ALSO BY LEAH PRICE

How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain

Unpacking My Library: Writers and Their Books

The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel:
From Richardson to George Eliot

WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT BOOKS

The History and Future of Reading

LEAH PRICE

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INTRODUCTION

When the first Waldenbooks opened in my hometown in the 1970s, its self-help bestsellers urged my parents to schedule date nights. A quarter century later, my generation, too, began to feel guilty about letting chores crowd out deep relationships. But what we lusted for wasn't a person. Our fantasy was to reconnect with books.

That love felt star-crossed. One Sunday morning in 1992, the *New York Times* sprawled across my doormat predicted "The End of Books." Could print, asked the novelist Robert Coover, survive the age of "video transmissions, cellular phones, fax machines, computer networks"? Coover wondered, but other essayists judged. In 1994, the window display of an independent bookshop that would be evicted a few months later to make way for a Starbucks led me to a hardcover called *The Gutenberg Elegies*. In its pages, ex-bookseller Sven Birkerts mourned the "focused, sequential, text-centered engagement" that he worried was being jostled aside by "the restless, grazing behavior of clicking and scrolling."[1]

Soon, newfangled blogs had me mousing through to surveys proving that even if book-length works continued to be read, it wouldn't be by men, or in the bathtub, or off the beach. In 2004, the National Endowment for the Arts released a survey of American reading habits—or rather, the lack thereof. The resulting report, *Reading at Risk*, identified a 14 percent decline in literary reading since 1992, with rates especially low for men and young adults. In 2007, a follow-up report appeared under the title *To Read or Not to Read*. The practice of engaging with texts, the riff on Hamlet suggested, was at existential risk. Once again Americans seemed to be reading less and reading less well, with 19 percent of seventeen-year-olds reporting that they "never or hardly ever" read. Meanwhile, 28 percent of teenagers who *did* read reported combining the activity with the simultaneous use of other media.[2]

As magazines migrated from doormats to laptops, articles vied to diagnose the disappearance of a way of life that Americans had once read. Just as often as the death of print journalism, though, journalists lamented the decline of printed books. When Nicholas Carr asked in a 2008 *Atlantic* article "Is Google Making Us Stupid?," the evidence for answering in the affirmative was the fate of long-form reading. "Immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article used to be easy," Carr confessed, but in the digital era he found himself "getting fidgety," "dragging my wayward brain back to the text."[3] What was lost wasn't just the information that he was no longer absorbing, but the taste for being absorbed.

My first smartphone strafed my pocket with predictions that even if reading survived, eyes would glaze over before the 141st character. Essays of every conceivable length braced us to

mourn the habits of mind or even soul that books had once occasioned: the capacity to follow a demanding idea from start to finish, to look beyond the day's news, to be alone. As our shelves emptied out, we feared losing our selves.

* * *

Here's what happened instead. Sales of printed books rebounded in the decade that followed—rising as steadily as electronic book sales leveled off.[4] In the United States, 2011 was the first year in which more ebooks were sold than hardcovers; by 2016, though, hardbacks were outstripping ebooks once again.[5] And since most of the books we read weren't bought yesterday, it may be even more telling that in that same year, twice as many Americans read glued or sewn wood pulp than read an electronic book.[6] As I upload this manuscript late in 2018, new industry reports inform me that print sales have increased in the United States for each of the past four years.[7] Last year, sales revenue from hardbacks and paperbacks outstripped revenue from ebooks by more than $300 million.[8] Also late in 2018, the Association of American Publishers reported revenue from hardcover sales up around 3.5 percent, with revenue from digital books down nearly as much.[9] And in December 2018 as well, gift-givers found best-selling titles ranging from a Richard Powers novel to a Frederick Douglass biography on back order. One culprit turned out to be that most old-fashioned of crises: a paper shortage.[10]

It's true that bookstore sales and revenues have declined in the past decade. But the fact that the dip began right after the 2008 recession suggests that the culprit is financial, not technological.[11] And it's true that a third of Americans in their late teens and twenties reported reading an ebook in 2017, twice the rate of their counterparts over sixty-five.[12] But the youngest Americans believe, at least, that printed books won't die off when their grandparents do. While in 2012, 60 percent of six- to seventeen-year-olds surveyed had predicted they would always prefer print to ebooks, by 2016, that number had climbed a modest but significant 5 percent.[13] Old media isn't just the province of the old.

