Booktech 2002

By Mathew Paris

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The Booktech Fair at the gaudy Hilton Hotel in New York in February of 2002 if less capacious than it had been in the past was an interesting and friendly event indeed. As a fair of artisans of books all in strongly related businesses it had a lateral bonding and cordiality absent in the Javits general corporate computer fairs filled with the resident ambassadors of tigers or the direct sales element of the prestigious Trenton Fair with more ideals and pitched at consumers. It stretched into ancillary technologies that were beyond computer use; some of the displays were pavilions set up by printers and binders using techniques centuries old in making physical books, or still involved in printing in volume and techniques like offset.

Yet this was the first year that this fair had closed down half of its operations, principally the Booktech West Fair in San Francisco. Evidently Booktech didn't have enough response for the Western bash; probably the tables of businesses that fund such fairs weren't buying space for their wares. I noticed no firm in this fair that came from west of Kalamazoo; there were many small Southern corporations at Booktech, several of them located in Tennessee. It is a world at this point that has taken many buffetings, has had innumerable disappointments, but still is in the optimistic mode businesses have to be if its salesmen are able to wake up in the morning and not hang themselves.

Strolling around the exhibition since the Booktech Fair was an amiable experience that like of which I haven't had since the early computer fairs of the last century. The book people in their display booths were a peer group. There business was the making of books in the old way. It was probably no accident that I didn't see any displays by the computer printers that can make a book wholly from Acrobat files or companies like Lightning Source that use such machines.

I had the feeling after talking to many of these salesmen that none of them liked the detail of what computers had brought the industry. They were grateful for the tools that brought down costs if they were horrified by central direction of computer printers dropping books on demand into the waiting hands of the reader. They were no less unhappy at the prospect of no editors, shippers, warehouses, pyramidal levels of middle management, agents, office buildings and bookstores like libraries was a destiny filled with discomfort and vertigo for them. They were like feudal artisans looking at the Industrial Revolution, realizing in a vague way what convulsions and vertigo a more efficient technology would bring them personally. Progress was as attractive to them as being out of a job.

Unlike the fairs at the Javits Center or at Trenton, I saw in this whole fair no Black, Hispanic or Asian faces. I also never met any company at Booktech doing business in New York. If it said terrible things if in a whisper about the competitiveness of New York or any big city now for attracting any new enterprise or keeping many of the old ones, it was redolent of the American industry after 1980 moving out of big industrial cities, looking for a work force and cheap land for their buildings in smaller communities happy to give them multi-year moratoriums on taxes. There were as well no foreign companies from Europe. The fair reflected from another direction the kind of geographical diversification that computers themselves have offered as an option for the business world. Every firm all came from small American cities one would not have thought of half a century ago as business centers. There was also not one sign much less a physical display of new printers, some German, that quietly sell their machines now to these very companies wholesale.

There were also no publishers selling blockbusters in volume; they were niche bookmakers of small runs now economically viable thanks to computers and binderies that did the mechanical work of making a book physically but many of the firms were doing offset and large runs in the old way. One never had the feeling as one did at previous fairs that one was among pioneers, or at the lip prophets making wild surmises about the science-fiction future of books.

The absence of both the makers of the computer printers from Acrobat Files and the dearth of big publishers at the fair was as significant as the presence of these neat smaller firms. I was looking at a national American niche market business almost everywhere I went on the two capacious floors of Booktech
displays. It impressed me first and most that books were being sold these days by these businessman by subjects, not authors. Subjects are substantial juggernauts of sales pitches as authors, variable and prone to human frailty, can never be. Such policies assume reductively and covertly that authors were not important, valued for brilliance or any other virtue but doggedness; they
aimed at most for the dull competence of drones of red ant colonies. Authors were expected to be simple and efficient as a Ford car. When they made a profit on one book they were expected to churn out sequel after sequel till the first drop in sales. They might even hire people to do it for them if they had better
things to do than repeat their actions like crickets until all but the imaginary and dead had departed from the room.

