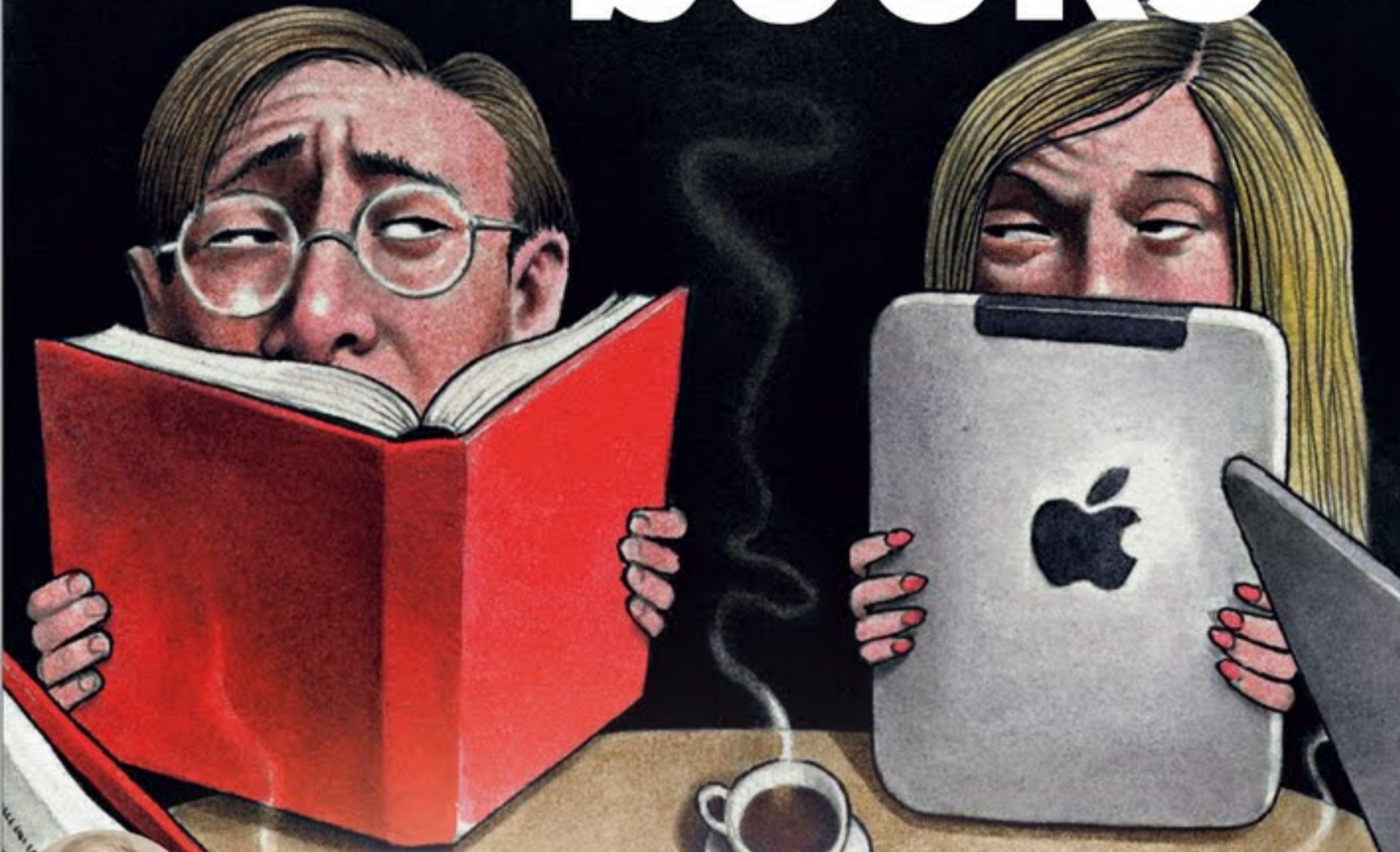




27 NOVEMBER 2011

SHRINKING ATTENTION SPANS IN THE DIGITAL AGE HAVE PUT A QUESTION MARK OVER THE SURVIVAL OF "FAT BOOKS". WILL THEY SURVIVE TO SEE THE DAWN OF ANOTHER CENTURY?

Future of fat books



● ROHINI NAIR

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hen Charles Dickens began his *Tale of Two Cities* with the lines, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times" to portray France on the cusp of its historic revolution, little did he know that circa 2011, those very same superlatives would be used to describe the uncertain future of his medium, the novel itself. The digital age is shrinking our attention spans, our minds, the time at our disposal. Will it shrink the Great Indian Novel as well?

Doom has been prophesied by voices as authoritative as Salman Rushdie and V.S. Naipaul. Rushdie's latest bit of "writing" was in the form of a limerick on Kim Kardashian's divorce, posted on the restricted-to-140-character microblogging site, Twitter. Quite a shrinkage from his 500-page tomes *Midnight's Children* and *Satanic Verses*.

India is witnessing a strange phenomenon. Whether it is Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* books or Amish Tripathi's *Meluha* adventures, "fat books" (those over 500 pages) are finding takers. So much so, that it is the short story collections (with the exception of award-winning writers like Jhumpa Lahiri) that aren't selling well. But for how long?

