

# THE NEW YORKER

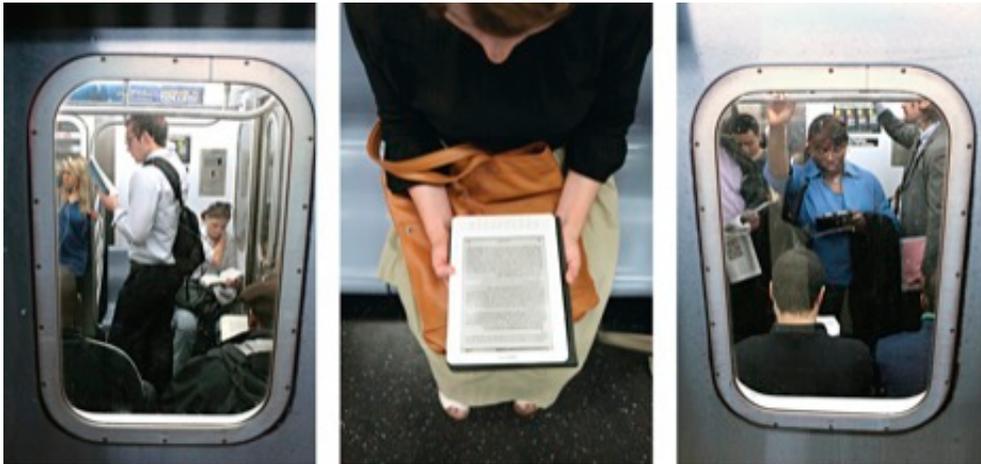
ANNALS OF READING

## A NEW PAGE

*Can the Kindle really improve on the book?*

by Nicholson Baker

AUGUST 3, 2009



Amazon is very good at selling things, but, to date, it hasn't been as good at making things. Photographs by Gus Powell.

I ordered a Kindle 2 from Amazon. How could I not? There were banner ads for it all over the Web. Whenever I went to the Amazon Web site, I was urged to buy one. “Say Hello to Kindle 2,” it said, in tall letters on the main page. If I looked up a particular writer on Amazon—Mary Higgins Clark, say—and then reached the page for her knuckle-gnawer of a novel “Moonlight Becomes You,” the top line on the page said, “‘Moonlight Becomes You’ and over 270,000 other books are available for Amazon Kindle—Amazon’s new wireless reading device. Learn more.” Below the picture of Clark’s physical paperback (\$7.99) was another teaser: “Start reading ‘Moonlight Becomes You’ on your Kindle in under a minute. Don’t have a Kindle? Get yours here.” If I went to the Kindle page for the digital download of “Moonlight Becomes You” (\$6.39), it wouldn’t offer me a link back to the print version. I was being steered.

Everybody was saying that the new Kindle was terribly important—that it was an alpenhorn blast of post-Gutenbergian revalorization. In the *Wall Street Journal*, the cultural critic Steven Johnson wrote that he’d been alone one day in a restaurant in Austin, Texas, when he was seized by the urge to read a novel. Within minutes, thanks to Kindle’s free 3G hookup with Sprint wireless—they call it Whispernet—he was well into Chapter 1 of Zadie Smith’s “On Beauty” (\$9.99 for the e-book, \$10.20 for the paperback). Writing and publishing, he believed, would never be the same. In *Newsweek*, Jacob Weisberg, the editor-in-chief of the Slate Group, confided that for weeks he’d been doing all his recreational reading on the Kindle 2, and he claimed that it offered a “fundamentally better experience” than inked paper did. “Jeff Bezos”—Amazon’s founder and C.E.O.—“has built a machine that marks a cultural revolution,” Weisberg said. “Printed books, the most important artifacts of human civilization, are going to join newspapers and magazines on the

road to obsolescence.”

Lots of ordinary people were excited about the Kindle 2, too—there were then about fifteen hundred five-star customer reviews at the Kindle Store, saying “I love my Kindle” over and over, and only a few hundred bitter one-stars. Kindle books were clean. “I’ve always been creeped out by library books and used books,” one visitor, Christine Ring, wrote on the Amazon Web site. “You never know where they’ve been!” “It has reinvigorated my interest in reading,” another reviewer said. “I’m hooked,” another said. “If I dropped my kindle down a sewer, I would buy another one immediately.”

