

# Side-Eyeing My E-Reader

[\\_ David McGrath](#)

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Awakened from deep sleep, I open my eyes and focus on the amber LED numbers on the clock radio. 3:10 a.m. Nothing good usually happens at this time of night, and Marianne is leaning over me from her side of the bed.

“You left the lamp on,” she says.

I blink. My open Kindle lies flat on my chest. I must have read myself to sleep. I reach over to the nightstand and turn off the lamp.

In the darkness, I apologize for the light. It’s OK, she says, but isn’t the whole idea of an electronic reader that you don’t need it?

My wife is right, because the e-reader’s screen is backlit. But my decision to purchase one 15 years after they became popular was more complicated than that, not to mention desperate and risky.

“Complicated” because I have a genetic eye condition called Fuchs’ dystrophy that shows up after age 50, makes reading print books difficult and can only be corrected with a partial cornea transplant operation.

“Desperate” because I hope to put off surgery as long as I can, while the illuminated e-reader should let me read with less blurriness and eyestrain for a while.

“Risky” because of what else I could lose without printed books and how my life might change.

Books are my refuge. During periods when my childhood was fraught, I escaped to Albert Payson Terhune's New Jersey hills and woodlands, Alistair MacLean's arctic snowscapes or John Steinbeck's coastal fishing villages.

My safe places I came to associate with the sensual characteristics of books: their weighty heft and, between the pages, the vaguely sweet smell of my grandmother's cellar, where she used to can cucumbers and tomatoes. The hard covers, front and back, were like church doors housing a sanctuary where I could disappear. In replacing my old friends — my books — with a thin, lightweight, odor-free digital medium like my Kindle Paperwhite, would I lose my safe harbors?

I decided to conduct an experiment to find out: I would read a book within the 30-day window Amazon allows for returning the device. It would have to be a book I know and love but hadn't read in many years. And I would compare what I once gained from reading it the conventional way against the gains from reading it electronically. If the latter did not measure up, I would ship the screen-reader back and ask the ophthalmologist to schedule my eye surgery.

The writer whose work I chose for the experiment was John Steinbeck, whom I hadn't read in decades, but whose novels, a row of battleship-gray volumes that I can still picture leaning together on a low shelf in my high school library, were the first to make me imagine and think seriously about other people — their dreams, their frailties, their courage. Steinbeck's plain words, woven into arresting descriptions, helped me love and understand his characters and, ultimately, myself.

When I was 14, those books seemed more than just conveyances of abstract ideas. The Bantam hardcovers, with their worn spines and slightly musty scent, became sacred objects blessed by the author's magic, radiating strength and joy and inspiration. I would start to feel their warmth when I ascended the library steps, and that feeling intensified and filled my heart as I squatted, alone in the narrow aisle, and opened one.

So, with a mix of sadness and hope, I turned on my new e-reader and ordered *The Short Novels of John Steinbeck* (Penguin Classics, 2009), an electronic edition offering six of his novellas for \$5.99. I clicked on *The Pearl*, the story about a poor Mexican pearl diver who suddenly becomes rich after a priceless find, and about the greed, injustice and violence that he and his family face in the aftermath.

Reading the first chapter, I got discouraged. For as I twirled my finger to turn the page, I remembered that wasn't possible. Instead, the familiar page-turning gesture, with the momentary break it gives the reader to reflect, was replaced by a screen-tap and the instant-on of the next text block.

And the absence of paper! No pleasing texture for my hand to sweep across. No evocative scent. No sandwich like thickness of hundreds of pages to gauge how much I have absorbed, and how much is left to read.

Two chapters in, I was still trying to turn pages. I realized this was just a habit I could overcome, and that the key to reading, the make-or-break stage in the experiment, had yet to coalesce. For which reason, I postponed the rest of *The Pearl* till nighttime, when my mind is more susceptible to wandering into another world.

Later, sitting up in bed, I powered up the e-reader and held it about 15 inches from my eyes. In Chapter 5, after dueling with townspeople who try to cheat him and thieves who try to kill him, the pearl diver rises at dawn to flee with his family to the capital city to sell the great pearl. Steinbeck writes: "The wind blew freshly into the estuary, a nervous, restless wind with the smell of storm on its breath, and there was change and uneasiness in the air."

Well could I imagine that contrary wind at dawn and its air of foreboding. And the feeling of loneliness on the outskirts of the small village of La Paz. And the steepness of the mountain the family must cross. And my sense that the challenge and the entire world of the pearl diver were

contained inside this featherlight device in my hand. The same sense I used to have while entering Steinbeck's world inside those Bantam volumes half a century ago.

All of this seemed to mean my experiment was successfully concluded, with results indicating I could delay that surgery. Not that I'll be hauling my book collection to the landfill any time soon. They mean too much — like an heirloom set of china — and I'll likely return to them if and when I have the transplant.

For now, it is a relief to know that the secret pleasure and solace I derived from those cherished tomes in high school is little diminished in what I feel today from my e-reader. Not because of the nature of either vessel, but because of the resilient work of a gifted writer.

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*David McGrath, an emeritus English professor at College of DuPage, is the author of Far Enough Away, an essay collection. His essay '[His Intimacies with Lake and Stream](#),' published in this magazine, was cited in Best American Essays 2022. Email him at [mcgrathd@dupage.edu](mailto:mcgrathd@dupage.edu).*