Robin Sloan

Novelist exploring publishing, software and the making of imaginative worlds

Robin Sloan’s career is an extended investigation into how an imaginative world becomes something another person can enter, use, and carry forward. The novel is his best-known instrument, but it is only one. A crowdfunded novella, a phone essay, a family messaging app, an olive oil company, an experimental album, and a print shop each let him work on a different part of that problem: the making, the form, the means of delivery, the relationship with the recipient.

His three novels—Mr. Penumbra’s 24-Hour Bookstore (2012), Sourdough (2017), and Moonbound (2024)—supply the visible literary spine. Around them lies an unusually extensive public record of experiments, explanations, abandoned expectations, and practical revisions. By 2026, he was describing himself as a writer, printer, and manufacturer.[1]

My reading is that the continuity lies less in a commitment to any medium than in a recurring ambition: to make cultural production intelligible, pleasurable, and available for further use. Sloan wants to understand how a thing is made, discover what its medium permits, and give the resulting object a viable life among people. That makes distribution, institutional affiliation, collaboration, and the price of materials part of the vocation itself.

This is also where the difficulties begin. Small-scale independence depends on large infrastructures. A welcoming fictional world can soften the power relations that sustain it. Technical experimentation can become its own reward. Sloan’s practice becomes most interesting when these difficulties change what he does, rather than merely furnishing subjects for commentary.

Research scope: public sources checked through 19 September 2026. This profile combines contemporaneous records, retrospective interviews, primary essays and project documentation, published excerpts, and attributed criticism. It is a research synthesis, not an interview-based biography or a claim to have independently verified private finances. Interpretations are distinguished from documented events; proposed projects are not treated as completed ones.

[External image / 外部圖片] Portrait of Robin Sloan
Robin Sloan in the portrait he uses on his own biographical page. Robin Sloan; photographer not stated · Rights retained by the source and respective rights holders; no open license stated. · Image source

1. Before California: the library, economics, and the making of a reader

Born in 1979, Sloan belongs to a generation whose childhood reading preceded the commercial web but whose entry into adult work coincided with its rapid expansion. The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction situates his fiction at the intersection of speculative storytelling and the cultural future of the physical book. That intersection has a biographical foundation: he grew up in Troy, Michigan, and identifies the Troy Public Library as formative. At Michigan State University, he studied economics and co-founded the literary magazine Oats.[2, 3]

These institutions offered different kinds of permission. A public library makes cultural abundance accessible without requiring that each encounter become a purchase. A student magazine turns reading into selection, arrangement, deadlines, and an actual object that must reach someone. Economics supplies a vocabulary for constraints and exchanges. The later Sloan repeatedly brings these activities together: an appetite for freely circulating culture, a publisher's attention to presentation, and an interest in the machinery that makes either possible.

This connection need not be inferred entirely from the degree on his résumé. In his 2010 essay "Stock and flow," Sloan explicitly linked his everyday thinking to undergraduate concepts such as opportunity cost, sunk cost, and marginal cost. He then distinguished the continual stream of public updates from work that retains value over time.[4]

The important formation was therefore not simply "a bookish person who also liked computers." He acquired ways of thinking about both imaginative experience and its organization. His later projects ask questions that literary biography often places outside literature: Who pays before a thing exists? What happens after it is finished? Which audience can find it? How much maintenance does it require?

There is insufficient evidence here for a detailed reconstruction of family finances or private childhood relationships. The publicly documented library, university, and early publishing environments are more solid ground than a speculative psychology of his upbringing.

2. Games and stories taught him how worlds become larger

Sloan's account of formative reading includes Lewis's Narnia, Le Guin's Earthsea, Lloyd Alexander's Prydain, Rosemary Sutcliff's historical adventures, and the films of Studio Ghibli. These are not just sources of fantasy scenery. They model stories in which discovering the world changes the discoverer.[5]

One of his most precise accounts of influence concerns the Super Nintendo game released in North America as Final Fantasy II. In "The widening aperture," he recalls the moment

an airship transforms the player’s understanding of the map. Ground covered laboriously becomes a small part of a much larger geography. He connects this sensation to later experiences at the Long Now Foundation’s lectures: encounters with geological and biological time that made familiar scales suddenly inadequate.[6]

What crosses from game to novel is an arrangement of knowledge. A story can let its reader inhabit an apparently complete world, then disclose that this completeness was provisional. The surprise is not merely that there is more territory. It is that the reader’s previous assumptions about what counts as the world must change.

This helps explain Sloan’s fondness for shops, markets, archives, and villages as points of departure. Such places have enough local coherence to feel graspable. They can subsequently become entrances to systems that exceed them. The small setting gives the expansion its force.

A second important encounter occurred in college, when he read Miyazaki’s Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind manga. In his 2025 account, what astonished him was the scope of an ecological and political world rendered by one person’s sustained drawing and writing. He distinguishes that solitary achievement from the collaborative production of animation. He also acknowledges his own inclination to control every part of a work, recognizing it as limiting as well as enabling.[7]

That admission complicates the convivial public persona. Sloan admires and depends on collaboration, but also wants unusual continuity between imagining a thing and determining its final shape. Much of his career consists of finding workable arrangements between those desires.

3. Poynter: an apprenticeship in institutions and encouragement

Sloan worked at the Poynter Institute in St. Petersburg, Florida, from 2002 to 2004, before joining Current TV and later Twitter. These were jobs concerned with changes in media, rather than an apprenticeship inside a conventional literary career.[8]

Poynter mattered because it brought technical experimentation into contact with working journalists and their institutional obligations. The issue was not simply what a new tool could do. It was what would happen to reporting, public knowledge, professional authority, and news organizations when the means of circulation changed.

