CHAPTER 1

Bookness

'I also get [e-books] while reading an actual book, to allow me to read when I forget to bring my book.'

(Survey 2020)

'I read both books and on my kindle.'

(Survey 2020)

'I think it's snobbery to say that only print books are "real".'

(Survey 2022)

The question of whether digital books deserve full status as 'books' – and equality with print – has dogged e-books since their inception. It's inspired illuminating debate on the bookness of books alongside painful and rancorous position-taking.[1] Readers scarred by the 'book wars'[2] and exasperated by the 'either/or logic [that] has plagued discussion of all things digital and literary since the early 1990s "death of the book" debates began'[3] are now negotiating e-book realness on their own terms. This chapter uses book history and digital humanities approaches to situate e-books' liminal 'book but not *real* book' status within historic and contemporary conceptualisations. Addressing long-standing debates on materiality and longevity, it progresses through aspects of legitimacy – the realness of digital objects, bookness as historically defined for physical books, and genre boundaries of literary texts traditionally presented in physical book form – on its way to investigating readers' responses when asked whether and why they consider e-books real.

The legitimacy of e-books is the central focus of only a few studies, but the question of what makes an e-book an e-book, rather than some other sort of artefact, lives in some way inside every study of the e-book yet conducted, as a necessary step in defining the corpus to be considered. It draws particularly on rich existing scholarship on the evolving metaphor of the book.

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The Metaphor of the Book

The question of 'what is a book' may be an old one, but it can be asked not as 'a tiresome postmodern game with words' but rather as 'an inquiry that is highly relevant to many facets of how a phenomenon acquires "cultural value"'.[4] In the twenty-first century, the question is more urgent, not less: as Caroline Koegler and Corinna Norrick-Rühl explain in *Are Books Still 'Different'?: Literature as Culture and Commodity in a Digital Age*, 'digitisation not only affects the structural conditions of the book market and the legal status of books but also book marketing and even how "books" themselves may be adequately understood'.[5] Inquiries that approach books as concepts, containers, cultural transactions, information architectures,[6] and other forms are in simultaneous use, and fruitful advances in the discussion often emerge from contrast.[7]

As 'the word "book" refers to two distinct concepts. . .an empirically measurable object [and] a powerful and comprehensive type of metaphor',[8] scholars have immense discretion over whether to frame bookness as something e-books can or cannot ever have. They can place emphasis on 'common features'[9] that e-books share with print books, or instead direct focus towards features that e-books lack. Attention to aspects such as fixedness,[10] embodiedness,[11] or romance,[12] foregrounds viewpoints from which e-books cannot easily be included in the category of book, while focus on aspects such as information seeking[13] and reader communities[14] foregrounds uses of books where digital can genuinely participate, if differently from print. Historical approaches (including platform studies and some schools of English literature criticism) have frequently contrasted the era of digital book adoption with previous format shifts (e.g. scroll to codex,[15] manuscript to print,[16] artisan production to industrial production,[17] or hardcover to paperback) and signposted the ways in which the definition of book has in the past expanded to embrace new forms. This emphasis foregrounds how the definition of book could (even if they judge that it has not yet) embrace the e-book. In contrast, sociological and cultural studies approaches, in examining the roles books play in book cultures and reading lives,[18] have tended to stress the ways in which e-books do not play the same roles or occupy the same position, hence foregrounding aspects of book status that currently, and may enduringly, exclude e-books. This is not to say that history and sociology or history and cultural studies are in any way in opposition: Westin's 'Loss of Culture: New media forms and the translation from analogue to digital

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books', for example, is the work of an archaeologist/historian approaching the question via critical heritage studies and Callon's sociology of translation.[19] In 'Ebookness', Rowberry argued that e-books are better understood as a service than as a product, drawing on platform studies and book history to investigate the porous borders of a form where 'not all digital books are ebooks, but all ebooks are digital'.[20] He identified three platform layers of e-books as technology, text, and service infrastructure, and examined ways in which e-book conventions sacrifice functionality for the sake of bookish allusions and fidelity to print traditions: e-bookness as tethered to bookness.

The Bookness of Physical Books

Philip Smith claims to have 'coined the term "bookness"' (in quotation marks) in the 1970s; inspired, in appropriately literary fashion, by questions on the 'horseness of horses' in *Ulysses*.[21] But in truth, the term has been originated many times over: remade in different settings and for different purposes, generally without reference to coinages that came before. Smith defined bookness against textness, describing a particular physical object (specifically, a 'hinged multi-planar vehicle or substrate on which texts. . .may be written, drawn, reproduced, printed or assembled') to exclude non-codex texts (such as *Bleak House* projected on a wall or *Mansfield Park* painted on a fan)[22] but include blank books, illegible books, and unopenable books, and hence demarcate the territory for book art as a subfield of fine art. But at roughly the same time, Donald Roy Howard was using the term in the context of literary studies, employing bookness in the 1976 *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* as an 'opposing qualit[y]' to 'voiceness'.[23] There, bookness encompassed aspects of status deriving from rarity, expense, and impressive materiality, the book as an 'object of veneration. . .a thing with dignity, magic, and the power to inspire awe'.[24] Later scholarly uses variously defined bookness against scrollness (in the sense of a physical scroll or a scrolling webpage), emphasising the manner of navigation through a text organised as a codex,[25] against audioness,[26] or against other dimensions of print. Non-scholarly uses were and are even more various, deploying bookness to describe anything or anyone book-related[27] (such as a personal blog by someone who likes reading or a Pinterest board of *Game of Thrones* memes) or simply as a play on words (as with the New York Public Library's 'Twelve Days of Bookness' or a bookbinding workshop entitled 'Mind Your Own Bookness!').[28] Whether it is called bookness or not, the concept of

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bookness is woven through debates on books in every era where books have existed: a concept left unnamed where deemed too basic and fundamental to require mention. It is ultimately a term without defined lineage and without fixed meaning: too scattered to serve as jargon, and perhaps too playful (or too often playfully used) to find a secure home in scholarly discourse. In each usage, it is defined anew.

