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dwindling scroll bar warns me that the imaginative world in which I'm taking refuge is about to come to an end, though, books feel more like intimations of mortality.

For years I rationed Trollope novels, keeping a new one in reserve next to the unopened chocolate bar stashed away for consolation if and when my equally bookish boyfriend walked out. But when I turned the last page of *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, it was Trollope's series that abandoned me. Elderkin and Berthoud are right to dedicate an entry to "finishing, fear of." Whatever life lessons we can glean from having read, perhaps being in the middle of a book is what really counts as living.

Chapter 5

BOUND BY BOOKS

IN 2005, National Public Radio book critic Maureen Corrigan entitled her memoir *Leave Me Alone, I'm Reading*. Corrigan memorializes a mother who warned her against ruining her eyes over a book—every page read an act of rebellion. Sven Birkerts's *Gutenberg Elegies*, too, are fueled by a childhood spent using books to "seal myself off as fully as possible" from a father "with a quick temper and an impatient disdain for anything that smacked of reverie or private absorption, almost as if these states in some way challenged his authority." A third midlife book reviewer, humorist Joe Queenan, structured his 2012 memoir by contrasting his own surreptitious reading of James Bond novels at school with the assignments of teachers who "rammed books down my throat" and the "grumpy, autocratic, middle-aged women who seemed to dislike children" but nonetheless staffed the children's section of his local library. When these readers reach back to remember a childhood that predates digital media, they're also grasping at their

own not-yet-professionalized selves, before reading became an activity done for pay and for publication.

In the genre that Mikita Brottman dubs “bibliofessional” (Seth Lerer’s alternative coinage is “biblioautobiography”), the narrator’s parents must nag him or her to stop reading under the covers, the narrator’s spouse must complain that the bookshelves are a health hazard, and the narrator must diagnose herself or himself as a “book addict.”¹ Just as rom-coms rarely feature arranged marriages, so autobibliographies—my own term of choice—ignore the parents who set up children with books. “To be literate is to become liberated from the constraints of dependency” declares one expert.² In real life, though, toddlers themselves can’t buy or borrow their first picture books. In real life, the lobby against library funding cuts is spearheaded by mothers.³ The myth of the self-made reader airbrushes out the parents who sent the child to school, the teachers who taught them letters, and the other adults who put books in their hands.⁴ Yet left-leaning bibliofessors live by Margaret Thatcher’s dictum when it comes to reading: there is no such thing as society.

Myths persist because they flatter. By reducing parents, librarians, and teachers to blocking figures, autobibliography emphasizes the reader’s quirky pluckiness. Stripped of logistical contingencies, the meeting of a reader’s mind with an author’s shines out unmediated, unchaperoned. But erasing the middleman sells short one of the book’s most powerful capacities: binding readers together.

Even when the hands through which a book has passed belong to an unidentified stranger, its content can gain value from the mere fact that we aren’t the first to read it. French anthropologist Michèle Petit observed librarians surreptitiously

sneaking books whose circulation they wanted to boost onto the returns cart. They had realized that people were likelier to pick up a book that they thought some other patron had taken the trouble of borrowing—a wordless recommendation.⁵

One way to measure the strength of the bond between library users is to trace the fears inspired by their proximity to one another. When public libraries opened in the middle of the nineteenth century around the English-speaking world, so did debates about whether citizens should share books. At stake were books as much as texts—that is, objects as much as words. The civic spaces established in Britain by the 1850 Public Libraries Act enshrined pages prethumbed by one reader, and soon to be rethumbed by another. But the librarians who agreed that sharing books drew readers together disagreed about whether that was a good thing. In 1890, it was a librarian who invented the “book disinfector” to shield middle-class patrons from the germs of dirtier borrowers. This gas chamber for books, a “metal fumigator made from 16th wire gauge sheet iron, with angle iron door-supports and side-shelf rests,” provided a kind of analog virus protection for the trashy novels favored by convalescent girls.⁶

Some Victorians strove to disentangle communication with authors’ minds from pages tainted with communicable diseases. At the end of the nineteenth century, best-selling novelist Marie Corelli ranted that “to borrow one’s mental fare from Free Libraries is a dirty habit. . . . The true lover of books will never want to peruse volumes that are *thumbed and soiled* by hundreds of other *hands* . . . messy *knockabout volumes*, which many of our medical men assure us carry disease-germs in their too-frequently *fingered* pages.”⁷ We often speak of ideas

poisoning readers' minds. Corelli's fear was different: shared pages, she thought, could literally infect their bodies.

