
Volume 16
Number 1
Print is Dead! Long Live Print! (Spring 2010)

July 2014

Why We Love Books

Sequoia Campshure
University of Washington

Recommended Citation

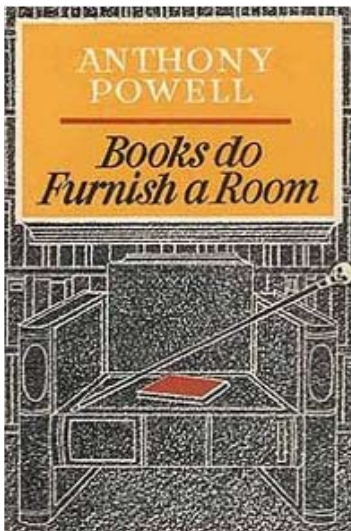
Campshure, S. (2014). Why We Love Books. *OLA Quarterly*, 16(1), 9-11. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1268>

© 2014 by the author(s).

OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

Why We Love Books

by *Sequoia Campshure*
MLIS Student
iSchool, University of Washington



A semi-autobiographical novel by Anthony Powell about a research library and writing, tenth in his series of *A Dance to the Music of Time*. ISBN: 9780099472490 OCLC: 58828028

Settling into my seat on a recent cross country flight I adjusted my necessities: water bottle, huge scarf that doubles as a blanket, and of course, a book. As the crew prepared for takeoff a flight attendant walked through the aisle checking seatbelts, overhead bins, and paused at my row to remind my seatmate engaged in a book of his own: “I’m sorry sir, even Kindles need to be turned off.”

The digitization of printed material continues to transform our current and future landscapes in relation to reading, publishing, and consumption habits. But based on my daily encounters with print, I have no fear that the physical books which fill our libraries and homes are on the verge of disappearance. Books as physical items have played a large role in our cultural history, seen as containers for information, knowledge, and often, privilege. But books are more than just items well suited to display one’s societal attainment. They have become ingrained in our society, symbolizing more than the tasks they facilitate.

There may be people who read using e-readers and only e-readers, but the purchase of Kindles by millions of Americans doesn’t necessarily imply the dichotomous future that those sales might suggest. In fact, I think most of us are actually interested in enjoying the utility of multiple technologies throughout the day, and in finding a combination of digital and print materials that works for us as individuals. As a student, one of the things I relish most about recreational reading is how distinct the physical book is, an entity that is entirely separate from my multi-functioning laptop. I am not alone in this regard. People continue to reach for physical books for a number of reasons (and not all of them are just to celebrate the break from academic responsibilities). I know a number of people who use e-readers on a regular basis, but on my public transit commutes, my hands and the hands around me hold print: magazines, paperbacks, library books, articles, and newspapers. In this essay, I’d like to explore some of the ways books remain an integral part of our culture, and why I think there will always be a place for the printed book.

Books = Ourselves

The well-filled bookshelves in many of our homes aren’t just aesthetically pleasing pieces of furniture, but are often an insightful reflection of those who live there. I recall surreptitiously checking out a potential suitor’s bookcase, as the contents therein have the potential to be much more revealing than any questions I could possibly ask. Most readers see their book collection as an extension of themselves. Yes, physical books grouped together on the shelf may be pretty and represent a sense of scholarship to their owners, but they also represent memories, emotions, and ideas.

Please though, do *me* a favor: if you are ever invited to my home, don’t judge me by those books! As much as I enjoy the chance to revisit and consult books that I love, I am even fonder of finishing a great read and then passing it on to someone who I hope will get just as much from its pages as I did. For me, handing off a printed book, a complete entity, is an act of intimacy entirely distinct from reading suggestions not followed up by the goods. There seems to be something more sterile and detached about casually mentioning to someone, “When you have the chance you should download *The Corrections* to your Kindle. I think you’d love it.”





Book Clubs

Our participation in book groups and book clubs show another way in which books are more than just containers of information. Whether with friends, acquaintances, colleagues, or strangers, book groups are a way to make reading social, to share our own experiences, to listen to others, to learn. The success of Oprah's Book Club illustrates the attraction to books as everyday objects. As a truly national program, her Book Club has been responsible for not only an increase in book sales but also in transforming millions of dormant and non-readers to active readers. At its most basic, the book group trend can be attributed to two things: accessibility and the reality that a person is more likely to read if those around them read.

For any book club, accessibility is essential; not only in matters of content, but in how and to whom the material is available. The success of Oregon Reads 2009 and other Everybody Reads programs are due in part to their aim of bringing people together through a shared experience. To ensure that these programs are inclusive they must be accessible to everybody, something which print allows and endorses. Any similar effort attempted with electronic materials requiring e-readers would in effect immediately exclude a large portion of possible participants. For some, the choice to use e-readers may just be an issue of preference, but for the general public their use is overwhelmingly cost prohibitive.

Book Functionality

I believe that physical books will continue to play a large role in our lives, and not just due to issues of accessibility or because of the way print satisfies tactile and emotional expectations. Physical books can simply be used in ways digital cannot. And most importantly, we can't overlook that print is a lasting format whose contents aren't dependant on programs or tools that become quickly obsolete and replaced with a newer technology. For some readers the transition from print to digital books is as easy as spraying Smell of Books™ New Book Smell around your designated e-reading area. But for most readers there are certain functionalities of a physical book that can't be replicated digitally.



"Have you been avoiding e-books because they just don't smell right?"


<http://smellofbooks.com/>

- The experience of holding a group of pages in your hand as you attempt to understand a long passage or character introduction that implores you to keep flipping back and forth.
- The satisfaction of closing a book as you finish the last page.
- Using a page marker to guide you back to a specific passage and running your finger across the immutable text on the page.
- The exposure to clues about where you are on a page or in a chapter: you can see that only half of the next page is filled with text or you can quickly look ahead to see how many pages are left till the end of the section.
- The layout of a physical text is more revealing of contextual clues overall. When I read something in print I am much more likely to recall where it was on a page and where that page is located within the book.



Additionally, there are some points that are specific to academic and instructional settings. For instance, the ability to have multiple physical objects open next to each other promotes a type of spatial reasoning that is unavailable when your only option is navigating back and forth between tabs on a computer or documents on an e-reader. Our experiences shape who we are as learners, and in the academic setting there is a familiarity and expectation that To Read is To Learn. In practice, it's not as easy to buckle down and create the same sacred study space when using digital academic materials accessed with e-readers, or through the online catalog, in place of physical texts. In digital situations, the tool used by the student isn't just for educational purposes, but also a tool to access the web. As a student completing my degree mostly online, I know firsthand that focusing my studies becomes more of a challenge with digital materials—even the most dedicated student can be tempted by the possibility to check the weather forecast or latest celebrity gossip every 15 minutes. Reading a physical book allows me to better focus my attention and that focused energy encourages true immersion in the content, facilitating a better chance of overall comprehension or sense of imagination.

Book Love

Electronic books undoubtedly have caused some displacement to the printed page, but the printed book as a tactile physical object and a tool for learning satisfy reading needs in ways that can't be digitally replicated. As someone who spends my days surrounded by print and electronic media, I recognize the continued place that print has in our work lives, our student lives, and our personal lives. Because books can be vivid symbols for the pre-digital age, some people fail to acknowledge the continued function and usefulness of print in our everyday lives. Print is alive, and as a reader I am not ready to, nor preparing to, give up something that is as embedded in our culture and as functional, just because there are digital technologies with a similar purpose to the printed page. 

References

Oregon Library Association (2009). *Oregon Reads 2009*. Retrieved February 15, 2010 from: <http://www.oregonreads2009.org/about.html>

