



Boston Authors Club

February 2023 Newsletter

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Monica Acker's debut picture book, *Brave Like Mom* (Beaming Books) was published last year. Monica is a writer and educator, and a member of SCBWI, 12x12, and Children's Book Insider with a BA in creative arts and an MAT degree in childhood education. She lives in Reading, Massachusetts, with her family.



What aspects of being part of a community of writers and appreciators of literature are most important to you?

I love writing, creating, and reading. Sharing in a community of people with similar passions is energizing. I love bouncing ideas off others. Writing is often done alone, but being part of a community allows for discussions that aid in my growth as a writer and as a person. Writing *Brave Like Mom* was such a personal experience. I originally wrote it for myself, but my critique group helped me see that this story allowed me to heal, and had the potential to help others.

What works have shaped you as a reader and/or writer?

I will never forget the end of *Miss Nelson Is Missing*, by Harry G. Allard and James Marshall. That surprise twist ending with Viola Swamp's outfit in Miss Nelson's closet still makes me smile. The end was surprising, supremely satisfying, and I wanted to read it again; the golden standard of awesome endings. This was the first of many books that made me want to write the story so I could one day surprise and satisfy readers.

Interview by Lisa Rogers

MEETING

the

MARKET

This is the first in a series of interviews by Mary J Cronin, BAC Newsletter Editor, highlighting publishing, marketing, and sales trends that impact BAC members.

Mark Coker is an entrepreneur, author, and ebook publisher. He launched SmashWords, a free ebook publishing and distribution platform, in 2008 with a mission to make it fast, free, and easy for authors to get their ebooks to readers, libraries, and bookstores. In 2022, Draft2Digital acquired SmashWords, and Mark became the merged company's Chief Strategy Officer. The newly combined publishing platforms include over 250,000 authors and publishers around the world, with over 800,000 ebooks and 11,000 print on demand paperback books. The following interview represents Mark Coker's personal reflections on today's most disruptive publishing trends.



Q: Mark, you were a pioneer in independent ebook publishing fifteen years ago. What major changes have impacted authors during that time?

Today, it's easier than ever for any writer anywhere in the world, to write a book, self-publish it and have that book distributed to all the major retailers. That has led to new challenges as well as benefits for authors and publishers. In the past, print books would be forced out of print, based on a limited shelf space at physical retailers. With the shift to online retailing and ebooks, shelf space has become unlimited, publishing is unconstrained, and retailers can continue to sell the titles on their virtual shelves, even the books that don't sell a single copy for years.

Of course, that's a double-edged sword for writers. It means your work is immortal; it can always be discovered and appreciated by a future reader. That's what we all want as authors. But digital publishing also creates a huge challenge for professional authors--the discoverability challenge. How do you stand out? Authors are too quick to blame themselves for not figuring out digital marketing and advertising tools. The reality is that today even great books, even free great books, will have difficulty finding readers. It has become more and more challenging for professional authors to earn a living through writing.

Q: How will AI and tools like ChatGPT change the publishing landscape?

AI is going to completely transform everything about publishing. I don't think people fully understand how soon this will happen. AI tools like ChatGPT transform how books are written, to the point where it will force a rethinking about the definition of authorship, and what qualifies a person to call themselves an author.

When I first played with ChatGPT, I asked it to write a couple of short stories, including a short story on a topic I had already written about. I was flabbergasted and shocked and terrified by the quality of what it spit out. Sure, there was some weird and anomalous information, but that could be easily edited out. What was shocking is how good the output was, how clearly it was drawing upon human knowledge about literature and artistry, including what makes a story we will enjoy reading.

Today, ChatGPT is only scratching the surface of the innovation we're going to see in the next few years. We're just in the Model-T era. Inevitably, AI will drive the rate of change in publishing exponentially. We will see an explosion of original written content that has been touched by AI in the next few years.

Q: Do you see any cause for optimism amidst these changes?

