

County

# End of story

## Local libraries, county fear future of e-book lending limitations

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As the internet has connected the world, libraries across Suffolk County have never been as linked as they are today with both patrons and each other.

The written word is strong, despite claims to the contrary, especially with the proliferation of e-books and audiobooks. Suffolk County's Library System allows for libraries to request books from fellow libraries and gives access to multitudes of e-books and audiobooks alike, all free on request, barring a wait list.

Some publishing companies are not happy with the status quo.

Macmillan Publishers, an international corporation and one of the top five publishing houses across the globe, announced its intent to limit the number of copies allowed to libraries to one for the first eight weeks of release starting Nov. 1. After those eight weeks, they can purchase "expiring" e-book copies which need to be re-purchased after two years or 52 lends.

While this decision has rocked libraries across the country, in Suffolk County, as the interlibrary program and e-book lending is handled by the Suffolk Cooperative Library System, that will mean one copy of an e-book for the entire system, according to Kevin Verbesey, director of the county library system. Just one e-book license for the whole of Suffolk and its near 1.5 million residents for the first eight weeks of its release.

To add some perspective, Verbesey said a hot new title could have thousands of residents on a wait list for the title, and the county library system usually tries to have one copy of said book for every two or three people requesting it. Like any anticipated piece of media, new and highly anticipated titles are most often sought and bought in those first eight weeks. Following that, barring renewed interest from something like a movie deal, attention begins to wane. Basically, the library system, which would usually purchase hundreds of licenses of that book, will effectively be restricted from having any.

In socioeconomic terms, Verbesey said it means people who can afford it can buy a book. Those who can't afford it will have their access restricted.

"In some parts of the county where there's not great socioeconomic need, people have the option to 'press buy' and buy it for \$12, but that's not the case everywhere," Verbesey said. "Rich people can have it, but poor people can't."

The North Shore is one of Suffolk County's heaviest concentration of library users, the county library system director said. Those patrons could see some of the biggest impact of this decision.

Debbie Engelhardt, the Comsewogue Public Library director, said her patrons are savvy and know when books are set to hit the street, and they depend on the library to have e-book copies available.

"We have a long history of working very hard to get things into people's hands as quickly as we can," she said. "Think about a tiny little library someplace, they can buy one, and then all of Suffolk County can buy one. It just doesn't seem equitable."

Engelhardt said libraries often have deals to purchase books cheaper than retail price through deals with publishers. They will also create lease agreements to gather numerous copies of whatever is popular at the time, so they are not later burdened with multiple copies of that same tome.

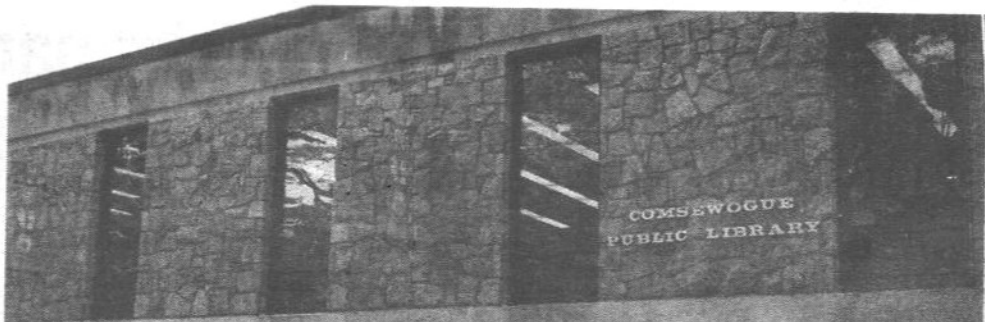
Ted Gutmann, the director of the Emma S. Clark Memorial Library, also pointed to the interlibrary loan system, which means not every library will need to purchase every book as long as it's available nearby.

E-books, on the other hand, are purchased by libraries for sometimes five times its original asking price. A regular e-book could cost around \$12. A library or library system will purchase it at around \$50 or \$60, according to Verbesey. This is because libraries need to buy the licensing agreement of the copy in order to lend it to multiple people over the course of its license before the agreement expires in a few years. Each publisher has different policies on how long the licenses last and what is the cost for relicensing a product.

