancies between the two analytical structures. They argue, “In contrast to New Criticism, structuralism does not focus on literary value, and it makes no distinction between high and low art forms... Indeed, part of the innovation of structuralism is that it offers a way to think about culture in general, not just about literature.” Further extrapolating upon the meaning of “culture,” the authors add, “Both movements regard culture as a system of ‘signs’ in which words do not reflect or refer to an objective world but have meaning only in relation to each other” (Moser and West 18). The system of “signs” with no exhibition of one common worldview or reality reflects the aforementioned quality of contemporary literature in its lack (and possible rejection) of unity or oneness in theme or subjective experience. Just as artists share their diverse stories and experiences through literary narrative, the “culture” of postmodern writing lies within these individualized, textually isolated “signs.” The words and their relations to one another solely exist within that particular poem, short story, or novel. Similarly, authors construct first-person

anecdotes and allusions to real-life trauma or expression through metaphor by piecing together the figure of the subjective individual while displaying recognizable and relatable facets of the human condition, no longer aiming to offer a universal understanding of the world to *all* readers or critics. Through the development of interpretive critical reading strategies and the pinpointing of similarities and differences between New Criticism and structuralism, the progression into the postmodern era becomes clearer as the emphases of textual analysis shift accordingly.

New Criticism and structuralism encounter a major divide when discussing the “oneness” in theme or style that each movement purports to trace. According to *Contemporary Literature*, critical “deconstruction” of text in the age of structuralism distinguishes the postmodern era from the previously accepted New Critical lens. Moser and West write, “Like New Criticism, deconstruction calls for line-by-line examination of the text, but it rejects New Critical notions about literature’s aesthetic unity, universal meaning, and primacy of the author” (Moser and West 19). Though New Criticism, like structuralism, views writing as a system of “signs” telling a narrative in relation to one another, modern deconstruction (modeled by Jacques Derrida’s philosophical tenets and integrated into literary criticism through its close alliance with structuralism) further isolates stories into distinctive experiences and narratives inimitably separated by their particular collections of words. Deconstruction’s explicit repudiation of “aesthetic unity” and “universal meaning” not only breaks novels down to their individual linguistic and thematic structures, but it disallows and redefines the concept of literary genre itself. Regardless of the many forms genre takes within the current landscape of genre and literary fiction both online and traditionally published, because language is infinitely complex and the innumerable possibilities for the configuration of words can express an even greater variety of literary accounts, the notion of grouping titles into predetermined labels based off their

general narrative schemes and formats becomes counterintuitive and misleading. This emergence of deconstruction in literature supplies a sharpened context for the explosion of self-publishing online and the enormous amount of titles produced there today. The “democratization of information” and the “disruptive force” that digitization presents for publishing corporations, as well as Amazon’s goal of the “maximum possible variety of offerings,” begin within deconstruction’s underlying hypotheses. The fluidity in genre and magnitude in scope of contemporary titles derive from the lack of uniformity in narrative forms disparate authors wish to recite, yet, as deconstruction’s analysis of the “primacy of the author” comes to the forefront of the literary discussion, new ideas regarding the telling of these stories must first materialize.

In Moser’s and West’s inquiry into contemporary literature’s relationship with deconstruction’s aforementioned renouncement of the “primacy of the author,” they provide a plethora of philosophical propositions and examples that unravel essential insights into the postmodern representation of the novel itself. When introducing deconstruction’s views on literature and relations between words, they cite Roland Barthe’s 1967 essay *The Death of the Author*, “in which he argues that the author is not a biological person but a socially and historically constructed subject who does not exist outside of language. In other words, writers create the author and not the other way around.” The researchers then go on to mention the many specific outcroppings of the “death of the author movement” by literary critics and authors alike, including New Historicism from Greenblatt, Gallagher, Feinman, and Montrose which breaks down the “distinction between literary and nonliterary texts” by examining “previously marginalized materials such as maps, letters, diaries, advertisements, and unofficial versions of historical events.” French feminist critics Cixous, Kristeva, and Irigaray “argued that female experience could not be adequately represented by male-formulated discourses marked by linear

and rational thought processes,” and similar ideas emerge from African American, Asian American, Native American, and environmental studies in which critics “analyze power relationships, share a commitment to social justice, and challenge a [traditional] literary canon” (Moser and West 19). The death of the author requires a certain level of interpretive collaboration between the reader and the writer, and that relationship manifests within the expansion of “cultural studies” over the last fifty years. Instead of the previous notion that authors exist outside of their work and transmit their writerly voices through interrelated real-life and narrative identities, contemporary literature, in the vein of deconstruction and, to an extent, structuralism, solely evaluates the authorial figure as residing within the words of the text. Because postmodern scholars argue that historical, social, and political context defines authorship (neither some “aesthetic unity” nor “universal meaning” once touted by New Criticism’s adherents), many of them believe that the only sense of unity or oneness in message should come in the struggle toward social justice and the untold stories of marginalized groups. Moser and West reflect on how the lack of oneness in cultural identity symbolizes contemporary literature: “Just as it is impossible to speak of American literature as a singular entity, it is impossible to describe the literary traditions of various racial or ethnic groups as homogenous” (Moser and West 87). The individual, not the external authorial character, is defined by the circumstances and context in which they relate their own history, and, because of an endless amount of perspectives that constitute subjective reality, postmodernists and contemporary critics look to illustrate this new era as an incredible amalgamation of those perspectives, not simply the predominant, “unified” one that has permeated all of history itself for so long. Though some, like critic Rachel Adams, define the renewed emphasis on cultural studies in literature as a



kind of globalist period separate from the postmodernist one of the 1970's and 1980's, I believe the common goal of an *uncommon* set of narrative voices characterizes the postmodern age.

Deconstruction bleeds into all facets of the literary marketplace and an examination of its philosophy allows a deeper insight into the connections that tie together the shifting relationship between authors, publishers, and readers as well as the disintegration of traditional literary boundaries exasperated and promoted through the Internet. One postulation that represents an outdated mode of thinking with which most postmodern literary critics would wholeheartedly disagree comes in renowned British literary philosopher Peter Lamarque's article "On the Distance Between Literary Narratives and Real-Life Narratives" for the *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*. In his distinction between what he calls *literary* narrative and *real-life* narrative, he cautions against readers' friendly relationships with fictional characters they view as similar to themselves, claiming that this is "to set aside nearly everything that makes great literature what it is." He argues that real life is so far removed from literature that even restoring or identifying these literary features contradicts reality itself. Here, Lamarque also justifies the separation between fiction and literature, stating, "A work of fiction could reach the highest standards as fiction—say, within a popular genre— without even aspiring to the aims of literature...a literary work in some way or other must have more to say, of general interest, beyond the particularities of its plot" (Lamarque 118-9). For Lamarque, character descriptions possess two simultaneous functions: "a characterising function and a connective or thematic function" that bridges various overarching literary themes together. Genre fiction and "real-life" narratives like biographies serve as "merely transparent vehicles for prompting imaginings" while surrounding literary descriptions "provide a more opaque kind of perspective for observing and making sense of a fictional world." One essential principle for literature, unlike real-life

narrative, is that it “provides an illuminating development of themes of broad human interest” (Lamarque 121-8). Opacity, for real-life narratives, is seen as “a weakness, to be minimised, and merely clouds personal characterisation.” After taking examples from famous works within the literary canon like *Jane Eyre* and *Our Mutual Friends*, in his closing remarks regarding the absence of literary nuance in the real world, the philosopher states, “When real-life narratives take on the appearance of artistic structures... they can easily foster the illusion of seeing lives themselves as works of art...Nothing in the real world happens because some structured design determines that it must happen” (Lamarque 130-1). In his view, the functions of literary narrative and its common fundamental principles contrast the function of basic real-life storytelling and biographical reference. Though Lamarque also draws from Roland Barthe’s “The Death of the Author,” other scholars and philosophical minds may cite his misuse of the essay’s true aim, this literary mindset marking the precepts of a dying era and creating several issues for the development of new narrative voices and the integration of the novel into the contemporary, postmodern fold.

