



The WordchipperSM

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IF YOU'RE A FREQUENT READER OF THIS COLUMN, YOU KNOW I've been studying "e-reader" devices. These little machines, lighter in weight than most printed books, hold the text of not one but *literally* (no pun intended) a thousand volumes or more. After considering the Amazon Kindle, Barnes and Noble's (B & N's) two Nooks, the Sony E-reader and others, about three months ago I purchased a Kindle for \$139. This was the third iteration of Amazon's product and, up to about a month or so ago, I felt it beat the grayscale or "e-ink" Nook. The more expensive "Nook Color" model has some features I didn't need; it also has an "LCD" screen similar to what's on my laptop computer. Although it's slightly easier to read in sunlight than a computer screen, the color version of the Nook doesn't seem quite as eye-friendly for reading lots of text over longer sessions. For reading outdoors, the *e-ink* Kindles and Nooks perform beautifully.

However, this technology and its highly competitive market is very much a moving target. B & N recently scored some points in their competition with the Kindle by introducing an all-new e-ink Nook priced at \$139, currently the same cost as the wi-fi version of the Kindle. Before you make an e-reader purchasing decision, I recommend you compare the *new* Nook with the Kindle. Both of these grayscale devices have common features, but each one boasts some advantages *unique* to their respective products. I'm still very satisfied with the Kindle 3.

While a "good and long" power supply is not a problem with my Kindle (battery lasts for about a month), B & N claims its new e-ink Nook goes up to two months without a charge. In either case, battery life is superior to larger "pad" type devices, any laptop computer, or the color version of the Nook. Here's something else: since its inception, the Nook system has always allowed borrowing books from participating public libraries, including the Fargo Public Library. However, Amazon announced recently that the Kindle will be able to do the same thing. The Fargo Public Library is considering participation; I believe most area libraries *will* offer Kindle borrowing as soon as it becomes available.

But despite all the buzz about electronic books, I have to agree with my friend Brad Stephenson, owner of B.D.S. Books in downtown Fargo: there are a number of trade-offs if the majority of books move from printed to *proprietary* electronic formats. Despite my fondness for the way the Kindle serves up text in clear, readable and digestible portions, not to mention the portability of choices, there is something very special about the well-designed *printed* page. And, printed books are enduring. While I can't open some computer-generated documents from ten years ago, I can still read traditional books, publications and documents produced by the printing press hundreds—if not thousands—of years ago. What will happen when current technologies used by e-readers become outdated? The printed books I purchased 30 years ago are still on my shelves, easily read. I can browse Brad's store and find thousands of books, preserving thoughts, ideas and stories from dozens of years ago or longer. His store also features many recently published books available at bargain prices. Meanwhile, electronic books are available from either Barnes and Noble or Amazon, each using its own incompatible format. Of course, there is a standard "ePub" format; however, not every device reads it, most conspicuously the Kindle (at the moment). But, when you buy a traditional book from any new or used bookseller, they're all on the same "railroad track," readable by the human eye. Growing electronic libraries are increasingly being located on an Amazon or B & N server. This can be a great convenience, but I do, like my friend, question the future of personal libraries.

This causes Brad to also ponder *privacy*. He writes: "Think back to when you were 15 years old: imagine your parents, or teachers, principal, or police, telling you that they were going to monitor everything you read, and a tracking device would be attached to all you read so your location while reading would always be known. I bet at that age you would have yelled 'bloody murder' and revolted against the heavy, intrusive hand of authority interfering with your independence and freedom—even if you had no plan to read anything objectionable. Am I right? So, I ask you: why now, at your age, do you not only give up that same independence and freedom, but you *pay* to have it taken from you [with e-books]?"

Something to think about, but Americans seem to give up a lot of privacy these days to gain convenience and instant gratification in communication, information and, as our used bookstore owner points out, e-books. Just as newspapers and magazines struggle with how to succeed in this new media world, so are book publishers, booksellers (new and used), and authors. Stay tuned.