And the unit was selling: in April, tech blogs had rumors that three hundred thousand Kindle 2s had shipped since the release date of February 24th. Bezos wrote a letter to shareholders: “Kindle sales have exceeded our most optimistic expectations.” He went on “The Daily Show” and laughed. (See the YouTube video called “Jeff Bezos Laughing Freakishly Loud on The Daily Show with Jon Stewart.”)

Amazon’s page showed a woman in sunglasses sitting on a beach with a Kindle over her knee. Below that were video testimonials from big-name writers like Michael Lewis and Toni Morrison, recycled from the launch of the original Kindle, in the fall of 2007. James Patterson, the force behind a stream of No. 1 *Times* best-sellers, said that he enjoyed reading outdoors, where he had, he confided, a “wonderful back yard, nice pool, and all that.” Patterson was pleased to discover, while Kindling poolside, that the wind didn’t make the book’s pages flutter. “There’s just the one page,” he explained. Neil Gaiman had moved from skeptic to “absolute believer.”

Well, well! I began to have the mildly euphoric feeling that you get ten minutes into an infomercial. Sure, the Kindle is expensive, but the expense is a way of buying into the total commitment. This could forever change the way I read. I’ve never been a fast reader. I’m fickle; I don’t finish books I start; I put a book aside for five, ten years and then take it up again. Maybe, I thought, if I ordered this wireless Kindle 2 I would be pulled into a world of compulsive,

demonic book consumption, like Pippin staring at the stone of Orthanc. Maybe I would gorge myself on Rebecca West, or Jack Vance, or Dawn Powell. Maybe the Kindle was the Bowflex of bookishness: something expensive that, when you commit to it, forces you to do more of whatever it is you think you should be doing more of.

True, the name of the product wasn’t so great. Kindle? It was cute and sinister at the same time—worse than Edsel, or Probe, or Microsoft’s Bob. But one forgives a bad name. One even comes to be fond of a bad name, if the product itself is delightful.

It came, via UPS, in a big cardboard box. Inside the box were some puffy clear bladders of plastic, a packing slip with “\$359” on it, and another cardboard box. This one said, in spare, lowercase type, “kindle.” On the side of the box was a plastic strip inlaid into the cardboard, which you were meant to pull to tear the package cleanly open. On it were the words “Once upon a time.” I pulled and opened.

Inside was another box, fancier than the first. Black cardboard was printed with a swarm of glossy black letters, and in the middle was, again, the word “kindle.” There was another pull strip on the side, which again said, “Once upon a time.” I’d entered some nesting Italo Calvino folktale world of packaging. (Calvino’s Italian folktales aren’t yet available at the Kindle Store, by the way.) I pulled again and opened.

Within, lying face up in a white-lined casket, was the device itself. It was pale, about the size of a hardcover novel, but much thinner, and it had a smallish screen and a QWERTY keyboard at the bottom made of tiny round pleasure-dot keys that resisted pressing. I gazed at the keys for a moment and thought of a restaurant accordion.

The plug, which was combined with the USB connector, was extremely well designed, in the best post-Apple style. It



*“Here’s another one about Teddy bears.”*

was a very, very good plug. I turned the Kindle on and pressed the Home key. Home gives you the list of what you've got in your Kindle. There were some books that I'd already ordered waiting for me—that was nice—and there was also a letter of greeting from Jeff Bezos. "Kindle is an entirely new type of device, and we're excited to have you as an early customer!" Bezos wrote. I read the letter and some of "His Majesty's Dragon" (a dragon fantasy by Naomi Novick set during the Napoleonic Wars, given away free), "Gulliver's Travels," and "Slow Hands," a freebie Harlequin Blaze novel by Leslie Kelly. I changed the type size. I searched for a text string. I tussled with a sense of anticlimax.

The problem was not that the screen was in black-and-white; if it had really been black-and-white, that would have been fine. The problem was that the screen was gray. And it wasn't just gray; it was a greenish, sickly gray. A postmortem gray. The resizable typeface, Monotype Caecilia, appeared as a darker gray. Dark gray on paler greenish gray was the palette of the Amazon Kindle.

This was what they were calling e-paper? This four-by-five window onto an overcast afternoon? Where was paper white, or paper cream? Forget RGB or CMYK. Where were sharp black letters laid out like lacquered chopsticks on a clean tablecloth?

