CHAPTER 3

Ownership and Permanence
E-book Transactions

> *'If I love a book, I need to **keep** a [print] copy. E books just don't give that feeling.'*
>
> (Survey 2021)

> *'I can **keep** [an e-book] with me at all times to read whenever I have a moment. My entire library is carried with me.'*
>
> (Survey 2021)

The book is chosen. The reader, having fought their way through jungles of epitext and negotiated with the author as to the value of the selected text, is ready to obtain it. But obtain it how? For a print book, the decision is difficult enough: whether to borrow or buy; if buying, hardcover or paperback, new or used; comparison shopping for the chosen edition from competing retailers, and so on. For an e-book, a different landscape of options presents itself. Even among digital artefacts, e-books are elusive. Readers working in a commercial context dominated by Amazon, where the 'Buy Now' button typically means 'buy conditional use licence now', are for each book confronted afresh with questions of what 'buy', 'collect', or 'own' mean in practice.

This chapter explores how readers who have chosen an e-book decide on their next step, contrasting the motivations for purchase (or conditional licence purchase), loan, and piracy. It will draw on legal scholarship, book history, and fan studies to explore how bookness and realness in the form of meaningful ownership can be constituted if desired, acknowledging that bookness and realness may be unwanted when readers prefer temporary, unauthorised, or unambiguously illegal uses. It concludes with modern conceptions of the rights of the reader and the fraught question of e-book control, and readers' experiences of conflict with corporate entities over ownership of their collections.

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The Legalities of E-book Ownership

When e-reading went from niche to mainstream, the new e-book market dragged authors, publishers, and readers into areas of intellectual property law rarely encountered in practice and not yet tested in the courts. Existing agreements between authors and publishers regarding who was licensed to reproduce, distribute, and sell works did not, in most cases, explicitly cover digital editions; conflict over such rights in older contracts has been the basis for numerous lawsuits and remains an area of disagreement.[1] (One example is the contentious and very public battle between Random House and the estate of William Styron; Styron's heirs eventually succeeded in clawing back digital rights and released the 2010 e-book edition of *Sophie's Choice* with Jane Friedman's Open Road Publishing venture.)[2] Existing case law regarding the rights and privileges of readers was equally inadequate to deal with the potential of digitisation, including storage and sharing of digital files and use of a given file across multiple devices.[3] Print-era customs served as foundations for some e-lending frameworks. A common example saw public libraries loaning to only one borrower at a time (as if it were a physical book sitting on a shelf), and loaning a given copy only a certain number of times (as if it were a physical book that would wear out and have to be replaced).[4] However nonsensical from a technical point of view, such agreements observed prior consensus on fair compensation and reasonable use, building on terms negotiated between libraries and publishers that weighed the needs of users and institutions against the commercial needs of authors and publishers, as well as preserving trust and cooperation between parties still mutually involved in the sale and use of print books. (With print still at that time accounting for the overwhelming majority of transactions, straining print partnerships for the sake of e-book opportunities was rarely deemed advantageous.) It is notable that the pilot study on library e-lending that followed the 2013 Sieghart Review, which agreed on the critical importance of compensating authors for each instance of borrowing, included as participants 'authors, publishers, agents, libraries and booksellers':[5] a list more representative of the creators and distributors of books than the buyers and borrowers of books, with librarians standing alone as, if not the voice of readers, at least guardians of readers' interests.[6] As I'll discuss later in the chapter, when readers consider rules regarding e-book use as unfair, they are disinclined to comply with those rules.

The approach of Project Gutenberg and Google, in contrast, exemplified the Silicon Valley ethos of 'move fast and break things': a 'build it first

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and ask for forgiveness later' policy familiar to other digital culture pioneers.[7] 'Backward-looking', far from being an insult, is an accurate description in this context of an approach building on tradition and prioritising existing relationships. 'Forward-looking' is not necessarily a compliment: as Google Books demonstrated in its rush to digitise over the objections of many authors and publishers, a future-oriented approach can be as mired in humdrum practicalities as a history-oriented one (as Project Gutenberg was reportedly shaped not only by a vision of access to literature but also the need for a value-for-money use of '$100,000,000 of computer time' on a University of Illinois mainframe,[8] and no more likely to be shaped by logic, justice, or even adherence to the law). Individual readers are similarly pulled between the past and future, informed by predigital practices and by emerging possibilities, and immersed in a larger cultural conversation on digital-era rights and responsibilities.

Examining three entities particularly influential in shaping modern perceptions regarding ownership of e-books demonstrates the variety, and flexibility, of stances on realness. The first is Project Gutenberg. The Project promises 'books for all and for free':[9] not stand-ins for books, or pale imitations of books, but books. Michael Hart's analogy of a 'Star Trek replicator'[10] suggests copies, but wondrous copies befitting a science fiction utopia: perfect, indistinguishable from and interchangeable with the original, entirely authentic and real (however much this promise collides with what Kirschenbaum calls the 'illusion [or call it a working model] of immaterial behaviour: identification without ambiguity, transmission without loss, repetition without originality').[11] When confronted with legal barriers to distributing real books, as when the edition on which they based their painstakingly constructed files of the works of Shakespeare did not enter the public domain as expected,[12] the Project did not change their stance that e-books are real books. Instead, they complied, taking down the files, and then lobbied to change the law (though plans for Hart to serve as Lawrence Lessig's plaintiff in the actual Supreme Court case against the Copyright Term Extension Act of 1998 broke down).[13] The second is Google Books. Google's contrasting response to legal challenges was to pivot to presenting e-books as sub-real. Despite early interest and significant investment in mass book digitisation, to the degree that 'the corporation's self-narrative places digital books at the company's inception',[14] when challenged, they recast their artefacts as 'snippets', things that are not books or meaningful parts of books (despite the fact that patient users can, through repeated searches, read large portions of a given book), and reframed the sharing of those artefacts as nothing more than

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harmless indexing.[15] The third is Amazon. The juggernaut of the e-book market, it has since the 1990s experimented with a wide and often contradictory range of approaches and narratives. And as discussed throughout this book – at length justified by Amazon's reach and influence – it sometimes describes its products to customers in ways that suggest books, real and ownable, and at other times in ways far short of real.

All three, however, have one aspect in common: by simply proceeding with what was suddenly technologically possible, and putting to one side the question of how this did or did not harmonise with existing legal frameworks and custom, these agents set an influential example of risk-taking and aggressive manoeuvring. In this period where the legal territory is broad and contested, readers' views are not necessarily informed by legal or regulatory realities. Readers' understanding of their rights as readers or owners is highly variable, often incorrect, and influenced by contradictory messages from self-interested retailers as well as folk wisdom, both on traditional rights of authors and on philosophies of free access and exchange common to digital culture.

Reading in Context: E-books in a Sea of Stolen Goods

The participants in my study are not unusual in describing a digital reading landscape that extends over many territories, each with its own legal environment and accepted norms, and with few if any signposts on the borders between. E-books rarely stand alone. They are read, frequently on the same devices, alongside journalism, commentary, crowdsourced reviews and Wikipedia entries, social media posts, and so on. Participants' e-books and other digital material come from a vast array of sources: some mainstream and some fringe; some adapted from print and some digital-original; some legal and some blatantly illegal; and many in a grey area somewhere in between, where readers may not know and may not care to inquire after status.

Much of participants' on-screen reading consists of free-to-the-user but not necessarily legal material, shared with explicit Creative Commons licensing or a less formal adherence to what Lawrence Lessig describes as 'the ideals of the Internet and cultural freedom'.[16] Fan fiction, spontaneously mentioned in the survey and focus groups by many participants, exemplifies the latter category.[17] Fan fiction thrives in both its original non-commercial territory and increasingly, after further transformations, in commercial arenas. Prominent examples of fan fiction reworked to

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remove identifiers include Anna Todd's *After* (discussed later in this book), Cassandra Clare's *The Mortal Instruments* series, and, of course, *Fifty Shades of Grey*.[18] Community standards regarding credit, attribution, and reuse, negotiated over decades in intersecting fandoms, are stretched to cover a vastly expanded audience as fan fiction is both made visible and corporatised by the entrance of actors such as Wattpad.[19] As legal scholar Aaron Schwabach explains, 'while there are some areas in which the law [regarding fan works] is unsettled, there are more in which it is settled but widely misunderstood by owners and fans alike'.[20] In my own study, participant responses highlight the degree to which even informed, experienced users can be unclear as to the legal status of what they are reading and sharing. They also demonstrate how good faith reliance on familiar terminology can spread misinformation. When participants describe fan fiction as 'not published, it's free', or its creators as 'writers' outside the category of 'actual published authors', one can see how such terms serve, in the context of the conversation, to draw useful distinctions between categories of works: commercial and non-commercial, authorised and non-authorised, and so on.[21] One can also see how easily describing published works as 'not published', or 'writers' as separate from, and by implication less than, 'actual published authors', could lead to unintentional violation of actual rights as creators and intellectual property owners.