The fair was blessed with the faith that with the same labor one can make more money selling by subject. That supposedly tough minded mathematical equation is how most businessmen think. Books here were hustled by subjects the sellers presumed were interesting to their clients. It made me think that if I were to have a career myself as a writer among the princes of these realms, I better have some books with intriguing subjects. My name, glibly sonorous as it is, wasn't going to carry any interest to the polloi hungry for new literature unless I assassinated a celebrity successfully and bellowed out imprecations against my foes as I straddled the top of the Empire State Building like King Long. I was in this galaxy not a respectable minor moon; I was a glum asteroid floating in darkness light years beyond Pluto.

I might of course aim at being one of twenty fiery starry authors hawked by juggernauts, engines spewing out from celestial spigots in great retching spasms the imaginary glory of the spirits who parse out fastfood reading fare for all of us. It was better that I find some agreeable subject at which to be mildly
competent. One might take refuge within some intriguing focus like the celery diet in the life after death of some sport celebrity. The computer technology had already put an army of typesetters and secretaries out of business was now whispering to publishers as well as authors they were fossils.

2

After some specific conferences, the keynote speaker, Frank Romano, a very charismatic professor at the Rochester Institute Of Technology, amused some of these book technicians by saying that books are almost religious artifacts. People have primal feelings about them like dogs. He talked about the multimedia
enthusiasm of 1985, how all were convinced after an article in the New York Times that books were going to be devoured on computers in multimedia. He recalled that most computers in that banner year of 1985 didn't have CD attachments, the general effect of the multimedia as an educational tool was to teach kids how to cut and paste, not ever to learn anything.

When students had to copy things out of encyclopedia by hand some of the information was retained in their brains along with the pain and the boredom. When they didn't have to read it and copy it to give a report they learned nothing more than they would had they been watching a Three Stooges marathon on
television.

Frank Romano has called publishers dinosaurs with big bodies and little brains, craven armadillos who hid at the advent of anything new, suicidal lemmings who jumped over cliffs into the sea at the call of their leaders to drown in great herds. The crowd laughed with some discomfort. Publishers, he said, didn't make things happen; things happened to them. When they read an
article in the New York Times that some new pied piper of publishing was in town, they followed him over the cliff, plummeted in great armies into the ocean to perish. Publishers, he remarked, once mad for e-books, are now largely out of that white elephant, ready with innocence and ardor for a new pachyderm. They realize they can't sell e-books and make any profit. Now, he said, there are plenty of e-books out there; there is still no financial way to garner income from them.

He implied the future would be like the past; the publishers would continue to be such instant zealots over new technology, then dourly disappointed that they couldn't figure how to make lucre worthy of them out of it. He also spoke of the personal value of handing down books to loved ones with one's handwritten
notes. John Adams, he averred, had never read a book without scribbling such commentaries. He had himself give a value of Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby to his son, thinking he could pass on his personal idiosyncratic response to his scion about at least one book. Instead he found his son's notes wholly
condemning every one of his opinions; his gift had become one more theatre of meanspirited family contention.

Romano felt that books were objective vessels of pure information, that the definition and substance of a book was its words, and that in one way or another the continuity of books rested on words preserved from time, then offered to a public. Then this professor made his own predictions. As literacy went
downward in this nation, the ability to type became superfluous, voice recognition in the future would make boos and computer handling of them something that was talked rather than read with the symbols of a written language.

He felt that screens would show people on their flat surface in color reciting their memos, letters or books. He spoke guardedly of other radical changes in books in the future; his message was that though styles change, substance in books does not. He didn't explain what would happen if the ability to speak or think because equally irrelevant in our culture. This was a
time, he explained, when there are no categories or niches for people in publishing anymore. Stores had also became publishers; so had authors. In this carnival country of itinerant hawkers all had become itinerant salesmen. In a blur of niches once secure as a season in Rikers of solitary confinement, this human multi-taking was a harbinger of both future vertigo and unemployment for one time simple soldiers.

The loss of income and jobs had begun at their margins decades ago, he said, to small and used book stores, was not a catastrophe that book artisans had especially mourned. They were selling books in volume. At the same time the industry had imploded at its center into four or five interlocking centralized
corporations; yet if they sold less books, the volume of sales had expanded. Romano felt that the demise of the small book store was a function of mass market stores undercutting them by offering big discounts that had undersold those mom and pop operations. The lead items at low profit margins had pushed up
the initial cost of most books to a level where it was hard to sell them at all; the inflated prices gave buying or selling gave a book a huckster's vaporous air.

