

## THE FUTURE OF READING

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**Y***ou can't get to me inside of my book*, he thought with a great deal of satisfaction. The bright lights of the city blurred as he reclined in his Auto-Auto. Roadside advertisements, with their garish and pervasive presentations, stuck like glue to the untrained eye. While he enjoyed the many comforts of the modern world, he could do without the mindjack of the ad man. Eyes clear, focused on his book, he once again resisted the dopaminic promises of the retail world.

The recent gift from his old friend's estate was a balm for his soul. Forty-seven actual paper books. A long-ago forest pressed into pages. Mostly novels (of the best quality from the last century), a few religious books, and a Bible. With copyright dates of 1925, 1932, 1970, 1999, some before his grandparents were born. He imbibed their aroma. How it reminded him of his childhood. The memory of quiet nights curled in his bed, reading the latest installment of Harry Potter flooded his mind. He frowned as he remembered how difficult it had been for his children to read the series in their literature classes. His reading was effortless, like a canoe gliding downstream, while they labored, paddling hard against the current. They had tried to save money on the novels -- only one hundred eighty-nine dollars for the bargain version on his Citizen-device. Sure, you had to wade through embedded ads and hyperlinks to get to the "text," but the "text" was in there. Of course, their thriftiness

was foiled when his children succumbed to the lure of the virtual reality movie remakes. Sampled in the text and a mere thumb-read away, the entire series of movies was another ninety-three dollars. Himself, he was mostly immune to the digital highwaymen. But this was the world that his kids were born to, an unceasing flow of consumer “opportunities.” The more expensive digital texts were free of them, but only the upper-crust could afford to regularly purchase those deluxe editions. And every printed book was a rare book.

Fortunately, his daughter and son managed to extricate themselves from the general downward pull of their culture, and they both acquired an education. Penelope was currently in tutorials with the Harvard III A.I. model. Artificial intelligence seemed quite natural for students attempting to fill their knowledge deficits. Conversations with learned scholars were quite the commodity, now that only a few schools were offering education in community. Lengthy dialogues with artificial intelligences had absorbed the demand for one-on-one teaching. The proliferation of A.I. units had begun in the 2030s. As the technology was refined, those distributed education dreams once dreamt by radio, television, and the internet were finally realized in A.I. With the “Taco Bell Be Smart” campaign, the President had mandated that every classroom in the country would have a device. “Reading time” became “smart time,” as the children preferred the probing conversations with their class mascot rather than reading.

His son Peter had benefitted from A.I. as well, taking a degree in architectural history with a Cornell II model that was deeply programmed with the schemas and philosophies of the great twentieth century architects. An internship had provided Peter with the requisite human contact, insuring that he developed the emotional intelligence to actually relate to his clients. But he knew that his son would grow old in an odd world when Peter’s first commission came through: the design of a “home” for A.I. units.

Now that the kids were settled in their adult lives, he had more leisure time on his hands. His parents had believed that they would never retire, as long as they were able-bodied or at least able-minded. His father was particularly dismayed when the only

work that he could find at age seventy was greeting at Walmazon. The gradual loss of their book library had been even more difficult to bear. As they moved to successively smaller and smaller housing, space for his parents' personal books had dwindled, until they finally ended up in something akin to his Citizen-unit. At the end, they each had three paper books. He had pondered for days what he would discard from his own living quarters to make room for the new book collection.

The social side of reading was enjoyable now. Though he couldn't tell what folks on the subway were reading anymore (his father could size up an entire car just taking in the book covers), he knew that seven of his nearest neighbors had read last year's runaway bestseller. And despite their global scatterings, he and his friends from college had read a philosophy book together this month. He had joined several book clubs over the years. No longer was he limited to his city; even the most obscure book could gather a group from around the world. He had kept some odd hours to interact with his fellow club members in real time, but the delights of shared interests were worth it. Some of clubs took a turn for the worse when readers couldn't restrain their literary wanderings; he remembered Anna speaking for an hour about the embedded variant of chapter three written by Golding's great-grandson for *The Lord of the Flies*. Eventually, book clubs were divided between the Originals and the Mutants (as named by the Originals; Mutants preferred "Amped").

Direct contact with contemporary authors, especially the less successful, was a benefit of the modern digital transparency. The letters exchanged with the author of two novels, read in their entirety by nine hundred twenty-three readers worldwide, at last count, had been great fun. But he wasn't entirely sure that it was the author with whom he was corresponding. The addition of substantial metadata in literature enhanced his reading dramatically. Book editions prepared by The Reading Company were loaded with excellent introductions, textual notes, and marginalia from well-known scholars.

Generally he enjoyed the capabilities of his Citizen-device. But the contacts from the missionaries had unsettled him. When

he ran into two of them at the café, they questioned him about a particular passage that he recalled highlighting in his “free” Book of Mormon. When he had a similar run-in while on vacation, his curiosity was piqued. His younger brother worked for the Secretary of Information. Isaac sent out some pulses. Yes – Walmazon could legally sell his entire reading profile. He immediately decided that he would become a more discriminating reader.

But now he had his cache of paper books. He read with abandon, writing notes in the margins, underlining, highlighting. From the American South that once was (or might have never been) to the Far East, he ranged over the fiction of Faulkner and Greene. He had forgotten about Orwell, but *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* were quite helpful in navigating the present world. The public library of his youth once opened him to this kind of experience, until the Haggar Jeans Red White and Blue Patriot Act of 2023 required all library stacks to be closed. This proved to be stultifying for patrons; most library books were recycled into air filters by 2032. Now, the quiet inwardness of his reading, unhindered by invitations both social and commercial, gave him space to think again. Some of the books asked questions that troubled his soul, most especially the Bible. Usually when literature had this effect, he would shift his intake to video or the chatter of his Citizen-account. But these paper books offered no respite.

He had noticed that finishing these novels was more difficult than he remembered. Perhaps he had grown accustomed to the brevity of modern novels and non-fiction works, most of them consumed in an afternoon. None of the mammoth novels of the previous century were read, none of Updike, much less President Clinton’s autobiography. But they were all available in condensed editions. Short stories had survived, though, and they provided the primary connection to classic fiction.

He remembered his communications professor telling them how the era of “secondary orality” had begun with the advent of the internet. The world had escaped the “Gutenberg parenthesis” and reverted to the immediacy of an oral culture albeit with a global effect. No longer were ideas bound to the codex. There had been

many good consequences to this transition, but nowhere were the negative results seen more clearly than in political discourse. All politics had indeed become local and violently confrontational. Political exchange, especially of the campaigning variety, had devolved into competing primordial yelps, judged only on the basis of tone and volume. The electorate seemed to respond well to this; who had time for a ten second sound byte anymore? His father read books by Kirk and Buckley. Today's reading public did not need to read about politics. Votes could be cast on the basis of favored colors. Once attached to political philosophies and parties, but now orphaned, these colors were all that mattered: red or blue, primarily, with a few opting for purple, green, or yellow. Slogans were simple: "Cast a few for Blue" and "Eat your Bread, Vote for Red."

Another campaign season has shuffled in. Candidates are closely monitoring the text intake of the public, looking for any signs of substantial trends. Instant polling necessitates vigilance. The most closely watched are the celebrity and gossip magazines. Politicians need to know which personalities to align themselves with. This is the key to a successful run, said the news reader. Expect delays in accessing your texts; the analysis programs are jamming the bandwidth. How thankful for his friend's gift, he thought, yet again. *You can't get to me in my book.*

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