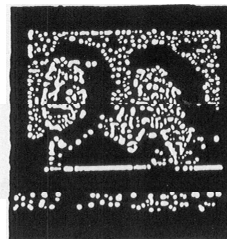


Another Dot-Corn Dream Punctured: Random House Scaling Back E-Books

by Gabriel Snyder



Last summer—just about when that big, fat Internet bubble had finally, officially burst—Random House pulled the entrepreneurial equivalent of stumbling into a party with a funny hat and a case of beer at 4:30 a.m., long after everybody had gone to bed. With great fanfare, the famous publishing house grandly announced the debut of an e-book imprint, AtRandom.com.

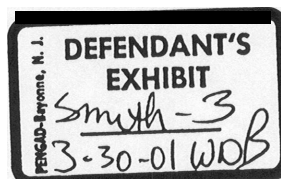
Now, Random House proclaimed, tech-savvy readers could use their computers to download the prose stylings of writers like Elizabeth Wurtzel, Lewis Lapham, Robert Samuelson, New Yorker staff writer Tad Friend and dot-corn chronicler Po Bronson. New titles by these authors would be available only as e-books; the publisher would not print hard copies.

It was a big, bold gamble, a thumb in the eye to 546 years of post-Gutenberg publishing. It was also a giant dud.

Six months after Random House's earth-rattling boast, e-books are about as popular as Jar-Jar Binks action figures and Color Me Badd records. With e-book titles such as Ms. Wurtzel's *Radical Sanity* fizzling on the e-shelves—sales through last week had just cracked 100 copies nationwide—enthusiasm within the publishing world toward e-books has significantly dampened. And now, Random House is reneging on its no-hard-copies pledge: AtRandom.com recently announced that it will offer print versions of its e-books.

"Right now, it's kind of a nonexistent marketplace," said Sam Lipskar, a publishing agent.

Lest we sound like Luddites, it's important to state that it's very possible, if not likely, that people will eventually come to embrace electronic publishing. Already, certain e-books—like Stephen King's *Riding the Bullet*, released for free last year—have succeeded. But so far, the ballyhooed e-book phenomenon has been pure hype, and Random House's euphoric AtRandom.com announcement—once viewed as the forecast of a revolution—has been significantly downgraded.



In an interview on Friday, March 9, AtRandom.com Books' editorial director, Mary Bahr, sounded more like someone who spends hours wandering the stacks at the Strand **Book** Shop than an e-book revolutionary.

"Words printed on a page provide a reading experience that is one we're accustomed to—but also, as it turns out, one that is extremely efficient," she said. "A paperback is not enormously expensive for us to produce and the reader to buy."

Ms. Bahr became the AtRandom.com chief after her predecessor, Jonathan Karp—who had helped negotiate e-book deals for Ms. Wurtzel, Mr. Lapham, Mr. Bronson and others—surprised his colleagues by leaving the publishing house to go work for the film producer Scott Rudin. (That pairing didn't take, however, and now Mr. Karp is back at Random House.)

While Mr. Karp once touted the no-hard-copies pledge, Ms. Bahr now says that AtRandom will be selling trade-paperback editions of all its titles. She also said that next fall's list of Random e-books won't have any novels on it, and that readers shouldn't expect much in the way of long-form literary journalism, either.

"Books that are narrative—that have a beginning, a middle and an end, that you're meant to read through for pleasure—it's a better experience when it's words on a page," Ms. Bahr said, noting that she was speaking, in this case, as a reader of books as much as an editor of them.

The two titles that Ms. Bahr will push hard as e-books are the increasingly media-ubiquitous Dr. Ian Smith's *Dr. Ian Smith's Guide to Medical Websites* and a series called *Code Notes*, which will consist of reference titles on computer programming. And in an attempt to make the e-book reading experience more compelling, Ms. Bahr said that each title will have a heavy Web component. For example, with *Code Notes*, e-book-readers will have the opportunity to go to a companion Web site that offers drills and chauooms. "There's a real value to that kind of digital book," Ms. Bahr said.

Indeed, AtRandom.com hasn't thrown in the e-book towel.

To celebrate its first list, on March 8 AtRandom threw a very traditional book party at W New York Union Square. The editors, agents and authors drank white wine, ate red-bell-pepper slices and mingled, but there was a sense of pessimism and defensiveness in the room.

When it came time for Jeff Blackburn—an executive for Amazon.com, which has partnered with AtRandom to sell its titles—to give his perfunctory congratulatory remarks, he ended on a dour note. "The one criticism I have to make is that people expect to find just about anything" on Amazon, he said. So far, the e-book offerings have been rather thin: "We need to make up that gap." Mr. Blackburn also said that the e-books had to be more compelling than regular

print books, drawing an analogy between the straightforward VHS videotape and the bells, whistles and directors' commentaries found on DVD's.

But also weighing heavily in the room that night were the dismal sales numbers released in an Associated Press story the previous day: In the first two and a half weeks they were offered, just 40 e-book versions had been sold of Ms. Wurtzel's *Radical Sanity*, a Jane Pratt-style advice book for younger versions of herself, and 26 copies of Cameron Dougan's first novel, *Because She Is Beautiful*. Ms. Bahr said that the numbers were held down by some early problems, like getting the titles to display properly on Amazon.com, and that the glitches have since been fixed. She added that initial reports from two of AtRandom's distributors for the past two weeks suggest that sales are picking up, with Ms. Wurtzel's 100-plus in sales leading the pack.

Reached by Off the Record, Ms. Wurtzel wasn't terribly dismayed by the double-digit sales number.

"I'm not surprised," she said, adding that she had hoped the book would be much cheaper than its \$10 retail price. "It seemed like an experiment, a whole new way of publishing books." (*Radical Sanity* was recently released as a paperback. too.)

Other e-book authors were similarly cautious. Henry Alford, a regular contributor to *Vanity Fair* and *The New York Times Magazine*, said he initially expected his AtRandom humor book, *Our There: One Man's Search to Find the Funniest Person on the Internet*, to be an e-book "for a while." Now, he said, "I think of it as a trade paperback."

Gersh Kuntzman, the *New York Post* columnist and author of *Hair! Mankind's Historic Quest to End Baldness*, said his impression was that the upcoming release of his title as an e-book was a marketing tool, and that the main event was the actual paperback edition, set for release in April.

"I do think there is a future for e-books," Mr. Kuntzman said. "But there's no present for e-books-or, quite frankly, almost anything on the Internet right now-so Random House is doing the right thing by putting a full commitment behind the printed versions of all our books."

Sam Lipskar, the agent who represents Mr. Kuntzman, agreed that for the foreseeable future, e-books will primarily be a form of marketing: "I think [AtRandom] clearly recognizes that a lot of the electronic marketplace is driving print sales."

Richard Abate, an agent at I.C.M. who is handling electronic-rights deals for authors, agreed. "People are recognizing that e-books can be used to drive paper books," he said. As for the promised revolution, he and others will have to wait.