

## The future of reading

**What does the next chapter hold for reading? RIT symposium will bring together the experts and explore the possibilities.**

**Stuart Low** • Staff writer • May 30, 2010

If you can read this [story](#), thank your teacher.

And while you're at it, thank your favorite [Web designer](#) and texting partner.

Never before have we had so many ways to read. We gulp down news and gossip on our BlackBerries. We surf from Internet Explorer to e-mail on our ultra-speedy [laptops](#).

We can still buy *Romeo and Juliet* at our quaint neighborhood book shop. But why bother? Whiz through the CliffsNotes version, and there's plenty of time to catch Lady Gaga on *Gossip Girl*.

Rochester Institute of Technology will explore the quickly shifting terrain from hardback books to Amazon Kindle at its "The Future of Reading" symposium, featuring 12 nationally renowned speakers in media technology, English and graphic design.

About 500 experts in related fields also will attend from June 9-12. Keynote speakers include acclaimed novelist Margaret Atwood and *Wired* magazine editor-in-chief Chris Anderson.

Atwood, through an e-mail interview, says she will address how reading is "brain science ... and how reading alters how we think and perceive."

"Then, of course, people want to know about the book industry," she says.

A strong sense of urgency underlies this conference. Many members are worried about the future of reading, and see troubling signs in their students and friends.

"I always assigned my students one three-decker

Victorian novel a week," recalls speaker Richard Lanham, 74, professor emeritus of English at the University of California at Los Angeles. "I couldn't do that anymore.

"I believe that some undergraduates couldn't pass seventh-grade vocabulary tests. If we don't solve these problems at the university level, what kind of readers are we going to have?"

He blames Madison Avenue in part for the erosion of clear language. In his 2006 book *The Economics of Attention*, he maintains that seductive packaging often trumps substance in an age of information overload.

"Books are the center of everything I value," he says. "But can fixed notation compete today with all the other demands on people's attention?"

On the RIT campus, Pat Sorce echoes his concerns. She heads the School of Print Media and helped organize the symposium.

"With complicated texts, college students must pay close attention to pull out the meaning," she says. "But they've rarely had to struggle. They grew up with TV and the Internet, and maybe used CliffsNotes.

"If a text isn't easily understood, they say: 'Hey, it's not my problem.' As citizens, will they be unable to perform hard work in an increasingly complex

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world?"

A group of RIT faculty and students is conducting research on different types of reading. They're comparing the experience of reading in print and on a computer screen to gauge which boosts comprehension and enjoyment. Sorce finds that many students go online for news but prefer textbooks for course work.

Atwood, too, notices preferred uses for paper and electronic texts. She recently ran a blog on the subject on [www.yearoftheflood.com](http://www.yearoftheflood.com).

"People want paper for books they want to keep ... and electronic for quick one-read books," she writes. "They also like to read the paper ones at home and the electronic ones while traveling. ... Let me ask you: Would you keep your will only in electronic form?"

She discounts rumors that people read fewer books today because of tight schedules.

"I do know the stats for one U.S. publishing company — 10 million e-books sold in the past year," she says. "Add in all the paper books, e-books sold by other publishing companies and used books — somebody is reading something. ... And libraries seem to be making a comeback."

A few skeptics insist that American's video culture is making traditional books look pitifully unsexy. But RIT has invited several experts to present eye-popping new types of graphics and typography. Lanham, for instance, will screen a pioneering 1980 video that he made with animated words, shifting colors and synthesizer music.

Another guest will reach deep into the past for writing that blends words and vivid pictures. Dennis Tedlock will introduce ancient Mayan texts preserved in stone, pottery and books.

"Some signs stand for syllables, some for whole words," says Tedlock, research professor of anthropology at State University of New York at Buffalo. "The texts are interlocked with pictures. The Spanish invaders began destroying these in the 16th century."

Next month's invaders of RIT also will deal with picture books — namely, Rochester travel guides. Three American symposiums have focused recently

on the future of reading, so some jet-lagged conferees might lose track of what city they're in.

You may see them with noses buried in tour books, getting a crash course on Rochester geography and history.

"How could I not have a secret fondness for a city that's named after Edward Rochester in *Jane Eyre*?" asks Atwood, tongue firmly in cheek. "Rochester, you sexy rascal."

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Margaret Atwood (above), Richard Lanham (center) and Dennis Tedlock are among the authors who will speak at RIT's The Future of Reading conference, to be held June 9-12. (Provided photos)

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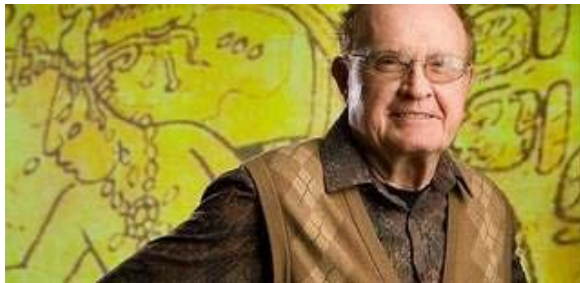
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**If you go**

**What:** The Future of Reading, a symposium co-sponsored by Rochester Institute of Technology's School of Print Media and Cary Graphic Arts Press.

**Where:** Rochester Institute of Technology, Lomb Memorial Drive, Henrietta.

**When:** June 9-12.

**Admission:** \$295 for full conference registration (\$150 for students). To enroll, go to <http://futureofreading.cias.rit.edu/2010>.

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