

The Chronicle Review

A WEEKLY MAGAZINE OF IDEAS

The Chronicle of Higher Education • Section B • June 12, 2009

BOOKS & ARTS



Reading Dickens Four Ways

How 'Little Dorrit' fares in multiple text formats

By ANN KIRSCHNER

HARDCOVER or paperback? Until recently those were our reading options. As with everything else, whether it's ice cream or television, things are much more complicated now. We are way beyond vanilla and chocolate, way beyond the corner bookstore and neighborhood library and into a multiplicity of forms and platforms and technologies and interfaces that could be dispiriting if you are inclined to worry about the death of the book.

Do I love books or do I love reading? When my book group picked *Little Dorrit*, I found myself asking that question.

Good old paid-by-the-word Dickens: I figured that it would take me months to finish nearly 1,000 pages. My reading would take place on the New York City subway, in cars and planes, on business trips and vacation, and (my all-time favorite) in bed at the end of the day.

I went automatically to my old Penguin paperback, standing ready on the shelf. Never mind its familiar and

friendly orange spine—I hesitated. Maybe it would make sense to read the book on the Kindle that my husband bought me last year. Then again, for my daily Manhattan life, I love audiobooks, the best choice for crowded public transportation and a wonderful companion for walking. And now that I use an iPhone, I have been surprised by the ease of reading its crisp, bright screen.

I decided to read *Little Dorrit* four ways: paperback, audiobook, Kindle, and iPhone.

It was often maddening to keep finding and losing my place as I switched from format to format. But as an experiment, it taught me a great deal about my reading habits, and about how a text reveals itself differently as the reading context changes. Along the way, I also began to make some predictions about winners and losers in the evolution of books.

Little Dorrit was an accidental choice, but I could hardly have done better. Its length, multiple story lines, 19th-

century allusions, and teeming cast of characters helped me to test the functionality of different formats. Beyond the artifice of my reading experiment, though, please don't think that technology compromised my ability to appreciate this beloved novel, written in 1857 at the height of Dickens's power and popularity. Just the opposite.

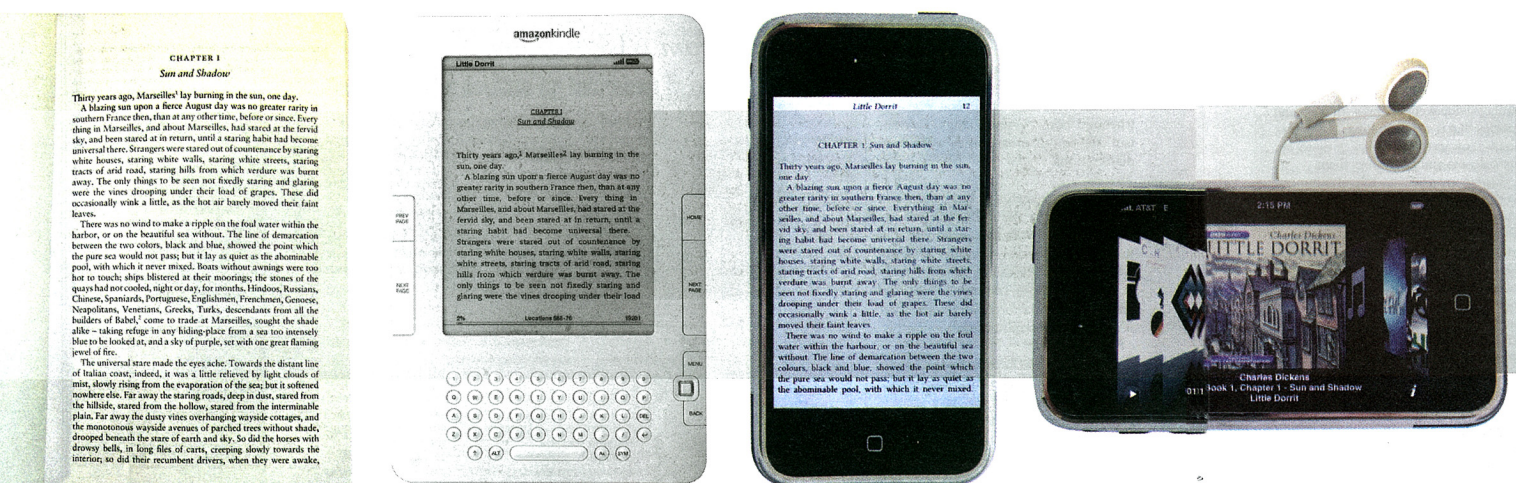
I started with the paperback, reading in bed. "Thirty years ago, *Marseilles* lay burning in the sun. ..." As soon as I opened the book, there I was, encountering my name and my own marginal notations—"Sunshine that illuminates or blinds?"—from decades ago. That and the \$2.45 price marked on the back made me more than a little nostalgic about my graduate-school days, when I first fell in love with the Victorian novel. In a book about how the present is haunted by the past, I was confronting my old self through the medium of the physical book, still in great condition, still fitting perfectly in my hands. How dare we think that anything could replace it? Impossible to imagine that

