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Ready Reader One: Recovering Reading as an Ambient Practice

Ian Gadd

Pick up and read Kate Pullinger’s *Breathe* on your phone and it begins with what looks like the title-page of a printed book: an upright rectangle of white space with the work’s title and sub-title (‘A Ghost Story’), and the author’s name. At the bottom are two short lines of text, exactly where one would expect an imprint. Everything is centred and while the title itself is the most prominent object, white space dominates, echoing the simple, balanced elegance of to be found at the start of any contemporary Anglophone printed novel. The ‘title-page’ is here strictly bounded by the edge of the screen—it is not possible to move up/down or left/right—but twist the phone at right-angles as if to play a video, and the title-page yields to an admonishment;

INSERT FIG 2.1 HERE

***Breathe* by Kate Pullinger (which has been made possible and was created by Editions At Play, an initiative between Google Creative Lab Sydney and London based Visual Editions)**

Above is an infographic showing how the screen should be re-oriented. Below, extending beyond the screen edge, are the stylised static silhouettes of ten shelved volumes: the first five stiffly vertical while the remaining five slowly tumble towards the horizontal.

The contrast between a fixed print-like page of text to a scrollable mix of text and image is reinforced by a switch from a ‘bookish’ serif typeface (Inknot Antiqua) with capitalisation following the usual ‘letter case’ practice of upper- and lower-case words, to a loud all-capitals

serif typeface (‘Montserrat’).¹ ‘I’M A BOOK’ proclaims your horizontally-held phone at the same time as signally its non-bookishness with a street-sign typography on a screen too small for its content. Borne this way, *Breathe* becomes unreadable—in effect, a closed book—but in so doing it asserts itself *as a book*. Of course few readers are perverse enough to begin *reading* with a phone oriented in this way but whether one is conscious of it or not, *Breathe* requires the reader to first acquiesce to its page-like layout: we cannot read it any other way.

The reader’s compliance extends beyond how the phone is held. The title-page’s ‘imprint’ reads ‘Pick up your phone | I’m ready’, with the latter underlined to indicate it is a hyperlink. Clicking brings up a short paragraph;

This book is sensitive to the world around you. For the best experience, we’d like to access your camera & location. None of this data is stored online, but it may be stored locally, on your device, to enhance the reading experience.

Underneath is another explicit, performative affirmation: ‘I understand’. Next is what in a printed book would be called the ‘fly title’, a version of the title page that immediately precedes the first page of text. Here, under the work’s title, are a few lines about *Breathe*’s protagonist,

¹ ‘[It] is designed to evoke Venetian incunabula and humanist manuscripts, but with the quirks and idiosyncrasies of the kinds of typefaces you find in this artisanal tradition’—(Google n.d., ‘Inknot Antiqua’); ‘The old posters and signs in the traditional Montserrat neighborhood of Buenos Aires inspired Julieta Ulanovsky to design this typeface and rescue the beauty of urban typography that emerged in the first half of the twentieth century’ (Google n.d., ‘Montserrat’).

Flo, and at the bottom are two lines that in their placement, form, and content echo those on the title-page: ‘Is your phone in your hand? | Yes. I’m ready.’ Only with this one final act of readerly consent does the story seem to begin.

In this way, *Breathe* blurs the relationships between book, reader, and story, whether through multiplicity of first-person pronouns from the title-page through to the start of the ‘story’—‘I’m ready’, ‘I am a book’, ‘I talk to my mother’—or the fickleness of the object itself, variously described as a ‘book’, a ‘phone’, and a ‘device’. This instability of subject and thing may seem harmless enough—at worst, another manifestation of late-capitalism’s twee personification of commodities—but it reminds us that books have long played with our identities as readers and our interaction with them as material objects. A reader might believe that the story of *Breathe* begins with the first numbered ‘page’ but as we have seen our reading begins from the moment the phone is picked up. The title-page asks us to be ‘ready’: to hold the phone in a particular way and to perform a sequence of assents. But all books, digital or otherwise, demand a ‘readiness’ from readers, which is always something more than simply giving them our ‘attention’. Reading means willingly submitting ourselves to a situated and embodied encounter with a text’s material form. We might not be as conscious of it as in the case of *Breathe* but any fluent reader has, as we shall see, already been very well schooled. As Leslie Howsam observes, a book is not simply a ‘text’ or a material object: it is a cultural transaction and an experience—all at once (Howsam 2015, 2–6). Our encounters with books are, in Johanna Drucker’s words, ‘always circumstantial and situational’, and their materiality is ‘exposed by the performative dimension of use’ (Drucker 2013, §§11, 12). Put another way, as *Breathe* reminds us, to ‘pick up and read’ is to affirm the material object *as a book*. Books ‘live’ only in the hands, literally or figuratively, of the reader.

