

\$10.00

# CREATIVE NONFICTION

WRITING AND PUBLISHING  
IN 2025 AND BEYOND:

PREDICTIONS BY

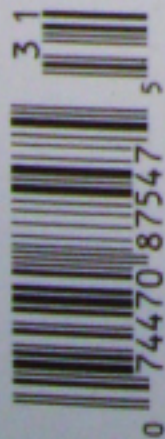
*George Gibson, Robin Hemley, Heidi Julavits,  
Phillip Lopate, Rebecca T. Miller,  
Donna Seaman, Astro Teller*  
AND OTHERS

PLUS

*Judith Barrington* CONSIDERS  
WHAT THE LIVING DO

*David Applefield* ESCAPES  
ARREST IN CONAKRY

*Imagining the Future*



# Writing Isn't the Future of Writing

ASTRO TELLER

**M**y 5-year-old daughter recently asked me about the habits of leopard seals. We went to Google and immediately had thousands of results to our search criteria. From the documents we looked at, it seemed that about a tenth of them had the basic information we wanted. We browsed a dozen sites for an hour—for free, of course—and got everything we were looking for and more.

With the exception of a few fiction writers who hold the rights to characters that readers love and want to hear more about (e.g., J.K. Rowling), individual writers are producing texts of less value to readers even as their works improve. This is so because the huge increase in the supply of writing makes the existence of acceptable substitutes by other authors much more likely than it used to be. I love *The Economist*, but I'm also happy to hear about the world from various free online sources such as Wikipedia, which is often better researched and better written than "professional" sources like Encarta. Each source is different and unique, but for me, there is an increasing supply of substitute writings for most subjects and genres if only I can dig through all the other writings to find it.

Writing of all kinds becomes more challenging each year as there is more to know, more to opine on, more to reference, more varied audiences and more to avoid repeating than ever before. That "media lives and dies by its content" sounds so true-by-definition that the new era we've already entered has crept up on us relatively unheralded: Making the content is harder than ever, but content is losing its place as the most valuable commodity in media. The most

valuable commodity today is no longer what the thing to be read says but rather the precious time it takes the reader to find (and read) that thing, which means that the future of writing—the ways in which writing becomes more valuable or redefines its value over the next few decades—lies in helping readers find and consume what they would be most interested in reading when they would be most interested in reading it.

Thanks to the Internet, the cost of publishing is essentially nil when done online, and high-quality self-publishing companies are creating a burst of new paper-printed writing. As the number of literate people who have Internet access increases globally, there are more people in the world than ever before who write and make their writing public. And when their works become public, they are now often available immediately to more than half of the literate population on the planet through the Internet. All these factors taken together mean that the supply of writing available to most readers has been approximately doubling every year of the last decade with no signs of slowing. All these things conspire to depress the value of each individual piece of writing. This trend is happening for all media content (e.g., home videos posted online), but the effect is most pronounced in the medium that requires the fewest special resources and, hence, allows the most people to participate: writing.

The proliferation of the writing supply (and the resulting reduction in the quality of the writing pool) dramatically increases the challenge of connecting people to the pieces of writing that will suit their present purposes best (or well enough). There is so much more to read, and it's so much more easily available, but how can readers quickly sift through all those possibilities for just what they need or want? However it is accomplished, helping readers quickly find the written materials they like will be essential to getting and keeping their attentions. The new standard economy view of this growing "connection challenge" is to let the computer scientists solve the problem. Google sees solving the connection challenge as its mission, and the company's extraordinary market capitalization indicates how important solving this problem is likely to be. Maybe this problem is best tackled by the programmers. But not necessarily.

What I'm certain of is that the situation will not reverse itself no matter what we, the writers, want. And I'm certain that a series of increasingly powerful, ingenious and valuable solutions to the challenge of finding just what a reader needs will be produced over the next few decades. These solutions, more so than the writings they help organize and present, are the big news in the future of writing. Rather than just ceding the field to the programmers, let's ponder how writers can help solve this problem. There are already key words called "meta-tags" attached to much that is written today. Many writers already write summaries of their works to help sell or advertise them. Perhaps the ever more important task of knowing and writing for a particular audience could be expanded to include the task of explicitly specifying that audience in some way. What else can we do as writers to address proactively the organization and presentation of writings? Rather than seeing today as the waning of the writer's power, we can redefine the writer's job to include the addressing of this connection challenge. That is the future of writing.

*Astro Teller's first novel, "Exegesis," was published by Vintage Books in August 1997 and was subsequently translated and published into numerous languages, including German, Japanese, Greek, Italian, Danish and Dutch. Teller holds a B.S. in computer science and an M.S. in symbolic and heuristic computation, both from Stanford University, and he completed his Ph.D. in artificial intelligence at Carnegie Mellon University. He is currently chairman of BodyMedia, Inc, the leading company in unobtrusive, wearable body monitoring.*