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E-Books on the E Train

By Maggie McGwin



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Sometimes I wonder why I care so much.

As I pull the latest of my library finds from my already too-full backpack on a crowded New York City subway car, I occasionally glance over to see the faces of other passengers softly glowing in the gentle lights of their Kindles and Nooks. Soft smiles sit on their faces as their eyes pass over the words on the thin, flat surfaces. I imagine them secretly smirking at me as I mop the sweat from my forehead and drop my bookmark for the third time, again losing my place. *No, I challenge myself, you are far more cultured and clearly have more profound respect for the written word. You sweat for these books! Think of how good they smell and how satisfying it is to run your fingers through the pages! You genuinely care more about literature and art than the robots with their digital personalities.*

But that's not really the truth, obviously. Who am I to say that I have a deeper appreciation for literary culture than the other commuters on my train? It is very possible that the person across the aisle could be reading *Paradise Lost* while I'm over here diving into *The Phantom Tollbooth* for the 27th time (an excellent book, by the way). So am I somehow the more cultured one? Hardly. But the acts of e-reading and reading are two different things, and they impact our culture and our personal lives in very distinct ways.

For me, and for the thousands (if not millions) more who [probably agree](#), reading is more than just a visual and mental activity. It's one that encompasses all of my senses, and to take away from those senses is to change the activity as I know it. Reading means feeling the texture of the pages. Are they rough or smooth? Thick or thin? What material is the paper made from? Is the binding fabric or leather? It means smelling the age of the book, the life it lived and the lives of others who touched its pages. Reading is holding the book in the palm of my hand and feeling the weight it adds to my own body. Will it leave a red mark on my leg if I rest it there long enough? If I fall asleep in the sun, what will the tan line on my arm look like? Will it hurt if I drop it on my face as I fall asleep at night? The smell of old pages reminds me of fireplaces, musty blankets, and classrooms. New ones make me think of fresh pens, warm printers, and clean silverware. Picking up a book and reading it stimulates me in a hundred different ways. But the blue-white glow of my computer and cell phone numb me from any emotion outside of what I can see on the screen in front of me. I become less of my individual self and more connected with the network I find in the digital world. It's amazing to be part of such a vast and connected web, but what am I losing in the process?

Being born in the early 90s allowed me to grow with the rise of technology. I saw my family move from having no internet access to dial-up to sluggish WiFi over nearly two decades.

Electronic gaming switched from floppy disks to CD-ROMs to streaming, and my first cell phone at 12 years old had squishy buttons and a removable colored faceplate. It was a tumultuous time to be a kid, and my peers and I learned to become adaptable and open-minded to our new normal. We became masters of losing attachment with personal items and routines, understanding that our phones will eventually break or be stolen and that tomorrow a new form of social media may release that shuts down Facebook forever. But through it all, our books remained. While so much of our modern technology betrays us in the cost it takes to own, repair, and maintain it, books persevere at about \$15 each and with the ability to withstand spills and drops consistently. What destroys a computer merely adds to the charm of a used paperback. And perhaps the ability of print books to age with raw grace and survive all matter of wear and weather reminds us that we can do the same. What doesn't kill us makes us stronger, after all. But what kills a computer is just our morning cup of coffee.

So what is it that makes e-books so appealing to an audience in the first place? For one thing, they certainly allow readers to condense an extensive library into a handheld device. It's an attraction similar to that of the first iPods. The ability to switch from artist to artist, song to song, without committing to anything changed the way we listen to music. And, to some extent, it changed the way we read books. But as the activity of reading changes, does it take away benefits offered in physical, print books? A study at the [University of Arizona](#) showed that most participants, ranging in age from baby boomers to millennials, feel more emotionally connected to physical books and the nostalgia and sense of personality they evoke in readers. Certain books remind us of our favorite bedtime stories, and we can express our interests and style in the way we organize our bookshelves in our apartments. Print books are an extension of us as much as the clothes we wear. Participants of the study also claimed to feel less control over digital books

and believe they aren't owning them so much as renting them. The experience of reading an e-book is an activity perhaps as distant and detached as scrolling through your Facebook feed. Because you can't actually touch and feel the pages, it's like they don't exist. E-books are ideas rather than physical objects and reading them is a concept more than an activity.

Many childhood memories of mine involve books and the effects they had on me. And in many ways, it wasn't so much the stories that impacted me as the physical objects they were. One day, as I was exploring the old storage room in my childhood farmhouse home, I came across books with strange holes gaping through the pages. I took them downstairs to show my parents and squealed in shock as we looked deep enough in one to find a small insect. *Look at that, Mugs!* my dad exclaimed, *a real bookworm, just like you.* I, of course, had heard of the phrase "bookworm." Until that moment, though, I had no idea such an insect existed in nature. To be a worm that feeds off of books sounds like a pretty great life to me.



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Growing up on a dairy farm, miles away from other kids my age, I learned to make a lot of my own fun. To me, that often meant packing up about 10 different books, a stash of granola bars, and a water bottle into a backpack and going “on an outing.” My destinations took different forms. Sometimes I’d climb up into the treehouse, sometimes I’d walk down the river to the clearing in the locust trees, and sometimes I’d bike up the path through the cornfield to the old dump. My books were always there, though. They were my best friends before I even knew what friends were. They were there before my cell phone, my computer, my family’s barely functioning dial-up internet. They never abandoned me. How could I abandon them for a cold, hard, metal rectangle?