It also narrowed the range of what could be sold. Books for the few had never made it on large and manipulable profit margins. A store that sold twenty book blockbusters in volume could make a prophet because those twenty wee being pushed like authentic Ike buttons by their publishers. If one wanted to go

beyond those twenty one was in financial mucho trouble because that kind of Gypsy marketing had closed the independent small stores that had knowledgeable salesmen and a wider range of books for the aristoi.

Romano remarked that nowadays he commonly read most of the prose he took in on the Internet, starting with the newspapers in the morning of coffee. He didn't mention that there wasn't much out there these days competing with the Internet in ease of distribution or availability; the alternatives were both more expensive and weren't hardly that choice. The kind of enormous hunger for vast income that sustains the current book industry becomes an inherent censor that is not going to inspire anyone to get brave who doesn't see the value in losing money for the right reason. At least on the Internet, the cheapness of the mechanics offer one as much of a free press as this oligarchical country on
salary with phantasmal giants can generate. It might be more true as well. Truth that is uncomfortable is never going to garner income that lies that are attractive or fashionable will. People always ask me who are the authorities that can authenticate anything they read on a web site. They don't realize anymore that it is preciously the lack of such pundits that they should be looking for.

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I enjoyed Frank Romano's persuasive style; it was a masterful performance worthy of a professor who is a kind of celebrity if I had more complex reactions to his much less audacious ideas. I discovered in talking to salesmen later many
of them were unhappy with Romano. "He's a professor," One of them said to me. "He looks at everything like a scientist, abstractly, on comfortable tenure, not as people like us who live and die on profit."

There are many ways to look at books. They were looking at book as a currency to be bartered for money. People of an age felt a great pleasure about having books for reasons that were not just information and therefore largely the resident follies of a seasonal faith system. They contained the works and thoughts of great men, a genus not easily found in any vicinity, a particular rara avis in a shopping mall. Books were a way of bringing the most excellent of thinkers and writers to them from places far away as Seattle or deepest snowy Russia. It expanded an owner of a book to living with access both to the dead and sensible enough those living thousands of miles away from oneself.

It was once in a way as powerful as a telescope or microscope, in a league in a deep way with our current computers that run scenarios of possible patterns of nature from atoms to eliminate us with the banalities of perished hacks scribbling in previously indecipherable dead languages to adorn our senses and
intelligence like a non-Euclidean porno site with what is possible if not real. A man equipped with a library was one who was liable to know more both about the world and make less mistakes in it, or at any rate, not the contemptible errors of a clerk, infant, court stenographer or tyro. Books as money severely limits the capacity of books to act as guides, influences, communicators. Not every prophet is also a viable commercial concern.

Our culture of expendable and quickly replaceable things and people has never applied to books until the past four decades, They were often made with care, designed with cunning illustrations. The paper might last for centuries. They were often by authors whom many didn't feel were replaceable and trivial as a hamburger. The culture whose most central act is to throw things in the trash to destroy one half of eternity was a hygienic revel that happened many thousands of years after the first book.

Books once represented not only themselves but a world in which generally one kept what one owned and valued it along with acting to nurture one's relations with people one didn't trash and replace with another plastic set in primary colors in another city. Rather than a medieval relic of a faith system, books are machines that can expand the senses, values and intelligence of

anyone who owns them. They are also in a very singular personal contract with their readers. Tolstoy read by armies of microcephalics in a loony bin is not the War and Peace of even a clerk.

Armed not with the mineral ethics of data but with animal charity, older books contain whatever scant wisdom on every subject their sages could put to writing. These volumes aren't merely information but select testimony. Those of us who learn from books are grateful to garner freely for what has cost
mortality and even martyrdom for others as the wages of any understanding. There is an early 20th century Indian mathematician who, growing up without any access to the West, reinvented mathematics from Euclid roughly to the present; how
many of us would like to be faced with such labor? Outside of a few geniuses, how many of us could do it? Books are a legacy of a dark fortunes earned by writers, pillaged by readers.

Our indifference and contempt for the past has only dominated the West for less than a century or two. It is part of an understandable medieval feeling that those who are literate are the enemy of the people. This righteous purge has come to an excess in a presumption that books are stale, old, used and need
to be changed.