The two fields where bookness has something approaching a critical heritage are book arts and digital humanities, largely due to the enormous influence of Johanna Drucker's work in both. In *The Century of Artists' Books*, first published in 1994, Drucker sought ways to examine a book's book-ness (with a hyphen but, significantly, without quotation marks) as 'its identity as a set of aesthetic functions, cultural operations, formal conceptions, and metaphysical spaces',[29] a project she continues to pursue for e-books as well as print and artists' books.[30] Even in these fields, where bookness has a comparatively coherent suite of potential meanings, Drucker's functions, operations, conceptions, and spaces offer a broad canvas for scholars such as Hayles, Kirschenbaum, and Galey to explore bookness from different angles.[31] As book artist and academic Amaranth Borsuk puts it, 'from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, our own codex book has been normalised to such a degree that we question the "bookness" of anything that challenges our expected reading experience, with little regard for the fact that reading in one direction rather than another, scanning text silently, and putting a title and an author's name on a book's cover are all learned behaviours'.[32]

The Realness of Electronic Texts

Since the 1980s, when scholars were in the early stages of grappling with hypertext fictions and other digital-first literary forms, the wider debate on the nature and realness of digital artefacts has moved substantially away from visions of the electronic as either super-real (what Baudrillard described as 'hyperreal') or sub-real; Bolter and Grusin's work on the nature of digital remediations was a key turning point in challenging conceptions of the digital as inherently less real.[33] Input to the debate on digital realness has been forensic as well as theoretical: while realness and materiality are in no way synonymous, 'tangible, fungible, visible existence'[34] of the kind observable in the physical world can serve as powerful evidence in an argument for real existence, and discussions of e-book realness are frequently developed with reference to digital materiality.

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Technical advances in the understanding of materiality at the nanoscale level have made it increasingly difficult to intellectually defend a position of the digital as literally intangible (a position eloquently countered by theorists such as Paul and Blanchette).[35] At the same time, the digital has remained to an extent 'popularly construed as intangible, invisible, ephemeral, unstable, and virtual'[36] and 'even the most astute and exacting critics of cyberculture tend to signal a certain ambivalence about the bodies that electronic texts have, judging at least from the frequency with which the word *material* appears between scare quotes. . .logic is logic, but material is "material"'.[37] Shep observed that 'the idea that digital objects should be reconceptualised as material, rather than virtual, has been the subject of considerable scholarly investigation in the humanities', noting McGann (2001), Hayles (2002), and Drucker (2003) as key figures.[38] Gitelman's investigations dramatically advanced the debate, addressing the full range of digital texts (including problematic forms at the margin of working definitions of 'text') in *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (2006), but focussing more specifically on documents as understood in print contexts versus digital contexts in *Paper Knowledge: Towards a Media History of Documents* (2014). Hayler, in *Challenging the Phenomena of Technology: Embodiment, Expertise, and Evolved Knowledge* (2015), argued that 'e-reading remains the best possible example today of talking about an encompassing definition of technology' and uses e-books as an entry point to examination of technology 'not as a class of objects, but as a class of phenomenological experience' where the only constant is adaptation, and our knowledge of the book (or any) artefact evolves in tandem with the artefact's knowledge of us.[39] For e-books, investigations of materiality have developed various systems for understanding materiality and identified various forms. These systems, however, are more often cooperative than mutually exclusive, and build and augment more often than they compete.

Kirschenbaum's 2008 *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination* is a milestone text, influential in fields including media theory, technology studies, and game studies as well as book history and publishing studies. Kirschenbaum applied archivist Kenneth Thibodeau's 'tripartite model of defining digital objects'[40] on physical, logical, and conceptual levels to differentiate between forensic and formal materiality. Forensic materiality 'rests upon the potential for individualization inherent in matter'[41] and recognises the full range of physical traces, visible and invisible, of so-called 'virtual' artefacts such as files and software; with it, Kirschenbaum dismantled the myth of the identical copy as well as myth

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of intangibility. Formal materiality recognises the 'imposition of multiple relational computational states on a data set or digital object' and the way that the object becomes different when put to use by different actors at different stages, articulating a 'relative or just-in-time dimension of materiality'[42] for digital objects such as image files or, as Kirschenbaum specifically investigated later in the book, works of literature such as William Gibson's *Agrippa* or Michael Joyce's *Afternoon: a story*. Drucker built on Kirschenbaum's forensic and formal categories, folding in Blanchette's distributed materiality and its apparatus for examination of 'co-dependent, layered contingencies' of storage, software, hardware, networks, and other components as she established her concept of the performative dimension in 'Performative Materiality and Theoretical Approaches to Interface' (2013).[43] Performative materiality acknowledges that 'the materiality of the system . . . bears only a probabilistic relation to the event of production, which always occurs only in real time and is distinct in each instance' and that 'what something *is* has to be understood in terms of what it *does*, how it works within machinic, systemic, and cultural domains'.[44] This 'contingent' materiality is wholly compatible with Kirschenbaum's and Blanchette's theories, but is antagonistic to 'literal materiality' that takes a mechanistic approach and 'presumes objects of perception are self-identical and observer-independent'.[45]

