I’ve been thinking a lot about books lately. Well, perhaps because I’m a publisher, I’m always thinking about books. But because I’m also a photographer, I’ve been thinking of their role in my creative life. This has led to a series of random thoughts that are starting to coalesce — with some startling implications. I still can’t quite wrap my brain around all of this to form a sort of “Unified Field Theory” so to speak, but the following random thoughts do seem to align and point — somewhat — in a unified direction. I think. Here goes . . .

**Everyone wants a book of their work**

There is an almost universal craving amongst photographers for a book of one’s work. Admit it, you too. Why? What is it about a book that is so seductive? Is it that we intuitively know that a book is the best way to get our work distributed into the world and be seen? Or is there more going on that adds to the seduction?

A book includes a component of “achievement” or validation — especially if one is published by a reputable publisher using their money to produce the book. In other words, there’s an ego component to being published. Nothing wrong with that, but why do we need validation? Are photographers still bound by that old canard that claims photography is not really an art?

Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that, for most of us, book publication is an unrealizable dream. Only famous photographers get published, but the way to become famous is to be published. It’s a classic Catch-22. Nonetheless, all of that logic and analysis is not persuasive when it comes
to so many photographers’ hearts and desires. We all want our work published in a book — no, that’s not quite right — we all want to be published with many books. Greed is an ugly thing.

There is something very deep about such a universal desire. It tells us so truthfully how we think about books and photography — in a much more persuasive way than we might care to admit. In fact, give most photographers the choice of a gallery exhibition in some New York posh establishment or a book published by a reputable New York art book publisher, and I’ll bet 99 out of 100 will choose the book over the exhibition.

Books have a greater influence both geographically and temporally and we all know it. Compared to our original prints, books are far more important in terms of our work’s longevity and visibility.

**Reproduction quality**

For a thorough explanation of my thinking on this, see my *Editor’s Comments* in *LensWork* #73 (Nov-Dec 2007). For those who don’t have access to that lengthy article, here is a thumbnail of my thoughts that pertain to book reproduction versus original prints.

One of the most astonishing technological improvements in photography in the last 100 years has nothing to do with cameras and original prints: it is the amazing improvement in commercial offset printing. Imagine poor Edward Weston wanting to do a book of his work in, say, 1935. Even the very best commercial printing was an anemic representation of his stunning gelatin silver prints. Fast-forward to today: original gelatin silver prints that you and I make look pretty much the same as they did in Edward Weston’s day, in fact we would all hope to print as well as he did. But look at what has happened to commercial printing since Weston’s day. While the technical qualities of original prints have not improved in the last hundred years, there have been incredible improvements in commercial offset printing — especially in today’s museum quality books, or even here in *LensWork*. This has an amazingly important implication for today’s photographers. Let me explain.
In the middle of the 20th century, if one’s only understanding of a photograph was its reproduction in books, the experience of seeing that original print in the gallery setting could be a breathtaking — almost a religious experience. Many photographers relate how they became hooked by photography when they saw, for the first time, the stunning quality of (we can all fill in the name of our choice here) spectacular original prints. Today’s beginning photographers, however, don’t have the same experience whatsoever. In fact, the reproductions they see in books can rival original prints — either so closely approximating the quality of the original print that the differences are unimportant, and occasionally being printed even better than an original print due to the effects of digital sharpening and other software-based improvements.

Said another way — and this pains me as one of the unwanted conclusions I referenced in my title — the importance of original prints has somewhat diminished now that book reproductions are so competitive from a technical point of view. Keep in mind, I’m only talking about the technical aspects of such things as sharpness, density, and tonal separations. All of this, of course, ignores any spiritual component in the difference between the machine-printed and the human-printed photograph.

**Books as the true medium**

And then there is this sticky problem of the practical realities of our knowledge of photographs versus our theoretical one. We all have a relationship with many — perhaps hundreds or even thousands of photographs that we have seen, studied, love, treasure, emulate, and admire. As a pragmatic question, let me ask you this: of those hundreds/thousands of photographs that are so important in your life (excluding the ones that you made), how many of them have you seen as original prints? How many of them do you know only as reproductions in books? I know a few dozen as originals and the rest I know through reproductions. If this is true for you and me, isn’t it likely true for almost the entire audience for photography? And if it is, doesn’t that imply that book publication is the true medium (for distribution?) of photography rather than original prints?
As I was growing up in photography, there was no question that original prints were the “artwork” and that books were the reproductions of the artwork: always inferior, always some form of marketing rather than artwork itself. I find myself more and more wondering if, during the latter half of the 20th century, that assumption has become less and less tenable. I can’t help but wonder if that is the true legacy of the improved reproduction in books as they have challenged the kingship of original prints as the medium by which most of us know fine art photography. Here again, I find this a somewhat unwanted conclusion, I’m sure because of my age. I grew up as a print-maker and I’ll end my photographic career as a print-maker, but I somehow find it more and more necessary to justify such archaic thinking in light of my photo book library consisting of some 1000+ beautifully printed contemporary photo art books in which I see wonderful work that I’ve never seen in original prints.