Breathe is, emphatically and explicitly, a work of ambient literature. It responds to your temporal and geographical location, the orientation of your screen, the tremor of your hand, and the rub of your finger. It glimpses your immediate surroundings and speaks about your world. Its *other* subtitle, given not on the visible ‘page’ but in the <title> tags of the HTML, is ‘[t]he book that comes to you’: it is a work that responds directly to the reader’s own situation. The effect is deliberately disconcerting, as many of us prefer to read just like we breathe, seemingly unaware of the bodily labour required to do either. In fact, the metaphors of modern western reading practice, especially as associated with novel-reading, actively seek to displace and disembody the reader. We ‘escape’; we become ‘lost’ or ‘absorbed’; we even ‘forget ourselves’. Such language frames reading primarily as inward, cognitive, affective, or even transcendental. Even the physicality of reading is downplayed as the ‘good’ reader is silent, still, and solitary. A reader who is distracted by, or finds meaning in, the *activity* of reading itself is either juvenile (they are still learning ‘how to read’), sentimental (they read in a particular place), pathological (they take sensory pleasure in a book’s physical form), or even weak-minded, capable of only ‘shallow’ or ‘fragmented’ reading. However, as *Breathe* shows, ambient literature demands a radical reorientation of how we understand and value reading. It not only offers the possibility of transformative reading experiences but also has the capacity to become a critical practice in its own right, making us actively re-attend to our reading experiences and reassess the consequentiality—and experientiality—of ourselves as reading, breathing bodies. Yet it is not new. *Breathe*, like the other works commissioned for the Ambient Literature project, relies on the affordances of pervasive computing but ambient literary experiences predate digital. Readers in the west have found meaning in their own situated and embodied encounters with books for

centuries but this kind of reading has, it seems, become increasingly undervalued in the last few centuries. It is the purpose of this chapter to recover some of this history and to show how a work like *Breathe* re-enables a reading practice that seems to have been otherwise forgotten.

Breathe is not the first book to ask that it be picked up and read. Some sixteen centuries ago, in a garden in Italy and in the throes of spiritual anguish, St Augustine heard a voice;

‘Pick up, and read, pick up and read’ [*tolle lege, tolle lege*] At once my countenance changed... I checked the flood of tears and stood up. I interpreted it solely as a divine command to me to open the book and read the first chapter I may find.... So I hurried back to the place that Alypius [Augustine’s companion] was sitting. There I had put down the book of the apostle [St Paul] when I got up. I seized it, opened it and in silence read the first passage on which my eyes lit: ‘Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts’ (Rom. 13, 13–14).

I neither wished nor needed to read further. At once, with the last words of this sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled.

Then I inserted my finger or some other mark in the book and closed it (Augustine 1992, 152–3).

This is one of the most famous moments of reading in western culture. For twenty-first-century readers, the familiarity of this reading experience—who has not read a book outside?—intensifies Augustine’s moment of revelation. However, in a fourth-century context, the episode reveals Augustine’s exceptionality. Highly literate and a book-owner, he handled volumes with remarkable ease: despite the sacred nature of the words they contained, these were not precious objects. The book he picked up was a codex (that is, a bound volume, not a scroll) and he read the passage silently rather than out loud—features of the reading experience that were still establishing themselves in this period.

As privileged and as modern as Augustine’s reading experience was, it was also emphatically embodied and situated. He was outside, under a fig-tree in the garden of his Milanese lodgings, and he was not alone. The voice he heard instructed him not merely to read but to *pick up* the book.² Notwithstanding their author’s multimedia experience on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1–9), the epistles of Paul had not been written to be read at a specific time or location: nevertheless, for Augustine, the particularities of moment and place combined with the senses of sound (a child’s voice), sight (words on a page), and touch (the book in the hand) to transform his reading into a uniquely rich, complex, and meaningful experience. Revelation here was predicated on Augustine’s ‘readiness’ for the multiple contingencies of reading itself (Kennedy 2013). In contrast, the same volume had been earlier ‘picked up’ from a gaming table by a visitor who was ‘astonish[ed]’ and ‘amazed that he had suddenly discovered this book and this book alone open before my eyes’ (Augustine 1992, 142): another powerfully embodied and situated

² Traditionally, the phrase has been translated as ‘take up and read’. Piper (2012, 1–23) uses ‘take it and read’.

encounter with a book but one in which the sacred and the profane were jarringly juxtaposed.

Much like Augustine himself had been in the years, months, and days prior to that moment in the garden, this reader was just not ready.

The readiness of the reader has to begin with the object, even though our terminology is slippery and inconsistent. Augustine picked up what we would readily call a ‘book’, although he actually used the Latin term ‘codicem’ (in English, ‘codex’) to distinguish it from the scrolls that had been the standard textual form in the Roman empire for centuries. ‘Codex’, defined as a ‘book made from hinged leaves’, is now seldom used in English outside of academic or bibliographical circles (Suarez and Woudhuysen 2010, 618), while ‘book’ is, of course, the standard term in common English parlance although it is often distinguished from pamphlets, magazines, and newspapers despite sharing the same codex form. ‘Book’ is also frequently used to conflate text with object (as in ‘have you read any good books lately?’), which is perhaps why ‘e-book’ now refers only to the text in electronic form as formatted and distributed by a publisher rather than the device used—which in turn is confusingly referred to as an e-reader.³ Scholars who work on the ‘history of the book’ use ‘book’ very capaciously, able to comprise all kinds of written texts including digital ones. For my purposes here, though, I will focus only on ‘books’ that contain written texts, although this means excluding some of the most interesting and evocative kinds of ‘books’, what Sydney Shep calls ‘memory archives’ such as ‘landscapes, visual and aural media, inscriptional spaces, maps, buildings and performative sites’ (Shep 2016, 36). This also means, reluctantly, excluding audiobooks: while sound is often a crucial part of contemporary ambient

³ A shift in the definition of the ‘e-book’ is dated to the end of twentieth-century: *OED*, s.v. ‘e-book’. A similar shift takes place with ‘e-reader’.

literature (such as Duncan Speakman's *It Must Have Been Dark by Then* and James Attlee's *The Cartographer's Confession*), it usually exists in combination with a printed or digital book of some sort.