Explicit considerations of e-book realness are rare, but highly significant where they appear. 'HCI-Book? Perspectives on E-Book Research, 2006-2008' drew together key questions and areas of inquiry as identified by participants in the Implementing New Knowledge Environments (INKE) project.[46] Though it ranged far beyond e-books into the wider territory of electronic resources, such as scholarly databases and hypertext literature less governed by the metaphor of the book, it included in its capacious overview many of the most important debates and controversies surrounding 'new forms of electronic-reader book-ishness'.[47] It examined the book, as book-object and book-metaphor, in terms of features such as tangibility, browsability, searchability, referenceability, and hybridity, offering a model for less binary consideration of print and digital affordances. It also highlighted the critical role of magnitude, of a book being 'more than can be consumed in a single visual event' in distinguishing an electronic book from other forms of electronic text.[48] Galey's 'The Enkindling Reciter: E-Books in the Bibliographic Imagination' (2012), further explored not only the possibilities but also the limits of a forensic approach to e-book studies, noting that while study of the full suite of material inscriptions is necessary for the understanding of any given e-book, it is not in itself sufficient.

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The 'interplay of social and technical forces' requires the reader never be excluded from analysis.[49] Galey found that 'e-books may have. . .no absolute Real that serves to anchor the evidence of our senses. The reason is simple: e-books, like all digital texts, require us to interpret phenomena not directly observable by the senses. . .digital objects never speak for themselves; someone always speaks for them'.[50] Gooding, Terras, and Warwick (the latter a contributor to the INKE project as well) addressed realness in 'The Myth of the New: Mass Digitization, Distant Reading, and the Future of the Book' (2013),[51] pushing debates on the realness of an individual work of literature in digital form into deeper, more complex territory revealed by distant reading[52] and the realness of literary corpora 'impossible for humans to engage with' without automated tools or reconstitution into their original separate texts, and highlighting both the stridency and entrenchment of unexamined claims where little data exists.[53]

The Complexities of E-book Paratext

Digital presentation has been a factor for e-books since the first books were digitised, but the application of Genette's paratextual theory[54] to mainstream e-books is in its early days. Paratextual theory is most often applied in literary studies, but since 2000 has been imported into fields from history and philosophy to film studies and information studies, and applied to film, webpages, games, and other digital or part-digital content,[55] extending its influence far beyond the books that were Genette's deliberately exclusive original subject of study.[56] It is regularly applied in scholarship in and around the digital humanities, as with Tether's investigation into the rendering of paratexts of digitised medieval manuscripts (2013) and Cooper's examination of how digital editions of medieval manuscripts can create new epitexts (2015), and to interactive electronic literature such as hypertext works.[57] Yet its application to mainstream commercial e-books, of the kind found on Amazon bestseller lists, lags behind: in early 2013, Birke and Christ concluded that there was no existing scholarly literature.[58] Since 2013, scholarship on the topic has gathered pace. That year saw Birke and Christ's cluster of articles on digital paratext in *Narrative*, 2014, one of the first edited collections specifically on paratext for digital texts from Desrochers and Apollon, and 2016 one of the first short-form monographs specifically on e-novel paratext, an extension of Ellen McCracken's 2013 *Narrative* paper on 'transitional' electronic literature (fittingly, from the pioneering Palgrave Pivot, which is challenging the definition of what 'counts' as an academic book).[59] Digital

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paratext has been represented in a number of important papers in book history and the book sector of platform studies (as a key thread, if not the stated subject of the paper) including Galey's aforementioned 'The Enkindling Reciter' (2012) and Rowberry's 'Ebookness' (2017).[60] More recent work on non-e-book forms of born-digital fiction and poetry, such as Leavenworth's 'The Paratext of Fan Fiction' (2015), Shanmugapriya, Menon, and Campbell's 'An introduction to the functioning process of embedded paratext of digital literature: Technoeikon of digital poetry' (2019), Skare's 'The paratext of digital documents' (2021), and Ensslin's *Pre-web Digital Publishing and the Lore of Electronic Literature* (2022) further informs e-book paratextual studies, and, increasingly, new works on literary paratext, such as Batchelor's *Translation and Paratexts* (2018),[61] incorporate analysis of e-book-specific aspects not as an afterthought but as a substantial component necessary to understand the reception of any new book released in both print and digital formats.

Literary Status

Recent scholarship on status in the literary field acknowledges the impact of digital formats; many studies define their scope to exclude e-books, or e-only books, expressly because status is constituted and communicated differently away from print. However, other studies embrace the complexity and include e-books, including e-only, as central and essential. Bourdieu's *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*[62] continues to serve as a foundational text for examination of literary cultural capital in the digital era, supplying a sociologist's vocabulary for analysis of the sociology of books[63] and the socialisation of texts.[64] Thompson, writing in 2012, noted the influence of Amazon in the beginning of the disintermediation of sales reps and chain bookshop buyers, one example of the sidelining of some traditional gatekeepers and tastemakers.[65] Early twenty-first-century examination of novels' literary status and reputation by scholars including English and Squires often excluded digital, for, as Squires wrote in 2007, 'electronic literature [had] yet to make any major impact on the market'.[66] But their work is directly applied to born-digital literary work and online literary networks by scholars such as Hungerford. In *Making Literature Now* (2016), Hungerford used case studies of digital projects such as *McSweeney's Internet Tendency* and the game/novel *The Silent History* to investigate the roles of '"neglected agents" of cultural formation' in online settings.[67] More recent studies of how literary status is negotiated in what Murray calls the digital literary sphere,[68] such as in

