

The lure of books

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Jonathan Franzen, who won the 2001 National Book Award for his novel *The Corrections*, does not like e-books because they seem impermanent. “A screen always feels like we could delete that, change that, move it around. So for a literature-crazed person like me, it’s just not permanent enough.” By contrast, a printed book has solidity. “Someone worked really hard to make the language just right, just the way they wanted it. They were so sure of it that they printed it in ink, on paper.”

Regardless of Franzen’s complaint, e-book sales are on the rise. *Publishers Weekly* reports that whereas in 2010 only 100 books had digital sales of over 25,000, in 2011 the number of titles in that category rose to 340. In 2010 five e-books achieved over 200,000 in sales, and in 2011, 35 titles reached that figure.

But Franzen is certainly not alone in preferring printed books over digital ones. Some critics argue that digital forms are changing the way we read. In *The Shallows*, technology writer Nicholas Carr goes so far as to suggest that the Internet is rewiring our brains and changing the way we think.

Even fans of e-books admit that e-books are better for reading works of fiction or memoirs than for pondering dense philosophic or historical works, especially ones with footnotes, in which case the reader needs to be able to flip back and forth

between pages easily.

One thing seems fairly certain: people will go on reading books in whatever form they're marketed. In one recent survey, reported in Alan Jacobs's *The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction*, more than 90 percent said reading is a good use of one's time. Asked whether they thought they'd do more or less reading in the future, 45 percent of those surveyed said more, 51 percent the same and only 3 percent said less.

Books in digital form are potentially more accessible to more people around the world. Someone with an Internet connection in Kinshasa can download the same books that are available to a person in Manhattan. Meanwhile, the Digital Public Library of America, working with institutions like Harvard and the Library of Congress, is hoping to create an online collection that will incorporate every volume ever published.

The lure of books will not go away. When we are curious, we read books for information. Dispirited, we read for inspiration. Bored, we read for entertainment. Stressed, we read for escape. Reading can help us capture a sense of solitude, but it also connects us to others—to an author, but also to a community of readers. Most readers enjoy nothing better than talking with other readers about the books they've read.

It is hard to think of a serious Christian not being a reader. Believers want to be more informed about their faith and to be challenged on how to live out that faith. That's why a robust coverage of books, including book issues like this one, continues to be a large part of the *Christian Century*.