SIZE DOESN'T MATTER

Size doesn't matter; it's what you do with it that counts. "I have two books on my bedside table and they're both over 900 pages long," says David Davidar, author and publisher. "They're the Steve Jobs biography by Walter Isaacson and Haruki Murakami's *IQ84* — both are bestsellers." David is often asked if the cost of publishing a large novel, with its problems of portability, is a prohibitive factor. He muses, "Why does anyone choose a big book to publish? Excellence. If the book is good, then all those things — cost per unit etc — don't matter."

ALL ABOUT THE GENRE?

Social commentator and brand guru Santosh Desai believes that to say that a fat book won't work is too categorical a statement. "*Harry Potter* is an example of a fat book that has worked. And it

worked with a market (pre-teens and teens) where it shouldn't have, if what is being said about attention spans etc is true." The size of the book certainly hasn't held back its sales in the fantasy genre. J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy continues to sell (the *LOTR* books have between 1,008-1,600 pages), while a more recent example is Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series.

Another genre that is benefiting regardless of the high page count is the thriller. Ashwin Sanghi's *The Rozabal Line* and *Chanakya's Chant* have been bestsellers despite their 500-plus pages. "When I was growing up, if one wanted to read a fast-paced thriller, one would turn to a Frederick Forsyth or a James Hadley Chase. But now you have books like the *Meluha* series, like *Chanakya's Chant*," he says.

HOW TECHNOLOGY WILL CHANGE THE GAME

The codex form of the book (pages bound together at one spine) replaced its predecessor, the scroll, so effectively that the modern-day book retains the same form nearly 1,500 years later. But it now seems that e-reader devices like the iPad and Kindle and availability of free e-books has changed the way books are published and consumed.

While many decry the harm the new technology will cause the profession of publishing, Sanghi believes it might have a positive impact as well: "When you walk into a store and pick up a book, its size and weight can create a doubt in your mind — 'will I be able to finish this?' But with an e-book, all you look at is the icon of the front cover, the back cover and then click on 'download'. You don't look at how many pages it has, so you don't get intimidated. So I think technology will work in favour of fat books."

It may work in favour of the books themselves, but for the publishing industry, the outcome may not be as positive. Davidar says, "Amazon has been a weird phenomenon... it has helped the cause of publishers, but ultimately, it is what will kill us too. It started as a retailer, then

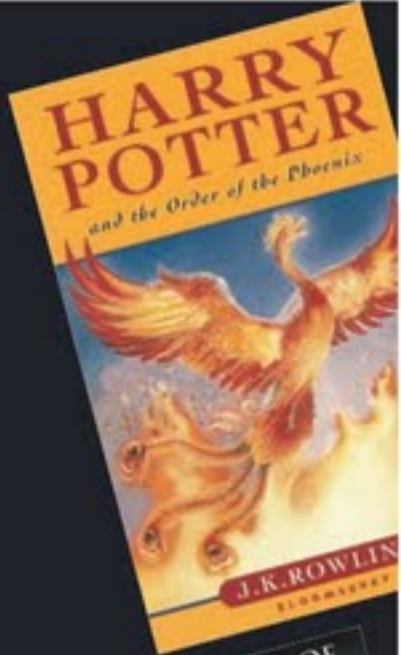
launched a library, wants to get into publishing..."

WILL CONSUMPTION OF FAT BOOKS CHANGE?

Even if technology doesn't kill the fat book, will it change the way we access and read it? Certainly, you may not walk into a large store and pick up the latest bestseller. But neighbourhood bookstores may yet survive. "Where Amazon loses out is the lack of a human interface," points out David. "So while large chain stores may struggle, smaller neighbourhood bookstores, that have a personal equation with customers, might do well. In the US, neighbourhood family-owned bookstores are making a comeback of sorts. The world of publishing, however, will be radically different in 5-10 years."

WHAT LIES BENEATH?

Acclaimed journalist Sir Mark Tully feels the underlying question is whether people will continue to read at all. He says, "Socrates was against the idea of writing down things at all, because he felt it would end the dissemination of ideas through debate and discussion. But just as no media has ever died out yet, books — fat or otherwise — will not die out either. Debate and discussion have not died, rumour has not died. Print did not destroy rumour; radio did not destroy print and television has not destroyed radio. So long as people have some interest in a book and its author, they will buy it, regardless of its size."



WHY THE FAT BOOK MIGHT SURVIVE

Ultimately, as long as there is pleasure to be found between the pages of a book, people will seek it. "When television first became popular, BBC Radio conducted a survey in the UK," recounts Sir Mark Tully. "When one respondent was asked why she preferred radio to TV, she replied, 'Because it makes for better pictures!'" And that's why books will continue to survive as well. Because the pictures are so much better. You'll know what I'm talking about if you've been lucky enough (as I was) to be read to by your mother." For the sake of those lovely "pictures" and thrilling adventures, that vicarious view of distant or fantastical lands, a retelling of the past (or the future) that can make it seem as though it's unfolding in the present, here's hoping that the fat book does overcome the odds — and survive.

