New York City has twice as many stories now. Everyone has a tale to tell, but since Sept. 11 everyone here can also describe the personal impact of that day's epochal events.

Thomas Beller, a New York novelist and editor, presents nearly 200 of these real-life accounts on his Web site, Mr. Beller's Neighborhood. The 18-month-old project is an online anthology of essays, memoirs and vignettes, most of them written before the World Trade Center attacks by authors in Mr. Beller's literary circle or by the site's visitors.

Next week Mr. Beller is also moving offline with the official release of "Before and After: Stories From New York," a self-published paperback containing 60 articles from the Web site. It is being distributed by W. W. Norton. Like the Web site the book relates colorful pre-Sept. 11 encounters with cops, coffee vendors and taxicab drivers as well as wrenching post-Sept. 11 accounts like a meditation (by Anne Kovach) on the death of the artist Michael Richards in 1 World Trade Center.

The appearance of the bound volume does not mean that Mr. Beller, 36, is abandoning the commercially iffy sphere of cyberspace for the iffy conventional publishing world. Instead he intends to expand the Web site and remains as committed to the Internet as a medium as he is to the book.

"Thinking about writing and the Internet is like thinking about writing and the paper-mill industry," Mr. Beller said. "They do have a tangential relationship, but this scenario -- the work we publish in the Neighborhood and now the book -- suggests that the medium isn't the message. The words are." Are they? By presenting the same material on the screen as on the printed page, Mr. Beller provides an opportunity for readers to compare the two experiences.

Given a choice between reading a story onscreen and reading it on the page, most people will prefer the traditional format. A book is tangible, portable, familiar and reliable. The type is crisp. Sunlight does not prevent you from seeing it. As the electronic book industry flounders, it is evident that readers can resist a digital version of a real-world text.

But Mr. Beller's site, www.mrbellersneighborhood.com, offers more than pure text. It is built around a simple yet compelling device: a detailed satellite map of Manhattan. Each article is linked to the location where its action is set. Click on a red dot at Fifth Avenue and 49th Street, and a window pops up to display Jeanette Winterson's passion for Saks' socks. Click on the World Trade Center, and two dozen accounts of the attacks and their aftermath become accessible.

Steven E. Jones, an English professor at Loyola University of Chicago with an interest in digital texts, said that the close visual relationship between the online stories and their geographic locations imbues them with a palpable sense of place and personal experience.

"As you zoom in, you get this feeling that you know exactly where you are," Mr. Jones said. "It's hit on that thing that people feel about a city: every street corner could tell stories. It immediately makes you start thinking of your own."

On the site is a link, "Tell Mr. Beller a Story," that encourages visitors to contribute their own tales. Whether it is used or not, Mr. Jones said, the feature implies that the reader is part of the site's community and not alone with the texts.

Mr. Jones cited another simple touch on the site, a real-time clock, which, he said, conveyed a sense that the site is alive and its material can be updated at any moment. By contrast, he said, once the text is between covers, "that chunk of it is separated and becomes static."

Paula Geyh, co-editor of the Norton Anthology of Postmodern Fiction (1997), likened Mr. Beller's site to those 1940's mysteries with maps of a crime scene and its surroundings on their back covers. Because the Web site is interactive -- visitors can read downtown to uptown or, if they know the route, follow a subway line -- it seems more immediate and grounded in reality than the vintage books.

Ms. Geyh said: "This site creates a much more dynamic and kinetic experience. It is akin to a virtual stroll around the neighborhood in which one pauses to chat with acquaintances and overhears fragments of conversations along the way."

Presenting the stories in such a desultory fashion is not an option with a book, where Page 2 always comes after Page 1. In choosing the order of the stories, Mr. Beller said, "I was approaching it like a concert. You start off all loud and up, then bring it down a bit, then go back up."
Scott Rettberg, founder of the Electronic Literature Organization, said the linear progression of a printed collection reflects its editor's artistic decisions. But online, he said: "Readers expect they will be able to make navigational decisions and form their own compositions from the available material. The music of print is more classical than the improvisational jazz of electronic writing."

Mr. Beller declined to favor one medium over another. He argued that the writer's eye more than the reader's imagination benefited from situating the stories in a physical location. He said the order in which the stories are read does not affect their individual integrity. If anything, he said, "seeing the pieces aligned in the more linear fashion and on something you can spill tomato soup on is very gratifying."

As for the Web site's evolving contents -- three to five stories are added each week -- Mr. Beller compared the site to serial novels: "It's like this giant, unfolding Dickens narrative that you pick up and read for a couple hundred pages. It's not in any way resolved."

In producing the printed edition, Mr. Beller used what might be considered a couple of multimedia tricks. Each story is accompanied by a small abstract map, although it does no more than vaguely indicate the tale's location.

But another idea is more effective. The book actually has two front covers, one for the "before" stories and one for the "after." Readers who finish one section reach upside-down pages. Mr. Beller said that approach was intended to depict how the city was upended on Sept. 11.

There is also a flip side to the Web site. It may seem more immediate, more alive, more interactive and more grounded than the book. But without the interactive map, readers of the printed version are forced to project themselves more deeply into the verbal world that the authors have constructed.

Mr. Beller said he did not expect one medium to vanquish the other. "To say which one is better is like saying one is going to win," he said.

So which version is better, the Web site or the book?

"Authorial tone, point of view, the personality of an author, writing style, these are immutable things," he said. "Whatever your favorite piece is is no better or no less a good piece of writing in either form. To me, writing is writing."
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