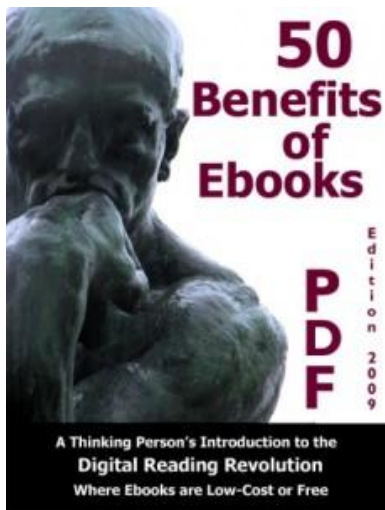


## Interview with Michael Pastore: Ebooks and Digital Publishing



A few weeks ago I posted a review of the brilliant ebook by Michael Pastore “[50 Benefits of Ebooks: A Thinking Person’s Introduction to the Digital Reading Revolution where Ebooks are Low-cost or Free](#)”.

This is such a great book that I asked Michael for an interview to expand on the book and his thoughts on this area.

Michael has also requested that this is published under a [Creative Commons license](#), which means you can distribute the content, or use it on your website but not for financial gain.

### Can you tell us a bit about you and your books?

I’m a full-time author and publisher who writes novels and non-fiction books in the glorious town of Ithaca, New York. I’ve written and edited more than 20 books: some novels (which take me a very long time to write) and various works of non-fiction, including [The Ithaca Manual of Style](#), The Zorba Anthology of Love Stories, and, most recently, [50 Benefits of Ebooks: A Thinking Persons’ Guide to the Digital Reading Revolution](#).

Let me tell you how I started publishing. I had written a novel that I thought was a good one (my second novel; my first novel consisted of 100,000 words of flowery prose and ludicrous puns). Then I dutifully followed the “expert” advice about sending 100 well-written query letters to literary agents and publishers. Needless to say, nothing happened. Most of these agents didn’t answer. The Paris Review sent a postcard that apologized for losing my manuscript — that I had never sent. And one agent’s reply contained nothing at all about my letter, but instead held a brochure that urged me to buy his new book about how to find an agent. I think I was foolish enough to continue sending letters for a few more months — I had not yet discovered Buddha’s wisdom, in which he predicted the plight of the modern author: “There is no grace, no help to be had from the outside.”

So one day my wife and I are driving around the countryside in the state of Connecticut, and I was ranting and raving about America’s un-literary culture, and the crushing power of big publishing that made it impossible for new writers to survive. My wife said to me: “If you have time to gripe and complain about something, you have time to do something about it. ... Why don’t you publish your own book?”

Promptly, I gave her 20 reasons why I could not self-publish, and as she refuted every one we passed a pickup truck that had broken down, and we stopped to see if we could help. The driver was an old white-haired woman, remarkably beautiful – like one of those women described in a poem by Walt Whitman. We drove her back to her farm, where a goat licked my face and nibbled on my beard; and we were served some fresh fruits and yogurt and homemade bread. When I told this woman that I had written a book, she said enthusiastically: “Wait here!” and in an instant she returned with two books, both with nice-looking covers. And after I had looked them over she told us that she had self-published the books. Through the next three hours and six cups of tea she told me everything she knew about self-publishing. ...

The next morning, [Zorba Press](#) was born.

**Your book gives 50 benefits of ebooks - can you pick your top 3 benefits out of those?**

I should start by saying that I love paper books, and I hope that they never disappear. But print publishing in general has three major problems.

First, it's too slow: books published by major publishers take many months to produce – and we impatient members of the Internet Nation want our information yesterday, or at the latest, right now.

Secondly: printed books are expensive, and costs are rising all the time.

Thirdly, and most importantly: printed matter eats up trees and energy and other resources: it's bad for the environment.

For example: one year of Sunday newspapers produced by the New York Times is responsible for the destruction and consumption of almost 4 million trees.

Ebooks solve these three problems of print publishing. They give us the latest available information. Ebooks of the future, like software, will be featured with an option for “automatic updates.”

So, for example, you can buy the 1.0 edition of my ebook about ebooks, and if you turn on your “update now” button, you get a newer and larger ebook, with more information, and a list of changes and additions. “New in version 1.1: Michael Pastore is interviewed by Joanna Penn.”

Ebooks are cheap to produce, despite protests from large publishers who are trying to justify high ebook prices. And ebooks are great for our environment, because they save trees, and reduce many other costs involved in transporting books.

