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Don't Burn Your Books—Print Is Here to Stay

The e-book had its moment, but sales are slowing. Readers still want to turn those crisp, bound pages

By NICHOLAS CARR

Lovers of ink and paper, take heart. Reports of the death of the printed book may be exaggerated.

A 2012 survey revealed that just 16% of Americans have actually purchased an e-book.

Ever since Amazon introduced its popular Kindle e-reader five years ago, pundits have assumed that the future of book publishing is digital. Opinions about the speed of the shift from page to screen have varied. But the consensus has been that digitization, having had its way with music and photographs and maps, would in due course have its way with books as well. By 2015, one media maven predicted a few years back, traditional books would be gone.

Half a decade into the e-book revolution, though, the prognosis for traditional books is suddenly looking brighter. Hardcover books are displaying surprising resiliency. The growth in e-book sales is slowing markedly. And purchases of e-readers are actually shrinking, as consumers opt instead for multipurpose tablets. It may be that e-books, rather than replacing printed books, will ultimately serve a role more like that of audio books—a complement to traditional reading, not a substitute.

How attached are Americans to old-fashioned books? Just look at the results of a Pew Research Center survey released last month. The report showed that the percentage of adults who have read an e-book rose modestly over the past year, from 16% to 23%. But it also revealed that fully 89% of regular book readers said that they had read at least one printed book during the preceding 12 months. Only 30% reported reading even a single e-book in the past year.

What's more, the Association of American Publishers reported that the annual growth rate for e-book sales fell abruptly during 2012, to about 34%. That's still a healthy clip, but it is a sharp decline from the triple-digit growth rates of the preceding four years.

The initial e-book explosion is starting to look like an aberration. The technology's early adopters, a small but enthusiastic bunch, made the move to e-books quickly and in a concentrated period. Further converts will be harder to come by. A 2012 survey by Bowker Market Research revealed that just 16% of Americans have actually purchased an e-book and that a whopping 59% say they have "no interest" in buying one.

Meanwhile, the shift from e-readers to tablets may also be dampening e-book purchases. Sales of e-readers plunged 36% in 2012, according to estimates from IHS iSuppli, while tablet sales exploded. When forced to compete with the easy pleasures of games, videos and Facebook on devices like the iPad and the Kindle Fire, e-books lose a lot of their allure. The fact that an e-book can't be sold or given away after it's read also reduces the perceived value of the product.

Beyond the practical reasons for the decline in e-book growth, something deeper may be going on. We may have misjudged the nature of the electronic book.

From the start, e-book purchases have skewed disproportionately toward fiction, with novels representing close to two-thirds of sales. Digital best-seller lists are dominated in particular by genre novels, like thrillers and romances. Screen reading seems particularly well-suited to the kind of light entertainments that have traditionally been sold in supermarkets and airports as mass-market paperbacks.

These are, by design, the most disposable of books. We read them quickly and have no desire to hang onto them after we've turned the last page. We may even be a little embarrassed to be seen reading them, which makes anonymous digital versions all the more appealing. The "Fifty Shades of Grey" phenomenon probably wouldn't have happened if e-books didn't exist.

Readers of weightier fare, including literary fiction and narrative nonfiction, have been less inclined to go digital. They seem to prefer the heft and durability, the tactile pleasures, of what we still call "real books"—the kind you can set on a shelf.

E-books, in other words, may turn out to be just another format—an even lighter-weight, more disposable paperback. That would fit with the discovery that once people start buying digital books, they don't necessarily stop buying printed ones. In fact, according to Pew, nearly 90% of e-book readers continue to read physical volumes. The two forms seem to serve different purposes.

Having survived 500 years of technological upheaval, Gutenberg's invention may withstand the digital onslaught as well. There's something about a crisply printed, tightly bound book that we don't seem eager to let go of.

—Mr. Carr is the author of *"The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains."*

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