Introduction

Today, many millions will spend time reading an e-book. All will have excellent reasons for using digital formats. Some will read on screens because no other option is given: perhaps students whose lecturers assign digitised textbooks, or Kindle Unlimited patrons sitting down with a new novel that has no print edition. Others will have had a choice. If asked why, on that day and for that book, they opted for digital rather than print, readers will cite a familiar array of factors: speed of access, searchable text, and so on. They will explain how their personal requirements and circumstances make e-books the right choice at certain times. But many will do all of this while holding e-books at arm's-length. E-books will be described as part of their reading lives; even an indispensable part. Yet they will remain distinct from 'proper books' and 'actual books'.[1] Readers may qualify that 'in many ways *I prefer real books*, but e-books take up much less space in the house'.[2] They may explain that 'the convenience of e-readers for travel is amazing. I can carry a huge library in my handbag. However *I still prefer real books*'[3] (also demonstrating how a library can be devoid of 'real' books, yet still valued and still a library). Or they may spell out that 'digital reading is a nice convenience, but I hope it doesn't ever *replace real books*'.[4] These readers can't be written off as snobs, luddites, or unbending print absolutists; their reservations can't be dismissed as hatred of technology or fear of change. E-books are frequently worth their time, their money, their respect, even their love. The fact that a book can be worthy without being real is the fascinating quandary of e-reading in the twenty-first century, and the subject of this book. What does it mean – for ourselves as readers and for our understanding of what a book can be – to devote the hours of our lives to books that aren't real books?

I'm not an e-book evangelist (though, like everyone who reads them, I'm sometimes called upon to play the e-book apologist when defending my reading to someone who considers it illegitimate or second-rate). I'm better described as someone fascinated by e-books and the people who read

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Figure I.1 Rocket eBook, © Mark Richards. Courtesy the Computer History Museum. www.computerhistory.org/revolution/mobile-computing/18/319/1721

them. This is not because it was love at first sight. I had commonplace opportunities to explore experiments in electronic publishing and squandered nearly all of them. Growing up, we had a family address book desktop-published using a GE TermiNet 1200[5] (when my father first became interested in desktop publishing in the 1970s, relevant reference books, such as Brian Kernighan and P. J. Plauger's *Software Tools*,[6] were sometimes sold with UNIX source code on an accompanying spool of magnetic tape). In my grade school library, CD ROM encyclopaedias sat next to the microfiche readers, and I found microfiche at least as intuitive and vastly more fun. I had a dim awareness of digital holdings in university library collections: things that weren't webpages but one would nevertheless read on screen (specifically, the screen of a humming dorm-computer-lab Macintosh Performa, or at best the candy-coloured clamshell of an iBook G3). But I have no memory of ever reading one myself, nor feeling any warmth or wariness or hostility towards these artefacts, nor having any opinion of any kind. Every encounter with the digital book hit the wall of my indifference and lack of imagination, until the Rocket eBook (Figure I.1).

In 1998, I was working as a research analyst at a small consulting firm in Los Altos, and my boss asked me to write up a quick report on a soon-to-be-released product.[7] She handed me a 5 by 7¾ inch block of bluish-grey plastic, bigger on one edge like a dough scraper (or, observers would later note, a wedge-shaped first-generation Kindle).[8] You could manually rotate the display to grip the bulky side in your left or right hand. It came with a stylus and a backlit LED screen. You hooked it up to your computer with a cable, next to your PalmPilot dock, to download books: the micro-selection included *Alice in Wonderland* and a handful of Agatha Christie novels. The physical object had the visual and tactile appeal of an electricity meter. I was entranced. I held it in my hands (both hands, because it

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weighed almost a pound and a half), elated by the possibilities and correspondingly impatient when the device I held realised so few of them, and blurted out that this would change everything. The Rocket eBook itself didn't last long enough to change much of anything,[9] and it would be nearly a decade before the Kindle, and the abundant cut-price bestsellers in Amazon's Kindle Store, made e-readers ubiquitous. But to me, that artefact felt like a step towards the realisation of a dream from so many stories: a personal book, one with a deceptively stable outside but contents that became whatever you desired in the moment. Like 'the idea of a talking book' (or talking scroll), something featured in literature since antiquity and that 'captured the popular imagination long before the technology came along' to make it a reality,[10] the idea of a mutable personal book evoked Lucy Pevensie in Narnia, reading her dreams and fears in the pages of Coriakin's magic book, or at the very least Arthur Dent extracting semi-useful information from his handheld Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy.[11] A book about anything you wanted, or everything you wanted, and changing alongside you.