One of the first things we are taught as readers is how to pick up a book. We learn how to hold it, how to position it in our hands and to keep it a certain distance from our eyes, how to 'open' and 'close' it, and how to turn the pages. This is not necessarily intuitive or easy, which is one reason why printed books for toddlers are as physically forgiving as they are.⁴ Nor do we learn these actions only once: we learn them afresh whenever we encounter a new kind of 'book', such as a Kindle, smartphone, or even a different type of reading software on our computer. It is why *Breathe* has to remind us how to hold the phone. However, regardless of the many diverse forms that books take, the continuities are striking. For a start, the reading 'space'—the papyrus scroll, the wax tablet, the manuscript or printed page, the digital screen—is invariably rectangular.⁵ It is usually oriented as 'portrait', that is with a distinctive text-area that is taller than it is wider even if, as with scrolls and codices, the reader is presented with an opening rather than a single 'page' unit.⁶ The book's size is nearly always scaled to the human, even at its rare extremes such as the seventeenth-century Klencke atlas that takes two people to turn the pages or the 1878 edition of Dante that can only be read with a magnifying glass. Indeed, the vast majority of books, from the

⁴ See for example two modern parodies of the codex as a technology: the Norwegian comedy-sketch, 'Medieval helpdesk with English subtitles' (Nærum, 2001), and IKEA's mock-advert 'Experience the power of a bookbook™' (2014)

⁵ See, for example, the statue of an Egyptian scribe dating from c.1400BCE in the Brooklyn Museum, and illustrated in Houston 2016, 246. Initially, this may have been a function of how the papyrus sheet was constructed and, subsequently, how sheets were attached to one another (Houston 2016, 10–14, 243–44; Mak 2011, 10–15).

⁶ Although the screens of desktop and laptop computers are oriented differently, when text fits the width of the screen, it most likely belongs to a 'page' that extends well beyond the vertical reach of the screen.

first codices to the latest digital tablets, remain within much the same size parameters, and resemblances often persist across centuries and different material forms: the duodecimo-format novels of the mid-eighteenth century, for example, are almost exactly the same size as the modern ‘A-format’ used for mass-market paperbacks, and both are only a little taller and wider than a large smartphone.

As remarkable as this may seem, it is not altogether surprising. Developments in technology or media will often deliberately echo earlier forms and books, at least since the emergence of the codex, have long been valued for their portability, whether to allow the transportation of a volume from shelf to desk and back again with relative ease or, as in Augustine’s case, to be read in the hand.⁷ In a striking turn of phrase, the scholar William Bathe noted that his linguistic manual, *Janua Linguarum* (1617), while not a ‘pocket-booke’ in size, would still serve as ‘a Pectorall or bosome-booke, to be carried twixt jerkin and doublet’ (sig. Q1r).⁸ There is an enduring association between a book’s size and particular kinds of texts, whereby more ‘intimate’ genres (such as devotional works or novels) use more mobile (‘handy’) book-sizes than grand works of scholarship. But the embodied relationship we have with books goes beyond their size: Andrew Piper marvels at the typical book’s ‘shapeliness’ that ‘fits it to our hands’ (2012, 2) while Jan Tschichold observes that a reader’s ‘healthy eye’ is always best placed ‘always about two [hand-]spans away from the book page’ (1991, 36). Reading, as *Breathe* reminds us, is usually depends on the intimate interplay between hand and book. Braille enables

⁷ In Christian countries, the most obvious exception was the ‘lectern bible’, whose cumbersomeness meant it remained on the church’s lectern at all times. It was, though, still sufficiently portable that copies were often chained.

⁸ I am grateful to John Gallagher for this reference.

entire works to be read with fingertips but even sighted readers read books by touch. '[E]very physical feature of a book shapes the reading experience and constitutes a kind of material thinking that impacts the processing of information' (Shep 2016, 41–2) but few are conscious that they are finding meaning in a book's size, shape, heft, and surfaces. I often begin my university course on the history of the book by handing out printed books to blindfolded volunteers and asking a series of questions about their contents, a task that reveals that adult readers are extraordinarily adept at being able to distinguish illustrated and non-illustrated books as well as identifying likely genres and even estimating dates of publication—all without being able to see the book (Gadd 2006, 65; McKenzie 1993, 3–7).

