Good evening, and welcome to the Aurora Forum at Stanford University. I’m Mark Gonnerman, the Forum’s director. It’s always a pleasure to be here in Kresge Auditorium for each installment of this ongoing series of free and open public conversations sponsored by Stanford’s Office of Public Affairs and Stanford Continuing Studies.

Tonight we are drawn together by the question, Why read books? That may seem rather odd in view of the fact that we’re gathered on the campus of one of the world’s leading institutions of higher learning. But anyone who is paying attention knows that the book, an acronym perhaps for “Basic Organization of Knowledge” (B-O-O-K), is competing more and more with other media, both in and out of the classroom. What does it mean if time once devoted to the printed page is now given to the pixilated screen? While the shift may enlarge our horizons, we might wonder whether and how it is also, perhaps quite literally, changing our minds. What are the skills that enable navigation of the terrain of thought laid out in serious books? Are these skills markedly different from those that enable other ways of receiving information, generating insight, and enhancing the kind of critical reflection that enables the considered, independent, and reasonable judgments that make democratic society possible? What is gained and what is lost if we become less intimate with books?

I cannot resist taking a moment to step back and set our contemporary book culture in a broad and deep historical frame. We know that modern humans (homo sapiens) began to flourish at the time of the extinction of the Neanderthals around 35,000 years ago, and that’s a conservative figure. The oldest script, Mesopotamian cuneiform, is less than 6,000 years old, and our oldest alphabetic writing is around 4,000 years old. Of all the tens of thousands of languages spoken in the course of human history, Munro Edmonson, in *Lore: An Introduction to the Science of Folklore and Literature* (1971), calculates that only a small fraction—about 106—have been committed to writing to a degree sufficient to have produced a literature. And most have never been written at all. Of the 5,000 or so languages spoken today, Munro estimates that only around 78 are available in literary texts. So, when viewed in large-scale, world historical terms, our reliance on books is really anomalous.

Before I introduce tonight’s conversation partners, I want to welcome especially the Stanford parents who are here with their offspring for Stanford’s Parents’ Weekend. I also want to emphasize that tonight’s program is co-sponsored with the Stanford
Humanities Center and thank the associate director of the Center, Matthew Tiews, for his partnership in planning and presenting this program.

The director of the Humanities Center, Professor John Bender, is here tonight as well. His presence reminds me that he will soon preside over one of our university’s best festivals: the Annual Book Celebration that honors works written, edited, and performed by humanities faculty members during the previous calendar year. Last year, 66 such books and 5 CDs were duly recognized.

Tonight we will follow our typical Aurora Forum program format of 45 minutes of onstage conversation followed by another 45 minutes of conversation inspired by audience questions and comments. If, when we get to that portion of the evening, you have a contribution to make, please line up behind one of the two aisle mikes and our moderator will recognize you.

Tonight we are joined by three virtuoso scholars who are intimately familiar with the life of the mind nurtured by the bound, printed word. I will keep my introductions of our guests brief, for you can get further details in tonight’s printed program and by visiting our Web site, auroraforum.org.

First, I’d like to welcome Leah Price, a professor of English and American literature at Harvard University, where she was tenured in 2002 after just two years there on the tenure track. Last year, she was named a Harvard College professor, meaning she holds a chair endowed in recognition of her extraordinary commitment to undergraduate education. Among her many contributions at Harvard and as an emerging leader in her academic field, she co-chairs the seminar on Victorian culture and the seminar on the history of the book at the Harvard Humanities Center. In 2002-2003, she held a Stanford Humanities Center fellowship and convened a Humanities Center workshop here, also on the history of the book. This year, she is enjoying a sabbatical as a Radcliffe Institute Fellow, and we look forward to the monograph she is working on now entitled Reader’s Block: The Uses of Books in Victorian Culture.

Professor Price and Seth Lerer co-edited the January 2006 issue of PMLA, the journal of the Modern Language Association on “The History of the Book and the Idea of Literature.”

We are pleased that Professor Lerer is also here with us tonight. He is the Avalon Foundation Professor of the Humanities at Stanford, where he has taught since 1990. He holds two bachelor’s degrees, one from Wesleyan University and one from Oxford, and he earned his Ph.D. in comparative literature at The University of Chicago. He has been the recipient of many awards for his scholarship and teaching, including the Hoagland Prize for undergraduate teaching here at Stanford. He is the author of many books and articles on reading and the scholarly imagination, and his book Inventing English: A Portable History of the Language will appear in March this year. His “History of the English Language” is a very popular lecture course available from The Teaching Company.
Our moderator tonight, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, is the Albert Guérard Professor in Literature at Stanford. His interests are countless and include, officially, Medieval literature and culture; Spanish, French, German, and Italian literatures since the Renaissance; Argentinian and Brazilian literatures in the 19th and 20th centuries; Aesthetics; History of Ideas, and the History of Scholarship. He is a champion of what he calls “riskful thinking,” which is part of what makes him a model university teacher and citizen. His most recent book, *In Praise of Athletic Beauty*, is now being translated into many languages worldwide. This is his second appearance as an Aurora Forum moderator, and I’m grateful to him and to each of our guests for taking time from their demanding—some would say “crushing”—schedules to lead us in this public conversation.

Please join me in welcoming our guests to the Aurora Forum stage. [Applause]

**Gumbrecht:** I was thinking that moderation is not something close to my heart—to be moderate—but thinking what would be the risk of this conversation. And the risk of such an evening is to get boring. That’s what we have to avoid. And I think the greatest chance of being boring would be if we just represent what you would expect from us. We’re all a little bit nervous because we were introduced as “virtuoso scholars.” I don’t know really how we can show we are virtuoso scholars, but what you would expect from the species of virtuoso scholars would be that we all make strong statements about how much we love books and that there is nothing in our lives that matters more than books and that we feel like an island in this computer culture—in this electronic culture—where books are less and less important, and we will keep up the values: a value conservative, a Wertkonservative, as you would say in German. Now, maybe that’s true for us, but I think that would really not be the right way to start. Because what would we say after the initial statement? Well, we hold onto this truth that the greatest value in the world is books. So this is why I wanted to start by asking my colleagues (and I’ll start with Leah as our guest and also the lady on the panel) whether you ever fall asleep over books. [Laughter]

**Price:** That’s one of the great advantages of a book as opposed to a screen. If you fall asleep on your keyboard, you will type out all kinds of gibberish, but with a book, your head can gently rest. If you think about the history of reading, reading has often been linked to the bed. It’s one of the most comfortable places to read, it’s one of the most intimate places to read, it’s the place where children are read to by their parents. So certainly I think you could say that there is a strong relation between reading and sleeping, and not simply in the case of a bad book.

**Gumbrecht:** Not for children only. Children are supposed to fall asleep when you read books to them. I think that’s a lousy type of socialization … [Laughter] … but we all practice that.

**Price:** And of course so many children’s books are about going to sleep. They’re a kind of indoctrination: *Bedtime for Frances, Good Night Moon*. 


Gumbrecht: Is there any specific type of book or any author that has this *vix dormitiva* for you? (I was saying that in Latin so you know.....)

Price: You know, I would be tempted to give a flippant answer to that, like the answer that you give when someone asks you what book you would take to a desert island, and of course you have to answer, *An Elementary Guide to Shipbuilding*. But in a way, I think fiction can put you to sleep because you’re already going into another world—a sort of dream world—and it’s easing you out of your own life. So I don’t think it’s an insult to a book to say that it’s soporific. Seth may disagree.

