

Why a book?

Why indeed, in this digital age, should we still be picking up and reading books – **Philip Davies** provides some answers.



Let me make it clear from the start that this article isn't an argument against e-readers. Their digital nature means they have a number of virtues, not the least being that they are compact and lightweight, with truly impressive storage and connectivity capabilities. Like all our digital technology (when it's working properly) e-readers are extraordinary.

But unsurprisingly books have a character all of their own, and their quite different physical nature means that the foundation of their character lies in our senses; as Alberto Manguel expresses it "...the touch, the smell, the look of the words on a page were an essential part of my relationship to books."¹ When considered this way, screens limit our interaction with the object we hold to read or look at pictures, which is important for adults but even more so for children, who need to be able to reach out with their senses from the earliest age.

First of all there is the weight and size of a book followed, when opened, by the feel of its pages – from the slight coarseness of older paperbacks to the smoothness of art books and exhibition catalogues.

And then there are those delights for children and adults alike – pop-up books. Be it *Fungus the Bogeyman* or *Alice in Wonderland*, vistas unfold as we open the pages, and there are flaps to lift and tabs to pull as well. A little tricky for very small fingers perhaps, though learning to look after books as early as possible is to be encouraged – as Hilaire Belloc admonished:

*Child! Do not throw this book about;
Refrain from the unholy pleasure
Of cutting all the pictures out!
Preserve it as your chiefest treasure.*

This raises the matter of how we, as adults, treat books – Anne Fadiman suggests that there are essentially two different types of book lover, courtly and carnal.

The carnal book lover has a high regard for the words, but not the physical book itself, which he or she will happily annotate, bend paperbacks back on themselves thus creasing the spines, or even rip out the chapters they have read to reduce the weight of the book.

Courtly lovers on the other hand (the group to which I belong) regard the physical book itself to be worthy of veneration as well, and would never break the spine of a book simply to make it easier to hold, nor use anything other than a proper bookmark to keep one's place.² There are limits to this

of course – second-hand books in decent condition are always welcome, and it would be foolish to try keeping favourite recipe books in pristine condition.

In search of lost time

I'm sure that most of us, very early on in our lives, have chewed on a book or two, but I don't think tasting books is a thing one can generally

Alice pop-up book by Robert Sabuda (Simon & Schuster Children's UK, 2003)



recommend. For the bibliophile however, one of the distinct pleasures of a new book is opening it at random, burying one's nose in it and inhaling deeply to get its particular scent. One or two books have, by way of their aroma, transported me back to primary school, not specifically, but in a general, one might say atmospheric way. An olfactory echo of something used in arts and crafts perhaps.

We shouldn't forget though that smell and taste are interwoven senses. In *Remembrance of Things Past* Marcel Proust (1871-1922) has his narrator describe the sudden recovery of a much fuller sense of his childhood through an involuntary memory stirred by the taste of tea and a type of small cake called a madeleine: "And suddenly the memory revealed itself. The taste was that of the little piece of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray ... my aunt Léonie used to give to me, dipping it first in her own cup of tea or tisane."³

Memory resides in books in other ways. The specific smell of old paperbacks fuses with the straightforward voluntary memory of, say, how old we were when we bought them, and what other things were happening in our lives at that time. And

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there can also be the things that we slip into books and forget about, as just happened when I was looking up the Proust reference: out of the back of the volume fell a note dated over 30 years ago that reads "Dear Philip, We thought these⁴ might keep you out of mischief for a few days! Love from all, Eric, Edith, Jessica". Time regained.

Sight is of course common to both screens and books. However, the *appearance* of books takes this way beyond the central matter of reading the text concerned. Whether or not you use it as a means of judgement, the first delight of a book is its cover. From the cheapest to the most expensive, some thought will have gone into the cover, and often a great deal of work was involved in its design and production, be it hardback or paperback.

