

The Washington Post

Democracy Dies in Darkness

There's now an e-reader just for kids, and it misses what children love about books

By **Ron Charles**

November 1, 2019 at 7:00 a.m. EDT

More than 15 years ago, the late Italian writer Umberto Eco said, “Books belong to those kinds of instruments that, once invented, have not been further improved because they are already all right, such as the hammer.”

For some perverse reason, we're still determined to prove Eco wrong.

Introducing the new and improved hammer: This week, Amazon released the Kindle Kids Edition, “ideal for both beginner and experienced chapter book readers.” (Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos owns The Washington Post.) It's the familiar six-inch e-reader spruced up with a cute case and access to more than a thousand child-friendly books. Tiger Moms will love the built-in dictionary and word lists that “take reading to the next level.” The next level, if you don't know, is flashcards.

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Amazon bills this device as the “first-ever dedicated reading experience built just for kids.” So much for my old copy of “Mr. Popper’s Penguins.”

I’m no Luddite (I have two Kindles and love them), but the arrival of this Kindle Kids Edition is making me fantasize about smashing the looms. There comes a point when we need to look critically at how electronic devices are corroding our lives. The iPhone has already ravaged dinnertime. Now these purveyors of technology are coming for bedtime.

With a clever bit of preemptive spin, the Amazon website declares, “Kindle Kids Edition is designed just for reading, which means no distractions from apps, videos or games.” But that only highlights the mind-numbing screen-based future awaiting our children — and the way this new Kindle trains them for it. It’s the literary equivalent of near beer.

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Resistance is *not* futile. From the start, most children need and crave the tactile interaction that real books provide. Their rapidly developing fine motor skills evolve alongside their delight with illustrations and the pleasure of turning pages. They move from chewing the covers to feeling the paper, as the wonder of one double-page spread unfolds to the next.

As they get older, we should be in no rush to lure them away from the talismanic aura of real books. Forget about *efficiency*. Kids don't feel burdened by carrying physical books; they feel girded with the tools of their own entertainment. They clutch them, they rearrange them, they show them off, and, most importantly, they use them to build castles in their own minds. Reduce the full spectrum of those objects to the soulless glow of a screen, and you've stolen something precious from a child. All the convenience of being able to access a thousand titles on an e-reader could never justify its efficient obliteration of a young person's shelf of cherished books. Seven "Harry Potter" volumes stacked next to the bed are a monument to a kid's determination and devotion; seven "Harry Potter" titles on a Kindle might as well be under an invisibility cloak. The very physical *thing-ness* of a printed book offers an enhancement that e-ink can't touch.

I don't need science to tell me how valuable printed books are to children, but the research exists. A study published earlier this year in the journal *Pediatrics* found that parents had better interactions with their toddlers when they read print books together than when they read e-books together.

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Suzy Tomopoulos is an associate professor of pediatrics at New York University's School of Medicine who has published extensively on how digital media exposure affects young children. She acknowledges the potential benefits of new technology that could increase reading for children, but she notes that e-readers also create a different dynamic. "I am concerned," Tomopoulos says, "because when using a device, the interface is less effective in supporting parent-child interactions that occur during reading a book."

She explains a process called "dialogic reading," which is a fancy name for what happens when parents read with their child: "Parents expand on the text based on what the child is interested in and place it into the contents of their lives." We already have some ancient technology perfect for that task. "There's something pretty special about turning the page and reading a book together and talking about it," Tomopoulos says.

That relationship extends deep into a child's life. Or it *can*. If you've seen a family of zombies sitting around a restaurant table staring at their phones, you know what the alternative is.

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E-reader advocates counter that these devices offer a handy slew of educational tools and metrics. Indeed, Amazon notes that with the Kindle Kids Edition, you can “set educational goals and manage content with easy-to-use parental controls . . . and track reading accomplishments for each day.”

Weeeeeee!

A recent report from Scholastic notes that around age 9, “children’s frequency of reading books for fun begins to drop” — and rarely rebounds. More education goals enforced by parents electronically monitoring a child’s interaction with stories is unlikely to reignite the fun.

As a dad, I’m sure I made all kinds of unforgivable mistakes, but I got one thing right. My wife and I filled our kids’ rooms with books — *real books* — and we read with them every day and every night. “Frog and Toad,” “Ella Enchanted,” “Love That Dog” and hundreds more became our common friends. We laughed, we gasped, we cried. I don’t mean to sound like one of those insufferable parents who says things like, “We only let our children play with gender-free corn cob dolls made from organic maize,” but long after my younger daughter could read on her own, we still clung to the joy of reading aloud together. We remained dialogic readers without even knowing it.

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As my kids grew up, their earliest books didn't vanish into the cloud; they transmuted into treasured objects, weathered signposts back through the mist of childhood. Maybe they don't read "Winnie the Pooh" anymore, but they smile whenever they see it sitting there and remember Pooh's efforts to outsmart the bees.

It's been a long time since my younger daughter and I enjoyed Dr. Seuss together, but we're still connected by a relationship spun from the paper of real books. Last week, I sent her a copy of Bernardine Evaristo's "Girl, Woman, Other." Sunday night, she had to catch a flight out of Denver, and she was nervous about taking off before a snowstorm hit. Turning pages was exactly the balm she needed. Just before phones had to be placed in airplane mode, she texted me, "I LOVE THIS BOOK."

That's all I want for Father's Day and Christmas and my birthday for the rest of my life.

Ron Charles writes about books for *The Washington Post* and hosts TotallyHipVideoBookReview.com.

Read more:

Bernardine Evaristo's 'Girl, Woman, Other' received half a Booker Prize, but it deserves all the glory

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