I showed it to my wife. "Too bad it doesn't have a little kickstand," she said. "You could prop it up like a dresser mirror and read while you eat." My son clicked around in the Kindle edition of a Bernard Cornwell novel about ancient Britain. "It's not that bad," he said. "The map looks pretty good. Some of the littler names aren't readable. I'd rather be reading that"—pointing to his Cornwell paperback, which was lying face down nearby—"but I can definitely read this."

Yes, you can definitely read things on the Kindle. And I did. Bits of things at first. I read some of De Quincey's "Confessions," some of Robert Benchley's "Love Conquers All," and some of several versions of Kipling's "The Jungle Book." I squeezed no new joy from these great books, though. The Gluyas Williams drawings were gone from the Benchley, and even the wasp passage in "Do Insects Think?" just wasn't the same in Kindle gray. I did an experiment. I found the Common Reader reprint edition of "Love Conquers All" and read the very same wasp passage. I laughed: *ha-ha*. Then I went back to the Kindle 2 and read the wasp passage again. No laugh. Of course, by then I'd read the passage three times, and it wasn't that funny anymore. But the point is that it wasn't funny the first time I came to it, when it was enscreened on the Kindle. Monotype Caecilia was grim and Calvinist; it had a way of reducing everything to arbitrary heaps of words.

Reading some of "Max," a James Patterson novel, I experimented with the text-to-speech feature. The robo-reader had a polite, halting, Middle European intonation, like Tom Hanks in "The Terminal," and it was sometimes confused by periods. Once it thought "miss." was the abbreviation of a state name: "He loved the chase, the hunt, the split-second intersection of luck and skill that allowed him to exercise his perfection, his inability to Mississippi." I turned the machine off.

And yet, you know, many people loved it. To be fair to the Kindle, I had to make it through at least one whole book. Jeff Bezos calls this "long form" reading. I had some success one morning when I Kindled my way deep into "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Writing Erotic Romance," by Alison Kent. There are, I learned, four distinct levels of intensity in the erotic-romance industry: sweet, steamy, sizzling, and scorching. This seemed like pertinent information, since romance readers are major Kindlers. "The success of the ebook is being fueled by the romance and erotic romance market," Peter Smith, of ITworld, reports. Smith cites the actress and Kindle enthusiast Felicia Day, of "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," who has been bingeing on paranormals like "Dark Needs at Night's Edge." "I've read like, 6 books this week and ordered about 10 more," Day blogged. "It's stuff I never would have checked out at the Barnes and Noble, because the gleaming and oily man chests would have made me blush too much."

**E**-romances don't fully explain the Kindle's success—and the kind of devotion that it inspires. To find out more, I went to Freeport, Maine, to talk to Eileen Messina, the manager of the British-imports store just across from L. L. Bean. Messina, a thoughtful, intelligent woman in her thirties, has all kinds of things on her Kindle, including "Anna Karenina," Murakami's "Kafka on the Shore," books by Dan Simmons and Abraham Verghese, and the comic novel "Pride and Prejudice and Zombies." She is so happy with it that she has volunteered, along with about a hundred others, to show it off to prospective purchasers, as part of Amazon's "See a Kindle in Your City" promotion. Her Kindle was in her purse; she'd crocheted a cover for it out of green yarn. In the past, she said, she'd taken books out of the library, but

some of them smelled of smoke—a Kindle book is a smoke-free environment. I thanked her and bought some digestive biscuits and a teapot, and then I went next door to Sherman's Books and Stationery. I asked Josh Christie, who worked there, to recommend a truly gut-churningly suspenseful novel. I was going to do a comparison between the paperback and the Kindle 2 version. Christie suggested "The Bourne Identity" and a book by Michael Connelly, "The Lincoln Lawyer"—one of his colleagues at the shop swore by it. I bought them both.

Outside, I sat on a bench near L. L. Bean, eating an ice cream, and tried to order "The Bourne Identity" wirelessly from the Kindle Store. But no—there is no Kindle version of "The Bourne Identity." What?