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online components of literary and writers' festivals,[69] on Wattpad,[70] on Bookstagram,[71] in Goodreads ratings,[72] and through celebrity book clubs,[73] continue to generate data on and deepen understanding of how legitimacy is constituted for both print-first and e-only e-books. It is worth pausing, however, to highlight that in capturing authentic experiences from readers' encounters with festivals, emerging platforms for writing, reviewing, and sharing fiction, and new forms of the book group, these studies inevitably showcase the most popular genre of e-book: the e-novel, a form not studied as often as its central position in popular digital reading would suggest.

E-novels: Latecomers to the Party

E-novel reading has, in a generation, grown from a niche activity to a fixture of cultural and intellectual life. It stands as a commonplace means (and for e-only novels, the only means) of accessing works of long-form fiction. But its journey to prominence was not smooth. Though novels are now the most popular category of e-books, the practice of reading fiction off the printed page (in something of a parallel with the repeated false dawns of handheld e-reading devices) was a story of advance followed by retreat, 'discovery' and forgetting, leading to limited recognition in publishing history. Brown's Readies, suitably for a technology touted in a modernist literary magazine, promised in its initial batch of texts short works by Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, and Ezra Pound (though the machine-readable micronised versions never materialised),[74] speaking to Brown's confidence that experimental literature would find its artistic match in experimental reading platforms. Rubery's work on projected books, where personal bedside projectors put reading on ceilings for hospitalised soldiers (and later a wider range of patients) during and after World War II, shows how screen reading intended to offer entertainment and distraction was heavily weighted towards novels, as well as how the scheme, which faltered after television became a ward fixture, is nearly forgotten by history.[75] But other early conceptions of the electronic book were more obviously heirs of Bush's research-organising Memex[76] than Brown's literature-sharing Readies. The first identified use of the term '"electronic book"' described the 1960s' 'proto-internet information sharing network' PLATO (Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operations) and its slides-on-demand system for university students, while its contemporary the 'electronic "book"' announced by the U.S. National Science Foundation debuted search functionality with the scintillating

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page turner *An Electronic Index to Chemical Patents*.[77] The digital reading environment was for decades afterwards dominated by educational, reference, and technical titles,[78] where the benefits of searchability were most obvious. And pragmatically, eye-watering prices for both hardware and texts could be most easily justified for enduring, frequently consulted resources; one pioneering handheld device, Franklin Electronics' 1989 Bookman, which more closely resembled a pocket calculator than a paperback book, offered the Bible in three lines of text at a time.[79]

When novel-length fiction began to reappear, it was enmeshed with gaming. As Kirschenbaum and Werner explain, Pinsky, Hales, and Mataga's 1984 *Mindwheel,* the first identifiable work marketed as an 'electronic novel' (from publishers optimistic enough to trademark the term) was a 'hybrid book/digital artefact' that told its story across an adventure game on disk and prose in a clothbound volume, and was only subtly differentiated from disk/book packages sold under the label of computer games.[80] *Mindwheel* was accessible only to those who could afford a (then ruinously expensive) home computer. Other early digital fiction projects had audiences limited not only by access to computers but also by access to membership networks or academic and artistic communities. Pre-Web, early hypertext fictions of the 1980s were often accessed via dial-up bulletin board systems (as with Malloy's *Uncle Roger*, released via The WELL), or read as well as created on proprietary software such as Intermedia, HyperCard, and Storyspace (such as Joyce's 1987 *Afternoon, a story*).[81] *Afternoon, a story* was not available for purchase by the public on CD ROM until 1990[82] and Project Gutenberg did not publish its first free e-novels until the 1990s.[83] Though some early commercial e-novel experiments, such as Penguin's 1993 release of Peter James's *The Host* on floppy disk as well as in print,[84] were capable of achieving significant sales (12,000, according to James),[85] only a tiny fraction of new novels were made available in electronic format. Users of early 1990s e-reading devices (including the Rocket eBook) could choose from a minute selection that often relied heavily on Project Gutenberg's embryonic stock of public domain classics. Readership of electronic novels expanded considerably in 2007 with the launch of both Amazon's Kindle e-reader and Amazon's aggressively marketed catalogue of low-priced recent-release titles, and again in 2010 with Apple's April launch of the iPad, preloaded with the iBooks app, and June launch of iBooks for iPhone and iPod Touch.[86] But it is only since late 2010 that e-books, e-novels and otherwise, expanded beyond 1–4 per cent of the commercial book business, and then only in certain Anglophone markets.

