

Illustrious Illusions

It is the Story that Counts

It was once said that elevators would replace stairs.

Why would they not? After all, elevators provide faster access than do stairs, are more efficient than are stairs, and cause less stress to the human body than do stairs. Why would one choose to tromp up a long flight of stairs instead of stepping into an elevator and being whisked away to another floor?

Of course, it didn't happen. We have elevators, we have stairs, and we have escalators –moving stairs. They co-exist, each serving the same purpose, that of moving people and things from one floor, one level, to another.

We have all read the speculation that Ereaders – Kindles, and Nooks, and iPads – will ultimately replace books. Indeed, sales of Ereaders have soared while bookstores have closed.

The writer who reported the early speculation about elevators, however, asserted that the demise of the printed book is as unlikely as the demise of stairs.

Now, argument by analogy is a tricky business. No analogy is perfect, and it may well be that the suggested link between the future of books and the future of stairs will not hold. Modern inventions have, in fact, replaced many of the things we formerly used.

We write on paper, not papyrus. We pull plows with tractors, not horses. We fly across the Atlantic rather than sail. Cars have replaced carriages, digital has all but replaced film, clocks have replaced sun dials, and my wife maintains that cell phones are replacing wrist watches.

Nevertheless, I tend to agree that Ereaders will not completely replace books.

I take this position as one whose wife gave him a Kindle Fire last August as an anniversary present. Amazon identifies it as “David’s Fifth Kindle,” (although two of the five actually have belonged to my wife). I have used a Kindle since shortly after I first read about them in the *New York Times*. I love my Kindle and the ability it gives me to take a single volume on vacation, rather than having to choose between three or four thick, heavy books and the second pair of shoes that I really need for river rafting.

Ereaders are terrific for straight reading, when you start on page one and read directly to the end. I review books for The Kindle Book Review. Last fall, I sped through each volume on my Kindle. It was great!

Yet, there are situations in which I prefer a book, a printed book.

Some texts are complicated. *Financial Intelligence*, a book I’m currently reading, describes how to understand and use various financial documents. For the chapter on how to read a balance sheet, there is a sample balance sheet – in the appendix. When the text discusses “cash on hand,” for example, I turn to the appendix to see how “cash on hand” actually appears in a balance sheet.

With a book, I'd stick a piece of paper – or my right index finger – at the appendix and flip back and forth as needed. With my Kindle, I bookmark the page in the appendix. To consult it, I tap the top of my screen to access a menu. I choose “Bookmarks,” locate the correct bookmark, and touch it. To return to the text, I touch the arrow at the bottom. In the next paragraph, the text discusses “depreciation,” and I repeat the process. It is as complicated in practice as it is in my description. Thumbs and sheets of paper work much better!

Have you ever looked at images, charts, or tables in an Ereader? My Kindle Fire produces beautiful color images. But they are small. Have you ever tried to follow the flow of a line graph across a screen? When I do find the balance sheet in the appendix, can I even read the entries? I have to touch the screen to enlarge the image and touch it again when I have finished with it. Give me a book any day!

When I read Mariah Jovan's book, *Dunham*, I read it straight through. On one occasion, though, I had forgotten the significance of a particular character and had to page back to find who he was. It was not fun – flipping backwards, having to remember my location in the book rather than marking it, locating the reference, then selecting “go to” in the menu and typing in the location when I was ready to read again. I can imagine reading a technical work, something difficult to understand – Steven Hawkins's book, *A Brief History of Time* comes to mind – and having to frequently page back to find a previous reference. *Lost* is an understatement. Ereaders are not optimized for this activity.

Finally, if the book is something that I want to keep, I want it printed on paper. I have the *Book of Common Prayer* on my Kindle, and I pretty much read in it six days a week (I hear it read on Sunday). My *prayer book*, though, is on a table beside my chair in the den; the copy on my Kindle is simply for convenience.

I have published two books, both of which are available on Ereaders (*The Reunion* and, recently, *The Handfasting*) and in print. I have copies of them both on my Kindle, but I assure you, printed copies can be found on the desk in my office. I love Greek icons, and I have books with reproductions of numerous images. I want these on paper where I can page through them slowly, enjoying their beauty, finding meaning in the details, something that would likely be impossible on my Kindle.

We know that technological innovations can be fleeting. In a decade, will .mobi files be readable on any device? Have you heard an eight-track tape recently? How about TRS-DOS, the operating system once used by Radio Shack's computers? Paper survives. Today's digital files? Maybe.

It is true. Ereaders may replace books. I'm thinking that they won't, but in the end, does it really matter?

Children's author Eric Carle once told a reporter, "I like to hold books and touch them. But in the future, who knows? When they invented papyrus, someone probably said, 'Storytelling was so good. Why did we have to go and put it on papyrus?' But one thing doesn't change: It's the story that counts. The medium doesn't matter."*

“It's the story that counts.” Well said.

**USA Today*, November 14, 2013