Contrasting Lamarque’s claims about the pitfalls of real-life narrative forms and personifying the widely accepted contemporary outlook of today, Bridget Chalk, in her scholarly review on Pete Boxall’s *The Value of the Novel*, discusses the progression of literature from the days of early realism at the turn of the twentieth century to the modern approach to literature alongside the Internet and the dissemination of authorial, editorial, and critical capabilities. She draws from several turning points within the literary and publishing industry mentioned within this paper when identifying Boxall’s idea of the “moral value” found in a novel, including “the ethical turn in literary studies, the governmental injunction on the humanities to account for themselves in a market-driven world, and the Internet, a forum in which criticism has become a

public, devalued activity.” Within that major shift, Chalk also claims that “The prevailing attitude toward the humanities in the early twentieth century as the preeminent source of moral value...gave way to the late twentieth-century insistence...on the ‘freedom of the critical imagination from ideological prescription’” (Chalk 384). Arguing that the commercialization, corporatization, and digitization of written material seeps into the content of the literary scene itself and causes a postmodern departure from the morally valuable “continuities” she views in early fiction, realism, and modernism, Chalks proposes that the contemporary period’s rejection of “aesthetic unity” and any oneness in “ideological prescription” of genre or message permeates literary history for longer than previously imagined and advances the development of the narrative form. She cites a simultaneous “existence” and “non-existence” of the novel throughout literary history, which means that, just as distinctions between genres, fictional, and real-life narratives break down alongside any boundaries between the authorial figure and the written works they create, the novel itself constantly fluctuates into and out of reality. In other words, the importance of literature’s capturing of central social, political, and, most contingently, *cultural* moments from the twentieth to the twenty-first century lends to the postmodernists’ unified goal for social justice through diversity of voice and *lack* of universal interpretation - a kind of concurrent “being” and “non-being.” Once again, culture no longer surrounds the literary field; it is subjective reality divided into individual experience. Chalk concludes, “In many ways, *The Value of the Novel* functions as a call to arms for critics, writers, and readers to continue to engage with the distinctive dualism of being and non-being on which the novel operates” (Chalk 385). This “dualism” denotes the complex dynamic that realism has aimed to encapsulate since its inception: the dichotomy between what *is* and what *ought to be*. Unlike Lamarque’s rigid separation of reality from fiction, Chalk not only implements a contemporary lens into the

discussion in her blending of the two, but claims that the novel has *always* been defined by those two themes interacting with one another. If realism's original goal for a fictionalized truth altered the course of literary history, then deconstruction and its promulgating of text and narrative reality to be interpreted according to each individual reader's experience revolutionizes the basic principles by which we evaluate literature.

"The Death of the Author" not only appears within a literary context, but also within the logistical arena of book publishing and the globalization and digitization of the changing relationship between the writer and the editor. Stuart Glover, in his article for *Publishing Research Quarterly* about Peter Carey, highlights many important changes in the publishing industry as it has developed into a globalized, dynamic, and complex market within the last twenty years. Glover begins by begging the question, "what has changed in author–editor relations as publishing and the print culture have globalized, through forces of capital, digitization, cultural colonization, and cosmopolitanism?" His basic argument, which he outlines at both the start and finish of his analytical article, is that this globalization of publishing has somewhat disrupted the "previously cohesive triad of author, editor, and the single authorized text" by giving way to "multiplicity and plurality" in editorial practices (Glover 55). Glover goes on to encapsulate the shifting nature of this delicate "triad" through the work of Peter Carey and the process by which his novel, *True History of the Kelly Gang*, was edited and ultimately published and released. This "tension between an ever more distributed...writing process and the requirement for a super-cohesive authorial identity" displays the unfolding relationship between the *compositional* aspects of contemporary literature and the *practical* means by which postmodernism and deconstruction have infiltrated the publishing scene through the shifting process of editing and distribution. The "identity" of the authorial figure, in Glover's

supposition, changes as well because of the collaborative efforts of prominent editors like Fiskjeton, the singular “author” beginning to become an element of the past. He concludes by describing the process of writing as occurring “in stages, some iterative, but some sequential, And while it is usually dominated by a single individual (the writer), he or she is often joined at later stages by a series of subsidiary writers and contributors: manuscript appraisers, agents, and editors” (Glover 55-6). Glover recognizes that the writer is always, even before the introduction of massive globalization into the world publishing market, a collection of many people directed toward a common goal of release and sale. However, he makes a clear and distinctive conclusion: “Only when the writers... have finished can the single author be constructed out of the ablation of the complexity of the writing process. At this point the hierarchicalised but multiple writers are united under the Romantic and economic category of the Author” (Glover 60). As a concluding remark, Glover depicts “Authorship,” in its traditional sense, as “almost always singular or unitary” because of the cohesive identity shaped by an author’s publishing team. In contrast, he asserts that globalization applies a certain “complexity and multiplicity” that dissolves this collective authorial identity - just as authors solely occupy unique voices and experiences within the narratives they construct, any one umbrella for a self-contained cultural amalgamation of editors, publishers, and writers all contributing their individual identities titled “Author” perishes alongside the New Criticism of the past.

One evident, continuous thread running throughout these critics’ and scholars’ impressions of an ever-changing literary field is a decentralization of voice in storytelling that alters the history of written material and the many forms that material inhabits. The construction of words (or, rather, the *deconstruction* of linguistic structures shaping stories themselves) always follows an underlying tenet of contemporary thought: the “one,” whether it manifested

