



Digital Barbarism: A Writer's Manifesto

Mark Helprin

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“A strange, wondrous, challenging, enriching book....Beautiful and powerful...you will not encounter another book like it.”

—*National Review* online

In *Digital Barbarism*, bestselling novelist Mark Helprin (*Winter's Tale*, *A Soldier of the Great War*) offers a ringing Jeffersonian defense of private property in the age of digital culture, with its degradation of thought and language and collectivist bias against the rights of individual creators. A timely, cogent, and important attack on the popular Creative Commons movement, *Digital Barbarism* provides rational, witty, and supremely wise support for the individual voice and its hard-won legal protections.

Digital Barbarism: A Writer's Manifesto Details

Date : Published April 28th 2009 by Harper (first published April 1st 2009)

ISBN : 9780061733116

Author : Mark Helprin

Format : Hardcover 256 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Politics, Science, Technology, Law, Social



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Varina says

This book is poorly argued. It displays a complete lack of understanding of the movement it claims to describe and oppose, not to mention Internet culture. In fact the whole argument is based on the largest straw man this side of the Burning Man festival. I want desperately to hate it, but the prose is beautiful. How could I hate any book that, in discussing a youthful pilfering of corn from an Iowa farmer uses the phrase: "he had thousands of acres of corn and, perhaps like Van Gogh, would not have missed a single ear"? I can't. I found this actually an enjoyable and engaging read, although perhaps when judging an essay large logical missteps should count for more.

Ben Guterson says

I think anyone in the literary world--authors, agents, publishers, sellers--would find this book of interest, though Helprin's style is so acerbic it's challenging to accede even to the constructive points he makes. The inciting issue--copyright terms--is not one I'd had much insight into nor passion regarding, and it was certainly illuminating to learn about the issues at play: duration of rights, intellectual property terms, access to works, and much more. To my eyes, Helprin certainly makes a compelling case that existing copyright laws don't hamper creativity or the free-flow of ideas. Furthermore, and much to his credit (and the interest of this reader, who finds Helprin's style absorbing no matter the subject) he doesn't restrict himself to copyright matters, but, rather, uses these as a jumping off point to critique much in the broader culture, including taxation, cell phones, and techno dreams of immortality. Ultimately, though, Helprin is so scattershot and seems so cranky and sententious, he undermines his claims to reasoned argumentation. Invocations of truth and goodness and beauty in his more restrained moments seem at odds with his animus toward "Slurpee-sucking geeks...pretentious and earnest hipsters...women who have lizard tattoos...beer-drinking dufuses" and more as he decries the mob mentality and exaltation of technology he believes are undermining our nobler human capacities. I admire several of Helprin's novels, but I can't help believing his screed against the so-called digital barbarians might have found a more receptive audience if he'd exercised more discretion--and been more open to the possibility that his opponents could be acting out of considered belief rather than stupidity.

June says

A fun read for those into intellectual property. Love the (c) breaks in the chapters. And I love the quote about lawyers. I didn't think anyone could defend copyright and the lack of intelligent deep discussion on the subject in such an entertaining way. I'd never want him to critique my writing...I have found a new author I like..

Chris Barnett says

I made a real effort to give this book the benefit of the doubt for as long as possible, but I found it really hard to read. I felt a desire to believe that it is propaganda created, however indirectly, by the copyright industry, but I know it probably isn't. Mark Halprin is most likely just expressing his own strong opinions. The first chapter seemed at first to be mere whining about the effects of technology and nostalgia for a slower past, but Halprin does acknowledge that there's no turning back the clock and seems to have a notion of how people can live with the benefits of the modern world while retaining some of the richness of life that he believes many people in the modern world have lost. I was struck by how believable I found his prediction of life a decade or so in the future. I actually didn't find his depiction unappealing at all. I skipped forward to the first mention of Lawrence Lessig, hoping that this would be a way of finding where Halprin makes his actual arguments about copyright. He did make some claims that I hadn't heard before such as that the Sony Bono copyright act had transferred some power from powerful corporations back to artists and writers by requiring copyright licenses to be returned to the original creator after some time period (like 35 years or something I think). I couldn't find any evidence that he actually addressed any of the arguments against copyright extremism by the likes of Lawrence Lessig, though, and from reading some reviews on Goodreads it seems he never did, which doesn't surprise me given the tone of the book. The part I read consisted almost entirely of sarcastic and self-righteous vitriol that I found really unpleasant to read, especially when he ridiculed arguments against copyright extremism without even providing a counterargument that I could discern. For example, he ridiculed a passage that made the distinction between physical goods (whose trade is a zero-sum game) and digital goods, which are non-rivalrous. He kept putting [sic] after zero-sum as though using this term was self-evidently preposterous. I found it increasingly painful to read and soon gave up on it in disgust.

leslie says

I thoroughly enjoyed this book despite Helprin's controversial views and crotchety tone. Here's why: 1. It's extremely well-written. Helprin has an impressive vocabulary yet he doesn't write cumbersome, circular sentences. 2. His arguments contain insights so sharp that they leave you questioning ideas you've unconsciously taken for granted. Whether or not you agree with him, you will leave this book feeling more conscious of your own views. I highly recommend it.

