



Opinion: let's all go HBO

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Peer review has its place but so do publishing houses with editors, argues Trevor Dolby I was on a panel a few years back with Lynne Truss - pre Eats, Shoots - Nick Clee and a couple of others, blathering to a group of hopefuls about how to get published. It had all gone well. Then a young woman in the audience addressed a question to me. What right did I have to decide that her book wasn't good enough to be published? 'None at all', I suggested. She went on to say that because of me, and people like me, there might be another Ulysses out there languishing under someone's bed. All I could say was that good writing will out: I may not find something to my taste, but that if the writer had real passion, tenacity and talent, the work would find an audience. She wasn't happy and button-holed me at the end, revealing that she'd written a masterpiece that had been repeatedly rejected.

Today she would have no problem getting her words out there. Anyone can get 'published', on blogs, social networking sites, Lulu, Tony Cook's ABCtales.com, amongst much else. One lady, part of a group of internet publishing activists I spoke to recently, publishes her books online, and suggested she had many thousands of people reading them and that soon there would be no need for publishers. Thanks to her, and people like her, peer review was going to sweep away narrow-minded self-interested publishers. As for paying for books, well soon we will be giving them away, particularly ebooks - as, apparently, they don't cost anything to produce. Someone asked how authors were to make a living. That's when it all got silly.

I haven't heard of her becoming a best-selling author or a critical success yet, but who knows. Not many self-published authors do become major international bestsellers, Christopher Paolini perhaps the most recent exception. You could say that's because self-published authors haven't got the marketing and sales operations necessary, which is a point. Perhaps that's our ultimate fate in 20 years time: to be just marketing and sales operations, delivering the books in whatever format. But one cannot help thinking that we are pretty good as a group of dysfunctional individuals at not missing talent, and that's why people are prepared to pay to read the books we publish.

It's striking how the TV business is having similar arguments about its future. According to some, TV is finished because only eight million watch *EastEnders* today when there were 13 million a decade ago. People no longer leave the pub in their millions as they did in the 1950s to listen to *Hancock's Half Hour* on the wireless. Today there's YouTube, BBC iPlayer and the other suit-yourself viewing devices, which are in the end making scheduled broadcast TV redundant.

It's complete bollocks of course. CD-RoMs were going to sweep away illustrated books, films-on-demand were going to sweep away cinemas, *Playboy* was going to sweep away men's penchant for scarlet women. What will actually happen is that we will get our words and/or moving images from a variety of sources, including the traditional printed book and the traditional broadcast TV. The problem will be how we authors and 'publishers' - make money out of these disparate delivery models.

In the end, of course, we come back to the judgement of quality and how we back that judgement. The charming, boyish, Tom Hooper, multi-award-winning film director of *The Damned United* and HBO's terrific 13- Emmy *John Adams*, was on *Newsnight* Review the other week with Kirsty-Shouty Wark.



Kirsty-Shouty: 'Is the day of the mass audience now at an end?'

Tom: 'You now need to be more tenacious about finding your audience. I think it would be a good idea to make a little bit less, fund it better, make sure you really have got something to sell because it's good and then really go after your audience. In HBO-land if they've got something they like they make sure you cannot miss it. There is an audacity about HBO from the top of the company [when we made *John Adams*]: they had ambition, they knew it was going to be a hard sell but they marketed it, and they pushed it, and they loved it, and they made it a success.'

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