Howard Finberg, Sloan’s boss and mentor, challenged him and Matt Thompson to make their ideas forceful enough to unsettle audiences.[9] Jim Naughton supplied a different kind of support: active allegiance to young people before they had accumulated achievements that seemed to justify it.[10]

The latter is a revealing influence on vocation. Some careers advance through selective

recognition: an established figure judges a promising newcomer. Sloan describes an experience closer to being encouraged into capability. Someone else's confidence makes an initially improbable self-conception practicable.

It would be too neat to make every benevolent mentor in his fiction a portrait of Naughton. The documented point is narrower and more useful: Sloan's account of his own formation assigns a powerful role to encouragement that precedes proof. His subsequent enthusiasm for other people's books, projects, and unlikely pursuits belongs beside that memory, without being reduced to it.

4. EPIC 2014: the future became a story before it became a prediction

Sloan and Matt Thompson's EPIC 2014 emerged from conversations about networked journalism, including a dispute over a speech by New York Times digital executive Martin Nisenholtz. Their early presentation described a system assembling information from professionals and users. When this failed to sufficiently disturb its audience, they recast the argument as a retrospective from an imagined future. The result included the fictional Google–Amazon combination "Googlezon" and a transformed information order. The publicly circulated Flash version appeared in November 2004.[11]

The consequential invention was formal. A diagram of an approaching system became a story told from the other side of its arrival. That change made institutional displacement feel accomplished and therefore thinkable.

My reading is that this early work joins activities that later recur throughout Sloan's practice: institutional observation, technical extrapolation, and a medium chosen to produce a particular response. Its force did not require every forecast to come true; the creators emphasized audiences' recognition of changes already underway.[12]

Calling Sloan a prophet on this basis would obscure the craft. He was learning to give abstraction a setting and a sequence of events. The relevant skill was making a possible arrangement of the world tangible enough to invite argument.

There is a further institutional lesson. This was not an isolated visionary somehow seeing past everyone else. It came from a partnership, a journalism institute, internal presentations, skeptical colleagues, available production equipment, and blog circulation. The "future of media" was made in a workplace.

5. Entering the Bay Area through an unfinished institution

In his 2024 retrospective "The golden door," Sloan describes moving toward California in 2004 while pursuing rumors of Al Gore and Joel Hyatt's participatory television venture, then called INdTV. He emailed Hyatt an idea a day over the course of August, sometimes

batching messages while driving across the country. A meeting with Hyatt and Joanna Drake led to a job; he became the company's seventh employee. Drake became an important manager and mentor. The venture launched as Current TV in 2005.[13]

This was an entry through demonstrated work. The emails were simultaneously an application, a portfolio, and a sustained argument about what the company might become. EPIC 2014 gave him another concrete object to show.

The circumstances matter as much as the initiative. A young institution was still defining its requirements. Its leaders were willing to consider an unconventional applicant. Sloan could arrive before a stable job category had fully formed around his interests. His career benefited from that opening; there is no reason to assume the same performance would receive the same response inside a mature organization.

Current also placed him among people working on the uncertain relationship between participation and professional production. His retrospective values the company's dispersed alumni network as a major part of its legacy.[14]

By January 2010, contemporary reporting announced his move to Twitter's media partnerships work. A 2011 account of Syfy's Haven describes him discussing the integration of character tweets with television narrative. These records locate the job more accurately than a generic label such as "tech executive": he was operating where media organizations, audiences, and a new communication platform met.[15, 16]

That position trained attention on the spaces between things. The programme, the conversation about the programme, and the technical channel carrying that conversation could become parts of one designed experience. Later, a novel, an email, a website, an event, and a parcel would form a comparable field of decisions.

6. The 2009 turn: finishing fiction and assembling its public

The decisive movement toward authorship came through completed small works. Sloan later told writing teacher Chip Scanlan that years of beginnings had taught him less than finishing very short stories and sharing them. Completion created an object that others could discuss; one finished scale made the next manageable.[17]

This is especially pertinent to a person capable of inventing elaborate publication systems. The infrastructure could easily become an excuse never to complete the story. His early progress required both the imaginative permission to start and the discipline to make something finite.

Diana Kimball's Kickstarter case study reconstructs the surrounding network. The collaborative New Liberal Arts project, associated with Snarkmarket's Tim Carmody, gave Sloan experience producing and distributing a physical book. Andy Baio's Kind of Bloop crowdfunding project supplied another example. Sloan's own "Robin writes a book" campaign then promised a novella composed during the campaign and delivered afterward.

It closed in October 2009 with 570 backers pledging $13,942 against a $3,500 target.[18]

Those figures establish a successful small publishing project, not a permanent salary. Its more durable effects were practical and relational: a deadline, readers who had committed before completion, experience explaining a work in progress, and proof that a physical artifact could be produced and sent.

The novella, Annabel Scheme, imagined a contemporary Holmes-like detective with an AI companion, moving through a strange San Francisco and its networked life. Its premise already put technological systems inside a recognizably pleasurable genre.[19]

Creative Commons documented the next experiment: Sloan released the book under an Attribution–NonCommercial license and allocated $1,000 to a remix fund. Readers were invited to propose further creations rather than only receive the original.[20]

Here participation had several distinct meanings. Buying underwrote production. Following updates created anticipation. Responding influenced the surrounding publishing process. Remixing opened another work. It is important not to collapse these into the claim that the audience wrote the novella. Sloan retained authorship while experimenting with how many kinds of involvement could surround it.

