

Headline: E-readers provide tough competitor for traditional paperback

By Kendall Breitman

House guests of Jody Reines, a self proclaimed retired mother from Philadelphia, should not be surprised when they are asked if they would like to see her midlife crisis.

Anyone who agrees to see will soon find themselves following Reines' tousled mane of black curls to an old mahogany door, characterized by years of wear and tear that are as difficult to conceal as the crows feet wrinkles magnified behind the her thick glasses.

Ten years ago, the door marked the entrance to her son's bedroom. Today this is where Reines keeps her personal library of over 400 books.

Walls that were once covered in navy blue paint now hold floor to ceiling rows of oak wood shelving. In the back right corner of the rectangular room, a twin bed was replaced by a tan tufted chaise lounge. Book spines of every color, some worn leather, others faded paper, stand in upright rows like an organized army of literature. Reines' life long collection of novels is so daunting, impressive and overwhelming that sifting through it could easily take days.

"People think this is a little crazy," Reines said as she sank into the plush red suede loveseat in the corner of the library. "But I think it's crazier to think that all of this could fit into the palm of someone's hand."

But as a recent increase in electronic reading devices now has 33 percent of Americans owning an e-reader, according to a 2012 report conducted by the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project, having the literary world at your fingertips is no longer such a crazy thought.

As e-reader sales continue to rise, the new medium is proving itself a strong competitor in the publishing industry. Pricey hardcover books that can only be found in stores are now making way for the cheaper and more convenient alternative of purchasing texts online. In 2012, e-book sales witnessed record growth, with fiction sales rising 42 percent over a year and cumulative e-book sales making up for 20 percent of publishers' revenues, according to the New York Times. According to Amazon, for every 100 printed books sold on the website during 2012 customers downloaded 114 ebooks.

"I mean, the impact is huge, no question," said Maya Bradford, an associate publicist at Abrams Books Publishing Company. "Everyone is kind of running to keep up."

In the past two years Abrams Books, like many other publishing companies, has had to downsize, cutting about one-fifth of their staff. New skills are needed for the few job positions open, such as the growing necessity to understanding graphic design, and innovative programming for a strong push for physical books has become necessary to counteract the shift from physical books to electronic mediums.

"There is no denying that this is the way the industry is going," Bradford said. "People are doing everything on their tablets and it seems like reading is just the next logical step."

Others in the industry, such as Iris Krasnow, a New York Times best selling author of six relationship books, have been benefitting from the rise in electronic alternatives. Her fifth novel, "The Secret Lives of Wives," was her highest selling e-book, with sales reaching slightly more than paper copies.

"I am really happy that people are reading my iBook," Krasnow said, as her dramatic hand gestures expressed her energetic passion for reading. "But I can't tell you the joy as an author when I do book signings and people come to me and their books are wine stained, coffee

stained, perhaps tear stained. I get more and more people today who come to my talks and say ‘I would bring you my tablet but you can’t sign a tablet.’”

With the Sept. 2 announcement of the casting of “Fifty Shades of Grey” by E.L. James making headlines as the first predominantly e-reader based novel to lead to a movie adaption, according to the New York Times, the shifting trend towards tablet reading is becoming hard to ignore.

“The advent of e-books in the mass market had already been established, but ‘Fifty Shades’ took it to the next level,” said Stef Woods, a professor at American University who taught received national attention for her course “Contemporary American Culture: The 50 Shades Trilogy.” The fiery red head and new mother studied the series and its affects on society, announcing in her blog “City Girl’s Blog” that the class would include discussions on the cultural phenomenon, including its impact on the literary world.

Writers Coffee Shop, a company based in Australia, originally published “Fifty Shades” in 2011 exclusively as through e-readers or print-on-demand paperback copies. At the time, e-readers were already on the rise, with Amazon’s Kindle dominating the market and booksellers such as Barnes & Noble offering the Nook as a strong competitor.

In 2012, Vintage, a division of Random House, bought the distribution rights of the novel and released a paperback version of the fan fiction. As the release coincided with the rapid growth of e-reader sales, profits soared to \$95 million, making James the highest earning author, according to Forbes. E-books made up about one third of total sales.

“I think e-readers facilitated ‘Fifty Shades’ success and in doing so ‘Fifty Shades’ spurred a new market for e-reader books,” Woods said.

The new market that spurred grew more than every before. According to a 2012 report conducted by the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project, between 2010 and 2012 e-book readership rose from 6 percent to 33 percent of total book readers. Also in that study, Pew found printed book readership fell from 72 percent of consumers to 67 percent.

To counteract the rise in e-readers, the American Booksellers Association reached a deal with Google in late 2010, which allowed costumers to download e-books from the websites of independent bookstores. The deal lasted for two years, until Google pulled out of the transaction. The arrangement was soon replaced by a contract between ABA and Kobo, a Canadian e-reader distributor.

Through the new agreement, independent booksellers can sell Kobo technology to customers and make a small profit for every e-book downloaded to the device.

One of the oldest independent bookseller's in D.C., Politics and Prose, whose iconic violet awning has greeted customers since 1984, has become involved in the Kobo program. In the window of the Connecticut Avenue storefront, a massive poster displays the newest Kobo tablet. But inside, costumers line the store grasping and scanning through the massive arrays of traditional paperbacks.

In June 2011, Bradley Graham, a former editor and Pentagon correspondent for the Washington Post, decided to buy the well-known bookstore. Before closing the deal, Graham says that e-books were a big consideration.

Graham was met with grim statistics. He recalls projections that e-books would come to occupy 50 percent of the market and predictions that physical book sales would soon diminish.

“Nonetheless we decided to go ahead with the bookstore anyway, in part on the assumption that physical books would continue to dominate book sales,” said Graham, sucking down a yellow Dum-Dum lollipop in the back office of his store.

And he seemed to be right in his predictions. Thus far there has been no decline in physical book sales for the store.

But the future of the publishing industry is still met with uncertainty. As the journalism industry faces a shift from print to online, Graham predicts that the future of publishing may follow the same path.

“There is a very real chance that the whole business as we know it will look quite differently in a decade or even less,” Graham said. “I am not even going to hazard to guess what will ways publishers will try to compete with e-books. There could be something that no one has even thought of yet.”

And at least on that Sunday afternoon, as college students poured over the newest in fiction, baby-boomers lined up to have their novels signed by a visiting author and as mothers carting strollers perused the children’s section, the future of the literary world did not look so grim. While the murmurs of commotion outside seeped through the cracks of his office door, Graham explained that although the ‘craziness’ of owning a massive library in a hand held device is still prevalent, the need for physical novels is a market that will not disappear any time soon.

“Books and bookstores provide a kind of service that you cannot replace,” said Graham. “The Internet can compete in terms of availability, efficiency, price, but the community around books provides a sense of belonging that I don’t think the Internet is ever going to be able to replicate.”

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