Lerer: It’s interesting you mention that because I actually brought a book and I brought one of my favorite books, which is the *Oxford Book of American Verse*, published in 1950 and edited by F. O. Matthiessen. And the last poem—you must have known this when you asked this question—because the very last poem in this book is written by the poet Robert Lowell, and it’s called “Falling Asleep over the *Aeneid*.” [Laughter] This is precisely the point of the poem and the point of this collection, as a whole. In fact, the book begins with Anne Bradstreet, who announces on the very first page, “To sing of wars, of captains and kings,” and so on and so on. So she’s setting herself up as a kind of female Virgil of the Americas. So the book begins with this and it ends with “Falling Asleep over the *Aeneid*.” At one level, you could say that the entire history of Western literature is falling asleep over the *Aeneid*. It’s the dreams we have after reading stories of conquest and communion. And so in some sense, there’s really little difference between reading and sleeping or reading and dreaming. If there’s a book I’d love to fall asleep over, that’s a really good question because there are so many books that I have fallen asleep over. And I think the most important books for me are books like this, which are great anthologies—that give you a whole history in snippets and selections. And I think you can see from the way in which this book is worn and slightly battered that I’ve fallen asleep over it many, many times. And, in fact, that’s probably the most decorous thing I’ve done with this book.

Gumbrecht: And this book is authentic. You all know that professors of literature, to convince their students that they’ve read all books....You can do that in half a minute; I mean you take it and you crush it a little bit, but this one has been…

Lerer: That’s right. No, this one has been lovingly abused.

Gumbrecht: Now, the opposite question, and I start with Seth this time. Is there a book you can absolutely not fall asleep over or rather, do you choose certain places where you like to read—fireside, or library carrel—or certain conditions, or is that relatively neutral?

Lerer: That’s a good question. For me, there is an inseparable physicality between reading and the experience of it. So there are certain kinds of books that I read in certain kinds of spaces. There’s airplane reading, there’s train reading, there’s home reading, there’s desk reading. For me, my ideal space of reading is, in many ways, a place to curl up. And it’s one of the things the three of us were talking about earlier today: the earliest
reference I could find to curling up with a book is from Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*, where Jo March curls up with a book in her uncle’s library. That, to me, is the sense that books are domestic things, they give a sense of belonging, they’re about home. So the places where I like to read are the places where I feel at home. And the books I like to read are the books that make me feel at home; they make me feel “me,” in a fundamental way.

**Gumbrecht:** It goes both ways. Does it matter to you to own books?

**Lerer:** Well, I own fewer and fewer books because I take a lot of them out of the library. As long as I, every couple of years, bring them back and have them restamped, [Laughter] I can have them, as my colleagues know, forever. But there’s something about owning a book, and owning particular books….There are a lot of books that I’ll just buy and own and maybe I won’t read them through, but I’ll just have them and I’ll know that they’re mine. I don’t have a large personal library, but I think the kinds of books that I like to have are books that I can constantly go back to—not novels that I’ve read, but books that have a certain association.

**Price:** I own very few books I think because, frankly, they’re heavy, and for years when I was in graduate school and moving every August, I made careful calculations about the ratio of interest to weight of every book in the store. I do now take digital photos of my bookshelves so that when I’m away from home I can visualize the spines of the books as a way of remembering what I own—what books I’ve read on a particular topic. But I don’t yet have that state of a kind of Zen emptiness and purity that I think many of my students have who have many more texts online and who don’t want objects as mnemonic devices.

**Gumbrecht:** Do you want more books online?

**Price:** No, but I think my students do. I think there has been a generational shift away from the book as an object. But if you can have all your music on your iPod rather than having acres of shelf space taken up by LPs, you want the same for texts.

**Lerer:** Some in the audience need to know what an LP is. [Laughter]

**Gumbrecht:** Obviously, you would expect that and maybe some of you can’t wait. We will talk about electronic books, and so forth, because, after all, we are at Stanford and, after all, at least Seth less than I … but I’m under a lot of pressure to show that I’m up-to-speed and up-to-date and not that old.

But before I do that, I want to go back to one of these things of physicality. I’ll give you an example. At some point—this is not because of my German accent but because I was writing a book on the year 1926, and a very famous and infamous book, namely Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, was written in 1926. And because I wanted to quote an English translation, I checked out some of the copies that Stanford’s Green Library holds of the English version of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, and the margins—I’ve never seen that—were
full of enthusiastic commentaries. These were Stanford college boys, or maybe Stanford faculty (I hope not) who were reading that book in the year 1926 and putting exclamation marks and “Right on!” and so on and so forth. It was an uncanny feeling. This was not a pretty feeling, but at the same time it was interesting. I will admit it was an experience. It was not only OK that there were enthusiastic readers of that book in America; that was not surprising. But to have it there in this physical contact … it almost gets you back to that year. Now the instructions, of course, are: never write in a library book. That’s why you buy personal books that you can make notes in, and so forth. But how do you react to such inscriptions or signs from previous readers—written signs, physical signs, coffee stains—in a book?

**Lerer:** I love them. For me, the meaning of a book really lies in everything around the actual print. And a lot of what I work on or a lot of what I enjoy is really feeling that when I’m picking up a book, I’m physically engaging with a previous reader. Sometimes that could be a famous dead reader (I’m holding a book that Thomas Jefferson held, and that’s an incredible experience) or just having a sense that the object of the book itself is recording this intimate community of readers. And sometimes our library books are annotated or marked up and sometimes they’re illuminating and sometimes they’re disturbing. But there is a sense of individuals who, even though these books are not their own, could not resist the temptation to engage physically with the book. That in itself is a mark of some kind of readerly intensity.

**Gumbrecht:** And you, Leah?

**Price:** I think everyone who works in this field—on the history of reading—is always looking for markings in books, which most often aren’t verbal. They could be, as you say, coffee stains, thumb prints, or in older books, whether the pages have been cut, because often you get to page 17 or so, and then the pages are no longer cut, and you realize that no one ever finished this book. That might be one reason why pornography has been one of the most important genres in the history of reading because it’s one of the only genres where readers at least have the potential to leave some physical mark of their reaction to the book. Now clearly, you don’t get that in most books.

**Lerer:** I’ve done time for saying things like that. [Laughter] I just want you to know that.

**Price:** It is the privilege of being female.

**Gumbrecht:** And she’s a Harvard College professor. Can you believe that? It would not be possible at Stanford.

**Price:** I would just also want to say that marginalia can be faked. The early twentieth century Irish writer, Flann O’Brien, had a kind of scheme for a service that would come to your house if you bought books by the yard to decorate your living room. And they would crack the spines, they would write in the margins, they would spill coffee on page
200 so that people wouldn’t think that you just bought your books by the yard and had never read them. So these marks are very hard to interpret sometimes.