Like public swimming pools, public libraries continued to form a testing ground for hopes and fears about civic connection. As late as 1988, a nurse at a New York hospital who contacted the local branch library to check out books for AIDS patients was turned away: library volunteers refused to handle any books that had passed through HIV-positive readers' hands.⁸ Like readers' bodies, books looked like disease carriers. Books that circulated too widely became a stand-in for gay men suspected of dangerous promiscuity. Whose hands you allow to touch the books that you yourself will go on to handle declares whose fellow humanity you recognize.

In the digital era, the transitive property that makes holdable, smearable objects into vectors for disease has become more salient than ever. The difference is that the connections once feared by policy makers are now actively cultivated. When Berlin librarians decided to grant borrowing privileges to undocumented refugees, they made access to books a common ground that cut across divisions of citizenship and language.⁹ Access to books, but also to the company of other readers—giving someone the right to handle books that have been, or will be, handled by her neighbors means giving her the right to belong.

At the beginning of this millennium, Deborah Brandt coined the term "sponsors of literacy" to encompass all those people and organizations who "enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way."¹⁰ In conditioning salvation on the ability to read the word of God, the Protestant Reformation gave the faithful not just a reason to be literate, but responsibility

for encouraging others' literacy, by any means necessary. Only once public school systems and libraries took over from church-sponsored education did children (and some adults) become a captive audience for secular publishers.

We may be living in the middle of a second such shift. Twenty-first-century required reading is as likely to come from probation officers as from teachers or pastors. And some activist organizations thrust books into potential readers' hands. In the United Kingdom, the Give a Book program donates new books to primary schoolchildren and kids in foster care, as well as to readers who are ill, imprisoned, or old. Others defend marginalized readers by championing persecuted books: one Houston Community College professor's brainchild, *Librotraficante*, distributes banned books in low-income communities, creating oases in book deserts. And some make bookselling a means to the end of book giving: Better World Books, founded in 2002, sells used books on Amazon to raise funds for literacy-related nonprofits. The doctors whom we met in the previous chapter are only one of several professions that have begun to encourage or even require reading—and not the only ones who do so with government support.

What these organizations encourage is not just reading, but more specifically shared reading. Andrew Piper's 2012 polemic *Book Was There* usefully distinguishes three goals of what he calls "social reading": "commonality" (wanting others to read what we're reading), "transferability" (the right to send that reading material to someone else), and "sociability" (conditions under which we can talk to one another about what we're reading).¹¹ Sociability doesn't have to take place in libraries: Reach Out and Read, founded in Boston in 1989, gives doctors and

pediatric nurses picture books to hand to patients. If waiting rooms can be the scene of reading, so can the tops of dryers. Libraries Without Borders places copies of books in laundromats in the Bronx, the only borough in New York that at the time of writing lacked a single independent bookstore. (In Mott Haven, painters are at work on a crowdfunded bookstore-cum-wine-bar called the Lit. Bar, whose book club has already launched online.)

Then again, we've seen that most reading has always happened outside of libraries, wherever readers have time to kill. A Harlem nonprofit called Barbershop Books builds on that tradition by providing picture books to read aloud while waiting for a haircut. This brainchild of a children's book author reinvents the coif-'n'-read multitasking that one eighteenth-century aristocrat perfected by "reading to two or three others the seventh volume of *Clarissa*, whilst her maid curled her hair, and the poor girl let fall such a shower of tears upon her lady's head, that she was forced to send her out of the room to compose herself."¹² In both cases, reading becomes an element of social life rather than a retreat from it.

Passionate readers are rarely content to read themselves. Most have equally strong feelings about whether and what the people around them should read. And no neat line divides literary nourishment from force-reading. Consider Changing Lives Through Literature, an alternative-sentencing program that gathers convicted offenders together with judges and probation officers to discuss photocopied short stories. It's common enough for probation to be conditioned on attending a twelve-step meeting or a group therapy session, but these readers stay out of jail only as long as they attend biweekly literary

discussions. Asked how the book club changed them, participants come up with Christian terms that were borrowed by the midcentury American New Critics: "turning points" and "epiphanies." "When it's working," the program's founder tells me, "this discussion has a kind of magic to it."

The same justice system that requires these men to read or go to jail forbids prisoners from being sent certain books—hardbacks that can be used as weapons; texts that preach violence; books not available through the businesses that have negotiated a monopoly on supplying goods to prisons. Books' danger, in this system, is seen to lie in their physical form as much as in the ideas that they contain. In 2006, *Beard v. Banks* upheld prisons' right to deny inmates in solitary confinement access to printed matter. Books, the ruling claimed, could be used to fling feces or start fires. In *Changing Lives Through Literature*, we can glimpse the obverse of that censorship.