On the plus side, AI will help all writers, including great authors, to write better. But we're only a couple of years away from AI tools writing full-length novels with amazing human complexity, with all the humanity, creativity, and fallibility that makes a novel great. And when that happens, even the best writers are going to face serious competition from machine-written stories and books. It's going to become increasingly difficult to distinguish between what's written by a machine and what's written by a human.

There will also be an impact on the audience. Using AI, readers will be able to create the exact story that they want to read. There could be a completely new skill set that we'll see develop, like when Google and other search engines first came on the scene, people needed to learn how to search for things. That's a skill that we take for granted now. I think that the people who enjoy reading are going to learn to write their own books, based on being able to describe the book they want to read to an AI tool. Millions, possibly billions, of one-of-a-kind books, high-quality, AI-generated books, will be created and enjoyed by individual readers. Maybe that explosion of content will be two years from now, maybe five years from now, but the technology that will make it possible is already here, so that day is coming.

Soon we may see an AI tool capable of deciding what it wants to publish independent of human input, deciding on the topic, and the treatment and style, leveraging all the information that it's automatically collecting about reader preferences. And some of this content is going to be very desirable to readers. Based on the history of exponential improvement in technology, we have to be prepared for a lot of these AI-written books to be very high quality. On the positive side, AI is going to unlock a tremendous amount of content, make it more accessible, more available, more affordable in more formats, to more readers. That's a good thing.

Q: What are the negatives you worry about?

There's already a darker side to social media and publishing. When anyone can publish anything, fake news spreads faster than real news. We have to expect there will be a dark side to a lot of future AI-generated content as well. What do I worry about most? The things that I've been worried about now for the last decade. That includes anti-competitive behavior by companies that dominate publishing, the impact that has on authors and independent retailers, on the culture of books, I'm concerned about censorship by algorithm, where books are published and promoted based on rules that don't necessarily reflect what readers are really looking for. When a dominant algorithm takes over, you can't expect there to be bookstores in every neighborhood, serving different communities of readers.

To sum up, I would say generally I'm still very optimistic about the future of publishing and authorship, the future of books and literature. I think anything that makes writing more accessible, anything that encourages people to write and read and enjoy books can be a good thing. Yes, there will be turmoil, but I believe that good is going to come out of the next stage of publishing as well.



PRESIDENTS MUSINGS

Books, books, books!

They've been arriving almost daily. I've gotten to know our UPS delivery man on a first-name basis. One of my now- adult children's childhood rooms has been turned into the "BAC room," as the books stack up, waiting to be delivered to the different reading committees.



There are close to 100 entries this year for our annual Julia Ward Howe prizes. This isn't entirely surprising: according to *Publisher's Weekly*, print book sales rose more than 8.8% since the start of the pandemic. Though bookstore sales are down, e-book sales are up. There have been anywhere from 700,000 to 1 million new books published worldwide each year in the past few years, though at least half of those are self-published books.

I enjoy opening these boxes that appear at my doorstep and leafing through each new book as I enter it into our database. What a variety of books there are! There are the multi-hundred page non-fiction books that I know must have taken their authors years of research. There are slim volumes of poetry with evocative titles (poetry collections have the best titles of any genre!) There are colorful board books for very young children, beautifully illustrated picture books for older children and enticing-looking chapter books for young readers. And then there are the novels that I and the rest of the fiction-reading committee cannot wait to begin reading. Some of the books are by very well-known and much-awarded authors, some are the first publications of writers. It's wonderful to see books written by colleagues, by friends, and of course, by BAC members

As I look at the piles of books, it's a little hard to believe that in just a few months' time, these thousands of pages will have been read, thought about and discussed by our reading groups who will make the difficult decisions about which books by Boston-area authors deserve the 2022 Julia Ward Howe prizes. But I know that soon these books will be off to readers, out of my son's room, and that I won't get to see Bobby the UPS guy quite as often until the 2023 entries begin to arrive.

