Is This a Book?

Angus Phillips and
Miha Kovač

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Abstract: This is a book about the book. Is this a book? is a question of wide appeal and interest. With the arrival of e-books, digital narratives, and audiobooks, the time is right for a fresh discussion of what is a book. Older definitions that rely solely on print no longer work, and as the boundaries of the book have been broken down, this volume offers a fresh and lively discussion of the form and purpose of the book. How does the audiobook fit into the book family? How is the role of reading changing in the light of digital developments? Does the book still deserve a privileged place in society? The authors present a dynamic model of the book and how it lives on in today's competitive media environment.

Keywords: book, publishing, audio, business model, reading

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1 The Variety of Books

In the 2020s for most people the book still means the printed book. It is familiar as an object and has shown great resilience in the face of competition from other media and attempts at the book's reinvention in digital form. Comparison with digital content has led to a renewed emphasis on the production quality of printed books, as publishers see the value for readers of the design, paper, and illustrations. The book in digital form has been the subject of much experimentation, but what is striking is that the most commercially successful format is the vanilla e-book, mirroring the structure (architecture) of the printed book. This type of digital book works well for fast-paced, linear narratives such as genre fiction. Catching up fast is the audiobook, a growing area of publishing. Meanwhile whole categories of publishing have migrated to the Internet, from reference to travel.

What are the types of book today? We commonly associate the book with text-based fiction and narrative non-fiction, and e-books are widely accepted by readers. There are other examples of products that would meet a traditional definition of the book – being printed volumes with a certain number of pages – from colouring books to silent picture books for children. Yet with little or no text, do they still qualify as books? With regard to the audiobook, we pay close attention in later chapters.

The Book in Print

If those set on burning books were going to get to work, would they choose an e-book or a CD-ROM? No, they would head to the nearest library or bookshop to source some printed material. Clearing someone's Kindle does not make a strong enough statement. The printed book remains the most visible and central form of the book. During the pandemic of 2020 bookshelves became the backdrop to many a Zoom call. The former prime minister of the UK, David Cameron, was spotted ensuring he had the right backdrop for an interview: 'Politicians take care over their choice of background. David Cameron caused a ripple while promoting his own book, when a spot-the-difference game over two separate photo shoots pointed up that he'd removed a Hitler biography (big, black font on the spine) from his shelves. Did he worry that we might think he was a fan rather than a reader?' (Heathcote, 2020).

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The printed book is also a reliable technology. The printed text benefits from the economies of scale available from the printing press, and its boundaries are set by the production system. To keep their prices competitive, and due to printing technology, books have constraints around length, the number of illustrations, and the optimum format. The traditional response of publishers to falling or static sales is to publish more titles. This is encouraged in turn by falling print costs and by the growth of digital printing, which facilitates ever smaller print runs and the printing of single copies to meet individual orders (Clark and Phillips, 2019).

A physical product can be owned and passed round friends and family; in the digital era it became a refuge from screens for office workers or parents seeking amusement for their children. Giving a physical book as a present says something about the recipient and also about the giver. The book in print confers status and symbolic capital:

> The symbolic meaning of the book imbues its readers with a certain affective and social status. Even a sense of identity might be said to attach to books; hence the persistence of the old saw 'show me your book case, and I will tell you who you are'. What is important in all these cases is the *visibility* of books, resulting from their materiality, and the obvious ownership relation projected by this visibility'. (van der Weel, 2010, 54)

Russian oligarchs may never open a book but still want to fill their libraries with leather-bound volumes. Country hotels need a book-lined lounge in which guests can relax. Chic cafes play vinyl records and use books to decorate the walls.

Yet the book is off-putting to some who are daunted by a visit to a bookshop or the thought of opening a book. The 2020 Booker Prize winner Douglas Stuart, the author of *Shuggie Bain*, said of his upbringing: 'As someone writing a working class story – as a boy I always felt excluded by books' (BBC, 2020). In 2018 the UK retail chain WHSmith, which sells a range of goods from stationery to books, was voted the country's worst retailer on the high street. The retailer was criticized for its poor customer service and out-of-date look. Authors leapt to its

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defence, arguing that it reached book buyers other shops could not reach and that some buyers see more traditional bookshops as intimidating. The writer Joanne Harris said: 'While it may not be the coolest shop on the High Street, research suggests that WH Smith, and not Waterstones, is the place where most working-class people buy books' (Cernik, 2018).

