

Books: Bound, but not out

Remembering Books —

The printed word under siege?

At one time, writers relied

exclusively on a pad and paper, a

typewriter and a dictionary. Now

they're faced with computer

screens, CD-ROMs and other state-

of-the-art technology. Some

bibliophiles worry that books will

get left in the dust as more people

make a mad dash for the informa-

tion superhighway. Are books

obsolete? FOCUS takes a fresh look

at the definition of a book, the

pitfalls of publishing and the nature

of writers. We also explore the

many award-winning publications

produced at Boise State University.

By Melanie Threlkeld

Imagine yourself on a cold, snowy day curled up on the couch beside a roaring fire ready to read your favorite novel. A cup of hot chocolate at hand, a warm wooly afghan tucked in around your feet. "Ooooh yeah, this is good," you think. Now for that novel.

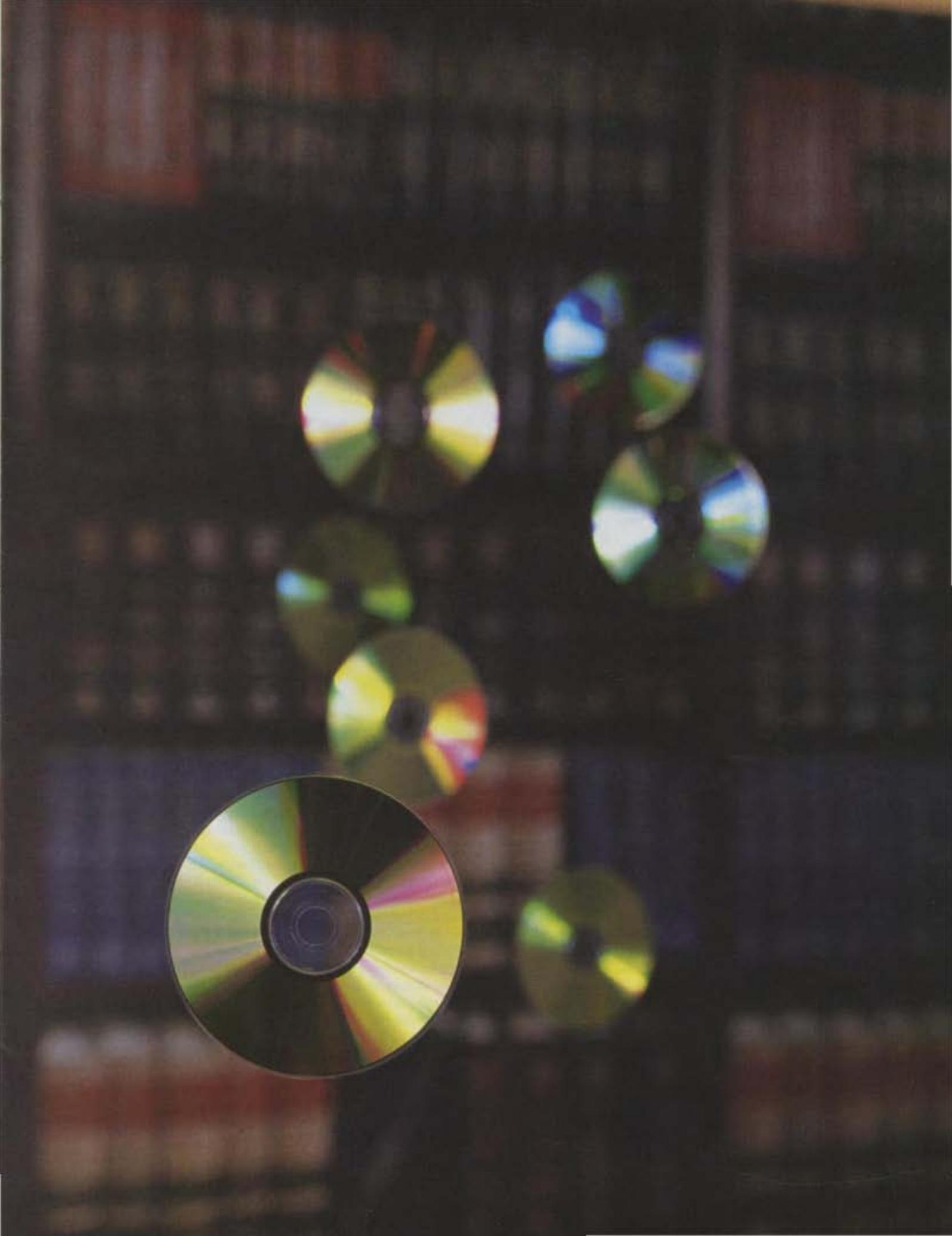
You flip open your laptop computer balancing it on the arm of the couch. Slip in a disk, punch a few keys and, voilà — *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

