Coda

*'It's the content that **counts** rather than the format.'*

*'I'm more interested in the writing than the format. Any format which conveys the author's expression **counts**.'*

*'Anything you can read that communicates the information **counts**.'*

*'Yes, books are the physical container. But what's inside is what **counts**.'*
(All Survey 2022, free-text responses to 'Do you consider e-books to be real books? Why?')

In October 2014, Simon & Schuster released the print edition of Anna Todd's first novel. That novel had already been read over a billion times.[1] Appearing as over a hundred serialised chapters on online storytelling platform Wattpad between Spring 2013 and Spring 2014, *After* began as fan fiction, but unlike *Fifty Shades of Grey* or *Twilight*, it achieved incredible prominence in its original, digital form, making Todd, and Wattpad, the subjects of extensive media attention long before the print book became available in shops.[2] In March 2014, David Streitfeld had written in the *New York Times* about Wattpad and the *After* phenomenon, using (as Todd, her readers, and Wattpad executives do), the terms *writer*, *novel*, and *chapter*.[3] Sven Birkerts, writing two years later, used Todd's success to illustrate an argument about the threat to the 'literary' posed by 'technology' (very much in the vein of his well-known 1994 *Gutenberg Elegies*, discussed in earlier chapters). He deployed the construction 'a woman named Anna Todd, who uses Wattpad to post episodes of a saga called "After"'.[4] (The 'named' is a further diminishment, as like 'called' it can serve as a signal to the reader that the writer under discussion is obscure, lacking in stature, or an outright pretender to professional status.)[5] The 'saga. . . "After"' is presented in quotation marks, while mainstream published novels mentioned in the essay appear in the typical italics. Other people who write things are named as 'authors': Mohsin Hamid in

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:48:51, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009490795.007

reference to his novels, but also journalist Matt McFarland, described as the 'author' of a *Washington Post* newspaper article. Birkerts demotes Todd to a 'woman' who 'posts'. In Birkerts' formulation, this 'saga' has readers but no author. Like a diplomat refusing to officially recognise a country, Birkerts elaborately excludes Todd and authors like her from any category that could suggest an earned place in the world of literature, and what she's written from any kind of bookness.

Do e-books count? The readers in my own study say yes – with conditions. They consider e-books real books specifically because 'any format which conveys the author's expression counts.' Or 'anything you can read that communicates the information counts.' Or 'it's the content that counts rather than the format.' Or 'what's inside is what counts.' But do e-books 'convey' reliably? Who decides whether they communicate 'the information' in the same way? And what are the boundaries of 'content' and 'inside'? The answer to the graduate student's excellent question, the query that opened this book, remains, unsatisfyingly, *sometimes*.

Bookness is a form of legitimacy that matters to at least some readers at least some of the time, but neither bookness nor realness is essential in every circumstance. Moreover, readers move between ideas of what an e-book is, typically conceptualising their e-books as real when realness is an asset, and unreal (*ersatz*, digital proxy, or incomplete) when any particular form of unrealness best suits their needs.

Reading Real Books

This book has followed readers through some stops on a (generalised and idealised) journey with an e-book. In Chapter 2, on first impressions, we saw e-books functioning as unreal: as *ersatz books* (perceived as lacking certification by the publishing industry, whether or not these perceptions are accurate) and as digital proxies. Readers demanding professionalism are ostensibly willing to consider the possibility of excellence appearing in e-books, but receptiveness in theory may not translate into receptiveness in practice. In evaluating individual e-books, readers transact with authors and publishers in some new and some familiar ways, continuing to draw on both peritextual and epitextual elements, demonstrating that the spatial dimension of paratext still exists for e-books even if it functions very differently than for books in print.

In Chapter 3, on transactions, we saw e-books functioning as real books, but alternatively as *ersatz books* or digital proxies. The deep-seated conviction, shared by many readers, that they have a natural right to own, keep,