With computers one can be sure that War and Peace or any other book leaps out of the commercial definition of oligarchs because every book, no matter what encryptions and metal locks the publishers put on them, is only a scanner away from being public domain and having infinite free distribution.

Romano said that books are a vessel of information; a web site is a book. This meant for his audience that books in some form were being written and distributed without them. That was their job he was talking about. It was bad news. Something like the Gutenberg web sites already stand as a way of thinking that is inherently antagonistic to the standards of a churning business.

Computer books are an amalgam of the old and new ways of thinking. We have all been sold the same product several times no matter what programs we have as improvements, updates, bug corrections. We have all quietly used older and simpler programs though it is unfashionable to admit it and au courant to be
enthused about any progress at all in anything, even dying. We've all bought or been given pirated programs that everybody but the business people who have tried to profit from them can tell immediately is a white elephant, have read impenetrable help manuals, have had our machines crash for no reason at all, all
out of the enthusiasms and emptiness of the faith system of manufacturers. No computer book publisher is ever going to be happy selling the same book only once.

Yet the computer world is more generous than the book world ever was. Or one might call it a theatre of a property war. There are whole worlds of hackers who have spent years cracking and giving away programs of profit making businesses for free. Since the offering of the Bible to all and sundry during the Reformation, there has been nothing like this generosity in the West. The charity and freedom from commerce suggests as well that authors and readers have more interests in common than the publishers who supposedly are an immortal conduit of hierophants between them.

Romano, comparing book businesses people to dinosaurs, may be unfair to reptiles. The dinosaurs were very efficient animals that lasted sixty million years. Efficiency is the province of reptiles and arthropods. If we judge ourselves by that standard, the reptile kingdom has it all over us. To be a fake reptile or arthropod is a dismal conation unworthy of a real one, much less a human convinced they are perhaps not a lizard, but doomed to do either a good or bad imitation of one.

Unfortunately for us, our business world judges itself and others by cold blooded efficiency. Books are the last enrichment to live a reptile might want. Nothing could be more inefficient than language, writing or books when one can pop out of an egg armed with all the information one needs to thrive on a planet in which we are geared in a simple clear way to take up imperial expansion and domination as human beings like Alexander the Great only dreamt of. We are not all

simple machines pent tragically on stratagems for our perpetuity. We all read books privately and alone, away from the corporate machine and not all that
emotionally affiliated ahead with hungers and aims either.

A reader like an author has no investment in the profit of a book. He doesn't care how many readers it has. It doesn't have to be famous, and it certainly isn't going to garner him an income. If anything it may cost him mortality he might have otherwise spent selling vacuum cleaners door to door. He and the author have a natural alliance that publishers have for many decades
been at pains to conceal. These deep and inherent cleavages between publishers and readers are part of an industry not selling paper but words as Romano says.

Until we change our definition of ourselves and acquaint business with other legitimate values beyond efficiency and domination we are going inherently to be at loggerheads with the people at Booktech along with own economy.

A book stays in one's home; one refers to it over a lifetime in different ways as if one were holding a conversation at one's leisure with it.

Sometimes we are not open to books until a certain age; of then we wonder what we valued in books we admired in the past. We continually refer to them in our minds even if we don't read them. Books, all read alone in a room, tend to have the quality of lifelong conversation with wonderful people, not a product no more valuable than a stale bagel.

As we change our responses to books modulates though the book though the information is the same. Romano assumes a discrete integrity to a book irrespective of its readers that really doesn't define it. When a genius reads a book he has experiences not available to a moron reading the same words.
Diverse as we are, our character and our changes in personality as we move through time colors our contribution to the books we read.

I believe there is an objective substance to a book. It
isn't information. It is a controlled invitation to a series of effects. I am not a Deconstructionist and think that theory an absurdity. Authors do control their books, their effects, their substance to a large degree. Otherwise we could not understand each other when we talk about War and Peace or Madam Bovary.

I'm not a believer that the criticisms of literature is a science either as people told me when I went to college. The polar folly of that quietly lunatic theory certainly generated absurdities such as counting the words in a Shakespeare play and comparing it with a word count of a drama of Shaw, they might has well have compared it with a script for the Three Stooges, but if
we know that the level of objectivity in a book is less than its experience for anyone, and that trying to make books and readings science is a comical enterprise, it is equally true that the absolute substance or lack of it in a book is a refractory element in all books of worth that makes booksellers unable to sell one book as a juggernaut at their whim. Readers of books are
often very selective about what they do, whom they know, and what they value, if others think they are snobs or reactionaries hawking the venoms of natural and artificial inequality; as customers they aren't the same passive villagers who follow the parade of pipers leading one into the mark and wilderness in the
world of the movies.