What else was missing? Back home, I spent an hour standing in front of some fiction bookcases, checking on titles. There is no Amazon Kindle version of "The Jewel in the Crown." There's no Kindle of Jean Stafford, no Vladimir Nabokov, no "Flaubert's Parrot," no "Remains of the Day," no "Perfume," by Patrick Suskind, no Bharati Mukherjee, no Margaret Drabble, no Graham Greene except a radio script, no David Leavitt, no Bobbie Ann Mason's "In Country," no Pynchon, no Tim O'Brien, no "Swimming-Pool Library," no Barbara Pym, no Saul Bellow, no Frederick Exley, no "World According to Garp," no "Catch-22," no "Breakfast at Tiffany's," no "Portnoy's Complaint," no "Henry and Clara," no Lorrie Moore, no "Edwin Mullhouse," no "Clockwork Orange."

Of course, the title count will grow. It will grow because not so subtle forces will be exerted on publishers and writers. Below the descriptions of all non-Kindle books for sale on Amazon, there's a box that says, "Tell the Publisher! I'd like to read this book on Kindle." If you click it, Amazon displays a thank-you page: "We will pass your specific request on to the publisher."

But say you've actually found the book you're seeking at the Kindle Store. You buy it. Do you get what's described in the catalogue copy? Yes and no. You get the words, yes, and sometimes pictures, after a fashion. Photographs, charts, diagrams, foreign characters, and tables don't fare so well on the little gray screen. Page numbers are gone, so indexes sometimes don't work. Trailing endnotes are difficult to manage. If you want to quote from a book you've bought, you have to quote by location range—e.g., the phrase "She was on the verge of the mother of all orgasms" is to be found at location range 1596-1605 in Mari Carr's erotic romance novel "Tequila Truth."

When you buy the Kindle edition of Konrad Lorenz's "King Solomon's Ring," rather than the paperback version, you save three dollars and fifty-eight cents, but the fetching illustrations by Lorenz of a greylag goose and its goslings walking out from the middle of a paragraph and down the right margin are separated from the text—the marginalia has been demarginalized. The Kindle Store offers "The Cheese Lover's Cookbook and Guide," from Simon & Schuster. "The picture of the Ricotta Pancakes with Banana-Pecan Syrup may just inspire you enough to make it the first recipe you want to try," one happy Amazon reviewer writes. She's referring to the recipe in the print edition, the description of which is reused in the Kindle Store—there's no pancake picture in the Kindle version.

Yes, you can save nine dollars if you buy the Kindle edition of "The Algorithmic Beauty of Seaweeds, Sponges, and Corals," by Jaap A. Kaandorp, et al.—it'll cost you \$85.40 delivered wirelessly, versus \$94.89 in print. *New Scientist* says that Kaandorp's book is "beautifully, if sometimes eccentrically, illustrated with photographs, drawings and computer simulations." The illustrations are there in the Kindle version, but they're exceedingly hard to make out, even if you zoom in on them using the five-way clicker switch, or "control nipple," as one Kindler called it. An award-winning medical textbook titled "Imaging in Oncology" (second edition) is for sale in the Kindle Store for \$287.96. Tables are garbled. The color coding—yellow for malignancy, blue for healthy tissue—has been lost. Arrows pointing to shadowy tumors become invisible in the gray. Indeed, the tumors themselves disappear.

One more expensive example. The Kindle edition of "Selected Nuclear Materials and Engineering Systems," an e-book for people who design nuclear power plants, sells for more than eight thousand dollars. Figure 2 is an elaborate chart of a reaction scheme, with many call-outs and chemical equations. It's totally illegible. "You Save: \$1,607.80 (20%)," the Kindle page says. "I'm not going to buy this book until the price comes down," one stern Amazoner wrote.

Here's what you buy when you buy a Kindle book. You buy the right to display a grouping of words in front of your eyes for your private use with the aid of an electronic display device approved by Amazon. The company uses an encoding format called Topaz. ("Topaz" is also the name of a novel by Leon Uris, not available at the Kindle Store.) There are other e-book software formats—Adobe Acrobat, for instance, and Microsoft Reader, and an open format called

ePub—but Amazon went its own way. Nobody else’s hardware can handle Topaz without Amazon’s permission. That means you can’t read your Kindle books on your computer, or on an e-book reader that competes with the Kindle. (You can, however, read Kindle books on the iPod Touch and the iPhone—more about that later—because Amazon has decided that it’s in its interest to let you.) Maybe you’ve heard of the Sony Reader? The Sony Reader’s page-turning controls are better designed than the Kindle’s controls, and the Reader came out more than a year before the Kindle did; also, its screen is slightly less gray, and its typeface is better, and it can handle ePub and PDF documents without conversion, but forget it. You can’t read a Kindle book on a Sony machine, or on the Ectaco jetBook, the BeBook, the iRex iLiad, the Cybook, the Hanlin V2, or the Foxit eSlick. Kindle books aren’t transferrable. You can’t give them away or lend them or sell them. You can’t print them. They are closed clumps of digital code that only one purchaser can own. A copy of a Kindle book dies with its possessor.

