

From the Stacks
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Today's readers are more informed than ever, yet it is becoming increasingly difficult to tell whether online content is a self-published blog, an edited opinion piece, fact-checked journalism, advertising, or AI-generated material. As the lines between influencers, journalists, and authors continue to blur, the definition of what it means to be a writer is evolving as well. At the same time, the publishing industry is undergoing rapid transformation, with several major trends shaping the future of how stories and information are created, distributed, and consumed in 2026.

Artificial intelligence has moved from experimentation to everyday use. Publishers are now using AI for editing assistance, translations, cover concepts, marketing analysis, and especially audiobook production. AI-generated narration is expanding quickly because it lowers costs and speeds up production, though it has also sparked debate over copyright, transparency, and quality. Community discussions also show growing concern about AI-written books flooding self-publishing platforms, with readers increasingly wanting disclosure about how much AI was used in creating content. Understanding the limitations of this technology is just as important as knowing the benefits.

Audiobooks are no longer treated as an add-on to print books. Publishers now plan audio releases alongside print and e-book editions from the start. Growth in streaming-style listening, smartphone use, and platforms like Audible and Spotify has made audio one of the fastest-growing parts of publishing. AI narration is also helping publishers turn older backlist titles into audiobooks more cheaply and quickly. Younger audiences especially are discovering books through audio platforms and social media recommendations rather than traditional bookstores.

Publishers and authors are increasingly selling directly to readers instead of relying entirely on bookstores or large retailers. This includes subscription services, exclusive editions, author newsletters, online communities, and special events. Publishers and readers care about a recognizable voice, a defined audience, and a way to stay connected. The goal is to build loyal audiences and gather reader data that retailers once controlled. A growing number of authors are going solo, doing their own social media marketing and developing direct relationships with readers.

The growing popularity of romantasy has attracted readers well beyond traditional fantasy audiences, with even those who typically preferred literary fiction becoming absorbed in series such as *Fourth Wing* by Rebecca Yarros. The genre's rapid rise has

also influenced bookstores, leading to the emergence of romance-focused shops across the country. Industry observers expect interest in romance and romantasy to continue expanding into related genres, including romantic suspense, mysteries, and thrillers, bringing greater attention to well-written and compelling genre fiction. Imagine having tea and cookies in a cozy mystery bookstore!

Publishing continues to evolve, and the industry becomes more digital and more dependent on the relationship between creators and readers. At the same time, book discovery is shifting toward personal recommendations, online book communities, and social reading apps. Even as technology changes the landscape, readers still crave authentic voices, compelling storytelling, and shared experiences, whether through a favorite audiobook, an online fan community, or a cozy bookstore filled with fellow mystery and romance fans enjoying tea, cookies, and conversation.