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:48:51, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009490795.007

and give away e-books in the same way they do print books indicates a sense on a profound level that e-books are books. A sense of meaningful ownership can be seized, and reappropriated, via principled resistance, digital audition, or a conscious decision to change one's idea of what an e-book can be and accept a digital book collection as a personal library. However, pain-free book disposal and some forms of piracy favour, instead, a conception of the e-book as *ersatz book*, while the use of digital reading copies to meaningfully spend time with a distant or sacrosanct book collection calls for a digital proxy. This recasts e-books as integral to building a personal library, but not necessarily as components of that library; when an e-novel is used as a digital proxy, it operates more as a tool for reaching a book than as a book in its own right. In Chapter 4, on materiality and the act of reading, we saw that in terms of enjoyment, e-novels function sometimes as real, but more often as incomplete books. Aesthetic pleasure in the material object emerges as something effectively exclusive to print, and tactile and sensory pleasure in handling the material object nearly so. However, other forms of pleasure are preserved or even heightened. Many respondents describe reading as such a valued and integral part of their daily lives that it is essential to them to have a book, ready for reading, at every moment: the fear of being caught bookless is so real that having e-books available as emergency reading relieves anxiety as well as providing enjoyment. The 'backup book' eases painful 'abibliophobia' precisely because, in this light, the e-book is real: potentially an austere or unlovely book, but still a book. While some ceremonies of reading such as physical bookshop browsing and putting aside time to relax on the sofa with a fat hardcover may be muted or even lost, interacting with literature on one's own terms, choosing the available, adaptable, accommodating book, fosters a new kind of intimacy, and opens up new spaces for reading in participants' lives. For some participants, the incomplete book is something that cannot thrive on its own – presenting barriers to immersion and being 'lost in a book' – but for others, it can deliver key reading pleasures just as well as print. In Chapter 5, on reading identities, we saw the e-book as again sometimes real, but more often unreal because it is incomplete. It can't contribute to readerly identity as fully as can a print book because its own identity is obscured: it is not only less visible to friends and to observers in the reader's physical environment but also less visible to the reader themself. While their e-books are to retailers uncomfortably and unprecedentedly visible, readers consider data gathered by retailers to be unrepresentative and misleading. Readers who object to retailer surveillance demonstrate particular concern about Amazon; the evidence that

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:48:51, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009490795.007

they avoid Amazon for e-book purchases but still use Amazon for print book purchases underscores the degree to which it is surveillance of page-by-page reading, not tracking of books purchased, that troubles them most intensely. Despite the image of e-reading devices as vital tools for furtive reading, the actual importance of furtive reading as a motivator for choosing digital appears very low, making the exaggerated, and gendered, image of the furtive reader a distorted and damaging stereotype.

And finally, when it comes to emotion, e-books can function not only as incomplete books but also as real books. Print inspires deep feelings and passionate loyalty for many: numerous qualitative responses highlight love, either for print books themselves or for print-specific activities such as browsing physical bookshops. That said, digital enthusiasts' love is no less true for being somewhat unusual. Loathing of e-books is rare, and the most common stance towards e-books among book lovers is tepid appreciation. E-reading is wholly compatible with a love of books, and with identification as a bibliophile. Participants qualified the bibliophile definition to stress that while they loved the material object, they loved reading and literature more, some describing themselves as 'readingophiles' or 'whatever the equivalent for stories is'. Book lovers, whether or not they embrace the label of bibliophile (and only a minority do embrace it), can experience love for e-books, and, through avenues including digital audition, annotation and other forms of personalisation, and patronage, can deepen their relationships with beloved e-books.

These four conceptions of what an e-book is – a real book, an *ersatz book*, a digital proxy, or an incomplete book – illuminate how the type of unrealness matters as much as the unrealness itself. Different conceptions further different agendas, and readers gain from being able to move between realness and unrealness, and back and forth between different forms of unrealness. The *ersatz book*, for example, is painless to discard and equally painless to steal. The digital proxy allows users to feel that they are spending time with their own cherished books without hefting, transporting, or damaging personal print copies. The incomplete book can give, at least for some, experiences of absorptive reading pleasure, intimacy, and connection shorn of all that draws attention, takes up space, or makes demands of the reader or those around them. Any one conception of an e-book has disadvantages, even the e-book as real book. But moving between conceptions, even in the same reading situation or for the same book, offers, on the face of it, the best of all worlds. Readers can have their books and read them, too. The price is a degree of instability, and evidence here indicates that readers are willing to accept that small price: to tolerate

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:48:51, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009490795.007

ambiguity, and to embrace contradiction rather than strive for tidiness. Given the rewards, it is easier to envision a future of continued flexible movement than it is to predict an outbreak of consistency.