More fundamentally, the pages that follow will try to persuade you that the digital-age printed book isn't really an old medium at all. Rather, it's a format being reinvented by booklovers before our eyes. In that sense, our own era continues, rather than breaks with, a tradition of innovation that has seen new formats emerge over and over again for half a millennium.

Like book owning, book borrowing doesn't just appeal to my middle-aged peers. In 2016, the Pew Trust found that adults under thirty-five were likelier than their elders to use a library.[14] One explanation is that parents of young children remain the most frequent visitors, but another is that libraries themselves were changing. Long providers of tax advice and public bathrooms, imaginative librarians now lent out interview suits and fondue sets.[15] As journalist Susan Orlean points out, libraries found themselves stretched in ever more directions to provide "voter registration and literacy programs and story times and speaker series and homeless outreach and business services and computer access and movie rentals and ebook loans and a nice gift shop. Also, books."[16] Librarians lobbied for public access to research findings; they taught patrons to assess the legitimacy of new sources; they offered floor space to patrons unhoused by hurricanes.[17]

Meanwhile, outside of the buildings officially designated for buying or borrowing them, books began to be handed out by volunteers on subway platforms, donated to barbershops in neighborhoods devoid of bookstores, and read aloud (in programs called Paws to Read or Tails of Joy) in order to calm cats and dogs cooped up in shelters. No longer just a tool to ferry information from one brain to another, reading began to look like a panacea.

Fear seemed to have goaded booklovers into action. And alongside the urge to rescue reading came the itch to understand it. College courses on media history mushroomed. National health institutes funded randomized trials to test whether reading raises serotonin levels, lowers body-mass indexes, or combats insomnia and Alzheimer's.[18]

As scientific journals migrated online, the articles in them variously compared print reading with screen reading, book reading with magazine reading, fiction reading with nonfiction reading, literature reading with the reading of whatever genres they identified as antonyms to the literary. Some credited the curative power of reading to its content (books whose characters ate healthfully seemed to curb their readers' snacking), but others focused instead on its medium (print vs. online), its scale (immersive prose vs. snippeted listicles), or its life expectancy (durable books as opposed to ephemeral articles).

Thus reading garnered testimonials from an unlikely quarter: science.[19] Or more precisely, *Science*. In 2013, that journal published a study concluding that reading about fictional characters correlates with more sophisticated theory of mind. More specifically, reading about characters in formally ambitious "literary" fiction did—for the authors discovered experimental subjects to be better at identifying the emotions expressed on faces or at understanding others' false beliefs when they had just read prizewinning short stories than when they had just read less esthetically ambitious popular fiction.[20] This latest version of the centuries-old attempt to distinguish trashy escapism from intellectually challenging and therefore morally respectable fiction was widely reported by journalists with their own investment in reading.

Neuroscientists drilled down, wedging readers inside fMRI scanners to measure novels' effects on "brain function and structure."[21] Social scientists scaled up: psychologist Steven Pinker's 2011 book *The Better Angels of Our Nature* correlated a centuries-long decline in violence with an increase in fiction reading. Some studies measured effects on health; others on wealth; yet others on civic virtue. Back in 2004, data aggregated by the National Endowment for the Humanities suggested that Americans who read outside of work and school were likeliest to vote and volunteer. Four years later, a meta-analysis connected the frequency with which Canadians read books to the rate at which they donated and helped their neighbors.[22] Also in 2008, a British study correlated pleasure reading inversely with divorce.[23] Madame Bovary would have been surprised.

As a literature lover, I, too, clutched at the kind of self once forged—unpredictably, unreliably, but also unstoppably—in encounters with a page. Switching my phone back on every time I exited a climate-controlled reading room, I chafed at the alerts and tweets from which Special Collections had briefly cocooned me. (Then again, I felt the same way on exiting jury duty.)

