

Epistemographer

New and improved, but severely in need of a stylesheet...

June 05, 2005

Tumbleweeds...

They'll be blowing through here for another few days, for two reasons:

- Wordpress changeover is almost, but not quite, done
- I'm spending most of my waking hours this week running a [workshop](#)

At the very least, I'll emerge later this week with a review of another good book, plus the text of an article that ran in this month's IEEE Annals of the History of Computing.

Posted by Josh at [06:34 PM](#) | [Comments \(1\)](#)

May 24, 2005

Bookmark Now

Welcome to a Very Special installment of the [Virtual Book Tour](#); Very Special because, you see, the book in question is the brainchild of the founder of the VBT itself, [Kevin Smokler](#).

Here's the thing - I love this book. It's diverse, it's got depth and breadth, it's breezy and fun yet bits and pieces bounce around in your mind for weeks after reading it. It's a great read, and successfully stands on its own two little book-feet.

And I'm completely and utterly incapable of approaching it as anything other than my friend Kevin's book.

Were I writing a review for Publisher's Weekly (something I've been doing roughly twice a month for the past several years), I'd say something like this:

Bookmark Now is an engaging collection of personal writing from some of today's most vibrant and exciting young authors. Compiled by Bay Area writer Kevin Smokler, who has made a name for himself among publishers as a consultant on the online world of online bibliophile blogs and communities, the 24 essays are a mix of autobiographical, introspective and confessional, all grappling with problem posed by the book's subtitle, "Writing in Unreaderly Times." One might expect such a volume to be full of a certain kind of self-absorbtion, but the writing is remarkably straightforward and without conceit (with the deliberate exception of one piece about the "Cult of McSweeneys" that is buried in



["Bookmark Now: Writing in Unreaderly Times" \(Basic Books\)](#)

so many layers of irony that one can't tell where the author actually stands). This is a snapshot of a generation of writers who are active rather than defensive, exploring the brave new world of the Internet and the changes it brings to the author-reader relationship without the "Everything is Different" hype or "The Sky is Falling" reactionary fear that saturates most discussions of writing in contemporary culture. Some of their concerns are, of course, nothing new; the relevancy of the MFA and other education to the actual process of becoming a writer, relationships between fellow writers as collaborators (and lovers), the innate itch to write that seems to figure into every writers' origin story. By pulling back the curtain and letting readers see the workings of the Great and Powerful Gen X Author, however, **Bookmark Now** both lays out the key issues for the future of books and invites their readers to enter into the conversation.

There'd be something false, though, if I left it there. One of the great narratives of my adult life has been the successive breaking down of the boundary between what my friends and I do and what Real Professionals do. I remember the first time I saw a friend onstage at the Kennedy Center, and the cognitive dissonance of "Wait, that's Justin...but he's up there, where I've only seen Real Actors." I've since seen friends conduct Broadway plays and run for Congress; I've seen honest-to-gosh movies that friends have made, I've used software that friends have written, I've seen friends' art hanging in Real Galleries. The same feeling popped up when I saw my first piece of writing in newsprint, my first piece of writing in a glossy magazine, my first piece of writing in a magazine that people actually pay money for; when I gave my first academic lecture, when I taught my first class, when I got a package in the mail containing my own dissertation in that black hardcover binding that I knew so well from reading other, Real Scholars' dissertations.

All this is a long way of explaining the feeling I had last weekend at the Strand in NYC, when I happened across a copy of **Bookmark Now** on the shelf (and told Jenny's parents, who were there browsing, to buy it). I'm starting to really "get" the fact that I and the people I consider as friends and colleagues aren't merely passengers in the world, but that we're actually the ones driving the car, and seeing **Bookmark Now** on the shelf was just another step in that process.

When I read the book, I couldn't simply read it as a book; I saw the way that my friend Kevin saturates every page. For those of you who don't know him, Kevin is a networker, a hub - he thrives on creating connections and discussions between people. That's why I can't read disentangle what I know of him from the tangible copy of **Bookmark Now** sitting on my desk. This book is Kevin Smokler's way of putting a lot of interesting people in the same room and saying with a simultaneously expansive and slightly awkward sweep of the arms, "So, talk to each other!" He's inviting readers around the world into a salon with the writers whom they read, pulling back the curtain of Real Stuff for everyone in much the same way as it's been pulled back for me in fits and starts over the past decade.

In the end, the thing that strikes me most about **Bookmark Now** is that it manages to let the reader peek behind the curtain of contemporary writing without feeling in any way cute or false; put simply, reading the pieces in this book feels like hanging out with the cool kids at the edge of the cafeteria, except without any of the self-doubting baggage of whether you really belong there. While each author has a distinctive voice, virtually every essay is written in an honest and direct fashion, cleanly addressing the

reader without getting bogged down in a given conceit. To be treated with such straightforward **respect** by a collection of authors is a remarkable thing, and it's a testament to Kevin's vision that he managed to impose his own abhorrence of pretense on an edited volume of 24 diverse writers. The essays don't explicitly speak to each other, but they resonate on certain points - the connection between the tools we use to write and our relationship to our readers, the role of education and credentialing, whether the life of a writer is necessarily solitary and neurotic. These are the points of flux in the contemporary world of writing, and while there are no real answers, Kevin Smokler is trying to ensure that we're all part of the discussion.