I didn't begin to ask about e-books and 'real books' until 2013. That set of questions grew from a study on the legitimacy and reputation of e-books and e-novels, which gathered data on reading and publishing in a format that had finally, after many false starts, burst into the mainstream. The question robbing publishers of sleep in the early 2010s was whether – or for the more pessimistic, when – e-book sales would overwhelm print. (The e-book plateau, where digital and print appeared to have settled into a rough equilibrium, only emerged later in the decade.) But for authors, the question of how to make a living in the e-book era ran alongside another question: how to be an author when the 'book' did not always, and might never, exist on paper. As one of my students put it, in questions after a graduate seminar on publishing technologies, 'but does an e-book *count*?' That characteristically insightful student asked from a writer's perspective – whether a digital-only publication was capable of delivering the kind of royalties, rights income, status, prestige (including eligibility for literary prizes), professional advancement, and/or personal satisfaction as print – without neglecting the participation of agents, publishers, distributors, retailers, and, ultimately (in every sense), readers in a process where consensus between people turns collections of words from manuscripts into books. What would it take for an e-book to *count* like a print book, to enjoy the same status, and deliver to its author the same rewards? Her question was enormous, and my answer painfully small – something I set out to remedy.

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My initial hypothesis was that if it were possible for an e-book to *count*, it would be for specific e-books in specific contexts: that there would be something distinctive about those books, those publishers, or those readers. I found something quite different. It remained the case that e- and print were not equivalent, and there was (and is) no immediate prospect of them becoming so. It remained the case that there is a dramatic range of opinion: many nuanced and interacting stances, too complex to be divided into neat sides. But it was not a matter of some people accepting e-books as real books as a condition of embracing e-reading and/or e-publishing. Instead, it proved possible for some (again, not all) readers to consider e-books as something separate from 'real books', but to embrace them anyway.

Something else emerged from the data. Participants frequently used the word 'real'.[12] Readers explain that they 'prefer real books but ebooks are very convenient', that they 'tend to prefer real books to ebooks', and share many variations on 'I just prefer the real [print] thing'.[13] But what readers never used – not once in the dataset – was the word 'fake'. (Equally absent were related terms such as 'impostor', 'fraud' and 'sham'; 'hoax', 'cheat', and 'forgery'; and also 'unreal'.) E-books were, by some, condemned as 'impersonal', or 'sterile',[14] but not as fake.

In extended conversations about e-books, something else emerges. While a single statement about e-books or audiobooks may sound definitive – splitting books into digital versus 'actual', or 'proper', or 'the real thing' – over the course of a longer dialogue, it was not unusual for e-books to be excluded from 'actual' at one point but welcomed in at another. Even a medium of exchange as rigid as a survey offered space for this mutability. In three examples from a single survey year, 2022, participants raise realness unprompted in free-text responses – saying 'For some reason, *books* feel more '*real*'. Everything was digital in the pandemic, so reading a physical book became a way of reconnecting to a reality' or 'I'm a book snob . . . prefer *the real thing*: how it feels, smells, looks' or 'I prefer *real books* [to e-books]' – but went on, a few questions later, to answer 'do you consider e-books to be real books?' with *yes*.

Many excellent books and scholarly papers concentrate on the definition of 'book' (as I'll discuss in Chapter 1) and the place of digital books inside or outside that category. This book will not. The discussion here is informed and enriched by that literature, but does not aspire to advance that particular debate. My focus is not on the dividing line between books and not-books, but rather the nature, the uses, and the counterintuitive appeal of this territory of the unreal book: not real but not fake, still 'book', but of a new and intriguing kind. This book examines the paradox

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of mass adoption without mass acceptance: the phenomenon of e-book readers for whom 'the opposite of "e-book" is sometimes "p-book", but often *real book*'.[15] It explores the way in which readers finesse definitions of bookness when they describe their range of experiences with digital books, as when 'older books, hard to find books I have in book form for personal library',[16] a division between print books as books 'in book form' and e-books as books but in some other form. It is about the space inside 'book' while outside 'actual book'; all the different permutations of 'no, but' that coexist with 'yes, and'. It's concerned with the space we make for ourselves as readers when we seize control of *book* and make it mean what we want, when we want. . .even if sometimes what we want is to deny our own agency, or that change is taking place at all. Exploring that space deepens our understanding of e-books, a major component of modern reading and hence a force in cultural, educational, economic, and political life. But it also opens up new ways of thinking about how we imagine, how we use, and what we want from books of every kind – and how this is expanding as book technologies evolve.