As a scholar, though, I began to wonder whether the past against whose glories I measured my frazzled present were a figment of my imagination. I'm not just a literature lover, but also an English professor. When I entered graduate school at the end of the last century, my life was changed by learning from librarians how to look at books as objects—as hunks of paper, ink, and glue whose look and feel and smell hold clues about the now-dead hands through which they passed before reaching mine. And over the course of the two decades that I've spent teaching Harvard undergraduates the field known as book history, I became less and less sure that books had ever commanded anyone's undivided attention.

Poetry collections whose crisp corners hinted that they'd never escaped the coffee table; romance novels crumpled from being hidden in an embarrassed teenager's pocket, with well-fingered pages of seduction scenes interrupting landscape description whose pages retained like-new crispness; political polemics stained with beer from being read aloud at the pub to listeners too poor to buy their own copy, too illiterate to read to themselves, or too encumbered with a card game to hold their own book—each genre testified that serious, silent, solitary cover-to-cover reading has never been more than one of many uses to which print had been put.

It's true enough that print experienced a golden age between the rise of mass audiences in the eighteenth century to the Cold War–era triumph of the paperback, by way of public school systems, cheap wood-pulp paper, browsable bookstores, and taxpayer-funded libraries. Parts of this story, though, began to strike me as unhelpful or even untrue. One is what I'll call the myth of exceptionalism—that is, twenty-first-century readers' sense of living through an unprecedented change. The more I tried to figure out how much time different societies had actually carved out for reading, the more the data confirmed that successive audiovisual media did indeed chip away at the dead time once filled by books. I was surprised, though, to find that the strongest proof of print's vulnerability to competition wasn't the smartphone. The best-documented such competitor turned out to be TV, whose arrival in the Netherlands in the 1950s, for instance, coincided with a dramatic and elegantly charted drop in rates of pleasure reading.[24] The problem, I began to think, didn't lie in our devices so much as in our schedules. When we mourn the book, we're really mourning the death of those in-between moments (waiting in line, riding a bus) that nineteenth-century changes in lighting and transportation made hospitable to light reading, and that twenty-first-century communications infrastructures made available to paid labor.

Equally unhelpful is the myth of the ideal reader. Whether they blame our vices on the failure to read or blame the failure to read on our vices, digital-age defenders of print equate reading with virtue. Unfortunately for this hypothesis, the golden age of print was hardly a golden age for the habits of mind that digital natives trust the book to induce. Print, Chapter 2 will try to persuade you, has inspired efficient multitasking more often than rapt attention. And while some readers may have lost themselves in a book until their surroundings faded around them and they forgot all sense of time, we'll see in Chapter 3 how consistently bedtime stories have paced circadian rhythms

and morning papers have numbed commutes. The printed books now being deployed to cure mental and physical ills spent much of their long life, as Chapter 4 details, under suspicion of sickening and maddening their readers.

Finally, the myth of the self-made reader—of an unmediated communion between a reader's mind and an author's—erases all the third parties who sell books, lend books, catalog books, give or withhold them. Searching for alternatives to this individualist account of reading, I found my way to the activists whom we'll encounter in the final chapter. Unlike essayists who champion reading as training for solitary self-sufficiency, these community organizers treat books—whether printed or electronic—as a means to connect the human beings who exchange them.

Each of these myths credits long-form print with producing a certain kind of individual. A longer view, though, makes books' effects look less predictable, beginning with the simple question of whether they get read at all. Well before competition from social media, only a tiny minority of the volumes that rolled off the presses ever found a reader—let alone sparked the focus that smartphone-fingering fidgeters dream of recapturing. Instead of plodding from page 1 to The End, the early readers whose traces I hunted down in libraries turned out to have hopscotched around chapters. Instead of giving novels their undivided attention, aristocrats had their hair curled while listening to a servant read aloud. Instead of respecting the anthology's boundaries, poetry lovers scissored pages apart to paste scraps of one collection into the margins of another.