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As a small segment, e-novels garnered only moderate levels of academic interest, and scepticism regarding the future of e-novels was justified. Technodeterminist predictions had held that once the technology existed, audiences would simply materialise. Coover's much discussed 1992 *New York Times Book Review* essay 'The End of Books' posited a future where print would lose readership, and therefore relevance, because of its own limitations in presenting the new hot commodity: interactive fiction.[87] Successive waves, including hypertext experiments of the 1980s, commercially available handheld e-readers in the 1990s, and pre-Kindle e-ink reading devices of the early 2000s, were in their time heralded as harbingers of a new era where digital reading would become the norm and print reading rare or extinct.[88] With a similar cycle of inflated expectations followed by disillusionment, high-profile experiments in fiction for a mass audience distributed through the internet, such as Stephen King's digital novella *Riding the Bullet* and serial novel *The Plant*, both released in 2000, failed to prove either profitable or influential.[89] After so many disappointments, it was not unreasonable to adopt a wait-and-see approach, or simply to predict that the Kindle, the Sony Reader, and the Nook would go the way of the Rocket eBook, the Data Discman, and the Active Book (the latter demonstrating how neither creator credentials nor corporate investment were reliable harbingers of success) (Figure 1.1).[90] (Many further examples likely remain forgotten, leaving not even a prototype in a computer museum or promotional video on YouTube: as Tenen observes, closed system obsolescence and Digital Millennium Copyright Act roadblocks to scholarly access mean that 'platform makers may. . .embed instruments of censorship or surveillance into cultural works, in a way that makes them physically resistant to interpretation or critique' and 'we know less about the history of electronic publishing than we do about the premodern book'.)[91] Since 2011, scholarship has responded to begin to give commercial e-books and e-reading the attention they merit, but there were and are shortages in terms of longitudinal studies[92] and data gathering on key topics in times of rapid change.

Selling Realness

Rhetoric of realness pervades public discussion of e-books. Wide variation in how the term is used only serves to underscore its ubiquity. Like bookness, realness is a fixture of the debate, and a fixture treated as valuable: it is vied for, contested, and worth contesting. Realness is a form of legitimacy foregrounded by e-book distributors as they attempt to

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Figure 1.1 Active Book prototype, courtesy the Centre for Computing History (exhibit reference ID CH53902).

address (and resolve to their advantage) my student's question: whether an e-book *counts*. Drucker noted in 2003 how the most inflated millennium marketing claims promising 'the expanded book, the super-book, the hyper-book' deflated along with the companies that made them, fading from use as (sometimes visionary) devices and platforms failed to win audiences or deliver on their bold promises.[93] Realness is now more often framed in terms of equality with, not superiority to, print. E-reading device and e-book retailers are not only emphatic but also careful in their use of the word 'real' in marketing messages and product descriptions, deploying it strategically to describe discrete aspects of e-books as well as the books themselves. One example is how, when announcing the device launch of the second-generation Kindle, Amazon promoted its display technology as using 'real ink', but on an 'electronic paper display' that

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'looks and reads like real paper', presenting the device as a hybrid incorporating real and facsimile elements.[94] In contrast, Amazon has over its years in the market overwhelmingly framed the digital products one can read on their Kindles as 'books',[95] not bracketed by professions of 'real' or 'like real', or even, in most cases, a letter 'e' or other indications of their digital format. Exceptions are rare and, consequently, arresting, as in a launch speech where Jeff Bezos followed numerous references to e-books as books with a boast that 'if you want, Kindle 2 will even read to you – something new we added *that a book could never do*'[96] [emphasis mine] (whether this constituted a Freudian slip, revealing Bezos's real opinion of e-books, is an intriguing question, but a single line from the founder does not by itself override the company's almost uniformly consistent message).

This attempted positioning of e-books as real books is a strategic commercial decision. Nicholas Carr classed the Kindle's projection of 'bookness [as] essentially a marketing tactic, a way to make traditional book readers comfortable with e-books', recognisably part of Amazon's 'existential commitment to the idea of literature' that Striphas earlier identified as the 'ethos of bookishness' that Amazon 'cultivated through. . .paraphernalia touting the wonder of books and reading' as part of a larger business strategy.[97] As Murray points out, 'in the Amazon world, whether or not we actively purchase any given title, we are being constantly sold the flattering image of ourselves as bibliophiles – literary connoisseurs belonging to an almost secret society of book lovers, replete with its own lingo, rituals, and enthusiasms'[98] – a campaign more obviously forwarded by selling e-books as books than as some other kind of product.[99] Retailers of print books are similarly motivated, commandeering 'real' as a synonym for print when they advertise 'A Real Bookshop for the Real World', or 'There's nothing like a real book & nothing like a real bookshop!', or simply 'Buy Real Books Online'[100] (this last from an online purveyor of print books) – all selling, in Murray's dual sense of *retailing* and *promoting,* bookishness as well as their books. As Price says of realness as sold by Amazon, or by the New York Public Library (touting the 'real-life librarians' who grace your wedding hire of the space), 'there's no point in specifying that something is "real" unless someone suspects that it's fake'.[101]

Given the commercial and commentariat atmosphere in which they buy, read, and share books, it's supremely unsurprising that participants in my own surveys, focus groups, and interviews also frequently use *real* as a synonym for *print*. Discussion was punctuated with variations on 'I tend to prefer real books to e-books', 'I prefer a real book', or 'I just prefer the real

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thing'.[102] References to print books as 'actual BOOKS', '(actual) books', or 'proper, print books' contrast sharply with references to e-books as 'some imaginary thing on screen'.[103] Descriptions of print books as real books went unremarked upon in focus groups: these were not flashpoints for debate, or an invitation to discuss the value of e-books. They were treated as valid shorthand, a mutually understood way to differentiate print from digital. Of the many possible constructions participants could have used to distinguish between the two, such as 'e-book vs print book', 'e-book vs book' or even 'e-book vs BOOK-book' (using contrastive focus reduplication to emphasise that one is referring to the 'real', true, or default mode rather than a variation, for example, 'I had a JOB-job once. [a "real" 9-to-5 office job, as opposed to an academic job]'),[104] the construction many used was, effectively, 'e-book vs real book'. Even e-reading enthusiasts sometimes praise the Kindle experience as 'it feels like I'm reading a real book' or state that e-books 'are getting better and better' and hence increasingly 'resemble books' (to the latter, a more sceptical peer replied 'why do you not just get a book then?').[105]