It may be too soon to understand how the seepage of reading recommendations from school to NGO will alter the landscape created almost two centuries ago by the handover from church to school. But these organizations recognize what bibliobiographies, in casting books as liberators and imagining the library as the one place where otherwise powerless readers can escape all social constraints, obscure. Often, the choice to read comes from above as much as within.

The court-ordered reading group favors stories that prompt empathy and chart transformation. Other NGOs, though, shift emphasis from the adjective "reading" to the noun "group." At the opposite end of London from the high-end bibliotherapy service, I make my way through a door imperfectly scrubbed of graffiti. In the entrance of the senior center, a faded portrait

shows a young Queen Elizabeth snipping the building's ribbon. A dozen retirees perch on folding chairs fingering photocopies of the opening chapter of a Somerset Maugham novella, *The Painted Veil*.

Asking what brought each of them to this reading group, I hear story after story of loss. A retired grocery checker uses books to ease herself into sleep, as a long-dead mother once read her bedtime stories. Another retiree describes the garden she used to weed on the weekends she didn't spend hiking with her now-ex-husband. These days, a bad knee converges with a bad divorce to rule out both pleasures—but she still has books.

The circle at the senior center is only one of a few hundred groups organized by Get into Reading, a mushrooming nonprofit that gathers people who are socially marginalized in some way—whether because they're unemployed, imprisoned, ill, or just old—to listen to each other read poems and short stories aloud.

I expected the group to feel cozy. Instead, the room felt raw, exposed. One of the first group meetings fell silent in embarrassment, its organizer told me, when a hitherto unnoticed participant burst into tears midpoem. When the woman took out her purse, her neighbors began fishing for a tissue, but what she wanted turned out to be her wallet. She folded up the photocopy, carefully, to stuff it there for safekeeping.¹³

Most reading groups could more accurately be called “talking groups”: when members of a book club gather to discuss what they remember of what they've read, the reading itself has already happened somewhere else, alone. Before coming together with the group, each participant (in theory, at least) has scanned pages in silence, or perhaps listened to an audiobook through

noise-isolating earbuds. As classicist Joseph Howley points out, the Greek and Latin terms for “well-read” or “cultured” or “learned”—*πεπαιδευμένος eruditus*—“are perfect passive verbs: we judge someone intelligent now because they have in the past been subjected to good reading.”¹⁴ Get into Reading groups, in contrast, emphasize the present tense and real time.

Nothing further from my own college classroom, where the only student who reads in full view is a bad student—the laggard who has failed to do the reading in advance and now must furtively scan the pages that form the backstory of group discussion. The reading group in the senior center may have looked like a classroom, but it sounded like a church—like the hum of a congregation. The nonprofit's founder, a Liverpoolian ex-literary critic named Jane Davis, says that she turned to literature to fill religion's traditional function of “building empathy, shared meaning and social ties: whatever we threw out with the religious bath water.”¹⁵ She's quick, though, to counterbalance the analogy of the church with a less goody-goody precedent. What she seeks in reading groups, she explains, is the camaraderie that the working-class neighborhood where she grew up sought in the pub.

Real-time sharing isn't confined to Get into Reading. Like the members of yeshivas, madrassas, and monasteries, participants in secular reading groups are beginning to read in concert rather than discuss what they remember of what they read. These groups don't even need to involve voicing the text. US-based “silent book clubs” are fueled by the insight that in a life where overscheduling makes it hard to carve out time to sit tête-à-tête with a book, scheduling a grown-up version of study hall in the same café or park or bar where others are

reading their own (different) books can be a way to connect at once to books and to other readers: the literary equivalent of a headphone party.¹⁶ Perhaps books can fence and bridge at the same time—can help us be, in the resonant words of sociologist Sherry Turkle, “alone together.”¹⁷

However different their methods, cognitive and social scientists agree in looking for empathy at the level of literary representation: their studies gauge how intensely readers imagine the thoughts and feelings of literary characters. The community organizers whom I met, though, were as interested in objects as in words. Where texts allow us to camp out in characters’ heads, these organizers realized that books can nudge us to picture other eyes scanning the same page, and other hands holding the same volume.

Get into Reading could easily be mistaken for a more socially inclusive variant of the bibliotherapy we encountered in the previous chapter. Funded in part by NHS grants, its reading groups do indeed tackle mental-health problems like isolation, stigma, and even depression. But where a bibliotherapist might ask participants to read texts about loneliness or find solace merely in the medium of print, Get into Reading gambles that both the subject of the text and its medium are beside the point.