There are a couple of bumper stickers that are hilariously common in my little town, so that if you see the bumper sticker you know that you're in Ithaca. One says: “Ithaca, New York: 10 square miles surrounded by reality.” ... Another bumper sticker, referring to life under Emperor Bush, reminds us: “If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention.” Our natural environment is in very bad shape, and publishers and authors (and everyone) had better begin to pay attention to these issues.

Authors and publishers should be leaders in helping our world make the essential transition to a sustainable (“green”) lifestyle.

**You are a publisher of physical print books (Zorba Press), so why are you so fascinated with ebooks?**

As a reader, I often use both: the printed book and the ebook. I can read a paperback or a hardcover, and then make notes and annotations in my ebook, without harming the physical book. And usually my notes are so long and rambling, that they would never fit in the physical book margins.

For print-book publishers, ebooks are a blessing. Offering ebooks, I can reach a much larger audience, and sell my works at a much lower price. And I can give away whole books, or parts of books, for free, in the ebook edition. Additionally, by offering my works as ebooks, I can much more easily reach an audience in every nation. The high shipping costs to these countries is now not a factor in the customer’s decision to buy.

So from a practical standpoint, ebooks are helping to connect me with more readers. But there’s something else, and this something else is very important to me. I really do believe that the publishing industry in America has lost its way. There are a few notable exceptions, but for the most part, corporate publishing has failed in its primary mission: to renew our culture by finding and publishing the very best books.

Clifford Lynch tells us that books are not merely commodities, and should not be treated as such. Books carry and convey our most significant thoughts, dreams and experiences. The world’s best books might stimulate discussions, and make our culture progress. Books really do have this power – to move individuals and cultures towards more freedom, more equality, more creativity, more personal fulfillment, more empathy and more human brotherhood.

Books help to make us more human and more free; and that is why, throughout history, tyrants who oppress freedom have always begun their mad reigns by destroying books.

So while traditional publishing has failed to bring a variety of new and significant authors to the reading world, ebooks – and independent publishing – are now taking up this important work. For me, ebooks are more than a technological advance. Ebooks have the potential to bring good books and great books to everyone, and to change our world for the better.

**What made you publish your ebook for only \$1? Why should ebooks be low-cost or free?**

To answer the second question first: ebooks should be low cost or free because they cost so little to produce. Selling an ebook on the Lulu storefront costs nothing for hosting or bandwidth fees, and Lulu takes only 20% of the total sale price.

What is your main goal as an author or publisher? If that goal is to make the highest possible profit, then your ebooks will not be cheap.

If your goal is to reach the widest possible audience and to thank your readers for their interest in your work – then your ebooks will be sold at the lowest possible price that you can afford to sell them.

Free ebooks are given away by Free Culture advocates such as Cory Doctorow, who has discovered that giving away his ebooks for free helps him to sell copies of the paperback.

“Why did I publish my ebook for a dollar?” ... I’m a “nut”, that’s why. Carl Jung says that to be fulfilled, we need to keep these four elements of our personalities in balance: thinking, feeling, sensation, and intuition. I am out of balance; my intuition is too strong, and I often follow it, sometimes to a complete fiasco, and other times to the stars. ... Well, I woke up one morning and my intuition shouted: “Sell this ebook for a dollar!” ... So I thought I would take a chance, and follow that inner voice.

In addition, I’m trying to send a message to the publishing and epubublishing community: “Selling your ebooks for a very low price is a great way to promote ebooks, and to attract new readers.”

### **The big question! How can authors make a living out of books if content is so cheap?**

Joanna, do you need to be so practical about this business? ... Just joking: actually, that is a very good question. But first let’s ask another – and perhaps a more essential – question: How can authors make a living?

A few years ago I reviewed an extraordinary book by John Maxwell Hamilton, titled: *Casanova Was A Booklover*. Giacomo Casanova, the 18th Century adventurer, is one of history’s most misunderstood individuals. He is often confused with “Don Juan”, who was an exploiter of women; but Casanova, if you read the Willard R. Trask translation of his *Memoirs*, is a lover and admirer of women, ala the Zorba in *Zorba the Greek*.

But I should return to talking about Hamilton’s wonderful book – which is now for sale, used, on the Internet, for 52 cents. (That’s less than a one-dollar ebook!) Hamilton explains the economic reality of the writing life: statistics prove that fewer than 10 percent of American writers are able to make a living from writing alone. Most authors have other jobs for income; or they are independently wealthy; or they rely on financial support from a relative or a spouse.

So the choices for modern authors and publishers are: A) sell fewer books at a higher profit; or B), sell more copies at a lower profit.