within the preeminent authorial archetype (under which multiple editors or ancillary creators belonged), the traditional literary “culture” that once dictated critical acclaim in writing circles, or the “aesthetic unity” in the message of the narratives therein, now permanently occupies an anterior epoch. The demand for self-publishing tools after the digitization and, therefore, the globalization of written text, as well as the simultaneous potential for groundbreaking contemporary masterpieces and somewhat disconcerting lack of critical evaluation online, denotes an unsurprising consequence of a divergent era. The masses of fledgling creators both contributing to online story-sharing forums and submitting original manuscripts to the big-name publishing corporations (whom I deem “the many”) occupy a recently integrated space within the literary universe. As linguistically formulated aspects of their own work, authors no longer answer to the traditional critical eye that used to define literary excellence or prestige; instead, they exist as channels of language through which readers can capture a singular social or historical moment. Scholars like Moser, West, Chalk, Greenblatt, and Cixous pinpoint specific authors and titles that exemplify the paradoxical implications of the contemporary era’s union in *disunion* and its importance in shaping a better, more accurate representation of what was once considered the collective American consciousness. For them, as well as the many adherents to the structuralist mentality in deconstruction, the culture of a narrative moment arises within text instead of surrounding its author or message. Such a revolutionary conception of literature naturally strikes a chord with the revolutionaries of the publishing industry and their upheaval of conventional modes for the dissemination of writing. Not only did Amazon foresee an economic opportunity to appeal to a growing self-publishing constituency as a result of the Internet’s transfer of power to the hands of the “user,” but they intuited a trend within the general landscape of both publication *and* literary analysis. In addition to a cheaper means by which their

creative expression could be produced and consumed, the “many” desired a dismantling of the long-established literary criteria outlined by Moser and West in restrictive genre-based categories, extrinsic critical appraisal, and the presence of known or even marginally acknowledged authors. Just as contemporary literature promotes a more direct connection between the narrator’s “I” and the active, interpretive role fulfilled by the reader through the unmitigated medium of isolatedly assessed “postconfessional” text, the author-reader relationship takes on a heightened intimacy amongst a sea of I’s waiting for wandering perusal of the “many.”

A major bridge between the publishing and the content of novels surfaces in the distinction between high- and low-brow literary “culture,” discussed by many of the aforementioned literary scholars, critics, and reviewers. In a prefacing section for the research guide, they state, “As genre and identity have come to be understood in more fluid terms, distinctions between high, or elite, and popular, mass culture have disintegrated. Popular culture has become a subject of serious study for academics and a model for writers...” (Moser and West 3-4). They list popular, bestselling authors like Michael Chabon, Robert Pinsky, and David Foster Wallace who have achieved the often elusive balance between mass appeal and literary regard. However, to many within the postmodernist perception of literature, such a combination is more plausible than first believed. According to the two researchers, the differences between high-brow and low-brow (which emerged within the modernist period of the 1920’s and 1930’s when discussing the cultural prominence and renown of works within certain “high art” critical circles) have almost completely disappeared within a new and changing world of thematic dissemination, “genre fiction” and “literary fiction” one and the same. The “disintegrat[ion]” of the boundary between bestselling, mass market titles and the high, critically esteemed literature

revered by scholars mirrors my previous observation regarding the Internet's breaking down of traditionally conceived notions of a unified cultural quality in novels. Though the popularity of online self-publishing is the byproduct of an already existent contemporary evolution, it displays the dissolving high-low cultural dichotomy, readers and digital users gaining even easier *practical* access to already *compositionally* "accessible" material. *Contemporary Literature* cites multiple cultural and literary scholars who subscribe to this theory. In a section regarding the interlocking exchange between postmodernism, the philosophy of deconstruction, and contemporary writing, Moser and West draw from French critic Jean-Francois Lyotard in his 1979 book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* in which he states that "the basic premise of Postmodernism is a lack of belief in the overarching, all-encompassing explanations that he calls 'metanarratives'; this stance maintains that there can be no absolute truth" (Moser and West 129). Another, more specific argument emerges from Jean Baudrillard's interpretation of Ferdinand de Saussure's idea that "words do not mean anything in isolation but only in relation to other words." With language acting as the "only reality," Baudrillard conceives of the world as an "image of an image... for which no ultimate reality exists." Moser and West argue that Baudrillard's theories are useful within a literary context for contemporary themes like pastiche, allusion, parody, and intertextuality: "The principal points of reference in a text are to other texts; there is little - perhaps no - reference to an independent reality. This phenomenon, along with the blurring of lines between high and popular culture, leads to the mixing of genres" (Moser and West 129).

Multiple literary scholars and critics, in addition to Moser and West, tackle the definitions of "high" and "low" writing forms and the reasons behind their abandonment within the last thirty years. Timothy W. Galow, in his piece for *Modernism/Modernity* called "Literary



Modernism in the Age of Celebrity,” dissects some of the origins for the high-low cultural binary through specific authors and novels, namely F. Scott Fitzgerald and Gertrude Stein, within the modernist literary period of the 1920’s and 1930’s. He states that the two had “oppositional career paths.” Fitzgerald almost immediately became popular and successful but attempted to gain “critical respectability while writing for smaller and smaller audiences,” while Stein spent much of her career among the literary and cultural elites, struggling with her inability to sign a “long-term publishing arrangement” until she was older (Galow 316). Galow explains how the use of “public persona” and the “celebrity” effect played a key part within the cultural landscape of modernism, and that modernism itself was shaped by the external lives of various best-selling authorial figures at that time. Galow, too, follows the shifting critical response to Fitzgerald’s work, and the critics who once “bemoaned the credulity of undereducated audiences, had come to an implicit consensus about Fitzgerald based in part on his media-generated persona” (Galow 318). To Galow, celebrity and the external principles surrounding an author in the modernist period, not the actual content or innate status of the text at hand, are what determined the reception to a work and the balancing of mass media appeal and literary prominence. Back when the apparent struggle between the mass market and the “scholarly” scene first surfaced, “public persona” and the “celebrity” effect served as both profitable and detrimental for authors like Fitzgerald and Stein, who sought recognition for their work in contrasting “cultural circles” from their own. The modernist period appears as a distant speck in the past for the contemporary literary landscape because of the traditional evaluation of text as existing amongst a set of prearranged peripheral binaries and cultural principles rather than representing a creative form in itself. The fact that readers and scholars seriously considered an author’s “media-generated persona” when dissecting the ideas within their writing presents an even more comprehensive

archetype for the shifts in literary movements over the past century. Barthe's essay opposes this wave of thinking, the authors' "celebrity" effect dissipating alongside their identity outside of the narratives they write.

Though several contributing factors for the rejection of the high-low binary reflect the diversely arranged contemporary aesthetic, the culminating point of contact between today's publishing industry and the future for the dissemination of new creative voices and stories lies within a kind of breaking free from the final time-honored structure of the modern novel: the corporate economy. Frederic Jameson's 1991 work *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* claims, "Consumer culture and the 'Information Age' ... have created a superabundance of disconnected images and styles, resulting in a sense of fragmentation and depthlessness. All experience is commodified; art reflects that commodification, blurring and even erasing the distinction between "high" art and popular culture" (Moser and West 129). Economic thinker and critic Tim Vincent, adding to Jameson's hypothesis, provides a detailed analysis of the trends seen within modern modes of consumption and mass market items, drawing from a number of cultural thinkers, critics, and writers in his article "What The Market Will Allow: High Culture and The Bottom Line" for the *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures* to pinpoint why the old distinctions between "high-brow" and "low-brow" are promulgated by capitalistic society and completely antithetical to the contemporary drive toward artistic expression. He provides a historical context for the emergence of artistic commercialization in the 1930's, stating that the high-low dichotomy was "so thoroughly steeped in the guiding belief of consumer choice, that cultural strictures from above were likely to be met - as they are today - with that deepest of 'fruitful' American values, 'to each his own.'" In such a time of cultural flux in America, Vincent argues that, regardless of whether one consumed high