I must say that the books that I value the most and were most influential to me over a lifetime were never pushed either by the media juggernaut, the schools or anybody else. Anything that was written a century or more ago falls into a category of books that goes back several thousand years and includes many
savants no doubt beleaguered by their own cultures now perished but with insights not available to us in our own follies. We cannot read the books or experience the pundits of the future; the past is a source of escape from our presumptions and received ideas for us. I am disturbing a kind of customer for books who wants to depart form the definitions of his culture, not embrace
them. It is hardly how we would describe most uses of contemporary products. I believe that is still a rather expensive part of the book market.

In one way I think Romano is accurate: his production that we are all going to download books and then having them printing at retail stores. Given the aims and agendas of business, and those of authors and readers, it seems inevitable for the latter to hope for such a technology, and for the printers who can now
do so but sell only to business to set up that kind of retail business in volume. Whether or not it will happen is another matter. I would with Romano wager it will.

Romano, after knocking the enthusiasm for imaginary worlds of the future of the publishers, stated that he was sure a major direction of books would be spoken volumes based on voice recognition computer techniques and the value of hearing a book read aloud. He claims that books as collections of symbols or
alphabets are a narrow production limited by old and primitive technologies. I would doubt this prediction. Books read by their authors certainly have more authenticity but may not be as effective as performers reading them. On the other hand a performer if offering a voice other than the one of the authors
and is presenting something other than the book itself to the listener: a kind of audio theatre. A book read by a reader which has no voice can be taken in at his own speed and reflected upon with maximum efficiency when he thinks some thought is called for. Readers like myself that take in one type of book, mostly
non-fiction with no musical qualities to savor in the prose at three seconds a page and dense poetry at a slow gait worthy of its impressions are not going to repair too often to spoken books.

A friend of mine worked in a downtown New York stores selling such tapes for playing on long car trips listened by commenting suburbanites while they traversed the concrete boulevards to and from Wall Street. The level of concentration of a driver on a road might be somewhat less than the intensity and reflective powers hoped for in a reader by many an author. If they were listening to rapturous poetry they might become too immersed in their transports to avoid an accident or not be prone to drive in a rapture into a wall.

That might not even be good for performance of manuals for tinker toys. The less attention a driver pays to Keats or Rimbaud, the more likely he is to have an accident or miss a sign that leads him to Patchogue. As Romano said, the degree to which we pay attention to a book is a major element in how much we
respond to it at all. My assessment of computer educational programs after using some of them to try to teach the last of my sons arithmetic or other skills was that he did better with the kinds of books I read in my childhood than with any computer It is common in the computer world to say that books are information as everything else ultimately is; I think that is a faith system that embraces the equal values, absolutely or subject of everything and everybody. I think books are information among many other things, one of them being a good reader who brings intelligence and character to a book or does
not. Calling a book information means we are trying to define it as a discrete entity, as they all our savants of this age do, which is either true or false. On the day that the human farce is extinguished, the value of any book, objective or otherwise, including all works of Tolstoy will have achieved ultimate triviality, if the publishing industry itself is trying to promote somewhat prematurely. The books might sit on the planet forever; they will be no more important than stones on the landscape of Mars.

Some books are of course nothing but information. A manual of how to put together a piece of furniture is nothing but information. It doesn't have to have charm, talent or magic; it aims only at mechanics and clarity. A poem by Keats on stars or nightingales that are immortal and he not so has more in it than information. If all there were in the verses were the information that stars and nightingales were deathless and the poet not so, the data is not only false; is hardly what effect the poet meant to achieve in these great stanzas.

If we ask what Keats was trying to offer us, we are going to have to go beyond the aegis of information. In fact, if we are not a fellow a few steps or less from his intents and effects, we are

not going to get what he was after, a sublime meditation on life and death, and we will have to be content with mere
information, all of it false.

We really go aground it we try to call any fiction information. Why we would want to have access to the inventions of a writer about people who don't exist is beyond me. Plainly we don't go to novels and short stories for data.