I thought back to the Toni Morrison character who feared touching the same Bible that had been touched by her African American servant. Where texts train readers to empathize with fictional characters, books allow readers to bond with each other. Where Books on Prescription makes self-help volumes a substitute for face-to-face encounters with a mental health provider, the community organizers I met make reading an excuse for social interaction. Where bibliotherapists work to

help the individual patient or the individual consumer, these organizers—call them biblioactivists—use books to forge community. And where beachfront reading retreats protect bibliotherapy clients from the masses huddled in the public library, social justice campaigners deploy the love of books to cut across social divisions.

Some biblioboosters are rich or famous. Since 1995 the Parton-funded Dollywood Foundation, based in Sevier County, Tennessee, has been one of the United States’ largest purchasers of children’s books, which it gives away to children up to the age of five. But books can also be weapons of the weak. Some bibliovolunteers lack the money to collect precious volumes or even to own a bookcase.

I met one such activist in a London church’s parking lot. Wedged between two smart cars was a dented white van whose plywood shelves buckled under the pressure of an Arabic Bible, odd numbers of a magazine called *Tunnels and Tunneling*, and duplicates of an advertisement-stuffed directory of Polish business in Britain, now three years out of date.¹⁸ The van’s sponsor, Quaker Homeless Action, helps readers who are sleeping rough reclaim a right that many citizens take for granted: book borrowing.

One of the few male volunteers ducks out of the van’s cramped doorway with the help of a cane like the one that mortarboarded schoolmasters hit him with at a high-end grammar school many decades ago, “like Wackford Squeers,” the whackhappy villain of a Dickens novel that he read to death half a century ago, he explains. But he doesn’t own the copy on which he spilled tea in those days, or any other book from before 2005, when he was evicted following a bad breakup.

He found his way to the bookmobile a few years later, set on the trail by an acquaintance who had been carting around an exhibition catalog nestled in torn bubble wrap: a coffee table book without a coffee table. Agatha Christie and Karl May filled the hours when the shelter was closed: 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. is a rather long time to get through. Plastic bags formed make-shift tarps for the few books that made their way into the cart that held his own possessions. As soon as he found housing again, he volunteered.

Like every library, this one is defined as much by what it excludes as by what it stocks. Its volunteers reject Marie Kondo fans' purged DIY guides, picture books, romance novels, and travel books. Hardbacks, decorative objects as well as reading material for the housed, are usually at the bottom of homeless readers' wish list. If you own no desk or even toilet top, cloth-bound volumes begin to look like a grotesque design failure: heavy to hoist onto your back, cumbersome to cram in a repurposed shopping cart, more vulnerable than even a person is to the lightest rain shower. Project Gutenberg downloads, in contrast, don't load you down, and old-model smartphones without a SIM card can be found for cheap. A built-in light source aids more than reading; the medium of enlightenment doubles as a flashlight.

The van admits all readers. In that respect, it's unusual. Long before internet filters, one Victorian librarian inked out the betting news in every newspaper in order to block out "numbers of rough and ill-behaved fellows, who . . . persisted in disturbing the peace of the reading rooms, and interfering with the comfort of quiet readers."¹⁹ In 1920, one Birmingham librarian complained that "no delicacy seemed to deter

the poor tramp from using, not only the news-room, but the best seats in the reference library for a snooze."²⁰ And battles over whether to exclude some from library borrowing—or even library entering—in the nineteenth century are not over yet. Some librarians continue to insist that "a library is not a refuge for the homeless." A double standard masks the fact that middle-class readers, too, have bodies. As one defender of class-blind access points out, those same librarians would never exclude "toddlers, who can be smelly and loud, are not . . . reading anything and are often asleep."²¹

Even the growing consensus among librarians that everyone should be able to enter the reading room rarely translates into enabling homeless men and women to borrow. Life on the street lacks the predictability of a four-week loan period. Books get wet, get lost, get stolen (usually by someone disappointed to discover that the bag he's snagged contains nothing more usable than printed pages). Networks formal and informal respond to that problem: day centers improvise a shelf or two where books can be taken and left; readers alert one another to the curbs across which evicted textbooks sprawl every June.

By taking books to readers rather than waiting for readers to come to books, the London bookmobile courts the very promiscuity Victorian book disinfectors attempted to ward off. In both cases, the medium is part of the message. Yet if the bookmobile asserts the value of community, it also enshrines autonomy. Unlike the probation officers taking attendance at the court-ordered reading group, the bookmobile's volunteers don't monitor reading or talking. Unlike World Book Day's subway distributors, they don't dictate what books get read. Unlike the doctors who prescribe books, they don't prejudge what moods

or behaviors should result from reading. No gossip about literary characters, no turn taking, no unison, no end to which reading is simply a means. Where Jane Davis enlists reading to combat isolation, the bookmobile defends individuals' right to choose what to read and how to talk about it. More: whether to talk at all.

