Reading Dickens Four Ways
How ‘Little Dorrit’ fares in multiple text formats

By ANN KIRSCHNER

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ARDCOVER 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 disorienting 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 artifact 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 one in my small pouch around my waist.

They made a constant clicking 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.
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.

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