

# A virtual affair

Live book launches, panel discussions and workshops over cyber coffee—**Erica Sontheimer** provides a first-hand account of the inaugural Second Life Book Fair.

A crowd of Harajuku urbanites and elegant literati surrounded David Morell as he discussed his latest thriller *Scavenger* (Vanguard Press). Oddly enough, one of the book's characters rose from the audience and approached the stage, announcing himself as the real David Morell. 'At the last minute I decided to be a participant in the audience,' David told me after the event. 'I discovered that I could answer the questions directly without the need for my publicist to type the answers.' And thus my pixelated Second Life avatar, LitChick Writer, spent the weekend of 20–22 April witnessing the inaugural Second Life Book Fair (SLBF).

Second Life (SL)—a virtual world that is currently one of the most popular sites on the internet ([www.secondlife.com](http://www.secondlife.com))—has been criticised for offering little more than simulated sex and shopping. The SLBF challenges this assumption, revealing a vibrant community of writers, publishers and designers who are bridging the gap between traditional books and modern audiences.

One of the main organisers, Adele Ward (Jilly Kidd in SL), is a published poet and a fiction editor for Bluechrome Publishing in the UK. Others involved in the initial idea were an American engineer from Xerox, an Australian scholar of cross-media entertainment and a handful of internationals with similar interests. The idea then spread through SL's viral networks and created what Ward calls 'an explosion of interest in books.'

## Village people

Sheena Dewan (Selina Green in SL) from the UK's Vision Paperbacks/Fusion Press offered a venue called the Publisher's Village, designed by a Second Lifer who sells real-world European castles to the rich and famous, and soon over 30 companies and individuals had signed on to exhibit, including Penguin, Macmillan, Bantam Dell, Wiley, Snowbooks (UK), Summersdale

(UK), Conte Verlag (Germany) and Blue Scar Productions (New Zealand). 'There's an ethos of encouraging all abilities and offering as much as possible for free,' says Ward. This has allowed independent publishers and aspiring writers to exhibit among the multinationals and bestsellers, with the SL community providing assistance when it came to designing a stall.

Events at SLBF included an opening gala, live launches, panel discussions and workshops covering topics from pitching to marketing and copyright issues. Exhibitors offered excerpts through podcasts and virtual books, which could be enjoyed while sipping cyber-coffee. By clicking on a poster, visitors could teleport to websites, related SL locations or the shopping cart at Amazon.com. Those in a hurry could stash note cards, web addresses and audio files to be reviewed at leisure. Avatars mingled on street corners and by simulated water fountains.

Vic Dreyer (Scars Ayers in SL), the managing director of Blue Scar Productions (BSP), New Zealand's largest independent publisher of comic books and graphic novels, was pleased with the results, reporting 'we've sold about 10 books, which is an excellent start for us as far as I'm concerned.'

## Get a (virtual) life

The SLBF isn't the first book event to take place within the SL community. Bantam Dell established a presence in February with an event featuring bestselling author Dean Koontz. Ken Wohlrob (Beelzebubba Rasmuson in SL), associate director of internet marketing, describes SL as 'another important avenue—similar to MySpace and YouTube—for expanding the discussion about books and authors. It's social networking that's much more personal and interactive than instant messaging or blogging. We are living the experience with the readers, as opposed to having a one-way conversation. That is a powerful resource for publishers, especially when we're competing with movie studios, television networks, online video sites and video games for a potential reader's attention.'

SLBF exhibitor Snowbooks also runs a permanent SL shop with regular office hours, a Book of the Month and 'small, timed promotions to coincide with events in real life. I've even had a serious book pitch from a real life agent at our SL office,' says publisher James Bridle (PK Rimbaud in SL).

As with any book fair, there are always tweaks to be made. The text-based chat contributed to a tendency for group discussions to be cursory or downright chaotic and Ward is particularly interested in 'working to bring sound to author events using podcasts and streaming.' Perhaps as the technology evolves with the needs of the SL community, we'll see the virtual world give new life to the traditional book. □

Below: Even 'virtual' poets manage to look cool and bored at the same time.

