

# A new way of spinning yarns

- **May 23rd, 2010**
- (0) comments

**Bill Hall**



## COMMENTARY

A new form of literature has emerged in the past century and ripened into a major art form. It has taken over our theaters, invaded our homes and, for better or for worse, mostly replaced books as a common form of storytelling.

The new art form is called "movies."

Changes in entertainment are often unwelcome at first. The changes represent what seems at first like a personal loss. Most improvements in our lives are mixed blessings. Most inventions are a tradeoff.

The Clarence Darrow character in the play (and movie) "Inherit the Wind," tells us: "Gentlemen, progress has never been a bargain. You've got to pay for it. Sometimes I think there is a man behind a counter who says, All right, you can have a telephone; but you'll have to give up privacy, the charm of distance. Madam, you may vote; but at a price; you lost the right to retreat behind a powder puff or a petticoat. Mister, you may conquer the air; but the birds will lose their wonder, and the clouds will smell of gasoline."

When changes like the invention of movies come along, most people tend at first to dwell on the smell of gasoline. Similarly, once upon a time, more than 500 years ago, people started complaining: "That fool Gutenberg went and invented the printing press and movable type. Now silly people are all crawling off in a corner and reading stories to themselves. Hardly anybody wants to gather around the fire anymore and listen to storytellers."

Likewise, today you hear people dismissing the new electronic book readers, saying things like, "I'll never use one of those. I like the touchy feely tactile sense of a substantial book in my hand with my fingers fondling paper."

Yes, and people way back in history hated it when parchment scrolls became forerunners of Gutenberg's books and helped destroy storytelling around the fire. But hardly anybody is reading scrolls anymore, and they would be whining if they had to.

However, in one sense, the electronic book is nothing new. It is merely a redesign - an electronic version of a paper book. But it is an improvement on the whole when you're traveling because each half pound electronic reader holds hundreds of books weighing nothing at all.

Whether a traditional paper book or an electronic book, the device is only a container. The electronic reader and the traditional wad of paper are not books. Books are thoughts and stories that weigh nothing at all, though thoughts and stories can be heavy with meaning if not with the pull of gravity.

However, traditional paper books are inefficient containers, holding about one long story per pound. The half-pound electronic books hold more books than a normal person can read in five years. To me, that's mentally touchy-feely, if not physically tactile like those old cardboard - and-murdered - tree pages that constitute a traditional book.

But while electronic book holders are just a step up from an old-style book, movies are essentially a new art form that has emerged in the past century or so, an incredibly different way of storytelling.

True, the movies only do what books do; they take us inside our own heads and make us co-authors of the story with our imagination supplementing the official creator's work. That's why traditional books are still fun and always will be. They let you help tell the tale.

If anything, the movies give us more help than we need in co-authoring the story with our impression of what we are seeing. But the movies are better for those with all but the wildest imaginations, especially when the story gets physical. A terrible accident or a fist fight or a love scene that would take countless words to laboriously get across in a book can be instantly conveyed in horrible or wonderful detail in a movie.

Does that mean the movies will eventually replace books?

I doubt it. It's apples and oranges. Both forms of storytelling have their charms. We don't have to choose.

Sometimes I think there is a man behind a counter who says, "All right, you can have the movies, but you can also keep the books because both are worthy of your time."

Best of all, you can always, to this very day, still sit around the fire reading aloud or telling stories to those you love. And it doesn't get any more touchy-feely than that.

---

*Hall is editor emeritus of the Tribune's editorial page. His e-mail address is [wilberth@cableone.net](mailto:wilberth@cableone.net).*