For e-books, as with news (cited by many participants as a core type of screen reading, and often read on the same devices as e-books), unauthorised use is commonplace. The UK Intellectual Property Office finds that e-books, whether mainstream-published, self-published, or shared on free-to-user sites, are most often accessed legally, but piracy is on the rise. The Office estimated that in May 2022, 24% of Britons who read e-books had pirated at least one in the previous three months: deemed an 'average' infringement level, higher than audiobooks (22%) but lower than digital magazines (41%), and nearly double the pre-COVID figure of 13% in 2018.[22] But even with that sharp increase, the Office found that only 11% of e-book readers pirated all their recent books: the great majority still obtained either some (13%) or all (76%) of their recent books legally.[23] Results from the US are similar: the Immersive Media and Books 2020 report, by Rachel Noorda and Kathi Inman Berens and funded by OverDrive, the American Library Association, the Book Industry Study Group, and the Independent Book Publishers Association, found that while 14.4% of reader survey respondents engaged in some book piracy, piracy accounted for only a portion of the books they obtained, and that in the early COVID period book pirates actually bought more books

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(e-book, print book, and audiobook) than the general survey population.[24] Together, these figures indicate widespread flexibility: some readers who never pay, but more who sometimes pay, and are not averse to a spot of piracy in certain circumstances. For them, the decision is not whether to pirate, but when – and why.

'Pirated' or 'piracy' was offered in most years by my own survey respondents as a write-in source of e-books. Specific websites included the entertainment-focussed Pirate Bay,[25] which offers novel downloads alongside music, games, and software, but also more academic-focussed websites including AAARG[26], Sci-Hub, and Library Genesis, that offer unauthorised copies of peer-reviewed research papers, monographs, and various forms of scholarly texts[27] (and which have been used by AI developers to train Large Language Models without the authors' knowledge or consent).[28] Piracy did not rule out selective future purchases: some explained that they would later 'buy physical copies if book [is] good'.[29] Some participants in my study who acknowledged reading ambiguous or openly pirated material expressed mild sheepishness ('pirating. . .which is a bit bad. . .') or a need for secrecy ('given that this is sufficiently anonymous, I tend to pirate e-books to see if it's any good and then buy it if it's decent in hard copy'), but for the most part a calm acceptance of strategic piracy and no regrets ('sure, I'll buy [e-]books. But normally if it's hard to pirate').[30] (However, it is worth noting that they could have felt regret without expressing it, and that participants who did feel more conflicted may have kept quiet on the subject.)[31] When acknowledging that they are using material in ways prohibited by the site or author, they often express irritation rather than remorse, and dismiss restrictions as both futile and an unreasonable impediment to use, as in this exchange in focus group 4:

P2: *'Yes, I know that some websites are learning about [manual copying of files] because I know fanficiton.net stopped doing that. . .they used to let you but now you can't copy and paste anything, they've got it protected. So they're sort of learning.'*
P4: *'They make it tricky.'*
P3: *'Isn't it still just publicly available though, so why do they need to lock it down?'*
P4: *'It seems obnoxious given that some people want to read stuff offline.'*

The right for authors to control how their work is downloaded is here regarded as less important than the right of readers to access the material on their own terms, in the formats most convenient and comfortable for

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them. Authors such as fantasy novelists Maggie Stiefvater, Samantha Shannon, Tom Pollock, and Laura Lam describe a painful bind where online piracy, sufficiently widespread to devastate sales, is often carried out by devoted fans who consider downloading an illegal PDF harmless, or even 'free advertising' and a compliment to favourite authors.[32] Though there was some censure of the 'grey area' or open piracy behaviour of other readers, such as family members or nameless hypothetical strangers (as with 'my brother is Torrenting books', greeted by the group with a general sigh of dismay),[33] among participants in my study, there was little open scolding or judgement of pirates in their midst (notable, as there was at times scolding and judgement on other topics such as appreciation of book materiality, as discussed in Chapter 5) no matter how explicit the discussion of illegal use. The single instance in any focus group of censure directed at a person present was in focus group 1.

P3: *I think pretty much everything I have on my Kindle I've just borrowed. Books that someone else downloaded and just gave me. . .'*
P1: *'You can't download books illegally.'*
P3: *'I didn't. I got it from someone else. I never touched the internet, from my point of view!'*

This saw the censure laughed off, and the subject immediately dropped as the group moved on. It is notable that, while joking, the participant's rationalisation of illegal downloads as a form of 'borrowing' didn't argue that the theft was trivial, but rather that the theft wasn't real theft. As law professors Michael Heller and James Salzman put it, ownership is a 'storytelling battle' between six fundamental narratives – first-in-time, possession, labour, attachment (not in the sense of emotion but in the sense of 'it's mine because it's attached to something that's mine'), self-ownership, and family – that a party can selectively assert depending on which story best serves their immediate interests.[34] 'Theft,' they explain, 'like ownership itself, is a legal conclusion, not an empirical fact'.[35]

Books Bought but Not Owned

Despite the prevalence of piracy and artful manual downloads, in my own study most of participants' digital reading consisted of e-books conventionally bought or borrowed. Terms and conditions, whether for major retailers, libraries, or free sources such as Project Gutenberg, further shape readers' understanding of what they should and should not do with a book (and, as discussed subsequently, misconceptions regarding terms may

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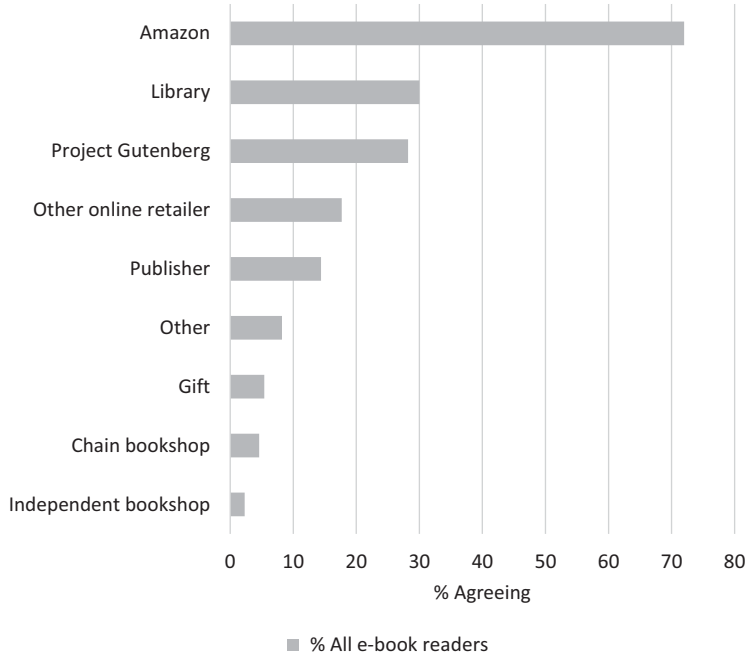


Figure 3.1 Sources of e-books.

mean that self-reported levels of unauthorised use underestimate the true scale). Amazon was the biggest source by a wide margin. Nearly three-quarters (72.0%) of e-book readers had obtained an e-book from Amazon in the past twelve months, more than twice the level for libraries (30.0%) and Project Gutenberg (28.2%) (Figure 3.1).

