

Five things that made me two-time paper books with my e-reader

You may love the old-fashioned book, but sooner or later your emotions are bound to be kindled.

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A few years ago, my brother-in-law, a person known to pepper his conversation with stuff I don't even understand half the time, such as, "the internet of things" or "SEOs and SEMs" or "bitcoins", gifted the spouse and me a Kindle, from what was, as it happens, one of the last Borders bookstores. I immediately cornered it. As the greater book lover of the two of us – a fact that might be hotly disputed by the spouse but is unutterably true – naturally it was to be mine, no arguments. I spent a great deal of money on a suitable cover. I transferred several pdfs into it which I needed to read for my PhD. And then promptly forgot all about it. (No wonder my PhD was always going badly.)

The Kindle lay about somewhere, gathering dust. Once in six months or so, when my sustainable phase would descend upon me like pollen allergy, I would hunt it out. Then I would have to spend a whole day hunting for the charger. (One of the secrets that Kindle-owners can attest to is that the Kindle and its charger are always already estranged. It's a principle.) Then, invariably, I would come across an article or a person (you know who) who would play devil's advocate: You might think you are saving the environment by eschewing print books – but what about the inbuilt cost of this technology? What about the unsustainability of mining rare earths, for example, that a device like this might use? Are you at least willing to consider the bigger more complicated picture?

I would sense a migraine coming on. And then, lamely, without sufficient facts to decide either way, I would allow my green fever to abate in a dignified fashion. The Kindle (and the solar cooker) would begin to gather dust all over again. I would, in secret relief, begin to acquire *real* books – the ones that people can smell and taste and judge by their covers – from the usual sources: bookshops, second hand stalls, online stores and, of course, with extreme book-greed, from my publisher's office.

In this period, I remember writing the following words in an essay called *The Secret Dreamworld of a Bibliomaniac*, which was all about my love for books, bookfairs, bookshops, College Street in Calcutta, and the whole song and dance about the solid materiality of bookish love – you get the drift: "I cannot say," I wrote cockily, "that I approve of Kindles entirely. Can you judge a Kindle by its cover? Can you prop it on the kitchen counter and splatter it with chocolate while you bake a cake, scribbling notes of your own on the side? Can you sip a cinnamon latte while bookshopping on Amazon? Can you walk into a person's room and instinctively understand their tastes by looking at their Kindle as you could their bookshelf?"

The problem

I remained with this smug self-satisfaction as an old-fashioned bookhugger might, writing cozy articles of the above sort, until one very wet very rainy night last winter. Everything changed forever.

In the rather remote environs that our JNU studio perched upon a ravine offered, I was alone, cashless and in the grips of acute bookfever. It was past ten o'clock, all bookstores everywhere would be shut. I was supposed to finalise a chapter of my thesis and send it to my guide the next day, but all I could think about was how I could possibly get to a bookstore before my liver burst with longing. My stomach felt knotted, my tongue was dry. The cure to this was as specific as Cetrizine for allergies or peanut butter and caramel shake for a broken heart: I would need to *buy* a book.

There *was* a magazine kiosk in Priya Complex that stocked a few second-hand books, but by the time I would get there – walking in the rain like an abhisarika since our part of JNU was not exactly a transportation hub – they too would have been locked up for the night. I began to pace up and down in panic. And then, deciding that panic did not work, I sat down and made a list of probable places that might have all-night bookstores: five-star hotels and the airport. Then I had a brainwave: what about the little bookshop in Max Hospital, Saket? If they had any sense they should keep it open all night, right?

I made several hysterical calls. No luck.

The solution

Then, from nowhere, I spotted my Kindle lying in a dusty corner of the bookshelf. My brain began to whirr. In a perfect display of the axiom that necessity is indeed the mother of invention, I stunned myself by managing to create a wi-fi zone with my phone, using the data connection and Bluetooth (believe me, before this I wasn't even *sure* what Bluetooth meant. I thought it was that dinky headset thing corporate types wore.) But book-greed, I'll have you know, exactly like hypnosis, does seem to bring out talents that one never suspected one had.

