Ethics in Ink: A Conversation with Michael Castleman

Author of The Untold Story of Books

Interview conducted by Brianna Lantz, Content Committee, George Washington Journal of Ethics in Publishing



Introduction

In *The Untold Story of Books*, Michael Castleman, a long-time writer with over 50 years of experience in the industry, breaks down the history of publishing and bookselling into three distinctly different book businesses. Today, when book production relies heavily on digital technology, what Castleman calls the third book business, it is important to understand the history of all three business models, and how their ethics and conventions have changed over the years.

We spoke over Zoom to discuss how this book came to be, and what ethical and cultural contexts this book serves today. What follows is an edited excerpt from our conversation, which was condensed for clarity and length.

On Creative Form and Intent

GWJEP: What inspired you to write the history of books?

MC: I never set out to write a history of book publishing. I signed my first book contract way back in 1979 when I was in my late twenties, and at the time I thought that it might be productive for my career to research the book publishing industry. One was that when I talked to other authors and bookstore owners and book people and agents and everyone involved in publishing, I heard all sorts of contradictory messages.

MC (cont.): I wanted to research the industry and see if I could figure it out for myself. But I didn't have a lot of time. I had a job. I was writing magazine articles, I was writing books. I was raising children. So on the side, at night, I would read about book publishing. I read the memoirs of famous editors and publishers, and I read histories and I read punditry and I read pretty much anything I could get my hands on. I also kept files of publishing articles from *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New Yorker* and other publications. I don't think all my research helped my career in terms of my income, but it did answer many of my questions and it debunked some of the myths, so I felt like the effort was worth it.

MC (cont.): Around 2000, everything changed. The industrial publishing of the twentieth century, what I call the second book business, yielded to digital publishing in the twenty-first, and all of a sudden everything looked very different. I was thrown into a confusion, along with most other authors. I thought, "Everything's changing, what is going on?" So I struggled with that for about five years, and then thought, "Things are changing, and authors and the public don't really know about this and so maybe there's a book to be written on the history of book publishing that would talk about all these changes." It was at that point that I really put the history of book publishing under a microscope, and I came up with the structure of *The Untold Story of Books*, which talks about the three different publishing industries—the changes in word reproduction technology in the twenty-first century that upended the whole industry. I tried to make sense of the many changes. Reactions to *The Untold Story of Books* suggest that maybe I succeeded.

GWJEP: What was the research process like?

MC: I researched the book business for forty years. All of the sources I was reading, the famous writers, the famous editors and publishers, their perspectives mostly revolved around their own lives. Now their lives were important, but their perspectives were pretty myopic—chatty and personality-

driven. They made the industry look like it was run by cocktail parties, when in fact, it's a tough, cut-throat business. Then I came upon a book by Jason Epstein, who was a leading editor during the second half of the twentieth century. Around the millennium, he wrote a book called *Publishing: Past, Present, and Future* that talked about the economic history of book publishing in the United States since World War II. I was fascinated by this book because unlike a lot of the memoirs that I was reading, Epstein's discussed how economics and post–WW II cultural changes, for example the rise of suburbs, changed publishing. I was absolutely captivated by it, and I thought "this is what I want to pursue."

MC (cont.): By accident, I stumbled upon a massive, three thousand-page, four volume book called *A History of Book Publishing in the United States* that had been published in the mid–1970s. I tried to buy it but couldn't find it. I found one volume on sale for $1,800 bucks and I thought that's ridiculous. So I went to the San Francisco Public Library and they had one volume of it but not all four, which left me very frustrated. But then all of a sudden it turned out, a small press on Cape Cod reprinted all four volumes and was offering them for $500 bucks. So I thought, "All right, I'll spring for it." That tome was really terribly written; I mean, it was horrible. And I thought, "Oh God, can I actually wade through all this?" But I decided since this was like a hobby. I thought, "All right, I'll open volume one to page one and I'll just start reading and I'll take notes." It took me four years to claw my way through the four volumes and take about seventy-five pages of notes. That exercise informed a great deal of the information in *Untold Story*, from colonial publishing in America through to around 1970, and then my own files picked up, so there was continuity.

