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own fingers encounter batter, butter, and some transparent stain whose composition I will myself not to identify—shortening? Saliva? The corner of one particularly unhinged page hints that the arrowroot pudding may have been finger-lickin' good.

If you're a cook, you may have used stains as a kind of improvised heat map, opening a recipe book first at the stuck-together pages that provide an unintentional vote of confidence in an often-made dish. Handling can remake a book as decisively as can words penciled in the margins. In both cases, readers refuse to remain silent consumers; the book becomes their story, remade in their image. When a woman-handled book betrays the confidences of long-dead readers, the find makes up for months of dead ends.

Yet the vast majority of data about reading today is no longer painstakingly hand gathered by human gleaners like me. Seeing analytics accumulate second by second in the grasp of businesses like Google and Amazon, a scholar who's spent years reading over long-dead shoulders in dusty libraries can feel like a pedestrian who sees a bus whiz along the road she's been trudging, splashing her with mud into the bargain.

Even for analytics-grubbing Silicon Valley, though, to know what people read—or even where, when, at what pace—isn't to know why. No matter how many keystrokes you track and blinks you time, others' reading remains as hard to peer into as others' hearts.

Chapter 2

THE REAL LIFE OF BOOKS

A RECENT *NEW YORK TIMES* article describes a Soho shop “that could be mistaken for an haute bachelor pad. . . . It's supposed to be organic, like a home. Clients roam around, they hang out.” In the digital age, the journalist gushes, the information that clients need can be accessed more cheaply online: the only way to sell the older technology is through personal recommendations and events that create a sense of community. You might be forgiven for assuming, as I did on first glance, that the product in question was books. No: it's analog watches.¹

The book isn't the only object whose old-fashioned version becomes more glamorous as electronic equivalents replace it day to day. If buying an analog Rolex gives the same thrill of stepping off the conveyor belt of history as does buying a hefty hardback, then perhaps the resilience of print is just one more instance of the uptick in “sales of instant-film cameras, paper notebooks, board games and Broadway tickets”² that has made

home brewing an antidote to Deliveroo and homeschooling the mirror image of TED Talks.

And yet, books are special—or at least have been treated as such, and are perhaps being treated as such more than ever. European laws continue to single out books: France's law against selling books below sticker price, for example, blocks supermarkets from competing with bookshops. The United States doesn't go that far, but our postal service does grant printed matter a special rate. And the judge who denied Kenneth Starr access to Kramerbooks' record of Monica Lewinsky's purchases believed that the books she'd gifted to President Clinton deserved greater privacy protection than did the matted poem she'd sent him on National Boss's Day or the sterling cigar holder that the *Starr Report* lists among the presents he gave her.³

Studying books can make it hard to venerate texts. I entered a doctoral program in comparative literature on the strength of teenage summers spent wishing that I could be a kinder Elizabeth Bennet or a more cheerful Jane Eyre. The first book history course I encountered, though, left me disappointed, dismayed, and finally depressed to learn that the publishing industry has never been propelled by great novels, poems, or plays. The 1,500 or so copies of *Pride and Prejudice* published in 1813 made no splash, but in the same year, poet laureate Robert Southey's biography of the scandalous navy hero Lord Nelson sold out twice, celebrity biographies being the closest thing to a sure bet in the most speculative of industries. Cookbooks fared even better.

Yet neither cookbooks nor biographies are what we talk about when we talk about The Book. For decades, the New York Public Library's wedding-ready lobby housed a case whose

shatterproof glass might also conjure up thoughts of taxidermy. To call the double-columned, thousand-plus-page folio that the case protects from any human reader a Gutenberg Bible is to say that it's one of only 48 that survive of the approximately 180 Latin Bibles printed in Johannes Gutenberg's Mainz shop in the middle of the 1450s. The NYPL's copy was the first of those 48 to immigrate to America. On the wall next to the case, a plaque explains that upon the book's 1847 arrival at the New York docks, US Customs officials were asked to doff their hats. Copyright and tariff laws governing which books can enter the country bear an uncanny resemblance to immigration laws.⁴ At the customs house, huddled masses of books can be quarantined or deported.⁵ But the trophy collected by James Lenox, the third-richest man in New York, was welcomed by paparazzi.

The first Gutenberg to enter the New World, but hardly the last—for between Lenox's time and ours, Americans have been their most avid buyers. Auctions like the one at which Lenox snagged the Bible for £500 laundered new (and New World) wealth into old examples of movable type. Thanks to tools that weren't available in 1847, though, scholars have begun to question the nature and significance of those examples.

First, Americans' confidence that movable type had brought them a kind of modernity lacking from oral- or handwriting-based civilizations turned out to be based on a false premise. In 2001, high-resolution imaging and computational analysis brought two scholars, the bibliographer Paul Needham and the physicist Blaise Agüera y Arcas, to the startling conclusion that the type used to make this Bible wasn't, technically speaking, movable at all. When examined closely, each instance of a given letter looks slightly different. That variation suggests that sand

rather than metal may have been the medium in which Gutenberg first cast type—which means in turn that the letters would have been too soft to be reused for multiple books. Metal was in fact first used a continent away: the oldest surviving book printed with metal movable type was written in Chinese by a Buddhist monk in Korea, where it was printed in 1377.⁶ Gutenberg's monumental Bible, in contrast, may have pointed back to manuscript as much as forward to movable type.

