

There's More to Publishing Than Meets the Screen

By Jonathan Galassi

WHAT is an e-book? News that the heirs of William Styron, the author of "Sophie's Choice," are licensing the electronic-publishing rights for some of his Random House books to Open Road Integrated Media got me to pondering: Are e-books a new frontier in publishing, a fresh version of the author's work? Or are they simply the latest editions of the books produced by publishers like Random House?

It was an old-fashioned book publisher who decided that William Sty-

ron's work was worth reading in the first place. Hiram Haydn signed him up and edited his debut novel, "Lie Down in Darkness," which Random House published in 1951. As Mr. Styron himself later said, both Mr. Haydn and his subsequent Random House editor, Robert Loomis, had a "genius for catching me out in my weakest or most slipshod moments, but never tried to impose their ideas on mine. It's the moral support that's been so valuable."

In the course of his career, Mr. Styron published nine other books with Random House, each of which received the scrupulous line-by-line attention of one of the great editors of the time. Each was also copy-edited through several stages of proof that were passed back and forth among the copy editor, Mr. Styron and Mr. Loomis.

The appropriate typeface was chosen and submitted to the author for approval by Random House's designers, and a binding was selected. A dust jacket — often involving art specially commissioned by Random House to represent

The e-book may be a new creation, but the words inside it aren't.

and advertise the book — was designed, and copy intended to induce reviewers and readers to pick the book up and pay attention to it was written.

Employees of the Random House publicity department then talked about the books with anyone who would listen and submitted bound proofs to newspapers and magazines for review, while the Random House sales department obtained advance orders from booksellers. The Random House rights department, working in concert with Mr. Styron's agent, pitched the books to magazine editors, movie agents and foreign publishers.

Large-print versions for the reading-impaired and audio versions were produced, marketed and sold by Random House or licensed to others, and, after a suitable period, cheaper paperback versions were also published.

For each book, Random House exploited its edition in every then-conceivable format. And through it all, Mr. Loomis and his colleagues kept in touch with Mr. Styron, monitoring the life of the book through its various permutations.

Recently, a new, previously unimagined version of the work became a pos-

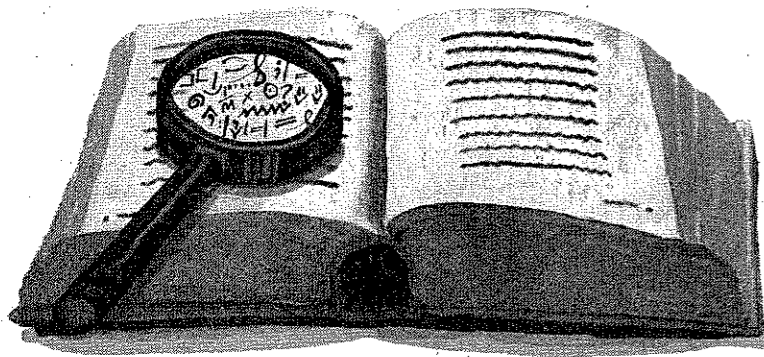
sibility: Mr. Styron's books can now be reproduced and distributed electronically.

The author's heirs hold the copyright to his work. But should another company be able to issue e-book versions of Random House's editions without its involvement? An e-book version of Mr. Styron's "The Confessions of Nat Turner" will contain more than the author's original words. It will also comprise Mr. Loomis's editing, as well as all the labor of copy editing, designing and producing, not to mention marketing and sales, that went into making it a desirable candidate for e-book distribution. Mr. Styron's books took the form they have, are what they are today, not only because of his remarkable genius but also, as he himself acknowledged, because of the dedicated work of those at Random House.

In this increasingly virtual age of open access and universal availability, it's important for readers to keep in mind what it is that a publisher does for an author. A publisher — and I write as one — does far more than print and sell a book. It selects, nurtures, positions and promotes the writer's work.

An e-book distributor is not a publisher, but rather a purveyor of work that has already been created. In this way, e-books are no different from large-print or paperback or audio versions. They are simply the latest link in an unbroken editorial chain, the newest format for one of man's greatest inventions: the constantly evolving, imperishable book — given its definitive form by a publisher.

Even if someday, God forbid, books are no longer printed, they will still need the thought and care and dedication that Mr. Loomis and his colleagues put into producing William Styron's work for nearly 60 years. Some things never change. □



ELLEN LUPTON