culture or mass marketed products, the collective American mindset “shifted from sacrifice, externality, and transcendence, to comfort, self-absorption, and social adjustment” (Vincent 81-2). Furthermore he adds that “‘the interaction between individual choice and larger societal structure’ both constrains and democratizes the consumer society that emerged in the 1920s and 1930s and characterizes... much of what we experience as mass culture today.” Shifting to a similarly fashioned cultural landscape today, Vincent describes the pitfalls and manipulation of the market in its separation of “high” and “low,” resulting in a “corporatized, profit-motivated environment” in which “all culture is mass culture, since mass consumption of the highest levels possible is the ultimate goal” (Vincent 82-3). In other words, the blurring of “high” and “low” art forms today is not the product of a changing cultural environment of tastes and preferences, but the result of a “disguised” mass market that permeates all facets of consumption-based societal norms. As I have mentioned within my analysis, this author also points to the Internet as facilitating a “better position than ever before to provide specific cultural experiences to specific audiences.” He pinpoints the permeation of a consumer-based economic environment in all aspects of American life, art and “culture” falsely labeled as exceptions to that rule. Later in his essay, Vincent further extrapolates on his philosophical arguments and offers a true solution to the masked high-low dilemma.

The aforementioned balance between individual choice and societal structure, as well as the simultaneous limitations and broader possibilities resulting from this consumer-based dichotomy, provides a new perspective on postmodern literature as a method of unveiling “high” and “low” as arbitrary titles perpetuated by the artificially constructed traditional “culture” bolstered by corporate entities. According to Vincent, all markets coalescing into a singular mass market results in the reduction and shrinking of “cultural” range for individual consumers within

that market. Vincent supports his claim that “defamiliarization does not sell” with Leo Bogart’s assertion of “the dilemma faced by the culture industry in a public that craves variety at the same time that it is governed by the familiar” (Vincent 84). Within his concluding remarks, he prescribes ways in which we can dissociate from today’s mass market culture, prompting us to “break the binary by revealing how market values invade both the center and the margins of the binary, effectively destroying it as a binary and replacing it with a new cultural framework.” Vincent draws from different scholars’ and contemporary philosophers’ conceptions of what culture itself means within the contemporary world. Rather than a set of things, culture should be a “set of practices” and concerned with the “giving and taking of meaning.” “High-brow” and “low-brow” is replaced by “a horizontal culture that establishes socio-cultural distinctions according to what combination of cultural products an individual or group uses to establish a ‘particular way of life’” (Vincent 85-7). The author cautions the formation of any binary system, including the emerging “mainstream/nonmainstream” one, because of the multiplicity and plurality with which individuals have the freedom to consume products “at various times and for various reasons.” Here, Vincent so closely resembles the contemporary critics’ conceptions of literature in his economic assessment of the disintegrating high-low binary that it appears as though he draws verbatim from their words and sentiments. He, too, mentions the emergence of the Internet as an essential factor within the new and ever-changing artistic landscape because of the subgroups and niches formed within that unique marketplace.

A capitalist market both benefits and detracts from the “cultural bloodstream” cultivated by the consumption and appreciation of art and creative work. As Vincent and many like him argue, the gaps between so-called “high-brow” literature and “low-brow” literature, as well as the categorizing of titles into particular genres and predictable reading audiences for those

genres, develop from the adverse effects of the commercialization and corporatization of the publishing industry after the Second World War. “Low-brow” was once customarily tied to a mass market of readers unconcerned with a “literary” novel, while “high-brow” indicated the absence of a corporate entity and more of a focus on the piece of art itself instead of its surrounding economic circumstances. Postmodernist deconstruction, in its pure isolation of words in relation to one another and de-emphasis on the traditional authorial archetype to establish a diversity of narrative voices within their “particular way[s] of life” and individual cultural moments, pushes back against such a stringent, capital-based system. Aarthi Vadde’s “gift-giving community” of writers, whether online or in print, encapsulates Vincent’s “horizontal,” as opposed to top-down, cultural landscape. This new “culture,” instead of being defined by the often intangible and ubiquitous market forces that dictate much of society, derives from the singular writer’s voice and the socio-political, cultural, or emotional themes that shape the stories they relate. A title-by-title evaluation maps out a complex tapestry of distinctive artists expressing themselves through the unmitigated, unhindered medium of literature, all united under a *lack* of universal meaning or genre classification, resulting in a contemporary “culture” created through the variety of cultural realities therein.

The rise of online self-publishing and the Internet’s wave of niche reading audiences erupts from the postmodern conception of artistic expression. The enormity in the sheer number of self-published titles, as well as the wide diversification with which independent authors, editors, and publishers disseminate those titles, coincides with a title-by-title evaluation system for the contemporary landscape. Both the practical procedure of publication *and* the content of the books being published promote individual experience as a framework for artistic culture, and what better way to represent the will of the autonomous writer than a never-ending database of

easily accessible content online? As we discussed for the historical trends within the publishing industry of the twentieth century, a combination of technological advancement, globalization, and commercialization always drives toward the distribution of written information for wider and wider audiences. Contemporary literature follows this doctrine. However, the Internet presents a digital force that possesses the power, through self-publishing, to bypass the corporate structure entirely - this “democratization of information” a prime medium for Vincent’s “horizontal” artistic matrix. The advantages and disadvantages of a decentralized market of writing introduce a new challenge for the postmodern thinkers of today: finding the balance between a “gift-giving” economy of individual artists that assesses titles based off critical deconstruction, void of an overseeing corporate entity, and a scattered, nebulous network unable to benefit from the positive attributes of the free market like artist promotion and popularity of especially prodigious writing. From my research into the world of publishing and the many possibilities that the Internet promotes within that field, I can formulate some common areas of improvement that would help in some of the difficulties I observe.

One possible solution for the aforementioned dilemma between the artistic community and the free market could come in the form of a publicly known platform designated for self-publishing that attracts enough attention from writers, editors, and publishers to act as a ubiquitous site for the posting of independent, original content. The forum could eventually gain traction within corporate publishing houses as well, allowing companies like Penguin Random House and Hachette to review titles sorted under categories like fiction and non-fiction or general themes within each book. That way, independent writers rising amongst a community of literary minds could, too, benefit from an economic system that rewards earned success while endorsing creative expression uncontrolled by Amazon’s increasingly monopolistic umbrella.

Perhaps corporate publishers would conceive of narrative voices as “horizontally” oriented, individual cultural iotas, allowing more written works to fit under both the “mass market” and the “literary” sphere. In integrating self-publishing into the “print culture,” scholars like Tom Bruno identify the role of local library vendors and their already developing relationships with services like Smashwords. With a greater force of vendors evaluating the content of those works, such innovative, localized synergy between the old and the new could serve as an example for traditional print publishers’ methods of artist outreach and dissemination of material. The industry has expanded to unfathomable heights on a global scale - a level of literary pervasiveness and ease of socio-cultural as well as procedural connection between writer and reader that has never been witnessed before. However, just as past eras of literary history have utilized the power of global growth and technology, we must now embrace a new movement that both champions the unique and diverse array of artists waiting to share their stories with the world and examines literature as an infinitely adaptable, self-contained cosmos of fine-tuned word placement and orientation. Though this balance seems daunting for a writer today, the Internet opens a gateway into the contemporary juncture and illuminates a path forward for artists striving into the unknown. If technology and the evolution of creative intimacy can once again coalesce into an unprecedented stage for writers from all walks of society, then the annals of history and the postmodern moment can pave the way toward a fruitful tomorrow for the writer, the reader, and the publishing industry.

