

# The Sensual Pleasure of Books

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We wanted to develop an electronic book that would appeal to frequent readers of conventional bound books, so we carried out a study of the opinions and practices common to English graduate students (Ruecker 2002: 135–46). We divided our discussion into five human factors, one of which was emotion. However, we found that many of our informants preferred to speak in emotional terms about every aspect of books and book culture. It seemed clear that emotional involvement with the many pleasures related to books was central to the experience: for this cohort, books are far from being a simple vehicle for content.

Our respondents were primarily women with more than one university degree. More than half were graduate students. They really liked books. They enjoyed reading books, lending and borrowing books, talking about books, buying books and having books around them.

Physically, they liked the fact that books are static and quiet. They liked the smell, feel and shape, and enjoyed holding books while reading. Some respondents enjoyed turning pages, and the feel of paper, while others enjoyed marking their books.

What do you like about books? The answers to this question had a significant emotional charge, perhaps because it was the central affective question for the entire survey. Several of the respondents used words like “love” and “treasure,” which are suggestive of the overall superlative tone:

I can't think of anything I do not like – make that love – about books. I do love owning them, and so even though I administer an academic library, I don't like to borrow them. They are that important to me.



From the exhibition “Touch Me: Design and Sensation” at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London

One respondent articulated an attachment that seemed to be shared by many. Q: “What do you like about books?” A: “The whole experience.” Another gave a detailed list:

The way you can take them anywhere. You don't need electricity. You don't need any hardware or software. They never crash. They smell good. You can flip back and forth with ease. You can read in a confined space. The way they're always there for you. The way they've saved my life more than once. The way they line up on a shelf so I can look at them whenever I want. The way they calm children. The way they enthrall children. The pictures of great artists are available to me even if I live in a remote location. And lots more. Books are beautiful.

In terms of books as objects, respondents felt strongly that books were personal and could be stamped through use: “it's easier to think of a book as a ‘friend,’ or have a ‘history’ with it.” Others emphasized the importance of the text being fixed rather than fluid.

People were variously enthusiastic about new books and old books, hard cover books and trade paper books and “disposable” paperback books. Details included the smell, the crispness of a new book and the comfortableness of a book that one has read repeatedly.

In direct physical terms it was remarked that books can be written on, and that their existence as physical objects makes subsequent reference to particular sections easier. One person provided a broad encomium: “Books are beautiful in their structure, educational, enjoyable, informative, insightful, and energizing.”

In the context of our study, the result seems quite clear. Any electronic reading device intended to fill the role that is already filled by books will need to be more than just a device for delivering content.

In order to meet that brief, the design should provide all the advantages of electronic text and images, but in a format that is more like a book and less like a laptop. It might, for example, have pages that turn, and a different spine and cover for each book; it should be portable and easily handled; it shouldn't make electronic noises, or be subject to stalling or crashing; it should have a nice weight and feeling to it, and surfaces that reflect light rather than transmitting it; it should be amenable to marking or annotating; it should be easy to display it on a shelf, and to lend it to friends: It should, in effect, be an object that people can love.

## Reference

Ruecker, Stan. 2002. “Carrying the Pleasure of Books into the Design of the Electronic Book.” In William S. Green and Patrick W. Jordan (eds), *Pleasure with Products: Beyond Usability*. London: Taylor and Francis, 2002.