

E-Books: More than E-Hype Steve Vivian

With Y2K safely out of the way, there are other tech stories to consider. One story with far better legs than is e-books. There's been plenty of hype surrounding e-books for the last year or so, and many skeptics replied, "Been there, done that." True enough, there'd been earlier attempts to market e-book readers, and the gadgets were duds: no content, no ergonomics, no future. But e-books in the first year of the brave new millennium will be different, and for a practical reason: good product, good ergonomics, and a good future.

The NuvoMedia Rocketbook deserves a lot of the credit for making e-books more than empty e-hype. With about 200 people, I tested the Rocketbook in September of 1998, and it took me about twenty minutes to realize that the Rocketbook was a very fine product. The Rocketbook is well made, easy to handle, and—most importantly—easy to read. And that's been the rub of e-reading until recently: e-titles were great in theory but pretty weak in practice. Few people enjoy reading lengthy text from a computer screen (although a generation raised on web pages might grow to prefer screens, for all we know), and the only alternative to screen reading was to print hard copy. During my month of testing the Rocketbook, several friends saw the gadget and were naturally intrigued. And the intrigue sometimes morphed into conversion: readers really like Rocketbooks when they actually get their hands on one.

There's also the Softbook, which has its own devoted cadre of readers. Some of the Softbook's features are awfully impressive, such as the ability to actually scribble notes—in handwriting as sloppy as one wishes—directly onto the screen. And the Softbook folks have their own growing collection of content, from daily papers to novels to business books. So, going into the Year 2000, we have two impressive and very practical products. And the good news about e-book readers—and electronics generally—is that the prices will drop as the quality rises. The Rocketbook, for instance, started out at \$499.00, and now it's \$199.00. There's little reason to not think that in the next 18 months or so, an e-reader will cost less than a hundred bucks and boast features far more powerful than current models.

E-book skeptics have also pointed to the allegedly inferior quality of e-books themselves...the standard industry rap is that authors who published e-titles couldn't get published in "real" publishing houses. As an author myself, I take gentle exception to this charge. I'd first point out that our local bookstores are sagging under the weight of thoroughly lame books in print: poorly executed, badly edited, and appallingly written. I'd also note that many of the heavyweights in traditional publishing are now eagerly jumping onto the bandwagon. E-books just make too much economic sense, and the e-book readers are growing far too handy (variable font size, variable lighting, easy annotation) to ignore.

It's also worth pointing out that some e-publishers knew all along that offering consistently good titles was the only way to gain acceptance. Online Originals, headquartered in the UK, offers a line of titles that requires no apology. My own publisher, Boson Books, offers fiction, non-fiction, poetry, even drama. I signed Boson's dotted line because it publishes work by Kelly Cherry and Fred Chappell, two of the finest literary authors of the last twenty years. Just as importantly, the co-owner and editor—Nancy McAllister—is a very astute reader and actually understands what authors are trying to achieve through the written word. Now, this might sound like faint praise—an editor that can read well—but it's high praise. Too many editors just don't "get it": they often don't grasp literary conventions, thematic development, prose style...in other words, they're "editors" in name only. Many other writers will tell you precisely the same thing.

I'd also note that the print industry is hardly heaven on earth. My college rhetoric textbook, *Writing With Authority*, is published by a huge company: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich. That's about as "establishment" as an author can possibly get: it's a huge company with plush

offices and an army of salespeople knocking down doors at colleges and universities nationwide. My own experience with HBJ is hardly entirely negative: for instance, my editor was very skilled and offered genuinely helpful suggestions. On the other hand, the sheer enormous size of the company is a built-in problem; such huge companies are typically not terribly quick to respond to changing market conditions and trends. On balance, I'm not terribly impressed by claims that print houses do "real" books and e-houses print the leftovers. There's junk in both mediums, but the real industry momentum is with e-books, thanks to companies such as Boson that had the foresight to see the writing on the wall.

Finally, there's Bill Gates. Love him or hate him, Bill Gates has put MS muscle behind e-reading with Clear Type technology. Clear Type might even make computer monitor reading a truly pleasurable experience; the early word on Clear Type is promising. Of course, we'll have to wait and actually see, but there's no doubt that Clear Type will be a strong boost to e-publishing generally. An even bigger boost will be the millions of Windows CE gadgets hitting the market in the next year and a half: these hand-held gadgets will feature beautiful color screens and ever-lowering prices. Windows CE gadgets could become the e-readers of choice.

What's most impressive about these developments—Rocketbook, Softbook, Clear Type—is that they're so new. The e-readers have been on the market for only a year and a half. Given the e-book industry's rapid growth, the e-skeptics' complaints are out-dated at best. When new titles by Stephen King and Bob Woodward are published as e-books, the argument is pretty moot: e-books are no longer e-hype.

Steve Vivian's novels *Flunky* and *A Self-Made Monster* are published by Boson Books at **Error! Bookmark not defined.** In 1999, he joined Boson as a marketing partner, and among his tasks is helping Boson get titles to market with companies such as NuvoMedia, Softbook, and Librius.