**Gumbrecht:** Fake spilled coffee is difficult to imagine. I would love to indulge more in that, but I do think you expect, and are impatient, that we engage in greater modernity. I’m teaching an IHUM course this quarter, like Seth often does—an introduction to humanities for Stanford freshmen. When I started that, it was actually a lie because I didn’t have much time to prepare and I told the students, “What you really have to learn is to listen to a 45-minute lecture. I will not do any visuals. You have to listen, you have to take notes, you are also supposed to read books. This is actually about medieval texts.” We recently had the mid-quarter evaluations and what I got back is that I was talking down to them: I was very condescending, how could I say that, and this is no longer their way of reading; they read in a different way. So of the range of questions I want to open with, there is: What do we think changes with the different reading culture? Seemingly, many of those students, although we provide them with books, read on screens. They cannot fall asleep over the screen reading, but they can hit their heads against the screen and break it or whatever disaster they may cause. So it’s a different physicality. So what changes? Also, and this is a more serious question (I was asking myself at this opening lecture of my IHUM, I was so sure this was a good thing and I was right on it and that’s what I should tell them), but what is really the value? Why *should* they read books? I mean, couldn’t we say, “Well, you know, maybe we are the very last generation that’s in love with books”? But should we really do that? And what will change?

**Lerer:** I think there are several things. One is that there is this physical relationship to the thing we are reading—that books are more than just the vessels for information. For people my age, we grew up reading like this [demonstrates], and the experience of reading is the experience of looking down. Now, my 15-year-old son has the experience of reading as looking *out* because he’s reading a screen. And I thought that this was not a problem until he decided that he would take his desk chair and try to put a cup holder in it. So I realized that what he was doing was watching television. My question is: Is there a relationship between your physical engagement with a book and cognitive development? That is, do you think and engage with texts differently looking down as an intimate process, or do you engage with things outwardly as an “extimate” process, where you look out at the screen and where your sense of direction is therefore not intimate but rather public? In this sense, then, reading is not a closed thing. If you are a student and you think of reading as looking out, there are many things you can do while the lecture is going on, and my students do all of them. They surf the Web, they engage with things. There are a lot of advantages to that with students online in the class, but I think the central issue is this physical relationship.

The second thing is that I grew up reading with a pen or pencil in my hand. There’s no way you read with a pen or pencil in your hand when you’re reading on a screen. So what is the relationship between writing and engagement? You cannot annotate a screen in the same way. And I think part of what’s going on, too, is the sense that the screen changes the way in which you access a book narratively. A book exists where you can
access it if you like vertically, where you can skim and you can open at random. A
screen is more like an old scroll, where you actually have to scroll through, where you
access it linearly. And so these are the kinds of questions I’m asking myself as, in
watching my son, I see myself in effect disappear from history in the way in which I’ve
read.

Gumbrecht:  Yes, this is our farewell event tonight. [Laughter]  But Leah, as Seth was
saying, this close relationship with the book—this is a phrase that has been used several
times—and there is of course, and I think it has to do with this, a soft semantic transition.
We talk of “close reading.” In what is now the Philosophical Reading Group at Stanford,
I was using the English words, “philosophical close reading.” So is close reading, the
culture of close reading, the culture of new criticism (a very Anglo-American thing), is
that possible in front of the screen? Can one close read a text from a screen? Just to
make one experiment, does it really change? I have no answer, so I want to learn from
you.

Price:  It may be that the shift that we’re experiencing now is like the shift that some
historians date to the eighteenth century from intensive reading to extensive reading; that
is, from households that would own one or two books, usually religious texts (a Bible and
something else), to a kind of deluge of print where you’ve got so much information
overload to wade through that you skim, you skip, you glance at things. It’s easy to feel
that now we’re in another moment of information overload in which we need to acquire
distant reading skills to get through texts quickly, instrumentally. And yet, as you were
saying, Seth, the book itself is an ideal device for skipping around whereas the computer
screen where you have the metaphorical scroll bar really restricts you to a single linear
trajectory through the text. It’s true that you can do key-word searches, but you can’t flip
back and forth the way that you can with a book. I don’t know if anyone here saw a
video that’s been circulating on YouTube (and I have to say I’m not the representative of
youthfulness here; I only saw this video because a student sent it to me and when I said
that I didn’t have a high-speed connection at home, and so on, the student came and paid
me a home visit with her laptop and stole wireless from the neighbors and showed me
this video). But it involves two monks. Have you seen this?

Lerer:  Yes, it’s in Danish [sic (Norwegian)], actually.

Price:  Yes, which makes it funnier, for some reason. One of the monks has…

Lerer:  One of the monks has a book and the other one is showing him what to do.

Price:  And the first monk says, “There’s this wonderful thing, but I don’t know how you
operate it.”

Lerer:  And the other monk says, “You just turn it like this and you open it up.”

Price:  And the monk says, “That’s miraculous. I’ve been looking at this object for days
and I couldn’t figure out how to enter it.” So the other monk opens it up and the first
monk says, “Well, that’s wonderful, but now the page that I was just looking at has disappeared. How do I get that information back? Has it been lost?”

**Lerer:** And so the other monk turns it back and says, “No, here it is. It’s right there.”

**Price:** You get the idea. And then they say it in Danish [sic]. How wonderful.

**Lerer:** But of course the kicker in this is when he leaves the book like this, and the first monk says, “Wait a minute! Wait a minute! I can’t open it! I can’t open it.” And the other monk comes back and he goes like that [demonstrates]. “Oh, OK. Thank you.” It is so much funnier in Danish. [Laughter] There is no comparison. But you see, this is the great thing. In fact, without exaggeration, ten people sent me this thing because they said, “Oh, here’s something you’d like.” And I’m always wary of it when people say, “Oh, here’s something you’d like.”

**Gumbrecht:** You know, that’s interesting. Nobody sent it to me. [Laughter]

**Lerer:** Well, after this, I will send it to you. Actually, people probably felt intuitively that you’d already seen it. When I saw it the first time, I thought, “Oh, Sepp [a nickname for Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht] had to have seen this already.

**Gumbrecht:** Oh, people know that once in my life I tried to learn Danish so they didn’t want to give me a hard time. Still, I want to insist on this question. When I first came to this country many, many years ago….If you’re German and have a German accent, people expect you to teach philosophy, to have read all of Hegel and Kant, but they don’t expect you to have a close reading culture. I think this is a point of honor and pride of American humanities culture and British humanities culture—close reading. I think, for example, I’m a better proofreader on the screen. I’m a lousy proofreader if I have this classic … what you call in German “Fahne,” these long things—printers’ books. I’m pretty good at proofreading on a screen, but I cannot imagine, let’s say, take “The Man Without Qualities,” a 1,500-page unfinished novel, which I think needs to be read slowly. It’s not very difficult to read, but to indulge in it—now, I have a hard time imagining doing that on a screen. I felt, when you were talking about curling up, and so forth, that it has to do with the body position. Would you agree, or do you close read easily onscreen?

**Price:** I think for me the difference lies in genre rather than medium, so that one of the frustrations that I’ve actually had with these American students who are trained in that close-reading culture is that they’re very good readers of literature, but they are often bad readers, I find, of history because they don’t know how to skim a book. They start underlining and highlighting and they highlight every word so that after a while the only word that leaps out at you from the page is the one word that they haven’t highlit, which, of course, when they return the book to the library, lovingly annotated, is the one word that shows up on a Xerox because when you make a photocopy of a book that has been highlit, everything that has gone under the highlighter is blacked out as if it’s been redacted by the censors. So I think that close reading can be a real liability as well if you don’t teach students how to switch it on and switch it off. And yet there’s such a kind of
theological belief in the moral value of close reading that you can’t tell students, “Close read this book and skim that book.” There’s a sense that the minute they enter a college classroom, every word has got to count. And frankly there’s a lot of stuff out there where every word is not going to count.