any of these newfangled devices could last nearly 40 years. The perfume of old paper filled the air.

I could have stopped there.

I downloaded an audiobook edition of *Little Dorrit*, hoping for one of those magical theatrical experiences that occur when a great narrator is matched with the right book, say, Jim Dale and the *Harry Potter* novels, or Frank Muller reading anything. I have loved audiobooks since the days of the Sony Walkman and my short career as a long-distance runner. Back then, each audiocassette held about 60 minutes, which might not last long enough for a training run, so I carried the next ones in a small pouch around my waist. They made a constant clacking sound as I jogged around Central Park or wherever I happened to be. On business trips, I would bring along a dozen cassettes or more. Even after I finished my first and only marathon, I remained an audiobook enthusiast.

Cassettes have gone the way of LP. Continued on Following Page



Dickens's *Little Dorrit* may be read via (from left to right) paperback, Kindle, iPhone's eReader, and/or listened to via audiobook, shown here on an iPhone. What's your pleasure?

Continued From Preceding Page

records, and really, does anyone miss the accident-prone little devils? My first digital device was an MP3 player. What bliss. The only hassle was when my cellphone rang, and I rushed through a ham-fisted dance to remove my headphones, dig out the phone, take the call, and plug in my headphones again. The iPhone has forever ended that frenzied fumble: It pauses the book automatically, connects me to the call, and then returns me right back to the same place where the book was interrupted. Given the enormous storage capacity of the iPhone, I can also have several books waiting their turns.

Alas for *Little Dorrit*, I was stuck with a competent but uninspired narrator. Nevertheless, Dickens has conquered far worse. Soon I was looking for any

shelsea; and the explanatory footnotes that were impossible in the audiobook. The controls were intuitive, and I was soon able to bookmark pages, highlight text, and switch back and forth between novel and notes.

I've been dreading this, but let me get my prediction out now: The iPhone is a Kindle killer.

I ABANDONED the Kindle edition of *Little Dorrit* almost as soon as I read one chapter on my iPhone. Kindle, shmindle. It does almost nothing that an iPhone can't do better—and most important, the iPhone is always with me. Woody Allen had it right: Seventy percent of success in life is showing up. Yes, the Kindle's reasonable imitation of a book is an advantage, but not enough to outweigh the necessity to carry an extra object and its power plugs. The Kindle screen is a permanent dishwasher gray, not exactly “just like paper,” as promised by the ubiquitous Amazon ads. With free software like eReader or Stanza, iPhone readers have the same capability for customization (font size, footnotes, highlighting, bookmarking) and a more-elegant interface. The new Kindle2 has an intriguing capability to turn any book into an audiobook, but even if that survives the legal challenges from publishers, the computer-generated voice is more R2-D2 than Jim Dale. Worst of all is Kindle's clumsy way of turning pages, only slightly improved on Kindle2. The momentary blackout is a constant annoyance, especially compared with the delicate swipe or tap that changes pages instantaneously on the iPhone (and which even has an option for cruise control, where the pages scroll automatically, though too slowly for speed readers).

