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Chapters And Verse

Judging Books Without Covers

I am one of those that simply loves reading books, holding books, mulling over cover design and page layout and studying author photos on the inside back flap. Yes, Virginia, you can judge a book by its cover! What I don't like much is hauling books around in purses, bags and suitcases. My summer reading for the cabin cost me an excess baggage charge and a sore back. So the new e-book technology may be the answer for the holiday haul. After all, the e-book readers weigh only about a pound - no matter how many books you cram into the system. And the experts predict that in less than 3 years, e-book readers will weigh even less, run for 8 hours off battery, and be priced under \$100.

Stephen King's e-books are already a hit. The Planet, his novel in installments (the second installment has just been made available), is sold directly to readers for a voluntary \$US 1.00 per installment on the Net. The "book" is already a trivia question on Who Wants to be a Millionaire?. Last March, King's novella Riding the Bullet was available only on line and only for on-screen reading. He now says he is considering making the installments longer and charging more – perhaps as much as \$2.50. More than 76% of readers who have downloaded the first installment happily paid the \$1 charge. King says he'll most likely reward those faithful readers by giving away the final installment.

It's all been made so easy. Storage and retrieval of literature is one of the true marvels of the chip. And now publishers have realized that the ability to download books onto your home computer, laptop or a hand held screen is a good move. The giant Random House (the largest English language publisher) is offering at least 20 digitized versions of traditional paper bound books while Time Warner has unveiled 23 titles this month including Evelyn Waugh and Nicholas Sparks through its electronic publishing unit called iPublish.com. McClelland & Stewart has 40 titles in three different formats -- depending upon which software you use to download. There is, of course, a raft of free stuff that's in the public domain –things like the Bible or self published material. And there are some new marketing ploys that are giving human readers a good deal. Kathy Reichs new book is just a buck from Microsoft Reader - just one of more than 2000 worldwide titles that Microsoft now offers.

It's a little confusing because this latest phrase to enter the new world lexicon -- e-books -- refers to both the text, which can be downloaded onto your computer, Pocket PC or electronic reading machine - and to the book sized, hand held reading and storage devices themselves.

Hand held Readers can hold about 40 books or, with a memory upgrade, as many as 135. The way it works is that you buy the title you want off the net, punch in your credit card, plug in your handheld e-Book reader and download the text. You can make notes in the margin, underline, highlight, change the font, bookmark and read in the dark. Or, you can download text on to your desktop computer - but then you have to sit at your desk to read it off the screen. A handheld PC, however, lets you do your regular computer work and, with the right software, have a portable reading device at the same time.

And then there's the rights and copyright issues. For now you probably won't see Michael Ondaatje's work on e-books because he has about fifty different publishers in countries around the world and coordinating "rights" would be a nightmare. In King's case, with material published exclusively for the on-line consumer, it's the honour system and the money goes directly to the author without the middleman - publisher and/or bookstore - getting their piece of the action.

Each publisher decides the copyright protection of any given author's material -- no matter what form it's printed in. One form of protection built into the new ebook buying system is that you must provide the serial number of your computer so that the text is only downloaded to you and only you. The material cannot then be transferred to another computer. What you do with your printer or copier is a matter of law and conscience, though the techno wizards are working on the equivalent of the lock on rental movies that prevents you from printing or copying.

All of these issues aside, I guess the best way to look at this is to consider your PC as a bookshelf and your handheld reading device as the book. The hand held readers will be a great convenience for traveling, but I can't see myself giving up my fresh new virgin paper books nor my precious musty copies of favourites, nor the obscure titles found at the treasure hunt in a second bookstore. So I'll just add ebooks to the list of formats -- like hard cover or paperback or audio - available to suit my needs at the time.