

Books vs. Digital vs. Audio

Look, as a writer, I'm all for the long suffering author selling his/her work through as many outlets as possible, whether it be hard cover, soft cover, digital Kindle, audio, stone tablets, Morse Code, whatever. I'm appreciative that all these options are open to today's authors, allowing them any kind of measurable success.

But, as a reader, I'm notoriously biased. It's strictly traditionally published books for me the whole way, and will be forever. There's something about feeling the weight of the book in my hands, the feel of the pages on my fingertips, the sound of the page turning, the ease in which I can enjoy the cover art. And the smell! Oh, that wonderful freshly printed book smell! My wife laughs at me whenever I purchase a new book because the first thing I do when I open it is smell the ink, the paper and the glue. And it's not just a quick sniff, no...it's a long, hissing inhalation of pure joy! I imagine the countless hours of love the writer spent stitching his tale together, the grueling process of editing, I imagine the book flitting through the printing press a page at a time, then getting assembled at the end and glued together after the cover has been added. Holding that finished copy in my hand is one of the few pleasures in my life that I truly treasure.

I don't think the same can be said about books in a digital format. I'm so glad I was born when I was, back when traditional publishing was at its peak. I often wonder, do people of today sniff their digital readers or their iPads before they turn them on and begin to read? Does holding their digital readers bring them the same joy I feel when I hold a book? Or is the whole process so mechanical, so coldly unfeeling now that reading a book on a digital reader is similar to watching a stale re-run on TV?

Sure, digital books have their pro's - it's much cheaper to download a book than to buy a hard copy; you can adjust the size of the text on the screen to make it more legible; and you can store hundreds of books in a digital reader the size of a single book.

But they also have their con's - they each possess a rechargeable battery that dies at a speed that depends on how high you have the brightness programmed on the screen; if you drop the digital reader on a hard surface, chances are it will break; people will steal a digital reader quicker than they'll steal a book (trust me on this - I've seen it); and I'm not sure, but I assume the useful life of a digital reader is far less than that of a book.

And yes, books have their con's – they wear out after many readings and fall apart if you don't treat them with care; they take up a lot of space (in my case, I have an entire wall of shelving devoted to books I love and wish to visit again).

It's encouraging to me to see in a recent article that there has been an uptick in traditional book publishing sales and that brick and mortar book stores are making a humble comeback. That same article also detailed the fact that digital books are down in sales by 26%. And so the pendulum swings! What really shocked me was that sales of audiobooks are through the roof. The article didn't mention why this is happening – could it be that we are so busy in our daily lives that we are too tired when we get home to read for ourselves and now prefer to have someone read to us in the car or train while commuting?

Me? I have a relatively busy life but I always make time in bed before I go to sleep for reading. I enjoy thinking about what I've read as I turn the light off and close my eyes. I must confess, though, that I do possess one audio book on cassette tape but it's not for the reason you think. It's Asimov's classic science fiction story, "The Ugly Little Boy," and I purchased it only because I wanted to hear Asimov's voice as he read something he'd written – and I wasn't disappointed. There's a part at the end where Asimov is so into the story and the sad situation he's reading about, that his voice cracks. That moment is priceless to me.

I would love to hear Hemingway reading his "Old Man and the Sea," masterpiece, or Shakespeare reading his sonnets, or Arthur Conan Doyle reading the moment he'd killed Sherlock Holmes over the Reichenbach falls in "The Final Problem," how relieved he must have been!

What about you? What particular literary method do you prefer?

Thanks for your time,
GC Rosenquist