DIKTUON: *A Good Look at the Nook*

by Beth M. Sheppard

When recently gifted with a black and white 3G version of the Barnes & Noble Nook e-book reader, I couldn't wait to see if, in addition to personal reading, it would work for theological library applications. After all, I had heard so much about the Barnes & Noble library of over 2 million titles, the ability to lend books to others for up to 14 days, and the great touchpad that would allow scrolling though colorful covers. Having previously rolled out the Amazon Kindle2 in my library setting,[1] I wondered if I should have invested my precious library collection dollars in Nook devices instead. Would the Nook live up to its hype? Would it unseat its rival Kindle?

DEVICE AND SOFTWARE

My initial reaction to the device was that in terms of overall weight, style, and e-ink display, the Nook was not too dissimilar from the Kindle. Even the screen savers of famous authors were eerily alike on the two devices. In essence, the Nook and Kindle seemed about as comparable as a yellow Labrador is to a Golden Retriever. Certainly the navigational touch screen of the Nook was quite a bit showier and more intuitive to use than the five-way controller on the Kindle2. Sadly, though, it did not function nearly as well. Setting up my Nook account took nearly a half hour as the touch screen keyboard was laboriously slow. After typing in each letter, there was a delay of almost two beats before the letter appeared on the screen. Finally, I mastered the rhythm, using my pinky finger as a stylus. Tap letter. Pause. Tap letter. Pause. Tap letter. Pause. In addition to its sluggishness, which has been noted by others,[2] quite often, no matter how careful I had been, the letter that displayed was not the one that I had touched, but a nearby neighbor. Letters in the central section of the keyboard (b/v/n) were particularly problematic. Entering the encryption key for my home Wi-Fi, which contained numbers as well as both upper and lower case letters, was extraordinarily excruciating. Although I ultimately prevailed, this particular struggle alone made me quite happy to have invested in Kindles rather than Nooks for the library. It also validated having the 3G option on the Nook so that tussling to input other Wi-Fi codes as I change locations might be avoided in the future.

The power cord/adapter that came with the Nook device was also a bit of a disappointment. Measuring 5′3″ (yes, I got out my tape measure to check), it is almost a foot shorter than the those that accompanied the Kindle2s in my library. Frustratingly, this made the Nook cord just several inches too shy to allow me to plug it into any of the nearby outlets while reading. Furthermore, since I am a chain-reader, I have found that the battery life when flipping pages of several novels back to back only lasts about two days, a much shorter span than is advertised. There is also an odd trick when charging: the Nook must be turned on in order to charge. This would seem to be a slight design flaw when coupled with the short cord and is not a problem with the Kindle2. If Amazon's marketing is to be believed, the current generation Kindle e-reader lasts almost a full month. The Nook simply can't compete in relation to the power aspect. This is not a major consideration for one's personal leisure reading, but is a significant factor when the devices are to be used in a library setting and checked out to patrons.

---

[1] See the review published in *Theological Librarianship* 2, no. 2 (December 2009) http://journal.atla.com/ojs/index.php/theolib/article/view/123/385.

[2] J. Hastings. "*Ereader:Nook,*" *School Library Journal* 56, no. 7 (July 2010), 11.

Beth M. Sheppard is Director of the United Library which serves Garrett-Evangelical and Seabury-Western Theological Seminaries.

That having been said, there are points at which the Nook e-book format far outstrips the Kindle, particularly in regard to the numbering convention applied to the pages of downloaded books. While the Kindle books employ location numbers that may bear no relationship to the actual pages of a title's paper version, the page numbers of the Nook *epub* files are calibrated to correspond to those of a volume's hard-copy iteration. No matter which of the Nook's six text sizes or three standard fonts are chosen, one always knows the particular page number one is reading. This feature is particularly helpful for classroom applications or for listing assigned readings on syllabi. All students, regardless of version (Nook or paper), would be on the same page!

Another handy feature of the software, this time for acquisitions librarians, is the ability to password protect the purchasing function on the individual devices themselves. Thus, if a library should obtain several devices for checkout to patrons, the password protection would prevent patrons from accidentally buying books when they are browsing the Nook "shop," even though the store is easily accessible via an icon on the touchpad. Although this is great progress in the world of e-books for acquisitions librarians, unfortunately, it appears that the industry at large still hasn't caught on to the idea of modifying their purchasing interfaces in other ways that might benefit libraries. For example, like the Amazon store, there is no way in the Barnes & Noble interface to "batch" purchases of multiple Nook books into one order. Each e-book must be purchased separately and appears as an individual charge on a credit card.