It was clear that through his years of research, Castleman had gained a deep understanding of the industry and its impacts on society, both positive and negative.

On Media and Cultural Relevancy

GWJEP: Do you feel like there is a similar sense of control and weariness around literacy today as there was in the early days of reading and publishing?

MC: The printing press, Gutenberg's press, freaked out the monarch of England and the popes and the bishops of the Catholic Church because they thought, "Oh my God, if anybody can get information, then we don't control it anymore and people can think things that we don't want them to think." That has been a recurring motif in publishing and all the mass media ever since. In fact, today you have a lot of people saying, "Oh, people are getting their information from Fox News, from TikTok." There's this panic that information

is out of control and that a lot of it is wrong, which a lot of it is. I hate to say it, but a lot of the information that's out there is pretty crummy and terrible and wrong. But that's the media environment we live in today. Anybody can publish anything, and they do, including lots of lies, and this has been a worry of people in power ever since the printing press was invented. In *The Untold Story* I go into how popes and monarchs tried to control printing presses and what they produced—and couldn't.

Castleman's thoughts on literacy control led easily into a conversation about AI use, and how it has affected the current industry.

On Ethics and Moral Dilemmas

GWJEP: You write about scribes losing their jobs due to the Gutenberg Press. Do you think there's a similar thing happening today with the growing use of AI?

MC: You know, I'm not a prophet. I don't peer into the future, but from what I see and from what I read, it's clear that AI is already putting entry-level coders out of work. I mean, I live in San Francisco, which is a tech hub, and all the big tech companies are laying off hundreds of people. In fact, some of them are laying off thousands because AI can do a lot of their jobs. And authors are terrified that AI is going to start writing books. There have already been scandals about AI generated books being sold on Amazon. It's a worry. I write for some websites, and now I have to check boxes that say, "This is human written not from AI." To me it's all kind of ironic because I love to write. I wouldn't use AI if I could, but you can't tell that to a high school junior when it's the night before the term paper is due and this kid is going to use AI to write his paper. That seems inevitable. I know people who teach in college who say that they no longer assign term papers because of the fear of AI. They make their students write in class.

While *The Untold Story of Books* focuses on the history of book publishing, I was interested in what else Castleman wanted readers to discover within the work.

On Takeaways from the Book

GWJEP: Beyond a deeper understanding of publishing history, what would you hope readers take away from reading your book?

MC: I wrote *The Untold Story* for two constituencies. One was serious readers who are interested in the publishing industry, and the other was authors who are trying to write and publish books. For readers, I hope that *The Untold*

Story of Books provides historical perspective that allows them to see how this industry actually evolved, how it actually developed, and why we have what we have today.

MC (cont.): For authors, I really want the book to provide a grounding in reality, and debunk the myths that their books are going to rocket out of the gate and ascend to the bestseller list. Only about one in five thousand titles becomes a bestseller. So you could fill Carnegie Hall with every seat taken by an author and just one of them would be on the bestseller list. So, it's important to give authors, I felt, a reality check of what their chances really are in this business and to push the message that unless you're on the bestseller list, writing books is not a career. Writing books is an expensive hobby, like world travel or playing golf or owning a boat. You have to put not just time into it, but also money. Most authors today spend more money on their books than they make from them. But my hope for authors is that they understand the reality of publishing, the world they actually inhabit, not just the myths.

Closing Thoughts

Castleman's passion for the publishing industry, as well as the amount of research completed for the work, is evident both in *The Untold Story of Books* and in our conversation. It felt important to have this conversation to understand how book production is always changing, and how factors that had effects at the beginning continue to influence the industry today. From literacy control to the implementation of new technology, professionals in the publishing industry have faced similar challenges throughout the entire history of books.

Author Bio

Award-winning San Francisco-based journalist Michael Castleman is, "One of the nation's top health writers," (Library Journal). Over a fifty-year career he's written fourteen consumer health and sexuality books, and more than 3,500 magazine and web articles. Recently, he's focused on the history of the book publishing industry with *The Untold Story of Books* (Unnamed Press, LA, 2024), now in its third printing.