Nothing incendiary about the words of a Spanish martial-arts manual that lies on the bookmobile shelf next to a Lithuanian translation of Alexander McCall Smith. The white van's political power lies elsewhere. If the meaning of books resides not just in the texts they contain but in the paths that they take to reach a reader, then it may matter less whether a book makes an argument about community than whether it's bought with a click and delivered by a drone, recommended by a familiar neighborhood bookseller, or handed over for free by a volunteer who lingers to discuss it.

Writing texts or designing books, therefore, aren't the only outlets for booklovers' creativity. Like World Book Night's creators, the activists who launched the bookmobile invest equal ingenuity in fashioning distribution systems. And if we take "activism" to encompass not just the content of texts but the channels through which they flow, then biblioactivists can be publishers, librarians, even booksellers.

No longer just sellers and buyers, independent booksellers and their customers have come to see themselves as engaging in a political act. Just as in an age of agribusiness Prince Charles could reinvent himself as an organic farmer, so the age of the deep-discounting online retailer has witnessed the emergence of the gentlewoman bookseller. The past decade has seen a spate of celebrities bailing out, buying, and discreetly subsidiz-

ing local bookstores—not just authors like Judy Blume and Ann Patchett but also Google cofounder Sergey Brin, a Robin Hood recycling digital profits into wood-pulp subventions.²² What they're rescuing isn't just books, but also the human beings who vend and recommend them. The bookseller becomes an endangered species, as worthy of saving as a wetland or a whale.

More radical, though, are those publishers and distributors who invent ways to bypass the market. In Thoreau's hometown, the Free Press requires anyone who wants one of its books to donate to charity whatever they judge the book is worth—a triangular payment rather than a one-to-one exchange. The press asks recipients to pass the book along to someone else when they're done; like many software publishers, this publisher doesn't offer an object to keep so much as a limited-time experience. The texts chosen engage slyly with economic questions: a volume of essays about money, a novel featuring a jewel thief.²³ Authors donate their time too. That may be less of an innovation; the wife of one contributor described the Free Press as "a new way for writers to not make money."²⁴

In Barcelona in 2015, a few friends began soliciting donations of books to hand out—with a catch. Their project, 1010 Ways to Buy Books Without Money, bartered books for actions. You could earn one book by giving blood, earn another by smiling at a neighbor, gain access to a third by promising to perform oral sex on your partner. Mixing archness with earnestness, a fourth volume was offered in exchange for a signed promise to quit smoking.

These triangular payments set books apart from other commodities, declaring them too sacred to be bought and sold. In the process, books are analogized to other substances that stand

above the market. As ethics rules bar blood donors from taking payment for their platelets, so the Free Press's refusal to charge brackets books with human organs, sex, and love.

That printed books are the granddaddy of all commodities may make it seem unprecedented how vehemently these book-lovers oppose buying and selling them. We've seen books pioneer self-service retailing in the eighteenth century, consumer credit in the nineteenth, automated inventory control in the twentieth, and e-commerce in the twenty-first. Compared to those innovations in marketing and distributing, biblioactivists' search for alternatives to the cash nexus could be lumped with Amtrak's "library atmosphere" as one more instance of digital dwellers idealizing the special occasions on which they visit the world of print.²⁵

Yet even if placing books on a pedestal untainted by commerce breaks with their long history as its spearhead, circulating books through ad hoc networks of readers continues the even longer history that we've witnessed of books being gifted, lent, shared, and read aloud. The Free Press can be seen as face-to-face successors to crowdsourced enterprises like Project Gutenberg, which attempted to free books from the market by digitizing the words that print originally veheled. Decades before ebooks came to mean in-copyright words purveyed by a for-profit corporation, Project Gutenberg's dozens and then hundreds of volunteers disseminated the books they loved not by standing on street corners, but by proofreading digital files recognizable by the almost Protestant austerity of ASCII files with raggedy margins.²⁶ They loved books enough to donate their time and eyesight to make it available outside of the market, and loved the democratizing potential of the nascent

internet enough to do that through exchanges with strangers whom they'd never meet, rather than through a local library or book club.

Later, nonprofit book digitization projects undertaken by the Internet Archive and HathiTrust would continue to avoid the licensing restrictions imposed by for-profit corporations such as Amazon. Because print isn't the only medium in which texts can be distributed outside of the market, biblioactivism cuts across any neat line separating print from digital reading. The volunteers who give away printed books, and digital information about printed books, mimic the circulation of electronic shareware—software whose mode of distribution is designed to boost community rather than bottom lines.