However, this shorthand of 'e-book vs real book' sat alongside other uses of the word 'real'. Realness in the sense of 'legitimate' genres enjoying high prestige (say, in a debate on the status of science fiction, criticising 'elitist' views as '"it's sci fi, it doesn't count as real books"', or a dismissal of 'self-helpy type books' as 'while helpful and interesting, don't feel like real books anyway'), or in the sense of mainstream published as opposed to self-published books, mingles in the discussion with realness in the sense of a print object.[106] The ability, in a real-time focus group or interview, to ask a participant to expand upon a given use of the word *real* is invaluable for teasing out potential layering of meanings; where written survey responses are ambiguous, they remain so.

However, written responses are more precise than verbal ones in flagging distinctions between real and 'real', and using scare quotes in a sense similar to the 'material' ambivalence discussed by Gitelman.[107] If scare quotes (which I didn't use in my survey questions) are typically 'used to alert readers that a term is used in a nonstandard (or slang), ironic, or other special sense' to 'imply "This is not my term" or "This is not how the term is usually applied"'[108] the point at which they appear in survey results is telling. While the word *real*, used to denote a print book, appears frequently in free-text responses across all years of the survey (as with the ubiquitous 'I prefer a real book'), *'real'* is almost entirely absent from 2014 until the final questions of 2022. The scare quotes suddenly appear

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in responses to the new question discussed subsequently, where they exemplify the 'this is not my term' function, and add a further layer of meaning in the many free-text responses where they feature.

Asking Readers: 'Do You Consider E-books to Be Real Books?'

The most direct way to investigate the question is, of course, to ask it.

Surveys on reading occasionally ask directly about attitudes towards e-book realness. Results vary widely, and appear predictably sensitive to the wording of the question, not least in terms of use of scare quotes. One 2017 survey of US book and magazine readers ($n = 1{,}020$), asking about 'consumer attitudes' regarding books and e-books found that 20% completely or somewhat agreed with the statement 'e-books are not real books'[109] – evoking spontaneous free-text responses in my own surveys such as the 2020 'I don't really see e-books as books'. However, a survey of US book readers in the same year ($n = 451$), asking 'if you choose a print version of a book instead of an e-book, what are the reasons for purchasing a print book?', found that 55% agreed with the statement 'I want to read a "real" book again'[110] – evoking instead the non-spontaneous free-text responses in my 2022 survey, directly responding to the 'why?' question, such as '[e-books] are "real" in that they exist to be seen and discussed in the world'.

These tantalising, but frustratingly brief, glimpses offer some hint as to the nuances of the question. I wanted to find out more about readers' reasons, as well as how such views correlated with book buying, book usage, and other attitudes towards print and digital reading. In 2022, I added to the end of the survey 'Do you consider e-books to be real books?', followed by 'why?' There was no 'don't know' or 'not sure' option, or 'strongly' versus 'somewhat' degrees of agreement: instead of asking participants to express the nuances of the question via a Likert scale, I wanted to ask them (appreciating that this is more time-consuming) to explore those nuances in their own words. (And, as discussed subsequently, several used the free-text to explain that 'the real answer is "yes and no"'.) Despite its placement at the end of the survey, when one might expect a few weary respondents to drop out, 99.1% of the 2022 respondents completed the question.[111] Of those 228 individuals who gave a 'yes or no' answer, 196 generously included a free-text response to 'why?'

Of the 228 responses, five out of six (83.3%) agreed that they consider e-books to be real books. (A figure that's remarkably close to the 80% seen in the 2017 survey of US book and magazine readers mentioned earlier,

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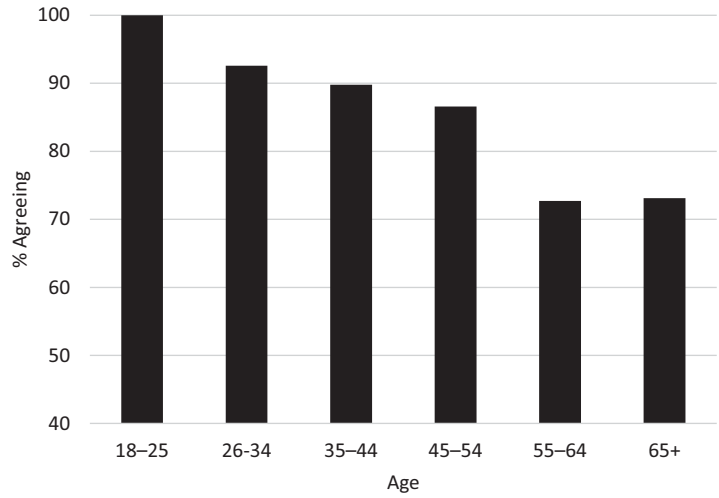


Figure 1.2 'Yes' responses to 'do you consider e-books to be real books?' by age.

asking about the *real* instead of the *'real'*.) The younger the respondent, the more likely they were to agree, though this sat on the cusp of statistical significance ($p = 0.05$): less than three-quarters of those aged 55 and older (72.8%) said that they consider e-books to be real books, compared with 89.1% of those younger than 55 – and all of those younger than 26 (Figure 1.2).[112]