The Suffolk library system has an annual budget of \$14 million, with \$4 million being spent directly on e-books and for the services of Overdrive, an application used by libraries to distribute their electronic media. E-books currently make up approximately one of every four checkout items from libraries in Suffolk.

Despite the price of these books, Verbesey said they are happy to purchase what can be hundreds of licenses of that one e-book if there's demand. This new policy would make it pointless to purchase any copies.

Macmillan did not respond to a request for comment, but in its original July 25 letter to Macmillan authors and agents announcing the change, CEO John Sargent wrote, "It seems



## Editorial comment

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Comsewogue, Port Jefferson and Setauket libraries will all have to contend with changes in the industry. File photos

that given a choice between a purchase of an e-book for \$12.99 or a frictionless lend for free, the American e-book reader is starting to lean heavily toward free ... Our new terms are designed to protect the value of your books during their first format publication. But they also ensure that the mission of libraries is supported. They honor the libraries' archival mandate and they reduce the cost and administrative burden associated with e-book lending. We are trying to address the concerns of all parties."

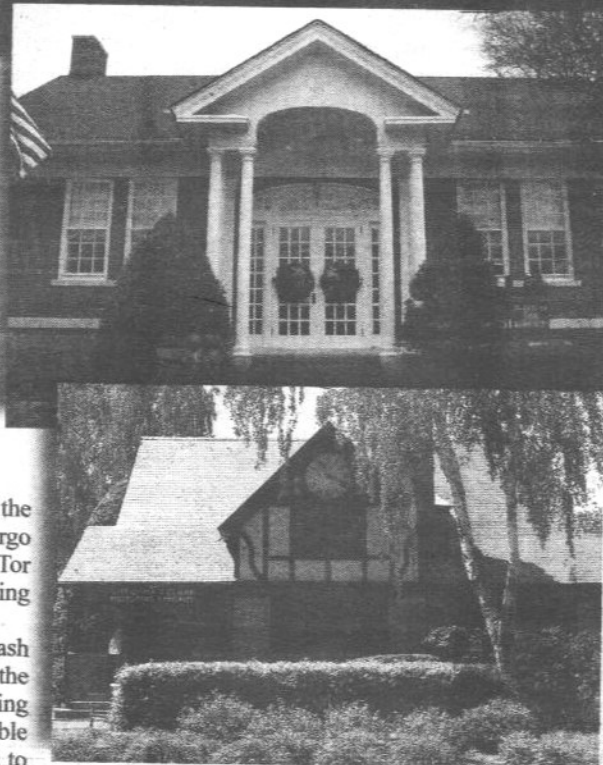
The changes came after the corporation tested a 16-week embargo with e-books from its subsidiary Tor Publishing, concluding e-book lending had a negative impact on sales.

Overdrive CEO Steve Potash condemned the move, calling the company's original test data faulty adding that very few Tor e-books are available in public library catalogs. He pointed to other studies that showed libraries had no material impact on e-book sales.

Authors published under MacMillan include romance author Nora Roberts, young adult fantasy based in African myth Tomi Adeyemi, and even famous and deceased authors such as C.S. Lewis. The company is also set to publish whistle-blower Edward Snowden's memoirs this month, which is sure to become a hotly requested item.

And though the libraries have no control over the publisher's requests, some expect the onus to fall on the individual libraries themselves.

"When a library serving many thousands has only a single copy of a new title in e-book format, it's the library — not the publisher — that feels the heat," said American Library Association President Wanda Brown in a July 25 statement.



"It's the local library that's perceived as being unresponsive to community needs," she added.

Engelhardt pointed to data from the national Library Journal's Generational Reading Survey for 2019, which showed 42 percent of those surveyed purchased the same book they borrowed from the library, and 70 percent bought another book of the same author of a book they borrowed. She added libraries are some of the biggest promoters for individual books, authors and literacy in general, and Macmillan may only be hurting its own brand.

While the limitation on e-book lending won't be in effect until November, libraries are already preparing to tell their patrons why Macmillan books won't be available electronically.

"We're going to have to explain the publisher is not working with local libraries," she said.