Although English professors number among those volunteers, biblioactivists are likelier to perceive us the way Joe Queenan perceived the grumpy librarians of his childhood. Whether addressing the residents of a blighted housing project or servicing the worried well-heeled, whether trained in social work or in marketing, the biblioactivists I met, too, described their role in a populist language that maintained a wary distance from English departments. Each one claimed to speak for common sense and common readers. Each endeavored to wrest great books away from jargon-loving literary-critical killjoys whose chaperoning interrupts literature lovers' heavy petting.

If literature cultivates empathy, I ask Jane Davis, the founder of Get into Reading, why do I leave every English department meeting wanting to strangle my colleagues? She asks, in return, whether I've heard of molecular gastronomy. By asking what we can learn about texts rather than *from* texts, by striving for originality at the expense of common sense, we're cooking up

the intellectual equivalent of the outlandish dishes invented by celebrity chefs. What you and your colleagues write, she tells me, is snail-flavored porridge.²⁷

Davis's stomach-churning metaphor made me worry that attempts to open literature up might wall literary criticism off. Cultural studies once offered nonacademic readers tools with which to critique nonliterary objects, such as advertising or political oratory or other forms of propaganda. But as academics' crit without lit has given way to biblioactivists' lit without crit, university English departments relinquished their role—forged during the Cold War—of providing a training ground for method that could later be applied to public and private propaganda. Biblioactivists, in contrast, wager that the civic engagement that books can teach consists of . . . distributing more books.

We love and hate characters, but we also love and hate other readers. Although the English language has a word for eating together (“commensality,” in case you were wondering), I've searched dictionaries in vain to find a name for readers' parallel play—for the reading that happens in subways and churches as much as in libraries and classrooms. Or in beds: my husband and I didn't really feel the weight of our vows until, unloading volumes from one final U-Haul, we started to interfile.

But loving books doesn't necessarily mean loving other people who love books for a different reason, or put them to a different use. Like Gideons, English professors spend their lives trying to thrust the books that they value the most into other people's hands. Also like Gideons, though, English professors spend our time trying to break other people's habits. Every time I met a doctor who prescribed books or a volunteer who drove

a bookmobile or a dog lover who trained poodles to listen to children read aloud, I saw myself in a distorted mirror. Literary critics themselves have sometimes contrasted academic reading to pleasure reading, imagined as a spontaneous, individual welling-up of desire rather than as a set of learned practices. We might learn from biblioactivists that pleasure, like misery, needs company.

English professors nag our students to resist the temptation to skip and skim, we wheedle them to care enough to finish the reading. But beyond influencing whether our students read, we also determine (or try to determine) how. We coax freshmen to care *less* about the world represented in fiction, shaming those who read for the plot or pick favorites among characters. We train them to see past the ostensible subject of a text to its linguistic structures, just as they see past the look and feel of a book to its textual content.²⁸

The biblioactivists whom I met eschewed any such critical distance. They struggled, on the contrary, to nudge readers closer to the characters. From them I learned that identifying with the characters wasn't some sloppiness to be slapped down, like splitting infinitives. From their extracurricular reading, I learned that the love of books takes as many different forms as romantic love does—and that the same act that gives pleasure to one person can pain another.

What I've learned from unprofessional booklovers isn't just academic. Like their autobiographies, mine is a love story entangled with stories of education, conversion, deprogramming. Drawing a salary hasn't stopped me from being a close reader, or a bad reader, or a greedy one. Just as ebooks and print books continue to exist side by side, a reader's middle-aged

identities don't displace her childish ones. I read to find company, to cushion heartbreak, to whet desire, to slake curiosity. And I read not just to fumble my way toward what writers have thought and felt, but to piece together the thoughts and feelings of earlier readers.

As leery as I am of making reading a means to the ends of health or empathy or community, as often as I've thought "with friends like this, books don't need enemies"—no matter what, long-form print has remained my own Ritalin and Valium. Like most lovers, I'd rather be the first one to go.

END PAPERS

INCREASINGLY, people of the book are also people of the cloud. At the Codex Hackathon, a convention whose participants spend a frenetic weekend designing electronic reading tools, I watch developers line up onstage to pitch book-related projects to potential collaborators and funders. "Uber for books": a same-day service that would deliver library volumes to your door. "Fitbit for books": an app that blocks incoming calls and buzzes your phone with reminders to get back to a book.¹ That literary pedometer meets its real-world counterpart in LitCity: "Imagine walking down a city street and feeling that familiar buzz of a push notification. But instead of it being a notification on Twitter or a restaurant recommendation, it's a beautiful passage from a work of literature with a tie to that place."² I thought back to the nineteenth-century guidebooks that inserted a snippet of Shelley next to their map of the Alps; the book has always been about bringing worlds together.