No other source was used by more than one in five readers. Most sources saw minimal change over the course of the survey: direct from publisher increased slightly (peaking in 2016 at 21.6%) while non-Amazon online retailers (peaking in 2016 at 29.5%) and Project Gutenberg (peaking in 2017 at 34.4%) rose slightly before falling back to original levels (though not in a pattern obviously linked to the pandemic), but most other changes were negligible. The exception was libraries. These saw a sharp increase, nearly doubling from 21.9% in 2014–17 to 41.2% in 2020–22, when so many readers shared the experience of 'did not go to a library in person for fifteen months, so e-book checkout was kind of a necessity'.[36] Usage predictably peaked in 2020 (44.1% in 2020,

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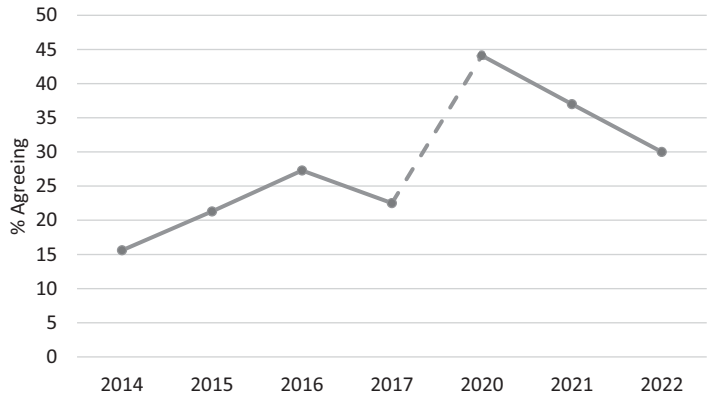


Figure 3.2 Sources of e-books: library, by year.

vs 41.3% in 2021, and 37.0% in 2022), but remained in 2022 still higher than before COVID-19 (Figure 3.2).

Increased pandemic demand was not without downsides: while many benefitted from enhanced collections, as with 'my library service expanded their eBook collection massively and got some great titles' (enhancements that were for many libraries temporary, and often linked to special, less costly licensing terms offered by publishers at the height of pandemic lockdowns) others found the competition for titles a barrier to reaching the books they wanted, explaining that 'due to ebook demand on libraries early in 2020 one of my library systems reduced the amount of ebooks you could loan/do holds on' or 'more people are accessing the public library's [sic] in my area, and the wait times for e-books are longer'.[37] As this book goes to print, it's not yet possible to predict whether library e-book loans will remain so popular. But the pandemic was for so many a chance to not only try e-books but also *rely* on e-books, as with 'when the libraries were closed, ebooks were what kept me going'.[38] For at least some, those who 'started using [e-books] more frequently because [they] got a library card and. . .now prefer ebooks to print because of the ease of reading them', or 'for a while, only ebooks were available from the library and that got [them] used to them so now. . .prefer them even though print through the library is back to being easy to get', the experience was good enough to convert them to regular e-reading.[39]

However, experience of buying from Amazon doesn't necessarily translate to full understanding of what one is actually purchasing, because

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Amazon terms and conditions are confusing. Conditional use licenses such as Amazon's are not unusual for digital book retailers or sellers of digital goods in general. Its tight restrictions on what a user can do with an e-book (e.g. not only banning resale but also such actions as conversion to another file format) and reservation of the retailer's right to revoke access at any time are in many ways industry standard. But customers can be 'misled by the apparent disconnect between the message communicated by the Buy Now button and the limited set of rights contemplated by EULAs and terms of service' as Amazon, like other e-retailers, knowingly 'leverages the common understanding' of the purchase of goods.[40] Such leveraging includes use of the same front end terminology for physical and digital goods (like a physical book and an e-book) when the actual terms are quite different. Perzanowski and Hoofnagle's 2016 survey of digital consumers revealed that large majorities believed that clicking a Buy Now button conferred ownership of an e-book (86%), the right to keep an e-book (87%), and the right to read an e-book on other personal devices (81%), and significant minorities believed that it conferred the right to lend (48%), gift (38%), or bequeath (26%) e-books.[41] Whether or not e-retailers can be proved to be actively and intentionally misleading consumers for the sake of profit (as Perzanowski and Hoofnagle posit), e-retailers benefit from the confusion when customers think they are getting more for their money than they actually are. Heller and Salzman point out that far from being an outlier, Amazon is engaging in typical corporate practice when it includes 'strategic ambiguity' (as when an airline declines to clarify which of two passengers owns an armrest, or the wedge of space taken up when a seat is reclined) as part of its overall ownership design, 'a social engineering tool designed to steer your behaviour, invisibly and decisively'.[42] Perhaps the most influential signal is 'automaticness': with '1 click' the reader takes possession, when a loan is expired the book simply disappears from their virtual shelf. The ground rules are relegated to 'terms and conditions' areas: separate zones of small-print legal terminology, framed not as reasonable arguments that a rational person can and should master, but as baffling and impenetrable collections of words, useless for the purposes of communication and utterly inaccessible to the non-professional. This infantilisation of the e-book reader – choice removed, details unknowable – sends a message that there is no point in engaging with the existing terms: *you won't be able to understand them, and even if you did you have no power to negotiate*. The result is an idea that the only way to effectively navigate a transaction is by trial and error, proceeding when permitted and stopping only when blocked, treating anything that is technically possible as

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permissible: *if I wasn't allowed to do it, they would have stopped me*. In choosing obscurity, Amazon and other retailers have effectively released users from any feeling of obligation to consider what is ethical and why, or what might be the best way to approach a PDF of unknown provenance sitting on a dubious file sharing website; arguably, from any feeling of agency in the ongoing formation of ethics regarding e-book ownership and use.

In my own study, survey data and, particularly, focus group and interview data underscore the degree to which e-book readers are unsure about ownership. While some participants were well-informed about Amazon's terms and what they meant for readers, many others were not. Some were aware that they were in the dark (often expressing irritation at arcane terms), but others were unknowing holders and confident sharers of misconceptions. But whether or not they have accurate knowledge of conditional use licenses, participants were as a group dissatisfied with the forms of ownership offered, in the current environment, by e-books. Whatever was on offer, it was not enough. Some informed participants singled out objectionable terms and conditions, particularly that when retailers 'can take it away at any time', exchanging money for an e-book is 'like renting it' while 'print copy ensures you actually own the book; electronic means you are at the mercy of the electronic rights and device makers'.[43] They noted that they 'disagree with e-publishers' policies that restrict sharing of e-books/inheritance of e-books' or chose digital in a specific incidence only because there 'was a special deal for e-books that I'd get to keep a PDF version of. Not rent a license to'.[44]

Whether the limitations were legal or practical, the fault of the terms or the fault of a counterintuitive interface (e.g. even participants who, though they could legally loan an e-book file, did not necessarily know how to go about the awkward process of extracting and transferring the file), the limitations were deemed not just burdensome, but unacceptably so: offensive and unjust. What makes them unacceptable is comparison to print books. Perzanowski and Hoofnagle argue that 'buyer's "default behaviour" is based on the experience of buying physical media, and the assumptions from that context have carried over into the digital domain'.[45] My findings strongly support the idea that readers believe firmly, and feel deeply, that the affordances of print constitute their rights as book-readers: if one can do it with a print book, one should be entitled to do it with an e-book. This speaks to a fundamental belief that on at least one level, e-books have bookness: the rights of a book-reader apply.

Crucially, Perzanowski and Hoofnagle found that 'respondents in [their] study indicated that they would turn to streaming services and

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BitTorrent if they were unable to engage in the uses typically associated with personal property ownership'.[46] My study's participants, in openly discussing their own book piracy, and not judging themselves or others for such breaches, suggest that this prediction is accurate.

Principled Resistance

Widespread and unrepentant piracy is not necessarily an indication that participants consider e-books to be unreal. Such a viewpoint would be one way to ease qualms about piracy (there is no crime in stealing something that is not real) but not the only way. Another response to the disconnect between what feels right and what is legal – the powerful shared conviction that readers should be allowed to enjoy the same rights of ownership with e-books as they do with print books – is to recast non-compliance as principled resistance.

Many participants expressed a sense that breaking bad rules is often justified and sometimes admirable, particularly when the actor or institution making the bad rules is not respected or liked. Amazon, accused by Perzanowski and Hoofnagle of manipulation and fraud, is singled out among retailers by a number of my participants (for more on the emotional dimension of dealings with Amazon, please see Chapter 5). For such readers, violating Amazon's terms can be cast as standing up to a bully: something done for self-respect as much as for any material gain. But even beyond a self-respecting citizen's response to unfair demands, indifference to terms can be cast as romantic: an expression of a more ardent readerly identity. If in nineteenth-century British novels 'the vulgar owning without reading epitomized by sofa-table books and dummy spines finds its antithesis in reading without buying . . . and even reading without owning (remember the hero of Ranthorpe freeloading at a bookstall)'[47] then the bookstall-loafing and reading-room-raiding hero of the Victorian period can perhaps find a counterpart in the PDF-ripping reader of today: similarly so enamoured of the text that obsession with ownership seems petty by comparison. (The theft of a treasure beyond price does at least demonstrate taste.) de Certeau was referring to defiance of a very different sort of authority when he described powerless-but-free readers as 'travellers' who 'move across lands that belong to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it for themselves': he spoke of resisting pressure to conform to official, sanctioned reading practices, not official, sanctioned file sharing regulations.[48] But readers can locate honour and dignity in poaching of the

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two separate kinds. Reading without owning can be righteous and even demonstrate a deeper, more principled commitment to books and reading. This offers a new perspective on digital book piracy. It validates some earlier findings on the scale of the phenomenon, including Perzanowski and Hoofnagle's, but challenges conclusions as to the motivations behind it, with major implications for authors and publishers seeking to curb illegal book downloads. This central role of affect, of feeling (connected, or righteous, or respected, or conversely feeling disconnected and disdained) further underscores the degree to which book ownership, for these participants, is bound up not only with practicalities but also with emotion. Acceptable levels of control are here subjective and personal, successful to the degree that they give the individual a sense of meaningful ownership, and overwhelmingly framed in relation to print books.