7. Why traditional publishing became an expansion of independence

The transition from self-publishing to FSG is often treated as a conversion between opposing systems. Sloan’s own record describes a more practical development.

In “Penumbra has a posse,” he recounts meeting agent Sarah Burnes, deciding that the original Penumbra story could sustain a novel, and finishing a rough complete draft at the end of 2010. Editor Sean McDonald had been following the earlier experiments and responding with both encouragement and demands for improvement. Sloan wanted people who could strengthen the text and create its larger publication: design, publicity, events, and placement in actual bookstores.[21]

Burnes’s account to NPR adds useful institutional detail. Chris Parris-Lamb passed Sloan’s stories to her; the novel was submitted broadly and went to auction. Some editors were interested while others struggled to position it. McDonald had been an early reader, but the eventual partnership was not simply an inevitable private arrangement. It passed through the mechanisms of agented trade publishing. The advance was not disclosed in that account.[22]

The combination is the point. Existing web readers made the work visible and supplied early confidence. The literary agent organized its encounter with publishers. The publisher brought specialist judgment and channels that exceeded the author’s own audience.

Independence here means retaining the ability to choose among forms and collaborators. It

does not mean performing every function alone. A writer who can publish a small object himself may still rationally prefer a publisher for a book whose ambitions require a different scale of distribution.

McDonald remained the editor of all three novels. In 2024, Sloan described both that continuity and the stimulus supplied by other MCD authors' projects. The imprint functions as an adjacent creative environment: its other publications expand his sense of what a book's public life can be.[23]

This is one of the career's central institutional conditions. An experimental temperament becomes more productive when it has a durable collaborator who can turn an unusual manuscript into a publication readers will actually encounter.

8. Mr. Penumbra: an initiation into other people's work

The 2012 novel places Clay Jannon, an unemployed designer, in an unusual San Francisco bookstore. Its puzzle draws him toward encoded volumes, an old fellowship, and contemporary computing resources, particularly through Google employee Kat Potente. The investigation makes different forms of expertise visible to one another.[24]

My interpretation is that its governing pleasure is initiation. A workplace that initially looks marginal turns out to connect to a larger history. People who might seem eccentric become intelligible through the things they care about and know how to do. The protagonist's progress depends on recognizing those capabilities.

This structure gives exposition a narrative reason. Learning about a medium or institution is part of solving the problem. A reader need not arrive already interested in typography or digitization: curiosity about the mystery can carry attention into those subjects.

The form also resonates with Sloan's own movement into publishing. His 2011 announcement imagines his collaborators as the specialists assembling for a heist. The pleasure of a team coming together is part of his account of both publication and storytelling.[25]

Yet friendliness is not the same thing as complexity. M. A. Orthofer's contemporary review praised the book's handling of technological details while finding its characters insufficiently developed and its story less ambitious than its premises. That is a substantive criticism of the method: when characters are valued principally for the worlds they introduce or the skills they contribute, they can become instruments of the explanation.[26]

There is also a historical vulnerability. To present a large technology company's resources as available to an appealing adventure is to choose a particular angle on corporate power. The story can illuminate what tools make possible while giving less attention to how those tools came to be owned, whose work sustains them, or who cannot gain access.

That criticism should not erase the novel's actual achievement or convert it into a policy

tract it never claimed to be. It identifies the cost of a powerful fictional invitation: the reader is welcomed into fascinating institutions, and may consequently feel less pressure to examine their exclusions.

9. A local novel enters several literary worlds

Sloan's own book page reports Penumbra's publication in more than twenty countries. It also records the later packaging of the prequel Ajax Penumbra 1969 with a new edition. The story-world could expand while the original novel acquired new readers through different editions and markets.[27]

Japan gives a concrete example of this circulation. Tokyo Sogensha's catalogue identifies Hiroko Shimamura as the Japanese translator and dates its hardcover to April 2014 and paperback to February 2017. A separate publisher announcement records the book's selection as the Grand Champion Book at the 2014 national university Bibliobattle held at Kyoto University.[28, 29]

That is evidence of a particular reception through translated publishing and readers' advocacy. It should not be inflated into a comprehensive claim about Japanese popularity. Its significance is more specific: an ostensibly very local Californian novel could travel through institutions organized around the pleasure of recommending books.

Sloan told Scanlan that translation changed his understanding of his writing. A finished English text was also material for another creative intelligence to realize anew.[30]

The career is therefore transnational in more than the familiar sense of an American writer acquiring foreign editions. Japanese games and manga helped form his sense of what stories could do; Japanese translators, publishers, and readers subsequently made his own work available in another literary setting. These directions are connected, but they are not interchangeable. Influence is an encounter with an existing work; translation and publication require other people's labor and judgment.

The distinction also limits the solitary-maker ideal. No amount of attention to the first artifact gives its author complete control over the languages, categories, and uses through which it will later be understood.

10. Sourdough: the body interrupts the technology story

Sourdough begins with a failure of nourishment. Lois Clary, a programmer at a robotics company, is exhausted by work and sustained badly by an engineered food substitute. A neighborhood food business introduces another possibility; when its proprietors must leave because of visa problems, she inherits their starter. Learning to feed it and bake with it leads her into a different working world.[31]

The opening's juxtaposition of industrial ambition and bodily depletion makes the

problem unusually concrete. The promised liberation of human labor coexists with a working schedule that consumes the programmer. Food enters as an obligation to something living, not just another object to optimize.

