To the members and friends of the North Carolina Writers' Network:

If you love books (even if only the ones you yourself have written), you need to be aware of a recent market trend that could have a far-reaching effect on readers and writers.

This fall, some of the country's largest retailers—notably Wal-Mart, Target, and Amazon.com—have begun pricing new and often best-selling hardcover books as low as $8 or $9, 50%–60% lower than the publishers' list price. This means that those retailers are often selling books for less than what they bought them for from the publishers. They are, in effect, losing money on each book sold.
It seems like a great deal for readers, doesn't it? Not when you think about its long-term effects.

These pricing practices could create a climate in the book business in which new and even established authors suffer because of the irresponsibility of retailers who have little concern for the health of bookselling and publishing, much less the literary community. They are telling readers that books aren't worth the price it costs to publish them.

Do any of us really want to live in a world where publishing a new book, in commercial terms, isn't worth the expense? Pricing a best-selling book in the single digits devalues the work the author, editor, designer, and publisher put into that book. Such pricing will inevitably push all retail prices—and thus, publishers' revenue—down. Facing reduced revenues, many small presses, those who often serve as the discoverers of new and exciting authors, will not be able to survive. Larger publishing houses will be much less willing to take risks on authors without a proven track record on the best-seller lists (including the authors who might write tomorrow's best sellers).

New and emerging authors—even established authors with solid but not spectacular sales histories—will find fewer and fewer venues available for their work. Those venues they do find will be less able to find and build an audience for the work of these writers.

The retailers engaging in this devaluing are using books as nothing more than loss leaders:

incentives for consumers to enter their stores or Web sites, where they will be encouraged to purchase more expensive items. They are discounting not only the economic value of books, but also the intrinsic intellectual and emotional value of what books provide. They are treating books merely as the prize in the Happy Meal box.

With the holiday gift-giving season approaching, we urge everyone to be aware of the disregard in which some retailers hold the printed word, and to consider this and the possible consequences when you do your shopping.

Sincerely,

Ed Southern
Executive Director
North Carolina Writers' Network

Nicki Leone
President
NCWN Board of Trustees