Arts & Theatre

Opinion

Is it time for Books to be Shelved?

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In a time when environmental impact is at the forefront of many peoples' moral compasses, books are a tricky subject. As a society, we love books. We love to consume media in any medium we can - through television, film, music, or the humble novel. However, reading is no longer defined by turning the pages of a paperback. Kindles, audiobooks and other eReaders are dominating the publishing market, and with their lesser impact on the environment, they look like the better method of consuming stories, but can they replace the feeling of cracking open a good book?

Perhaps the popularity of the Kindle owes its success to the COVID-19 pandemic. After the onset of lockdown in March 2020, more than 10 million ebooks were downloaded in the month that followed, the highest sales month ever recorded. With people stuck inside, it's no surprise that a Kindle would be a great option to find an escape from the troubles of the world. You didn't need to leave the house to pick up your next read - it was ready in the palm of your hand within seconds. On paper (pun intended!), the Kindle or an eReader of your choosing looks like an easy way to read to your heart's content, but for keen literature lovers, nothing beats the feeling of cracking open a brand new book.

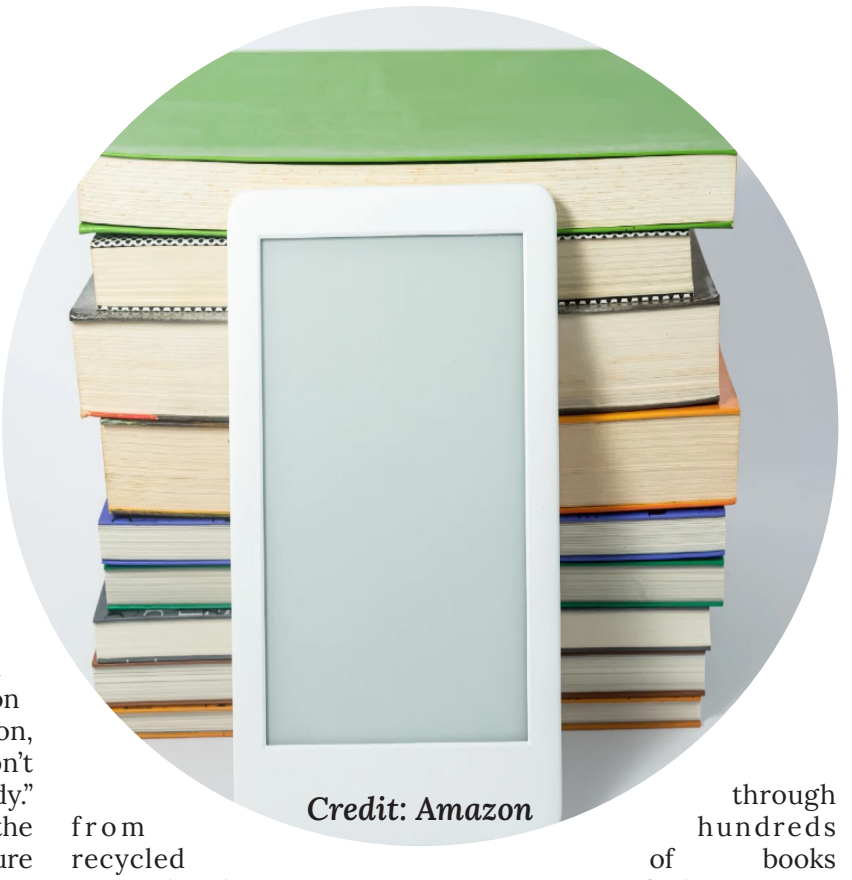
Elliot is a third year English Literature student, so the pleasure of the book is no novelty to him: "While it is easy to store your books on a kindle, I love the feel of a real book. Being able to hold a real piece of literature makes the experience so much better."

For those who travel, the Kindle is the ideal way to keep your reading streak without the burden of carrying around several paperbacks at once. Rosie and Rebecca are both Arts and Humanities students, currently on a year abroad in New Zealand; they spoke about the ease of having a Kindle and why it is so beneficial whilst travelling with nothing but a rucksack: "For travelling, a Kindle is definitely easier. I had two books in my backpack and it was literally the worst, they took up so much space," Rosie said, although she did note that she prefers reading from a physical book. "You just can't replace the feeling of actually reading a book. If you download the books, you can have an entire library in your hand," Rebecca said. She also commented on how the Kindle is a helpful asset for those who struggle with book reading: "You can change the font and size, so it's more accessible for someone with dyslexia."

For students and those with a heavy reading list, Kindles and eReaders allow for an easier experience, and a quick way to get through a lot of content. Hannah is a final year student at UCL, studying Literature and Spanish, and finds that the Kindle is a great aid to her studies: "When I'm reading Spanish books on a Kindle, they come with a dictionary. I can press on a word and get a translation, so if I'm reading and don't recognise a word, it's handy." She also commented on the additional financial pressure of having to read a long list of texts: "For uni, Kindle books are better because they're generally cheaper. For a degree with a lot of books, buying them all as paperbacks is expensive."

We do, however, find ourselves living in a time of environmental crisis, and the publishing industry is far from helping. The American publishing industry alone uses around 32 million trees each year in producing books; globally, the production process is responsible for the emission of 40 million metric tons of CO_2, according to WordsRated. To put this into perspective, you would only need to buy around 23 paperbacks before it would become more environmentally friendly to use a Kindle, which produces around 168kg of CO_2 in its lifecycle.

Considering this, there is an obvious benefit to stopping the production of printed books. However, there are huge changes being made in how the publishing industry approaches sustainability. For example, HarperCollins have vowed to ensure that all paper used for publishing is sourced from recycled material by 2025. Additionally, Macmillan Publishers have been officially carbon-neutral since 2017. These demonstrates that the industry standard is changing for the better, and that publishers are seeking to be more eco-friendly in their practices.



Credit: Amazon

Physical books, if taken care of, have a much greater lifespan than that of a Kindle, which is exactly why second-hand books in charity shops are such a good way to find your next read. Going to a bookstore keeps the heart of the high street beating, as well as allowing independent book shops to thrive. There is something undoubtedly exciting (for an English student like myself) about nipping into a book shop and filtering through hundreds of books to find a story to lose yourself in. The smell of an old book is the epitome of nostalgia - something you definitely can't get out of an eReader.

There's no question that the publishing industry poses an environmental nightmare, no matter the efforts to become more eco-friendly. E-Readers have quickly cornered the market as being the next best thing to a book, perhaps even overtaking it as the public's preferred reading medium. That being said, it is certainly not time that books were shelved. In a world that is constantly changing and evolving, it's important to connect with the simple pleasure of a book. New production methods are being refined so often that there may be a future where this industry can operate without causing mass harm. Will the book stand the test of time? Maybe, but with the world and our understanding about climate change always evolving, the printed book must equally be able to change and evolve alongside it.

