

Denis Dutton

The New Yorker (<https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/denis-dutton>) · by Blake Eskin



Returning to the office after the Christmas holiday, I was cleaning out my RSS reader and noticed that the daily feed for Arts & Letters Daily (<http://www.aldaily.com/>) was missing its trademark three teasers to stories elsewhere on the Web. In the past, I have e-mailed Denis Dutton, the founder and editor of Arts & Letters Daily, to let him know that his feed was broken. I didn't write to Denis yesterday; there was a lot of catching up to do, and I depend less on Arts & Letters Daily than I once did. This morning, I learned that Denis Dutton died in New Zealand, where he taught philosophy at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch. He was sixty-six and, according to Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Denis_Dutton), suffering from cancer.

Founded in 1998, Arts & Letters Daily was the first and foremost aggregator of well-written and well-argued book reviews, essays, and other articles in the realm of ideas. Denis was the intellectual's Matt Drudge. Like the Drudge Report, [aldaily.com](http://www.aldaily.com) has a retrograde design that has barely evolved over the years; Denis said he modelled it on the eighteenth-century broadsheet. Nevertheless, it became the home page of professors, students, editors. To be featured on Arts & Letters Daily meant your work would be read and discussed, whether you were Christopher Hitchens or a struggling neophyte, whether your piece appeared in *The New Yorker* or an obscure site with six regular readers. We met only a couple of times, but I would send Denis links to stories that I was proud of writing and editing; after I returned to *The New Yorker* to edit its Web site, he would e-mail me, asking us to put an individual article in front of the paywall. As much as Denis admired long writing, he had a gift for enticing short

teasers; as the *New York Review of Books* Twitter feed said this morning, “Denis Dutton was a master of the tweet long before Twitter existed (<http://twitter.com/#!/nybooks/status/19776243528372224>).”

As I mentioned earlier, over time I looked less at Arts & Letters Daily. Denis’s contrarianism at times became predictable; his teasers could sometimes be better reads than the stories they linked to; and I couldn’t quite get over discovering that Denis was also behind the falsely even-handed Climate Debate Daily (<http://climatedebatedaily.com/>), which strikes me more as an assignment for an industry lobbying firm than the passion project of a philosophy professor with little patience for nonsense. Denis was no Luddite—he was publishing e-books (<http://cybereditions.com/>) a decade ago—but Arts & Letters Daily clung to its 1790s/1990s format, giving an edge to other highbrow curators who make better use of technology: The Browser (<http://thebrowser.com/>) and Longreads (<http://longreads.com/>) and Give Me Something To Read (<http://givemesomethingtoread.com/>), which culls stories popular on Instapaper (<http://instapaper.com/>), not to mention any number of Twitter users. I, too, owe a debt to Denis; in 2002, an organization called Nextbook invited me to develop a “Jewish Arts & Letters Daily” and the Nextbook Daily Digest—three items of Jewish cultural interest—has since blossomed into a robust online magazine, now called Tablet (<http://www.tabletmag.com/>). Through Arts & Letters Daily, Denis helped prove that the Web could be a platform not only for fast-paced celebrity gossip and pictures of cute animals but for long and serious writing and the exchange of complex ideas. Denis died today, but his site and his vision will endure.

Photograph: Christchurch Star/Martin Woodhall/AP

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