Ownership as Realness: Feeling, 'Safekeeping', and Reaping What Authors Sow

The ability to keep and control – alongside feelings associated with keeping and control – underpins many respondents' core reasons for regarding e-books as real or unreal. Ownership is one of the overarching themes emerging from free-text responses to the question in the 2022 survey. To some respondents, e-book was unreal 'because I don't own a physical copy'; realness was absolutely contingent on that tangible and traditional form of ownership. For others, lack of a print copy was more an issue of affect, or lack thereof: 'Don't feel like I own it in same way as a physical print book' or 'I don't feel as if I own e-books in the same way I do physical copies' (offering the possibility that the ownership still existed, but did not deliver the same satisfaction, a legal but not emotional reality). Lack of control over the book's destiny was another reason for unrealness, as with 'you can't look at it again, see it on a shelf, lend it to someone, discuss it with a friend. Feels like a much more private reading experience' or '[I don't feel as if I own it and] I used to like sharing books with family and friends': without the ability to lend and share, and experience emotions that lending and sharing inspire, the book is not real. Linked to this is the matter of permanence, and how 'Digital can disappear', both in the sense of a deleted file and of versioning and obsolescence. As one respondent explained, 'e-books will turn out to be more transient than the written word. Around the corner will be a new, unknown reading delivery system that we can't even dream of. Books, however, those things written down, or placed between covers for safe keeping, will outlive us

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all.' Here, ownership is not limited to the individual: 'safe keeping' spans generations, and e-books are unreal because they can't be kept for posterity in the same way as print.

However, ownership in another sense provides a powerful argument for e-book realness. As noted earlier, one of Heller and Salzman's six fundamental narratives of ownership is labour, 'the idea that labor justifies ownership – that you and you alone deserve to *reap what you sow*' [emphasis theirs].[49] A number of respondents consider e-books real because they 'know how much work goes into making both [e-books and print books]'. 'The same amount of work went in to create them as print books', another respondent argues, 'so why would they be any different?' In their estimation, realness hinges on the fact that 'it's a finished written text', specifically 'something someone has written'; 'a person wrote it, a person is reading it. It's a book' – it is the human involvement, the human effort, that makes it so. (A conception of realness that expands Foucault's author function to enfold additional responsibility as well as additional means to control a text,[50] with enormous implications for AI-authored books; as Leah Henrickson has established, it is entirely possible for readers unsure whether a machine, or its creator, can fulfil the author function, to conclude that a text was written by nobody.)[51] It's not only the author's effort at stake: editor and publisher investment (in the form of effort and expertise as well as money) make it possible to say that 'ebooks contain all that is required for a manuscript to become a book, ie. [sic] an edited text in the final version of record including the publisher's paratext'. Even though these are reader arguments in favour of e-book realness, the qualifiers – '*the same* amount of work', '*all* that is required' – demonstrate how fragile that status is. As discussed in Chapter 2, where 'books that do not merit print publication' are viewed with scepticism, and readers even sometimes ask 'if the publisher wasn't willing to invest in it [to the same extent as a print edition], why should I?',[52] mere suspicion that the 'amount of work' was not *the same*, or that *some* but not '*all* that is required' had been supplied, would be enough to place realness status in jeopardy.

Even with editor and publisher effort in the mix, the figure of the author looms larger still. When respondents explain that e-books are real 'because they are authored and written to be read', 'you are still reading the author's work', and 'the content that the writer came up with is still contained in the work, I don't think it matters whether it's printed on paper or an .epub file!', they are, in differently nuanced ways, asserting the right of any person to be rewarded for intellectual labour, confirming that 'any format

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which conveys the author's expression counts,' and refuting insinuations that what the author has created is less real when it is read on a device rather than paper. If it were, some authors would sow yet be left with nothing for anyone to reap. One respondent declared their self-interest: e-books are real 'because my book's coming out in e-book format 😊' – but the readers quoted earlier are very much on their side.

Print versus Digital: Different Tactics in the Pursuit of Control

Ownership matters, but it doesn't matter equally to all readers. When asked 'when you choose print, what are your reasons?' motivators linked to control are among the most important in my survey: keeping and collecting, but also borrowing and accessing (on one's own terms), as well as giving and passing on. There were differences between demographic groups, but patterns of book acquisition and access offered sharper contrasts: between those who borrow books and those who do not, between those who buy from various locations, between those who read different categories of books, and those who read on different platforms. There are particularly stark differences between those who read e-books and those who do not.

'Better for Borrowing or Buying Secondhand'

Fully half of respondents (53.0%) choose print because it is better for borrowing or buying secondhand, a proportion that increased significantly over the course of the survey (from 44.5% in 2014 to a peak of 60.4% in 2022). Older respondents and men[53] were less likely to agree. Intriguingly, there is no difference between e-book readers and print-only readers. But it's meaningful that the survey asked 'when you choose digital' and 'when you choose print', leaving open the possibility that each format will be best for different reasons at different times:[54] participants frequently explained that preference depends on context (e.g. 'if I am travelling, it's easier to have it on my kindle', or '[digital] easier for travel or in hospital').[55] While readers who value borrowing and buying secondhand were more likely to have obtained print books from every source in the survey, it was, unsurprisingly, exceptionally strongly correlated with recent history of borrowing and secondhand purchase.[56]

The pandemic affected patterns of book borrowing. In 2014–17, just under half of e-book-reading respondents (47.5%) had borrowed a print book from a library in the past twelve months, double the proportion (21.9%) who had borrowed an e-book from a library. At this point, the

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e-book borrowers were effectively a subset of print borrowers: using the library solely for digital was quite unusual, accounting for only 4.0% of e-book readers. This changed dramatically after lockdown and library closures. From 2020 to 2022, roughly the same number borrowed in print (44.3%) and digitally (41.2%) and fully 30.8% of those who borrowed from a library borrowed only e-books, not print.

Libraries, however, now have significant competition for e-book borrowing. Amazon launched Kindle Unlimited in the US in 2014 (with other markets following, sometimes years behind) and Prime Reading in 2017. From 2020, I began to ask about Amazon e-book loans separately from Amazon e-book purchases: two in ten of 2020–22 respondents (22.2%), obtained an e-book in the past twelve months as part of a Kindle Unlimited or Prime Reading membership. But the overlap between Amazon buyers and borrowers proved nearly complete. Only a quarter (27.3%) of Amazon e-book purchasers also borrow, but nearly all Amazon borrowers (90.8%) also purchase; a mere 2.0% of e-book readers in the survey fell into the rare category of those who borrow from Amazon but do not buy. While modest compared to Amazon purchases, and even library e-book loans, the Kindle Unlimited/Prime Reading figures dwarf those of other subscription services such as Scribd or 24symbols: fewer than one in twenty respondents (4.3%) had used them in the prior twelve months.

Focus group participants confirmed that borrowing digital books from libraries was often aggravating, leaving readers feeling controlled rather than in control, and, implicitly, of having a technologically simple process artificially complicated to serve the commercial needs of publishers and/or retailers, as when 'you used to be able to do some kind of jiggery-pokery [to load a public library e-book onto a Kindle in the UK] but they stopped it and you can't do it now'.[57] Some noted the ease of returning an e-book,[58] but checking that book out in the first place was often exasperating. As one participant put it, 'borrowing e-books is a real pain as well. I went through a phase of trying to do that, because I thought it was going to save me so much money. But it was really annoying to download them and get them on there'.[59] A quirk of Amazon lending made the hassle even more obnoxious: 'and when they disappear after the loaning period is gone, they leave behind a little notify [sic], "You used to have a book here but now you can't open it"'.[60] To lose a book, but be forced to keep a reminder, gave this reader the worst of both worlds: taunting ghost spines on a digital shelf, a memorial to inconvenience rather than reading pleasure.

