

# Making Books, 21st-Century Style: An Interview with Rick Smolan

**Written by** Steven Heller

**Published on** July 21, 2009.

Filed in Voice: Journal of Design

Over the past 25 years, Rick Smolan and his wife, Jennifer Erwitte (daughter of the Magnum photographer Elliott Erwitte), have been producing books that combine creative storytelling with state-of-the-art technology. Their company, Against All Odds Productions, was the first to design a top *New York Times* bestseller on a Macintosh with *A Day in the Life of America*. Thanks to Steve Jobs, all the photographers, editors and writers contributing to the *Day in the Life* books were paid with Macs, which, according to Smolan, was how Macs first entered the art departments at *Newsweek*, *National Geographic* and many other publications that their team worked for. From *Alice to Ocean: Alone Across the Outback* was the first coffee table book to ever come with an interactive CD, and Apple bundled 500,000 copies of the CD with all their computers. The CD they produced as part of the incredibly moving *Passage to Vietnam* won every major interactive design awarded the year it was released. The website for *24 Hours in Cyberspace* was the first to be inducted into the Smithsonian archives (by then-Vice President Al Gore). *The Planet Project* documented the world's largest real-time poll, for which the duo sent 3,000 pollsters around the world with Palm Pilots to ask 220 questions in eight languages about sleep, sex, politics and more, garnering 1.6 million people's participation online. And five years ago they released *America 24/7*, the first *New York Times* bestseller that was mass customized by the public (21 percent of all book buyers created personalized covers for the book). Most recently, Smolan and Erwitte created *The Obama Time Capsule*, a customizable documentary book that enables the user to be part of history. The implications for this project are profound. Will it transform book publishing? Or is it simply one in a series of digital novelties? A veteran publisher and packager, Smolan talks about the impetus for doing this book and the future as he sees it.

**Heller: President Barack Obama souvenirs are big business. I realize this is a bit more than that. But what triggered your interest in *The Obama Time Capsule*?**

**Smolan:** I was sitting with a group of friends on election night and was amused to see many of my non-photographer friends pick up their cellphone cameras and shoot pictures of the TV set at the moment Obama's victory was announced. I asked why they were all doing this and everyone laughed and said they knew they were witnessing history. As the conversation went on, I noticed that everyone had a story to share about how they personally felt a connection to the outcome of this election and to Obama.

Many of my photographer friends had been on the campaign trail, and in speaking with them I kept hearing stories about “the pictures that never saw the light of day,” images they had all shot that were symbolic or too subtle. I asked them to send me the ones they were most proud of and received 40,000 images—many of them amazing and many of them never seen. I also called foreign photographers who had been sent here and their work was never published here.

**Heller: So that’s the making of a big conventional book, but yours is more unique than that. What makes it so special?**

**Smolan:** Well, I wondered if there was a way to create a book that wove together all these amazing images with each individual book buyer’s own story, photos and even their children’s artwork, so that every single copy was unique. I intentionally didn’t want to do a trade book edition because part of the goal was to have no books in warehouses, no print run, no books printed that might have to be later pulped and destroyed, no books shipped over by container ship from China or Korea (where all the big coffee table books are printed). The idea was to do the book of the future 10 years ahead of its time.

**Heller: How much of the book can actually be customized? Is it just another gimmick?**

**Smolan:** There are seven places that can be customized: 1) Your name appears on the cover as one of the authors. 2) Your family photo appears on a button on the back cover of the book. 3) You get to write your own dedication to your family inside the book. 4) The inaugural invitation is in your name. 5) Your photo appears next to Oprah Winfrey, Sean Penn, Tiger Woods and other celebrities on the Key Obama Supporters Page. 6) The email message from Obama that appears on the BlackBerry screen is addressed to you. 7) Your children’s artwork appears on a page of Obama-related kids art.

**Heller: What are the limits of technology in terms of customization?**

**Smolan:** The real limits are not technology, but psychology. We had to be careful about not overwhelming people with too many choices. We could have customized every single page of the 200-page book, but most people would never get around to doing it.

**Heller: In this era when books are said to be on the verge of extinction, how will this concept alter the paradigms of book publishing?**

**Smolan:** Professionally produced books—great photography, essays and infographics—merged together with each individual book buyer’s own content is going to be an important differentiator going forward.

**Heller: What does this concept say about traditional publishing methods and distribution? Are they on the way out?**

**Smolan:** Many publishing experts believe that the future of publishing is something like the Kindle, as well as print on demand books like *The Obama Time Capsule*. The current model where publishers print millions of books, 60 percent of which end up being unsold and destroyed each year, simply cannot continue anymore.

**Heller: I agree, but I'm concerned that the quality of books will diminish in this on-demand environment. How does design play a role in your project? Must you provide a design template that appeals to a common denominator?**

**Smolan:** No. We designed this book from scratch. The personalized pages were designed so that if someone wanted to personalize them, they could—but if they don't, the pages always have pre-existing content.

**Heller: OK, aesthetics aside, what are the financial implications? What does it cost to produce a copy—physically and in terms of content—and how much profit can be made?**

**Smolan:** Right now high-end print-on-demand books like *The Obama Time Capsule* are extremely expensive—a book like this would normally cost \$65. Because our sponsor HP and paper company called NewPage donated 25-five tons of paper we are able to offer the book at an initial price of \$34.95 (exactly what an offset book of this size and quality would cost). We were also fortunate to have sponsors like Google, Facebook, AOL Platform A, Glam Media and others who are providing us with over a million dollars in free advertising because everyone fell in love with the concept of the book. What's more, I should mention that our sponsors have no editorial control or even review of the contents of our books. It's like a PBS special.

**Heller: How is the project faring at this time?**

**Smolan:** The book is doing great (at this moment it is #48 on Amazon). People absolutely love the personalization.

**Heller: So, can and will you apply this concept to other books?**

**Smolan:** Absolutely! And we plan to.

---

**About the Author.** Steven Heller, co-chair of the Designer as Author MFA and co-founder of the MFA in Design Criticism at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *Iron Fists: Branding the Totalitarian State* (Phaidon Press) and most recently *Design Disasters: Great Designers, Fabulous Failure, and Lessons Learned* (Allworth Press). He is also the co-author of *New Vintage Type* (Thames & Hudson), *Becoming a Digital Designer* (John Wiley & Co.), *Teaching Motion Design* (Allworth Press) and more. [www.hellerbooks.com](http://www.hellerbooks.com)