The novel's occasion was also practical. Reporting around Fat Gold's first harvest identifies Chad Robertson's Tartine Bread as a stimulus to Sloan's interest in starters. The same report locates the book's speculative food community at the decommissioned Alameda Naval Air Station. Its imaginative world grows from recognizable food culture and repurposed Bay Area space.[32]

My reading is that Sourdough advances the question already present in Penumbra. There, different kinds of knowledge needed to recognize each other. Here, knowledge must confront a living process whose behavior exceeds its keeper's intentions. The material answers back.

This does not produce a simple opposition between craft and machinery. Sloan's discussion of the novel with Y Combinator is fascinated by the intelligence required for ordinary kitchen work and by the difficulty of translating it into robotic action. He describes research as something to learn from closely and then move beyond imaginatively.[33]

The generational geography is recognizable as well. The published opening explicitly gives Lois a Michigan-to-San Francisco trajectory and a move from comparatively settled engineering work into the Bay Area's rhetoric of exceptional ambition. Fictional biography should not be read as a transcript of the author's life. Nevertheless, the juxtaposition creates a useful contrast between two meanings of technical work: a durable occupation within an existing industrial world, and a supposedly transformative mission that claims the worker's entire identity.[34]

11. Where the food fable becomes uncomfortable

The transfer of a starter is also a transfer of culture. That double meaning creates the novel's warmth, but it also opens a question about who gets to turn inherited knowledge into a vocation.

A dissenting review at Vestige argues that the novel insufficiently examines Lois's entitlement to commercialize the Mazg starter and cultural inheritance. The reviewer connects that omission to a familiar technological assumption: sincere enthusiasm can be mistaken for permission to appropriate other people's resources.[35]

That is one reader's argument, not a settled judgment about the book. It is valuable because it exposes something a celebratory account of creative reinvention can miss. A protagonist's discovery of meaningful work may depend on circumstances that are much less emancipatory for the people who supplied the knowledge. Visa insecurity and the freedom to pursue a new calling do not distribute themselves evenly.

The appropriate critical question is therefore not whether Sloan likes food or admires makers. It is whether the structure of discovery gives sufficient weight to those whose displacement enables another person's adventure.

There is a parallel challenge outside the fiction. When a novelist enters food production, the resulting story can be told as an ingenious writer's new project, obscuring the expertise of the people who make the product possible. Fat Gold's records permit a more exact account—and, in doing so, make Sloan's real practice more interesting than the solitary polymath version.

12. Fat Gold: a business governed by fruit, machinery, and other people's expertise

The early Fat Gold story begins with a leased three-acre olive grove in Sunol and a first harvest in 2017. Contemporary reporting described maintenance, protection against olive flies, hand and motor-assisted harvesting, and plans to use Jeff Martin's mill. This was substantial physical work, and the report makes clear that Sloan and Kathryn Tomajan were learning cultivation as they went.[36]

Learning to farm should not be confused with arriving without professional knowledge. Tomajan's formation included the University of Gastronomic Sciences in Italy, research into olive oil's supply chains, and an apprenticeship with miller Joan McGovern in Australia. In a 2022 interview, she explained that processing olives was her primary expertise and that operating their own grove taught them how demanding continuous farming could be.[37]

The company subsequently changed its organization. Instead of growing all its own fruit, it developed relationships with growers and invested in a mill. Fat Gold's current account locates its milling operation in the San Joaquin Valley, identifies Tomajan as majority owner and leader, and describes Sloan as apprentice miller and communications chief.[38]

These distinctions are essential. "Novelist becomes olive farmer" freezes the story at its most picturesque moment. The more consequential development is a production business discovering which part of the chain it should control. It can select fruit and make oil without owning every grove. That choice reduces one set of commitments while leaving dependence on growers, crops, transport, and capital equipment.

Tomajan also explains the communicative necessity. Their oil is expensive to produce, and customers must understand what its quality entails. Educational material has included a breakdown of costs. Her account presents explanation as part of the business's survival, rather than an ornamental expression of taste.[39]

That gives Sloan a concrete role in the enterprise. The company's newsletters, guide, website, and zines packed with orders help people understand what they are buying and how to use it.[40]

In my reading, the business joins two forms of skill without making them identical. The miller transforms a perishable crop into a particular oil. The writer makes differences in that production legible to its buyers. Neither substitutes for the other. A beautiful account cannot repair defective oil, while excellent oil can remain commercially invisible if buyers have no way to recognize its difference.

The practice also complicates the word "craft." This is not the rejection of machines. It is informed judgment exercised through machines, within a network of suppliers and customers, under conditions that cannot be wished away by enthusiasm.

13. Seasonal labor changes the architecture of writing

In his 2024 interview with Jane Ciabattari, Sloan described October and November as milling months, followed by December's packing work. During that season, sustained writing largely stops. Driving and operating equipment nevertheless generate images and ideas, which he captures in voice notes.[41]

This is a more distinctive working condition than a favorite pen or a prescribed morning routine. Another enterprise sets limits on the writing calendar. The interruption is structural, arriving with the harvest and the demands of fulfillment.

The likely creative value is not that physical labor magically improves prose. It changes the available mental activity. Drafting at a desk requires one form of attention; carrying out a familiar task or driving a route can leave room for another. Capturing a thought preserves something for a later period when it can be worked into a sustained composition.

Sloan's metaphor for his writing process is fermentation: accumulating notes, experiences, language, and feelings, then allowing connections to develop. The metaphor is useful because the notebook is neither a complete plan nor a random storehouse. It holds material whose eventual function remains unsettled.[42]

His 2024 Audible interview likewise resists a strict division between outlining and improvisation. Reading Christopher Tolkien's documentation of his father's revisions helped unsettle the image of a fully predetermined fictional world. Sloan recognized a process in which discovery and retrospective arrangement coexist.[43]

The resulting method can be reconstructed in broad terms: notice and record; give material time; find a voice or premise capable of organizing it; write enough to discover its implications; revise the arrangement. This is a synthesis of his accounts, not an independently observed daily schedule.