4

Frank Romano said that one of the notions of linear history that is most destructive to us is our idea that things supersede other things. Sometimes they do; we have no more need for a typewriter after we realize what a world processor can accomplish. Yet much of the time, as Emerson says, there are
tradeoffs and compensations for most of what we would like to see as clear boons or disasters that should make us stop and wonder at the simplicity of our own intelligence.

Romano felt his audience wanted prophecies. He gave them. I would hate to remember often the predictions of history I lived through by anyone. One of the major prophets of my youth was Robert McNamara, the man who used computer to prove to all who listened, many of them in power, that we could not lose the
Vietnam War.

It's probably more accurate to think of books as tools in a great war that has been going on before Egypt for control or freedom of information. This war began the first day a tribal chief wanted to know what was going on in the next valley and send out his spies to look. It gave the spies, middle men offering selective information, tremendous power to produce reality or make it disappear, at least in the magic vessel of their data. This war was already millions of years old in Egypt. Rather paradoxically we lost our ability to read Egyptian and glean its information for thousands of years because in its heady only their priests and a few others could read it.

Universal literacy and the Reformation is as much as anything else not only getting information to people freely but keeping the information itself alive. We on our way to another phase of the war in which the freedom of information armies are going to win some of the next major battles. As soon as we get
those printers in stores we are all going to have access to books we want and download; even before that, if we can read at length on a monitor we can have the books we want instantly. Many of the Booktech people I talked to where producing runs of twenty five or even five books. We are not very far away for a personal and even private covenant between writers and readers that will be very different from the ones predicted by Frank Romano.

As Romano says, nothing presumptively means the death for lack of utility of something else. There were always be blockbusters and juggernauts. Yet if a society wants to take up the logical direction of ultimately malleable materials and their replacement, it must as a consequence try to eliminate, criminalize or make imaginary the irreplaceable kind of writers and books and the level of excellence they represent in the society. Whether they can do that and compete against others in the long run who have a more healthy respect for freedom of
information as well as excellence is doubtful.

Booktech is a convention of people involved in commerce. That is ordinary enough but the developments on the Internet very often are beyond business. For the past ten years many scholarly enthusiasts now for a nominal sum offer their gleanings antithyroid by a hunger for money. Nobody could pay the people who run the web sites I look at ass a scholar to do what they do. It is a return to a world that we should be familiar with since our species lived in it at least a million ears, one in which information is not a pure function of commerce, coin or barter.

There have been civilizations such as the Cornwall Celts that made it a crime to write anything at all because they were very protective of the freedom and autonomy of their sources of

information. They knew what objective books or information such as Frank Romano describes would do to honest definitions of
information. So do most of the people Frank Romano and I repair to daily on the Internet.

Frank Romano says the first thing he does in the morning is look at news sites there. Of course there are plenty of such sites bundled into the commercial world but there are others, equally available that are produced out of bravery and enthusiasm. This isn't confined to the margins of the book world
or zealots. My first editor at Avon Books told me at thirty years ago what was recently said to me by a Barnes and Noble high executive that their company was in business to lose money. The Barnes and Noble poobah told me his met with a committee every week to figure out how to lose it.

The Internet among its commercial operations also represents a world of web masters that are out for influence and moral charity rather than income who join with readers wanting to be influenced in a natural alliance very threatening to any control by any juggernaut mechanism such as the Booktech acolytes man which inherently, whether it likes it or not, is on the side of ruling the flow of information. A scholar like myself is always going to go to theaters of utter freedom of information if I can find them because I am more interested in the truth than what is political correct, fashionable or profitable. I am not concerned that the truth, offering it or knowing it might lose myself or others money. As long as people have this taste, an arena of freedom in our present and future can never be wholly defeated.

Currently Booktech is manned by very amiable people of commerce whose living and survival rests on a big volume juggernaut which in its very mechanics is reductive. Its very neutral churning of its machines must set into motion a pique and dissidence from all those who can afford never to be fashionable
or profitable. The Internet like a tavern without walls has room for everybody. I think plainly the future of Booktech and books is to follow the direction of a nature that is going to pull us at least in the short run toward freedom by the same unobtrusive laws by which water runs downward and the sun goes from east to
west.