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e-booking the future?

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IT'S finally happened. We have e-mail, e-cards, e-commerce, but innovators decided that the e-world still lacked some ... well, e-soul.

Enter the electronic book, the latest device to recast an ancient practice into a technotronic format.

A (relatively) small handheld device, the electronic book is as yet only available in the United States priced between US\$199 (RM760) and US\$1,600 (RM6,080).

From pictures on the Internet, most e-books look slightly smaller than a sheet of A4 paper but there is no clue as to how much it weighs.

Navigation around the e-book seems easy enough: you use buttons and a stylus to flip pages, key in bookmarks and write e-notes in the margins.

The software, that is the books that you read using the gadget, is downloaded from the Net. Although there is a range of titles which comes at the amazingly low price of US\$1.99 - this includes the intriguing Life and Death of Cormac the Skald and the extraordinary Saga of Grettir the Strong - most of the software is sold at almost the same price as a real book.

There are obvious advantages to the e-book which can store up to 100,000 pages of electronic text at a time. If the average length of a novel is 400 pages, (which translates roughly into 800 e-pages), that would mean that this trusty little gadget can store up to about 125 books at any one time.

There are other significant benefits: when sites such as Amazon.com (a website which sells an enormous variety of books over the Internet) first came into existence, book-lovers the world over rejoiced.

At the click of a button you could plunge into an ocean of ideas and come up with prize catches, again and again. The only snag was the weeks and weeks of waiting before consummation came in the form of opening that brown paper package.

With the e-book, gratification is e-mmediate. Books can be downloaded in a matter of seconds, their secrets divulged within minutes of acquisition.

Secondly, with e-reading, your treasured tomes will come to you untouched, bypassing the hands of pilferers and the morals of censorship boards.

In purely physical terms, the e-book is certainly preferable to carrying a small library with you wherever you go.

Says former politician Datuk Lee Lam Thye: "I travel around [within Malaysia] attending seminars and conferences. I think this would be very useful say for example if I were delivering a paper and had to look something up quickly; books can be quite thick and bulky to carry around.

"Once I become a little more IT-literate, I would like to try it out. I'm quite excited about this."

But many are sceptical.

"What about the whole aesthetic experience of reading?" says Professor Clive Kessler, who is a sociology professor at the University of New South Wales in Australia.

"It's not just the text that matters, it's the whole act of picking up a book and feeling the paper and seeing the print.

"And sometimes, you buy a book and you don't read it till five, 10, maybe 15 years later."

Says newspaper columnist and social activist Datin Paduka Marina

Mahathir: "I don't want to seem closed-off to a new idea, but what about when you read to children? Children are tactile, and they need colour; I don't know how an electronic gadget would cover that. How can you replace a pop-up book, for instance?"

"Somehow I can't imagine reading from an e-book to my children."

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia sociologist Norani Othman, has a slightly different concern.

"What else would I decorate my apartment with?" she asks with a plaintive note in her voice.

Plus, she says, sometimes, you pick up a book again, years and years after that first reading:

"When you come across those parts which thrilled you, you wonder, 'Will it make me feel that way again?'" she says.

It is difficult to make a judgement considering the electronic book is not even here yet.

For those eager to make an informed decision, however, a sample of one brand - the Rocket ebook, manufactured by NuvoMedia - can be downloaded from the Net into your PC free of charge (the actual hardware costs US\$199). (More on the Rocket ebook on page six)

To make the e-book more reader-friendly, the New York Times reports that Microsoft is working on a programme called the Reader, which is designed to make an e-book page have the same clarity and resolution as a page in a book.

Also in the pipeline is the Everybook Dedicated Reader, which has the physical appearance of a leather-bound volume, boasts facing pages, and can hold up to 1,000 electronic editions.

The software is available from sites like barnesandnoble.com and Powells.com.

Most e-editions are brand-specific, which means if you own a Rocket ebook (hardware), it is only compatible with a RocketEdition (software).

Some hardware manufacturers insist that customers spend a minimum of US\$19.99 monthly on software.

There are however, e-libraries from which material can be downloaded for free.

"If the hardware becomes smaller, which it will, and if it becomes cheaper to buy electronic versions of books, I would get an e-book," says Anand Pillai, 17.

"It looks cool. And what's the difference if a book is stored on a bookshelf or on a disk?"

Johan Joseph, a Malaysian bank executive living in Chicago, says that the e-book would work perfectly for him.

"It's the substance that matters to me, I have no problem with the form," he says.

But to some, the rustle of paper does matter.

Says Kessler: "Someone gave me a book on Erasmus for my 13th birthday. It was only about three or four years ago that I picked it up and read it while I was on a plane.

"It had been over 40 years since I had received it, but when I read it, the paper, the print, the text, everything was just right; it was right for me then, at that time."

And surely, there is something to be said for the feel and weight of a book, the way it flops open at a favourite bit, the discoloration of the paper, faded ink and romantic inscriptions, well-thumbed corners and gorgeous covers and, with old editions, the idea that generations before you have read, touched and thrilled at those very pages.

Perhaps the position of the e-book is best summed up by theatre practitioner Jo Kukathas: "An e-book? What a handy thing to have if you're

travelling and want to take 10 books but your backpack and your atrophied deltoids can only manage one.

"But as a replacement? Years from now we may be forced to forgo the sensuous pleasure of turning pages; the heady thickness of the pages of a Borzoi, the comforting rustle of an elderly Penguin, the tenderness towards a cloth bound Everyman, raddled with silverfish but still spry. Until that time, why just read a book when we can enjoy it?

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