More fundamentally, scholars have begun to question whether "print" means "great books." The earliest surviving specimen of printing in the West whose publication date we know for sure doesn't come from a grand Bible like the one in the NYPL lobby. It takes the form of one of the documents that Gutenberg and his partners churned out more frenetically than any book: papal indulgences.

In Manchester, a different rare-books library holds a sheet of vellum whose dimensions could lead you to mistake it, from a distance, for an 8 ½-by-11 photocopy. Its printed blanks are filled in with a handwritten inscription indicating the date on which it was sold—October 22, 1454—and the name of the woman who bought it, Margarethe Kremer. Indulgences raised money for timely causes by absolving purchasers like Kremer from their sins. (Her payment went to the defense of Cyprus against the Turks.) With their blank spaces meant to be filled in by sinful purchasers, they were the first form letters.

Indulgences aren't just one of the earliest productions of Gutenberg's press. They're also one of the most common. Besides Margarethe Kremer's, forty-nine copies of the same indulgence from 1454–1455 survive.⁷ This may not sound like much, but it's

double the number of Gutenberg Bibles printed during that time that have made it into the twenty-first century complete.

You might expect just the opposite. Physically, bound books are sturdier than loose leaves. And culturally, a large, expensive sacred volume (Gutenberg's Bibles weighed in at over a thousand pages and cost around a year of a master craftsman's salary) was likelier to be treasured and protected than a bureaucratic form.⁸ Why, then, would twenty-first century libraries own more indulgences than Bibles?

The likeliest explanation is that indulgences were produced in very large numbers. A mass-produced object can survive despite a low preservation rate. This would become one of the advantages of printed books over manuscripts, which had been treasured precisely because they were rare and expensive. As printed books were to manuscript books, so Gutenberg's indulgences were to his Bibles. James Lenox bought immortality in the form of a marble library, but the case of the otherwise anonymous Margarethe Kremer shows that far flimsier purchases could bestow immortality too. Indulgences survive by accident: many copies whose blanks were not filled in have been preserved as binders' waste, recycled as raw material for the spines of later volumes.

Printed sheets sometimes preceded printed books. In fact, if you look closely at the Bibles that Gutenberg produced, they seem to ape the indulgences rolling off the same presses, even—by the time that type had become truly movable—recognizably reusing the same letters.⁹ The blanks that his Bibles left for red letters and hand-decorated initial capitals may have been modeled on the fill-in-the-blank format of indulgences whose

printed boilerplate was made to be completed by writing in the purchaser's name.¹⁰

In the seventeenth century, far from rendering manuscript obsolete, the easy availability of printing made handwriting more important than ever before, as printed forms (the descendants of those same indulgences) made it all the more crucial for middle-class people to know how to fill in the blanks.¹¹ Another result is that early printers saw books as a headache, indulgences as a godsend. Each indulgence was a single sheet on a single side, so there was no fiddling with the order of pages, and print runs were in the hundreds of thousands, so the start-up costs of setting type were quickly amortized. Furthermore, the fact that the church that commissioned them also bought the final product cut out the pesky distribution logistics required to sell books—not to mention the cut taken on book sales by carters, wholesalers, retailers, and everyone involved in supplying credit.¹²

Those indulgences remind us that from the very beginning, printing wasn't only or even primarily a tool for producing sacred texts or timeless literature. Just as not all books take the form of print (whether that's because they're gorgeously illuminated manuscripts or ruled Mead copybooks), conversely, not all print takes the form of books. In 1907, as bibliographer Simon Eliot points out, industry estimates put books at only 14 percent of the total value of print production in Britain. Printed literature formed an even smaller fraction, since the 14 percent included handwritten notebooks and account books. Measured by sheer number of pages that rolled off the press, there's never been a time when book-length volumes kept pace with "jobbing printing"—that is, single sheets paid in advance.

More than two centuries later, most printed paper is made to be thrown away. When David Mikics posits that "literature, music and art express; computers, by contrast, lead you in a step-by-step way," he might as well take Ikea assembly leaflets to prove that paper leads in a step-by-step way.¹³ Ask someone to visualize a reader, and they're likeliest to picture a pair of hands holding a book. If you take durable, long-form texts as the paradigmatic printed matter, then much of what you read on-screen will indeed seem to fall short of that benchmark. Compare Facebook posts to Gutenberg's Bible, and civilization seems to be going down the drain. But compare tweets to indulgences, and it's much of a muchness.

Printers spent the centuries following Gutenberg diversifying into more secular genres: broadsides, handbills, tickets, bureaucratic forms, even food labels and betting slips. Examining the output of eighteenth-century America's most famous printer—Benjamin Franklin—James Green and Peter Stallybrass find auction announcements, handbills advertising rewards for runaway slaves, newspapers crammed with classified ads, and above all blank forms: lottery tickets, bills of lading, legal documents ("indentures" got their name from being torn jaggedly in half), and account books like the ones in which he himself recorded these transactions. According to an advertisement in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Ben Franklin's shop offered,

Bills of Lading bound and unbound, Common Blank Bonds for Money, Bonds with Judgment, Counterbonds, Arbitration Bonds with Umpirage, Bail Bonds, Counterbonds to save Bail harmless, Bills of Sale, Powers of Attorney, Writs, Summons, Apprentices Indentures, Servants Indentures, Penal Bills,

Promissory Notes, &c all the Blanks in the most authentick Forms, and correctly printed.