Posted by Josh at [02:16 PM](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#)

May 23, 2005

Switching to Wordpress...

Just a heads-up to anyone actually looking at the pages for this site (as opposed to the RSS feed) that things might get hinky over the next few days...

Posted by Josh at [04:46 PM](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#)

May 18, 2005

NYTimes affiliate program...

Via the Six Apart Pronet blog, [TimesSelect as a blog business opportunity?](#):

"We want to create a second robust revenue stream," he explained, filling me in on some of the details and answering key questions about the timing, advertising and the blogosphere. One aspect of the plan is specifically for bloggers -- an affiliate program a la Amazon." (Martin Nisenholtz of Times Digital)

This is wicked smart - I even [said so](#) a few months ago...

Posted by Josh at [11:14 AM](#) | [Comments \(1\)](#)

May 11, 2005

On code and words...

Lately, I've been doing more coding than writing; in fact, at times it feels as if a large switch has been thrown in my mind, and my default mode is now the former, rather than the latter.

As practices, coding and writing can be quite similar - in both cases, though I might sketch an idea out on paper beforehand, the bulk of the work is done sitting in front of a computer screen, making sequences of characters appear in a text-editing window on my computer's screen. Arguably, part of the reason that one tends to crowd out the other (one way or another) is the sheer similarity of the two actions...there's only so much time that one can sit and type on a keyboard, and the activity will naturally come

to be associated with whatever you use it for the most.

This is the thing that concerns me - when I sit down at my computer these days, my mind begins to automatically ease into coding mode. I say that this is a concern for one main reason; though I enjoy both, I fundamentally identify more as a writer than a coder.

The difference, as I see it, is less one of practice than of intent. As I said, both coding and writing involve stringing together symbols, but with different normative goals; there's a richness to prose, meant to be read in many more ways than the spare efficiency of code written solely to achieve a discrete task when executed. I find coding to be a more mechanistic process, constructing a Rube Goldberg-esque machine which, when set in motion, is ultimately assessed on one criterion - does it **work**? Prose, on the other hand, can aspire to more than mere functionality.

I don't mean to denigrate code - there can be an elegant beauty or astonishing intricacy to a well-crafted function, but in the end, it's meant to be executed, and execution seems fundamentally different from reading. It might just be a question of the user's intent...we come to a program expecting it to work, but we come to a book looking for more than the pure conveyance of information.

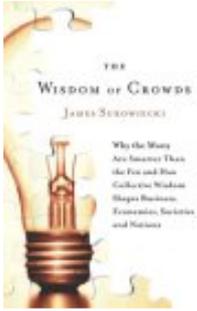
The thing I've been noticing is that the more time I spend coding, the more my prose begins to resemble code. As I've begun to associate my keyboard more with coding than writing, my writing has become more functional, less joyous. In some ways, this isn't anything new - my trajectory throughout graduate school was toward a simple formula, "writing = argument," and the upshot of this "tyranny of the thesis" is an unfortunate state of affairs in which I've grown to see writing in mostly instrumental terms. The words become a means to an end, not really much different than lines of code, and the more code I write, the harder I'm finding it to recapture a mode of writing as more than purely informational. On the fringes of my conscious mind, I can tell that I'm grasping to bring back a sense of joy (or at least something more than workmanlike trudging) into my prose, but I can't seem to find it.

Even more unsettling, I'm finding that my coding skills are getting sharper and sharper, but my writing feels as if it's getting muddier. It's shouldn't come as a surprise, really - I've been exercising the former on a daily basis, while my experience with the latter has mostly been limited to revisions on my dissertation, a project of which I'm more or less tired by now (this work falls solidly into the "green vegetables" mode of writing - I'm doing it more because I know that it's good for me and my career than because I really want to do it). Maybe things'll improve once I get this damned manuscript out the door, and take the time I've been learning to carve out of every week and apply it to fresh ideas and fresh projects...

Posted by Josh at [02:40 AM](#) | [Comments \(1\)](#)

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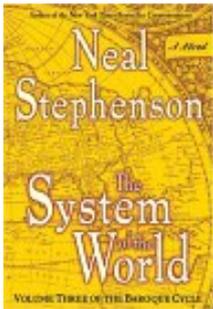
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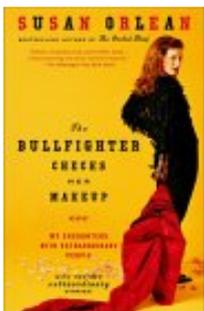
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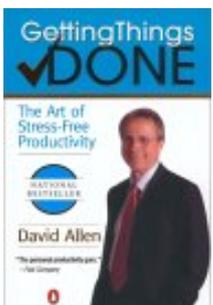
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