Further, there are significant correlations between agreements with 'better for borrowing and buying secondhand' and almost every other

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motivator in the survey. The strongest correlations, with choosing print because it is easier to share and better for giving as a gift, speak to the importance to these readers of book exchange, but other sentiments, such as print books being more enjoyable to handle and use and identifying as a bibliophile, are more about preference than practicality: a grouping (which I will discuss again in later chapters) of bookish values.

Conferring Ownership: Gifts

The kinds of ownership these participants valued included control over not only a book's present but also its future: the ability to sell, to loan, to give as a gift, to bequeath. Ownership of a physical book includes the ability to determine the fate of one's own personal copy, and many respondents in my own study consider this affordance of print important. (And given Perzanowski and Hoofnagle's data about the significant minorities of customers who mistakenly believe that they already have rights to lend, gift, and bequeath e-books, this is likely an underestimate.) 'I'm a serial recommender', as one put it, and being a serial recommender (framed here as an identity, not just an activity) includes 'want[ing] to be able to give them a copy'.[61] Giving may be near-automatic, where 'most times' a reader will 'resell/swap or give [print novels] away after reading', or may be reserved for only the best of the best: '[If a novel is truly exceptional] I might buy a copy for someone [as a gift]'.[62] But either way, digital reading and print giving can coexist: '[despite having become] a consumer of mostly digital media. . .I enjoy receiving (and giving) print books as gifts, and treasure them when they arrive'.[63]

The importance of gift-giving to the book industry, and to book culture, is difficult to overstate. From a business perspective, the months leading up to Christmas account for an outsize proportion of annual sales and are vital for survival, as publishers and retailers market books not to readers but to customers who are buying for other readers (or would-be readers) in their lives.[64] The historian Stephen Nissenbaum goes so far as to credit (or condemn) book gifts as the foundation of modern Christmas traditions, calling booksellers and publishers the 'shock troops' on the 'cutting edge of a new commercial Christmas', with books (including 'Gift Book' anthologies tailored towards specific recipients, based on their demographics or interests) 'making up more than half of the earliest items advertised as Christmas gifts' in nineteenth-century America.[65] Though Amazon launched its first Kindle model in 2007, it was the 'Kindle Christmas' of 2010 when e-book sales expanded from a fraction of the

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book market to a major force: the gifts were not the books but the devices, and while print book sales peaked as was typical in the weeks leading up to Christmas, e-book sales peaked the week after, as Kindle recipients bought to stock their gifts.[66] Books are culturally important objects that can, at least if the book is sufficiently highbrow, confer cultural capital on both giver and recipient, and they are available for a strikingly lower price than many other forms of art.[67] But even the humblest literature has powers beyond its value in terms of capital, cultural or financial: as Natalie Zemon Davis demonstrated, the book as not just a 'commodity' but 'bearer of benefits and duties'.[68] Giving books fuses gift exchange with knowledge exchange, strengthening social bonds whether the present is in the form of priceless incunabula or 'vernacular literature' such as personal recipes.[69] Recognising 'the powerful tradition for understanding what a book was and what it embodied. . .a privileged object that resisted permanent appropriation'[70] acknowledges that it is something larger than one person, made to be shared and never fully relinquished even when given away. Book gifts were even centuries ago a perfect example of 'objects [that] carried with them something from their givers—Mauss called it a spirit animating the gift'[71] and retain a special ability to serve as 'a physical token of the emotional bond shared by the giver and recipient';[72] Nissenbaum puts 'the "commercialisation of sincerity"'[73] in a distancing extra set of quotes, but the publishing industry's success in promoting books as always-appropriate gifts, harnessing existing and authentic aspects of book exchange, is exactly that. Few if any other gift options offer such a combination of meaning, connection, high status, low cost, and, not at all trivially, ease of wrapping.[74] (This last affordance of print books was a key factor in the rise of Amazon: according to his biographer, Bezos selected books as his initial product in part because books were simple to package.)[75]

In my own survey, exactly half (50.0%) of respondents chose print because it is better for giving as a gift, with no significant difference between e-book readers and others. (Agreement was slightly stronger after the start of the pandemic, with 48.3% agreeing in 2014–17 and 52.2% agreeing in 2020–22.) This is less an indication that they prefer print for this purpose than an indication that they give books as gifts at all. Giving a specific e-book as a gift, as opposed to giving a generic gift voucher, remains awkward in many cases: on Amazon, for example, at time of press, gifts can only be redeemed in a customer's own country, and redemption links can't be resold.

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Sharing Books via Exchange of Copies

Sharing books in the sense of loaning, giving, or bequeathing one's personal copy is a key consideration for ownership. It's not just 'ability to lend' but ability to 'share with children, family and friends',[76] with the loan, gift, or bequest of a book serving as a means of underscoring a book's importance to the giver. The exchange creates or strengthens a connection between giver and recipient, and can foster a special connection between book and recipient as well: 'I feel connected to books, and sometimes to the people who gave them to me'.[77] But it always also affirms the connection between book and giver.[78] This connection may or may not be public (and, if personally inscribed in a physical copy by the author, becomes part of the book's peritext).[79] If the gift is anonymous, the recipient might never know who bestowed that book. But the giver always knows, and respondents describe the gift of a book as deeply meaningful.

E-book loans between individuals are often technically impossible (one respondent lamented the retrenchment of schemes such as Lendle[80] and many criticised Amazon for impeding or blocking peer-to-peer loans) and are often described as, like e-book gifts, less meaningful or satisfying: the experience, like the book itself, is missing some pieces. As respondents noted, 'you lend out physical books. It's satisfying/enjoyable to share your reads in person with friends' and they specifically buy not only print copies but also, where possible, durable hardcover copies for some books 'so that [they] can then pass them on when [they're] done'.[81] Some noted the physical act of pressing a book into a friend's hands as a key element of the exchange, as with 'I like passing books on as well. I will be, like, [mimes handing a book to fellow participant with both hands, as if in a ceremony] "take this!"'[82] They described the experience as diminished by digital exchange – instead of 'I got this from my friend' the feeling was 'well this just got beamed to me, and it's from. . .somebody' – and joked about the inadequacy of making it 'more of a social thing' by ceremoniously handing over a USB stick.[83] But more often the experience is simply missed, when they identify a text they want to share but cannot, because they read it digitally in a format they cannot easily 'beam', pull down from a shelf and make the connection then and there: 'you're having conversations [about good books you want to loan], and you're like, oh, it's on my Kindle'.[84] To diminish or lose such an opportunity for connection can be seen as not just a personal issue, but a 'cultural' one that leaves society impoverished, as in this exchange in focus group 5:

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P5: *'The crap thing is that you can't hand on a new book to friends.' ['yes' – sounds of agreement]*
P1: *'Yes, that's the biggest downside.'*
P5: *'I think this is an enormous sadness really.'*
P7: *'Yes, it's huge.'*
P5: *'It's a kind of cultural and social sadness because handing on a book is a pleasure.'*

Unsharability is precisely what makes e-books, to some respondents, not real books. If they 'used to like sharing books with family and friends',[85] and no longer do thanks to digital reading (one respondent's reason for not considering e-books to be real books), that exemplifies the 'kind of cultural and social sadness' expressed above. In some other context, 'feels like a much more private reading experience'[86] might be seen as a positive development (as with reading privacy, discussed in Chapter 5), but in terms of sharing it is a profound loss to that reader, a reason for considering e-books unreal, and a profound lack in the incomplete book. And the link between 'you can't. . .lend it to someone, discuss it with a friend' highlights how, for some, digital makes even book recommendations more difficult.[87]

Sharing Reading with Unsharable E-books

Word-of-mouth recommendations remain highly important, and unless the book is only available in one format, there is nothing to stop a reader acting on a recommendation by obtaining a book in whatever format they prefer. Acting on a recommendation by obtaining an e-book can be considerably faster. As one respondent put it: 'I have had people message me on Facebook, "I've just read this, it's great" and I'm messaging back, "I'm reading it now, yes", and I'll buy before I know I've done it'.[88]

One form of sharing that combines elements of connection with elements of display is the spontaneous public transport book conversation. In one personal story shared in a focus group, a print book, explicitly labelled 'the real thing', is critical to making 'that connection'.