The option “B” is available only for self-publishing authors who do their own work. If you were employing a team of publicists, editors, designers; if you have a rented office instead of a home office; and so on, then your expenses would be too great,

and “B” would not be an option for you. If you’re going the independent route — and you’re not related to Oprah Winfrey or Bill Gates — it’s a good idea to keep your expenses as low as possible. As you make money, you can put that money back into the business, by investing in essential things.

My idea is that by selling the ebooks for one dollar, I will reach more readers, and eventually, in the long run, make more profit. And if you reach more readers, then you are promoting reading — and every author and publisher should make a commitment to solving our industry’s biggest problem: People these days are reading less. If we don’t work together to solve that problem, then paper books — and even ebooks — will become extinct in a future that may appear sooner than we expect.

**I have (amusingly) bought the print copy of your book as well as the ebook. Do ebooks really boost print copy sales?**

Do ebooks boost print copy sales, or are ebooks a competitor to the print editions? ... I tend to think “yes” to both questions; but a bigger “yes” to the first half: Ebooks do help to sell your print copies. It’s equally good for me whether a reader buys my ebook edition or my print edition: I’m happy as long as she/he is buying one of the formats. Offering the book as an ebook edition gives the reader one more option.

Thank you, Joanna: that’s very kind of you to buy the print copy along with the ebook. Authors need to support one another in many ways. Now of course you can’t buy everyone’s book, but you can find some authors who you like, and get behind them 100%, and build a small “support team”.

A few years ago I lectured at the local library, a presentation that was called: “Authors Beware! The Perils and Pleasures of Publishing by Print-on-Demand.” ... There are many advantages of print on demand; but the biggest downside is that the cost to print one book is very high. My solution? ... When I lived on a Greek island I saw that the villagers had joined together to form an “Olive Oil Cooperative.” ...

They needed to press the olives into oil, but individually they could not afford the big pressing machine. So all the farmers combined their cash on hand, and bought one machine that they shared. Then each farmer would bring their olives to the factory, they would leave the place with bottles of olive oil. (Which, by the way, has a dozen uses in Greece, from salad dressing to hair tonic.) The cooperative (owned by everyone) would take ten percent of the value of the oil, to pay for the upkeep of the expensive press that made the olives, and to pay for “promotion” of this delicious olive oil.

So I think that if publishers and authors are going to survive, and make a living from their work, they will need to join together into these kinds of cooperative ventures, 100% employee owned. That would offer many advantages, including correcting a great injustice in contemporary publishing: the percentage of the book’s sale price that is given to the author.

Authors in the future may look back at our generation and wonder:

“Wow! Were these authors crazy? ... Why did they give up their copyrights to the publishers? ... And why didn’t they insist on getting a fair share — a much larger percentage — for their creative work? Didn’t they value their work? ... Why didn’t those early 21st Century authors realize that the publishing industry can exist without agents, and without publishers, and without booksellers — but it could not exist for one minute without its authors!”

Instead of an online bookseller, why not sell books through an authors cooperative? ... That’s a win-win opportunity for everyone, and the energetic founder of this gold mine would be very well rewarded.

**You love reading and are obviously well read. What do you say to those people who think technology is “killing” reading and book culture?**

I would first say, “You’re right.” ... Technology is “killing” reading and book culture, and the facts exist to fuel this claim. American teenagers are now spending more than 31 hours per week online. The American Psychological Association, and other watchdog groups, now recognize that too much television watching, and playing violent video games are dangerous to children in many ways.

Everyone should read the book by Neil Postman, Technopoly. (If you can’t find time to read it, there are summaries on the Internet).

Postman explains how every new technology changes us. The new technology helps us in some ways, and it harms us in other ways, often in unexpected ways.

On the whole, I think that Technology has helped our world much more than it has harmed it. But we do need to be aware of the dangers, and one of those dangers is distraction. Tied up with computers and the Internet, many people are ignoring the “essentials” of living, such as relationships with live human beings, creating things (whether it is writing a novel, or playing an instrument, or pursuing some hobby with a passion ... ), and connecting with nature and the outdoors.

Technology is a tool that can be used for good or for not-so- good.

About a year and half ago, I started a blog [Epublishers Weekly](#), hoping to explore those aspects of technology that humanize us.

Reading is declining, and my hope (and prediction) is that ebooks and the Internet can (and will) help to spark a renaissance in reading, and in appreciating good books.

**You say “Print publishing has one foot in the grave and the other foot on a banana peel”, so what is the future of publishing? What will publishing look like in 5 years time?**

The future of publishing is up to us. We are creating it: everyone involved in independent publishing is part of a movement that is growing in sales and in significance.

