

The Evolving eBook Saga

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As an established freelance writer, book doctor and editor, I had only a passing interest in the burgeoning eBook market back in 1999. I had looked into eBooks as a potential new arena for my work, but without the necessary user base in place, I decided eBooks were best left for others to pursue. After all, how much money could there *be* in titles sold only through mom and pop online retailers?

I mentioned eBooks in an online chat with Fran Baker one day. Fran is the owner of Delphi Books, and a successful writer and publisher. She just happened to be in negotiations with a small eBook publisher who had approached her to help guide the company through the maze of publisher woes most startup houses face. Fran was also asked to recommend titles that might fit the new publisher's line and that might lend themselves to eBook production, especially those with full color graphics.

Fran knew of my fantasy story, entitled *The Scythian Stone*, which had languished in the, "I'll get around to submitting it someday," category for as long as she had known me. Fantasy was just not a genre I was ready to admit that I could sell--especially in eBook form.

Nevertheless, Fran persuaded me to convert the first episode of the series to an eBook and submit it. I spent a month teaching myself Adobe Acrobat, built the eBook version of *The Scythian Stone* and submitted it via email. Being used to the long production delays in the print book business, I was mildly shocked to get a phone call from the publisher *the next day*. They wanted the first book, and they wanted the rest of the series as soon as it became available. Of course, there was a catch--no up front money--but a fairly lucrative royalty arrangement and the promise of print versions somewhere down the road.

I took all of this in stride since eBooks were new, the publisher was greener than an Irish meadow, and I viewed my fantasy writing as more recreational than reward worthy. The eBook publisher, however, knew more than she had let on. Within a month, *The Scythian Stone* had been submitted to the *Preditors & Editors* website that holds an annual Internet readers poll for the BEST NOVEL ON THE WEB. My eBook won their top fiction award and I suddenly found myself being touted as both an eBook authority and fantasy genre expert.

Fast forward several months and my eBook had been optioned by an old line German publisher for the European market. A bit later, the German version was nominated for a prestigious book fair award, which it did *not* win. However, as a

result of that nomination, Time Warner's eBook acquisitions department contacted me about possible U.S. distribution for *The Scythian Stone* in their upcoming iPicturebooks line.

As it happened, my original eBook publisher had folded due to financial problems, reverting all rights to me. That, in turn, opened the door to a nonexclusive contract with iPicturebooks and exposure on a scale only a big publishing house can muster for eBooks. *The Scythian Stone* soon became available through a host of online retailers, libraries and educational sources. To date, the sales numbers have been nothing close to a print bestseller, but the potential market for eBooks is huge--some estimates say 500 million users worldwide--and growing daily!

The major market exposure gained through iPicturebooks' eLibrary System gave me the credibility to begin querying major print publishers over the next two years. In January of 2005, that effort finally paid off in a hardcover print contract with Hollywood Media's Tekno Books Five Star Speculative Fiction line. Subsequently, *The Scythian Stone* evolved from a relatively short eBook to a 126,000 word tome entitled *The Blackgloom Bounty*, episode one in a five book medieval fantasy epic due out in April 2006. From there, "The sky's the limit," as they say.

Though the evolving eBook saga is still in its infancy, eBooks are rapidly becoming more mainstream and credible. I doubt that eBook titles will make anyone rich or famous like a print bestseller can, but they are a short route to break into the business and get authors' names out where publishing's decision makers can notice them. In the meantime, those small royalty checks are a great way to supplement a writer's income and maintain the focus on writing all writers need.

From my perspective, eBooks present a terrific opportunity to slip in the back door of a major publishing house. The big houses won't admit it, but they *do* pay attention to such things--especially if a trend is clearly in evidence. They have also discovered the not-so-obvious advantages of eBook production and sales. Even with full color graphics, eBooks (and their cousins, POD books or Print on Demand) are far cheaper to produce than traditional print runs. Distribution arcs are reduced to weeks instead of months, and there is virtually no cost to 'stock' the product.

And if an eBook sells well to the online user base, it's perfectly reasonable to assume that it will do well in traditional print form. That eliminates the problem of costly, short-run printings that might end up being returned for credit. The risk factor for the publisher goes down, more new titles--especially from unknown authors--can be produced in a shorter time, and customers become the winners by having more quality books to choose from for their dwindling recreational reading dollars.

The end result is opportunity, both for writers and readers. It's the publishers who must learn to embrace the new technology of eBooks for the sake of profit and public service. I'm confident that will occur, but it won't happen until more readers (and writers) adopt the mind set that eBooks are here to stay.

Jon Baxley is a Hollywood Media, Tekno Books print author and a Twilight Times and iPicturebooks eBook author from Hondo, TX. Look for hardcover versions of his fantasy books starting in April 2006.

A free .pdf demo version of Jon's original medieval fantasy, *The Scythian Stone* is available via email to TXeBookAuthor@aol.com. His homepage is located at <http://hometown.aol.com/wasp1946/>. Your comments and critiques are both welcomed and encouraged.