Some projects return to the decades-old premise of electronic enhancements or "enrichments," which went during the

oughts under the ungainly name of “vooks.” SubText overlays digitized works of literature with annotations and images; BookPlaylist synchronizes a text with background music. Then again, perhaps print books aren’t the ones whose poverty needs to be remedied: other projects feel like pale electronic imitations of features that print books have long taken for granted. Rebook generates digital “association copies” (remember Obama swearing in on Lincoln’s Bible) by allowing readers to give away ebooks that they’ve underlined or annotated. Cover Design History catalogs the dust jackets too often lost when books are digitized or even just discarded by libraries, while Gavel (as in, “you can’t judge a book by . . .”) uses snapshots of book covers to generate and summarize reviews.

One of the problems being solved is death. Would a diagnosis of terminal cancer be softened by an app that helps you divvy up your books among your heirs? The book may not be dying, but its users seem sensitive to their own mortality. *Fahrenheit 451* ends with characters rescuing books from a biblioclastic regime by choosing a book to “become.” You can take a love of reading to mean preserving a threatened past; you can also understand it as a spur to imagining what new forms books might take in the future.

This book opened with Coover’s 1992 magazine article “The End of Books,” which launched a thousand eulogies for the book as we knew it. Coover took “book” to mean a gathering of printed pages mass-produced on spec to be sold to anonymous strangers in exchange for hard cash. His assumption, we can see now, would have surprised a Victorian circulating-library patron or an eighteenth-century subscriber to a hand-circulated

newsheet. But Coover’s understanding of what a book is and what a book does would have been equally hard-pressed to include the Free Press’s wares.

In 1992, hyperlinks were the killer app. Coover’s title punned on the page-turning powers of the codex, which sweeps novel readers inexorably from Page 1 to The End. (The codex replaced the scroll, millennia before Bible.com, precisely because it allowed early Christians to flip hyperactively through their scriptures.) Yet chronology makes it hard to believe that the hyperlink was killing the book, because that metaphor predates the web. In 1835, Théophile Gautier’s novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin* declared that “the newspaper is killing the book, as the book killed architecture.” Gautier was one-upping Victor Hugo’s *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1831), which depicted an archdeacon worrying that the book would kill the cathedral and a bookseller complaining that newfangled printing presses were killing scribes’ trade. This nineteenth-century historical novel is set a quarter century after Gutenberg’s first Bible, when a thriving industry of manuscript-on-demand was forced to readjust.

In hindsight, we can see how rarely one technology supersedes another: the rise of the podcast makes clear that video didn’t doom audio any more than radio ended reading. Yet in 1913, a journalist interviewing Thomas Edison on the future of motion pictures recounted the inventor declaring confidently that “books . . . will soon be obsolete in the public schools.”³ By 1927 a librarian could observe that “pessimistic defenders of the book . . . are wont to contrast the actual process of reading with the lazy and passive contemplation of the screen or listening to wireless, and to prophecy the death of the book.” And in

1966, Marshall McLuhan stuck books into a list of outdated antiques: “clotheslines, seams in stockings, books and jobs—all are obsolete.”⁴

Throughout the nineteenth century and again in the twentieth, every generation rewrote the book’s epitaph. All that changes is whodunnit. Gautier’s culprit was a very real historical phenomenon: the daily papers emerging in 1835 thanks to broader literacy, the metal press invented around 1800, and steam printing shortly thereafter. Later sci-fi writers imagined a succession of replacements: “fonografic” recordings (*Library Journal*, 1883), “telephonic sermons” (Edward Bellamy, 1887), VCR-like “Babble Machines” (H. G. Wells, 1899), microfilm-esque “reading-machine bobbins” (Aldous Huxley, 1932), and “spools which projected books” (Ray Bradbury, 1948). In 1885, French librarian R. Balmer gave the names of “whispering-machine” and “metal automatic book” to something that sounds uncannily like an audiobook. Its user “would place the machine in the hat, and have the sounds conveyed to the ear by wires.” Besides curing eyestrain, these “reading machines” would “permit of the pursuit simultaneously of physical and of mental improvement.” Translation: instead of hunching over desks, intellectuals would be free to jog. And with both hands free, their wives could read while dishwashing: “The problem of the higher education of woman would be triumphantly solved.”⁵

The more spandex jumpsuits, the fewer leather-bound volumes: the future was recognizable by its bookshelf-bare walls. The Enlightenment visionary Louis-Sébastien Mercier predicted that in the year 2440, the sprawling bookstacks of the Royal Library would have been condensed into a single volume.