On the other hand, there’s no clutter, no pile of paperbacks next to the couch. A Kindle book arrives wirelessly: it’s untouchable; it exists on a higher, purer plane. It’s earth-friendly, too, supposedly. Yes, it’s made of exotic materials that are shipped all over the world’s oceans; yes, it requires electricity to operate and air-conditioned server farms to feed it; yes, it’s fragile and it duplicates what other machines do; yes, it’s difficult to recycle; yes, it will probably take a last boat ride to a Nigerian landfill in five years. But no tree farms are harvested to make a Kindle book; no ten-ton presses turn, no ink is spilled.

Instead of ink on paper, there’s something called Vizplex. Vizplex is the trade name of the layered substance that makes up the Kindle’s display—i.e., the six-inch-diagonal rectangle that you read from. It’s a marvel of bi-stable microspheres, and it took lots of work and more than a hundred and fifty million dollars to develop, but it’s really still in the prototype phase. Vizplex, in slurry form, is made in Cambridge, Massachusetts, by a company called E Ink. E Ink layers it onto a film, or “frontplane laminate,” at a plant in western Massachusetts, and then sends the laminate to Taiwan, where its parent company, P.V.I. (which stands for Prime View International, itself a subsidiary of a large paper company), marries it to an electronic grid, or backplane. The backplane tells the frontplane what to do.

The prospect of Vizplex first arose in the mind of a scientist, Joseph Jacobson, who now works at M.I.T.’s Media Lab and avoids interviews on the subject of e-paper. Sometime in the mid-nineties, according to a colleague, Jacobson was sitting on a beach reading. He finished his book. What next? He didn’t want to walk off the beach to get another book, and he didn’t want to lie on the beach and dig moist holes with his feet, thinking about the algorithmic beauty of seaweeds. What he wanted was to push a little button that would swap the words in the book he held for the words in some other book somewhere else. He wanted the book he held to be infinitely rewriteable—to be, in fact, the very last book he would ever have to own. He called it “The Last Book.” To make the Last Book, he would have to invent a new kind of paper: RadioPaper.

At M.I.T., Jacobson and a group of undergraduates made lists of requirements, methods, and materials. One of their tenets was: RadioPaper must reflect, like real paper. It must not emit. It couldn’t be based on some improved type of liquid-crystal screen, no matter how high its resolution, no matter how perfectly jewel-like its colors, no matter how imperceptibly quick its flicker, because liquid crystals are backlit, and backlighting, they believed, is intrinsically bad because it’s hard on the eyes. RadioPaper also had to be flexible, they thought, and it had to persist until recycled in situ. It should hold its image even when it drew no current, just as paper could. How to do that? One student came up with the idea of a quilt of tiny white balls in colored dye. To make the letter “A,” say, microsquirts of electricity would grab some of the microballs and pull them down in their capsule, drowning them in the dye and making that capsule and neighboring capsules go dark and stay dark until some more electricity flowed through in a second or a day or a week. This was the magic of electrophoresis.

In 1997, Jacobson and his partners joined with Russ Wilcox, an entrepreneur from Harvard Business School, to form E Ink. “When we first got involved with this, people were, like, ‘Oh, you’re trying to kill the book,’ ” Wilcox said recently, by telephone. “And we’re, like, ‘No, we love the book.’ Unfortunately, we fear for its future, because people just expect digital media these days. The economic pressures are immense.”

The newspaper industry, Wilcox figured, was a hundred-and-eighty-billion-dollar-a-year business, and book publishing was an additional eighty billion. Half of that was papermaking, ink mixing, printing, transport, inventory, and

the warehousing of physical goods. “So you can save a hundred and thirty billion dollars a year if you move the information digitally,” he told me. “There’s a lot of hidden forces at work that are all combining to make this sort of a big tidal wave that’s coming.”