**Lerer:** Well, this raises a question that I wanted to ask both of you, which is: Do you think that reading is a good in itself? That is, not just that reading good books provides you with information. Do you think that learning how to read—that being a reader—that this is somehow a moral virtue?

**Gumbrecht:** I have to think.

**Price:** You know, in my period, which is Britain in the nineteenth century, there are a lot of people who believe that it is.

**Gumbrecht:** That’s your period of research.

**Price:** [Laughter] Thank you for the clarification. I do have students say things on their evaluations like, “Professor Price seems to know the period so well it’s as if she was born in it.”

**Gumbrecht:** Seth and I do medieval…..

**Lerer:** And Sepp really was born then.

**Price:** I think there is a sense of reading as a secular substitute for religion as a good in itself. But at the same time you have a lot of Victorian writers, especially more social-scientific writers, saying: Look at the statistics of what gets requested in the new public libraries which were founded after 1850 in England. The number one request is the betting pages—the sports pages—of the newspaper. People learn to read so that they can fill out a form when they go to the bookies. People learn to read so that they can fill out employment forms. People learn how to read so that they can read pornography. Clearly, most of what people use reading for is not literary, and that’s true today. Books represent a tiny fraction of what gets printed in this country or in any country. So I think we tend to think of reading as the reading of literature, but overall it’s more vocational, it’s more instrumental, it’s not about aesthetics. So there’s a kind of borrowed virtue to reading.

**Gumbrecht:** Instead of answering your question, because I’m not qualified to answer questions as a moderator, I can only stop you and ask you questions. But clearly, in most English departments, but even in modern literature departments, we feel that we have this conservative (not in the political sense) duty of keeping a traditional form of reading alive and making the students appreciate books and so forth. And as you were mentioning, your son Aaron (and I could mention my sons Marco and Christopher) do precious little reading—it’s very selective—and also precious little postcard writing. My 29-year-old son writes us one postcard every other year that he calls “my bi-annual postcard.” He’s
very successful in his profession and actually, I’m not sorry to say, he’s a fighter pilot; he flies Euro-fighters. Now, do I have a point in persuading him and the future generations that they should love books as much as we somehow do? It’s a real question. I don’t really know because I’m always saying, “You have to learn that; You need to learn to appreciate it; It can be beautiful” in my lectures. But is that really something we should continue to do or is it stubbornness?

**Price:** From a practical point of view, we have an interest in encouraging it in the next generation because all parents would like their children to be quiet, to sit in a corner and curl up with a book, to be alone, not to need other people. And it seems to me that that’s one of the differences with the kinds of reading and writing that kids do now, which involves instant messaging and e-mailing, their sociable forms of writing and reading, their forwarding the YouTube video about the Danish monks to 100 of their closest friends; whereas I think for our generation there was more of a sense that reading was what you did to be alone. And that’s still maybe what commuters do on the train. You hide behind your newspaper so that you don’t have to talk to people.

**Lerer:** I grew up believing and being led to believe by my parents that, in some sense, reading would save me.

**Gumbrecht:** It did. [Laughter]

**Lerer:** Well, it did save me. And when my mother sees this on iTunes or whatever this is going to be on, she’ll feel she accomplished something. Because the idea was that the way we were going to get out of the lower-middle-class urban immigrant world was by the absorption of high culture; that in itself would redeem us, and the way to do that was through reading a book. So things like the public library were, in effect, the secular chapels of our imagination, and bookstores, and not just the owning of books but the privilege of owning certain kinds of books. And for the world in which I was a child, reading on the subway was less a matter of being alone in your own space than being able to say, I’m on this subway and going to this job, I’m living in this world, but I’m somehow redeemed by this book, or I’m somehow not so much escaping the world as I’m somehow made sacred—made genuinely better—that I’m actually reading Dickens or I’m reading Thackeray or I’m reading Flaubert on the subway.

**Price:** It’s a way of being in the subway but not of the subway. [Laughter]

**Lerer:** That’s right.

**Gumbrecht:** So is there a point of doing that for the next generation? Your son Aaron wants to have a cup holder, and it will look like … well, it will look like in the movie theater or watching TV. Of course, automatically when we described that, we described it with irony, and we thought it was really bad. But the question is: Should we change that? I’m asking myself. I have two boys who don’t read at all, and two girls who read spontaneously almost, I would say. But should I be tough on the boys and say, “You have to read books”? I used to do that, but in the first place it was counterproductive, and
in the second place, even if it’s not counterproductive, should I do that? Is there a point for the next generation? Of course, you have sociological analysis; this was the way of getting a better position in society—clearly an investment. But you are also asking the question about reading for and by itself. Do we have an experience—an aesthetic experience, probably—not so much related to the content of the book but to the moment of reading a book that is so precious that we feel that should not get lost, not so much because it’s a value but because it’s so enjoyable, and maybe in the next generation without us insisting, they won’t experience it; they won’t know it.

**Price:** Maybe that’s the question that John Stuart Mill asked: Is there a difference between enjoying poetry and enjoying Pushkin? We get enjoyment from reading great works of literature or not-so-great anthologies of American verse …

**Lerer:** Oh, I think there are very great anthologies. [Laughter]

**Price:** … but if your son gets enjoyment from playing video games that I would never get from playing a video game, because I’d be too bad at it to ever enjoy it, is there a difference? I suppose I would defend the cup holder.

**Lerer:** I think part of what you’re saying is that what each generation does is it finds its moments of intimacy, of the sublime, of redemption, of intellectual and emotional reward. For many generations that was done with books. Now it will be done with something else. So if it’s done with something else, what is the place of the book in a non-redemptive culture of reading?

**Gumbrecht:** Of course, there’s one other nightmare I have: I feel with the elimination of these palpable objects like books and others, our everyday life is more and more going on an interface between software and our mind. Basically, the materiality—the location of your body—becomes less and less important. You could say we have become a kind of Cartesian nightmare. I think, therefore I am. We are just our mind and nothing more. The media technology allows us more and more to be that, so that the physical investment—somatic investment—becomes less and less. And I ask myself whether this is ideal, this is wonderful. We have achieved this divine predicate of omnipresence; with the cell phone and e-mail, you can be everywhere except with your body. Now is that something desirable that we should push as far as possible or is there a limit where it becomes dangerous—not just physically dangerous, but when you feel this is a type of human existence you would no longer want to have?

**Price:** Certainly it’s physically dangerous if people are talking on a cell phone and reading the directions on their onscreen navigator, but to the extent that you’re talking about a sort of moral danger, isn’t that battle lost already? I mean, if you think about silent reading, which has been around for how many centuries would you put it at, Seth?

**Lerer:** Oh, 30.
Price: But if you think about the ballpoint pen and the fact that now we can write anywhere—we don’t need to sit at a writing desk with an inkwell and a quill and some sand—we’ve become more and more mobile in our means of writing for a long time now. One of the advantages of the book over the scroll which preceded it is that you can read a book hands-free. It lies open. You can read it like this [Demonstrates], while with a scroll in the ancient world, you had to hold it with your hands. So your son’s cup holder, I think, is just the logical reductio ad absurdum of that long process.