Printers in the American colonies depended even more than their British counterparts on jobbing printing. The reason was that luxury items, among which books counted, were cheaper to import than to produce for a limited local audience. As a result, Franklin also printed labels for medicine bottles, wrapping for soap, and “500 advertisements about thread.”¹⁴ What he didn’t print, with a handful of exceptions, was any object that we would recognize today as a book—let alone as a work of literature.

We think of the printed word as transcending space and time, but jobbing printing was location based and date sensitive. Where defenders of print today accuse blogs and tweets of destroying our power to immerse ourselves in the great classics, Franklin’s printing was already sound bite-sized, ephemeral, and profit driven.

Even if you leave aside indulgences and classified ads, the very books whose longevity we now use as a stick with which to beat the obsolescence built into hardware and software was in fact the first mass-produced consumer good to be marked with its production date—and, whether by remaindering or by recycling, an expiration date. When journalist Calvin Trillin described the life span of a book as “somewhere between milk and yogurt,” he bracketed books with date-stamped perishables rather than with treasured heirlooms.¹⁵

A looming sell-by date, in turn, may make renting more attractive than owning. Polemics decrying “the end of ownership” often contrast electronic licensing with a printed past in

which buying a book meant that you could do whatever you wanted with it.¹⁶ Here, too, rearview mirrors flatter. Young couples may choose to marry at the NYPL because bound and printed paper remains a marker of eternal commitments. But like staying married, sticking with a book for life may be intended more often than accomplished.

The first generation of commercial ebooks, print lovers soon discovered with dismay, couldn’t be lent or even inalienably owned. Most of us, in fact, realized only long after pressing Amazon’s “Buy” button that it should really have been labeled “Rent” or “License,” for when you pay for the right to read an ebook, you’re not buying the right to resell it or even to own it yourself forever. This may come as a surprise if you’ve never clicked through to Amazon’s disclosure that “Kindle Content is licensed, not sold, to you by the Content Provider,” and that “you may not sell, rent, lease, distribute, broadcast, sublicense, or otherwise assign any rights to the Kindle Content or any portion of it to any third party.”¹⁷

Amazon’s business model, in short, relies on its customers’ failure to read the fine print (fine screen?). Scholar Keith Houston compares the ebook economy with a housing market in which readers, like “tenants, remain trapped on the wrong side of the divide.”¹⁸ But we should be careful not to blame on a technology what’s in fact the result of a business model. Licensing restrictions don’t inhere in screens any more than copyright law inheres in printed paper. Law, rather than technology, ensures that most commercially distributed ebooks today can be neither owned nor loaned. As manuscript, print, and electronic formats evolved, one thing that’s never changed is that buying a book outright is the exception rather than the rule.

From the beginning, printed books were more often borrowed than owned. Moreover, much printed matter was bought by groups—a book club or, in the case of periodicals especially, a chain of readers who paid more or less depending on their place in the reading order. Newspapers were traditionally read first by a wealthy subscriber, then resold to a neighbor who paid a reduced price for yesterday's news, then passed down to below-stairs users—an unschooled seamstress who might use it to cut out patterns, or an illiterate cook who might use it to mop up spills.

Soon after the publication of *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen complained that her readers were “more ready to borrow and praise, than to buy.” They were borrowing at for-profit circulating libraries—most common in spa towns where vacationers had leisure to read—that doubled as venues for flirting, browsing, and occasionally talking about books. Where today's critics of digital licensing dismiss renting as a poor substitute for owning—assuming that the only party that it benefits is greedy corporations—middle-class Victorian readers paid a premium for the right to get rid of books after reading them. *David Copperfield*, *Jane Eyre*, *Middlemarch*—all the great realist novels were originally rented more often than bought. Their earliest readers saw them as disposable single-use items that you didn't want cluttering up your shelves once their brief life expectancy had elapsed, any more than you'd keep yesterday's newspaper. One 1845 journalist declared that “few are the works of fiction, as long and wearisome experience teaches, that you wish to select and purchase and place upon your shelves, as deserving of a second and a third perusal.”¹⁹ A year later, Balzac described a character who abandons his old mistress for a younger one, “without saying goodbye, as one throws away a novel after reading it.”²⁰

When Dickens's bookshelves were cataloged after his death, the absence of novels—except copies sent and signed by authors trying to cozy up to the great man—revealed how rarely fiction had made it onto his own shopping list. This is because most Victorian readers accessed fiction through a hybrid strategy: instead of choosing between borrowing and buying, readers followed one with the other. We can see this hybrid at work in the rules for one Yorkshire book club, pasted into the pages of an 1849 novel. In this club, each subscriber paid a guinea and a half to join and a guinea and a half each subsequent year (the equivalent of about \$150 today). The rules stated that “no book be admitted which is either strictly professional, or on statistics, or the price of which shall exceed three guineas”: one such book would have eaten up the profit of two whole memberships. Subscribers were allowed to borrow large books for ten days and small books for five days; distinctions among book sizes were often as sharp as the distinction between books and periodicals. The yellowing insert explicitly excludes Sundays from the day count; the library must have feared encouraging time-strapped members to cheat on the Sabbath.