Such haptic knowledge—literal *fingerspitzengefühl* ('fingertips feeling') to adapt the German word for intuition—is learned through repeated encounters with printed books throughout a lifetime but a book's tactility is often considered to be a distraction, an anomaly, or even a fetish. The palpable frisson prompted by a copy of a 1640 English translation of Machiavelli's *The Prince* reputedly bound in human skin seems to lie beyond the scope of reading.⁹ So, it appears, do the sensual if not erotic pleasures of readers such as Charles Lamb (for whom George Daniel kept 'a book of old songs and ballads...specially for [him] to finger and dog-ear when he came to visit him, in the same way that a parent gives a child some worthless toy to play with'); Leigh Hunt (who liked 'to be able to lean my head against [my books]'); R. W. Chapman (who rhapsodised of how his 'fingers thrill to the touch of old vellum'); Bessie Craigmyle (who declared that her books 'seem to know and care for / The tender touches that I give / To every

⁹ Copy in Bath Central Library, UK.

well-worn cover, / And, as I love you, friends of mine, / I could not love a lover’); or Eugene Field (who spoke of holding a book ‘lovingly in my hands and press[ing] thee tenderly to this aged and slow-pulsing heart of mine...how tenderly do they respond to the caresses of my hands, and with what exultation do they respond unto my call for sympathy!’) (Rees 1887, 173–4; Hunt 1823, 1; Chapman 1920, 65; Craigmyle 2011, 692; Field 1896, 89, 98). Only exceptionally do writers comment on the book in a reader’s hand, such Jane Austen’s passing nod that ‘the tell-tale compression of the pages before them’ in her novel signals ‘that we are all hastening together to perfect felicity’ (Austen, 1994, 234) or Italo Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveller* that repeatedly reminds the reader that they indeed ‘reading Italo Calvino’s novel, *If on a winter’s night a traveller*’ and revels in the situated and embodied contingencies of reading;

You derive a special pleasure from a just-published book, and it isn’t only the book you are taking with you but its novelty as well, which could also be merely that of an object fresh from the factory, the youthful bloom of new books, which lasts until the dust jacket begins to yellow, until a veil of smog settles on the top edge, under the binding becomes dog-eared, in the rapid autumn of libraries...Perhaps you started leafing through the book already in the shop. Or were unable to, because it was wrapped in its cocoon of cellophane?...Or perhaps the bookseller didn’t wrap the volume; he gave it to you in a bag... (1998, 1, 6–7).¹⁰

¹⁰ Some of the contingencies Calvino explores, though, are strikingly localised: a passage about cutting through the bolts of the pages with a paper-knife reflects Italian book-manufacturing practices rather than British or North American (42–3).

However, as Calvino makes clear, even as they may mock the ‘bibliomania’ (to use the term coined in the mid-eighteenth century) of Lamb and others, modern readers will have their own pleasing physical rituals: preferred locations, positions, circumstances, times of day (Littau, 2006). Paradoxically, the goal is often to find the most precise ways of reading that enable you to forget that you are reading: ‘Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade.’ (Calvino 1998, 3).

The imperative that the reader must dissolve the world beyond the text is, I argue, fundamental to contemporary attitudes to reading. I have already mentioned that we have, through language, valorised a kind of reading that forgets itself but this depends on a twin illusion about books and readers that they belong only to the ‘world around you’ and have no place in the reading experience itself. Andrew Piper’s stimulating exploration of ‘reading in electronic times’ takes its title from a line by Gertrude Stein—‘Book was there, it was there’—but does not pick up the irony that it comes from an elliptical passage of stream-of-consciousness about a misplaced book (Piper 2012, vii, ix; Mitrano 1998, 92). The book is *not there*; nor, it seems, are our hands. ‘Good’ reading forgets the book as an object and the reader as a subject. As Augustine and *Breathe* demonstrate, this effacement is neither innate nor essential to the act of reading itself but is a consequence of how we read, how books are designed, and the changing cultural value we place on books and reading. Paradoxically, it is the habituation of reading that makes forget how we read, it is the materiality of the book that makes reading feel immaterial, and it is the learned intimacy between book and reader that makes them both disappear.

Book in hand, the literate eye will first glance at the centre of the page to orient itself, before, most likely, looking to the corner where it expects the written lines to start: top left for readers used to the Western left-to-right horizontal written arrangement (Heie 2006). On finding a series of words, the eye will flit along them in a series of hyper-fast jerks known as saccades; for a language such as English, the eye will fixate on approximately 10–12 characters, then skip rightwards about eight letters, fixate again, and so on. Each fixation is about 50 milliseconds and each skip lasts 25–30 milliseconds; reading cognition can take up to 500 milliseconds per word (Altmann 1997, 172–78; Wolf 2008, 145–54; Dehaene, 2009, 13–18.). The reading ‘eye’ is only ‘on’ when it is focused on the group of characters: consequently, readers neither ‘see’ the repeated jerking nor ‘feel’ the cognitive lag. Instead, we experience what we believe is a smooth scan across the page. This illusion, especially as we become faster readers capable of reading over 500 words per minute, accentuates the sense that reading is, physically speaking, effortless.

It is an illusion that has been facilitated by generations of printers and designers. The size of the book, the proportions of the page and page-opening, the margins, the type-face and type size, the line spacing, the line lengths, the spacing between words and even individual characters all help to shape ‘readability’, that is the ‘ease’ with which a book can be read (Tschichold, 1991, 36–64; Bringhurst 1999, 143–78; Dowding 1995).¹¹ ‘Readability’ depends on the disappearance of book and reader. ‘Printing should be invisible’ is the subtitle of a highly influential twentieth-century essay by Beatrice Warde while more recently Robert Bringhurst talks of the ‘statutesque transparency’ of the well-designed printed page: ‘typography must draw attention to itself before

¹¹ A key term for Warde (13) and subsequent type- and book-designers. OED, however, does not distinguish between this specific meaning and the way in which a text might be ‘easy to understand and enjoyable to read’ (OED).

