In the aftermath of last year’s tsunami, earthquake and nuclear meltdown, digital publisher Byliner sent National Book Award winning author William T. Vollmann to Japan for two weeks to cover the story. Seven days after Vollmann returned to Northern California, “Into the Forbidden Zone,” a 22,000-word Byliner original appeared in Amazon and other e-bookstores. “It’s not tossed off or rushed, but a well-observed, nuanced narrative of his exploration of the forbidden zone, right to the gates of the nuclear power plant,” said John Tayman, Byliner’s CEO. “We published that even before the news weeklies reported from Japan. Certainly before the conventional shorter tales that might have come out in Esquire, The New Yorker and GQ. We were swifter than all of that.”

Tayman began thinking about a shorter digital format for books several years ago. “As a writer, I wanted to tell a story that naturally needed to be about 20,000-25,000 words,” he said. “There was no avenue for me to tell that story. I could either compress it down into a magazine piece or have it blown up to the conventions of legacy publishing, which generally is around 70,000-100,000 words. Giving writers the opportunity to tell these stories at their natural length and getting them in front of readers while they were still current was very interesting and intriguing to me not only as a writer but as a reader.”

Tayman said Byliner Originals seem to resonate with the way people like to read on Kindles and iPads. “The stories that we publish on Byliner.com are best enjoyed in lean-back mode, and we see that from the analytics with how people are engaging with them and the website itself,” said Tayman. “We think these reading habits are going to become ingrained. Not all that long ago, I would look at my night stand or table piled high with big, fat, thick great books, and I found myself not picking them up because that commitment was too high for when my impulse to read was most present. Now I know I can enjoy a Byliner Original and have the satisfaction of finishing it. It gives me the option of having a really pleasant, complete experience whenever I want it.”

**“WE’RE NOT CALLED BYLINER BY ACCIDENT”**

Tayman stressed that authors are a primary focus of his writer-centric company, adding that many members of Byliner’s editorial staff are former writers and editors. “We’re not called Byliner by accident,” he said. “We’re organized completely around the writer brands and we let readers discover, dive down and do anything they want around the idea of the specific writers. If you organize around magazine brands, you create silos that are not porous enough to allow the kind of discovery, recommendations and interesting things that this new technology allows.”

Byliner consists of two components: a publishing arm, which has published 15 titles since it was started a year ago, and a website that is formed around writers and designed so that they and their work can be easily found.

When Tayman initially began thinking about Byliner, “it was obvious back then that there was going to be a discovery or distribution challenge for this new size book. It couldn’t work the way conventional publishing works—that is, you publish it and hope an audience gathers around it and reads it. We wanted to figure out a way to turn that upside down, really studying the way communities of readers formed online and specifically the ways that communities of fan bases of readers gathered around a particular...
Tayman wanted to build what amounts to a kind of LinkedIn page for writers that leverages all of their periodical work, past and present. Many of these writers have been writing for a variety of magazines over decades and their work is scattered across a dozen or more archives that are executed with varying levels of skill. And some of their great pieces may have existed pre-2000, meaning they weren’t ever online, he said. Tayman wanted that periodical work to serve as an introduction for new fans. “I wanted to create a site that at its barest level was an extremely useful, easy and fast and simple utility to find more things to read by your favorite writer.”

Social media such as Facebook and Twitter are important components of Byliner. Not only can readers go to a page that has all of Michael Lewis, Susan Orlean’s or John Krakauer’s stories, but they can also follow their favorite writers. Byliner sends out social media alerts if one of its writers publishes something new, no matter where it’s published. “It speeds that process from somebody who reads a single story by that author to somebody who becomes a habitual fan of that author, and then a consistent buyer of that author’s work. So the follow mechanism was an obvious next step in all of this,” Tayman said.

Byliner also employs a Pandora-like mechanism to help readers find authors they might not already be familiar with based on what they’ve already read. “There were similarities among writers that we could leverage to the benefit of the reader,” Tayman said. If the system notices that a reader has spent a lot of time with Writer A, it suggests that the reader is probably going to like Writer B, too. “It makes for a more vibrant community and happier readers, but it also exposes to an audience a writer who doesn’t have the marketing muscle of some A-list best-selling writers,” he added.

The specific recommendation aspect is both algorithmically and editorially based. “It begins to define a writer genome, for lack of a better phrase, and that might be noticing consistencies in topics that writers consistently write about or publications,” said Tayman. “Topics are one aspect, but then it goes even deeper into areas that you might not think about, like regionalism,” said Tayman. For instance, if a reader is a Roy Blount fan, odds are they are going to like Rick Bragg’s work, too, because their world view is very colored by the region they’re from and write most often in. Tayman said. “We look for all sorts of data points that we can cross-reference and use to direct you in an intelligent way to a new voice that we think you’ll enjoy.”

Digital Updates
Byliner also capitalizes on the ability to easily update digital stories,
something that’s very difficult, if not impossible, to do in print. For instance, in the 22,000-word Byliner Original, “Three Cups of Deceit,” John Krakauer investigates the fraud and fabrications surrounding Nobel Peace Prize Nominee Greg Mortenson’s “Three Cups of Tea.” Over the past 10 months, Krakauer has written an additional 20,000 words of updates, Tayman said. “So he’s essentially written another full-size book of updates to that story, and it allows the writer to let the story evolve and to keep it alive.” Byliner sends out the updates over social media, which also generates interest in the original book. As a result, instead of the conventional sales drop-off after the initial spike, Byliner has had months where sales have climbed back up due to the updates, and the overall sales level has remained much higher than might be expected without the website component, Tayman said.

With digital books, stories need never die, even if they’re decades old. New Yorker staff writer Tadd Friend has updated several stories on his Byliner page, including an article he wrote about the death of the celebrity profile that originally appeared in Spin magazine. “That piece had never lived online anywhere because it was 1998,” Tayman said. “He updated it and made it current, and that allowed us to push it out and make reference to it again through social media.” Among the 36 stories on Friend’s Byliner page, one goes all the way back to the Dark Ages of 1987. Friend’s article “The Crankiest Judge in America” was originally published in Spy, a magazine that has been defunct since 1998. “The idea of letting a classic story become fresh again and generate new readers for current work is exactly the kind of discovery and distribution platform we knew had to exist if Byliner Originals were going to do well,” Tayman said. Byliner’s writer discovery website has become “a really wonderful and logical support system for the publishing half,” he said.

DEVELOPING NEW WRITERS
Although Byliner primarily publishes established authors, it has also discovered some new talents, like Rachel Corbett, who e-mailed Tayman a couple of paragraphs from a story she thought could only be told at the length of a Byliner Original, about 15,000 words. “We published her story, ‘A Killing in Iowa,’ about two months ago. It’s been on the best-seller list for its first nine weeks of publication. Some weeks it was outselling Stephen King on Amazon,” Tayman said. “While it’s wonderful to publish established writers like John Krakauer, Amy Tan and Mark Bittmann, in some ways it’s almost even more satisfying to turn a Rachel Corbett into an author that people are now following and looking for.”

After reading Corbett’s first few mesmerizing paragraphs, it’s easy to see why Tayman was so enthusiastic. Byliner is almost religious in its belief in the writer’s narrative. “We have an obsession with narrative. We appreciate that one thing that every great writer wants to do, to cast a spell with that first sentence or paragraph. Grab the reader by the collar and not let them go until they’re done telling that story,” Tayman said. In that sense, it’s not much different than a great book—only shorter.