In short, printed books gave birth to many of the capacities—and dangers—for which digital devices are now being faulted. Long before playlists, amateurs reshuffled and recombined snippets into new collections. Long before anyone spoke of "spreadable media," texts survived in epigraphs for other texts. Long before anyone fretted about Amazon displacing bookstores, bookshops sold fish while clothing peddlers backpacked pamphlets door to door. Authors debated in print, as strenuously as today's content providers do online, whether the written word should be rented or sold, licensed or owned, linked in or locked down.

What's driving digital-age debates about print, I began to realize, may be as much a mood as a belief. That mood is fear. We may be seeking refuge from technological and commercial upheavals, from the people and places that crowd in on us, or from our own sickness and weakness. The problem is that treating the book as a bunker may shortchange its potential to engage with the world—not just with the world represented by its words, but with the world of other human beings who made or transmitted the object itself. Yes, the book can be a shell (essayist Alberto Manguel reminisces that "my library was my tortoise shell") but it can also be an antenna or a spear.[25] Seeing books thrust into the service of comfort and sanity and good taste, I started wanting to recover the book's power to upset and unsettle and even anger readers.

Digital-age essayists can idealize books only by dint of imagining that reading has always meant curling up alone with a novel purchased for hard cash, read cover to paperback cover. The book historians whom we'll meet in the next chapter, though, insist that the characteristics we associate with reading now haven't been around forever, let alone been bundled into a single package. In ancient Rome, texts circulated as papyrus scrolls; even after early Christians adopted the gathered pieces of paper called the codex, their raw material was animal skin, not paper. The movable type invented in the fifteenth century didn't enable mass production until the substitution of wood pulp for old clothes drove down papermaking costs four hundred years later. It's even more recently that retail sales nudged out books printed at the author's expense, bankrolled in advance by subscribers whose names appeared at the front of the book, or subsidized by a dedicatee. Ebooks form only the latest of these many chapters.

Nor is competition among media anything new, for even at its height, print never clawed out more than a niche in a crowded landscape. Right up to 1789, the most influential political newspapers in Europe were hand-copied by professional scribes. As a more flexible, more discreet, more distributed technology than print, handwriting allowed radical writers and publishers to both avoid censors and create a loyal coterie audience that forged collective identities through the act of forwarding or exchanging materials.

Those activities may sound uncannily like blogging or tweeting. In fact, a missing link connects the handmade with the digital. The oldest distribution technology (hand copying) and the newest (the internet) flank mid-twentieth-century media like the mimeograph, the hectograph, and the microfilm, now too old to be sexy but too new to be quaint.[26] During the Cold War, in the Eastern bloc and parts of Southern Africa, photocopiers shaped the circulation of news, providing a middle ground between handwritten documents (nimble, private, and participatory, good at cementing communities of like-minded individuals but inefficient for reaching large anonymous audiences) and the printing press (high start-up capital but low running costs, facilitating standardization but discouraging interaction, easy to scale up but also to regulate).

From its beginnings, as each of these episodes suggests, print changed in step with the media that surrounded it. And even at any given historical moment, printed books took different forms and prompted different behaviors. Only by ignoring both kinds of variation can we make a monolithic printed past into a stick with which to beat our digital present. The more long-dead readers I encountered on the pages of the books that they'd once borrowed or owned or read or handled, the more differences within the world of printed books seemed to outstrip differences between print and digital.

The more reading changed before my eyes, the more precedents I recognized in earlier moments of media history that had seemed just as dramatic in their own time. The more I studied book history, in contrast, the harder-pressed I was to find any precedent for the content of digital-age beliefs *about* print. For while debates about its effects were very old, the emotional tone of those debates had shifted, within not much more than a generation, from fear to hope.

Throughout the first few centuries of its existence, experts had already assumed print to be life changing—but with the exception of a few sacred texts, that change was most often thought to be one for the worse. Ministers warned against the distractibility engendered by squandering time and eyesight over a novel. Doctors diagnosed newspaper addicts, sickened not just by the ideas transmitted but by the sheer experience

of wallowing in a wood-pulp world. The literate classes themselves felt embarrassed about what they read, or meant to read, or wished they hadn't wasted a night devouring.