Methods

To explore this territory, and examine the phenomenon of mass readership of unreal books, I'll investigate how realness and bookness as forms of legitimacy are conceptualised, constituted, and experienced by contemporary readers. To do so, I'll analyse data on readers' choices, priorities, requirements, beliefs, and values relating to e-books, not as abstract questions but as they interrelate in actual reading lives. Data is drawn in the first instance from surveys, focus groups, and interviews with readers and writers. The survey ($n = 1{,}732$) was conducted yearly from 2014 to 2017 and again from 2020 to 2022. Additional material, including journalism, social media posts, author websites, and Amazon terms and conditions, was sought out to further investigate questions and themes identified in the surveys, focus groups, and interviews,[17] and interpreted using qualitative content analysis.[18] In this synthesis, I enlist methods from publishing studies, book history, and digital humanities. Media studies, particularly media archaeology and platform studies, and digital literary studies support my efforts.[19] I draw inspiration from studies that go where the readers are, from Janice Radway's interviews with forty-two romance readers in a midwestern town to the READ-IT project's groundbreaking qualitative data aggregation,[20] and as always from the interdisciplinary approaches of scholars such as Johanna Drucker, Lisa Gitelman, Matthew Kirschenbaum, Simone Murray, and Leah Price.

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E-books and e-reading are extraordinarily contentious subjects, inspiring hyperbolic rhetoric and defensive position-taking among defenders and detractors alike.[21] The vocabulary of legitimacy is aggressively deployed not only by e-book retailers such as Amazon and Apple but also by anti-e-book commentators, giving rise to headlines such as 'How real books have trumped ebooks', 'Real books are back. E-book sales plunge nearly 20%', and 'Rise and Fall of the Kindle: how Real Books are Fighting Back'.[22] In a commercial environment where realness is treated as a commodity, it's all the more vital that new research on the cultural value of e-books draws on empirical evidence – and of more than one kind. Anne Mangen describes questions regarding differences between paper and screen reading experiences as 'properly empirical questions', despite a shortage of empirical studies and of contact between disciplines on such studies, though some progress has been made.[23] However, Ben Davies, Christina Lupton, and Johanne Gormsen Schmidt note the prevalence of 'empirical studies of reading in the present moment that might be accused of downplaying the cultural, historical, and spatial particularity of the interaction between text and reader'.[24] Jonathan Rose pinpoints the temptations of speculation in the absence of data, noting the misrepresentations that result when scholars 'dogmatise enormously about the sociology of reading without bothering to study actual readers', while Christine Pawley stresses the importance of ethnographic and other qualitative methods to preserve the historical and spatial dimensions of individual acts of reading, and skirt the trap of distorting generalisation.[25] Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo note how qualitative methods, widely used in book history and reading studies, are themselves under scrutiny, particularly the semi-structured interviews often hailed as the gold standard: researchers justifiably ask whether established data coding practices aimed at 'identifying similarities and repetitions' fail because this 'merely reproduces what we already know about the social world' and propose 'postqualitative' alternative approaches, such as diffraction analysis, that recognise 'instability of meaning'[26] and embrace multiple interpretations of data.[27] To subject data validity to scrutiny, I used a mixed methods study (in convergent parallel form, where multiple categories of data collected at the same time allowed me to confront and examine contradictions as they emerged) to triangulate on more robust findings.[28] But the more important component is, following the example of researchers above, working to remain open-minded. I wish to put forward my interpretations in the hope that they will be critiqued and questioned, and that debate can lead to new interpretations.

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Scope

Three areas of concentration will help keep discussion in a book-sized, rather than library-sized, space: focus on readers, particular attention to novels, and one decade in time.