Lerer: Yes, as you’re speaking, it occurs to me, because I’m thinking, Where can you take books that you can’t take screens? And it seems to me that the one place that you can take a book that you can’t take a screen is into battle. One of the things that struck me in the history of reading is how many people went to war with books and how, for the American Civil War or for the First World War or even for the Second World War there was this sense that you were living through a battle—read through, if you like—the Aeneid, or read through other works of literature, and that the experience of reading in battle somehow would redeem you or get you through it. And it was the idea of that physical book that you took with you; you had your gun and you had your book. There was a moment when I thought it was lost and the place where I really found it again was in Anthony Swofford’s book Jarhead, where it suddenly occurred to me that the relationship between the book and the battle is still there. And that the issue really is the way in which….What soldiers are taught to do is they’re taught to interpret, they’re taught to read signs, they’re taught to experience the world symbolically, and they’re taught to interpret very, very quickly. And one of the things that a book like Jarhead or any of the great war books really shows you is the way in which the book or book-like phenomenon will always have a place in battle. So one of the things that I think is an interesting question: Why read? Or is there a moral value to reading? What does it mean to read in wartime? Should we issue a book with every gun? This is the applause line, actually. [Laughter]

Gumbrecht: Now we have figured out what audience we have.

Lerer: Right. I see that.

Gumbrecht: No, but I meant precisely something like this—something existentialist to hold onto in difficult situations, which I don’t think is a given with electronic communications. But I think we should open it up to the audience, but not before I have asked you one final question. That is, how did you get to read? What was the first intense reading experience that you had? It doesn’t have to be a book, but all of a sudden, it was irresistible. Or maybe that’s never happened. Maybe the good reader—the clinical reader—is the one who never had this temptation. Was there any such first book that you remember dearly?

Lerer: I remember vividly the first book I ever read, which was a book published in 1955, the year I was born. It was called Atoms: Today and Tomorrow. And this was the first book that I got out of the Brooklyn Public Library when I was able to sign my name when I was four, because in order to get a library card, you had to be able to sign your
name. So when I was four, my mother took me to the Brooklyn Public Library, and that was the book we got out. I remember going through it and it talked about the future of atomic energy and how we were all going to be smarter and cleaner and brilliant, and for years I thought I had imagined this book because it had played such a symbolic role in my life. Then, literally three weeks ago, I was in the Stanford Education Library, and they have a whole collection of old textbooks and children’s science books, and there it was. And it was the epiphanic; it was the sublime moment for me because at that moment I realized why I became a reader. It wasn’t so much the fact that I read this book; it was that this book was the placeholder for a kind of family relationship and that about the first thing you could do was take your kid to the library.

Price: I think mine would be a family relationship, too, and as I think about it, I’m realizing that it goes back to Sepp’s idea about reading bedtime stories to children to put them to sleep. My first memory of reading is watching my brother, who is a year older than me, read a picture book with few words and being extremely jealous that whenever he had his nose in a book he would not play with me. He was sort of off-line and unavailable, and I wanted to be able to read the book, too, so that I wouldn’t need him—so that when he wasn’t there to entertain me I could entertain myself with a book, and it was Good Night Moon. So that book now has a very bittersweet feeling for me because it’s the book that I associate with basically hating my brother and hating the fact that he was a year older and bigger and smarter and knew how to read better than I did.

Gumbrecht: And who’s teaching at Harvard today?

Price: Fair enough. So that would be my primal scene.

Lerer: Well, Leah, as my therapist likes to say, “I’m afraid we’re out of time.” [Laughter]

Gumbrecht: I want to say that’s a beautiful gender stereotype: Seth with atoms and Leah with the moon. That is very, very beautiful.

How about questions? Have we provoked you? No, we haven’t. You had a good time, and that’s actually what humans should not do. They should never give people a good time. At this point, you should be frustrated; you should really see that this is very serious business, and there’s no future.

Question from the Audience: I just wanted to say that there’s another medium, and that is the audio book, that you did not mention. I found that the medium or the method suits the environment. You can listen to audio books while you’re driving or walking and you can read the book in bed and you can read the screen on the desk, so actually they could all be synergistic rather than competitive.

Lerer: I find that audio books put me to sleep because of being read to as a child. So when we’re in the car and we’re listening to a book, I’m dropping off.
Gumbrecht: It’s not a secret that the president of this university has switched to audio books.

Lerer: As opposed to what?

Gumbrecht: As opposed to books. [Laughter] Leah, how about you with audio books?

Price: I can’t do them because you can’t speed them up; you can’t skip the boring parts. Listening to an audio book, I feel as if I’m tied down to the tracks. I can see the train coming, I know how the story is going to end, and I need to wait for it. It always surprises me a little bit that parents—good, bourgeois, right-thinking parents—who wouldn’t be caught dead at least being witnessed allowing their children to watch TV when in the presence of other good, bourgeois parents, nonetheless play audio books to their kids to keep them occupied in the car, because it’s really not clear to me what the difference is between listening to a recording or looking at a video. But for you there is some difference.

Lerer: There’s the deep memory of being read to. As you were saying, when was I read to? I was read to so that I would go to sleep. So all you have to do is read to me and I will fall asleep.

Gumbrecht: Seth recently said at a colloquium—he was quoting Middle High German—and that was completely different from the book. For example, the Niebelungenleid…

Lerer: And you didn’t fall asleep.

Gumbrecht: No, that was fantastic, so that was a great audio book.

Question from the Audience: You mentioned that some of your students at least at this point in time have some resistance to wanting to be told to read books. The question that I have is: Have you been able to generalize? Were there readings that you wanted them to read rather closely that they are reading more extensively than intensively because they only want to read on the screen? Secondly, is there a difference in what is available for them to read onscreen only compared to the information you want them to read?

Gumbrecht: Well, this is a specific class that starts out with texts from late antiquity and we go to early modern times. It’s mainly medieval texts, and I want them to read the texts in translation. (I want to say one thing first: this is not conservative in the sense that I do think that our incoming undergraduate classes are unbelievably smart. I actually think, in terms of intelligence, in terms of organizing their work, in terms of asking challenging questions, if anything, they get better and better.) But in this particular class, the difficulty is that they ask: “What segment should we read?” or “What segment are you dealing with in class because that’s what we’re going to read.” I say, “No, read the entire book and wait.” In reality, I don’t tell them that I prepare just the day before. They imagine that I was born… [Laughter] Well, that’s good enough; I can prepare it the
morning before. But they want to know exactly what I will engage with them in class and they want to know those pages, and if ever they have to read more, they find that’s not functional. That’s the problem. I’m not saying that they cannot write excellent exams; I get very good questions and so forth, but there is a functionalization of reading that goes along with reading on the screen. They would like to have available onscreen just the segments that they need. And that is very different from this curling up, from this engaging with the book. But I think we all have our doubts whether there is such a value to it. So I describe a difference, and my first reaction was that it’s scandalous; they have to learn to have this book which they love and read the entire book and finally it will grow on them, but I have my doubts about whether we really have, well, the right is maybe too strong, but whether we have a point in doing that.

**Question from the Audience:** First, an observation: we shouldn’t scoff at the benefit of these electronic books as we get older because of course many of the programs allow you to magnify the image on the screen and so we will go to the ophthalmologist less frequently as our reading vision deteriorates. But really, the more serious thing that I wanted to ask you is this: I have a friend who has two very, very different ways of reading. She only reads things that she thinks are truly compelling when she knows she will not fall asleep because she is compelled to read a book from beginning to end if it really gets her attention (novels, mostly). However, when she wants to go to sleep, she only reads old Agatha Christie novels because she already knows how they end and it won’t make her miss her bedtime. Do you have similar experiences of certain kinds of reading at certain times based on if you want to go to sleep?