#### Chapter 4: Unraveling the New Slush Pile

My foray into the art of writing began when I was eleven years old. I wrote a whole two hundred page novel about the escapades of a magical being and his friends. After finishing it, back then, I simply moved on to the next project for school or whatever interested me at the time instead of going back to the book I had written and editing it. However, when I found my way back to writing at that level, I was seven years older and had just completed my first year in college. I wanted to write about something I knew - something close to me that I could extract from my mind at any moment and translate it into a narrative voice. I decided that the overarching theme of the novel would be my family, especially my grandfather, Mac. Combining real-life stories and various fictional accounts as I progressed while jumping between the past, the present, and the future, I formed a memoir around my childhood, my mother's childhood, and my grandfather's journey from a stage-hand on Nantucket Island to an artifact collector and professor at Columbia University. In *Homestead*, I looked to capture some of Mac's intangible, even mystical qualities that had seemed indescribable when I was younger without the tools to articulate the immense reverence I held for him. For the book, I gained considerable inspiration from writer Michael Chabon, especially his popular familial memoir *Moonglow*, which tackles intergenerational trauma and experience in ways I had never before experienced. The novel takes place in the future, when it is my responsibility to sell the house and all the memories therein. However, while digging up those mementos of a distant time, I uncover things that lead me even deeper into the lives of my family members and I find untouched aspects of my past self that guide me in my quest. I must examine those stories to understand what is asked of me in such a pivotal moment for my family.



My creative process usually encompasses a rather unstructured, improvised approach to plot development. Though taking a break from my book for a year helped me step back and reassess the ways in which I believed I could improve this relative procedural chaos, I always felt, and still feel, a kind of excitement when I cannot yet plan out the exact contents of the next sentence. It keeps a level of interest within my decision-making for the book, yet I believe I can improve considerably if I lay out a skeletal framework for my writing. Basic organization buttresses a succinct and engaging narrative that flows smoothly through a storyline, and, though my novel follows some main threads throughout, I can still manage the peripheral stories and characters that come into the fray. For me, the best and most impactful passages are ones describing or establishing a particular setting or scene in the past, while the least effective sections seem to be those concerned with turning points in the plot and a certain lack of immersive surprise or conflict either between characters or within their own narrative voices. One peculiarity within the structure of *Homestead* emerges from the frequent switches between first-person and third-person perspectives. The first-person narrator (my closely oriented yet fictional character in the future) embodies a more direct relationship with the audience, while the third-person voices from Mac and my mother occupy an anterior space, depicting distant occurrences of the past that echo into my present. In many ways, though I never considered this before researching the tenets of modern thought for this project, I utilized common tropes of postmodern philosophy in *Homestead* through a fluid, diverging amalgamation of narratives and cultural expression. A fictional memoir sums up the blending of genres as well as historical fact and fiction that Moser and West mention when highlighting Philip Roth and E. L. Doctorow. Contemporary literature is also marked by the layers of complexity that writers can transmit to their readers, and pairing the direct (first-person) with the indirect (third-person) allows me to

play with the parameters of the self-contained literary universe of my novel. Many instances I relate resemble my personal memories and real-life stories from family members, yet I remove myself as an author in reality to create an artistically fabricated, narrative representation through fictional identity. “The Death of the Author” provides additional insight into my role within the abstract yet accessible theses that govern much of the contemporary moment in art that emphasize the author’s sole existence within the microcosm of subjective culture designed through words.

Though I see “postmodern” archetypes within my work, I also integrate more traditional motifs when considering the basis for the book and its potential appeal to a “mass market” of readers. I view the old distinction between “high” and “low” literature as so arbitrary yet so unnecessarily absolute. Even discussing how my novel could fall into one ambiguous category or the other outlines why the contemporary critics and authors look to outright abolish them. *Homestead* could cede to a number of literary labels: genre fiction, memoir, family drama, quasi-historical fiction, etc. The “horizontal” title-by-title evaluation appeals to me and many other writers today because of its licentious yet merit-based appreciation for the individual artist. I subscribe to the idea that, instead of the publishing industry pigeonholing novels into subgroups strategically disseminated to and advertised for specific demographics of readers, both the author and the consumer should choose for themselves the mode of exchange that best lends to the literature itself. The swaths of online writers would embrace a system that unifies the literary marketplace and the deconstruction movement. I possess no personal experience within the field of publishing (either online or within the “print culture”), but writing, editing, and getting my own novel published have been aspirations of mine since I first began to read and construct language creatively. Within such an intricate era for publishing, as I discuss all throughout this

project, I find it difficult for any newly established writer to navigate the multifarious roads that one can walk upon, along with their accompanying opportunities and pitfalls. I concluded that, to gain a broader and more personalized perspective on the publishing industry of today and the voices that have both seen major change as well as embody unexplored areas of literary interest, I would conduct interviews with a variety of people in the field to guide me in my publishing journey.

I have known my first interviewee, Otis Roffman, for almost my entire life. As neighborhood friends since childhood, he and I both progressed in our love of writing and cultivation of the artistic form. Otis is a self-published fiction writer who has edited for the *Beloit Fiction Journal* as well as *Folio Literary Management*, two smaller, independent publishing companies that require him to sort out fictional manuscripts and short stories submitted by individual artists. In talking to him, I gained a deeper understanding of the mindset of and central drive behind the independent publishing movement. One of the major discrepancies between traditional publishers and “grass-roots” creative organizations that Otis described was the connection between the writer and the publishing process itself. Many authors today, he claimed, want to bypass the intermediary literary agent or editor required for initial consideration and review. Just as I allude to within my dissection of the contemporary emphasis on a more direct relationship between the narrator and the reader, many authors like Otis desire to reach their publishing constituents on a smaller, more intimate level. Another intriguing topic emerged: the potential bias from submission reviewers that indie writers look to avoid. I discuss the unnecessary genre categorization and shrinking of literary audiences that big publishers institute, yet Otis stated that this bias takes on a more malicious form when considering the role that artificial intelligence plays in evaluating titles for corporations. This AI can potentially sort

by race, gender, nationality, or any number of configurations to adhere to its unfair, unethical standards. Though I mention the pitfalls in the integration of mass marketed commercialization and corporatism into the advancement of online technology, I had never considered how this pairing could result in such a grossly partisan system. Otis claimed that, because of such corruption, the empowerment of independence provides artists with alternatives to a distant algorithm that further separates narrative voices from their publishing audiences. As he and I talked, we began to formulate a better approach to the Internet's capabilities for writers that inspired some of my concluding remarks within this research paper - namely, the effect that well-known platforms like SoundCloud and YouTube have had on the independent music industry, whose utilization of digitization and the dissemination of artistic capabilities resembles that of the publishing industry. We surmised that, in order to cultivate a similarly popular site that both promotes creative, grass-roots projects and takes advantage of technological development in a positive, unbiased way, we must look to indie music and its adapting modes of marketing and ease of access.