Every December, the club's members met to auction off all of the books bought in the previous year, suggesting that they considered year-old books past their sell-by date—so much for the timelessness of print. Any books unlucky enough to find no takers were bought, like it or not, by the member who had originally ordered them. He or she (the subscribers included a few ladies) was required to pay half price and haul away the book, to leave space for newer volumes in the coming January.²¹

The assumption that books are made to be bought is in fact a recent innovation, propagated for commercial reasons by

interested parties. In the nineteenth century, publishers began trying to persuade readers that far from showing generosity, sharing books was immoral or even disgusting. In 1855, the American magazine *Godey's Lady's Book* ran a story titled "The Life and Adventures of a Number of *Godey's Lady's Book* Addressed Particularly to Borrowers, Having Been Taken Down in Short-Hand from a Narration Made by Itself." The "number" (what we would call an issue) complains bitterly of the wear and tear that it suffered when lent by subscribers to all their friends. Each girl should buy her own copy, the long-suffering magazine declared, the same way she bought her own bonnet: "How would you like to have that passing from head to head?"

A cruder method was to reframe as theft what had long been understood as sociable sharing. In 1931, Bernays launched a contest "to look for a pejorative word for the book borrower, the wretch who raised hell with book sales and deprived authors of earned royalties." Entries included "book weevil," "borrocole," "libracide," "booklooter," "bookbum," "bookkibitzer," "culture vulture," "greeper," "bookbummer," "bookaneer," "blifter," "biblioacquisiac," "book buzzard," and "greader."²²

In the new division of labor that Cold War publishers invented, hardbacks were for gifting and displaying, paperbacks for hiding and discarding.²³ Amazon's digital rights management (DRM) strategy made no provision for the gift giving of individual titles: you could buy a Kindle gift certificate, but particular ebooks needed to be bought—or rather licensed—by the end user.

Today, libraries continue to amortize the cost of each volume by spreading it over successive generations. Even readers who buy a printed book outright often do so in the expectation that

they'll own it only temporarily. Resale value determines affordability: college students are willing to advance the price of that organic chemistry text because they trust that a few months later some unidentified stranger will take it off their hands.

Nothing more humbling than spotting the novel I assigned last semester back on my campus bookstore's shelves, especially when it's labeled "clean copy." But in an era of music and video streaming, owning a book may appear to students less like a sign of love than like economic wastefulness. The most recent studies of hard-copy textbooks suggest that 61 percent of students sold their textbooks at the end of the semester, while 51 percent just rent them in the first place. As a result, fewer than half of the students annotated their textbooks.²⁴

The organization expert Marie Kondo prompted outrage in 2011 when she advised readers to throw away any book that fails to "spark joy"—including her own.²⁵ On the other hand, the workbook sold along with it proved a canny ploy to avoid undercutting her royalties with a flood of secondhand copies. When we think of the book as a cherished hand-me-down, we ignore how often, and how variously, they've been designed to be unloaded. Even as books have provided a guinea pig for commercial innovators from Gutenberg to Jeff Bezos, one constant has been their complicated relation to ownership. You can read a book without paying for it, thanks to organizations ranging from the Gideons to the public library system to the birdhouse-like structures known as Little Free Libraries. The Big Expensive Libraries maintained by state universities often make their hard-copy holdings available to all taxpayers but reserve for enrolled students their electronic subscriptions, at the behest of for-profit digital journal publishers.

Conversely, you can—and probably do—buy books without ever ending up reading them. Like an exercise bike rusting in the basement, a book gathering dust testifies to good intentions.²⁶ (I delay discarding books the same way my grandmother, who grew up during the Depression, waited for leftovers to rot in the fridge.) But a book sitting unread on the shelf is also like an unopened bottle of designer bubble bath. Just as Jacuzzis attract home buyers whose long hours at work preclude the self-indulgent soaks that they pictured while touring open houses, so a book makes its buyer feel guilty for not spending time where she has already spent money.²⁷

Even when a book does remain in a reader's possession, that's no guarantee that it will absorb her from start to finish. In 2016, Amazon banned publishers putting the table of contents at the end of the book. Only once that prohibition hit the news did ordinary readers discover that the company's Kindle Unlimited subscription service had been paying publishers in proportion to the farthest page read—perversely, creating incentives to game the system by moving the most often-read content to the very end. On the face of it, nothing is more logical: a novel whose pages one turns convulsively until reaching the end should earn more than one whose readers drift away on page three. Yet by this measure, an encyclopedia whose users looked up a single entry on Xylography would look more thoroughly thumbed than one in which they'd consulted every single entry up through Woodcuts.