It also explains the long intervals between novels without reducing them to either delay or effortless interdisciplinarity. Five years separate the first two novels and seven separate the next pair. Public activity continued between them, but newsletters, small projects, and another seasonal business make demands on the same finite working life. There is no evidence here that every side project accelerated the next book.

14. Moonbound: abandoning the familiar frame

In early 2020, Sloan was working on a direct sequel to Mr. Penumbra’s 24-Hour Bookstore. The pandemic sharpened the question of whether to keep postponing the book he most wanted to write. He switched to Moonbound, approaching speculative fiction directly rather than through a contemporary Californian setting.[44]

The novel appeared in June 2024. Its main action takes place roughly eleven thousand years in the future, in a world where a boy named Ariel encounters an ancient intelligence that becomes his companion and the story’s narrator. The premise combines recognizable adventure with an unfamiliar account of human and nonhuman history.[45]

The change is not just a larger quantity of worldbuilding. In the earlier novels, present-day readers could use contemporary institutions as orientation points. Moonbound must manufacture its own orientation. Familiar fantasy forms provide an entrance, while subsequent revelations alter their meaning.

The published opening demonstrates one of the solutions. The narrator is physically implicated in events: it transfers from a dead warrior to the boy, so its ability to tell the story is bound to survival and embodiment. An apparently abstract intelligence becomes a situated presence.[46]

This device lets Sloan approach a recurrent problem from a new direction. A narrator who knows much more than the protagonist can supply historical scale; one who also depends on that protagonist can retain intimacy and vulnerability. Explanation becomes an activity undertaken by a character with a position, rather than an invisible author temporarily stopping the adventure.

The biological component matters. In the Audible conversation, Sloan connected this narrator to the starter in Sourdough, describing an imaginative continuity between them. He also explained that years of AI experiments supplied material for the novel, although the desired result had not been a novel co-written with those tools.[47]

The transformation is characteristic: an unsuccessful way of making something can still become knowledge from which something else is made. The experiment’s value migrates from production technique into fictional material.

15. Deep time, ecology, and the politics of possible futures

Long Now’s influence on Moonbound is documented rather than conjectural. Sloan had attended its lectures from their early years; the foundation identifies him as an early member. In their 2024 interview, he also names James Bridle’s Ways of Being as an important stimulus to thinking about multiple kinds of intelligence.[48]

These influences expand the field in which a vocation can be imagined. The relevant agents are no longer only people and companies. Living communities, inherited systems, and

different temporal scales exert pressure on what any individual can know or do.

Christian P. Haines’ s Strange Horizons review identifies Moonbound’ s movement through broken myths and improvised alternatives. He reads its young protagonist’ s curiosity and capacity for transformation as a different model of masculinity from mastery or invulnerability. His account also emphasizes the conjunction of cosmic stakes with an unusually playful tone.[49]

Anja H. Lind’ s SFRA Review essay supplies a complementary reading. She connects the book’ s long view to decarbonization, cooperation, and continuing ecological management, and sees a development beyond the more restricted technological optimism of the earlier novels.[50]

These are useful critical interpretations, not substitutes for the novel. Together they suggest that Sloan’ s optimism is most defensible when treated as a compositional commitment: catastrophe should not exhaust the available repertoire of futures.

That commitment carries a real intellectual burden. A narrative can refuse fatalism while still understating the institutions and conflicts required to achieve its alternative. Far-future fiction can demonstrate that the present is contingent; it cannot, by the act of imagining alone, establish how a transition from here to there would work.

The open question is how much explanation the adventure must carry. If every political and ecological premise had to be exhaustively justified, the novel could cease to move. If too little is justified, hope becomes scenery. Sloan’ s characteristic answer is to make new possibilities attractive enough that readers want to inhabit and investigate them. The pleasure is genuine, and so is the limitation.

The intended series adds an economic condition to this aesthetic ambition. Sloan’ s “Theory of the series” describes an expanding world whose continuation depends on readership. It also treats a series as a shared experience in time: writer and readers move through an unfinished project together. That is a publishing theory, not a confirmation that every planned volume will appear.[51]

16. Fish and the problem of attention that leaves nothing behind

Sloan’ s 2012 Fish presents an argument through taps, typography, color, and pacing. Its subject is the difference between approving of something online and sustaining a deeper attachment to it. The official project page records an instructive afterlife: he lost the original source code, and the work eventually returned in a recoded, expanded edition documented in 2022.[52]

The interface is part of the argument. A tap regulates progression through a designed sequence rather than sending the reader into another undifferentiated stream. Its rhetoric

depends on when something appears and how it occupies the screen, not only on what the sentences say.

Its disappearance and reconstruction also expose the maintenance cost of an invented medium. An app is a publication that lives inside another party's changing environment. Making it once does not guarantee that anyone can still encounter it a decade later.

This gives additional force to the earlier "Stock and flow" distinction. The continual maintenance of visibility can crowd out work that accumulates durable value. Yet Sloan's 2010 argument did not call for disappearance into a private workshop. It advocated a relationship between ongoing communication and lasting work, recognizing that even accomplished artists often depend on others to maintain the public channel.[53]

Alan Jacobs's 2014 discussion at Nieman Lab shows the concept circulating beyond Sloan's own readership, connecting it to the renewed appeal of bounded newsletters and much older practices of selection and correspondence.[54]

The contrast is therefore about time and obligation as much as media. A novel or essay can offer a completed encounter. A feed can make continued presence feel compulsory. Sloan keeps trying to preserve communication without allowing the requirement to communicate to become the whole practice.

