The death of the book has been duly announced, and with it the end of brick-and-mortar libraries, traditional publishers, linear narrative, authorship, and disciplinarity, along with the emergence of a more equitable discursive order. These essays suggest that it won't be that simple. The digitization of discourse will not be effected without some wrenching social and cultural dislocations.

The contributors to this volume are enthusiastic about the possibilities created by digital technologies, instruments that many of them have played a role in developing and deploying. But they also see the new media raising serious critical issues that force us to reexamine basic notions about rhetoric, reading, and the nature of discourse itself.

My Personal Review:
The FUTURE OF THE BOOK, edited by Geoffrey Nunberg, frames the debate about the future of the book in the digital age with a lot of erudition but also some unwarranted concerns. Several essays provide invaluable information about the history and development of the book. Most of the essayists are concerned that computers will radically alter the concept of the book as a legal object, undermining current concepts of the author and the reader as well. They will disrupt established publishing and distribution methods for texts. They will decentralize control of information currently dominated by libraries, universities, and the government. Computers even threaten to redefine the nature of texts and, more important, the nature and function of language. But cyberspace will not destroy the concept of authorship and texts as legal entities. If you have doubts, just read those dire warning labels about copyright infringement on the latest web page you surfed or on the that software you just bought.

Geoffrey Nunberg sees hypertext leading to a loss of quality information because he thinks publishing on the Internet is not controlled as well as it is by print publishers. To him, Computers don't preserve the social and material boundaries ... they disrupt the properties embodied in the notion of publishing. Nunberg is correct. But I don't think removing control of publishing from the hands of a few communications conglomerates, whose bottom line is money, is such a terrible thing.

Others, like Nunberg, are also concerned about the breakdown of catalogs and classifications of information by hypertext because collections won't be materially constrained. The chaos that surely will follow is to him akin to removing library walls and seeing the reading rooms fill up with street people. Understand, the government, universities, and libraries have
controlled information and access to it for centuries. They have done a pretty good job. But like other bureaucracies, they wont tender their control easily. Despite this, computers are making revolutionary changes in how information is accessed. And most of those changes suggest that it will be a more democratic, less elitist system, at least for a while.

Virtual Reality (VR), more than hypertext, is seen by many of these essayists as the major threat to the book as the purveyor of our culture and a particular threat to verbal language. A good part of these essayists concern has to do with an apparent lack of closure to VR worlds. It is true that VR will create entertainment, work, and instructional environments all over the known landscape. There is, however, a vast difference between having a VR experience and writing a novel about a VR experience. That is, there is a critical difference between looking through and experiencing virtual worlds and looking at and creating texts about them as Richard Lanham points out elsewhere. The difference between experiencing a VR world and writing a text about that experience is clear. One is life; the other is art.

But, anxiety about Virtual Reality runs even deeper. It has to do with what Jay David Bolter calls the renegotiation of word and image with images dominating text and leading to a crisis in rhetoric. Others direly predict that VR is a movement toward an unmediated perception of the world away from language all together toward natural signs. I find these comments interesting but unrealistic. When, for example, was the last time you had an unmediated perception? If you're not sure, maybe it's time to re-read Mikhail Bakhtin about language, perception and mediation. And, how can a sign be natural once we make it symbolic?

Some of the essayists express legitimate concerns about the effect of the computer on the book and society; others less warranted ones. Many happily conclude that society is not at the mercy of implacable technoforces. O'Donnell, for one, asks not what computers can do to or for people, but rather what people can do with computers by pitching in joyously to the ongoing reconstruction of our culture.

The main flaw of THE FUTURE OF THE BOOK is that its a book with some outdated information and flawed assumptions. More important, it offers vital insights into how we can shape our multimedia future and still preserve our cultural connectedness to our most glorious, printed past.