It's easy for teenagers who have never flipped through a printed user manual to associate books with losing oneself rather than with finding information. But given that both Bezos and his critics grew up with printed dictionaries, a likelier expla-

nation for their blind spot lies in wishful thinking. The long dominance of books designed to be searched, skimmed, and discarded needs to be airbrushed out of our memories because it challenges the digital-age fantasy that print inculcates patience, strengthens work ethics, and stretches attention spans. "If you can incorporate the gym into your regular routine," the *New York Times* "Year of Living Better" lifehack column proclaims, "you can incorporate quality time with a book too."²⁸

In 2013, David Mikics recommended "slow reading"—the verbal equivalent of making your own bread or knitting your own socks—as the ultimate digital detox. "If you're looking at this book," he told the readers of his acid-free hardcover volume, "you're committed"—to patience, to concentration, to deep thought. In choosing books over emails and tweets, "you have the chance to live up to that commitment." Digital pleasures, he seemed to be saying, were tempting weak-willed booklovers to betray a long-term relationship. Book reading became a retreat from digital chatter (as absolute as entering a monastery), a protest against consumer society (as bold as climbing the barricades), a therapy for racing brains and frenzied pulses.

A recent article in the *Guardian* complains, more specifically, that web browsing "fragments our attention span in a way that's not ideal if you want to read, for instance, *Clarissa*."²⁹ In one way, Samuel Richardson's great novel *Clarissa* is an obvious example to choose. Just under a million words in its first edition, the blow-by-blow story's winding verbiage led even Richardson's fan Samuel Johnson to declare that "if you were to read Richardson for the story, your impatience would be so much fretted that you would hang yourself." Paradoxically, though, that length prevented most readers from ever giving *Clarissa*

their full attention. On first publication in 1748, the novel seems to have functioned more as background noise: in one 1756 diary, the historian Naomi Tadmor finds a cloth merchant reporting that “as I was writing all the even[ing] my wife read *Clarissa Harlowe* to me.” When his human audiobook read aloud what he termed “the moving scene of the funeral of Miss: [*sic*] *Clarissa Harlowe*,” the merchant continued to add up figures.³⁰ The absence of calculation errors testifies to the carefully titrated attention that he withheld from the story, as a driver today might keep one ear open to a podcast and another cocked for GPS directions.³¹

The merchant was unusual less in economizing the time and attention that he gave *Clarissa* than in leaving an articulate verbal trace of that experience. The irregular wear and tear that I found in library copies of novels like *Clarissa*—a heavily thumbed rape scene followed by pristine pages of landscape description, getting grimmer again as the plot picked up—suggested that print readers who progress evenly from Page 1 to The End are as rare as rational economic actors.

The codex continued to tout its put-down-ability in the advertisements for one 1835 “Parlour-Table Book” whose publisher boasted that “it may be taken up and laid down without inconvenience.” For us, interrupting a book denotes impulsivity and impatience. But for most of print’s history, it proved civilized self-restraint. Where twentieth-century parents measured their children’s impulse control by their ability to refrain from eating a marshmallow, earlier generations tested their resolve by the ability to refrain from racing through a book.³²

For most of the half millennium since Gutenberg, readers have browsed and skipped their way around books: think (if

you’re old enough) of the walks that your fingers once took through the yellow pages. As evidence that we’re not the first readers in history to complain of information overload, historian Ann Blair points to the notes taken by early modern scholars as well as to their printed equivalent, the then-mushrooming genre of the reference book. Fighting fire with fire, the scholars whose working methods Blair reconstructs responded to the glut of books with more books designed to summarize, abridge, or index the mass of printed matter that was too bulky to read from cover to cover.³³

When one of the shrewdest analysts of digital reading, Clifford Lynch, called ebooks “more like reference databases than [like] traditional books that are read sequentially from beginning to end,” he airbrushed out the long tradition of print that invites dipping and sampling—imposing our own order on the text, not submitting to its undertow.³⁴ When a British Library report lamented that academic researchers “go online to avoid reading in the traditional sense,” the world’s greatest research institution, too, ignored the long tradition of pick-and-choose reading.³⁵

Nostalgists for print stack the deck by assuming a best-case scenario in which all printed books were great, and all reading rapt. Sven Birkerts, for example, complains that when his students open their laptops, “I pretend they are taking course-related notes, but would not be surprised to find out they are writing to friends, working on papers for other courses, or just trolling their favorite sites while they listen.”³⁶ True enough—but the fact that a student’s eyeballs were glued to a page has never been a guarantee that she was paying attention. As far back as thirteenth-century Russia, the Dutch paleographer

Erik Kwakkel finds a seven-year-old schoolboy decorating the margins of his birchbark class notes with a caricature.³⁷ Just over half a millennium later, as cheap wood-pulp paper replaced scarce rag-based predecessors, a new form of procrastination was born: the spitball. The laptop's real victim may not be the ability to pay attention so much as the skill of crafting an aerodynamic airplane from lined paper.³⁸

When we think about the death of print, we're likelier to picture a rapt novel-reader than a ruled-notebook doodler. Pundits who compare the way we do use digital media with the way we wish we used printed books are often contrasting ideal apples with real oranges. Comparing the way people actually read print with the way they actually read electronic texts, on the other hand, would make it possible to either corroborate or contradict subjective perceptions.

