

estimation, we're still in the early days of digital publishing, an era defined by efforts to translate the experience of reading a book "exactly onto an electronic device" such as Amazon's Kindle or tablet PCs. This is fine as far as it goes, but for Nash, genuinely excited by the possibilities that lie ahead, it's only a first step.

"That seems, to me, to be ignoring what digital books can do, the fact that we don't need to be glued to a narrative set down exactly as the author wanted it to be set down," he says. "Some authors will say, 'Well that's the book I wrote, I don't want you messing with my narrative. I spent years constructing this and that's the way the story flows for maximum effect.' That's fine, then don't change it. But there are things that you can do now that weren't possible with the book."

Consider the music industry, Nash says, where the advent of MP3s has radically changed the way we consume music. Where once we bought albums and singles, now we buy tracks and simply don't bother with the songs we don't like. "I don't think there's a direct correlation with reading, but it's that kind of spirit that I think is going to be interesting to see applied," he says. "Just the fact of books being digitally available will affect the way they're read and written in the future."

**"What worries me is how do readers know if a writer can string two words together before they buy?"**

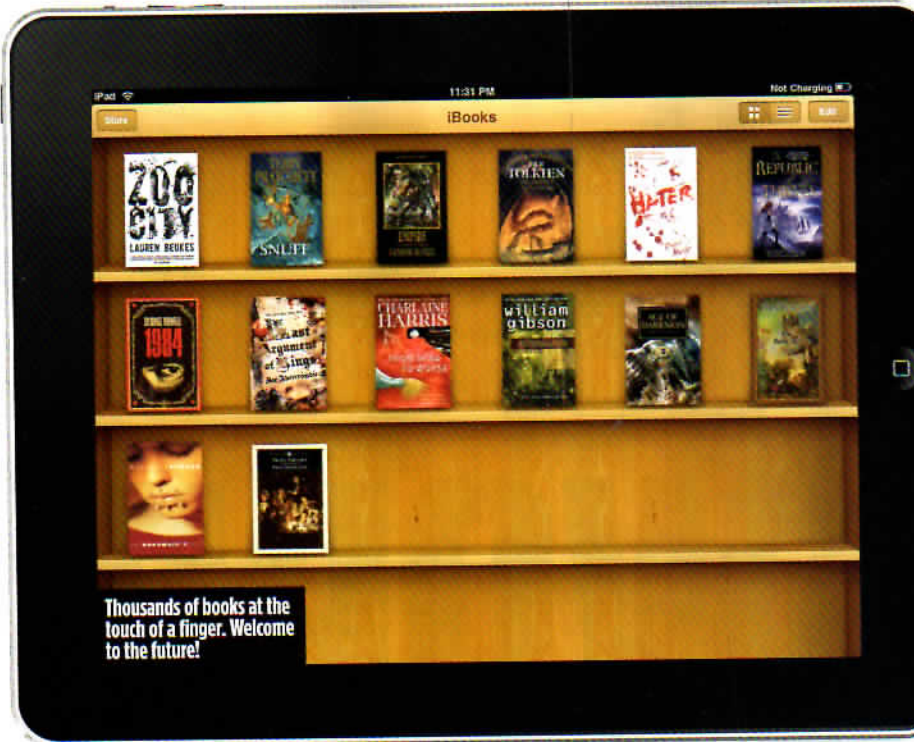
It's a crisp, clear-sighted vision that holds out a future of, for example, e-books augmented with video files, bolstered by short stories and interviews, and which incorporate social media, but in many respects it begs more questions than it answers.

Most pertinently, if this really is the future of publishing, how do we get there and what happens along the way? One answer is that the journey will certainly be bumpy, in great part because digital technologies open up publishing in new ways because it's so much easier to get work to an audience when you don't have to pay print-and-paper costs.

John Jarrold, a literary agent who previously worked for many years as an editor, explains what this means in practice. One of his clients is British author Adam Nevill, whose *Apartment 16* was top of Amazon's horror bestseller lists for close to three months last year. But look at the horror bestseller lists just a few months on, he says, and you'll find it's largely made up of self-published novels for the Kindle selling at less than a pound a pop.

"You don't know if that's going to last because people may think, 'It's 70p, it doesn't matter whether I like it or not,'" says Jarrold. "The public will vote with their wallets: people will either say, 'Yes, this is the way I want to do it,' or, 'No, I still want to pay more to get e-books from a reputable publisher.'"

For the industry, much rests on which way readers decide to go here, especially when you set that 70p figure against a dispute a couple of years back between US publishers and



Amazon.com over a price of \$9.99 for e-books. But however readers decide to jump, the wider point is that we're already in an era when digital publishing is shaking up the market.

Consider the career of horror novelist David Moody, whose *Autumn* garnered more than half a million downloads, prompting him to set up his own Infected Books as early as 2005. Moody, who prefers the term independently published over self-published because of connotations of "crap books which really shouldn't be published", started outside the conventional industry before coming into the fold after finding an audience.