Julie Dobrow
BAC President

BAC Author News

Elly Swartz is happy to announce that the paperback edition of her middle grade book, *Dear Student*, is coming out on Valentines Day.

Looking ahead to the fall, her forthcoming book, *Hidden Truths*, is scheduled for publication on



YESTER YEAR

Samuel Silas Curry's Daily Chuckle

Samuel Silas Curry (1847-1921) joined the Boston Authors Club in 1907. At the time he was the President of Boston's School of Expression. The School of Expression had been founded twenty-two years earlier, in 1885, as the result of a merger of Anna Baright's School of Elocution and Expression and Boston University's School of Oratory, where Curry was the Snow Professor of Oratory. The educational merger was accompanied by a second, more personal one; Curry and Baright were married in 1882.

Baright and Curry (pictured here) would work together to transform the School of Expression and eventually co-found Curry College in Milton. But I'm getting way head of myself. There are many more Samuel Curry elocution insights to describe.



Boston University was by no means the only academic institution that included courses in elocution during this period. Curry himself taught elocution courses at Harvard, Yale, and the Union Theological Seminary as well as at BU. He earned a master's degree from Boston University in 1878, and a PhD in 1880, taking courses in elocution while training for the ministry. In the process, Curry studied over forty theories of elocution but found them all wanting. Clearly, he thought, the world needed another one. In one Curry College history, Curry recounts that his motivation for doing elocution research stemmed from his experience of being unable to speak in public after years of "misuse of my voice" as a minister. Curry says, "I determined to search still more diligently to find the causes of my condition." The books he wrote expounding his theory include: *Foundations of Expression*, *Lessons in Vocal Expression*, *Mind and Voice*, and the ever-popular *Hints to Officers on Giving Commands* (Rule #8 Change words which are trochees to spondees.) A 278-page PhD dissertation by Paul Havener Gray titled *Origins of Expression: Principal Sources of Samuel Silas Curry's Theory of Expression* is available if you'd like to delve into the nuances of Curry's theory.

One can imagine a number of professions in which expressive speaking was a skill that could make or break a career---drill sergeant, actor, and minister come readily to mind---but it is hard to imagine, at least today, such an intense scholarly study of the topic of elocution. And yet.... Audible, LibriVox, and Blinkist, not to mention the daily flood of podcasts, seem to be doing quite well today. How many books by members of the Boston Authors Club are available in an audio format?

Recently I realized that my enjoyment of an audiobook is just as much a function of the narrator's skill as it is of the content of the book. I found myself listening to a title that I'd never take off the shelf just to enjoy the narrator's...er...elocution. So maybe the study of oratory is alive and well today even if it's not prominent in university course catalogs. As a side note, I've found that authors are not the best readers of their own work although there are exceptions; William Manchester and Bill Bryson come to mind.

Later in his life, Curry expanded the range of his literary work to include two best-selling self-help books. The first, published in 1915, was *How to add ten years to your life and to double its satisfactions*. Since longevity is at least as timely today as it was a century ago, I'll share the following advice from Curry on this topic: Start every day with several minutes of silent chuckling.

To quote from the book:

Sustaining the extension and full breath, laugh heartily, with little or no noise, chuckle to yourself persistently for several minutes. Centre the laughter in the breathing and the torso...If you are still skeptical, observe and experiment...Exercise in laughter sets free the vital organs and brings all parts into harmonious, normal activity, stimulates the circulation, quickens the metabolism of the cells and causes elimination. You will be tempted to omit the practice of the chuckle, but it should be especially emphasized.

Curry said that he changed his career trajectory from the ministry to elocutionist after attending a lecture on the scientific aspects of speech given by Alexander Graham Bell. We will pick up this thread of the story in the next column when we also address the weighty question: What is the difference between currying and schonfinkelling?

By Scott B Guthery



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