it will be read. Yet in order to be read, it must relinquish the attention it has drawn' (Warde 1956; Bringhurst 1999, 17). Warde talks of the reader's preference for the 'quietly set' printed page but the silence of the page is something readers have to learn to hear (17). Take, for example, the contemporary Western preference for books, whether digital or printed, to be set in serif type-faces (that is, type-faces whose characters carry extra lines at the end of the letter stroke) rather than sans-serif. This is often explained in terms of the greater 'readability' of the former but familiarity may well be as important a factor. Up to World War II, Germany and Scandinavia routinely used fraktur typefaces (what we could call gothic or black letter) for book printing and although we may struggle to decipher it we cannot assume that the original readers of Goethe or Mann found it anything other than straightforward. The use of a sans-serif type-face in a novel such as Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* creates a cognitive 'drag' for the eyes and brain of a reader conditioned to serif-type faces has to adjust. For a while, the reader is unexpectedly conscious that they are *looking* as they read: a contextual distraction that, in a diminished way, mimics the hyper-perception of the novel's narrator who has a form of Asperger's.¹² After a while, a reader may shake that feeling only to rediscover it as they pick up an article or book set in a conventional serif typeface. Finally, a serif type-face is often no friend of anyone diagnosed with dyslexia.¹³

The easy familiarity of the Western page extends beyond simply the choice of type-face. I have already noted the ubiquity of the page's rectangularity across the millennia and the similarity in

¹² Haddon is not alone among contemporary authors in using typography to represent a 'neurodivergent' character; indeed, as Kayt Lackie has argued, it has become 'a pervasive conceptual metaphor' that risks a kind of 'othering' of such characters (2017, 323–4, 350).

¹³ The British Dyslexia Association recommends sans-serif faces 'as letters can appear less crowded' (2018, 1).

size and proportion of the earliest codices and contemporary novels and even e-readers. The preferred proportions of the ‘text-block’ within the page and the surrounding margins can also be traced back into at least the medieval period (Bringhurst 1999, 144, 162). In other words, Western readers have repeatedly encountered written objects whose physical form and design have been, in certain fundamental ways, unchanged for centuries if not longer. But there have been crucial transformations too, the most significant of which was the introduction, well over half a millennia before the arrival of print in the West, of visible spacing between written words. The book that Augustine held in his hand was almost certainly written as *scriptura continua*, that is as a continuous stream of characters with little or no interword spacing or punctuation. Augustine made a point of noting that he read Paul’s Epistles ‘in silentio’ but many scholars have seen *scriptura continua* as indicative of a textual culture in which reading aloud remained the dominant practice: silent reading, the argument runs, is more difficult with unspaced and unpunctuated text (Saenger 1997).

Reading out loud has its own long and enduring history: there are several references in the Old Testament to reading ‘in the audience of the people’ and ‘in the ears of the people’ (and variations), and to this day, priests, poets, and parents continue to read aloud.¹⁴ It was a distinctive practice in many seventeenth-, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century family households, and remains a valued skill in societies with relatively low literacy rates (Loveman, 20–21, 32–4; Williams 2017). Regardless of whether Augustine read silently (in the Middle Ages, reading ‘in silentio’ was understood to mean quiet rather than silent reading) or whether silent reading was

¹⁴ Exodus 24:7; 2 Kings 23:2; 2 Chronicles 34:30; Nehemiah 13:1; Jeremiah 29:29, 36:6, 13–15, 20–21 (all from King James’ version).

more widespread in antiquity than previously thought, it is only relatively recent that silent reading has become the expected norm in the west (McCutcheon 2015; Saenger 1997, 268). Around the start of the eighteenth century there seems to have been a decisive shift in the English-speaking world towards a presumption of silent reading as the model for reading practice. According to the work of Elspeth Jajdelska, this can be traced through stylistic and narratological shifts in eighteenth-century writing, and it enabled the emergence of a new kind of literary narrator, paralleling the rise of the novel as a genre. The ‘storyteller’ (who ‘brings the text to completion through performance’) was replaced by the ‘narrator’ (who ‘cannot be encountered in person and indeed may well have properties (such as omniscience) which a real person could not have’. What is most striking, however, is the language she uses to describe the impact of the transition upon *readers*: from the reader as ‘embodied speaker’ with an audience, to the reader as ‘non-embodied hearer’ listening to the words of a ‘imagined, non-embodied, and absent writer’ (Jajdelska 2007, 169, 7). The establishment of silent reading as the dominant mode of reading practice was predicated on readers becoming disembodied and passive.

The timing of this shift is significant. In Britain, the eighteenth century was a period of increasing literacy, rapid urbanisation, and a rising middle class, creating a larger marketplace of readers and with it a demand for new kinds of books (Kernan 1987; Hunter 1990; Raven 2007, 83–319, Lyons 2010, 119–36). New readers and new books, however, fuelled a growing moral anxiety about the dangers of reading. Novels, with their casual subjectivity, ambivalent morals, and self-indulgent readers, were seen as particularly dangerous (Hunter 1990, 157–8; Littau 2006, 63–76). ‘[T]here seem to me’, thundered the preacher James Fordyce in mid-century London;

to be very few, in the style of Novel, that you can read with safety, and yet fewer that you can read with advantage.—What shall we say of certain books, which we are assured (for we have not read them) are in their nature so shameful, in their tendency so pestiferous, and which contain such rank treason against the royalty of Virtue, such horrible violation of all decorum, that she who can bear to peruse them must in her soul be a prostitute, let her reputation in life be what it will. But can it be true—say, ye chaste stars, that with innumerable eyes inspect the midnight behaviour of mortals—can it be true, that any young woman, pretending to decency, should endure for a moment to look on this infernal brood of futility and lewdness? (1766, 1.148–9)¹⁵