UK residents were somewhat less likely to consider e-books real books: 77.3% agreed, versus 91.6% of those resident elsewhere in the world. Gender identity was not a significant factor.[113]

Agreement did not depend on devices used for reading e-books, sources of e-books, genres of e-books read (with the exception of a slight connection to non-fiction e-book reading), or indeed to genres and sources of print books (with the exception of a slight connection to receiving print novels as gifts). But it did depend, strongly, on whether respondents had recently read e-books. Almost all respondents who had read at least one e-book in the past twelve months agreed (92.7%), compared with fewer than six in ten others (58.7%).[114] It is striking that even among those who don't read e-books, a majority agrees: clearly, considering e-books real is not enough to make you read them, nor is considering them unreal enough to stop you. However, *reasons* for choosing electronic formats over print proved irrelevant: those who choose e-books because they find them easier

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to obtain, faster to obtain, better value, and so on were not significantly more or less likely to agree. The same is true for most, but not all, reasons for choosing print: because they find it better for keeping as part of a personal library, for example, or because they prefer to support independent bookshops, or because they find print better for sharing or giving as a gift (notable, as it marks attitudes towards the bookness of e-books as outside the bibliophilic cluster of values discussed in Chapter 3). The exceptions were reasons that have to do with experience of the material object. Those who particularly value holding a physical codex and reading from a printed page are less likely to consider e-books to be real books: respondents who choose print because it's more enjoyable to handle and use (78.8% vs 95.2% of others),[115] and those who choose print books because they are easier to read (72.4% vs 91.5%).[116] This singling out of one specific kind of book experience is something I'll return to in Chapter 5, on reading and rereading. But it's notable that for those who consider e-books as enjoyable to handle as print, and as easy to read as print, agreement on realness approaches 100%.

Why Are (or Aren't) E-books Real Books?

Even at the end of a fairly long survey, when respondents gave their free-text answers to 'why?', they gave responses that were reflective, wry, funny, insightful, impassioned. Especially impassioned: nothing I have ever asked in the service of publishing studies research has made people so angry with me. The question proved inherently inflammatory, poking at the old wounds of the 'e-book wars', aggravating both for reviving a tired controversy and for the tired controversy it revives. My choice to force answers into binary yes/no paths was itself potentially vexing. But the question was also posed at an unintentionally infuriating point. Placement was not random: the question was inserted at the very end of the survey to prevent priming respondents and affecting their answers to the year-on-year questions. But an unintended consequence of that placement was provocation. Almost three-quarters (72.1%) of 2022 respondents were e-book readers, and had just spent some minutes answering questions about their thoughts, feelings, and values about reading. . .only to reach a final question that, in its bland neutrality, seems to accept the premise that at least some people may see those books as less. From there, it is a short leap of bookish logic to accepting that if their books are less, their reading is less, and they themselves are less. If one were looking to design a question to antagonise book lovers, this would not be a bad start.

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Responses ranged from full paragraphs – mini-manifestos, potted personal histories, fleshed-out arguments about materiality and tradition and affect – to a single character ('?', as eloquent in its succinctness as many longer answers challenging the premise of the question). Six overarching themes emerged. Four – equivalence, materiality, ownership, and utility – weave through arguments for and against e-book realness, arguments I'll revisit through the chapters to come. But two – certainty and elitism/ableism – do not accept the premise of the question, and explain why some respondents judge that inviting in even the possibility of doubt as to the realness of e-books is dangerous, exclusionary, insulting, and foolish.

Certainty

E-book realness is something many respondents are very, very sure about. An e-book is a real book, as several respondents put it in the same words, 'because it is' (or 'because they are?' or 'because they are!', with every variation in punctuation passing a different judgement on what it means to ask). Variations of 'books are books', 'the book is a book', 'a book is a book', and so on were among the most common free-text responses, as were variations on 'reading is reading'. In short, 'of course they're real :)'. Some perform mystification, countering with 'it's right there in the name' or 'I mean, of course, definitionally e-books are books', archly adopting a stance where application of the word 'book' resolves all questions. Other respondents reach one step beyond 'because they are' to say 'because they are actual books': *actual* serving to add nuance, demarcating within the territory of *books* a further zone of notional books, in which e-books are in danger of being relegated. As it was put in my favourite response (to this and, indeed, every survey question I've ever posed): 'Because they're actually fucking books. Who gives a shit if it's on a digital or physical format. Them bitch ass letters still show up in the same god damn order. Sorry for the language, I'm lit.'

'Who gives a shit' eloquently encapsulates a body of responses that questioned the necessity of the question. In contrast to those who found the question dangerous and wrong – on which see subsequently – these respondents treated the question as nonsensical, ridiculous, or irrelevant. Saying that they are 'not sure quite what this question is getting at', they ask 'why not?' and 'why would you think they are not real books?', explaining that they 'don't understand how they wouldn't be real' or 'sorry – I find the idea that e-books might be considered anything other than "real" baffling'. Or, as noted earlier, they might shut the question

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down with a crushingly simple '?'. Their bemusement could be summed up by 'because they are? What a weird question'.

Others, however, elected to explain *how* they came by their certainty, couching their response with 'as a print technician', or 'I studied cyborg theory', or '(and I used to design printed books for a living)'. These calls to expertise fold in legitimacy in another way (arguably, a defensive one that presupposes that one's credentials may at any moment be checked) but represent a step down in terms of strength of belief. In describing their journeys towards the conclusion, they accede that a journey was necessary; that it was possible to believe, and necessary to consider, arguments against e-book realness, and that these arguments could have swayed them were it not for their personal education and expertise. Such seeking is a far cry from 'because they are!'