The only time I relied on my Kindle was on vacation last year. All the grown-ups on beach chairs seemed to have one, as if we all had obeyed some secret command to buy Kindles and wear sunscreen. In fact, readers 50 or older are the largest group of Kindle buyers. Therein lies the clue to Kindle's short life. Middle-aged readers think that the dimension of the screen is critical. It's not: The members of the generation that grew up playing Game Boys and telling time on their cellphones will have absolutely no problem reading from a small screen. Let us pray that they will. Right now, they aren't buying Kindles—and they aren't reading books.

Nor will the newly announced large-format Kindle DX halt the death spiral of newspapers and textbooks. The days of prearranged and rigid formats are over. Sadly, so is the editorial intervention that authenticated and improved content. The future of all publishing is an open question.

I'm not gloomy, though. We will still find our way to quality. We will find new ways to seduce the next generation of readers. Creative people are begin-

ning to exploit interactive and multimedia capability into digital books. Tomorrow's readers will immerse themselves in their favorite books, not self-consciously as I did for this experiment, but based on deeper needs. It will be just the sort of seamless decision we make every day when we decide whether we will place a phone call, send an e-mail message or text message or photo or video, handwrite a note, or make a personal visit.

So I hardly read any *Little Dorrit* on Kindle. I will probably continue to use it at times, since its battery life is far, far better than an iPhone, and besides, I'll worry less about dropping my Kindle in the sand. More intriguing is that Amazon has now thoughtfully enabled any new Kindle purchases to be available simultaneously on my iPhone. Why would the company do that? My personal theory is that Amazon cares less about our choice of screen than our choice of store. Amazon wants Kindle to be a verb, not a noun, as in “I Kindled that book,” which could mean that I read it on a smartphone, computer, or dedicated electronic-book device.

Oh boy, have I had a lot of arguments along the way to the marriage of Little Dorrit and her long-suffering beau, Arthur Clennam! Readers are passionate and opinionated advocates for their preferred formats. Flip announced that she reads only hardcovers; end of conversation. “I get it,” said Bill, watching me read on the iPhone: “You like your books little.” Bob is no Luddite, but he insists that Steve Jobs has bribed me, since the Kindle is so obviously superior. Just wait for the Apple tablet,” advises techno-sage Joe. And Judith derides my affection for audiobooks as “not really reading.”

That's the worst accusation: that I am not a serious reader. Not guilty! I love books as much as anybody. But I love reading more. It is the sustained and individual encounter with ideas and stories that is so bewitching. If new formats allow us to have more of those, let us welcome and learn from them.

I spent my graduate-school summers at the Berg Collection of English and American Literature at the New York Public Library, working just a few feet away from Dickens's actual desk. Surely Dickens—the most successful author of his day—would be experimenting now with the form of this novel, seeking ways to expand his impact on readers. Regardless of format, *Little Dorrit* seized me no less forcefully today in its indictment of society's ability to destroy through greed and crushing self-interest. ■

Ann Kirschner is university dean of William E. Macaulay Honors College at the City University of New York and the author of Sala's Gift: My Mother's Holocaust Story (Free Press, 2006), also published in German, Polish, Italian, and Chinese editions, and available as an e-book on Kindle and iPhone.

Members of the generation that grew up playing Game Boys and telling time on their cellphones will have absolutely no problem reading from a small screen.

excuse to stay plugged in just a little bit longer. In fact, if I made a graph of total reading time on *Little Dorrit*, I bet that the audiobook would win (though not for the most pages).

You can listen while you are walking around.

You can listen while driving.

You can listen while applying make-up.

You can listen while you are cooking.

You can listen while you are in the dentist's chair.

Audiobooks also impose a certain discipline. I think of this as real-time reading: The author and narrator control your pace, and it is impractical to skim ahead or thumb back to another section. For Dickens, so naturally cinematic and plot-driven, that can have a breathtaking effect. It was my good fortune to be listening when Little Dorrit and Maggie spent their long night wandering the London streets. I shivered with them, I shared their exhaustion, and I sighed with the dull relief of returning to the Marshalsea prison.

Just a fingertip away from the audiobook controls on my iPhone was the eReader, a free application, and the option for reading the same Penguin edition of *Little Dorrit*. The electronic text included the original illustrations by Hablot Knight Browne, more familiarly known as Phiz; the map of the Mar-