Moreover, the eighteenth century was decisive in establishing cultural attitudes to readers and books that persist to this day, with the origins of many if not all of the elements identified in this chapter as indicative of modern reading practices being found in the period. The middle decades of the century may have seen a spate of what Christina Lupton calls ‘self-conscious novels...[that] distinguish[ed] themselves by soliciting readers literally as partners in the processes of bringing characters to life, solving problems, and finishing or destroying the book they are reading’—*Tristram Shandy* is the most famous exemplar—but ‘the pleasures of reflexivity’ they prompted in readers were soon eclipsed by a dominant realist literary mode that demanded readerly ‘self-forgetting’ (Lupton 2012, 27, 45). Similarly, the abstraction of ‘literary work’ (writing as ‘purely the product of a disembodied intellect’) came to supplant the idea of ‘text work’ (‘writing as always concrete and physical, mediated by technology, subject to market

¹⁵ Silent reading may well have exacerbated the fear that young women might be reading the wrong books in secret.

forces, and shaped by audience demand'), an effacement reinforced by the emergence of new conceptions of intellectual property (Maruca 2007, 4). Other contemporary factors played important roles: the emergence of public circulating libraries, for example and a significant growth in the international antiquarian book market by the end of the century (Raven 2006; Jensen 2011). As books came to be valued and treated in different ways and as readers acted differently, the reading experience itself changed: the book and the reader began to disappear.

Notwithstanding debates about the exceptionality of silent reading in the ancient world, the developments of word spacing and punctuation were intended to facilitate reading and in that respect they belong to a whole web of textual features that help a reader better navigate themselves through a book. Some are purely visual, such as the disposition of space on a page; some have clear pragmatic functions, such as page numbers or chapter headings; others are substantive in their own right, such as title-pages or indexes. These elements are variously understood as 'bibliographical codes' (McGann 1991, 56) and 'paratext' (Genette 1997) but their shared purpose is to provide a set of 'physical and cognitive architectures' that make the page (and the book as a whole) an 'expressive space...a cultural artefact...a technological device...[and] all of these at once' (Mak 2011, 18).¹⁶ The origins of these features can be traced back centuries and their familiarity to the experienced reader makes them seem intuitive if not actually invisible but, again, each has to be learned. Harry Belafonte, for example, spoke wondrously of his first encounter with the footnote—'I discovered that at the end of some sentences there was a number, and if you looked at the foot of the page, the reference was to

¹⁶ Genette would have seen these textual features as part of the 'peritext' which together with the 'epitext' made up the 'paratext'.

what it was all about' (Grafton 1997, 235)—while the semi-literate subject of Alexander Masters' biography *Stuart: A Life Backwards* is happily bewildered by the purpose of epigraphs (Masters 2005, 278–85). Even Jane Eyre, one of the most famous readers in the English literary canon and whose seclusion in a window-seat at the start of the novel appears to romanticise her as a young reader, singularly fails to read Bewick's *History of British Birds* correctly, distracted by the tiny and incidental vignettes printed at the end of the chapters: she ignores what she should be reading and reads what she should be ignoring (Brontë 2001, 6–7).¹⁷ Good readers, though, know the codes: all of them. In N. Katherine Hayles's words, 'navigational functionalities are...part of a work's signifying structure'; indeed, their meanings overlap to the point of 'redundancy, enfolding more sensory information into what we see and therefore what we read' (McCutcheon 2015, 20–21; Piper 2012, 3). Familiarity with the book as an object and with our role as a reader means that we expect to know where we are and where we are about to go, even when we do not know what the story will do next. We come to trust the story's relationship to its material form so that as much as we want to get lost in a story, we learn not to get lost in a book.

Reading has become an act of faith that depends on a belief about the immutability of books as objects and readers as subjects. However, the limits of such certainties are exposed by new textual forms, much as they try to mimic pre-existing ones just as the earliest printed books did with manuscripts. Readers look for familiar cues, only to struggle when they are absent or are more opaque: books on Kindles, for example, habitually 'open' at the first page of the first

¹⁷ It is worth remembering that the young Jane is exactly the kind of female reader that James Fordyce was worrying about only two generations earlier.

chapter, overlooking epigraphs and prefatory matter, not to mention title-pages and copyright declarations (Malone 2015, 22–6). Digital editions of previously printed books can be confounded by the particularities of the printed page (Galey 2012). There are, though, radical new opportunities. E-readers allow readers to manipulate, albeit within strictly defined limits, a range of paratextual and bibliographical codes (most obviously typeface, type-size, line-spacing, justification, even colour and contrast) that would otherwise be determined by the printer and the publisher. As there are no pages to turn or pile up—dynamic e-readers ‘reflow’ the text on the fly depending on typographical choices, and measure a reader’s progress not in pages but in percentages and reading speed—it is possible too to suppress the reading progress indicators on a Kindle, facilitating a reading experience that, in the absence of ‘the tell-tale compression of the pages’, becomes hypersensitised to the inconclusive rhythms of narrative.