From the publisher's point of view the purpose is to get booksellers to stock the book and us to buy it, but that unreservedly practical outlook does not necessarily exclude good design. Perhaps because they were originally intended as "cheap, good-looking reprints of fiction and non-fiction in paperback", and rapidly became ubiquitous and finally iconic,

an outstanding example of cover design over time is that of Penguin (along with Pelican and Puffin) books. Penguin books were the brainchild of the Lane brothers, Allen, Richard and John, who realised early on that their books – originally retailing for the modest sum of 6d – "needed to look attractive in order to encourage shops to display them to advantage".⁵

Books as friends

Some people are more inclined to buy books than others, and I have to confess that like Julian the Apostate "I have been possessed since childhood by a prodigious desire to buy and own books."⁶ This sort of thing inevitably leads to a book collection, and finally your own library, where your books line up on shelves and the cover designs and colours knit together to form part of the décor. There's no need for elaborate bookshelves or cases because, as William Ewart Gladstone (1809-1898) wrote, the books "are themselves the ornament".⁷



We gather books around us just as we gather our friends and family. The books, upon inspection by visitors or our friends, can tell them much about ourselves – our tastes and interests, whether we prefer fiction or non-fiction, or whether we are organised or disorganised, demonstrating "The uniqueness of each reader, reflected in the particular nature of his personal library..."⁸ And the books themselves can also be our friends, sometimes lifting our spirits when we are down: the French politician and philosopher Charles de Montesquieu (1689-1755) said that he did not know of a distress not relieved by an hour's reading. At other times they can reflect our pleasures. In his interesting little pamphlet *Lunacy and the Arrangement of Books*, Terry Belanger tells the story of Martin Breslauer, who "made a special point of always having his reference books bound in morocco of the brightest colours ...

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saying that they were his close friends, and that he used them often, so why shouldn't they be cheerful in appearance".⁹

And this leads us to another pleasure that e-readers cannot provide the book lover – how to arrange one's books on the shelves. Needless to say different people have different preferences, and the French author Georges Perec (1936-1982) even tried to list the different possibilities. His suggestions include by colour, by size, by genre, by literary period and by frequency of consultation.¹⁰ As a lapsed librarian my own preference is alphabetically by author within separate fiction and non-fiction sections. Alphabetical arrangement has a long history. In the tenth century, for example, Abdul Kassem Ismael, Grand Vizier of Persia, could not bear to be parted from his collection of 117,000 volumes when travelling, so he had them carried with him by four hundred camels that had been trained to walk in alphabetical order.¹¹

And sometimes – just as with our human companions – we may find that we have one or two very special book friends. For me there are two such – *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*



*And Types may be re-draped to taste
In cloth-of-gold or camlet.*¹³

Books, I feel, can be friends in ways that e-readers simply cannot, and I hope to have gone some way to making that case convincingly here. Certainly for my own part I will be sticking with the old technology for the foreseeable future.

References:

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- 3 Proust, Marcel, *Remembrance of Things Past*, v.1 p.50. Translated by C. K. Scott Moncrief and Terence Kilmartin. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1983
- 4 In this edition, *Remembrance of Things Past* is in three volumes and runs to well over 3000 pages
- 5 see Baines, Phil, *Penguin by Design: a cover story 1935-2005* (London, Penguin, 2005) for the full story
- 6 Bonnet, Jacques, *Phantoms on the Bookshelves*, p.11. London, Maclehose Press, 2010
- 7 Petroski, Henry, *The Book on the Bookshelf*, p.205. New York, Knopf, 1999
- 8 Zaid, Gabriel, *So Many Books*, p.11. London, Sort of Books, 2004
- 9 New Castle DE, Oak Knoll Press, 2003, p.3
- 10 Bonnet, op.cit. p.35
- 11 Manguel, Alberto, *A History of Reading*, p.193. London, HarperCollins, 1996
- 12 Sir John Tenniel (1820 – 1914) was the illustrator and political cartoonist who created the original Alice illustrations
- 13 Carroll, Lewis, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Illustrated by Arthur Rackham. London, Heinemann, [1907]

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and *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There*. I have a small collection of 30 different versions of these books, some gifts from friends, a few happy discoveries in charity shops, and some bought from specialist booksellers. But I do not buy simply to get as many versions as possible. I'm principally interested in the illustrations, which is where we start off with our reading – simple words and pictures together, and we can keep the child's delight in illustrations through into our adult lives.

With the Alice books I'm looking for novel, well-executed pictures that bring fresh life to the stories, be they the work of classic or contemporary illustrators. Part of Austin Dobson's 'poem' to the edition of Alice illustrated by Arthur Rackham reads as follows:

*Enchanting Alice! Black-and-white
Has made your deeds perennial;
And naught save "Chaos and old Night"
Can part you now from TENNIEL¹²*

*But still you are a Type, and based
In Truth, like LEAR and HAMLET;*