17. The medium is changed by the journey through it

"Dancing the flip flop," published in 2014, names a process in which a work moves between physical and digital forms and changes along the way. Sloan's examples include sculpture, photography, printing, and movements learned from manipulated images. Fidelity is not the governing aim. The transfers produce effects unavailable in either domain alone.[55]

This is a more precise account of his interests than a general love of combining old and new. The question becomes what an actual transformation enables: what gets added, lost, distorted, enlarged, or made actionable.

The Cotton Modules, his collaboration with composer Jesse Solomon Clark, turned that question into a production method. During lockdown, the two exchanged mono cassette tapes. Clark supplied musical material; Sloan selected fragments, used them to prompt a music-generating model, supplied lyrics, and returned recorded results. Clark then built musical structures around the generated material. Their documentation emphasizes both the constraints of the exchange and the unpredictability of what each received.[56]

The cassette did not make the project technologically innocent. It imposed a boundary on the collaboration. Each participant encountered the other's sound without an accompanying digital project or complete account of intention. Selection and interpretation became unavoidable.

A related, smaller experiment occurred in the Sourdough audiobook. Sloan used a recurrent audio model trained on Croatian klapa recordings to help realize the fictional music associated with the starter. He described the model's imperfect generalization as part of its aesthetic usefulness.[57]

These projects show why "AI made the work" is an inadequate description. The work includes choosing material, setting constraints, generating, rejecting, arranging, performing, and delivering. They also leave an ethical question that aesthetic interest alone cannot settle: transformation may produce unfamiliar sounds without resolving questions about the source recordings and their makers. This profile does not treat the projects as proof of any general legal entitlement to training material.

18. Writing with a model: the experiment and its disappointment

In 2016, Sloan published an Atom editor plugin connected to a recurrent neural network trained on old science-fiction text. His write-up credits the open-source components and educational resources that made it possible, including Justin Johnson's work and Andrej Karpathy's explanation of recurrent networks. The purpose was an unusual exchange with language, rather than increased output. He also acknowledged that the results did not yet repay the effort of using the tool.[58]

This is a valuable record precisely because fascination and disappointment coexist. An imagined instrument can be much more compelling than the instrument as built. Continuing to experiment requires distinguishing a promising possibility from an achieved artistic result.

The 2022 Google Wordcraft commission gave that distinction a more demanding test. Sloan initially tried to make the system function as a detective within an unfolding mystery. It failed to follow the developing work adequately. He then assigned it a narrower task: generating names and deaths for a fictional fantasy saga, which he selected and edited into "Author's Note." His account explicitly distinguishes that useful contribution from having a satisfactory writing partner.[59]

The episode challenges two easy narratives. Early experimentation does not mean Sloan simply endorsed every subsequent claim about AI. Disappointment with a model as a co-author did not mean he found every use artistically empty.

The deeper question is about the unit of collaboration. A system may be useful for a bounded class of variation without understanding the evolving intention of a whole work. A writer can reorganize the task around that limitation, but the reorganization is itself creative labor. Describing only the generated sentences would miss much of what made the story possible.

19. Home-cooked software: a different definition of success

Sloan’s 2020 essay “An app can be a home-cooked meal” begins with the loss of Tapstack, a messaging service his family used for casual visual contact. He built a replacement for four people. Its narrow scope removed many requirements of a commercial application: it already knew who its users were and did not need to attract anyone else. Annual updates to the essay report continued use through February 2026.[60]

The proposed analogy is exact enough to be productive. Learning to cook need not mean becoming a professional chef; learning to program need not mean producing a scalable business. A person can make something specific because it improves the lives of people they know.

This is an alternative account of technological competence. Success is not measured by how far a product travels or how many users it acquires. The small audience is not a stage to grow beyond. It is the reason the object exists.

The limitation is equally revealing. A family app still depends on operating systems, distribution mechanisms, hardware, and hosting. Its independence is consequently partial: control over the purpose and design, rather than escape from the technological world that supports it. Sloan’s essay describes the difficulty of getting through Apple’s development and provisioning machinery.[61]

The practical aspiration is nevertheless meaningful. A tool can remain shaped around its users’ wishes rather than around demands imposed by an expanding business. The distinction is especially important in Sloan’s career because he has worked inside platforms that sought enormous audiences. Smallness here is a chosen operating condition, not unfamiliarity with scale.

20. Spring ’83 and the design of a less demanding public

Spring ’83, proposed and developed in 2022, asks a different question: how could one follow interesting people without privileging those who post most frequently? Sloan’s design uses compact, individually expressive boards laid out together. Each publisher maintains a current board; it can retain its place even when it is not being updated. The protocol omits built-in likes and replies.[62]

The contrast with a chronological feed has practical consequences. A novelist publishing every few years and a person sharing a thought each morning could remain equally locatable. The reader would visit an arrangement of presences rather than process an ever-renewing queue.

Sloan explicitly presents protocol design as investigation and criticism. The intellectual result does not require the proposed network to replace an incumbent platform. Building a plausible alternative reveals which features of the existing arrangement were choices.[63]

This is closely related to the vocation question. A communication system can quietly dictate a working rhythm: make more, appear more, respond more. A different system might permit an artist to remain in relation to a public while withdrawing to do a kind of work that takes time.