**Lerer:** Oh, absolutely. He’s gone now, but Herbert Warren Wind was the golf columnist for *The New Yorker*, and I could read three consecutive sentences by him and be out like a light. [Laughter] It was like a drug, you know? And I know exactly what you mean. There are certain things that I read to put me in a particular mood—to either lull me to sleep or to do something, and there are some things….I’m reading now, for example: I got this book that I thought would be bedtime reading, which is Allen Shawn’s book *Wish I Could Be There*, which some of you may know. He’s written a book about his phobias and his fears, and it’s unbelievably compelling. I just can’t put it down. And I’m sitting in bed reading this book and I can’t put it down and I realize…

**Gumbrecht:** You sit in bed? Really?

**Lerer:** I sit in bed, I lie there….

**Gumbrecht:** You either sit in bed or lie there.

**Lerer:** Well, you’ve never seen me in bed. [Laughter] I sit like this and I have a little backrest, so I sit in bed but my feet are out like this.

**Price:** And do you have a cup holder? [Laughter]
Lerer: No, I don’t have a cup holder. I have a cup bearer who comes in and asks me how I’m doing. And I say, “I’m OK. I’ll have a glass of tea.” And I sit there and I read this book and I suddenly realize I can’t put it down. I had to put it away; I had to hide it because it would have kept me up all night.

Gumbrecht: And you, Leah? You seem to be the specialist for the smooth transition into sleep. You describe it so compellingly.

Price: I’m just always surprised by the articles on insomnia that tell you to listen to a piece of music that’s not too interesting or read a book that’s not too exciting. I do tend to read literary criticism before bed, not because it puts me to sleep but because, as you say, I know that I won’t mind stopping at an arbitrary point; I don’t need to wait until the end of chapter. Literary critics do many things well, but we don’t do cliffhangers. [Laughter] So narrative for me is not the thing to read right before bed.

Gumbrecht: That’s a good prescription.

Question from the Audience: We have an ongoing debate in Palo Alto about the value and the use and what the library should consist of. I would be very interested in how you all see the value of the library and what should be in it.

Lerer: Well, libraries are many things, and libraries are first and foremost social spaces. And they are social spaces that exist around books. And so they can be places of study, they can be places of communion, they can be places of just simply being. And it seems to me that what a community’s public library can do is provide a kind of safe and potentially imaginative space for all different kinds of individuals or all different kinds of communities, but also to recognize that in doing so, they should provide a service. And that service is a certain kind of set of books or a certain set of journals or magazines—a certain body of things that can speak to and perhaps even define the community that’s going to go in. And so for many people the library is the place to go to get out of the rain. If you’re going to get out of the rain, then at the very least you should have an experience in that library that will be uniquely different from any other place where you get out of the rain.

Question from the Audience (continued): What about providing all the electronic connections to all the other literature, research, that kind of thing?

Lerer: Well, that I don’t know about that, but it just seems to me that in my own local public library, there’s internet access. And the larger issue is: if that’s the kind of service that brings somebody into the building, then that service should be provided, because you don’t know what else they’ll do in the building. They may find a real book; they may discover something that they hadn’t discovered before, but the internet access is perhaps the hook. By contrast, someone comes in looking for books and discovers the internet.

Gumbrecht: May I ask you a question before you ask your question? As a moderator, I can do that. [Laughter] There’s a Spanish bank that will soon expand to California. I
think they’re already present in southern California: BBVA, Banco Bilbao Vizcaya Argentaria. They are the second-largest bank in the Spanish-speaking world. And they have found out (it’s the best-kept secret, but it’s true) that people do not like to do banking online, that people actually prefer to go to the bank. Of course, for the banks it’s devastating because it’s much cheaper online, but the BBVA has now accepted that they have to keep branches and now they actually want to start in Spain branches that are in the style of public libraries and will have books so that people can hang out there. What I’m asking you is if your favorite bank, the bank you’re working with, would not do that, but a competing bank would have their branches like that with books—a space that’s the way Seth described—would you change your bank?

**Question from the Audience:** Only if they serve coffee. [Laughter] Anyway, I think you’re very funny…

**Lerer:** All three of us or just Leah? [Laughter]

**Question from the Audience (continued):** All of you. I have a very serious problem. I don’t have any problem with insomnia. As soon as I get to bed and there’s a pillow, I fall right to sleep. But sometime around eight o’clock at night, I’m not ready to go to sleep so I get a book. And I don’t take it to bed because I know I’ll fall asleep. I sit down in a chair and I try to read, and in 15 minutes, I’m asleep. The problem is, how do I stay awake when I read?

**Lerer:** What kinds of books are you reading? We’ll give you the stimulating syllabus.

**Question from the Audience (continued):** I don’t like books about murder…

**Lerer:** Do you like poetry?

**Question from the Audience (continued):** I like poetry, but I fall asleep.

**Lerer:** For example, Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* is not a poem you can fall asleep to, and it’s a very long poem. And I would say it would take you about 25 minutes to read that poem, in all seriousness. And that is a poem of such arresting, verbal power and such effrontery, such aggression, such force, that I defy anyone to fall asleep reading it.

**Question from the Audience (continued):** I think you should publish a book on things that don’t put you to sleep when you sit down to read.

**Lerer:** I will personally come to your house [Laughter] and make sure that you don’t fall asleep.

**Question from the Audience (continued):** When? [Laughter]

**Lerer:** We have another 25 minutes up here.
Question from the Audience (continued): I’ll wait. [Laughter]

Price: This sounds like something that Starbucks could work on: marketing a line of stimulating books.

Gumbrecht: Now I have a serious question. Why don’t you try something else? This is actually the question we had. Do you feel that only trying books to stay awake is dignified enough? I don’t know … playing computer games or watching ESPN, as I would do, is not dignified enough?

Question from the Audience: In a way, my question is a little different. I love to read and it keeps me awake. The question that I have is this: besides the instrumental reading and reading for getting an “A” in a class, or whatever, I find that reading for pure pleasure is probably one of the most creative things I do. And the difference between, for example, reading Tess of the D’Urbervilles by Hardy and seeing the Polanski movie is that when I read it, I imagine everything. This was a huge thing when I was growing up: reading books of all kinds—history, biography, literature, newspapers, whatever. With all the electronic media, I’m wondering what’s happening to the creativity in the process of reading and if there’s ever been any evaluation of that.

Gumbrecht: You’re back to the question, in a way, of the intrinsic value, if there is any, of reading and about what could be the creativity.

Lerer: Well, it’s the sense that what defines you as a person is the experience of reading. And you seem like the kind of person who, if asked to write your autobiography, would make it as much a list of books as a list of experiences. And I think for many people there is an unsettling, if not a threatening, quality to the electronic world because it challenges who we are. If we’ve defined ourselves as book people, then the electronic world challenges that. And if we see ourselves, in effect, at our best while we’re reading—if you say, “I’m only my best when reading,” or “I’m at my best self when reading,” or “I’m at my most creative self when reading”—then the electronic world is a challenge to that. And it’s hard for someone like me to assess someone else as developing a sense of self or being creative in engaging with the electronic world. So I feel very much what you’re saying. I don’t know that there’s an answer to it because I think it is a question about feeling as opposed to a question about behaving.

Gumbrecht: I think that also would bring us to the question of how it is different to read fiction from nonfiction. I think this idea of creativity—of triggering your imagination—is something that we associate with fiction.