In his 1979 poem 'A Martian Sends a Postcard Home', Craig Raine called print books Caxtons, 'mechanical birds with many wings' (Raine, 1979). Printed books come in many formats and production values, from pocket editions to luxury collector editions. Leah Price proclaims the variety of print 'across historical periods and even within a single culture. They come in different sizes and shapes (a hefty coffee-table book vs. a dainty pocket diary), are bound to their owners for different periods of time (a family Bible passed down from generation to generation or a textbook loaned to another student for the year), invite or at least allow different uses (reading or wrapping)' (Price, 2019, 29). That variety in print is now enhanced by experimentation with digital technology to transform the book.

The Digital Book

Books have been presented on CD-ROM, as apps, and as enhanced e-books with multimedia. The high costs of such projects, against relatively low sales and low retail prices, have so far proved largely unsustainable in consumer markets. However, in educational and academic markets, digital content and services have replaced many print products (Clark and Phillips, 2019).

In the 1990s, when the digital book began to be developed commercially, the view was that in this new format the book could take off in many directions. The use of hyperlinks would enable books to connect to a host of external content, from text and image archives to live video streams. Instead of embedding a video file in the e-book, hypertext links would be added to the text. Jack Schofield wrote: 'books are fixed, finite things contained between covers. The electronic online book is different: it is kinetic, distributed, constantly changing, almost alive . . . an online book can not only refer to things outside itself, it can enable the reader to link to them without leaving the book' (1994). Of course the Internet itself now offers this functionality and much reference and other content has shifted online.

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In turn books continue their promise of permanence and internal consistency, preferring not to send readers off at tangents (Phillips, 2014).

There has been playful reworking of the structure of the book in digital formats. Books can easily be produced along the lines of Create Your Own Adventure, with multiple routes through a story. The risk is that this is the territory of gaming, and most narratives benefit from being presented in a straightforward, linear format. Some books like educational textbooks are not often read from beginning to end – discrete chapters will be accessed – but for fiction and narrative non-fiction, linearity remains of great benefit (Phillips, 2014). Liza Daly confirms that ‘text adventures weren’t the future of novels, CD-ROMs weren’t the future of non-fiction, and . . . the meteoric rise of ebooks hasn’t been accompanied by a flowering of interactive experimentation from traditional authors and publishers. But quietly, games have been filling that gap’ (Daly, 2013).

The inclusion of multimedia in the book should offer exciting opportunities. A notable success in the market was the release of the Solar System app in 2011 by Faber and TouchPress. Steve Jobs used the product to demonstrate the iPad 2 at its launch. Highly interactive, offering the ability to rotate planets with your finger, the product won an award for the best app of 2011. The app was born digital, created for the market opening up around the iPad. Yet the app was described as a book: ‘A breakthrough electronic book about the Solar System, offering hours of interactive exploration and presenting a treasure trove of visual information . . . This much-anticipated new title from Touch Press . . . raises the bar yet again on what an electronic book can be’ (apps.apple.com). By that Christmas Faber was releasing the print book of the app, written by Marcus Chown, who provided the text for the digital edition. Overall, however, book publishers have struggled to make the app business model work, with a large number of failures amongst born digital projects. From the days of CD-ROMs through to apps, multimedia projects have subsumed large budgets whilst the market has required low prices to attract buyers. Book apps have to compete in a crowded space (2 million apps are available to download on the Apple Store) and have achieved little impact. Book publishers have mostly abandoned the publishing of apps.

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Reference is a category of publishing that has suffered in the face of online competition, ranging from Wikipedia to a multitude of user-generated content. Arguments in the pub are quickly settled by consulting our mobile phones. Yet there remains a market for authoritative reference works. The second edition of *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) is still available in print: in twenty volumes the reference work traces the usage of words through 2.4 million quotations from a wide range of international English language sources. The CD-ROM version appeared in 1992 but was discontinued in 2017 since it would not work on new operating systems. Most users today will access the online edition, which is regularly updated. In September 2020, 650 new words, senses, and subentries were added, including 'code red', 'craftivist', and 'Cookie Monster'. Consulting the dictionary for its definition of a book reveals two relevant entries: firstly, 'A portable volume consisting of a series of written, printed, or illustrated pages bound together for ease of reading'; secondly, 'A written composition long enough to fill one or more such volumes' (*Oxford English Dictionary*). The print edition is certainly a book, but is the online edition a book or a database? Website copy refers to it as an online publication. Users access it using the search function, with little sense of the A to Z arrangement of the print dictionary.

Consulting *The Oxford Companion to the Book*, edited by Michael Suarez and H. R. Woudhuysen, suggests that a book can appear comfortably in both forms, print and digital. Their own volume is a book 'in the abstract, non-corporeal sense (and can thus be described in its Internet manifestation), and also in the physical sense of a three-dimensional object in codex format' (2010, 543). Their book appeared in print as well as part of the Oxford Reference online resource. But what if an online text does not appear in print simultaneously? We do not regard Wikipedia as a book, nor do we see a blog as a book. What of a novel that appears solely online and has not been published as an e-book or in print – is that a book? Writers contributing to literature sites such as Wattpad are certainly writing stories long enough to be published in book format, but when do those become a book? Does a book require an act of publication in a book-specific business model or the transformation of the text into the architecture of the book? We will deal with these issues in more detail in Chapter 3.