As an inexperienced author, I asked Otis what advice he would give someone like me. His points proved to be invaluable results of prior experience and provided insights into his personal beliefs regarding where publishing currently stands and where it should go. He described the stark differences between the smaller, more direct-from-author publishing houses in the Midwest and the huge corporate media conglomerates in New York that dominate much of the production of books around the world. He talked of the Midwest scene fondly because of the personal and mutually favorable relationship he possesses with his publishers as well as the publishing company for which he works. However, Otis clarified that, regardless of the relative scale at which the publishing house operates, networking is an advantageous activity for anyone

looking to put their foot in the door. It provides many avenues through which writers can advertise and share their content with people willing to disseminate and market novels to wider and wider audiences. Even in acquiring jobs with the online editorial journals, he said a plethora of new opportunities opened up for him and allowed him to improve as both a professional and an author. In terms of the ways in which he claimed his creative process has evolved since becoming entrenched within the world of independent publishing, he cited a special form of maturity in relinquishing a concept or idea that he had worked on for weeks or months. Though we did not discuss my own manuscript, Otis advised me to possess that same willingness to keep integrating new writing styles and themes into my work while readjusting and getting rid of whole swaths of material. In his analysis, I recognized a similarly oriented “feeling out” of the effectiveness and level of craft that I evaluate as I write, and, though I believed his method still encompassed a bit more organization than my own, I understood his frame of mind in formulating his words on paper. Another essential point he made came when discussing the psyche of a writer after I asked whether anyone designs a manuscript thinking of the particular facets of its plot and style that can fit either the quintessential “mass market” or the “literary” mold. He rejected this notion for a writer looking to shape an original novel, and I immediately responded by citing the absurd image of famous authors entering their books with the idea that these titles would one day become literary or commercial successes. That little back-and-forth between me and him further solidified the publishing industry’s innately strange and confining system for rigid categorization of genre and audience while cementing my understanding of the postmodernists’ push against it.

Within his concluding advice for me, Otis emphasized a rule of thumb that applied to any aspiring author desiring a publishing chance: both a level of trust in oneself and a lack thereof.

Trust for one's own writing skill and the qualities that define each word and phrase must be counterbalanced with a constant self-questioning that allows artistic growth and reflection. He said asking others around him to honestly evaluate his work helped him readjust many of the recurring mistakes and ineffective strategies that he believed kept him back from improving. Such an individualized approach to self-critique brought me back to the blending of "high" and "low" literature in many contemporary authors like David Foster Wallace, and the horizontal, title-by-title evaluation of the novel sounded similar to the self-correction and unbiased criticism that Otis depicted. In this way, the self acts as a kind of microcosm in line with the aims of scholars like Vadde and Vincent on a wider socio-cultural scale. Otis's experience with independent publishing and the driving motives a young writer like him champions within such a modern and ever-changing system helped contextualize contemporary literary thought in more ways than I could have ever imagined.

In my second interview with published author and professor of creative writing at Westchester Community College Heather Ostman, I gained a broader understanding of a more experienced writer's journey and her decision to take the traditional publishing route. As a former literature major at Purchase, she knows my position all too well in navigating the many choices that young aspiring authors must make when first being inundated into the scene. I began by presenting some of the advantages and disadvantages to the individual author in both self-publishing and traditional houses, and she agreed in my assessment of independent authors' desires for artistic freedom and the Internet's expansion of that mindset amongst the writers of today, yet she told me that, in order to make an early impact within the literary world to reach renowned publishers and cast a wide net for reading audiences, print publishing houses and companies prove to be most effective. Like Otis, Heather emphasized the need for an initial

connection with people already positioned within the industry - a networking strategy that allows better social traction and upward mobility within smaller corners. She recited many of the lessons she relates to students in her creative writing course when they inquire into the publishing process, including finding literary agents online as well as writing as many query letters as possible to a diverse assortment of big and small publishers (whether they be online short story publications, poems, or printed articles). Delving into her personal growth as an author and the gradual development of her mindset, she pushed forth the importance of belief in oneself and one's own writing in addition to the reality of rejection. Just as Otis surmised, both the trust and *lack* of trust in the individual writing process seems to remain consistent across self-publishing and its predecessor, Heather depicting creative writing as an artistic procedure that follows no predetermined script or formula. The story emerges from the writer, and a preoccupation with the requirements of a mass-market paperback title defeats the purpose of creative expression. Heather continued that, at first, she was so fixated on appeasing others that she lost her own narrative voice, yet, instead of turning to independent publishing, she began gaining confidence in her unique writing style and found traditional avenues through which she could transmit her vision. I emotionally resonated with her experience and what she described as a need for "approval" or recognition from established publishers like Macmillan (who produced her most recent nonfiction novel *Kate Chopin and Catholicism*) as well as smaller publishers like Rowman and Littlefield, who published *The Fiction of Junot Diaz: Reframing the Lens*.

Through her work with a varying spectrum of both larger and smaller publishers, she has acquired extensive knowledge of the relationship between writing and the appeal of that writing to agents and publishers, passing what she has learned on to her students for twenty-five years. In this way, we found even more common ground in our affinities for both literature and teaching. I

am taking classes towards a masters in education for English, and a fascinating conversation ensued in which we discussed our reasons for choosing teaching as a natural conclusion or progression from reading and writing. Once I explained why I believe teaching literature allows me to influence students to gain broader societal perspectives - just as teachers have done for me over the years - Heather joked that we were the same person because of her similarly inclined motivations. She began teaching while still formulating her own exceptional authorial voice, and teaching itself gave her a better understanding of the writing decisions that both worked and failed within her work. After she relayed the advice she gives to her students, I took the opportunity for her to review my manuscript and describe how I could improve my creative writing for a more concisely constructed story and a piece that interests traditional publishers. She then sent me a “blurb” or summary most writers use to gain the attention of literary agents or publishers, walking me through the process itself and insisting that, in the future, I should pursue the publication and dissemination of my novel in printed form. In terms of my writing style and strategies for improvement, she stated that, at times, I used superfluous adverbs or overly frothy language, which has emerged as my habit for several years. She recommended that I read aloud and try to pinpoint some of the unnecessary words or phrases in the book, which has always helped me in trimming some of the proverbial fat from my prose. Heather’s encouraging words and points of emphasis in selecting an agent and publisher gave me a level of confidence in *Homestead* that I had never experienced before. Her motivational, ambitious attitude toward an attempt to get published ignited a desire in me - one that told me to keep editing my novel and pursuing success within the traditional literary marketplace. Otis’s call for artistic expression and individualism echoed in my head, but I never conceived of the two ideas as mutually exclusive or even separate. I believed I could transmit my creative narrative voice to a publisher without



relinquishing any sense of pride or originality in my work. Yes, my book would probably be sorted into a genre like so many others before it, yet, like Heather, I knew a powerful satisfaction accompanied even the thought of the physical printing and dissemination of my novel.