Dan says

I might have actually agreed with his arguments but he spent so much time convincing the reader that he was an old man I forgot what his original thesis was.

Helprin is a great writer, who has become very cranky. I understand that when the web attacks it can be vicious, but you must learn to ignore the trolls.

At times I felt as if I had fallen into the middle of an Ayn Rand novel, though Helprin does seem to have more wit. Early on the put downs of the netizens were humorous, but they become old after a while.

Fred says

Excellent argument in favor of copyright; even for extending copyright into perpetuity of descendants. I believe if you own a house you should be able to pass it to your kids without burdening them with the taxes; perhaps a tax scale that takes into account the income of the recipient as well as the value of the inheritance. The argument is not perfect - as others have noted, the author takes some time to throw in all kinds of opinions about other issues, usually with a conservative viewpoint. I found these digressions to be tolerable, in fact even enjoyable to see conservative viewpoints elucidated by someone who isn't a power hungry knuckle-dragger.

The gist of Helprin's argument is that if the ability to make money from one's artistic efforts is stymied by open use and digital replication then literature of quality will not be written. That he is correct is self-evident; the extinction of independent, full-time intellectuals has been well-documented by Jacobi and others. Any glance at the best seller list will reveal the lack of quality. An occasional quality work will slip in, but typically only by the anointed of academe such as Murakami or Pynchon.

Helprin takes the time to eviscerate the Creative Commons arguments; at this point he need merely sit back and point at the smoking wreckage of the music industry. A day hasn't passed without another artist pulling songs from the cloud services for non or negligible payment. Artists deserve to be paid for their work; they deserve to derive income from that work in their own lifetimes and I'm convinced they deserve to pass that legacy on to their children as well. Google should not be able to scan every page ever written and display it for free; nor should Bit Torrent users (or whatever the theft service of the day) be able to copy movies/games/books and make them available for free. No reward means no worthy product, and we are already reaping that harvest via the lowest SAT scores ever recorded, and a freedom of press rating lower than a Balkan dictatorship.

Greg Pettit says

Mark Helprin is a novelist who wrote this screed in defense of copyright. His style is excessively erudite and pompous, with almost as many commas as nouns. Unfortunately, I agree with him. It would be so much easier to be turned off by his style and simply dismiss him as an ass.

In arguing for copyright, he branches into other more philosophic ideas like individualism versus collectivism. I found the book to be very interesting, but his voice was off-putting.

Apparently, this book originated from an Op-Ed article he wrote not long ago. It drew such a firestorm of criticism from people from all over the internet that he felt compelled to respond. Sadly, he comes across as a bit of a troll, except instead of responding to his detractors on the internet, he wrote a book about it (so that he can be verbose and get the last word in, I suppose). It amused and somewhat saddened me that an author would bother to quote and reply to some anonymous posters from the web.

In the end, I think the battle for copyright is an important one, and Helprin is literate, intelligent, and stubborn enough to keep up the good fight. I'm just glad I don't have to be in the same room with him while he's doing it.

Sam Schulman says

Sadly underserved by his publisher in its name, it's not at all a long argument about copyright, but really a memoir intended to explain by example why one writes, and how only one's own individual experience in life can produce writing that is original and unique and one's own (and here he returns briefly to the copyright question and the nature of Internet writing vs. real writing.

Writers should read it.

Anna says

This is not just a writer's manifesto but a personal talisman. I would say it's brave, but I don't believe it was an act of bravery for Helprin to write this book. Rather an act of frank and honest devotedness to his work and to the many ideas and ideals he holds most dear. I read this in conjunction with 'The Craftsman' by William Sennett and the two together have given me much pause and direction.

Joe Haynes says

I agree with first review of this book. This seems to be more of an old man's rant against teenage angst "You damned kids get off my lawn!" and not a treatise against the destruction of the laws that protect works of art.

Arguing against technology using the laws and notions of the past makes no sense because laws and notions of the past are irrelevant when it comes to protecting works of art. The Creative Commons movement is at least an inclusive group that seeks to make sense of how technology and art can fit together. This book contributes little because Helprin can't get past the notion that technology can contribute to art (he sees only one side of the argument through his perspective from the past).