The 2020 newspaper serial Annabel Scheme and the Adventure of the New Golden Gate explored another arrangement. It appeared in the Mercury News and East Bay Times, after which a thousand patrons paid $9 apiece to receive a digital edition and unlock a free web version. The campaign also supported release of the web edition's code.[64]

The two projects operate differently. One designs a possible communication protocol; the other combines an existing newspaper institution with collective funding for public access. Both turn the relation between a finished work and its audience into a subject of deliberate construction.

That is a useful limit on claims that Sloan has simply retreated from platforms into private ownership. His experiments include ways to make work common, not only ways to keep it under his control.

21. Printing changes the ambition from expression to usefulness

The physical turn becomes especially clear in the Penumbra Print Shop. Its statement of purpose credits three histories of material media: Adam Smyth's The Book-Makers, Keith Houston's The Book, and, particularly, Roland Allen's The Notebook. The attraction of the last lies in the importance of blank books—objects whose contents and uses are supplied by someone else.[65]

In the publicly available portion of Jarrett Fuller's June 2026 interview, Sloan describes this as a change in what he wants to make. A story transmits the author's own vision; olive oil can enter any meal its buyer chooses to cook. Reading the history of notebooks helped him imagine comparable openness in manufactured objects. His successive occupational labels, he adds, often state an aspiration before describing an established practice.[66]

That is a consequential shift. The question is no longer only how to make an absorbing experience for a recipient. It is how to make something that becomes material for the recipient's own activity.

Magic Postcard embodies the overlap. The shop describes a physical postcard to which its sender attaches a photograph or video, accessible by scanning a code without a special app or account. It states that the media are end-to-end encrypted and access belongs to the postcard's bearer. Those are the producer's descriptions, not a security audit conducted for this profile.[67]

The object is interesting because physical possession becomes part of a digital interaction.

A postcard can be kept, given, lost, or destroyed; each possibility carries a different meaning from a file floating in a permanent account history. The social form is doing work that would be difficult to recreate merely by adding another button to a messaging application.

Its dependence on digital service also puts pressure on the celebration of paper. The printed object can persist while the linked media become unavailable. The experiment therefore does not abolish the maintenance problem exposed by Fish. It redistributes that problem across a physical and digital object.

The shop’s larger significance is vocational. Sloan is assembling the skills and equipment to control production directly while making objects whose usefulness extends beyond the act of reading his sentences. The print shop draws the literary author toward the stationer and manufacturer.

22. The return to Penumbra is also a revision of the original bargain

The May 2025 Secret Playbook paired an essay with a three-color Risograph poster. Sloan reported designing the poster so that contemporary frontier models could not read it correctly, and presented the work as an invitation to artists to seek forms resistant to automated understanding and imitation. Its typography involved designers David Jonathan Ross and Rutherford Craze’s work.[68]

The claim about unreadability was tied to particular systems at a particular time. It should not be treated as a permanent technical property. More important for the career is the direction of inquiry: an early experimenter in machine-generated language was now investigating what could remain difficult for machines to assimilate.

The form made the argument consequential. A statement about physical specificity became a printed object requiring handling, looking, and interpretation. Design and manufacture joined the prose in articulating the position.

In July 2026, Sloan announced a further project: a thousand-copy edition of two booklets, a revised The Writer & the Witch and Mr. Penumbra’s All-Night Reading Room, a new version of his first Penumbra story. He described writing, designing, printing, and binding them himself, and named Italian paper and Japanese Awagami endpapers among the materials. The announcement promised the second booklet later that summer; this profile does not infer completed delivery from that promise.[69]

The revision matters beyond bibliographic novelty. Sloan explicitly said that both the technological setting and his own abilities had changed since the original story. A familiar title was becoming an occasion to reconsider the relationship between books and technology, not merely to preserve a successful brand.[70]

This produces an unusual loop. A fictional bookstore helped make him a professional novelist; the accumulated professional experience now supports a real print shop bearing the fictional name; that shop provides a way to remake the originating fiction. The career is not moving from digital to physical in a straight line. It is repeatedly revisiting earlier work with new production capacities and changed commitments.

23. By September 2026, his position on AI contains a deliberate tension

In July 2026, Sloan reported joining a San Francisco march calling for a conditional, coordinated pause in frontier AI development. He distinguished that position from opposition to every use of language models, arguing that societies needed time to understand and choose among the consequences of existing capabilities.[71]

Two months later, his essay “‘Ask for what you want’ is a key skill for the 21st century” described using AI agents to build personal applications. His examples included a notes application called Rocksteady. He favored finished, standalone tools over dependence on a continuously operating agent, described extensive refinement through actual use, and expressed unease about both the technology’s power and the weakening of his own willingness to program manually.[72]

The distinction is coherent, though not free of difficulty. One can support restraint in the development of a technology while making use of its existing forms. One can also prefer automation in the construction of a tool without wanting it inside every subsequent act performed with that tool.

But use and industrial support cannot be completely disentangled. Customers participate economically in the systems they criticize. Nor does a personally satisfying application settle questions about labor, access, or the distribution of power. Sloan’s account is most useful as a situated experiment, including its discomfort, rather than as a universal resolution of those issues.

His strongest recurring test is whether the tool eventually disappears into worthwhile activity. The danger he identifies is endless improvement of the workshop without making anything beyond it.[73]

This is an old problem in his career in a new form. The person fascinated by inventing media must repeatedly decide when a medium is ready enough to carry actual work.

During the same period, Sloan and Alexis Madrigal co-hosted KQED’s Dream Machines, a public-media series about AI. Its published episodes include conversations with Annalee Newitz, Erik Brynjolfsson, Jungwon Byun, and Camilo Landau. KQED’s account explicitly locates the project in San Francisco and in the relationship between technological change and lived experience.[74]

The institutional choice deserves notice. Public conversation becomes another way to work through questions that a private experiment cannot answer. The old media apprenticeship has not disappeared; it has re-entered the mature practice.