> *'I was on a train reading a book, about three months ago, it was a brilliant book, I was just reaching the end and getting excited, and then this woman suddenly said to me, "It's great, isn't it?" I said, "Yes, it's just so wonderful. I can't believe I didn't read it 30 years ago" and then we had a discussion about*

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> *it. [comments from other participants: 'great!' 'that's wonderful!'] If I hadn't had been reading* ***the real thing*** *[in the form of a print book] I wouldn't have had that connection with her, and it was really nice and special.' (FG 5 respondent 4)*

Qualitative data highlight the degree to which the two sides of the book recommendation equation – serving as the giver and serving as the recipient – are not symmetrical; while both are important, they are driven by very different motivations and satisfy different needs. As discussed in Chapter 2, seeking out or acting on recommendations is most often noted in the context of trust, in finding good books and having the confidence to invest time and/or money in a given title. While this does clearly represent accepting something from the recommender, feelings of connection and strengthening of relationships are not emphasised the way they are when the information is imparted in the other direction. Richards draws a critical distinction between conscious recommendations, valuable because chosen and selectively passed on, and the 'data exhaust pipe of personal information devoid of context or real content' that is Facebook-style 'frictionless sharing'.[89] Offering recommendations is instead noted in the context of sharing or giving, incorporating elements of ownership, and also (as I will discuss in Chapter 5) identity and love.

While 'sharing books' has multiple meanings, taking different forms for print and digital books and incorporating elements of gift, loaning (and hence ownership), discussion, social connection, image, and display, it is not a particularly important motivator for choosing print or digital formats. Only 29.4% of all respondents in my own survey choose print because it is 'easier to share.' (There was no significant difference between print-only and e-book readers, a sharp contrast to values such as enjoyment of print and ease of reading in print.) Choosing print because it is easier to share was stable over the eight years of the survey. There was no significant variation due to age, but men were slightly less likely to agree.[90]

Sharing is correlated with every print value in the survey other than availability, most strongly (and unsurprisingly) with 'better for borrowing or buying secondhand' (78.0% vs 41.7% of others). Those who value sharing were, predictably, more likely to have obtained print books not only from secondhand bookshops and libraries but also independent bookshops, direct from publishers, and via gifts. (It's frivolous but tempting to speculate that friends and family might like to give them books as gifts because they will go on to share the books.)

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Impersonal Library? Defining a Digital Collection

Participants in my study placed enormous importance on personal libraries. Almost two-thirds (64.3%) choose print because it is 'better for keeping as part of a personal library', making it the second-most important motivator in the survey (just behind finding a print book 'more enjoyable to handle and use', at 67.9%). While only 15.6% choose digital for the same reason, between the two preferences almost three-quarters of respondents (72.6%) choose format with their personal libraries in mind. While the overlap is very small (just 28.5% of the already small group of those who choose digital as better for keeping as part of a personal library also choose print for the same reason), it's not insignificant: this indication that sometimes cloud storage is better than a shelf, and sometimes a shelf is better than cloud storage, harmonises with Buchanan, McKay, and Levitt's findings on how university users (academics and students) pragmatically select digital or print access depending on when and where they intend to use books[91] and resonates strongly with responses from focus groups and interviews. These data also sharply contradict earlier theoretical conclusions that in an era of widespread digital reading, the concept of a personal library might not remain relevant. But participants diverged sharply in their description of their own personal libraries and what role, if any, digital could play. Some explicitly link 'personal library' or 'home library' to print, for example, 'I also lean towards digital for books I don't require in my home library, such as a guidebook for a specific trip'.[92] (The way that a set of e-books can have the function but lack the feeling of a personal library was highlighted in several groups.) Others, however, will readily apply the term 'library' when describing digital books, as with 'I love the feel of print books, and have thousands, but ebooks allow for an even larger library without having to curate them (moving) or find space'.[93] A number of survey respondents wrote in, as reasons for choosing digital, variations on 'to have a more portable library', 'carry my entire library wherever I go', 'more portable (whole library in my bag)', or 'I can carry a huge library in my handbag'.[94] This sense of a portable personal library can be powerful enough to, by itself, make the entire e-reading experience worthwhile: 'the ability to carry a huge library in a small space makes e-books wonderful'.[95]

E-book readers are less likely than print-only readers to choose print because it is better for keeping as part of a personal library (60.9% vs 73.9% of print-only readers). Agreement rose significantly over time,

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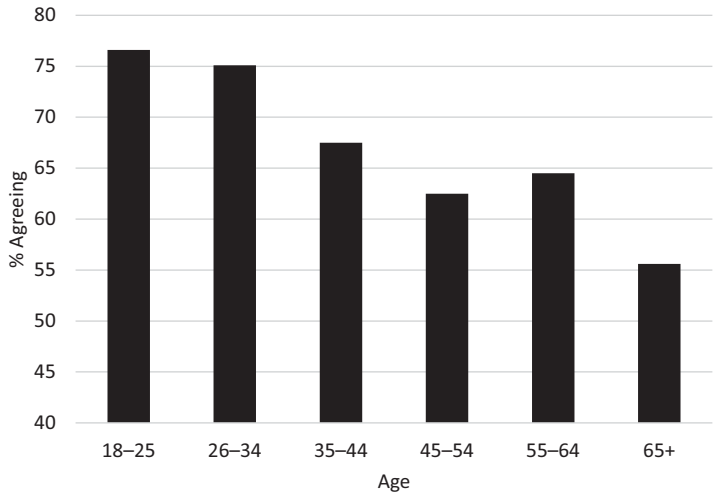


Figure 3.3 Reasons for choosing print: 'better for keeping as part of a personal library', by age.

peaking in 2022 at 73.9%. The one striking demographic factor is age: younger respondents are significantly more likely to agree (Figure 3.3).

This finding initially appears to defy conventional wisdom that youthful digital natives are more comfortable than their elders with cloud storage and digital longevity. But greater confidence with digital may be outweighed by greater attraction to the physical: Price and Pressman[96] demonstrate that bookishness is as seductive to the digitally savvy as the digitally reticent, and as with the revival of vinyl records as an alternative to unsatisfying or untrustworthy digital music,[97] the romance of analogue is most pronounced for younger generations.[98] And an obvious further link between younger readers and print collections is the importance of photographable print editions to Bookstagram, BookTok, and bookish content on other social media, presently more actively pursued by younger users.[99] If the readers most enthusiastic about physical personal libraries are young, this could point to a coming resurgence of interest in print. However, another potential explanation is that the appeal of a print library is most powerful when book collections are small, hypothetical, or stored in someone else's house (as two respondents put it, 'I keep them, even really bad books. . .I send them all home to my family' and '[at parents' house] I have, like, eight boxes. And I was like, please keep these and don't throw them').[100]

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For print-lovers whose collections are of any size, and who have to shelve and dust the volumes themselves, the overwhelming problem is domestic storage space. Responses noting that choosing e-books 'saves physical space in a small flat' or 'I only have so much shelf space'[101] were extremely frequent across all surveys. Storage efficiency was noted not only in positive terms, as an affordance of digital (e.g. 'I love that I can keep reading new titles [digitally] without completely cluttering up my house') but also negative terms, as an example of regret and capitulation (e.g. 'like paper books better, but I have no more room to store them!').[102] When available storage space shrinks, or the book collection continues to expand, the only option is to relinquish books (an exercise many collectors find 'really hard',[103] profoundly unpleasant, or actually traumatic).[104] As one respondent put it, 'having had to cull hundreds of print books for relocations, e-books mean space/weight is no longer an issue. . .also the trauma of letting books go is lessened because there is less personal attachment to an e-book'[105] – notable in that the 'personal attachment' is described *less*, not absent, when the book is an e-book. The hybrid book collection, part-print and part-digital, spares this individual pain, but at the cost of 'less personal attachment' to their book collection as a whole.

Those who choose print for this reason are print enthusiasts in another way: they are more likely to agree with almost every other print reason in the survey, particularly 'a print book is more enjoyable to handle and use', but also bibliophilia, a desire to support traditional bookshops, and print being better for giving as a gift. This confirms the intuitive connection where 'print personal library' sits alongside bibliophilia, book-gifting, support for traditional bookshops and other values (including, intriguingly, print privacy, a link I discuss further in Chapter 5) in a constellation of bookish values.

