

Poetry finally joining e-book revolution

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This March 26, 1953 file photo shows poet and author Langston Hughes speaking before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in Washington, D.C. Hughes, Adrienne Rich, Allen Ginsberg, and Wallace Stevens are among the poets whose work recently became available in electronic format. Random House Inc., W.W. Norton and several other publishers now routinely release new books in both print and digital versions. (AP Photo, file)

(AP)—Over the past two years, publishers have been steadily filling one

of the largest gaps in the e-book catalogue—poetry.

Adrienne Rich, Allen Ginsberg, Langston Hughes and Wallace Stevens have been among the poets whose work recently became available in electronic format. And [Random House](#) Inc., W.W. Norton and several other publishers now routinely release new books in both print and [digital versions](#), including last month's Pulitzer Prize winner for poetry, Sharon Olds' "Stag's Leap."

"In the spring of 2010, we actually formed a team to focus on books that were complicated to make into [e-books](#), like poetry and illustrated nonfiction," says Liisa McCloy-Kelley, Random House Inc.'s vice president and director of e-book production, strategy and operations. "Over the past 20 months, we really shifted into production."

The problem had been how to transfer a poem from paper to screen without either breaking a line up—a primal violation of the art form—or making the font size too small to read. It's unlikely that publishers can design a perfect solution, but they have managed to find acceptable compromises. In part, they credit advances in technology that make it easier to keep the original look intact. They also cite a technique long used in print.

The hanging indent.

The poet's worst fear is for a line to break up randomly, ruining the rhythm and mood of the verse. But publishers and poets have been agreeable to ending the line at a specific word, then creating a second, indented line, alerting the reader that the train of thought belongs with the line above.

For instance, here are the first two lines of Olds' poem "Love," as they appear in the hardcover edition:

I had thought it was something we were in. I had thought we were
in it that day, in the capital

Here is how they look on an iPad 3:

I had thought it was something we were in. I had
thought we were
in it that day, in the capital

Poetry e-sales are a tiny subset of poetry sales, a perennial subset in publishing. But for publishers, and poets, it's less about commerce than accessibility. Olds says she doesn't have a lot of interest in e-books and has not seen the electronic edition of "Stag's Leap," but that she "certainly respected the fact that readers like to read in different ways." Poet Philip Levine allowed such collections as the Pulitzer Prize-winning "The Simple Truth" to be digitized, even though he also has little personal interest in e-books.

"I don't think the people who would buy an e-book of one of my books, or one of (W.S.) Merwin's books would want it other than what it's supposed to look like," Levine said.

Part of the challenge is the devices themselves, with screens varying in size and feel from Apple's iPad touchscreen to such smaller, standalone devices as Amazon.com's Kindle and Barnes & Noble's Nook. The e-book editions for Random House and other publishers will commonly include a reader's note that suggests the proper font size for a given device.

Some works are especially challenging, like Anne Carson's collection

"Red Doc," in which poems begins at various points on a given page. Random House decided on a fixed format, according to McCloy-Kelley, who says that the text "cannot be enlarged without a pinch and zoom," meaning it can only be changed on a touchscreen. The verse of the late Greek poet C.P. Cavafy, who sometimes used extra spaces between words, proved so difficult to set accurately that English-language translator Daniel Mendelsohn settled for an e-book edition admittedly much different than what appeared on paper.

"You have to accommodate to a new medium in order to survive," says Mendelsohn, an award-winning author and critic. "I take the long view and say, 'It was ever thus.' When the Greek tragedies were first written down, the lines were written straight across the page, with no distinction of different speakers and no stage directions. Now, you obviously want to identify the speakers. The original way is not necessarily the ideal."

Smaller presses have cited limited budgets as a deterrent to digitizing. But a top poetry publisher, Copper Canyon Press, last year began an e-book program funded by a grant from the Paul G. Allen Foundation. Copper Canyon has issued electronic versions of collections by former U.S. poet laureates Charles Simic and Ted Kooser, along with dozens of other works.

"One of the things we've done is put a note at the beginning of the book to show which is the longest line of the poem," said Copper Canyon's e-book coordinator, Amelia Robertson. "The note demonstrates what will happen if that line is broken up and suggests the best setting on the device for keeping the line intact."

Progress is incomplete and some of the best poets of modern times remain entirely or mostly unavailable in electronic format, from Merwin and Richard Wilbur to Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop. In some cases, poets prefer it that way. C.K. Williams, a prize-winning poet

known for his long lines, has seen some of his work show up on the Internet and has not been encouraged.

"I'm quite horrified by how little it has to do with what I had in mind when I wrote it," Williams says. "Ultimately, it's about the words. You can say you have to sacrifice one thing for another, and I suppose I will have to accept that, because e-books are such a central part of our literary culture. But I haven't been terribly happy about it."

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