Naomi Baron's ingenious strategy was to juxtapose surveys of college students' feelings about reading on paper and screen with experiments measuring the physiological effects of both.³⁹ Strangely enough, students' opinions ran directly counter to their behavior. Asked which medium they prefer, college students endorse print no less roundly than any middle-aged professor. (The exception, Baron notes wryly, is one student who complained, under the heading "Liked least about reading in hardcopy": "It takes me longer because I read more carefully.") Students in the United States, Germany, and even smartphone-dense Japan report that they understand and remember more on paper. Yet when tested for comprehension and retention, they score the same on paper as on-screen; nor do physiological measures of their eye movements show any difference between the two media. Even though subjects report more

eyestrain with screens, the frequency with which they blink is identical for screen and paper.⁴⁰

Trying to make sense of these contradictions, I find myself remembering the double-blind "violin experiment" carried out at the 2010 International Violin Competition of Indianapolis. Researchers challenged musicians to guess which of two instruments was a Stradivarius and which a violin a few days or weeks or years old. Blindfolded and asked to play two instruments doused with the same perfume, an overwhelming majority of participants identified the new violin as the one they'd like to take home with them—even though the very same musicians declared that they preferred older violins.⁴¹ Here, too, nostalgia for an older technology makes self-reporting untrustworthy.

Baron hazards a more generous explanation. The experimental subjects were reading under lab conditions, on a schedule. When researchers lifted the time limits, in contrast, study participants consistently spent longer on print than on screens—and their comprehension varied accordingly.

But perhaps this is because around books, we expect more of ourselves. Imagine some study comparing the rate at which food gets chewed in a fast-food joint or in a fancy restaurant. The explanation wouldn't lie in the physical difference between plastic and silver forks. Printed books put us on our best behavior.

The irony is that books became talismans—empowered to silence cell phones or inculcate focus—in precisely the decade when historians were coming to agree that books have whatever powers their users vest in them. Adrian Johns's 1998 monograph *The Nature of the Book* showed how many centuries users of movable type took to make the assumptions about printed books that we make today: that every copy of

the same edition can be treated as interchangeable, or that the place and date of publication listed in a book can be trusted. Where Cold War-era technological determinists like Elizabeth Einstein had argued that the material form of books mass-produced through movable type contributed to the Reformation and the Scientific Revolution, Johns asked instead how changing ideas, beliefs, and feelings shaped the use of books. Worrying that digital media will corrupt its users can lead us to cast books as omnipotent—their presence magically guarantees virtue, their absence vice. But Johns suggests that human beings can alter the book's function just as dramatically as books change their users.

I described early printed books as standardized, but it might be more accurate to say that they were *perceived* as standardized. To our eyes today, early books look more like fraternal than identical twins. Different copies of the same edition were customized with different bindings. More importantly, those copies might even have contained subtly different texts, thanks to so-called stop-press corrections made when an error was caught as the first sheets rolled off the press.

Only centuries later could the owner of one copy of a particular edition of a particular text feel confident that distant owners of other copies were holding a functionally interchangeable object in their hands. Even then, Johns shows that confidence to be the product of social conventions, not just technological possibilities. "Functionally" is key because one of those social conventions was the unstated agreement to ignore differences in binding and size and paper, to assume that for all intents and purposes these different objects were the same.

The perception of standardization also made possible citation as we know it. In footnoting a page number for the book that I just referenced, I'm wagering that the copy you pull down from your shelf or your server will be identical to the book lying on the desk in front of me. We distinguish digitizations of printed books from "born-digital" books, whose texts went straight from a word processor to an ebook file. The metaphor obscures the fact that pbooks and ebooks alike are made, not born.⁴²



In 2015, faced with complaints of headaches and eyestrain, Google issued a disclaimer that its wearable Glass was not "designed for . . . reading 'War and Peace.'"⁴³ "Things like that are better done on bigger screens," the spokesperson added drily. Media scholar Clay Shirky points out that that same novel happens to be the only literary work mentioned by name in Carr's article "Is Google Making Us Stupid?"⁴⁴ (Carr had exemplified internet-induced dumbness by quoting a doctor's confession of losing patience with Tolstoy's masterpiece.) And Michael Harris's 2014 meditation *The End of Absence* recommends reading *War and Peace*, a book that's "thirteen hundred (long) pages long and weighs the same as a dead cat," as a way to distract oneself from the buzzing of the cell phone.⁴⁵ The devil makes work for idle fingers.

When Carr adds that "a book, if it is going to be a true book, needs to be more than a container of words; it needs to be a shield against busyness, a transport to elsewhere,"⁴⁶ the tacked-on qualifier "if it is going to be a true book" makes clear that not all books fit that lofty bill. The yellow pages don't still

users' thumbs; neither do podcasted short stories or tweeted poems. Often, booklovers are thinking of a subset of books defined by a medium but also by a particular scale and a particular genre, one they assume to be read in a particular way. Call it Long-form Literary Print.

