

# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

## The Chronicle Review

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October 15, 2012

### Reading in Place

By Leah Price



Timothy Cook for The Chronicle

Review

Wherever I'd seen him, he'd been reading. The Kindle app was open on his smartphone every time we passed each other in the hall; I'd read iBooks over his shoulder during an interminable meeting, and heard about some audiobook he'd just raced through on the elliptical trainer. Only gender stopped me from seeing what he read on the toilet.

But I'd never visited my colleague at his home before. What struck me first was that his built-in bookshelves were attractively stocked. Almost too attractively. No spines were crinkled; no colors were faded; no paperback interrupted the line of cloth. What made the books look odd, I realized during the salad course

of the dinner that he was hosting, was their evenness. Spine matched spine, each imprinted with the logo of our local university press. Had a truckload been sent from its warehouse in return for product placement? If so, the investment paid off: I can't have been the only guest who came away with a reading list.

That I'm not naming the colleague in question suggests how much unopened volumes embarrass academics like me. Yet the digital age is rendering such books more common, not less. It's true that there's nothing new about "furniture books" (as one magazine dubbed them as long ago as 1859): The trade in reading material has long been dwarfed by the market for coffee-table books, books that steakhouse chains buy by the yard, empty bindings that interior decorators use to accessorize the upholstery.

The rise of e-books has, however, coincided with an upsurge of books as objects. Kate Spade's line of paperback-shaped purses was launched the same year that Amazon began selling more e-books than print books. At the same time as mail-order catalogs are entering the dustbin of history, artificially weathered blank books landscape the windows of clothing shops such as Anthropologie. Do-it-yourselfers can consult Lisa Occhipinti's 2011 *The Repurposed Library*, a how-to guide to turning books into household objects such as firescreens, mirrors, and lamps.

What spawns this use of fake books as real reading migrates online?

One answer is that readers—along with their e-readers—continue to be housed in rooms designed for earlier media. Built-in bookshelves are especially common in houses from the 1930s, when Edward Bernays, the father of public relations, lobbied architects on behalf of the publishing industry. He assumed, rightly, that cabinetry would generate demand for books. No one foresaw that supply might outlast demand. Two decades later, in a 1955 issue of *The Library Quarterly*, a writer called it "not likely, for instance, that changes in methods of reproducing the written word will have much effect on my cabinetmaker. The book for the mass-market will continue indefinitely to look like the book we know."

Just half a century later, its author was proved wrong. As the rise of MP3's left old stereo cabinets sitting on curbs across America, and the triumph of laptops left CPU trolleys to rot in university storerooms, so the filing cabinets and bookshelves that dot campus offices are threatening to become antiques, as decorative as a candlestick in a house lit by electricity.

The first generation of PC users tried to retrofit old desks, converting pencil drawers into keyboard trays not long after television sets were stashed in armoires designed to contain clothing. Today, the problem is the opposite. Instead of a dearth of furniture to match our new possessions, we face a surplus of furniture bearing the ghostly imprint of outdated objects. Ikea responded by redesigning its bookcases: The Billy, whose assembly has bruised so many graduate students' fingers, has deepened to accommodate exhibition catalogs and tchotchkes. In the same way that some New Yorkers use their ovens for storing shoes, bookshelves are morphing into curio cabinets.

As coffee-table volumes gather dust, reading migrates elsewhere. Once, readers came to the book: The first printed folios were chained to lecterns. Gradually, books came to readers. Gaslight let duodecimos clamber into our beds—no more fear of the curtains catching fire. The publisher Allen Lane slipped books into our pockets: The first Penguin paperback, in 1935, bore the same relation to a quarto that a laptop does to a desktop computer. The first audiobook cassettes were even smaller: Sitting in the driveway to hear the end of a chapter, my parents' generation found a private space where text could unfold uninterrupted.

Scholars might be library-bound, but pleasure reading could take place anywhere. In 1915, an early adopter already lamented that "micro facsimiles will always take second place to the codex book, at least until some genius develops a way for reading them everywhere that books can be read: in the subway, in the bathtub, in a fishing skiff, and the various other places whence readers are wont to repair."

The Romantic poet Robert Southey identified three different categories of book: one for the table, a second for the fields, and a third for the coach. The cold-war-era publishers who invented the

"airport paperback" were updating an early-Victorian innovation, the "railway library." Nineteenth-century readers chose one book for the train, another for the parlor: A journalist in 1851 observed that "persons who apparently would be ashamed to be found reading certain works at home have asked for publications of the worst character at the railway bookstall."

The photographer who blogs at [Underground New York Public Library](#)—"a visual library featuring the reading-riders of the New York City subways"—snaps book covers, not closed on a bookshelf but open in a commuter's grasp. Titles that sit unopened at home come to life in a swaying subway car. As each commuter glances from the inside of her book to the cover of someone else's, readers become sandwich boards. Now that in-flight wireless has reduced "airplane mode" to a metaphor, only the deepest tunnels carve out time for reading something other than tweets and memos.

Although libraries are the only institution that contains official "reading rooms," noncirculating library books are not the only thing best read on the spot. Once, the dentist's waiting room brought us up to date on celebrity divorces. Now, readers carry texts the way a snail carries its shell. Forget the death of the book; the real casualty is SkyMall. Now that my smartphone guards me against boredom as surely as a granola bar staves off a hiker's starvation, I've stopped choosing my supermarket line by its magazines. Less graffiti is carved into classroom desks because the students whom I bore can check Facebook. As the MP3 killed Muzak, ePub may kill Gideon Bibles.

Where does this leave campus libraries and faculty offices? The School of Design in my own university plans to stud its stacks with "cold spots": metal shields blocking cellphone reception and wireless signals from carrel-like cubbies where students can curl up with a book, or even with an already-downloaded e-book. Books continue to connote stillness: In 2004, as campus libraries invested in cacophonous milk frothers, Amtrak unveiled its first "quiet car," whose loudspeaker invited travelers to "enjoy our library atmosphere." Bed, bath, and beyond: Sustained reading is easiest away from our desks. And my colleague's living room

suggests that stay-at-home books may end up, in every sense, on the shelf.

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**fortysomethingprof** • 2 years ago

I already have so much work that requires me to read a screen that actual books and magazines provide relief from that. But maybe that is my age and slowly declining eyesight talking. e-Books do save trees. Maybe I will get a Kindle for Christmas and that will settle it for me.

"Less graffiti is carved into classroom desks because the students whom I bore can check Facebook." Here we differ. I do not allow laptops or phones to be used in my classroom; in addition to distracting the student they distract the student's neighbors.

"As the MP3 killed Muzak, ePub may kill Gideon Bibles." Really? This could be the best thing that ever happened to the Gideons. They could provide each hotel with a certain number of Kindles to be checked out from the front desk, and each Kindle could have not only the Bible in several versions (KJV, NIV, RSV, etc.) but also a concordance, an illustrated children's Bible, the latest Joel Osteen and Joyce Meyer books, prayer guides, Christian histories, videos, and a bunch of other cool stuff.

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