



Editorial 210

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New Year editorial

Happy New Year to all our readers! I realise the year is no longer as young as it was but we are still very much looking forward, wondering what the coming months will bring.

Predicting what might happen is not something to be done with any confidence. No wonder the Delphic Oracle made sure any pronouncements were opaque and ambiguous: better hedge your bets so that you are always right. I cannot claim expertise as the sibyls. However, I'm tempted to try to map the future, sketchily.

As might be expected, storm clouds hover over the horizon not least for public libraries. The Chancellor has announced that the austerity drive will continue, directly affecting local government. This is a particular threat to services, like libraries, where it is difficult to provide the hard statistical or financial evidence of worth; some things cannot be measured in this way. There seems to be no end in sight for closures ? even Birmingham Central Library, unveiled with such a fanfare only a couple of years ago, is threatened. What hope is there for those small branches often housed in buildings that require significant up keep? School libraries are also suffering, seen as irrelevant when most schools are concentrating on their league table position. If more libraries close, more librarians ? knowledgeable professionals who can provide valuable advice and suggestions ? will be lost. Already, according to CILIP, the profession has shrunk by over 5,000.

However, it's not all doom. There was the welcome Sieghart Report on public libraries, published in December last year, which emphasised their importance to communities, and the looming General Election may provide a chance to ask awkward questions.

What *is* certain is that the book will continue as an important medium. Sales of children's books over the Christmas period rose. While it is mainly a few well established, high profile authors who benefited, this is still very good news: such authors introduce children to the joys of reading, and ensure that reading for pleasure is seen as ?cool?. New authors will probably struggle even more to get a traditional publishing deal as the big publishing houses get ever bigger and marketing departments, rather than editors, drive policy. However, there are still some brave independent publishers taking risks. As Writing Courses flourish and multiply, new writers determined to see their work published will increasingly turn to self-publishing, both printing their own books, and producing e-books. According to Neilson BookData, the sales of e-readers have peaked and the market has levelled off, but E-books will not disappear. Instead, they will be increasingly absorbed into the publishing scene; they will become just another route through which readers can access books.

Perhaps more novels aimed at older readers will have the added impact of illustration ? as was once the case. Illustrations would make books more expensive, and so publishers might start to copy those of the 19th century who regularly sold illustrated and non-illustrated editions of a book at different prices. Today the smaller format paperback, a convenient pocket size, is returning and I think the number will grow. To keep the price down, the content could be drawn from a publisher's backlist ? once a standard feature of their catalogue. This might mean a welcome revival of

good titles that have been out of print for a number of years.

While I know my crystal ball is not reliable, I'm certain of one thing: the year ahead will be full of incident, with opportunities to be grasped and developments to be encouraged. Here, at Books for Keeps, we will be ready to report and review them as they happen. Keep in touch.

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