Question from the Audience: First of all, I think you have done a delightful job tonight. I’ve been out of the country for a few years, and I feel as though, based on the premise of this conversation tonight, that there’s a group of people reading books on computers versus people reading books, and I haven’t seen that. I haven’t seen people reading a preponderance of information on computers or on iPods, and I wonder where that perception comes from—if it’s from Stanford and Harvard?
Price: Well, I would say from my own experience that, although I got into this business in order to read books, in a given day I probably spend twice as much time reading onscreen as reading on the page, and it’s not mostly time spent reading books that have been digitized; it’s spent reading e-mails, reading digitized versions of what used to be called in paper form “memos,” it’s reading student papers that have been sent to me as attachments, it’s reading Web sites. So no, it’s not a continuous, linear, imaginative, aesthetic experience, but it is reading in the sense of running my eyes along alphabetical characters.

Lerer: There’s something called Project Gutenberg, which has placed thousands of books online. You can pretty much read any book you’re going to buy online. And for me the issue is, do I assign my students physical books to read or do I tell them to read the texts online, and what are the different experiences that they would have, because the words are equally accessible.

Gumbrecht: In this sense, I think that with each new year of students coming in, there are more of them who would find it strange if you assigned them books. Even if you leave it open how they read them but say you would prefer they read books, that seems to be strange to them. And, of course, precisely in the sense that Leah was saying, we would also say that probably on an average basis, people have never been reading more than today because of course a lot of what we read on the screen used to be face-to-face communication. It’s very astonishing that we’re sitting here on this panel and not doing that on the web, but I’m happy we’re not.

Question from the Audience: I was wondering if you look at people’s bookshelves to get a sense of who they are?

Gumbrecht: Absolutely.

Question from the Audience (continued): Sometimes I’m embarrassed by the books that are on my bookshelf. They are exposed on the shelf, whereas the electronic things can be hidden.

Lerer: That’s how I met my wife. We were in graduate school at The University of Chicago. We were all in these dorms, and what I would do is I would cruise the dorms and I would check out people’s bookshelves. [Laughter] And I walked into this young woman’s room and I noticed she had all these really cool, interesting books. And they were juxtaposed in interesting ways and they were organized. They told me something very much about her. And I thought, the kind of person who has a bookshelf like this is the kind of person I would like to know, and, dear reader, I married her.

Gumbrecht: Do you do that with people, Leah? Do you check out their bookshelves?
**Price:** Sure, but I’m an ignoramus about the iPods, but most people are not. So isn’t it true that you can examine other people’s play lists? Can you judge other people by what they’ve got on their iPods?

**Gumbrecht:** You can? Oh, my God?

**Price:** So presumably, then, we can all do that with eBooks.

**Question from the Audience:** I’m thinking of the experience of going to church, and in particular, the Catholic mass, because it’s so completely built around the book. We hold the book and the priest holds the book, and at its finest and purest, it is a time of communion, of love. And then physicality, of course, is really important; everybody is present. And then it becomes extremely physical because of the body of Christ, “The Word became flesh.” And it’s also that call to battle, in a way, to overcome our self-centered lives to live this life of sacrificial love. I know that my faith in words is very much connected to that faith. You talked about reading a book to be alone, and so the connection I’m trying to make is that I have felt that books have been a way to retain individuality and independent thinking, and I’m not sure exactly why I think that going to a book, and definitely not a movie, would help me somehow access deepest convictions or a kind of resolve or courage. And it has something to do with being in the subway but not of the subway—that there’s some access to, if I go back to Christian terms, the kingdom of love, because everybody wants to live in the kingdom of love—but that somehow books can take us out of the man-constructed system. And technology to me feels very, very man-constructed, so I am wondering if printed words keep alive a kind of independence of thought or even a kind of vision of the world that we hope for as opposed to what’s with us right now.

**Price:** I wonder how much that reflects the fact that books have been around for so long that we naturalize them. We don’t look at them; we see through them. You kind of look at the page and you’re in another world, whereas the newer a technology is, the more you’re going to be aware of it. That may be too simple, but do you have a more satisfying explanation, Seth?

**Lerer:** No. I think that there’s a sense in what you were saying of the Word incarnate: the idea that part of what the Western spiritual tradition has done is that it has made the Word the location for the incarnation, the location for the spiritual. And because we sort of associate that Word as an object, as something written, as something physical, it’s hard to see it in a sort of ephemeral, electronic space. So one of the things that I think we’re working with is really a fundamental sort of metaphor, almost, for Western spirituality and its relationship to the book and to the written word itself.

**Gumbrecht:** May I—this is my one opportunity—give you an altar boy anecdote? I may be the only ex-altar boy on the panel.

**Lerer:** I think we can say that with some assurance. [Laughter]
**Price:** As for current altar boys, of course, there are plenty of them here.

**Gumbrecht:** I was eight and I joined the altar boy forces. And at the high mass on Sunday morning, there were eight altar boys, and part of what we had to do was to carry a heavy Bible from the altar from left to right. This was pre-Second Vatican Council, so the priest would still be with his back to you. And I didn’t really know how to do that, but it was important. There was no function in carrying the Bible from left to right and from right to left and doing a genuflection, and so on, and I didn’t really know how; I had no choreography. So after being very insecure and nervous about it, I asked the priest, “Can you tell me how one has to carry the book?” And the answer was a very good answer and I think, in your sense, he said, “There is no choreography. You just have to do it convincingly.” So you have to take the book and do it convincingly.” And I thought this was a good answer because somehow it presupposed that you would have a physical relationship to the book and that would integrate you in the entire ritual. So maybe that’s why I ended up being a professor of literature.

**Question from the Audience:** I feel as though I’m giving you a report from life on a completely different planet. In 1955, Dr. Lerer, you were born, I had my first child, and I had my first television set. When I was a child, there was no television.

**Lerer:** How was it having a first television? Was it as painful as having the first child? [Laughter]

**Question from the Audience (continued):** Well, actually, it was. We were on a limited budget. My husband was an electronic engineer, and we had scrounged one that you could just barely make out, but radio was deteriorating a lot. There wasn’t the same kind of entertainment as there had been on radio, so we felt that we needed it even if we couldn’t really get a good picture. I remember my mother visiting us and saying, “Is that a man or a woman?” So it was pretty painful. But I wanted to talk about life in the olden days—growing up without television, with some very good radio, so that I was used to listening to stories without wanting to fall asleep at all. In fact, once in a while I would fall asleep when I stayed up late for something and I’d be so mad. My mother and my father read to me, but during the day, my mother would read to me, and it was never about going to sleep. And I became a voracious reader, but also a lover of the radio, because the radio had so many great things on it that you would never get today. And I think that’s why, although I do spend a lot of time in front of the computer, I think that I work so well with books on tape and Dr. Lerer’s courses that I enjoy very much. I live about 45 minutes away from anything whatsoever.

**Lerer:** So each commute is one of those tapes.

**Question from the Audience (continued):** Actually, with “The History of English,” I listened to each tape about three times.

**Lerer:** Were they that hard? [Laughter]
Question from the Audience (continued): They were that terrific. And I really wanted to know about it, and that was time I didn’t have for additional reading. When I did the Chaucer, I read the Chaucer. I’m working on the *Aeneid*; I just finished reading it. If you read it just before you go to sleep, lots of luck, because you’re going to have a pretty unhappy night if you’re a dreamer. Anyway, it’s so different, and I had never been aware of how you young people relate differently to listening.