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I was so incredibly engrossed with reading that I did it whenever I possibly could. My parents had to make a new rule that I was not allowed to eat at the dinner table. But I still somehow read my books in the shower, in the car, during lunch and recess, and by the light of my dim nightlight. I dropped so many books in the bathtub that the waterlogged pages stopped

fitting in my bookshelves. I collected bookmarks like souvenirs and had my favorites that were saved for the stories I'd reread over and over again. On Valentine's Day when I was nine years old, my dad gifted me with the entire *Lord of the Rings* trilogy in a single volume. It came with a Bilbo Baggins bookmark and a copy of the One Ring itself. The book was bigger than my head, and I read that entire thing in less than six months with the One Ring never leaving my finger until the gold paint rubbed off and the metal turned my skin green.

I used to spend nearly every day after school at the public library. Sometimes it would be as I waited for my evening sports practices or rehearsals to begin, while other times I'd need to hang out there until my parents could pick me up. I put so many books on hold that I still have my library barcode number memorized. I'd check out armfuls of books at a time only to return them in a week because I read so fast. I was about 12 when I discovered Stephen King. I'm not sure how I stumbled upon the horror section, but I'm sure it had something to do with my stewing pre-teen angst. I nearly shrieked when I found the thick hard-cover copy of *IT*. The cover of the book made me sick with terror. It showed scaly, green, long-nailed fingers reaching out of a sewer grate. I could barely touch the book for fear of what those nails might feel like. I gingerly picked it up by the edges, brought it to the front desk, and checked it out. The next month or so it took to read the over 1,000 pages was full of nightmares and eye-opening looks into the mind of an author who remains to this day one of my absolute favorites. I was afraid to take showers and run water in sinks. Balloons spooked me, not to mention clowns and sewer grates. I was on edge at all times. I loved it. I always knew books could make me smile, laugh, and cry. I never knew they could also make me fear. When I returned that copy of *IT* to the library, I still refused to let my fingers brush across the top of the monster ones on the cover. The physical activity of touching, feeling, reading that specific book changed me. It changed my life.

Both of my parents fostered and grew my love for reading, as did my aunt, Pauli. Days at her house were some of the happiest of my childhood, and she always had new recommendations for books, movies, and music. One day, when I was maybe 16, she handed me *Everything Is Illuminated* by Jonathan Safran Foer. It is now one of my top five favorite novels, and I currently own four different copies in different colors. The bindings on the bookshelf in my tiny bedroom are often the first things I see when I wake up in the morning and the last when I close my eyes at night. They bring me joy and comfort simply in the fact that they are present in the same space as myself. The cell phone resting on my bedside table can't compete with that emotional connection.

For many people, myself included, books are some of the very first objects we interact with as children. Books teach us how to count, feel, share, and (of course) read. For some, books grow to become lifelong friends and companions, moving apartments with us across cities and countries because we can't bear to leave them behind. And reading them is an activity worth getting excited about. I look forward to turning the next page, smelling an old-but-new-to-me binding, coming across a note a previous owner wrote in a margin. Each dog-eared page exposes a new chapter of the history of an object that, though inanimate in essence, contains so much life. This can't be said for a \$300 Kindle or the new MacBook Pro that cost me nearly a month's paycheck. Despite the steep expense we pay to own electronic devices, we know they will die eventually. We buy products we know will fail, yet they define our existence and are practically mandatory to survival in a modern, Western lifestyle. Books, however, can last generations. We cherish their longevity and timelessness,

Just as vinyl collections have been increasing in popularity over the years, print books are making a comeback. Reports show that e-reader sales are drastically dropping as independent

bookstores are seeing increases in revenue. In 2017, digital book sales fell [3.9 percent](#) while bookstore sales increased by [5 percent](#). Some people believe that the very reasons digital books became popular in the first place may be why print books are [gaining popularity again](#). The fear of losing the beloved past time of browsing for books and sipping coffee in the stacks is causing a resurgence of support to indie booksellers and lowering devotion to the convenience of e-books. It's an ironic reaction that I fully support.

I was wandering around Prospect Heights in Brooklyn on a warm September day in 2017 when I came across [Unnameable Books](#), a small, slightly unorganized new and used book store. I unearthed a copy of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* and started flipping through. There was a scribbled love note on the first page, written to Lydian from Will. On the next was a playlist Will made to accompany the book. Recognizing several of the songs, I bought the book and went home to read and listen. Will was right. The music went with the story perfectly. And for a little while, that playlist felt like a love letter to me instead.

So yes, sometimes I wonder why I care so much about the great feud between e-books and print books. Reading a digital book is better than reading nothing, after all. But no electronic device has ever connected so gently and intimately with me as the used book with the scribbled love note on its inside cover. No software application has ever made me want to think just a little bit deeper of the lives of all those who've experienced it before me. When I hold a printed book in my hands, I feel like I am part of my own story, a part of something so much bigger than myself. No Instagram post would ever make me feel so significant. And no e-book could ever bring me so much life.

Article Note

This article was an opportunity to share my passion for print books while also touching on the potentially problematic side-effects of living in a digitally dependent world. I was inspired in part by Charles Kostelnick's article on supra-textual design and my own research for our first paper. Heavy in narrative, my article was also influenced by our lectures on storytelling and the use of *pathos* to persuade an audience with personal accounts and shared experiences. My article is directed towards fellow millennials, but anyone who has read both print and digital books would likely relate to the content in some way. This article would fit well with the work published on sites like Medium, Refinery 29, and Aeon.