Out of all the possible (and fascinating) points of focus on the digital communications circuit, I've chosen one: readers.[29] My reason is their unique position regarding legitimacy. Readers are no longer routinely imagined as dead ends, as they were in some twentieth- and pre-twentieth-century models depicting readers as the last link in a linear chain, 'passive receptors' of material conceived and shaped by authors, editors, booksellers, and other actors 'above' the reader in every sense.[30] But their onward contribution (captured in contemporary models such as Ray Murray and Squires's update of Darnton's communication circuit[31] by dotted lines; see Figure I.2) is more flexible and optional than that of other

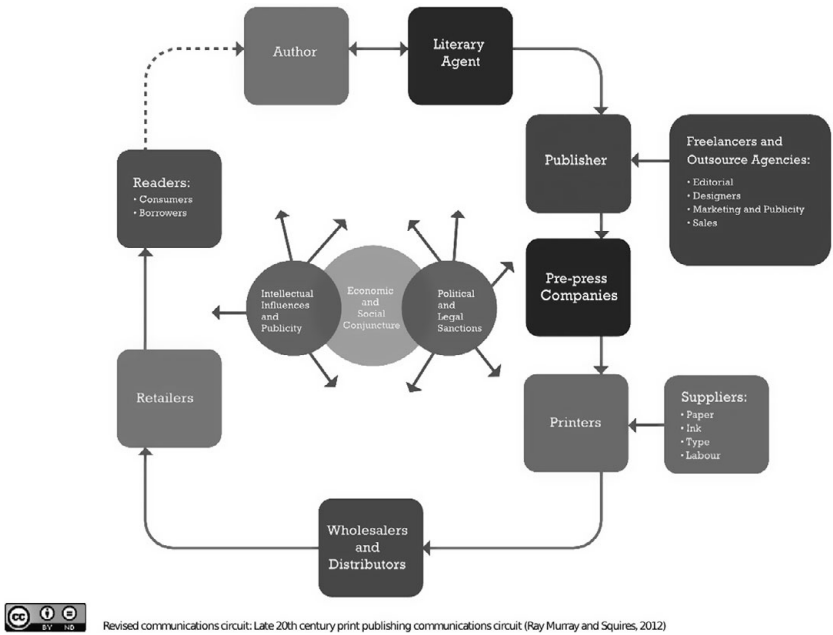


Figure I.2 Revised communications circuit, Ray Murray and Squires, 'The Digital Publishing Communications Circuit'[32] (Published under a Creative Commons Attribution-No Derivatives licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/)).

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participants: they do not have to take any further action, and the circuit will not come to a halt if they do not.

They are the only participants who do not hold as a primary concern how the work will be passed on to the next participant, and how the next participant will be convinced that the work *is* a book, and a book of quality. Their requirements (or lack of requirements) shape the efforts of those 'upstream' who seek to please them, yet their definitions of legitimacy can be more personal and individual, even idiosyncratic. This makes readers' experiences of book realness fascinating but elusive; at times veiled even to ourselves. The complexities of this form of legitimacy, and how we constitute it, won't reveal themselves without dedicated investigation.

An extraordinary range of artefacts and humanistic knowledge objects have been placed at some point, by their creators or by commentators and scholars, in the category of 'e-book'.[33] But in terms of trade publishing, novels are the largest single subcategory, making up such a large proportion of commercial e-book sales that any movement in the adult trade fiction sector shifts the entire e-book market. By 2015, two-thirds of e-books sold in the US with ISBN were adult fiction, a category that at the time claimed only a quarter of print book sales (and only a third of print sales before the start of the e-book revolution).[34] While data gathered at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic must be interpreted with caution, given how temporary conditions (bookshop closures, paper shortages, changing reading patterns under lockdown, etc.) affected different territories at different times, in the UK, in 2022, adult fiction accounted for nearly 80 per cent of e-book purchases.[35] Since 2015, the size of the e-novel market has become more difficult to quantify as an increasing share has been taken by Amazon, which does not share detailed sales figures, and self-publishing, for which there are no detailed sales figures centrally compiled, but the predominance of adult fiction for these publishers[36] suggests that the dominance of the novel has only increased.

Self-evidently, not all books are the same. Whether grouped by commercial category (cookery, travel, etc.), by genre (history, memoir, romance, etc.), by audience (children's), by setting ('beach reads', etc.), or by other logics, no two classifications will have the same usages, communities, or traditions. But e-novels are rarely grouped together and studied as a category despite distinctive characteristics that link as strongly to the history of the novel as the history of the e-book. Novels have a unique history in electronic publishing, a unique commercial environment (e.g. on key distribution platforms such as Kindle Unlimited and Wattpad) and, as I'll discuss in later chapters, sometimes perform differently from

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other kinds of text in studies of e-reading immersion, transportation, and comprehension. It's essential to consider where e-novels differ from other forms and where they do not, lest characteristics unique to this commercially dominant category be mistaken for characteristics of e-books as a whole.