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The most successful digital transformation so far has been the vanilla e-book (Phillips, 2014), reproducing the look of the printed page. For enthusiastic readers of genre fiction, e-books offer great value with low prices on individual titles and available subscription services. Dedicated e-readers are also free from the distractions present when reading on your phone, laptop, or tablet: 'Because they are standalone devices that don't ring or beep (like phones) or let us toggle elsewhere (like tablets), they may turn out to be more like print' (Baron, 2015, 149). The e-book offers extra functionality compared to the printed book – for example, search (an index is no longer required) and the ability to adjust the type size – but it also possesses disadvantages such as little sense for the reader of their progression through the text. Many readers of print have a clear map of the book in their head and can quickly find an earlier passage, looking on the left or right page, with an idea of how far they were in the book. As three meta studies have shown, especially when reading longer texts with informational content, readers in print remember more than those who read the same content on screens (Singer and Alexander, 2017; Delgado et al., 2018; Clinton, 2019). Print books retain their symbolic value for both authors and readers, allowing the expression of identity and ownership; whilst Adriaan van der Weel argues that 'it seems doubtful that ebook reading confers any more symbolic capital than digital reading at large' (van der Weel, 2014, 45).

Advocates of the container theory of books argue that books are ripe for disaggregation in digital form. Brian O'Leary said, 'We need to think about containers as an option, not the starting point. Further, we must start to open up access, making it possible for readers to discover and consume our content within and across digital realms' (O'Leary, 2010). This happens in academic markets where readers may encounter chapters in large databases alongside journal articles. The publisher adds an abstract and a list of keywords and the chapter starts to become a single unit separated from the original volume. Readers browsing the text may not realize its ancestry as part of a whole book. In 2006 Kevin Kelly, the co-founder of *Wired* magazine, argued for a universal digital library in which books cease to be 'isolated items, independent from one another'. Links and tags would be added to connect books together so that the library becomes one very large, single text.

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> At the same time, once digitized, books can be unravelled into single pages or be reduced further, into snippets of pages. These snippets will be remixed into reordered books and virtual bookshelves . . . Once snippets, articles and pages of books become ubiquitous, shuffle-able and transferable, users will earn prestige and perhaps income for curating an excellent collection. (Kelly, 2006)

This approach faces first the hurdle of copyright and then the opposition of authors and publishers keen to earn a return from publications. Additionally, many authors (and their readers) would prefer their work to remain in a unified whole rather than be cast adrift in a world of remix and mash-up.

Silent Books

Most books involve text but some books are silent, from children's picture books to colouring books. A children's picture book can tell a story without the need for any printed words – we still call it a book because of its physical format, yet no reading is involved. Parents may describe the story to their children, introducing their own narrative. Some books of course display an artful mix of words and pictures, and as Lewis Carroll's Alice thought: 'what is the use of a book . . . without pictures or conversations?' (Carroll, 1865, 1).

There are genres of publishing where few words may be employed. Take a photography book such as *Exposure* by Jane Bown (2009), which contains her portraits of a range of famous people from Bette Davis to Samuel Beckett. There is a one-page foreword by David Bailey and a four-page introduction. There is no commentary on each portrait – simply a blank page opposite with the name of the subject and the date the picture was taken. They are wonderful pictures and little reading is required to enjoy the volume.

In the UK, in 2013, a book appeared titled *Everything I Know about Teaching*, with the author given as Michael Gove, the then secretary of state for education. In 2021 it was still on sale at £4.99. Apart from the chapter titles, each page was entirely blank with ruled lines enabling the book to be used as a notebook. The selling copy offered: 'Over 90 blank pages of Gove's teaching wisdom – the perfect gift to put a smile on the face of any UK-based teacher.'

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Similar titles include *Everything Men Know about Women*. Such books cannot be read and there is little story beyond the title, but they have the paratext of the book, such as a title, title page, and back cover blurb (Genette, 1997).

Colouring books benefit from the low tax regime of the book and also appear in the guise of the standard printed work. Although there is no author, there usually needs to be an illustrator to construct the lines. When the colouring book craze took off all over the world in the first decade of the new millennium, it was put down to a rise in craft activity and people looking to reduce anxiety and raise their level of mindfulness. Notable successes were *Secret Garden* and *Enchanted Forest* by Johanna Basford, which sold millions of copies worldwide: 'In 2011, the British publishing house Laurence King asked Johanna Basford, a Scottish artist and commercial illustrator specializing in hand-drawn black-and-white patterns for wine labels and perfume vials, to draw a children's colouring book. Basford suggested instead that she draw one for adults. For years, she told her publishers, her clients had loved to colour in her black-and-white patterns' (Raphel, 2015).