Roles of E-books in Personal Libraries

Attitudes towards personal libraries are quite different when it comes to e-books. Only 15.6% of e-book readers agreed that when they choose digital, one of their reasons is 'better for keeping as part of a personal library'. Agreement did not vary according to age or other demographics and, perhaps surprisingly, was highly stable across the survey: pandemic conditions, including the common experience of sheltering away from physical book collections,[106] did not move the needle. Links to the devices readers use to access their digital personal libraries revealed intriguing patterns. Respondents who had read on tablet or smartphone were more

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likely to choose e-books for this reason – but those who had read on an e-ink reader, laptop, or desktop computer were not. As noted earlier, Amazon advertises its e-books and e-readers with a message of a personal library at one's fingertips, using the term for both one's cloud-stored cluster of purchases and one's device-based history of files, including expired loans (a practice singled out as 'annoying').[107] And as noted, a number of participants have adopted this terminology, describing their e-reading devices as a 'huge library in my handbag', a 'whole library in my bag' and so on.[108] For Kindles to sit alongside laptop and desktop computers, with their well-founded associations with work- and education-based reading (and, for many readers in this study, with e-books as a last resort for books they can't access in print), might by itself suggest that Amazon's messaging is not successful. However, examining correlations with sources of the kinds of e-books commonly read on Kindles offers a different explanation. Choosing e-books because they are better for keeping as part of a personal library is linked to obtaining them from Amazon, both as purchases and as loans via Kindle Unlimited or Prime Reading,[109] as well as direct from publishers. What is not linked, even very weakly, is obtaining e-books from the free-to-user sources of a library or Project Gutenberg. Acceptance of e-book personal libraries as meaningful libraries appears less associated with the device itself than with specific kinds of personal investment: in short, who paid for the book. Sources where the books are paid for by individuals stand apart from sources where books are paid for by institutions, taxpayers, or donors and volunteers. If the link were purely a matter of temporary versus permanent custody of a book – of feeling differently about an e-book that will be out of one's hands in a matter of days or weeks – we would expect to see Project Gutenberg grouped with Amazon purchase and libraries grouped with Kindle Unlimited and Prime Reading. The fact that they are not suggests that a personal financial stake – in a specific title (or in the case of Amazon, in the purchase of a conditional use licence) or monthly membership – changes readers' feelings towards the e-books.

This possible connection between financial transaction and feeling makes the link between obtaining e-books directly from the publisher and a greater likelihood of valuing digital libraries is an especially interesting one. These e-books were not necessarily purchases. A number of respondents wrote in options such as 'Netgalley or publisher', 'publisher provided pre publication [sic] pages', 'review copies from publisher/author' and 'received for review':[110] exchanges more reminiscent of gift, with at least some of the attendant connection between giver and recipient that

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commemorates a relationship between reader and publisher. It may be that the hand of the publisher changes the way the e-book file is perceived, and how it feels to have it on one's device: that the sense of a direct relationship or personal touch may transform the previously impersonal, generic file into something unique. It is also possible that the files themselves are, unlike e-book files, obtained via other channels: the respondents who read galleys and other pre-release materials are confronted on a page-by-page basis with the fact that theirs is not an ordinary commercial product but something special, reserved for those with connections to and relationships with book creators. This could make them, in a sense, digital collectables, for which enduring digital status is authentic and desirable, and for which digital could be more easily experienced as satisfyingly real.

In terms of relationships to other reasons for choosing digital, 'digital personal library' is positively correlated with most other reasons in the survey, though these correlations are modest compared to those between 'print personal library' and other print reasons.[111] While convenience motivators such as value, selection, and digital being easier to read are prominent, the strongest correlations are with 'I would describe myself as a technophile' and 'a reading device is more enjoyable to handle and use'. Technophilia and digital enjoyability are rare motivators, chosen by only a very small proportion of respondents overall. But they share a clear orientation towards digital reading as genuinely superior: not a thing to be done when print is inconvenient or expensive, but something to choose as the preferred option whenever possible. This group may be small, but it is distinctive and important, suggesting that beside bookish values lies a (much smaller) parallel constellation of e-bookish values, and perhaps corresponding e-bookish behaviours and identities (though unlike bookish values, the constellation is not effectively separate from convenience and cost considerations).

E-books do offer kinds of ownership not possible with physical copies, such as access from a distance or (in some cases) use on multiple personal devices. But these extra affordances were not discussed by focus group participants as an acceptable trade-off. Many described not a sense that e-books are owned differently, but that e-books are not properly owned at all. Participants particularly fear losing digital books: not misplacing them, but watching helplessly as tech giants such as Apple, Google, or Amazon purge books – out of neglect or, after a 'tantrum', with malice.

> *'I always worry that Amazon will go out of business and my eBook purchases from them will dissolve in the digital wind.'* (Survey 2015).

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> *'If something goes wrong with your e-book collection, it's gone forever. I know you've got iCloud and things, so you can store it somewhere but it's just the sense that you might lose it all, for me. So the special books that I'd like to keep referring to, I'd like on my bookshelf as a hard copy.' (FG 3 participant 4)*

> *'I have a minor concern about [digital books] being under the* ***control*** *[emphasis mine] of someone else (amazon, google) who could at any point change their rules of access. But then, I remind myself that I could lose all my physical books in a fire/flood/etc and they're pretty replaceable'* (Survey 2016)

> *'I don't like the idea that ebooks are only licensed, not owned, and AMZN can take them away in a tantrum if it wants.'* (Survey 2020)

'Control' is the key word: the promise of future access appears to mean little when the access is (as terms and conditions invariably emphasise) entirely at the discretion of a distant megacorporation. Thompson observes that trust in the sense of existing commercial relationships was crucial to the tech giants' early footholds in the e-book market: for the many consumers who had already created accounts with Amazon or Apple, storing credit card details and becoming comfortable with delivery systems, buying e-books on top of other goods was simple and low-risk.[112] But the very ubiquity that gives Apple or Amazon or Google an aura of permanence (they're less likely to go out of business than, say, Oyster) also gives a stench of dominance; a sense that the seller dictates the terms to helpless customers.

Shaping a personal library requires multiple kinds of control: the power not only to securely and meaningfully hold but also to bar or remove.[113] 'Keeping as part of a personal library' is far from synonymous with 'keeping', just as 'building a personal library' is far from 'accumulating the greatest possible number of books'. The possibilities of e-books for sampling, trying out, and effortlessly discarding open up new possibilities for finding the ideal level of 'keeping': to read without owning, to access without owning, to license without owning, and ultimately to use many books but own only a special few.

Gatekeeping for One's Collection by Means of 'Digital Audition'

'Digital audition' allows readers to use an e-book to sample a title and, if it proves itself worthy of inclusion in the permanent collection, 'upgrade' to print.[114] Although digital reading makes audition, in many cases, simple and near-effortless (as with 'public domain books I read online first to see if I want a copy'), auditioning books is nothing new: many readers describe

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sampling books via library or personal loans and upgrading not from digital to print but from borrowed (or shabby, or cheaply produced) print to other print, for example, 'if I borrowed [a novel] from the library and I really liked it I would go out and buy one', 'in the past, if I've really enjoyed a book that I've got from the library I'll buy one', or 'there are books that I've got out of the library and then gone and bought afterwards' (a practice Noorda and Berens found extremely prevalent in the US, where 31% of their 2020 survey respondents had purchased a print book after first discovering it in print form in a library).[115] Reading a print copy borrowed from the library understandably does not offer the same feeling of ownership as reading a personal print copy.[116] But unlike .EPUB files, which might seem to belong to no one, these auditioned print books often do have owners, and readers can feel obligation towards the book owners as well as the books themselves. As one focus group participant put it, a print library copy imposed a special burden of responsibility: 'No [I don't feel a sense of ownership for a physical library book]. If anything it feels like I'm looking after someone's pet and then I'm going to get in trouble if I do something with it [entire group laughs]'.[117] The borrowed book is not just someone else's valuable possession, but something far more unique and treasured, demanding special care but conferring no special value in return for that care.

The emotional dimension of a personal library could suggest that how readers use and conceptualise them is somehow beyond conscious control: that one 'feels it' or one does not. However, respondents in this study sometimes describe conscious reconceptualisation: a decision to think of one's collection differently. This is most prominent when a change of circumstances puts a large physical book collection out of reach. On a daily commute, the collection might be out of reach for the length of a train journey, but sometimes the separation is prolonged or permanent, particularly after moving house or moving to a new country. Some tell, in the space of a few lines, a complete story: one of finding a way, in the face of adverse conditions, to remain a book collector and someone for whom a growing, current personal library is important and meaningful, even when one's books are taken away.