That such readerly interventions in a digital text seem incidental is not surprising given the book and reader are seen as essentially irrelevant to the meaningfulness of the reading experience, but they belong to a long and at times contested history that, again, has no place in the contemporary model of reading practice: that of a reader meddling with a text. At one extreme, this includes the deliberate destruction of a book (such as in public book burnings) and the radical repurposing of a book, whether for spiritual motives such as the extraordinary Gospel harmonies constructed by the Ferrar family in the 1630s or for profane non-readerly activities such as wrapping, lining, or wiping (Smyth 2015; Donaldson 1998). Less drastically, readers annotate, doodle, underline, highlight, mark with fingernails, and fold down the corners of pages. Many of these practices were considered commonplace markers of readerly use during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to such an extent that a dog-eared bible was seen as an outward manifestation of piety,

but from the late eighteenth century they were increasingly considered to be evidence of book abuse: witness, for example, the *OED*'s pejorative definitions, and supporting quotations, for 'dog-ear' (Jackson 2001; Sherman 2008; Gadd 2018). The ideal reader is one who leaves their books seemingly untouched; even breaking a book's spine is taboo.

Like their printed counterparts, digital books too strive to be invisible, often by drawing attention to their own material form. Weight and size are distinctive selling points. Design developments in the successive generations of the Kindle, for example, focused on making it lighter and thinner, while the latest model, the Kindle Oasis, has an asymmetric design to facilitate one-handed use: '[t]he ergonomic design shifts the centre of gravity to your palm so that Kindle Oasis rests in your hand like the spine of a book' (Amazon, 'Kindle Oasis E-reader'). Lack of weight is, of course, a major selling point, and while data does have a literal weight, there is no discernible difference for the reader in the feel of an accountancy textbook and a novella in digital form (Ray 2011, D2). The Kindle Paperwhite, for example, prides itself that its weight allows for 'long reading sessions' (Amazon, 'Kindle Paperwhite—Previous Generation (7th)'). The feel and shapeliness of digital reading devices, especially multi-functional devices such as smartphones and tablets, are always considered by reviewers (with the reviews themselves often entitled 'hands on'). Touch itself is now a ubiquitous feature of portable digital reading interfaces. Readers click, press, or swipe, with the latest devices simulating haptic feedback, such as the iPhone's '3D touch' or the Kindle's 'PagePress' ('turn the page without lifting a finger') (Amazon, 'Kindle Voyage E-reader').

Taken together, transparent typography, silent reading, a predictable and familiar layout, an unmarked page, and an unfingered book all help to create the illusion that neither book nor reader is there. This is an ambience of absence, an effect only accentuated by the fact that we learn these skills and codes at such a young age that most fluent adult readers simply cannot remember how they learned to read. The lack of vocalisation and the apparently effortless glide of the eye over the page enables a kind of reading practice that we characterise as intimate, interiorised, and affective. This may seem irreconcilable—how can an ‘absent’ reader feel emotion?—but what I have been describing throughout this chapter is a reading practice in which the reader *as a reader* is not there. The reader is ‘present’ within the text itself, capable of thought and feeling but they become disembodied, reading not with the eyes or the hands but ‘with the heart’ to use the fifteenth-century French term (*lire au coeur*) for silent reading (Saenger 1997, 268). ‘Good’ reading means remaining within the text and its success depends on a co-operation between the book and the reader, facilitating a readerly ‘readiness’ that, while of a different kind to that which we encountered with Augustine and *Breathe*, is nonetheless still embodied and situated.

This kind of reading practice is what N. Katharine Hayles has termed ‘deep attention’: ‘concentrating on a single object for long periods...ignoring outside stimuli while so engaged, preferring a single information stream, and having a high tolerance for long focus times’, and it is striking that she twice cites a nineteenth-century novel as the prompt for such a cognitive phenomenon (Hayles 2007, 187–8). She contrasts this with ‘hyper attention’, (‘switching focus rapidly among different tasks, preferring multiple information streams, seeking a high level of stimulation, and having a low tolerance for boredom’), choosing as her exemplar a pre-

adolescent boy vigorously engaged in a computer game, in marked contrast to his seemingly inactive and ‘oblivious’ older sister with her volume of Austen (187–8). The game that she places in the hands of the ten-year old is *Grand Theft Auto*, notorious for its adult themes, implying a distinction between ‘serious’ and popular culture and between ‘good’ reading (disembodied, quiet, and morally edifying) and ‘bad’ entertainment (agitated, noisy, and corrupting) that has unfortunate echoes of Fordyce’s condemnation of novel-reading 250 years earlier.¹⁸ Others have been more forthright about the potential impact of digital technology upon reading. Only a few years after the arrival of the internet, Sven Birkerts feared what technology had already wrought on ‘the “feel” of the literary engagement’;

being on-line and having the subjective experience of depth, of existential coherence, are mutually exclusive situations... We are experiencing the gradual but steady erosion of the human presence, both of the authority of the individual and, in ways impossible to prove, of the species itself (Birkerts 1994, 6, 219, 228).