Finally, the project examines attitudes towards e-book realness over time. The decade covered, 2013–23, is arbitrary (chosen for its placement in my own research life rather than any retrospective selection) yet fortuitously turbulent. The 2010s were already a time of enormous change in the e-book environment. The years 2014–17, when initial surveys were conducted, spanned developments from the United States Department of Justice ruling that Apple conspired with Hachette, HarperCollins, Macmillan, Penguin, and Simon & Schuster to fix e-book prices, the drastic rise in average price for mainstream-published e-books,[37] the explosion in the availability of low-priced or free-to-reader fiction in the form of self-published novels (often via Amazon) and pirated copies, the launch of Kindle Unlimited, and the shift from Kindle reading to tablet and smartphone reading. All of these developments contributed to the most significant change, the plateau of e-reading and shift of e-book sales from mainstream commercial publishers to Amazon and self-publishing.[38] The only thing that might make the 2010s seem like an uneventful decade for reading is comparison to the 2020s. This book was initially due for submission to the publisher in early 2021. But by mid-2020, it was undeniable that reading, digital reading in particular, would continue to be so profoundly affected by physical confinement, loss of access to personal book collections and ordinary sources of print books, scrambled routines and relationships to time, increased consumption of news, and isolation and anxiety, that it was necessary to ask how relationships to books and reading might be permanently changed by the crisis.[39] Would the pandemic be, as Bronwen Thomas asked in November 2020, the moment when digital reading came of age?[40] When the experience of digital reading as the default (for the many rather than the few) brought platforms and audiences to maturity? More pessimistically, I questioned whether the shared experience of digital as a life raft, keeping reading and shared experiences of literature afloat would really show the strengths of digital as an invaluable component to be retained – much less cherished – when conditions improved. It seemed equally likely that digital would become, to those privileged readers returning to a buffet of reading options, the government cheese of literature: a last resort to be shunned until the next crisis.[41] The span of 2020–22, when the second round of

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yearly surveys were conducted, captured at one end the first of the COVID-19 lockdowns and at the other the early months of the war in Ukraine. Gathering longitudinal data in these years offered the potential for identifying change, or lack of change, at times when access to books and reasons for reading were in particularly violent flux.

Contribution

Research to date has demonstrated that e-book legitimacy is both complex and contested: only partially understood, but still recognised as relevant and important. Examinations of e-book materiality[42] intersect with debates on the realness of digital artefacts, and activate longstanding controversies surrounding the evolving metaphor of the book.[43] But it had not previously been established that readers share any assumption that bookness (or any other form of legitimacy) is consistently an important factor in e-book desirability, utility, market value, or cultural value. However fervent the bookness messages from retailers (or however fervent the resistance from anti-e-book voices), readers remain 'active agents' who can 'resist the codes implicit in the text'.[44]

The value of e-books – how and whether they *count* – matters to anyone who cares about the value of books. The potential of digital publishing to transform the processes by which worth is constituted and communicated is long recognised. Even predigital proposals for specific mechanised reading technologies, such as Bob Brown's 1930 Readies and Vannevar Bush's 1945 Memex, confronted the issue of value: when pioneers speculated as to how new reading functionalities would change readers' relationship to texts, this included how readers would evaluate and esteem texts (and in Brown's case, argue that mechanised reading represented an existential, and long overdue, threat to print).[45] Before the earliest device prototypes were built, researchers acknowledged the capacity for disruption and proposed ways in which any future move to mass e-reading could transform the status of books and reading. The new ubiquity of e-books makes it possible, and essential, to continue to bring these long-standing explorations of e-book cultural value from the hypothetical to the concrete. Legitimacy in the form of realness is only one aspect of cultural value, but for e-books it is a fundamental aspect, crystallising the central question of whether e-books can be classed with books and partake of the book's cultural status and privileged cultural position. 'The book', as Galey reminds us, 'is never just an ideal object in isolation, but always contextualised by the systems that surround it, whether those systems are social or mechanical'.[46] Examining e-books within these systems, the data I have

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collected to date indicate that legitimacy in the form of realness or bookness remains highly relevant for readers. However, conceptions of realness and bookness are flexible and context-specific. While realness and bookness are widely recognised as desirable qualities, many uses to which readers put their e-books make realness, and the responsibility and weight that come with it, unnecessary or actually undesirable. Further, the moiety of unrealness is as important as the unrealness itself, with three main categories of unrealness emerging as most prominent: e-book as *ersatz book*, as digital proxy, and as incomplete book. Individual readers move between conceptions, demonstrating willingness to adopt different ideas of realness (and by extension different stances regarding the nature and cultural value of e-books) depending on their needs in the moment, and what they require from a given e-book at a particular time.