My third and final interview with a two-year assistant editor at a Big Five publishing house named Carolyn gave me an even deeper look into the publishing world. Carolyn was not video recorded because of her desire to remain anonymous. Though she premised her understanding of the industry with the fact that she has only been working as an editor for such a large conglomerate for two years, she highlighted some of the efforts that more traditional publishers have made for diversity in title selection and promotion in recent history. Her specific press publishes novels rather narrowly and exclusively in terms of proven authorship and marketable content, dealing in nonfiction with some spattering of literary fiction. However, she observes strides take place within the push for unconventional real-life stories and characters. When I alluded to some of the advantages and disadvantages within the online self-publishing market and my idea for an easily recognizable, media-based platform that allows independent authors to gain recognition from big publishers, Carolyn mentioned sites akin to what I proposed and thought such a system could garner success among young writers today. She noted the many difficulties and barriers to entry that indie writers must face when attempting to gain access to traditional houses and the Internet's ability to somewhat shift that long-standing dynamic. After describing some of the ways in which Big Five publishing conglomerates like hers can open up to more narrative voices, she cautioned against a network that solely rewards the most read and disseminated manuscripts across the reading base because of a potential descent into the mass-marketed romantic fiction dominating a considerable portion of the most popular tier of self-published options. I asked Carolyn her thoughts on the categorization of genres and whether it

detracts from the nuances and subtleties tied to the act of writing itself or simply allows readers to easily locate titles they enjoy. She agreed with both sentiments, referring to some nonfiction titles labeled under World War II that delve into a variety of topics without falling into that description as well as a publisher's interest in marketability and audience familiarity. She claimed that most readers naturally gravitate toward the same authors or topics because of the propensity to stick with similar writing they enjoy, big publishers fixating on the profitability of such a predictable formula and further complicating new authors' and titles' passage into the industry. For the majority of my project, I researched the fictional literature that inhabits a large chunk of the conversation, yet Carolyn opened up my knowledge of the nonfictional world and some of the similar issues emerging within the balancing act between a popular, formulaic structure or appeal and unique or unheard stories. Though I considered this phenomenon consistent across both fiction and nonfiction, learning these details from someone under the "umbrella" of a large corporation shed new and fascinating light on the matter.

Carolyn managed to read over the first fifty pages of my novel, and she offered a realistic and instrumental analysis from her perspective as an editor. I gave her a brief synopsis about the arc of the story, and she subsequently revealed some of the tactics an author could employ when attracting traditional agents and publishers. She said that a punchy and attention-grabbing premise or storyline always helps conceptualize a narrative from the view of the reader, and doing so would aid me in shifting from a story I wish to tell to one readers wish to read. This reminded me of Heather's advertising blurb for my book: "*Homestead*, Lucas Gray's debut novel, ushers in a new era of narrative drama. Fast-paced and heartfelt, Gray's characters reel you in and never let go until the last page. Their yearnings become your yearnings, as they sort through loss, grief, and hope, amid treasure and intrigue." Carolyn added that the first successful

novel of an author's catalogue could emerge from a place of original storytelling, while the traditional publishing framework dictates what agents and editors alike want in the author's second and third titles: a book that possesses proven selling power, similar in style and subject matter to that first book. Though I disagree with the relative monotony that results from this format, I was unsurprised by it, the book market speaking for itself and predicting readerly interest. Carolyn, too, emphasized the hoops and hurdles authors like me must traverse, hinting at the exclusivity of agent groups and literary publishing clubs. Like Otis and Heather, she advised me to network my writing skills and become inundated into these circles as quickly as possible, explaining how opportunities in publishing arose for her when she began talking to experienced figures and gaining connections from the inside. For *Homestead*, she expressed that the act of selling a house and moving is a topic with which many readers can relate, while she had never seen anything like the treasure-hunting aspect before. Explaining that capitalizing on the uniqueness of a story while maintaining that level of emotional accessibility and common understanding among an audience presents an attractive commodity to publishers, she encouraged me to keep writing and undertaking the extensive editing process. Her parting words still echo in my mind: read as many similar top-selling authors as possible. That, she added, encompasses a mindset of constant learning and creative renewal for anyone aspiring to gain literary traction. I appreciated the comprehensive and invaluable wisdom she administered, and I knew I would retain this information within my career as a writer and (hopefully) published author.

Throughout this whole process of constructing my research paper and organizing interviews with a diverse array of figures within the publishing industry, I have researched and analyzed where publishing was and where it could progress in the future. I relish in the potential

for a giant online “gift-giving” marketplace of writers who also benefit from the traditionally configured market economy as well as the trajectory of contemporary literature itself and the varying ways in which the fundamental definitions of “text,” “reader,” and “author” have shifted across the arc of writing history. The inspiring stories of Otis, Heather, and Carolyn extend to all corners of the literary world, and I am fortunate to glimpse into that macrocosm of word-working genius and social revolution. I not only look to improve my own writing by absorbing as much experiential knowledge and perspicacity from people already knowledgeable within this particular culture as I can, but I also strive to pluck the treasures of historical resonance from the ever-expanding, deep well of my research here. My voice, a floating singularity within the infinite chamber of time, bounces off and between other stories, ultimately nestling along the historical continuum, waiting to be unfurled from the tapestry.

Two brief excerpts from *Homestead*:

The renters occupying the small one-floor studio directly adjacent to Toad Hall let us use their fire pit, so we finished the moonlit get-together by roasting marshmallows on the studio lawn. The flames were big, and the crackling of firewood complemented the many grasshoppers humming through the trees. No one had any particularly chilling or memorable ghost stories to tell, but there was a peculiar tale from one of the friends of the Sunderlands, who had been close family counterparts of ours for many years. He was a young guy who proceeded to describe a strange encounter he had with his friends while sneaking into an abandoned amusement park one night. He purported to have gotten an eerie feeling from the place the whole time they were there, and he could’ve sworn that the park looked so freshly deserted that he would not have been surprised if some of the rides had started up again while they were walking around. Though the most notable bits of the story were the multiple iguanas that jumped out of the brush and

scared him and his friends half to death, my parents chimed in unexpectedly. This was one of the less common summers in which my dad was able to come to Bartlett with us, so when his deep voice chimed in from across the fire, I acknowledged immediately that he had a story to tell, too.

“Lori and I used to go to that park all the time when we lived down there before John was born,” he said. “We always thought it was haunted.”

My parents had apparently moved away with John and Sarah before the place officially shut down, but my dad said it already felt like it was abandoned, even when it was open to the public. It wasn't exactly a scary story, just one that made us collectively question why the market for tourist attractions in that area was so subpar. Not really something that made one's blood curdle, but it did the trick of creeping me out a bit. I wanted Sarah to share a story she'd told a few years before, but she didn't really seem interested in anything but laughing with Faith on my side of the fire. I would've told it myself, but I could never get the details of it as precisely as Sarah could. Something about a friend of a friend staying at a sleepaway camp and encountering a runaway woman from a nearby mental asylum. When I thought about the prospect of my telling the story, though, I started to realize that I hardly knew the outline of it anyway, let alone the visceral details that gave me chills the first and only time I had heard it.