But even if we have evidence that readers benefit from the instability – is that all readers? Subjective and conditional realness is one thing if, should you for any reason require realness (the experience or feeling of it for yourself, or the reliable appearance of it to others), you can simply revert to print. If you are among the many for whom print is not an option, having one's reading open to relegation is anything but trivial. Returning to the free-text comments of survey respondents explaining why they consider e-books to be real books, 'the argument about what constitutes real reading is very annoying for those of us with disabilities who have less choice of how we read', meaning that 'only classing physical books as "real books" feels outdated and ableist' and 'implying that [e-books] are somehow less valid is not okay'. If a person with visual impairment who uses text-to-speech or audiobooks, or whose dyslexia is helped by the low-glare screen and adjustable margins and line spacing of an e-ink reader, or indeed a person who presents as female and likes reading on a Kindle, but loses the cultural capital associated with reading because onlookers assume that she must be reading *Fifty Shades of Grey*, can have their reading 'unreal'd', that is an erasure – one that is as unnecessary as it is unjust. If we accept a status quo of subjective and conditional realness, we must also accept authority and autonomy on the part of the reader. For literary communities to shrug our collective shoulders and say *I guess it's real to you* is complacent and insufficient. What would bring such readers in from the cold, and make our reading equal, would be *if it's real to you, that makes it real full stop*.

Creating Real Books

The present inability of e-books to consistently serve as real books presents creators with an immediate challenge and a longer term question. Just as moving between conceptions requires comfort with a degree of inconsistency, the idea that an e-book can attain bookness without first attaining realness requires a certain mental flexibility. But as Tea Uglow makes clear, it is possible to be an enthusiastic creator of e-books,[6] and a creator who regards e-books as books, without conceding that e-books are real.[7]

The challenge lies in generating capital – economic, social, or cultural – from e-books when not only their value but their nature is also in constant flux. If (as I hypothesised at the very start of this project) there were evidence of some distinct population of readers that believes e-books to be

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:48:51, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009490795.007

always real, always enjoying bookness, or always equal in value to print, shrewd marketers might locate and cater to an 'e-books are real books' camp, and work to expand that camp by understanding and promoting its motivations and beliefs. The fact that it is the same readers, sometimes when reading the same novel, who see an e-book as real or unreal, and enjoying or not enjoying bookness, as it suits their present needs, demands that any strategy address those present needs, and approach specific reading contexts and reading events, not just specific readers.

On the level of marketing, framing a given e-novel as a portable, unobtrusive part of a book (as contemporary Kindle marketing, with its iconography of park benches and beach totes, so often does) is not immediately compatible with framing it as real and whole, or indeed as a handy digital proxy or undemanding *ersatz book*. While major publishers or retailers may have the data and the resources to microtarget advertising based on reading context and reading event (a crude but immediately feasible example would be using location data to speak differently to a reader on a speeding commuter train, a reader outside her usual country of residence, and a reader sitting in her own home – after all, Amazon knows where you live), smaller operations may not. If so, independent publishers and retailers could be forced to choose, foregrounding one conception at the expense of others. On a deeper level, that of e-book and e-reading device design, the e-novel as product could be shaped to cater to certain needs, and hence conform to certain conceptions: either in committing to one path and accepting that readers will be fickle, or in attempting to create texts and devices capable of adaptation. Examples could include further advances in adaptable paratext, with changes controlled by the reader (as with customisable font) or controlled by the publisher (as with targeted advertisements overlaying a Kindle Original e-book on a basic-model Kindle). Chapter 4 explored reader customisation efforts such as hacking e-book files to embed favoured cover images, as with Penguin Classics-inspired cover art for the Harry Potter series.[8] Netflix's controversial practice of presenting the same film with different movie-poster visuals depending on customer viewing history and inferred demographics (e.g. sometimes showing Black supporting characters as if they were central characters, but only to customers whom Netflix thinks may be Black),[9] which will only be accelerated by increasing use of AI,[10] raises the possibility not only of targeted cover art but also other elements of peritext such as blurbs, scholarly prefaces, reading group guides, and preview chapters that influence reading of the text. A retailer like Amazon knows when a given customer reads the same e-novel twice, suggesting that it had become

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:48:51, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009490795.007

a rare 'reread novel'. Similarly, it knows (as long as all the purchases were with Amazon) when a given customer has bought an e-book followed by a print edition, suggesting either digital audition or gift, or print followed by an e-book edition, suggesting reading copy. The way that a retailer like Amazon could then tailor paratext to foreground a real book, *ersatz book*, incomplete book, or digital proxy conception opens up new possibilities for paratextual exchange – if authors and publishers are privy to the essential data.