We fetishize books because we imagine that they can protect us from our distractibility, our sloth, the weakness of will that the earliest monks called *acedia*.⁴⁷ Long before clickbait, reading was already entangled with worries about who was in control: the reader or the text. The very term "page-turner" attributes to books a mind of their own. The momentum of the gathered and bound pages appears to drag a helpless reader in its wake, as if every book were one of those rare volumes whose pages flip mechanically inside a glass case displayed in a library lobby.⁴⁸

Eighteenth-century readers worried just as much as their twenty-first-century counterparts about pace or completeness—but they worried in the opposite direction, stigmatizing lazy, passive readers who allowed inertia to drag them along from start to finish. As literary critic Nicholas Dames explains, "The media it is now seen as a bulwark against—film, television, electronic technology—are described in precisely the same terms as an earlier tradition had explained the novel itself."⁴⁹ Just over a century ago, one moralist warned that "some people cannot stand very exciting or thrilling stories, just as some people are better without any wine." Readers were advised to swear off novels, "unless, indeed, you can train yourself to sufficient self-control resolutely to keep their fascination under mental lock and key—a grand piece of self-discipline in itself."⁵⁰ Today, we outsource our willpower to print.

Like digital reading, print reading has been shaped by the tension between centripetal and centrifugal impulses, between readers' desire to disassemble books and reshuffle or reassemble them with others, and readers' desire to cocoon themselves within the covers of a single book, to use the finitude of the book to block out the paralyzing range of possibilities offered by a library. Reading on digital devices where books must compete not just with other books but with shorter and more visually arresting media—for the printed book, unlike its manuscript forbears, makes its black-and-white form deliberately dowdy—throws into relief the printed book's power to focus its readers.

Even a defender of digital media like Steven Johnson can call print books "a kind of game preserve for the endangered species of linear, deep-focused reading."⁵¹ British novelist Will Self warned in 2014 that if soon "the vast majority of text will be read in digital form on devices linked to the web," the fate of the novel depends on whether "readers will voluntarily choose to disable [internet] connectivity." If they won't, Self predicts, long fiction can't compete.⁵²

A digital device offers an infinity of activities among which any particular text can get lost. In contrast, as science writer Annie Paul observes, "the built-in limits of the printed page are uniquely conducive to the deep reading experience."⁵³ Essayist Michael Harris reflects, similarly, that "book-oriented styles of reading opened the world to me—by closing it."⁵⁴

The blindfolding exercise my students attempt each year focuses them by eliminating the distraction of the words on the page. So, too, the printed book's unique selling point is turning out to be its limits: the choices that it refuses to present, the infinity of mental paths that its closed form bars us from taking.

Like horses, readers need blinders. We enlist print in what the political philosopher Jon Elster calls a Ulyssean contract. Just as Odysseus binds himself to the mast because he doesn't trust his future self not to leap overboard in pursuit of sirens, so I board a Wi-Fi-free plane carrying only a Penguin Classic that I've spent years trying and failing to finish. When in 2017 a xenophobic administration banned laptops on flights entering the United States from ten airports in majority-Muslim countries, I found myself, for the first time in a decade, reading a novel in one transatlantic sitting.

The same hucksters who once peddled get-literate-quick speed-reading techniques now advertise "zenware" (Freedom, LeechBlock, Chrome Nanny) to block us from racing through, and around, our online reading. Yet the strongest ropes may remain Gutenberg's. "Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room," Wordsworth wrote in a sonnet meditating on the freedom that fixed poetic forms confer. ("Stanza" is Italian for both a section of a poem and a room in a building.) As poets have sometimes welcomed formal constraints, so digital-age readers are learning to cultivate material limits. In choosing to read in print rather than online, one's present self can choose to quarantine the pop-up windows and online games that one's future self might otherwise choose. The first ebook bestseller, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, dramatized an English major's craving for constraint. Readers now boast, rather than confess, to being held spellbound.

One blustery February afternoon, the class that had played Name That Book took a field trip. A school bus whose bright yellow looked like something out of a Richard Scarry illustration ferried us to an exurb an hour west of Boston, where

a climate-controlled Home Depot-style hangar refrigerates Harvard Library's 10 million least-loved volumes in off-site storage. A clang drew our gaze upward: twenty men were shoveling snow from three acres of roofs. Beyond the fumes of the loading dock, neither leather spines nor wood shelving lay in sight. Instead, my students encountered fluorescent lights, linoleum floors, metal carts, plastic bins sold by the thousand-count, an eyewash, and a stenciled hard-hat reminder. Climbing on the cherry picker for a high-tech hayride, the students looked about as credible as politicians posing in a tank.

Stored at a temperature inhospitable to human bodies, the books in Harvard's depository also inhabit a scale incomprehensible to human minds. As tall as five people stacked on top of one another, the sublime crags of the depository's thirty-foot-high metal shelves produce the same vertigo as a stark cliff face.⁵⁵ On campus, books are shelved by subject; here, by height. Arriving at the depository, each volume encounters a sizing tray reminiscent of the devices into which you cram your hand luggage at the airport to test whether it will fit into the overhead bin. Also on arrival at the depository, each book's title is replaced with a bar code readable by a pistol-grip Motorola scanner: prisoner without a name, cell without a call number.