Rachel Smalter Hall says

This is that book that you love to hate! Mark Helprin is such a nasty, mean windbag in his book Digital Barbarism. As a tattooed woman (2 strikes against me), I'm apparently just one of the millions of riffraff he loathes! However, although it KILLS me to admit it, he does raise a couple of interesting questions about Intellectual Property. So, 2 stars.

But ultimately Helprin is still wrong. The evil that he imagines himself to be fighting when he attacks Creative Commons is a cartoonish villain: a radical, frothing-at-the-mouth, fanatical, nihilist communist. Kind of a foil to Helprin himself, who fancies himself a hero: a rational, noble, courageous, moralist capitalist. The problem is that Helprin gets the Creative Commons movement all wrong.

Although I'm sure a blogger or two has, indeed, argued for the abolition of copyright, I'm also sure that a blogger or two has argued for just about anything you can think of. That's the beauty of blogs -- everyone has a voice in the public forum (not just Mark Helprin). The copyright reform movement as a whole, however, is much more moderate. In fact, Creative Commons actually seeks to slow down and dial-back a radical movement that would see copyright abolished.

As the transfer of information and ideas has become more fluid in a digital environment connected by the internet, the policy mechanisms to control IP have also gotten much more restrictive and chilling. This is because the industries that profit from licensing IP panicked and lobbied for stricter controls to protect their investments. The reward for their lobbying was copyright extension and the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA). It is now no longer safe, even in the context of fair use, to critique and respond to Intellectual Property without fears of unreasonable legal fees and prosecution.

So yes, people responded to these strict new controls by becoming pirates and thieves. But Creative Commons seeks to correct that, to be the moderate solution in-between that gives producers the option still to license their intellectual property, but more fluidly. I think this is probably in line with what the framers actually had in mind when they established a "limited term" for copyright, so that, as rugged individualists, innovators and capitalists, we could still profit from our ideas -- but that these ideas would then eventually be "freed" for public use and progress. The framers made this weird exception for ownership of Intellectual Property, as opposed to other sorts of property, because they recognized a special quality in ideas that allows us all to benefit when they are free.

I admit that *Digital Barbarism* **did** force me to critique my own views on Intellectual Property licensing, which had drifted pretty far to the left. For that I appreciate it. That's why it got 2 stars instead of 1.

Ryan says

Sarcastic book, fun to read. Unfortunately, his arguments are weak and he doesn't address many of the opposing argument's points. There is more to copyright debate than Mark Helprin speaks about and he addresses only what I consider to be "common sense" when it comes to copyright. The book is more of a ramble against the teenage and internet culture (two cultures that are completely separate, but Helprin combines throughout the entire book). Overall, this is the basic argument that all *pro-copyrightists* use, and Helprin doesn't exactly bring new ideas to the battle.

I was hoping to get some great insight to pro-copyright opinions. I was hoping it would really take books like "free culture" and really tackle their points. If you dislike (or ignorant of) the internet or teenage culture, then you will probably enjoy and agree with this book.

I am still left with the opinion that DRM and unregulated copyright (etc, etc) should be abolished for the sake of the consumer, artists, and corporations alike. I should probably mention that I am a musician and hoping to work in the field, not an illegal downloader.

Paul says

Every writer, artist in the world needs to read and heed this wonderful book. Not only is Helprin one of the smartest writers around, he's funny, wise and prophetic too. So seriously, read this book.

Ben McFarland says

It's rare that when finishing one book I immediately turn back to that same author for more, but I'm doing it

in this case: my next book is Helprin's *A Soldier of the Great War*. I want to get more of Helprin's prose in my head. But the reason I'm breaking my own rule and getting more of the same author is that I found *Digital Barbarism* to be unsatisfying on a few levels. Helprin's argument for copyright extension works beautifully for the type of work he does: literature to last the ages. He makes a compelling and fascinating argument on those grounds. However, he's so busy fulminating that he only occasionally sets his argument in the context that it comes from. This is no doubt by design, because he's writing literature to last the ages, right? But the context it comes from is a society that has lost the distinction between software and literature, and between background music and Wagnerian opera. Helprin's arguments about the rights of the sole creator fall apart when, as with software or a movie, there is no sole creator. Much of the friction between him and his online adversaries can be attributed to this category mistake. The problem is that the people he's arguing with would never read one of his books in the first place, so the argument is destined to fester. Argument aside, like everything Helprin writes, this is a jewel box of words, and so it's worth it just to hold them up to the light and admire them. Just make sure you pay for them. Unless you got this from a library, like, uh, I did.