**DIGITAL AMBITIONS**

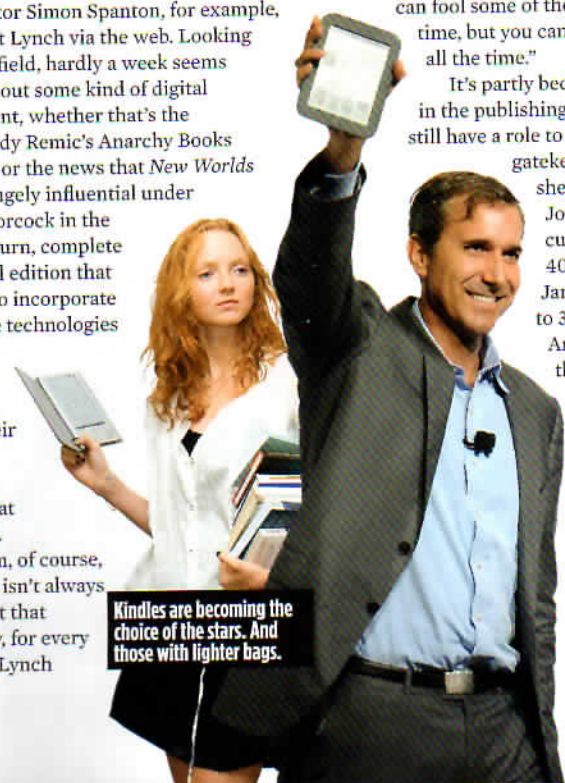
Other writers have similar career trajectories. Gollancz editor Simon Spanton, for example, "found" Scott Lynch via the web. Looking at the wider field, hardly a week seems to go by without some kind of digital announcement, whether that's the launch of Andy Remic's *Anarchy Books* (see boxout) or the news that *New Worlds* magazine, hugely influential under Michael Moorcock in the '60s, is to return, complete with a digital edition that will "strive to incorporate cutting-edge technologies to present fiction and editorial pieces to their maximum impact" – whatever that might mean.

A problem, of course, is that more isn't always more: To put that another way, for every Moody and Lynch

who make a breakthrough, there are thousands of budding authors who will never make the grade, and it can be confusing for readers trying to sort through which writers are actually worth seeking out. "What worries me is how do readers know if a book's been edited or not, how do readers know if a writer can string two words together before they buy?" says Jo Fletcher. "They don't."

In this context, Fletcher offers up a cautionary tale. A glut of bad books, she says, killed off the boom in literary horror that followed in the wake of such writers as Stephen King. "Publishers started jumping on the bandwagon without knowing anything about the field and publishing an awful lot of stuff that simply wasn't good enough," she says. "You can fool some of the readers some of the time, but you can't fool all of the readers all the time."

It's partly because of this that many in the publishing industry insist they still have a role to play as so-called gatekeepers, filtering the sheer volume of material. Jo Fletcher, for example, currently has more than 400 books to assess. John Jarrold says he receives up to 30 submissions a week. And even for those books that do make it through, points out Julie Crisp, editorial director at Tor, there's still a huge amount of work in getting them ready for publication. "There are books out there by self-published authors now who will still prefer to have a publishing house



Author David Moody – who's actually a very nice chap, you know.



behind them because they have the support of a marketing team and a PR team. They have an editor and they have that direction and focus, which they can't afford to do if they're doing it all by themselves," she says. "So I don't think the publishing company is going to die, far from it, but I think we'll evolve."

Tor, she says, already has big e-publishing plans, although some of these rely on the technology catching up with what the company hopes to do. If not exactly relaxed about changes in the industry, she's certainly not fazed by what's happening. "When you think about it, *Hitchhiker's* was the original e-book wasn't it?" she says. "The whole concept came from that. Douglas Adams would have loved it."

Indeed he would, but he would probably also have been acutely aware that, once change begins to cascade through an industry, it can

be next to impossible to control, as record companies have recently discovered to their cost and, with the recent nosedive of DVD sales, film companies too.

"A younger generation that loves technology will be much more open to e-books," says John Jarrold, musing on a death-of-stuff era where those growing up today cease to see books as physical artifacts. You might also add that a younger generation far more used to dealing with the deluge of information that a digital world produces might not see the need for a publishing industry mediating what it reads.

Despite these kinds of concerns, though, Jarrold remains essentially optimistic about the future – as indeed do Crisp, Fletcher and Nash. Readers, after all, will always read. "I know it's a Chinese curse," he says, "but I'm really pleased to live in interesting times." **SFX**

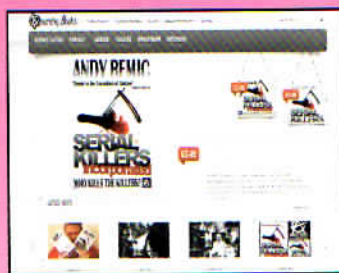
## Anarchy in the UK...



Launched in April, Anarchy Books ([anarchy-books.com](http://anarchy-books.com)) is a new digital venture from novelist Andy Remic that may offer some clues as

to where publishing is going. It came about, says Remic, when he tried to sell books that departed from what he'd previously done. "The few publishers approached weren't interested," he says, "because they claimed I would be pitching to a 'new' audience from my existing fanbase. Business execs, huh?"

What started as a way to get his own work to an audience soon snowballed into something more. "Our focus is on multi-strand publishing projects," proclaims the company's website, grandly, "concepts which combine different media to present a wider experience for the entertainment junkie."



"I have close links with some musicians and filmmakers, and to be honest, I always admired the finely bearded Michael Moorcock and what he did with Hawkwind – the symbiosis of music/poetry/novel," says Remic. "I thought I'd experiment a little, and nick Big Mike's idea. If it doesn't work, I'll try something else."

So far, the omens are good, especially as other writers will be contributing material too, including the likes of Eric Brown, Lauren Beukes, James Lovegrove and Neal Asher.

However, all this doesn't mean we should be predicting the death of the traditional novel, says Remic. Digital books, he thinks, "will expand quickly, then settle into a balance with traditional print media". He adds: "There will *always* be a place for traditional print novels as long as I, and people of my mindset, are still breathing. There's something perfect about holding a new novel. Fuck Hollywood. Nothing gets close to a brilliant new book."