24. The network and the economic conditions

Sloan’s career becomes more legible when its relationships are separated by what they make possible. The table below is a synthesis of the documented connections, not a ranking of influence.

Relationship or setting / Its practical contribution

Relationship or setting: Troy Public Library; Michigan State; Oats
Its practical contribution: Access to reading, an economic vocabulary, and early experience making a publication.

Relationship or setting: Matt Thompson; Tim Carmody; Snarkmarket
Its practical contribution: Conversation, collaboration, public experiments, and a community in which work could circulate.

Relationship or setting: Howard Finberg; Jim Naughton; Poynter
Its practical contribution: Technical and editorial challenge, institutional access, and encouragement before literary success.

Relationship or setting: Joel Hyatt; Joanna Drake; Current TV
Its practical contribution: Entry into a forming media company and sustained experience of participatory production.

Relationship or setting: Sarah Burnes; Sean McDonald; FSG/MCD
Its practical contribution: Representation, editing, design, publication, and access to a wider book trade.

Relationship or setting: Kathryn Tomajan; growers and millers
Its practical contribution: Specialized production knowledge and the material relationships on which Fat Gold depends.

Relationship or setting: Jesse Solomon Clark
Its practical contribution: A musical collaborator able to transform exchanged and generated material into compositions.

Relationship or setting: Translators, booksellers, libraries, readers
Its practical contribution: New interpretations, new markets, discoverability, and continued life beyond the first publication.

Relationship or setting: Alexis Madrigal; KQED
Its practical contribution: A setting for sustained public inquiry into technology and its consequences.

The economic evidence supports an account of multiple revenue mechanisms: salaried media work early on; crowdfunded publication; trade books; commissioned writing; food production; and direct sales of printed objects. It does not establish their relative contribution to household income, current profitability, private savings, or the ownership of early technology-company equity.

This boundary matters because an attractive career can easily be mistaken for a reproducible financial formula. “Write novels, make olive oil, build small tools” leaves out the acquired audience, specialist partnerships, geographic access, reputation, distribution systems, and time required to learn.

The career is better understood as a sequence of capacities that made later moves less difficult. A completed small publication reduced uncertainty about making another. A readership reduced uncertainty about finding buyers. A trade publisher extended reach beyond that readership. A production business developed knowledge of fulfillment. Later manufacturing could draw on those accumulated capacities.

Those are plausible mechanisms, grounded in the sequence of projects, rather than audited causal measurements. They explain why the activities can reinforce one another without requiring the romantic claim that every interest contributes equally to a seamless whole.

Sloan’s 2022 discussion of discoverability is especially candid. He acknowledged that simply posting work on the open web had never been enough; publication with FSG taught him more about the commercial and cultural channels that bring work to people.[75]

Independence therefore rests on a selection of dependencies. The question is which ones preserve room to work, which ones provide capabilities worth their cost, and which ones can be replaced when their demands become incompatible with the work.

25. What kind of vocation this is—and where it remains vulnerable

The label “polymath” contributes little to understanding Sloan. It names the variety of outputs while leaving their organization unexplained. The practice is more specific: he repeatedly follows an imaginative possibility far enough into its production and circulation to discover what kind of work it actually requires.

That movement has several recurring features.

First, he learns by making bounded things. A finished story, a small application, a campaign, or a batch of printed objects produces information unavailable in anticipation. It exposes the gap between an appealing idea and an experience that works for someone else.

Second, he treats form as a material and social decision. A book, app, serial, cassette, and postcard establish different expectations about attention, ownership, response, and duration. Choosing among them changes the work itself.

Third, he uses explanation to create interest in other people’s competence. The novels and production essays frequently make specialized activity available to a non-specialist. At its best, this gives unfamiliar work dignity without draining it of strangeness.

Fourth, he keeps revising the scale at which success should be measured. Some projects need an international readership; others need four family members. A substantial literary audience and a tiny software audience can each be appropriate to the object in question.

These strengths bring corresponding vulnerabilities. The delight of explanation can leave insufficient room for character or conflict. Access to interesting networks can look more universal from inside them than it is. A maker’s appetite for control can understate collaborative labor. A limited edition can be a rewarding object while remaining economically inaccessible to many people. The pleasure of an experiment can obscure the question of whether it should become a continuing obligation.

The public record does not show a final solution to these tensions. It shows a person repeatedly changing the terms of his work in response to them: accepting literary institutions, learning from an expert partner in production, publishing accounts of technical disappointment, designing smaller social systems, and turning increasingly toward objects other people can use.

What made this career possible was a conjunction: public access to books; a university setting in which publishing could be tried; early professional institutions willing to support invention; a web culture that carried experiments between peers; an agent and editor able to recognize a book beyond its initial format; a readership willing to follow across forms; and collaborators with skills the author did not possess.

Sloan’s contribution is not a prediction about which medium wins. It is the sustained demonstration that a writer can take responsibility for more of the passage between an idea and another person’s life—while remaining answerable to the material, institutional, and economic conditions of that passage.

Sources and further reading

The notes distinguish first-person recollection, contemporary reporting, commercial documentation, and criticism. Product descriptions establish what their makers claim; they are not independent performance tests. For the novels, the strongest reading path is the books themselves, accompanied by the interviews and criticism below. The 2025–26 sources are particularly important because they prevent the career from being frozen at the release of Moonbound.

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