Long story short: a wi-fi zone was invented and my kindle began to sing. While it poured outside and foxes howled, I was able to buy and immediately begin to read Ann Patchett's *Truth and Beauty*. The book – memorable for so many reasons – will always remain especially piquant in my head, its charms enhanced by the memory of clayey rain smell softening the hard winter cold and the traces of acid reflux in my mouth that extreme book hunger induces.

It was a brave new world. The age of Kindle was upon us.

Now that I am a Kindle evangelizer, people often ask me to tell them exactly why they should invest in a Kindle.

The reasons

ONE: The most obvious reason why one should own a kindle (and acquire the ability to create a wi-fi zone using sticks, matches, a Swiss knife and the underwire of a bra) is, of course, the freedom to buy books anywhere, anytime. The fact that you *can* sure sweetens that unbelievably dull party you are forced to attend (if P- sings one more time or Q- gives that lecture on "Postmodernity and Yo-Yo Honey Singh" again, you don't need to brain the friend who dragged you here. You can just slip into a coat closet and buy an old Sophie Hannah or the new Taseer); it is something akin to the serenity in your soul when you know you have a fridge stashed with goodies you can access anytime. The downside is that, the payment gateway is so very effective and remembers every detail of all your cards so well, that it is highly possible you will suddenly realize that it's the middle of the month and you have no money left in your account. But at least all the *Wizard of Oz* books you can download for free will help you get through the tough fiscal time.

TWO: If you are a man who wants to read *Fifty Shades of Grey* on the commute, you can be sure no one will judge you (especially not all those women who read and write papers on how erotica is an integral part of feminism, but glare at men who might read it openly). On the downside, you may miss your stop.

THREE: You know how early on in your marriage, you display your combined books proudly on the gorgeous bookshelves you bought together, the most expensive pieces of furniture you both agreed unanimously upon? Well, take it from me, later on in the marriage, if you are anything like the spouse and I, you will cross a threshold limit on the book-vanity book-hunger graph, and find that shelf space in the house is at such a premium you are negotiating all the time. That is the moment it is prudent to get a Kindle. Downside: If you are anything like me, you will attract Satan's minions, so however many books you buy and read on your kindle, somehow your bookshelves will still get fuller and fuller. It's possibly the spouse's fault. But he insists it's something netherwordly. (I'm working on taming the minions though. Keep watching this space. A breakthrough is at hand.

FOUR: You know how books were the perfect way to stop creepy strangers from making smalltalk with you in trains? Well, you know what, it just doesn't work anymore. Books invite more questions: Is this Chetan Bhagat's new book? (The cover says Orhan Pamuk.) Is this better than Chetan Bhagat's new book? Is Chetan Bhagat's new book selling less quickly than his last book sold? And so on and so forth until you want to throw yourself on the bloody tracks. But if you are a kindle-wielding individual, especially if you have one of those dinky cases with a light fitted on top, trust me they will stay scarce. Kindle is the new creep repellent.

FIVE: And finally, if you are an author who's written a book recently and find yourself afflicted by a strange condition that ensures you never ever spot your own book in any bookshop (though other people assure you they've seen you book here and there), then you *may* want to read on your Kindle for a while. All that jealousy you feel in bookstores cannot be good for your health. The downside, however, is that you cannot sign a copy of your book for

someone on Kindle. A huge downside, right? So, in all earnestness then, yes, keep you kindle close to your heart. But make sure you tell it, you are not exclusive, after all.

You can buy Devapriya Roy's novels, The Vague Woman's Handbook and The Weight Loss Club on your Kindle. Her husband, however, has separately emailed to tell us that for all her obsession with the threshold value on the book vanity/ book hunger graph, Roy is hatching a plot to move to Daryaganj, just so she can have morning dibs on the Sunday Book Bazaar.