The ticket to this Siberia isn't always one-way. At some point in their exile, the luckiest books will be released at the request of a catalog user. If that user requests hard copy, the volume will be zapped by a scanner in the grippy-gloved hands of a fluorescent-lumbar-support-clad worker riding a cherry picker, bundled into a plastic bin, shunted onto a metal hand-truck, and loaded into an eighteen-wheeler to trundle past the sentry box and the nearby Kwik Print to the highway leading to campus,

and finally into the reader's hands. When books do make the trip down the highway that our school bus took, they travel—as Jeffrey Schnapp's vivid documentary about the depository points out—11 million times slower than a packet of digital information. More often, therefore, the catalog user requests page images—meaning that the lucky volume will be scanned without ever escaping the building.

No sooner did Harvard's library announce that infrequently consulted journals would be evicted to the depository than impromptu civil disobedience campaigns arose, readers manically requesting entire runs of periodicals whose pages they never had time to open. Putting down a book seemed as cruel as putting down a pet dog. (In contrast, only a few student picketers protested when the college's most popular course, Introduction to Computer Science, commandeered the on-campus library's main reading room to hold office hours.)

Yet, difficult as it is for us to imagine a post-paper world, classical civilizations managed just fine without it. Clay or wax tablets, stone, papyrus, parchment: all of these seemed adequate to write on until a material that miraculously combined durability with portability and affordability came along. Stone lasts but can't be carried; papyrus is light but brittle and vulnerable to climate; parchment is as expensive as the animals that are skinned to make it. Outside of cemeteries and law offices, paper shunted many of those surfaces aside. Odds are that you are not reading this book on a clay tablet, a coconut husk, a palm leaf, or a piece of parchment, papyrus, or even a sheet of paper recycled from linen rags.

Invented in China around the beginning of the Common Era and brought to Europe via Muslim Spain just over a mil-

lennium later, paper soon generated as much buzz as any e-ink technology today. The newfangled material offered a fourth benefit on top of price, weight, and longevity: where papyrus and parchment could be scraped clean and reused, paper's absorption of ink made it unerasable. The disadvantage of being less recyclable was outweighed by the advantage of being less vulnerable to forgery. Our Etch A Sketch-like e-readers may bear more resemblance to paper's predecessors than to the medium invoked by the name of Amazon's Paperwhite e-reader.

Like e-readers, paper aroused controversy. What provokes nostalgia today was once seen as an enemy to tradition: thirteenth-century sheep and cattle breeders had lobbied for a papal decree invalidating documents on paper. That it offered a cut-rate substitute for parchment doesn't mean that paper wasn't expensive in absolute terms: though one Bible no longer required herds of sheep to be slaughtered, until two centuries ago paper remained the single biggest cost in most book production. Our now-dying custom of starting a business letter halfway down the page comes from a time when wasting an expensive sheet marked respect, the epistolary equivalent of a potlatch.

One factor driving up prices was the raw materials: where Asian paper incorporated mulberry bark, Europeans made it from linen rags. In England, the expense of old clothes was compounded by paper taxes, which served both to finance wars and to limit the circulation of news. What open source and Creative Commons are today, campaigns against "taxes on knowledge" were for Victorian radicals who understood taxes on paper and postage as an indirect form of censorship. Only in the second half of the nineteenth century did the lifting of

those duties combine with steam technology and plant-based raw materials to make paper cheap enough to be disposable. As paper bags and toilet paper came onto the market, old newspapers were suddenly redundant.

Even today, in the age of scans and bar codes, we haven't really disowned paper. Essayist Ian Sansom points out that even travelers who check in with an electronic ticket still vomit into a paper bag and repair the damage with a wet wipe (invented in 1915). One could add that even the two months of the year when e-readers, hardbacks, and paperbacks sell most briskly are kicked off with a paper shredder; after New York's 2012 Thanksgiving parade, spectators piecing together confetti discovered that they were recycled from confidential police records.⁵⁶ It remains to be seen whether books will have more in common with playing cards and money—paper goods for which digital equivalents quickly emerged—or with tea bags and diapers.

A recent toilet-paper ad showed a tech-savvy man scolding his wife for scribbling on scraps of old-fashioned paper; when he shouts out from the toilet that there's nothing left on the cardboard roll, she slips under the door his paper-thin iPad.⁵⁷ The bathroom, this play on paperlessness reminds us, may be the last reading room whose contents will never be shipped to the depository.

Chapter 3

READING ON THE MOVE

IN THE MIDST of the 2013 Supreme Court hearings on the Defense of Marriage Act, which sought to outlaw same-sex unions, Amazon aired an advertisement for its newest e-reading device. Side by side on lounge chairs against a backdrop of beach umbrellas, a man strikes up a conversation with his bikini-clad neighbor: "That's a Kindle, right?"

She looks up from her reading. "Yeah, it's the new Kindle Paperwhite," she replies.

"I love to read at the beach," the man says. "But . . ."

"This is perfect at the beach," the woman reassures him. "And with the built-in light, I can read anywhere, anytime."

After a pause spent squinting down at his iPad again, the man announces triumphantly, "Done!"

"With your book?" asks the straight woman—literally straight, as we're about to discover. For when the man explains that, on the contrary, he's done buying a new Kindle device and invites his neighbor to celebrate, she sidesteps the question by