

A letter on the persistence of (e)books

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Dear Colleagues,

I have an original Amazon Kindle, bought around 2008. I also have a Barnes & Noble Nook, from around 2010, and an early Sony Reader a bit older than the Kindle.

My graduate student was using them for his research. He gave them back to me this past summer after he finished his thesis (*Congeniality of Reading on Digital Devices*, RIT 2011).

I set them on a shelf and didn't think about them until last week, when I got them out to show to my book design class in the fall (2011).

The Kindle was totally dead. Wouldn't light up, wouldn't charge, wouldn't run even when plugged in. The Nook wouldn't charge but would work when plugged in, until yesterday, when it wouldn't work at all. I took it to Barnes & Noble, where a staff person changed the battery, to no avail, and then called B&N tech support, who advised removing the battery, letting the thing sit for half an hour, and then recharging for four hours, to see if that would reboot the battery.

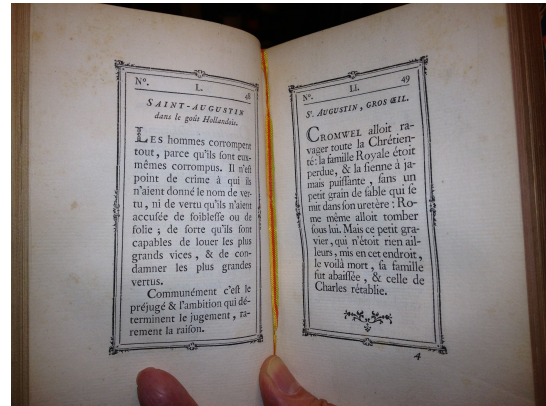
I took it home and plugged it in, with the power cord I almost left in the store, forgetting that an e-book has to have cords and connectors. The Nook connector doesn't fit my Kindle, so I have to keep track of which e-reader has which connector. But, that's not a problem now, because the Kindle is beyond recharge anyway, and so is the Nook, which never did revive.

The Sony Reader was hopeless whether or not it took a charge, because it required hooking up to a Windows PC to download books, but I use a Macintosh. And anyway, I'd misplaced the cables and connectors. Hard to keep track of those things.

At home, I went over to my bookshelf and took down a beautiful little book printed in Paris in 1764–1766 by Pierre-Simon Fournier.

It was still in excellent working condition, even though it hadn't been charged in 247 years. I opened it, and immediately it started up! I could read everything, without connectors or cables.

It still works today. The print on the pages is a rich, dark black with good contrast against a pale creamy background. The type is elegant, cut by P.-S. Fournier himself, the greatest type designer of his era. The pages have a slight texture with a good feel, making them easy to turn with a simple swipe of the fingers. It has generous margins so you can hold the book open without covering the text with your thumbs—a brilliant feature of the user interface. It has many illustrations in vivid black and white, including fold-out pages with



Fournier's *Manuel Typographique*, hand-held. Built-in bookmark tape visible along gutter. St. Augustin size (14 point modern measure, about the size of menus on Macs). Page L (50) uses St. Augustin in the Dutch style (big x-height, narrow letters, light weight); page LI (51) also St. Augustin.

landscape format images, and other fold-outs with music. Its casing is a rich, dark red leather with gold tooling and ornamentation and colorful marbling, also on the inside covers. The page edges are gilded, so the whole book glows with a faint aura even before it is opened. It is small enough to be held with one hand, but works with two hands just as well.

I won't strain credulity by pretending the book is perfect. There are two volumes, so you have to keep track of both. The search function is primitive: you must browse or skim; and if you want to capture text for later reference, you have to remember it or copy it by hand, and if you want to link to a page, you have to use a bookmark (this book comes with its own bound-in, bookmark tape movable to the page of your choice).

These reading exertions put a severe strain on my brain, to be sure. Sometimes I have to eat some chocolate to re-charge, but I have to be careful not to get chocolate on the pages, because it won't wash off. Some of the pages are slightly spotted by mold or foxing (not from chocolate but from centuries of humidity and slow chemical changes in the paper), yet the text is still readable. The type can't be resized, a problem for many of us over the age of 40, so to read the smallest size specimen, which Fournier called "Parisienne", a gem-like cutting at about 5 point body size in modern type measure, I have to use bifocals or a reading glass.

Oh, and this particular book is in French, which slows down my reading, but well, when I'm reading this book, I'm not in much of a hurry anyway.

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