A likely scenario? Yes, experts say, as painful as it may be to most bibliophiles. And it's already happening. But not to worry, they add. Books are not about to be tossed aside forever in favor of CD-ROMs or whatever the next technological advancement will be.

"Radio didn't knock out books, TV didn't knock out radio as everybody thought," says BSU English professor Tom Trusky and director of the Hemingway Western Studies Center. Besides, there's just something about a book.

"Typography has a psychological effect on a reader," Trusky says. "Colored paper, white space have an effect on a reader. Sometimes they're subtle, sometimes they're not."

Don Sower, a volunteer at the BSU library and an avid reader and book collector, agrees.



"There's something about reading a book that's a private affair," he says. "I'm not so sure that's true about sitting at a screen on a monitor in CD-ROM."

What's happening, experts say, is technology is enhancing our ability to read and write, and in some cases, replacing books where it makes sense.

Dan Lester, network information coordinator for the BSU Library, says the Library is gradually making changes to accommodate more computer-accessed information. The Library has computerized the periodical index, a reference section students use to find information on topics for term papers and reports. It made sense to computerize the section, Lester says, because compact discs are faster and easier to use than the traditional publications, and they don't take up as much shelf space.

So far most of the information on CD-ROM in the BSU Library is either governmental reports or statistical data used primarily by business students and faculty members.

The Library is working on installing multimedia CD-ROM equipment to provide educational support materials to secondary and elementary teachers. Encyclopedias on CD-ROM could be next. "There's no question things are moving more and more to the technical world, like it or not," Lester says.

Resource and reference materials are what most people request when looking for a CD-ROM disc at the Book Shop, says Dan Wilson, who owns the downtown book store with his wife Merritt, a BSU grad.

Wilson added CDs to the store's inventory to meet the demands of its customers, whom he describes as either "consciousness expanders" or "information seekers." And there's a difference between the two, he adds. "The information seekers want it now."

Wilson, who has spent his life around books, has a multimedia computer at home. "Purely as a reference tool, I think the CD-ROM is more valuable," he says. "You can get more information in there." And as grandparents of a toddler, the Wilsons have come to respect the educational value of CD-ROM, which includes computer programs to help children read.

"A hundred years ago, more people read to improve their minds. It was the best way other than getting out there and traveling," he says. "Any tool ... that stimulates a person to want to know more about their world is positive. [Computers] are just another way for someone to know more about their world."

For Sower, a retired Episcopal priest, reading has been his life's work and pleasure and an interest shared by his wife.

"For a person with 6,000 books I don't have a great love of books," he says. "I do like the things I find in them. They've brought a tremendous amount of joy to my life."

But he adds, "I can't imagine reading Fyodor Dostoyevski on a CD-ROM, but I bet it's there."

Many books in his collection are reference and theology books, but his interests are eclectic. As a public speaker for many years, Sower says he relied on his growing personal library to recall favorite sayings, passages and quotes to get him through his speeches. "I didn't use library books much because I got in the habit of marking up my books," he says.

Whether it's reading or writing on a computer, technology can make our lives a little easier if we let it, experts say.

"Writing is so laborious," Trusky says, who confesses he's weaning himself from a legal pad and pen and learning to compose his writings on a computer. "It's incredible the editing you can do [on a word processor]. Talk about liberating! I no longer fear the revision process. It's wonderful."