In fact, once the mechanization of papermaking and the spread of state-supported schools led to near-universal literacy in the West a few centuries after Gutenberg, reading provoked new anxieties. Best-selling lists of what to read were joined by bestsellers advising on how to read, and how not to. Trawling through these early how-to books, the French historian Roger Chartier realized that as the mere fact of being able to read came to be taken for granted, and as new technologies and changing laws multiplied the number of books owned by the average household, the distinction between literate and illiterate people gave way to finer distinctions within the reading public. To read was no longer enough. Nor was the trick even to read the right books. Rather, you now had to read in the right place, at the right pace, at the right time of day.

Then, as now, policy makers debated demographics: who's expected, required, or forbidden to read. They debated economics: Should print be sold or rented, lent or gifted, repaired or trashed? They argued even more vehemently about what would eventually come to be called ergonomics: the proper positioning of the hands that held books and the laps on which they lay. The history of reading is also a history of worrying, and those worries rule out any clean contrast between bookish virtue and digital vice.

Only toward the end of the last century, as these anxieties about the guilty pleasures brokered by print gave way to diatribes against the addictiveness of ubiquitous, always-on electronic information, did books change from the problem to the solution. Where gentlemen had once fretted about the shilling shockers devoured by their wives, children, or servants, now bloggers began to confess, with rueful self-mockery, to their own inability to finish a book. And just as the printed codex caught on only once it became cheap and portable enough to be consumed with an efficiently divided attention (read aloud at the hairdresser's in the eighteenth century, skimmed on a Victorian train), so too did past anxieties about paper anticipate present concerns about screens.

Hand-copied, recited, gifted, exchanged, printed books were the first social media.[27] They started conversations; they started fights; and they connected each reader to others. The American and British librarians, booksellers, and activists to whom this book gives the last word are once again enlisting printed books to forge community. Instead of defending the page from the screen, though, they repurpose digital tools to circulate printed books. Proofreading and uploading classic texts, logging the location of book giveaways, posting smartphone snapshots of their bedside book piles, using social media to publicize collective reading aloud, these booklovers don't confine their efforts to texts that happen to be about community. Rather, their ambition is to bind readers together by the act of distributing books, or even just exchanging information about books.

One constant in the history of books is their power to take new forms, and to prompt new ways of reading as a result. Encountering those printed objects in all their variety may help us to worry less about the difference between print books and electronic books, but also to understand what's old and what's new about those worries. For each of the book's reinventions has prompted mixed, and strong, feelings. As cheap and portable

print sold everywhere and read anytime replaced monumental volumes tethered to particular occasions, a new kind of object became a proxy for a new kind of self. That self could forge bonds with a long-dead author's mind, could make the book a stimulant or a sedative, a shield or a goad, a refuge or an arena. Show me how you want to read, and I'll show you who you want to be.

Chapter 1

READING OVER SHOULDERS

One summer day in 2012, I trundled myself, a laptop, a phone, and a duffelful of paperbacks onto a southbound train. I—we—were heading from Cambridge, Massachusetts, where I taught English literature, to New York, where I was hoping to examine one of the world's earliest vegetarian cookbooks. I snagged a seat in the Quiet Car in order to plunge into a novel, but the quiet proved short-lived. A few miles outside Providence, a few chapters into *Middlemarch*, Mr. Casaubon's cringe-making marriage proposal was interrupted by a loud command to "enjoy our library atmosphere."

In a year when real librarians were lugging microfiche readers to the curb and selling off card catalogs to conceptual artists, "library atmosphere" was a moving target. Amtrak's Northeast Corridor line opened its first Quiet Car in 2004, around the time when 3G broadband first enabled video streaming. This was also the year in which my own university began to debate the logistics of wheeling an ear-splitting coffee grinder up the ramp to its library coffee shop. Cast in the early twentieth