Lerer: That was affirming because (1) you have affirmed my importance in the intellectual world, and (2) you called me a young person, and that has made me feel.... [Laughter]

Gumbrecht: No, she called us young persons. [Laughter]

Question from the Audience (continued): I really appreciated your courses so much and look forward to further ones.

Lerer: I think the thing that you’re saying is this: that I genuinely believe that there really is a generationally defined idiom of listening in a particular kind of way, and that is the targeted demographic of distance learning and the kinds of things that I’ve been involved in. And I think that it is very clear that what certain universities or certain corporations have figured out is that people learned to listen in different ways than they learn to listen now. And what you’re describing is akin to what we’ve been talking about, which is, you grow up learning to listen in a certain kind of way as certain people grow up learning how to read in certain kinds of ways. And one could ask the same questions about listening that we’ve been asking about books. Are these in themselves goods, or are they things that we’ve been taught to do through socialization or through family experience?

Gumbrecht: Thank you. I cannot do an evening entirely without any sports metaphors, and I would propose, as Mark told me we should close at nine o’clock, that we do tie-break conditions now. Could we do that? We’ll take four questions and then you will elaborate on the questions, because I think if we have the questions individually, it will take too long.

Lerer: So you just want them to ask questions and then we’ll take care of them.

Question from the Audience: My first question was going to be directed first to Leah Price. I just wanted to know a little bit more about your ideas about skimming the novel because I feel that on a computer it’s easier to skim and there’s not necessarily a point if you know what you’re looking for to skim in a book. A book is right there and you read it in its entirety. What is your thought process behind that? My second question was kind of general, but in more of a broad sense, in thinking about this arc of literature and where it’s going in the future. Are books just going to be read by a select few in education in the future? If you’re outside of the educational realm and upbringing, what does it take to keep that endurance or to acquire it? Or if you are brought up with it, what does it take to have that endurance to keep going?
Question from the Audience: My experience is with K-8 children. I would say that there is a pretty good body of information that says that children will become communities of readers if you give them time to read, books that they like, and the choice to read what they want to read. Unfortunately, I think what is happening in schools, especially with this “No Child Left Behind,” is that we are ending up with schools that are teaching students to do the mechanics of reading without allowing them the love of reading.

Question from the Audience: I was a member of a physics department at a college, but the people in the English department were really trying to discourage vehemently students from using things like CliffsNotes or miniplots, etcetera. I was wondering what your opinions are about such abbreviations, even going to the point of the Reader’s Digest Condensed Books.

Question from the Audience: I’m 15-1/2, so I’m part of the cup holder and MySpace generation. I have to read textbooks on a daily basis. How do you enjoy reading textbooks on subjects that you don’t like?

Gumbrecht: You don’t have to. That’s the beauty. Now I would invite Leah first and Seth to engage with all the questions and opinions that you have heard and to round it up into a beautiful closing statement. [Laughter]

Price: I’m sure on YouTube someone would do a much better job. For the skimming question and the CliffsNotes question, it seems to me that the reason that literary critics and English professors are so afraid of CliffsNotes, which I certainly am, is that they hit too close to home. Literary criticism is a form of paraphrase. It’s taking a literary text and repeating it in different words. That’s what we all do, and so seeing the CliffsNotes lined up in the 7-Eleven where no one will ever sell one of our books (but perhaps Seth’s tapes might appear there) is like looking into a fun house mirror. So of course part of what we do as literary critics is tell you what to skim, what you can skim, what’s important, what isn’t important, as your students would like to be told. We have a kind of gate-keeping function; we select, we preserve, we choose not to preserve certain things, we decide what goes into the libraries. And in this moment of information abundance, it seems to me that if we have any hope of keeping our jobs, that’s where it lies. It’s that we can sort of stem the tide that is coming out of the fire hose directly at everyone else and maybe filter the fire hose a little bit.

Lerer: I would agree largely with the assessment of literary criticism as a form of paraphrase. What I would add, though, is that literary criticism is a form of quotation. And I think the experience of skimming as opposed to the experience of CliffsNotes is that it does not necessarily give you the words of the original. To my mind, it’s not a question of reading the whole book necessarily, but it’s a question of reading some original part of the book—being able to engage in the verbal texture. And this, it seems to me, speaks to the question about reading the textbook. Everything that is in print—everything that is between covers—is a book. It has a story to tell; it has a voice.
And we can read books and hear the voice of Dickens or we can read books and hear the
voice of Allen Shawn or the voice of great poets. And what I would say in answer to
your question about reading textbooks is, read them aloud in your own voice, or better,
read them aloud in a funny voice and see if things come to you. Read them aloud in a
funny voice standing in front of a mirror dressed in period costumes, and I will guarantee
you not only that you’ll get to the end of the book but that your grades will go up and that
I will see you in my class at Stanford here in three years.

Gumbrecht: By the way, there’s an alarm clock ringing in the background. This is
really impolite. The Aurora Forum should not do that because I wanted to do a closing
statement for us, but then Mark has the real closing statement. But what I wanted to say,
and this is something that the discussion has produced for me, and I had never thought
that before, is that you could perhaps say that what we had tonight, being together in
physical presence, is something as far as I’m concerned—of course it’s very old-
fashioned—that I could not see being replaced electronically, although it was a rainy day,
it took away your time, you have to go back 45 minutes (thank goodness you have some
book to listen to).

Lerer: Thank goodness she has my tapes! [Laughter]

Gumbrecht: And, you know, he’s going to write more. But that is something which I
have never felt so closely as tonight in our discussion: it is that really, culturally, if you
have a typology, it is rather on the side of the book. There is some physical engagement,
some physical contact, not in the sense that it’s functional, not in the sense unfortunately
that you would lose pounds and kilos, but there is a physical presence there. And instead
of praising my colleagues, which one doesn’t do out of jealousy—you cannot do that—I
wanted to thank you. This was really fabulous, and I wish our IHUM students would so
politely and enthusiastically laugh at our jokes. [Laughter] I really want to thank you.

Gonnerman: That’s a wonderful closing statement, and I’m simply here to thank Seth
Lerer, Leah Price, and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht for providing us with a very pleasurable
and stimulating evening. Thank you very much. [Applause]

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Seth Lerer, the Avalon Foundation Professor in the Humanities at Stanford, joined the Stanford faculty as Professor of English in 1990, received a joint appointment in Comparative Literature in 1996, and served as Chair of the Department of Comparative Literature from 1997-2000. His research interests include medieval and Renaissance studies, comparative philology, the history of scholarship, and children's literature. He has held fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the American Council of Learned Societies. He is author of many books including *Chaucer and His Readers* and *Error and the Academic Self: The Scholarly Imagination, Medieval to Modern*. He recently completed *Inventing English: A Portable History of the Language*, which will appear this year.

Leah Price is a Professor of English and American Literature at Harvard University, where she teaches on the novel, on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century culture, on narrative theory, on gender, and on the history of books and reading. Educated at Harvard and Yale, she was granted tenure at Harvard in 2002 after serving two years on the Department of English faculty. Her best know book is *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel*. She co-directs two seminars at the Harvard Humanities Center, one on Victorian studies and the other on the History of the Book. In 2006 she and Seth Lerer edited a special issue of *PMLA* on “The History of the Book and the Idea of Literature.”

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Comments?
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