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For Their Children, Many E-Book Fans Insist on Paper

by MATT RICHTEL AND JULIE BOSMAN • NOV. 20, 2011



Before nap time, Ari and Sharon Wallach read books to their twin daughters Ruby (in yellow shirt, left) and Eliana.

Print books may be under siege from the rise of e-books, but they have a tenacious hold on a particular group: children and toddlers. Their parents are insisting this next generation of readers spend their early years with old-fashioned books.

This is the case even with parents who themselves are die-hard downloaders of books onto Kindles, iPads, laptops and phones. They freely acknowledge their digital double standard, saying they want their children to be surrounded by print books, to experience turning physical pages as they learn about shapes, colors and animals.

Parents also say they like cuddling up with their child and a book, and fear that a shiny gadget might get all the attention. Also, if little Joey is going to spit up, a book may be easier to clean than a tablet computer.

“It’s intimacy, the intimacy of reading and touching the world. It’s the wonderment of her reaching for a page

with me,” said Leslie Van Every, 41, a loyal Kindle user in San Francisco whose husband, Eric, reads on his iPhone. But for their 2 1/2-year-old daughter, Georgia, dead-tree books, stacked and strewn around the house, are the lone option.

“She reads only print books,” Ms. Van Every said, adding with a laugh that she works for a digital company, CBS Interactive. “Oh, the shame.”

As the adult book world turns digital at a faster rate than publishers expected, sales of e-books for titles aimed at children under 8 have barely budged. They represent less than 5 percent of total annual sales of children’s books, several publishers estimated, compared with more than 25 percent in some categories of adult books.

Many print books are also bought as gifts, since the delights of an Amazon gift card are lost on most 6-year-olds.

Children’s books are also a bright spot for brick-and-mortar bookstores, since parents often want to flip through an entire book before buying it, something they usually cannot do with e-book browsing. A study commissioned by HarperCollins in 2010 found that books bought for 3- to 7-year-olds were frequently discovered at a local bookstore — 38 percent of the time.

And here is a question for a digital-era debate: is anything lost by taking a picture book and converting it to an e-book? Junko Yokota, a professor and director of the Center for Teaching Through Children’s Books at National Louis University in Chicago, thinks the answer is yes, because the shape and size of the book are often part of the reading experience. Wider pages might be used to convey broad landscapes, or a taller format might be chosen for stories about skyscrapers.

Size and shape “become part of the emotional experience, the intellectual experience. There’s a lot you can’t standardize and stick into an electronic format,” said Ms. Yokota, who has lectured on how to decide when a child’s book is best suited for digital or print format.

Publishers say they are gradually increasing the number of print picture books that they are converting to digital format, even though it is time-consuming and expensive, and developers have been busy creating interactive children’s book apps.

While the entry of new tablet devices from Barnes & Noble and Amazon this fall is expected to increase the demand for children’s e-books, several publishers said they suspected that many parents would still prefer the print versions.

“There’s definitely a predisposition to print,” said Jon Yaged, president and publisher of Macmillan

Children's Publishing Group, which released "The Pout-Pout Fish" by Deborah Diesen and "On the Night You Were Born" by Nancy Tillman.

"And the parents are the same folks who will have no qualms about buying an e-book for themselves," he added.

That is the case in the home of Ari Wallach, a tech-obsessed New York entrepreneur who helps companies update their technology. He himself reads on Kindle, iPad and iPhone, but the room of his twin girls is packed with only print books.

"I know I'm a Luddite on this, but there's something very personal about a book and not one of one thousand files on an iPad, something that's connected and emotional, something I grew up with and that I want them to grow up with," he said.

"I recognize that when they are my age, it'll be difficult to find a 'dead-tree book,'" he added. "That being said, I feel that learning with books is as important a rite of passage as learning to eat with utensils and being potty-trained."

Some parents do not want to make the switch for even their school-age children. Alexandra Tyler and her husband read on Kindles, but for their son Wolfie, 7, it is print all the way.

"Somehow, I think it's different," she said. "When you read a book, a proper kid's book, it engages all the senses. It's teaching them to turn the page properly. You get the smell of paper, the touch."

There are many software programs that profess to help children learn to read by, for example, saying aloud a highlighted word or picture. Not all parents buy in; Matthew Thomson, 38, an executive at Klout, a social media site, has tried such software for Finn, his 5-year-old. But he believes his son will learn to read faster from print. Plus the bells and whistles of an iPad become a distraction.

"When we go to bed and he knows it's reading time, he says, 'Let's play Angry Birds a little bit,'" Mr. Thomson said. "If he's going to pick up the iPad, he's not going to read, he's going to want to play a game. So reading concentration goes out the window."

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