**Printing in China**

As recently as 30 years ago, any photographer wanting a book of their work had only a few choices for a quality printer. With the invention of duotone and tritone printing, the monumental leap forward in the reproduction of black-and-white work was an exclusively American phenomenon. It didn’t take long for that technology to spread to Europe and some terrific print-ers exist in a number of European countries. But in the last 20 years, quality printing has expanded to Asia in ways that were previously unpredictable. The stunning work that one can now procure from printers in China, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Japan, is every bit as good as the best printers in America and Europe. The volume of books now being produced globally is geometric. I know a photographer who (in 1980) owned a personal library that included almost every photography book that had ever been published. Now, I doubt any one of us could own a library of every book that was printed last year. And this says nothing about print-on-demand publications like Blurb, Lulu, etc. I used to look forward with eager anticipation for new publications to be announced; they were such a rare and exciting addition to the world of photography. Books have now become anything but rare and precious. And, I’ve noticed that printing press manufacturers keep producing more and more presses. I can’t help but wonder if we’ve
just seen the tip of the iceberg in terms of the volume of book printing for fine art photography that lies before us in the next 50 years.

**Average sales of art books**

All of this is compounded by statistics of book sales compared to books printed. The most recent statistics I’ve seen state that the average hardcover art book sells less than 600 copies. On the other end of the spectrum, the minimum press run of a hardcover art book is typically not less than 2,000. This leaves 1,400 unsold books to store in one’s garage or attic. Clearly, marketing is the great challenge in publishing.

But there’s another way to look at this average sale per book statistic. Sure the average sale per book may be only 600 copies, but the average sale per photograph we fine art photographers produce is far less than 600. Okay, less than six. Maybe two? What are the chances of us selling 600 copies of a single photograph? Sorry I had to mention this, but it is the elephant in darkroom.

Even if we only sell a few hundred books, that will undoubtedly do more to distribute our work than anything we could possibly do with original prints. Here again, I’m led to ask the question about whether books might be the true medium of photography.

**Books as collectables**

I own a number of books that have become quite collectable. Several are now worth more money than I’ve ever paid for an original print. What does it say when a book can be, and can regularly be, more valuable in the marketplace than original artwork?

**E-books**

And now we can muddy the water considerably by introducing the latest digital elephant in the darkroom: e-books and digital publications for computers and tablets. How will e-books (and their infinite supply) impact not only the art world but the mind of consumers, where price and scarcity are so often linked by supply/demand? We’re just beginning to see the impact
of digital publishing, and its future is both bright and cloudy. There is no question, however, that digital publishing will have some impact on printed books, original prints, and the life of the creative photographer. We don’t (at least I don’t) have the ability to accurately predict what that impact will be — although I know it will be substantial.

It would be foolish to take all of this and conclude the death of the original print, God forbid. Large and ultra-large prints need never worry that book reproduction will steal their thunder. But it is true that original prints, and especially ultra large original prints introduce additional problems relative to production, storage, pricing, shipping, etc., which do not plague photography in book form.

Books and e-books are here to stay — of that I have no doubt whatsoever. I must confess, however, that I’m not sure I can say the same thing for original prints. As much as it pains me to admit it, the history of photography does validate my concerns. Consider the daguerreotype, the parmelian print, the albumen print, or the Woodburytype. Sure, there are still photographers utilizing these “alternative processes” and even more still doing tintypes, platinum/palladium prints, cyanotypes, and certainly gelatin silver. But the history of photography is littered with abandoned technologies that are replaced by newer ones that are more compatible with both the makers and viewers of photographs. Now that commercial printing has improved to its current levels and book publication has become such a universal method for enjoying photography, it does give us pause to contemplate the role of various media available to us and how we choose, as creative individuals, to manifest our artistic vision.