I gazed silently into the fire, its orange flames licking the starry sky and casting faint shadows of chaired figures onto the dark grass. Nobody spoke for a while, as if they were all admiring the light as well. The island buzzed as one, and the deep vibrations roaming through the atmosphere lulled me into a kind of waking sleep. My mind was clear, and the anxiety I had sensed before the performance seemed lightyears away. The only part of my consciousness that lingered, however, was my pity toward Nana. She had to stay with Mac at the house back home that summer to take care of him. It was the only instance that she could remember since

graduating from college in which she hadn't spent at least a week on Bartlett Island. There was something missing - a hole in the flames. Though I could not meticulously place the gap, it was there, like a finespun string that led to a past epoch, looming in a dream or in the corner of the eye. Toad Hall's foundation stirred while its sister's, whose walls were content with the bounty they held, slept soundly back home. All we could do was wait for a sign: the stir of a fallen leaf, the call of an owl. We sought guidance from before, when the trees were more plentiful and the land was barren. Something to really make us dream. Until then, though, we watched as the woodpile turned to gray embers at our feet, wistfully mimicking the constellations (79-81).

. . . . .

The several shovels that leaned against the side of the chimney were all fairly heavy-duty, the rightmost being a huge blue curve clearly meant for blizzards of biblical proportions like the present one. The tool that intrigued me most, however, was a long silver spade near the back of the pack. It was surprisingly heavy in my gloveless hands, which were already becoming numb from the cold. I trudged further with the spade and the map, past the house and the lawn and onto the steady slope leading to The Barn. Holding the X up to my face, I estimated its location in relation to my position as accurately as I could, carefully observing the surrounding trees and terrain to ensure that the mountains of snow would not throw me off. The snow was coming down in ice pellets now, stinging my eyes as I pushed the map into my coat pocket and raised my hood over my head, next plunging the spade into the ground with all my strength. I figured it would take a while to actually reach the soil beneath, but I knew that once I cleared out a little hole in the snow surface, I'd dig with precision not power.

The first couple of strokes were fairly easy, since the snow turned out to be more powdery and lighter than I'd anticipated, yet I could feel sheets of ice relentlessly pummeling the back of my head and back. Once I got to the dark wood chips, I raised my head and looked out across the path. The wind and snow were so fierce that I could hardly make out the porch light still glowing in the distance. The thought of being unable to re-enter my house because of the sheer amount of buildup flashed across my mind, but I quickly dismissed it and continued shoveling up heaps of dirt. I was sweating profusely beneath my coat by then, yet, even as my chilled fingers and heavy breath told me to take rests, I convinced myself to keep going. With each stab into the earth and subsequent pulling up from the ground, my levels of adrenaline escalated higher and higher until I could feel my heartbeat racing through four layers of winter clothing. The strokes of my spade became increasingly wilder by the second. I was a man on a mission, determined to uncover something, *anything*, there in the dirt. I didn't care if it took me all night - or all of eternity, for that matter - to reach it.

Before long, I could see disembodied glimmers of white briefly blaze across the sky. I'd never previously witnessed lightning during a snowstorm, but it seemed right to first experience it that night, of all nights. Everything was muffled, and the only noises I could discern were the snowflakes scraping against my coat and, of course, the spade's incessant scraping against the frosted, dry soil. The dirt particles, spread across the snow like chocolate crumbs atop a vanilla cake, began encircling the small trench I'd created. For all I was concerned, the expanse of the universe could have helplessly collapsed into that black hole. I ignored another streak of lightning that flashed through the haze. Sweat dripped from my nose into the pit. I finally stopped to check that the X was where I'd remembered. The hole was precisely where the "WALT" mark had been placed. Undeterred, I began digging a slightly wider perimeter around

the excavation to guarantee that it did not collapse in on itself. My body became slippery under the coat, and I considered tucking my hands into my pockets to warm them. I couldn't grasp very tightly because my palms and fingers were so numb that there was hardly any indication of my grasping of the spade's handle. A part of me deeply desired to fill the hole back in and go inside, but a different, more intangible portion of my psyche refused to quit. It reasoned that if there did happen to be a stash of stolen Egyptian artifacts under the ground, I had to discover it then and there. There was no later. My visible breath shot from my nose in a vaporous cloud as I labored.

*It's official: I'm insane. I must be.*

I had no idea how much time passed before the soil became too tough to tunnel through. The gaping trench stretched from the sharp ridge along a neighbor's property to a small wire fence encompassing Nana's garden, horizontally bridging the dirt path to The Barn. My shirt and sweater were drenched and stuck tightly to my torso. I also guessed that my hands were in the beginning stages of frostbite, since the tips of my fingers were abnormally blotched with blue and white. My face had sweat and frozen over so many times that a thin layer of frost coated all the exposed skin and accumulated around my eyelashes and eyebrows. My teeth chattered as I scanned for any sign of foreign objects hidden deep within the dark brown mass.

Nothing.

An indefinite, yet profound sadness racked my soul. The lightning had left, and the snowfall was less intense. I could identify the bulky outline of The Barn from where I stood, its big garage door mocking me. Falling to my knees, I slumped my shoulders and bowed my head while being supported by the spade handle. I tried to cry, but my tear ducts couldn't build up a sufficient amount of moisture in the cold. I just kneeled there, my head completely emptied of substance. The sudden urge to bury myself under the dirt arose, just to escape the cold forever.



At least whoever found me there would have an interesting story for the neighborhood. Perhaps they would write about me throughout the state, or even the whole country - a major newspaper headline attached to the obituary. What would they say about me? Had I really accomplished anything they would have found particularly newsworthy? Probably not. Hopefully I would have been held in high regard by family and friends instead of the especially flawed human they saw before them. Maybe Lily would have thought it happened because of her, which was further from the truth than I cared to comprehend. It was just so cold, nothing more.

I recalled a conversation between my mom and my grandfather, in which he very eloquently explained why people died. "I guess they just go when they go."

"You mean, like, it's always their time even when we don't think it?" my mom prodded.

"Um, yeah. I think that's it," he mumbled, taking another sip of Budweiser.

The delicate flakes that descended from the sky were already somewhat covering up the black clusters of soil. The porch light beckoned to me in the distance, but I kept waiting, as if the Ethiopian relics would miraculously leap from the hole into my hands. One thing was certain: I was selling the house at all costs, regardless of how long I had to withstand living at home. That seemed to be the only constant that remained, the storm blowing away every prior dream that so foolishly crept into possibility. The world was too small for such a pitiful attempt at revitalizing some non-existent mystery. My work had only just begun, and I was sitting near a haphazard pit hoping for a miracle instead of sleeping for the next day. I threw the spade into the hole, trudging back in the direction of the porch light (153-157).

Interviews:

Otis Roffman:

[https://youtu.be/\\_rmCbQWcv4](https://youtu.be/_rmCbQWcv4)

Heather Ostman:

[https://youtu.be/JLRV88\\_R8EE](https://youtu.be/JLRV88_R8EE)

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<sup>1</sup> Note: Page numbers sourced from e-books are displayed online in a general range, so the relative accuracy with which those pages are expressed within in-text citation may vary minimally.

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