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SPECIAL ISSUE: WHO'S IN CONTROL BOOKS

Plugged-in Proust: Has e-lit come of age?

By **Julia Keller**

Tribune cultural critic

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Lovers of literature, be afraid. Be very afraid.

Let's modify that: Lovers of traditional literature -- the stuff squashed between stiff or flimsy covers, arranged in clumps of typography and that remains as unassailable as stone tablets bearing sacred hieroglyphics -- ought to be afraid.

Everybody else might be intrigued.

Literature, like all genres, is being reimagined and remade by the constantly unfolding extravagance of technological advances. The question of who's in charge -- the producer or the consumer -- is increasingly relevant to the literary world. The idea of the book as an inert entity is gradually giving way to the idea of the book as a fluid, formless repository for an ever-changing variety of words and ideas by a constantly modified cast of writers.

"There's a shift going on -- people are going from being consumers to being co-creators," declares Scott Rettberg, assistant professor of New Media Studies at Richard Stockton College of New Jersey.

Adds William J. Mitchell, head of the Media Arts and Sciences program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, "All of these things are astonishing outbursts of popular creativity, unleashed by the electronic format."

Destinations

Blogs, e-mail, e-books, hypertext, text messaging, unbundling, Google Print -- such terms, once esoteric, have shouldered their way into the common parlance.

Yet new technologies such as unbundling -- a service recently offered by Amazon.com, in which customers can order portions of a book rather than the entire book -- or Google Print, that company's plan to make the contents of more than 15 million books available online, would seem to apply to readers, not writers. The audience for literature, rather than literature itself, would seem to be affected.

Changing ways of accessing literature, however, could end up changing the way literature is produced. If customers increasingly nab their



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reading material by the phrase or by the page -- rather than by the book -- surely writers will eventually get the hint and begin to create works that capitalize on the new reality. Thus literature itself will undergo a dramatic retooling.

Or maybe not. Must the new always mean curtains for the old?

"I see all these things as coexisting," says Rettberg, a former Chicago resident who writes award-winning hypertext novels. "It's not like one technology comes along and replaces another. Things find their place in a new system.

"I teach New Media, but I also teach courses in print literature. I think of electronic literature as a continuation of many different genres of experimental literature in the 20th Century. I never thought hypertext would eliminate the book. The book will never go away."

Hypertext literature -- computer-based works in which certain words, phrases or images are highlighted, encouraging readers to click on the links and indulge in digressions from the main text -- is "finding a place in writing programs," Rettberg reports.

The rise of blogs is a positive sign, he adds. "I watch how the students here use their computers. It used to be mostly games. But now, there's a real self-conscious identity creation -- it's blogging and social networks. People are creating their own music and art."

Mitchell agrees that blogs are an important new genre, one that puts consumers in control of content in fascinating and innovative ways.

"Blogs are pretty significant. It's a popular art form. It's folk art -- it has the inconsistency, but also the vigor and energy, of good folk art. It's very powerful."

Both ways

Mitchell's books are published simultaneously in print and online. And that's his vision for the future of literature: Not one delivery system crowding out another, but a variety of systems sharing space on the literal and virtual shelf.

He's also a big fan of e-mail and text messaging. "E-mail should not be taken too lightly as literature," Mitchell muses. "It's an incredibly vigorous literary form that's practiced by millions every day.

"Text messaging has a haikulike character. I think it's an expression of the vitality of language, of the urge people have to express themselves."

But what about the long narrative works -- fiction and non-fiction -- that traditionally are associated with the notion of literature? Will "Moby Dick" become a hypertext with links to Herman's Hermits and Starbucks? Will "Hamlet" be reduced to a text message ("2B/N2B")?

Mitchell and Rettberg say no.

"There's a place for electronic literature but the book won't go away," opines Rettberg.

Adds Mitchell, "Traditional paper-based literature survives where it makes sense . . . a book is a beautifully designed artifact. Fun to read. Convenient. It feels good, it looks good -- it really works.

"All of these new formats just enrich and democratize literature."

jikeller@tribune.com

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