E Ink ran into some trouble after 2000, when there was less venture capital to go around. The company’s direction changed slightly. It wouldn’t make the Last Book, but it would sell other manufacturers the means to do so. The company’s models were Coca-Cola—which grew great by selling the syrup and letting others do the bottling—and NutraSweet. “Imagine you’re NutraSweet,” Wilcox said. “The cola industry is already up and running. There’s no way you’re going to make your own diet cola and compete head to head. So what do you do? You sell the ingredient.”

E Ink’s first big, visible customer was Sony. Sony bought a lot of Vizplex display screens for its Reader, the PRS-500, which Howard Stringer, Sony’s C.E.O., introduced at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas in January, 2006, standing in front of a photograph of the electrophoretic version of Dan Brown’s “The Da Vinci Code.” Sony set up an online bookstore, and sold its machines at Borders Books and the Sony Store, and, later, at Target, Costco, Staples, and WalMart. Sony is, of course, a deft hand at handheld design. Its Reader was very good, given the Etch-a-Sketch limitations of the Vizplex medium, but it lacked wirelessness—you had to USB-cable it to a computer in order to load a book onto it—and Sony had no gift for retail bookselling. Hundreds of thousands of Sony Readers have sold—and you can now read five hundred thousand public-domain Google Books on it in ePub format—but, oddly, people ignore it.

Along with Sony, several other companies rushed to develop Vizplex-based devices. Amazon was one of them. Since 2000, Amazon had been offering various kinds of e-books (to be read on a computer screen), without success. “Nobody’s been buying e-books,” Jeff Bezos told Charlie Rose in November, 2007, at the time of the Kindle 1 launch. The shift to digital page turning hadn’t happened. Why was that? “It’s because books are so good,” according to Bezos. And they’re good, he explained, because they disappear when you read them: “You go into this flow state.” Bezos wanted to design a machine that helped a reader achieve that same flow—and also (although he didn’t say this) sold for a premium, fended off Sony’s trespass into the book business, and tied buyers to Amazon forever.

Thus, Bezos’s engineers—including Gregg Zehr, who had previously worked for Palm and Apple—ventured to design a piece of hardware. “This is the most important thing we’ve ever done,” Bezos said in *Newsweek* at the time. “It’s so ambitious to take something as highly evolved as the book and improve on it.”

But the Kindle 1 wasn’t an improvement. Page turning was slow and was accompanied by a distracting flash of black as the microspheres dived down into their oil-filled nodules before forming new text. “The first thing to note is that the screen isn’t like reading actual paper,” Joseph Weisenthal wrote on paidContent.org. “It’s not as bright and there is glare if the light is too direct.”

The problem wasn’t just the Vizplex screen. The Kindle 1’s design was a retro piece of bizarrerie—an unhandy, asymmetrical Fontina wedge of plastic. It had a keyboard composed of many rectangular keys that were angled like cars in a parking lot, and a long Next Page button that, as hundreds of users complained, made you turn pages by accident when you carried it around. “Honestly, the device is fugly,” a commentator named KenC said on the Silicon Alley Insider: “The early 90s called and they want their device back.” The comments on Engadget.com were especially pointed. “It looks like a Timex Sinclair glued to the bottom of an oversized 1st gen Palm device,” Marcus wrote. “That’s some ugly shit,” Johan agreed. “Was this damned thing designed by a band of drunken elves?” Jerome asked. CB summed it up: “It is truly butt ugly. wow. ugly.”

Undeterred, the folks at Amazon gave the Kindle 1 a hose blast of marketing late in 2007. And they had a lucky break. Oprah, who had been slipped a pre-launch Kindle, announced that she was obsessed with it. “It’s absolutely my new favorite, favorite thing in the world,” she said. “It’s life-changing for me.” To counter the threat, Sony boosted its advertising for the PRS-500, but it couldn’t compete. Amazon sold out of Kindles before Christmas, 2007.

Reading the one-star reviews for this device, which accumulated throughout 2008, must have been a painful experience for Amazon’s product engineers. Yet they soldiered on, readying the revised version—smoothing the edges and fixing the most obvious physical flaws. They made page turning faster, so that the black flash was less distracting, and they got the screen to display sixteen shades of gray, not four, a refinement that helped somewhat with photographs.

