

Book to the future: how the way we read has changed

Print sales may be down, but literature is far from dead, it's just gone digital, says *Rosa Silverman*

Back before air travel was affordable, my family would undertake interminable car journeys every time we set off on holiday. The only thing that prevented them from being intolerably dull was the voice of the actor Martin Jarvis. His side-splittingly funny narrations of Richmal Crompton's *Just William* stories brought those books to life so vividly that even now we find ourselves quoting lines from them in his incredible range of accents.

You might think the analogue pleasures of story tapes have no place in today's world. In fact, the reverse is true. Audiobooks (their modern incarnation) are expected to generate revenues of £115 million in the UK next year, a 30 per cent increase on 2018. Deloitte predicts that the global audiobook market will grow by 25 per cent to nearly £4 billion in 2020.

This is quite something when you consider that, just a few years ago, commentators were seriously debating whether books were dead. The answer appears to be no. But undeniably, the way we read has changed, with the rising popularity of audiobooks just one of the ways. Here's how we're doing books now...

Printed books and the rise of the book-boast

Sales of printed books still accounted for more than 80 per cent of the combined print and digital UK book market of £3.6 billion last year, according to figures from the Publishers Association. However, sales of physical books fell for the first time in five years, by a margin of 5.4 per cent (£168 million in sales).

At the same time, our relationship with books is changing. Thanks to our reduced

Long story short: audiobooks are ideal for time-poor book fans

attention span, we hunger for easily digestible snippets at the same time as wanting new ways to show off about our love of culture.

Bringing a new meaning to the term "snackable content", in September, the University of Lincoln installed free vending machines dispensing passages from classic novels or poems instead of packets of crisps. Similar machines have also been installed in London's Canary Wharf, servicing time-poor commuters. Vending machines dispensing entire books have also sprung up around schools and transport hubs, though the choice of titles on offer is necessarily limited.

Elsewhere, the enduring popularity of the printed book has been helped by the "shelfie" trend – taking pictures of one's bookshelves and posting them on social media. A friend likes to call this "book-boasting": reading not as a performance; a sly means of courting admiration and approval by others.

This tallies with a Sky Arts poll in October, which found that more than half of us pretend we've read books we have not. (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, 1984, *War and Peace* and *The Odyssey* were among those lied about the most.)

Sonic boom: The explosion of the audiobook

For the time-poor, tech-rich, audio is the obvious answer. Income from audiobook sales rose by 194 per cent in the five years to 2018, according to Publishers Association figures.

Imogen Church, who has voiced more than 300 audiobooks, including *Bridget Jones's Diary*, attributes their appeal in part to the pressures of modern life. "I think we're just too busy," she says. "We're [listening] while we iron, wash up, hold the baby. People don't have time to 'eye-read'."

"Hopefully, most of us were read to as kids, so it is soothing, but also we were telling and listening to stories way before printed text, so I feel it's hard-wired in us."

Philip Jones, editor of *The Bookseller*, reckons certain book genres lend themselves to listening better than others, with non-fiction titles such as Elton John's memoir, *Me*, read partly by Sir Elton himself, among those that work well.

Stephen Lotinga, chief executive of the Publishers Association, welcomes the recent sonic boom and the fact that "audiobooks are reaching a wide range of consumers, including those who didn't previously buy books".

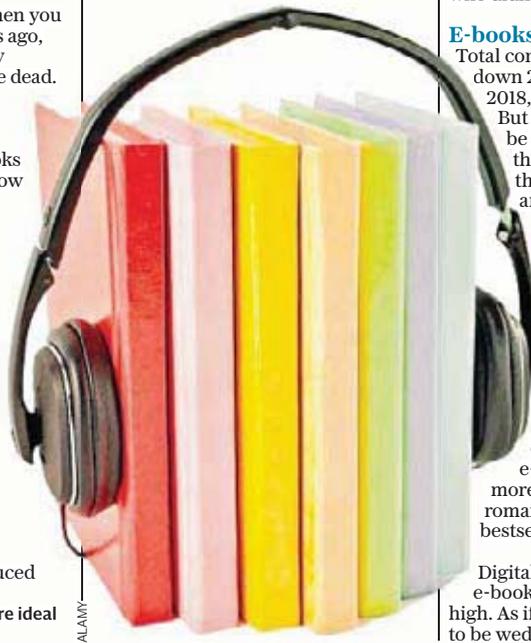
E-books for convenience

Total consumer e-books sales were down 2 per cent to £251 million in 2018, representing a slow decline.

But Jones doesn't expect them to be overtaken by audiobooks in the short term, attributing their appeal to "convenience and price: [they give you] the ability to download a book to your Kindle at a moment's notice, and usually cheaper than print". He adds: "It's tapped into that market for people who want to read and read, but don't want to put books on their shelves."

For most writers publishing commercial fiction today, at least 30 per cent of sales are likely to be e-books – in some cases far more, Jones suggests. Sci-fi and romance titles, and other airport bestsellers, tend to be popular.

Digital literature, whether in e-book or audio form, is riding high. As if we needed another reason to be wedded to our phones.



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