Book Structure

The chapters to come are organised chronologically, examining conceptions of bookness before following readers through the stages of discovering, obtaining, reading, and keeping a digital book.

Chapter 1, 'Bookness', uses book history and digital humanities approaches to open discussion of the evolving metaphor of the book. This chapter reviews existing scholarship on the bookness of physical books, the realness of electronic texts, the complexities of e-book paratext, and realness as it relates to literary status, progressing to personal definitions of book realness and analysing original survey data on whether and why readers consider an e-book a real book.

The next four chapters follow a reader's journey, examining bookness and realness as they are constituted – and used to further the reader's purposes – at different stages. Chapter 2, 'Paratexts and First Impressions: Taking a Chance on an E-book', investigates first encounters with e-books and the process by which readers evaluate a given work on screen. It examines how trust is established and legitimacy constituted in practice, considering realness and bookness in terms of a given e-book's status as cultural product and cultural object. It further applies Genette's paratextual theory to the negotiation of status between reader, author, and publisher. Chapter 3, 'Ownership and Permanence: E-book Transactions', explores how, but also why, readers who have decided to take a leap of faith with their chosen e-book will obtain it, contrasting the motivations for purchase (or conditional licence purchase), loan, and piracy. It draws on legal scholarship, book history, and fan studies to explore how bookness and realness in the form of meaningful ownership may be constructed (should the reader

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wish it) even in the absence of traditional forms, and when readers may prefer temporary, informal, or actually illegal uses to permanent and authorised ones. It concludes with debates on the rights of the reader, the fraught question of e-book control, and readers' experiences of conflict with corporate entities over ownership of their collections. Chapter 4, 'Materiality, Convenience, and Customisation: E-books and the Act of Reading', looks at the comparatively brief period when the book is not anticipated or recalled, but experienced. Contrasting devices and platforms, it considers what kinds of pleasure readers seek from an e-book (in different settings, and at different times), and the ways in which an e-book does or does not deliver such satisfactions. Examining aspects such as tactile dimensions of embodied reading, the role of the material object, convenience and access, optimisation and customisation, and narrative immersion, it contextualises original findings with recent empirical research on screen reading and offer insights on how, where, and when intimacy, sense of achievement, and the feeling of being 'lost in a book' can be found in e-reading. Chapter 5, 'Reading Lives and Reading Identities: Genre, Audience, and Being a Reader of E-books', brings the reader's journey full circle, investigating how e-books, once read, are shared or not shared, displayed or not displayed, and made a cherished part of the reader's personal history or barred from such status. Working with theories from legal studies and psychology (on the definitions and uses of embarrassment, guilt, and shame), it considers how and why readers reconcile e-book reading with personal definitions of bookishness. It examines, in particular, privacy, including narratives of furtive reading, and public declarations of book-love. Investigating bibliophilia as both an identity and a set of bookish practices and values, it considers what it means to be a book lover in the digital era and report on how readers form, strengthen, and express relationships to digital texts. The Coda draws together realness, bookness, and the e-book reader's journey to offer perspectives on e-book legitimacy, worth, and cultural value, and outline implications for all participants in the communications circuit.

This book aims to begin to map the no man's land between e-books and 'real books'. This begins with acknowledging that it exists. In my study, some respondents have found fault with themselves for experiencing complexity. Apologising for the 'emotive', for the 'little voice' causing trouble, one explained:

> *Mine is an emotive answer [to the question of e-book realness] not based on logic. Logic tells me that the actual format is fairly irrelevant and that all cultural product develops and changes over time. . .and so it should. The conception, construction and realisation of a written product far outweighs*

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> *what media it is produced in / accessed. 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?' Which is wholly irrational but there it is.*

This book argues that such a stance is far from irrational. The space between bookness and 'real book'-ness is made together. There is much to be discovered by, instead of apologising for the contradictions, confronting the ambiguity and examining how and why we maintain it. In asking why it is we read books that aren't real books, it makes sense to ask who gains when we keep this area grey.

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