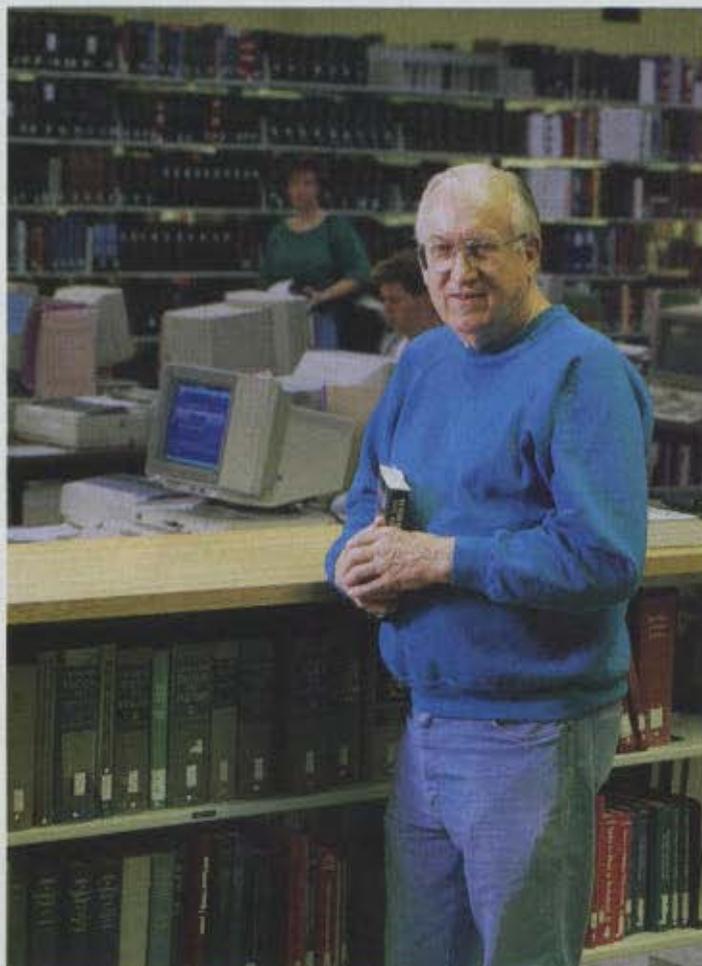
Lester, who can compose only on a keyboard, agrees that word processors give us the ability to make changes to our writing as quickly as we think of them. It may be good in the long run he says, but what about the process, the journey the writer takes to give us the finished product? "Very few writers who write electronically save first drafts, second drafts or even third drafts on a disk," he says. "Even if they do, they've probably not saved the manuscript corrections. Now is that vital to the world? Maybe not. Vital to the literary world, maybe."

A new book, *Silicon Snake Oil*, by Clifford Stoll, a self-described computer jock, raises questions about the social ramifications of relying too heavily on computers for information, in lieu of reading a book, the daily newspaper or chatting with friends.

In a recent interview in *USA Weekend*, Stoll says, "Now that I spend less time with a modem, I'm discovering wonders in my own neighborhood. ... As I push [my infant daughter], I wonder about the schools she'll attend. ... Will her classroom become an interactive video game? ... Will her library be little more than a row of personal computers connected to CD-ROM readers? Or will Zoe discover real books and magazines, as well as a lively librarian who reads stories on Saturday mornings?"

Lester is thinking along the same lines. He pulls from his bookshelves a slightly tattered 1877 copy of *Conference of Librarians*. Its yellowed pages and faded green cover have a sticky, rough feel. It's signed by someone who has been dead for nearly 120 years. He reaches for another, *The Little Package*, by his favorite author Lawrence Clark Powell. It's an apricot color with big, dark lettering. "This is a well-made book," he says as he pats the book's binder and holds it to his nose. "It has a certain feel, a smell that CD-ROM doesn't."

And then he laughs at the symbolism. "That's what books are," he says. "Little packages." □



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