> *'Advantage to digital: easier to transport/move personal library. I'm in a mobile profession, and I have to limit the physical books to take with me to professional references (almost universally unavailable in digital) only – no room for (physical) 'personal' books.'* (Survey 2015)

> *'I switched from mostly print to mostly digital some years ago for my personal library because I move frequently and a large collection of print books is*

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physically cumbersome: it takes up a lot of space, is tedious to pack and unpack, is backbreakingly heavy to cart about, and is tiresome to dust. So now I limit the number of print books I keep to less than a hundred.' (Survey 2017)

'I dramatically increased e-book purchases over printed books when I made a transatlantic move. I had to get rid of much of my print library as transporting it was prohibitively expensive, and I wanted to retain access to books I purchase from now on if I move again.' (Survey 2017)

Un-owning Books: Choosing (and Sometimes Failing) to Let Go

Readers do discard some books: painfully for owned print copies, less so for loans and digital files. In promoting any book to the permanent collection, but especially the personal print library, respondents cite something more than admiration: they describe these 'favourite' books as those they 'really like' or 'love'.

'I have been known to buy a book after reading it on my e reader and ***loving*** *it.'* (Survey 2014)

'My physical library has started to get too large so I've mainly switched to e-books when I read something new. If I ***really like it****, I buy a physical copy.'* (Survey 2016)

'I frequently have digital and print copies of the same book. . .this is especially the case with ***favorite books****.'* (Survey 2016)

'Occasionally I have bought books in both print and e-book versions because. . .I read the ebook and ***really liked*** *it'* (Survey 6/2021)

'for [digital] books I ***really like*** *I'll probably buy a physical copy as well* (FG 1 participant 2)

'I'm sort of a sole e-book reader these days; that's all I read. But if I do come across a book that I absolutely have ***read and love****, then I'll go out and buy the hardback. . .I read [a particular biography] on e-book and I thought, "****I must have*** *a big, thumping 600 page hardback on my shelf".'* (FG 3 participant 2)

Respect alone is not enough to qualify a book for retention. In a typical conversation from focus group 6, participants unanimously agreed that there were numerous examples of books they thought well of – that they considered *worthy* of keeping – but did not care enough about to include them in their collections. The need to include a book in a personal library can come from a sense of importance and personal meaning inseparable

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from emotion: the signal that a book must be included is described as not only an intellectual one but also as something that comes from the heart. In one particularly eloquent exchange from focus group 5, participants drew fine distinctions between the kinds of owning possible for a deeply treasured book: the meaning conferred by gifting; the gulf between 'a copy' and the same novel 'in electronic form'. But just as evident are the burdens of print ownership. After the trauma of books lost to a fire, there is the ceremony of replacing books one might 'really feel' are 'needed. . .in the house'. . . plus the requirement to supplement that 'needed' print with an e-book edition, without which 'you won't read it!'

P5: *I had a copy of* [A Prayer for Owen Meany] *I'd had for a long time, and then [a friend] was reading* A Prayer for Owen Meany *on holiday, and I went "aaah! I love that!" He finished the book whilst we were on holiday and he gave me his with as little inscription on it. [sounds of approval from group]. So I have two copies, one I'd read four times anyway and the other was this lovely thing I have. I can't find either of them. I don't know if they were* ***lost in the fire*** *we had last October. . .I've bought another copy. I didn't buy it in electronic form, which I might've done and it would've been more logical to, because* ***I really feel I needed to have a copy in the house,*** *but actually, because it's so big and thick. . .*

P6: *You won't read it!*

P5: *I won't read it.*

P8: *So, you* ***need to get it in electronic form as well so that you can read it*** *in bed at night!*

P2: *Absolutely!*

This liftable, usable second version is one instance of the 'digital reading copy' many participants describe using or, pining after bundling,[118] wishing they could use. While there are many reasons to employ a digital reading copy, such as sparing tired wrists ('carpal tunnel makes it hard to hold books') and reading conveniently backlit versions at night ('Read at night without disturbing my husband'),[119] this usage is also a means of reading the text without sullying the pristine physical object. The more loved the print book, the more important digital can be for preventing wear and tear: 'I love print books, but I love to keep them in good condition, so I will often get the e-book as well', a second purchase that means one can 'read the ebook when travelling and the print copy at home' and also 'read it without bending the spine'.[120] These 'copies [they] don't particularly want to damage'[121] may be signed copies or first

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editions, and may simultaneously be the kind of long or physically bulky books for which they want e-book affordances such as light weight and searchability: reasons for keeping a digital reading copy can be layered. This is especially relevant for comic book readers, where the community values both deep, detail-oriented repeat readings[122] and the preservation of poly-bagged mint-condition archives for investment purposes. For collectors, digital offers a means of obtaining new titles with no trade-offs regarding the existing collection and of reading without risking the agony of a physical collection cull. And for book-lovers, adding a new zone to the edges of a book collection, a buffer of demi-owned digital files, offers the opportunity to effectively hang a velvet rope around the core collection, creating a VIP area where books can be treated with even greater solicitude. Digital can allow one to have it both ways. But for a reading copy to be meaningful, for it to represent time spent with the original rather than with some impostor, it must be a digital proxy,[123] not a real or *ersatz book* in itself.

Readers feel deep responsibility to their physical book collections[124] but little or none to their virtual, indestructible digital book collections. Fear of personal failure in losing or neglecting a physical collection (including 'someone's pet' in the form of a print library book) is replaced by fear of institutional failure in the sense of a tech giant bungling its cloud storage; loss in either case, but in the latter instance the individual is spared the blame. The smaller and safer the physical collection, the less one needs it for daily use, the more special and separate it can become, and potentially the more sidelined and irrelevant. 'Personal library' and 'book collection' remain distinct. Though each means different things to different people (as exemplified by my groups, where many used the terms interchangeably), the latter does not as directly imply personal use. An eighteenth-century bibliophile's priceless rare volumes, or a contemporary comic book investor's bagged and sealed issues, can confidently be called collections whether or not they are ever read. The use of digital as a means to spare (some) physical books the strains and risks of being read, replacing in many cases earlier use of cheaper, more disposable paper reading copies, could lead to ever-higher standards for preservation, an ever-higher standard for what it means to cherish a deserving book. In the given example, the book-lover who bought her new print copy of *A Prayer for Owen Meany* in a cumbersome edition unsuitable for reading[125] will then need an electronic version if she means to actually access the text. This in turn could lead to a situation where the most ardent print-lover could no longer be as regular a print-user, and for the most beloved personal library to be less a used,

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lived-in, occupied space than a safe-deposit box – not Price's 'vulgar owning without reading', but reading without touching – or a shrine.

Conclusion

Readers describe meaningful book ownership as complex, but ultimately inseparable from a sense of control. Dominion over one's own books is essential. Suffering anyone else to control one's books (or worse, to be personally controlled through one's books, like a buyer manipulated by 'AMZN') is intolerable. The threat of books being lost, deleted, or taken back is felt deeply and taken seriously: a fear of such actions is enough to drive many readers away from digital, as a blanket policy or as the format for a given book.

The idea, widely shared and deeply felt, that readers have a natural right to own, keep, 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, enjoying realness and bookness. However, viewing e-book legitimacy through the lens of ownership reveals the ways that readers not only hold seemingly contradictory senses of e-book realness but also toggle pragmatically between them as the situation demands. A sense of meaningful ownership can be seized and reappropriated, via principled resistance, digital audition, or a conscious decision to accept a digital book collection as a personal library. An idea of e-books as real is of clear benefit to the expat book collector who has transitioned to a digital collection. It is also of value to the proud pirate, the one for whom defiance of Amazon is a matter of self-respect. The sheepish pirate, however, would benefit from seeing e-books as *ersatz books*, as would the disposal-averse book collector who deletes an unwanted e-book: both are treating 'files' in ways they would not wish to treat a 'proper book'. The *Owen Meany* owner needs a digital reading copy to spare both her print copy and her overtaxed wrists; a digital proxy can give her the sense that she is connecting with her personal copy of her treasured novel. This recasts e-books as an integral part of building a personal library: sometimes as components, but sometimes just as tools. This fascinating and nuanced usage, combining conceptions of e-books as real books, *ersatz books*, and digital proxies, further demonstrates how readers are able to move flexibly between visions of what an e-book is – a flexibility we'll continue to explore in the next chapter, on enjoyment and pleasure.

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