The question facing creators is whether e-books represent a viable medium for their art. The idea that e-books can ever be real could be welcome news to writers previously leery of e-only or digital-first imprints. But the fact that any e-books they make will not be consistently real, and can at any moment lose their bookness, may not satisfy the author, editor, designer, or artist called to create books. Is the e-novel real enough, *book* enough, to be their life's work? A sense that they have created a functional part of a book (such as a text that fosters genuine narrative engagement and gives a true experience of being 'lost in a book' even if certain aspects of enjoyment of the physical object are, so to speak, out of reach) may be acceptable, but the sense that they have invested their hours and their identity into the making of an *ersatz book* may not. Whether contingent realness and unstable bookness can be enough may depend on a given creator's combination of personal motivations: for example, creating for the sake of profit, prestige, wide readership, professional recognition, what Lewis Hyde would recognise as a gift to the world,[11] or any proportion of these. But, as Uglow demonstrates, creators are not dependent on realness any more than bookness is dependent on realness. Creators may find the idea of parallel and coexisting conceptions of realness liberating and invigorating, opening up new creative possibilities for books that do not need to be real to be useful, valuable, important, meaningful, and loved.

The nature of authorship is, at the time this book goes to press, on the brink of complete transformation. Advances in AI made 2023 the year when routine use of natural language processing was placed in the hands of the general public, and when machine-authored literature passed from the domain of experimentation by an informed and technologically equipped minority (a long-standing tradition, as Henrickson documents)[12] into routine publishing workflows. As the rights of authors whose works have been used, without their consent, to train large language models[13] are thrashed out in the courts, the status of authors of any text, AI-assisted or not, remains uncertain. The scenario Eichhorn envisaged in 2022, asking

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:48:51, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009490795.007

'could Harlequin Romance, which already publishes a massive amount of content each month (about 120 unique titles), lower its cost and increase its content production by handing over some or all of its writing to romance-writing bots?'[14] is now perfectly within reach – if one is comfortable with considering 'some' to include a human writing prompts, approving the cover, opening the Amazon CreateSpace account, and posting the output as a book, Kindle Unlimited is already teeming with examples (some of which parasitically pursue sales by appropriating the name of an established author).[15] But data from this study suggest that the technical means to replace human authors would not automatically translate to a commercial imperative, or a cultural shift, or even appetite for such a replacement. As we've seen, human effort constitutes a core argument for e-book realness: if to any reader 'a person wrote it, a person is reading it,' is the reason why 'it's a book', the author is not expendable.[16] Shot through the discourse of the 'e-book wars' is constant fear of diminishment: anxiety that moves towards digital will mean a loss of magic (as with respondents choosing print because 'the smell of old paper is magic' and headlines such as 'With Its New Kindles, Amazon Tries to Replicate the Magic of Paper'), and reaching backwards for a time when, as Howard explained, a rare, costly, imposing book could attain bookness through status as an 'object of veneration. . .a thing with dignity, magic, and the power to inspire awe'.[17] If human authors are one means of attaining bookness, and bookness holds magic we still desire, how is it in our interests to demote even a single magician?

For readers, implications include the degree to which experiences of realness are individual, contextualised, utilitarian, and specific. If creators need not strive in every case for realness as a necessary precondition for importance or meaning, readers need not grasp after it either. As consciously switching between conceptions allows readers to effectively make e-books real at will, the power appears to have shifted in this regard decisively from authors and publishers to readers. With digital audition, reading device choice, and paratextual customisation offering further opportunities to readers to consciously distance themselves from some texts and cultivate closer relationships to others, authors and publishers are more dependent than ever on negotiation with, rather than dictation to, the reader. But as the power of publishers wanes, the power of retailers may be increasing. If the act of purchase can indeed meaningfully foster feelings of connection to a given e-book (an important area for further research), exactly how Apple and Amazon and other major distributors frame the transaction – as purchase or (as with Kindle Unlimited) as loan – will have enormous influence on readers' relationships to books (much,

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:48:51, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009490795.007

perhaps, as Netflix and Amazon and Hulu exert influence on relationships not only to streaming television platforms but to the medium of television itself).

There are a multitude of reasons to defer study of e-book realness. Scholars are warned against research on the digital for fear of a rapidly changing topic and rapidly dating results.[18] Examination of the subjective and unstable is, as my student recognised, frustratingly short on firm conclusions. But learning more about reading, a vast swathe of which now takes place on screen, requires it. Understanding more about how we imagine the book, and what we want from it, requires it as well. Asking when, and how, and why e-books count is indivisible from the joint cultural project that is our evolving conception of the book. It is a vast and collective act of making in which no reader's experience can be ignored.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 12:48:51, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009490795.007