Strength of belief takes another step down in responses that set boundaries on realness: setting '[their] criteria for what constitutes a book' and explaining when e-books meet them and when they don't. Respondents qualify that 'yes, they are real *on one level* (i.e. supplying the reading material)' or 'well, they are books, *in the sense of* the word definitions as they evolve' or '*as far as* content yes. *But* you can't browse the shelf and check the blurb in a kindle which removes much of the anticipatory pleasure' [emphasis mine in each case]. And certainty dissolves for respondents who defied the intentionally binary framing of the question and detailed the ambivalence in which they're suspended. 'Difficult question', 'the real answer is "yes and no"', and 'phew. That's a hard one,' are followed by exclusions such as lacking a feeling of ownership (discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3), or contexts such as 'If someone asks if I've read a book and I read the e-book, I say yes. In that instance, book = story. But when I hear the phrase "real book," I think of something tangible—a particular physical object', or a story of how their views changed over time. The 'that's a hard one' response contains just such a narrative: 'Maybe 3 years ago, I would've said no. In some cases, ebooks in my present environment have felt like a lifesaver', the three years in question being 2019 to 2022, and the 'present environment' being the start of the COVID-19 era. The intensely personal nature of the question is grounded in feeling by the respondent quoted in the introduction: 'Mine is an emotive answer not based on logic. . .So I guess I consider an e book to be a real book. . .but some little voice is still saying, "It's not though, is it?"' Layer upon layer of uncertainty couches the realness of the e-book in equivocal terms, dependent on the reader, the author, the place in time (like a realness that's performative in a way analogous to Drucker's

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performative materiality, a realness that 'occurs only in real time and is distinct in each instance'),[117] and sometimes on 'some little voice'.

Others, not to be outdone, went straight to the nature of reality, asking versions of 'what is real?' and 'what's not real?' As one put it, '"Real" is a kind of arbitrary and personally defined label. For me, [e-books] satisfy almost all of my criteria for what constitutes a book; but I would rarely call them "real", 'cause I don't think in those terms' – ploughing into Bolter and Grusin's conceptions of remediation[118] and right through into mediation in the Hegelian sense. It's worth noting, however, that questioning the nature of reality did not equate to accepting e-books as either real or not real (or indeed that real, or 'real', means whatever an individual wants it to mean). 'What is real?' was given as a reason for why e-books are real books, but 'what exactly is "real", anyway?' was given as a reason for why they're not.

Elitism and Ableism

There was no such ambiguity in responses focussed on the justice of the question. Respondents raising issues of elitism and ableism were firm, certain, and disgusted. Numerous respondents noted accessibility as a critical affordance of digital books, including classing them as 'narrative or informative text in the same way braille books might be' (and neatly equating equivocation on the legitimacy of digital reading with equivocation on the legitimacy of reading braille). Some spoke to the experience of hypothetical others ('some disabled people'), others to their own, as with 'I loved reading a book as a child but as I've got older health has made holding a book more difficult and listening is better on the eyes'. And there is no arguing with 'the argument about what constitutes real reading is very annoying for those of us with disabilities who have less choice of how we read': it's not theoretically annoying, it is actively and currently annoying – for which I make a heartfelt apology to this and to every other respondent whom I hurt or offended with the question. 'Hurt' is not an overstatement: while some called questioning digital realness 'snobbery' or 'privileging materiality over accessibility', one equated it with questioning the legitimacy and value of a person, explaining that 'defining a "book" strictly by the dead trees is like defining a "human" as having a penis. Reductive and incorrect'. Multiple respondents agreed that they 'don't like the arguments made about why they are not real books – they tend to be elitist or ableist', that 'only classing physical books as "real books" feels outdated and ableist' and that 'this is also very ableist. . .Implying

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that [e-books] are somehow less valid is not okay'; evoking what people who are blind face when confronted with messages that they are 'not reading in the same sense as other people' because their books are audiobooks.[119]

Conclusion

Real or 'real'? If unreal, unreal in what way? The complexity of readers' conceptions of the realness of e-books demonstrates how strands of the metaphor of the book, the bookness of physical books, the realness of electronic texts, and the particularities of paratext and literary status for digital works interweave. Envisioning e-book realness as a form of legitimacy, a collective process mediated by individuals,[120] the voices of these particular individuals can be heard moving through Drucker's functions, operations, conceptions, and spaces of bookness, pursuing 'what something *is*. . .understood in terms of what it *does*, how it works within machinic, systemic, and cultural domains'[121] – contingent and relative materiality,[122] and contingent and relative bookness to go with it. The next step is to follow readers into those domains, and from the abstract to the concrete, to ask what e-books *do* in the context of their own lives. For what uses is realness an asset or a requirement? In what settings is it inessential, or even an impediment? Progressing through stages of discovering, obtaining, reading, retaining, displaying, and (sometimes) loving a digital book, the next chapters consider how the e-book genres we read, the devices we read on, the bookshops and libraries and collections and illegal download sites we patronise, and above all our reasons for choosing e-books and print books interrelate, and suggest ways in which how we think of our books shifts in sync with what we want from our books. To return to Galey, 'e-books may have. . .no absolute Real that serves to anchor the evidence of our senses' and 'digital objects never speak for themselves; someone always speaks for them'.[123] The coming chapters listen as readers do that speaking.

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