What about a desk diary? Those still using a paper journal have an object that is often sold as a book with an ISBN (more on the role of ISBNs in Chapter 3). It may have some printed content – for example, tables of time zones and weights and measures – but it is completed by the user and they become the author of the text. Diary entries from famous people may be converted into book form if of sufficient interest. The original diary, however, is surely in manuscript form although within a bound volume.

At Length

Does a book have to be a certain length? Traditional constraints around economics and technology suggested a minimum length in many categories and established printing methods work in multiples of signatures, or printed sections, most commonly of sixteen pages. A few decades ago a short book of 27,000 words, such as the present volume, would not command a decent price in the market and would feel insubstantial to readers. Yet led by shorter books in digital form, which in turn found a print market, shorter books in physical form have become widely accepted not only in academia but also in fiction publishing.

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Short stories may be published individually in magazines, but to appear in a book they would traditionally be collected together. The story ‘Cat Person’ by Kristen Roupenian, about a bad date, first appeared in the *New Yorker* in 2017 and provoked an amazing reaction, going viral and being described as the most famous short story of the century. The story is still available to read online for free, and its success led to a book deal for its author. She published a collection of short stories in book form, *You Know You Want This*, in 2020. In the meantime *Cat Person*, a story of around 7,000 words, was published in print as a 72-page paperback (2018), with photographs, and as an e-book. One Amazon reviewer commented that ‘It will take you longer to download it to your Kindle than it will to read it!’ The volume had the appearance of a book but the publisher downplayed this aspect by proclaiming that Roupenian’s first book was still forthcoming.

Beyond a certain page count books become unwieldy and are split into separate volumes. *The Oxford Companion to the Book* appears in two volumes of around 650 pages each. Surely the arrival of the digital book should have released the length constraints of the book. There is no reason why books cannot get longer and there is no need to break longer texts up into separate volumes. Reference works become part of databases, sold mainly to institutional clients. Yet e-books have the same commercial considerations as print, and if the author or publisher can develop and sell a series of shorter books, that makes keener financial sense.

Reading

Reading is of course not only book reading. As we will discuss in more detail in Chapter 6, reading is happening in many different ways through work, study, and social interactions. We read thousands of words each day – work and home emails, texts, social media posts, news bulletins – often at great speed. We have become expert at skimming for the key points and headlines across reports, articles, and web postings. This type of reading is functional, necessary to obtain information or to communicate for work. Naomi Baron comments that ‘one of the major effects of digital screens is to shift the balance from continuous reading to reading on the prowl . . . The result? The

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meaning of "reading" increasingly becomes "finding information" – and often settling for the first thing that comes to hand rather than "contemplating and understanding"' (Baron, 2015, 39). As the amount of information available expands at a fast pace, we can only aim to scratch the surface with our own reading. It is probable that AI will undertake more of this kind of work – machines can work across vast amounts of information, reading books, reports, and articles. Already AI can summarize research papers in a few sentences and the potential is there for personalized summaries of the information relevant to a person's interests and work. Meanwhile AI is writing simple news stories and can write formulaic fiction – the program GPT-3 from the company OpenAI can generate a story when given an opening sentence. Yet, as we will show in the chapter on reading, higher levels of reading such as deep reading remain a human domain and one of the prerequisites for analytical thinking.

If a motive for defining the book is to help us better understand reading, then digital forms of the book offer an advantage. User data can track how much of an e-book is read – this is almost impossible to establish with print books. When it comes to books opened and completed, the most passionate readers of e-books open 77 per cent of their books and complete 60 per cent of their purchases. By contrast average readers of e-books open 60 per cent of their purchases and finish only 40 per cent of their books (Kobo, 2016). The data also support the hypothesis that reading on a dedicated device is a more immersive experience compared to reading through an app on a phone or tablet (Baron, 2015; Kobo, 2016). Readers of e-books spend three times as much time reading on a dedicated device compared to reading through an app, and the most passionate readers of e-books spend 50 per cent more time on the e-reader.

In summary, books as we know them today appear in many different manifestations and offer a range of different experiences, from reading stories to the craft activity of colouring. Yet the problems with finding a common denominator and defining what a book is did not first appear with digitization. In the following short chapter we turn to the past, to the field of book history, a scholarly discipline in which the question of what is a book emerges in varied historical and cultural contexts. To the delight of any researcher, this is where things get really complicated.

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