Despite its smoother design, the Kindle 2 is, some say, harder to read than the Kindle 1. “I immediately noticed that

the contrast was worse on the K2 than on my K1,” a reviewer named T. Ford wrote. One Kindler, Elizabeth Glass, began an online petition, asking Amazon to fix the contrast. “Like reading a wet newspaper,” according to petition-signer Louise Potter.

There was another problem with the revised Kindle—fading. Some owners (not me, though) found that when they read in the sun the letters began to disappear. Readers had to press Alt-G repeatedly to bring them back. “Today is the first day when we have had bright sunshine, so I took the Kindle out in the sun and was dismayed to see that the text (particularly near the center of the screen) faded within seconds,” one owner, Woody, wrote. Another owner, Mark, said, “I went through 4 kindles til I found a good one that doesn’t fade in the sun. It was a hassle but Amazon has a great CS.” (CS is customer service.)

Amazon remains fully committed to electrophoresis. “We think reading is an important enough activity that it deserves a purpose-built device,” Bezos told stock analysts in April. Heartened by the Kindle 2’s press, Amazon introduced, in mid-June, a bigger machine—the thumb-cramping, TV-dinner-size Kindle DX. The DX can auto-flip its image when you turn it sideways, like the iPod Touch (although its tetchy inertial guidance system sometimes sends the page twirling when you don’t want it to), and on it you can view—but not zoom on or pan across—unconverted PDF files. Some engineer, tasked with keyboard design, has again been struck by a divine retro-futurist fire: the result is a squashed array of pill-shaped keys that combine the number row with the top QWERTY row in a peculiar tea party of un-ergonomicism. Pilot programs have arisen at several universities, including Princeton, which will test the Kindle DX’s potential as a replacement for textbooks and paper printouts of courseware. The Princeton program is partly funded by the High Meadows Foundation, in the name of environmental sustainability; for Amazon, it’s also a way to get into the rich coursepack market, alongside Barnes & Noble, Kinko’s, and a company called XanEdu.

The real flurry over the new DX, though, has to do with the fate of newspapers. The DX offers more than twice as much Vizplex as the Kindle 2—about half the area of a piece of letter-size paper—enough, some assert, to reaccustom Web readers to paying for the digital version of, say, the *Times*, thereby rescuing daily print journalism from financial ruin. “With Kindle DX’s large display, reading newspapers is more enjoyable than ever,” according to Amazon’s Web site.

It’s enjoyable if you like reading Nexis printouts. The Kindle *Times* (\$13.99 per month) lacks most of the print edition’s superb photography—and its subheads and call-outs and teasers, its spinnakered typographical elegance and variety, its browsableness, its Web-site links, its listed names of contributing reporters, and almost all captioned pie charts, diagrams, weather maps, crossword puzzles, summary sports scores, financial data, and, of course, ads, for jewels, for swimsuits, for vacationlands, and for recently bailed-out investment firms. A century and a half of evolved beauty and informational expressiveness is all but entirely rinsed away in this digital reductio.

Sometimes whole articles and op-ed contributions aren’t there. Three pieces from the July 8, 2009, print edition of the *Times*—Adam Nagourney on Sarah Palin’s resignation, Alessandra Stanley on Michael Jackson’s funeral, and David Johnston on the civil rights of detainees—were missing from the Kindle edition, or at least I haven’t managed to find them (they’re available free on the *Times* Web site); the July 9th Kindle issue lacked the print edition’s reporting on interracial college roommates and the infectivity rates of abortion pills. I checked again on July 20th and 21st: Verlyn Klinkenborg’s appreciation of Walter Cronkite was absent, as was a long piece on Mongolian shamanism.

The Kindle DX (\$489) doesn’t save newspapers; it diminishes and undercuts them—it kills their joy. It turns them into earnest but dispensable blogs.

**A**mazon, with its listmania lists and its sometimes inspired recommendations and its innumerable fascinating reviews, is very good at selling things. It isn’t so good, to date anyway, at making things. But, fortunately, if you want to read electronic books there’s another way to go. Here’s what you do. Buy an iPod Touch (it costs seventy dollars less than the Kindle 2, even after the Kindle’s price was recently cut), or buy an iPhone, and load the free “Kindle for iPod” application onto it. Then, when you wake up at 3 A.M. and you need big, sad, well-placed words to tumble slowly into the basin of your mind, and you don’t want to wake up the person who’s in bed with you, you can reach under the pillow and find Apple’s smooth machine and click it on. It’s completely silent. Hold it a few inches from your face, with the words enlarged and the screen’s brightness slider bar slid to its lowest setting, and read for ten or fifteen minutes. Each time you

need to turn the page, just move your thumb over it, as if you were getting ready to deal a card; when you do, the page will slide out of the way, and a new one will appear. After a while, your thoughts will drift off to the unused siding where the old tall weeds are, and the string of curving words will toot a mournful toot and pull ahead. You will roll to a stop. A moment later, you'll wake and discover that you're still holding the machine but it has turned itself off. Slide it back under the pillow. Sleep.

