

Unwrapping the Mystery of Ebook Reader Devices...for Christmas

By Dorothy McFalls

I used to be like many readers out there, viewing the printed book as irreplaceable. There is something magical about holding a creative work. There's a weight to them. A texture. It's the tactile experience of turning the page to see what comes next...

Wait a minute—did I just get a paper cut?

On second thought, books are heavy. It takes two hands to hold them open. Fall asleep and let the book slip out of your hands—forget about finding your place again. And the typeface seems to be getting smaller and smaller...or perhaps I'm simply getting older. Not to mention publishers limiting the length of novels because of the rising cost of paper.

Why not revolutionize how we read books?

It has become perfectly acceptable to send an email instead of sitting down and penning a letter. The Internet has completely changed how we research new topics. Music downloads are fast becoming more popular than CDs. And more and more Americans are choosing the Internet as their main news source. Why not ebooks?

For me, it was unknown—a confusion about exactly how ebooks worked—that held me back. I certainly wasn't interested in reading books on my computer. I work at my computer, and reading is a pleasure. I want to curl up in my favorite chair or in my bed under a warm blanket, or lounge on the beach. Reading is all about comfort. And convenience.

Can I really get that from an ebook?

It took selling my first erotic romance to an e-publisher to get me to do some serious research on ebooks and ebook reader devices. I had decided right then and there that if I was to ask my loyal readers to plunk down their hard-earned money for an electronic book, I needed to learn exactly what they were getting.

Naturally, I ran across several unfamiliar terms, such as:

1. DRM—Digital Rights Management (also called Secure Format ebooks): I ran across mention of this mysterious term over and over. Basically, a DRM is a software lock on the ebook file. It keeps the ebook from being copied or used by anyone other than the purchaser. All of the major publishers use some form of DRM (lock) on their ebooks. When shopping for an ebook reader device, I made sure the device I planned to purchase supported a widely available DRM or Secure ebook format.
2. Unsecured Format ebooks—These are ebooks that you can copy and use on multiple devices. Most of the smaller publishers use this format. You can also find free unsecured ebooks at Project Gutenberg: www.gutenberg.org.
3. eInk—Electronic Ink: Using positive and negative electronic fields, a sheet filled with black and white microcapsules can produce an image or a page of words in a manner very much like an Etch-a-Sketch. The result is a crisp, paper-like display that is easy on the eyes.

Next, I looked at the books I was currently reading and then searched for them at online ebook stores. When I found a book, I'd note the specific file format (Secured or Unsecured) available.

Finally, I looked at the different ebook reader devices available out there. Last year, I purchased a Cybook 2 (a model that is unfortunately no longer available for sale). I was drawn to its large color screen and ability to read a wide range of ebook formats.

After connecting the device to my computer for the first time, I nervously purchased my first ebook (Liz Carlyle's *A Deal With The Devil* in secure Mobipocket format) from Fictionwise (www.fictionwise.com). A few clicks later, the book was in my device waiting for me to read it.

Wow, this is great! I don't have to wander the aisles of a bookstore trying to remember the name of the book I wanted to buy because I was too disorganized to write it down. Instead, I have instant gratification...which can be expensive. And I still go on buying binges.

The more I use my ebook reader device, the more I wonder how I ever got along without it. I have enjoyed the ability to adjust the text size of my books, use a backlight to read at night without disturbing my husband, bookmark several books at a time so I never lose my page, and bring stacks of books with me on trips without filling a suitcase.

Though my particular ebook reader device is no longer in production—used Cybook 2s do occasionally show up on ebay for a reasonable price as do other ebook reader devices—there are several other models currently available on the market.

I have reviewed four currently readily available devices.

EBookwise-1150

Price: \$109.95 to \$179.95 (depending on size of memory card)

www.ebookwise.com

This ebook reader device has been around for a number of years. About the size of a paperback book, it has a grayscale backlit touch screen.

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Extras: Audio Player that plays unsecured MP3 and AAC

PRO: eInk Display/Time-tested Product

CON: Limited to purchasing secure ebooks from Sony

Cybook 3

Price: \$350 to \$450 (depending on size of memory chip and options)

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This new ebook reader device also has an eInk display. About the size of a paperback book, the crisp paper-like display can be read even in bright light. Unlike the Ebookwise, there is no backlight and currently no add-on light available. Its long battery life lasts for 8,000 page turns.

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Extras: Audio Player that plays unsecured MP3

PRO: eInk Display/Uses popular secure ebook format that can be purchased from multiple sources

CON: High Price

Amazon Kindle

Price: \$399

www.amazon.com

This is the newest ebook reader device to be sold. Like the Sony and Cybook models, it uses the crisp eInk paper-like display. Unlike the other devices, the Kindle has a keyboard and is about the size of a hardback book, though much thinner. Though it does not have a backlit screen, an attachment that is very similar to a book light can be purchased for \$19.99.

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Though I'm pleased with all of these ebook reader devices, I'll still read a printed book if it's not available in electronic format or if the printed version is cheaper (which, oddly, happens). In fact, I don't even hope ebooks ever replace ink and paper books. But I do hope the ebook will one day stand side-by-side as a recognized and equal partner to both the hardback and the paperback book. Anything that gives the reader more choice and flexibility in enjoying a well-penned novel is an exciting advancement indeed.

I know which one I'd want Santa to bring *me* for Christmas!

Do any of them fit your fancy?