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Further Thoughts of a Novice E-Reader

By VERLYN KLINKENBORG

I have been reading a lot on my iPad recently, and I have some complaints — not about the iPad but about the state of digital reading generally. Reading is a subtle thing, and its subtleties are artifacts of a venerable medium: words printed in ink on paper. Glass and pixels aren't the same.

When I read a physical book, I don't have to look anywhere else to find out how far I've gotten. The iPad e-reader, iBooks, tries to create the illusion of a physical book. The pages seem to turn, and I can see the edges of those that remain. But it's fake. There are always exactly six unturned pages, no matter where I am in the book.

Now, a larger problem. Books in their digital format look vastly less "finished," less genuine. And we can vary their font and type size, making them resemble all the more our own word-processed manuscripts. Your poems — no matter how wretched or wonderful they are — will never look as good as Robert Hass's poems in the print edition of "The Apple Trees at Olema." But your poems can look almost exactly as ugly — as e-book-like — as the Kindle version of that collection.

All the e-books I've read have been ugly — books by Chang-rae Lee, Alvin Kernan, Stieg Larsson — though the texts have been wonderful. But I didn't grow up reading texts. I grew up reading books. The difference is important.

When it comes to digital editions, the assumption seems to be that all books are created equal. Nothing could be further from the truth. In the mass migration from print to digital, we're seeing a profusion of digital books — many of them out of copyright — that look new and even "HD," but which may well have been supplanted by more accurate editions and better translations. We need a digital readers' guide — a place readers can find out whether the book they're about to download is the best available edition.

And finally, two related problems. I already have a personal library. But most of the books I've ever read have come from lending libraries. Barnes & Noble has released an e-reader that

allows short-term borrowing of some books. The entire impulse behind Amazon's Kindle and Apple's iBooks assumes that you cannot read a book unless you own it first — and only you can read it unless you want to pass on your device.

That goes against the social value of reading, the collective knowledge and collaborative discourse that comes from access to shared libraries. That is not a good thing for readers, authors, publishers or our culture.

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