Right now there are three major “forces” in publishing. There is the “traditional publishing”, which is mostly owned by big corporations, who publish for profit, and for whom books themselves are mere commodities, like canned meat. (When exceptions exist, they are wonderful: publishers such as [W.W. Norton](#), and [O'Reilly Media](#), and [Grove/Atlantic](#) and many others are doing extraordinary work. These publishers have remembered that publishing has a noble mission, and must be a balance between commerce and culture.)

The second force in publishing is “Free Culture” publishing: this involves people such as [Brewster Kahle](#) and Michael Hart who are giving the public access to free ebooks, and other media. And many other authors, and academic institutions, are now giving away, for free, electronic copies of their books.

The corporate publishers are big dinosaurs: change there happens slowly, and in five years we may just see more of the same, except for a steady decline in sales. The Free Culture people are enhancing our culture, and fortunately for us, they will keep on doing what they are doing.

The biggest change in the next 5 years will come from the third force in publishing: the Independent publishing movement – Indie publishing, as it is called.

As recently as ten years ago self-publishing was a stigma. If you walked into a party and said “I self-published my book,” then the room would first go silent, a hundred eyes would stare at you with a mixture of incomprehension and pity – and then you’d be politely or impolitely ignored for the remainder of the evening. Now everything has changed: self-publishing and small-press publishing is not a last resort, it is a smart choice.

So here’s what might happen in 5 years, if independent publishers are savvy enough to unify. (In my book, 50 Benefits of Ebooks, I give 10 predictions for the future of publishing: here are 5, including some new ones.)

**a. More people will self-publish, and publish their books as ebooks.**

Take a look at Mark Coker’s website [Smashwords](#), and you’ll see a number of “name” authors have jumped on board there, including the grandfather of self-publishing, [Dan Poynter](#).

**b. Print book sales will decline, but more ebooks will be sold.** In the very near future we are going to get a much larger choice in ebook reading devices, and of course, color displays will replace the current black and white. The next big thing in reading ebooks may be “Netbooks” – those small computers that connect you with computing “in the clouds”.

**c. Leaders will emerge.** Some leaders of the indie-publishing movement will arise to give us information and inspiration. ... That's happening right now. I've been thinking about writing an article for my blog, titled: "Superwomen of the Independent Publishing Movement."

... I see people such as [April Hamilton](#), [Joanna Penn](#), [Liza Daly](#), [Madison McGraw](#) and [Sylvia Hubbard](#) (apologies to many others not mentioned here but doing great work) who have generously and intelligently been spreading the word – via paper books, and ebooks, and blogs, and newsgroups, and Facebook posts, and Twitter tweets – about the fascinating and complex new worlds of publishing.

**d. Independent publishers will unite.** An umbrella organization – an International Association of Independent Authors and Publishers – will form, and emerge as a major force in the new publishing movement.

This will bring both sanity and balance to the troubled publishing industry. For example, as the Authors Guild denies the right of ebook reading devices to read books aloud, this new "Indie Authors Guild" will welcome this feature with open arms and open ears.

**e. Reading will rebound.** More people will read books (or ebooks) that matter. ... I think we're on the edge of a reading renaissance. Human beings have many facets and needs: and one of these is the need for self-understanding, and personal fulfillment. Great books offer wisdom and insights that people in today's society are seeking. And of course the pure joy of reading is yet another reason to be hopeful for a reading renaissance. And finally, our modern world is so complex, and growing more so every day, if we do not become once again a nation of readers and learners and creative persons, then we will not survive.

### **What is your next project? What are you excited about next?**

I am excited about Spring coming to Ithaca, and the warm weather and the bird-songs, after five months of snow and cold. Writing-wise, I'm now working on a novel about my year living in Greece and Turkey; and some non-fiction books: The Tao of Information, and The Art of Love and Happiness. I'm also studying some authors that I admire very much: the American Transcendentalists (Emerson, Fuller, Thoreau, Whitman); and Goethe, and Anzia Yezierska, and Nikos Kazantzakis, and Erich Fromm.

### **How can people get in contact with you and buy your book?**

The book has a companion website, [www.EpublishersWeekly.net](http://www.EpublishersWeekly.net). That site offers contact information, links and resources about ebooks and independent publishing, and a link to my storefront on Lulu where my paperback can be purchased for \$ 20, or the ebook edition for \$1.

Original Post can be found at [The Creative Penn](#) blog: Writing, self-publishing, print-on-demand, internet sales and promotion... for your book.