The threat to ‘deep reading’ was the subject of Nicholas Carr’s influential and polemically titled, *The Shallows: How the internet is changing the way we think, read and remember*. More recently still, Maryanne Wolf argues that we are at a ‘cultural, cognitive crossroads’, where ‘deep reading’ itself is at risk;

¹⁸ Hayles’s later work on these different types of attention is more nuanced (Hayles 2012, 55–79, 99–101).

will the very plasticity of a reading brain that reflects the characteristics of digital media precipitate the atrophy of our most essential thought processes—critical analysis, empathy, and reflection—to the detriment of our democratic society? ...will the formation of these same processes be threatened in our young? (Wolf 2018, 204, 205)

Wolf, herself a cognitive neuroscientist and developmental psychologist, cites the ongoing work of the multinational, multi-disciplinary EU-funded E-READ project on the ‘evolution of reading in the age of digitisation’. This research will make a major contribution to our understanding of the neuropsychology of reading, and it is not my place to anticipate, let alone question, its findings. However, what is striking about much of the writing about the effect of digital technology on reading is the tendency to assume that ‘deep’ reading—Jane Eyre in the window seat, Hayles’s university student in the easy chair—is not only a transhistorical and transnational experience but also that it is the ‘best’ kind of reading. For example, Wolf draws on Aristotle to argue that, for the contemporary reader, the life of contemplation is ‘daily threatened in our culture’, yet we know very little about how Aristotle would have himself read; we do know, though, that his mentor Plato reported that Socrates was deeply sceptical of the value of writing itself: ‘it will introduce forgetfulness into the soul of those who learn it’ (Wolf 2018, 13; Plato 2001, 81). In fact, for most of its history, reading has not been silent, sedentary, or solitary. For the Romans, reading was a demanding cognitive, affective, and physical experience—one read standing up for a start—and it was prized for its challenging nature (Willis 2018, 132–3). Then as now, many readers read while doing other things. Samuel Pepys frequently read on the move: on coaches, in boats, and while walking, the last a recommendation by contemporary physicians (Loveman 2015, 26–30). John Wesley read ‘History, Poetry, and Philosophy’ on horseback,

while the young Robert Burns read songbooks while driving his cart (Wesley 1775, 92; Burns 1819, 1.62). Thomas Ballard, a nineteenth-century painter, was ‘always reading in the streets, and by long practice he steered in and out among the passengers on the pavement in a most skilful manner’ (Jones 1919, 1.139). Napoleon, a ferocious reader who installed a bookshelf in his carriage, would throw from the moving window, ‘all the reports he does not wish to file...all the newspapers he has read; and, finally, books which he glances at when he has a moment to spare, and then consigns their fate in the mud of the highway’ (Ludwig 1922, 335): the very epitome of a pre-digital ‘hyper reader’ to use James Sosnoski’s term (Hayles 2012, 61). The desire to be able to switch rapidly between texts prompted the sixteenth-century Italian engineer Agostino Ramelli to develop a ‘book wheel’ specifically to hold multiple volumes (Petroski 1999, 114–18). Sacred reading—perhaps the most profound kind of reading experience—was frequently embodied. In Christian tradition, kissing or rubbing books or images contained within them was a sign of pious veneration: Elizabeth I famously kissed the bible as part of her public procession before being crowned while Kathryn M. Rudy has catalogued the effects of repeated such encounters on the surfaces of medieval manuscripts (Holinshed 1577, 1792; Rudy 2011, 21–30). In seventeenth-century Scotland, Protestant readers were reminded that the Bible ‘should be a well-finger’d Book in gloomy times’ (Hutcheson 1691, sig. Hh1r). In contrast, the Qu’ran instructs its readers to be clean or purified before being touched, which is usually interpreted as meaning that *wudu* or a formal ablution needs to be performed first, while the surface of the Torah scroll is not to be touched during a synagogue service by anything other than a *yad*, a dedicated pointer in the shape of a hand (Robinson 2016).

Reading is, by its very nature, an ambient act. It is, and has always been, an embodied and situated activity that requires a ‘readied’ reader: one who understands how to read not just the words but the material form of the work itself. It requires attention, of course, but it also requires an informed understanding of the potential relationships between subject, object, and text. The apparent similarities of book shapes and sizes should not beguile us into thinking that readers and their reading practices are also much the same. During the eighteenth century, enabled by a matrix of shifts in writing, reading, and publishing as well as wider social, economic, and cultural changes, one particular kind of reading practice began to predominate in the west. It simultaneously valued subjectivity and interiority—key markers of individualism—while at the same time subordinating, or even completely effacing, the individuality of a reader’s own body and situation. Two centuries or so later it still remains the ascendant mode of reading but latterly its pre-eminence and assumed universality has been challenged by resistant, sceptical modes of critical reading and by the work of historians of reading who have begun to recover alternative reading experiences, such as those of women or African-Americans (Radway 1984; Littau 2006; Jackson 2010; Willis 2018, 68–107). New technology too is providing opportunities for new reading experiences, whether banal or profound, but these do not mark an abrupt fissure with the past. Just as the dog-eared page has been rehabilitated as an emblem of textual use through the ubiquitous desktop icon for the document, so digital technology is enabling us to rethink and rework older ways of reading (Johnson et al 1989, 16, 18–19). Sixteen hundred years after Augustine found himself poised exquisitely between orality and writing so, *Breathe* is unsettling its readers by blurring the line between book and digital device—and is fostering new kinds of readerly ‘readiness’.

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