Like a chemist distilling botanical essences, Mercier explained, the editors of the future would “extract the substance of thousands of volumes, which they have included in a small duodecimo”—scaled somewhere between an iPod and an iPad.

History proved Mercier right in one sense: the future lay not with expanding information, but compacting it. By 1961, the Polish fantasist Stanislaw Lem pictured bookshelves squeezed onto what we would now call an e-reader, supplemented by what we would now call print on demand.

All my purchases fitted into one pocket, though there must have been almost three hundred titles. . . . They can be read with the aid of an opton, which was similar to a book but had only one page between the covers. At a touch, successive pages of the text appeared on it. . . . As a rule, a bookstore had only single “copies” of books, and when someone needed a particular book, the contents of the work was recorded in a crystal. The originals—Crystomatrices—were not to be seen; they were kept behind pale blue enamel steel plates. So a book was printed, as it were, every time someone needed it.⁶

Four years later, Frank Herbert’s doorstep-sized *Dune* conjured up a “Bible made for space travelers. Not a filmbook, but actually printed on filament paper.” Herbert measured the book, like thumb drives and PalmPilots, against a human body: thanks to a “magnifier and electrostatic charge system,” the unabridged volume would take up less space than the joint of your finger.

The term “ebook” endorses such optimism. Whatever replaces the codex, it implies, will be functionally equivalent: the same textual content in a new and improved (usually shrunken)

package. A darker strain of futurology, in contrast, emphasizes political decline over technological progress. *Fahrenheit 451* represents book burning as an end in itself, not just a means to suppressing sedition whose medium happens to be print. A few years earlier, *1984* opened with the purchase of a “thick, quarto-sized blank book with a red back and a marbled cover.” A blank notebook speaks louder than a printed volume: “Even with nothing written in it, it was a compromising possession.” The final piece of evidence of thoughtcrime that sends Winston Smith to Room 101? A paperweight found in his possession. Here as in Amtrak’s Quiet Car, the idea of the book remains more powerful than any ideas that it contains.

Fiction has been better at predicting the invention of cylinder books and filament books, or the survival of marbled pages and glass paperweights, than at imaging what as-yet-unborn institutions might in the future carve out room to read. Even the writers whose imaginations run riot in picturing new machines for viewing and storing text either give no space to libraries, bookstores, and postal systems, or imagine those intermediaries as mirror images of their own era. On the eve of World War I, one humorist imagined a day in the life of a late-twentieth-century household:

There was a knock at the front door, and the young people slid up the moving stairway, anticipating the parcel of books delivered each morning by the public library aeroplane service. They returned disconsolate; it was only the sterilized milk. “You youngsters don’t know what hardships are,” said the elderly uncle; “when I was a lad, back in 1913, I used to get up at

nine o’clock in the morning and walk the length of the street to get a book from a Carnegie Library.”⁷

The librarian fed up with “the death of the book” in 1927 predicts more darkly that in the future “we shall press a button, or turn a handle, and receive the books selected by ourselves—or much more probably by some paternal committee.”⁸ In the decade when Orwell’s dystopia is set, the pulp magazine *Planet Stories* ran Ray Bradbury’s second most famous book-burning fable, *Pillar of Fire*. Washed up in the twenty-fourth century, its time traveler heads straight for the library. For even in a society that torches horror fiction, circulation desks still exist, and their attendants still ask “May I help you?”

“I’d like to ‘have’ Edgar Allan Poe.” His verb was carefully chosen. He didn’t say “read.” He was too afraid that books were passé, that printing itself was a lost art. Maybe all “books” today were in the form of fully delineated three-dimensional motion pictures.⁹

However the terms change, fiction makes the place where books are read, had, or received a comforting constant.

Not so in real life. If you believe that infrastructures have consistently done more to shape reading than have this or that device, then the question becomes not whether we read in print or online or in some as-yet-unimagined medium but rather in the interactions through which we get our hands on books—and even more fundamentally, the interactions that awaken a desire for them. Writers who foresaw space travel, time travel,

and virtual reality still failed to imagine that libraries that provide more digital and print service than ever before might nonetheless find their staffs fired and replaced by volunteers; their survival dependent on self-help books prescribed by doctors; their Carnegie-era premises sold off to for-profit companies that turn their vaulted reading rooms into private gyms where books are ingested, if at all, through earphones on the treadmill. Whatever its medium, I'm confident that the experience of immersion in a world made of words will survive if and only if readers continue to carve out places and times to have words with one another. As for the marbled notebooks, they can take their chances.

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