I've done this with Joseph Mitchell's "The Bottom of the Harbor" (\$13.80 Kindle, \$17.25 paperback) and with Wilkie Collins's "The Moonstone." The iPod screen's resolution, at a hundred and sixty-three pixels per inch, is fairly high. (It could be much higher, though. High pixel density, not a reflective surface, is, I've come to believe, what people need when they read electronic prose.) There are other ways to read books on the iPod, too. My favorite is the Eucalyptus application, by a Scottish software developer named James Montgomerie: for \$9.99, you get more than twenty thousand public-domain books whose pages turn with a voluptuous grace. There's also the Iceberg Reader, by ScrollMotion, with fixed page numbers, and a very popular app called Stanza. In Stanza, you can choose the colors of the words and of the page, and you can adjust the brightness with a vertical thumb swipe as you read. Stanza takes you to Harlequin Imprints, the Fictionwise Book Store, O'Reilly Ebooks, Feedbooks, and a number of other catalogues. A million people have downloaded Stanza. (In fact, Stanza is so good that Amazon has just bought Lexcycle, which makes the software; meanwhile, Fictionwise has been bought by a worried Barnes & Noble.)

Forty million iPod Touches and iPhones are in circulation, and most people aren't reading books on them. But some are. The nice thing about this machine is (a) it's beautiful, and (b) it's not imitating anything. It's not trying to be ink on paper. It serves a night-reading need, which the lightless Kindle doesn't. And the wasp passage in "Do Insects Think?" is funny again on the iPod.

The paperback edition of "The Lincoln Lawyer" (\$7.99 at Sherman's in Freeport) has a bright-green cover with a blurry photograph of a car on the front. It says "MICHAEL CONNELLY" in huge metallic purple letters, and it has a purple band on the spine: "#1 New York *Times* Bestseller." On the back, it says, "A plot that moves like a shot of Red Bull." It's shiny and new and the type is right, and it has the potent pheromonal funk of pulp and glue. When you read the book, its gutter gapes before your eyes, and you feel you're in it. In print, "The Lincoln Lawyer" swept me up. At night, I switched over to the e-book version on the iPod (\$7.99 from the Kindle Store), so that I could carry on in the dark. I began swiping the tiny iPod pages faster and faster.

Then, out of a sense of duty, I forced myself to read the book on the physical Kindle 2. It was like going from a Mini Cooper to a white 1982 Impala with blown shocks. But never mind: at that point, I was locked into the plot and it didn't matter. Poof, the Kindle disappeared, just as Jeff Bezos had promised it would. I began walking up and down the driveway, reading in the sun. Three distant lawnmowers were going. Someone wearing a salmon-colored shirt was spraying a hose across the street. But I was in the courtroom, listening to the murderer testify. I felt the primitive clawing pressure of wanting to know how things turned out.

I began pressing the Next Page clicker more and more eagerly, so eagerly that my habit of page turning, learned from years of reading—which is to reach for the page corner a little early, to prepare for the movement—kicked in unconsciously. I clicked Next Page as I reached the beginning of the last line, and the page flashed to black and changed before I'd read it all. I was trying to hurry the Kindle. You mustn't hurry the Kindle. But, hell, I didn't care. The progress bar at the bottom said I was ninety-one per cent done. I was at location 7547. I was flying along. Gray is a good color, I thought. Finally, I was on the last bit. It was called "A Postcard from Cuba." I breathed an immense ragged sigh. I read the acknowledgments and the about-the-author paragraph—Michael Connelly lives in Florida. Good man. The little progress indicator said ninety-nine per cent. I clicked the Next Page button. It showed the cover of the book again. I clicked Next Page again, but there was no next page. My first Kindle-delivered novel was at its end. ♦

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