QUALITY AND SCOPE OF NOOK BOOKS

Speaking of acquisitions and collection development, in mid January I decided to use the advanced search features in the respective Barnes & Noble and Amazon stores to compare availability of titles.[3] I first searched for e-book versions of texts from a few of the larger religious publishing houses. It was gratifying to see that some publishers, like Augsburg Fortress, were selling on both sites but others were not. Eerdmans, for instance, offered titles only in the Kindle store. The overall impression was that Amazon had the far superior stable of religion publishers who were producing e-books. Furthermore, searching the Nook store on the Barnes & Noble interface certainly was not as easy as to do as it was on Amazon's. The latter remains a far better experience from a shopper's perspective in terms of its ability to track clicks, narrow searches, and return recommended titles. And the collection in the NOOKbook store seems sadly lacking despite its much ballyhooed millions of available titles. The category of "Religion and Inspiration on the Barnes & Noble site returned only 12,498 e-book results while the equivalent "Religion and Spirituality" collection at Amazon boasted about four times as many at 59,090 titles.[4] Even more interesting, the 1,896 results for the Nook subcategory for "Christian Fiction" appeared to be grossly inflated due to duplication and sloppy metadata. Indeed, this particular search returned not only seven public domain copies of Dickens's *Barnaby Ridge* but also seven versions of Plato's *Republic*! Enough said.

Like other purveyors of e-books, those offered via the Nook site are of uneven quality in terms of publication processes, typographical errors, and corrupted files.[5] Over the course of two weeks I was able to purchase and read fourteen books in my weekend hours on my Nook. Although my leisure preference runs to fiction rather than non-fiction, I assume that my sample was representative of the type of quality one might expect from e-books in general. While eleven of the fourteen novels were flawless, three of the titles, all from reputable publishers of

3 www.bn.com and www.amazon.com.

4 These results were for searches executed on 1/16/2011.

5 On occasion one encounters books scanned early in the Googlebook archive with curved pages and missing letters in the interior page margins due to scanning on flatbed scanners.

mass-market fiction, evidenced slipshod e-book conversions. In one, there were many, many typographical errors, the most amusing being the word "carnage" for "carriage." In another the publisher obviously had used a specialty rather than unicode font for diacriticals. This resulted in numbers appearing at junctures where a word should have had an accent mark. The third had four instances where entire lines of text were repeated multiple times on the page. Although the "errors" may be due in part to degradation of the file during delivery or downloading to the Nook, it seems equally plausible that the publishers uploaded files that were not thoroughly edited or that some other publishing oversights occurred. In short, the publishing industry has some work to do on quality control.

Lending

Perhaps the most promising feature for library applications is the ability to lend some NOOKbooks to another individual for up to fourteen days. Called the"LendMe" feature, one surfs to a given title in one's personal Nook library, clicks the item information option, and then selects "lend" to send an e-mail invitation to another party. The borrower may accept the invitation to begin reading the book on their own Nook or any device upon which the borrower has downloaded the free Nook reader software. Just as with physical books, when a NOOKbook is out on loan, it is not available on one's own e-book library. It seems that there are only two drawbacks to this feature. On the one hand, in order to loan a book one must pre-enter the e-mail address of the borrower into the contact folder on the device rather than merely type in the address at the moment of lending. On the other hand, a book may be lent to each borrower only once. There are no renewals. From a library's perspective, this can be quite limiting.

In actuality, I was not able to test this particular feature. Apparently individual publishers must agree to enable the "LendMe" feature on their e-books. Of the fourteen novels that I purchased for myself, none of them were eligible. LendMe books at this time are few and far between, and there is not a way to limit a NOOKbook search to only LendMe titles with a sub-category of "religion" or "Christianity." An attempt to use the "advanced search" screen with the key words "LendMe" and "Religion" returned only fifty-nine results, most of which were false positives and did not actually have the "LendMe" ability. Others, like *Divanomics: How to Still Be Fabulous When You're Broke* by Michelle Hammond (Tyndale House, March 2010) is likely not a book that should be categorized as a "religion" text at all since it appears to be about shopping. I can only assume there was a mix-up in the metadata between the words "diva" and "divine."

So, while the LendMe feature may someday be a model that would be useful in library applications such as ILL, where the ability to renew might not be so critical as it would be with other types of lending to patrons, at the current time it is a non-starter for theological libraries in terms of available content.

Let the Buyer Be Aware

Before closing, it is important to say a word about some dubious practices currently in play on the NOOKbook site. First, deeply discounted items in the NOOKbook store should be reviewed carefully. If the deal appears to be "too good to be true," it likely is. While surfing for works of fiction, I was very glad to have access to reader reviews before buying. Indeed, some "discounted" volumes are short stories rather than full-length works. And, although many books offer free samples, others do not. Some "deeply discounted" titles are just "teasers" or "samples" themselves for which one pays a modest price but then must later still pay full freight for a copy that is the entire text. The advice given by other Nook readers on the Barnes & Nobel site is sound: Before making a purchase always check the page length and file size.

Another consideration the savvy shopper might make is whether or not texts listed for $0.99 on the Nook store might actually be available in public domain for free. A title like *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* is an excellent example.[6] Similarly, when seeking to stretch collection development budgets, one might determine whether or not format is the driving concern for your collection objective. Although one might assume that without investing in paper, transportation costs, and warehousing expenses e-books should be less expensive than physical copies, that is not always the case. Even though many NOOKbooks are less expensive than their hardback equivalents, there are instances where Barnes & Noble is offering hardback versions at "bargain prices" that are lower than the e-book version. It is also the case where mass-market paperbacks are sometimes discounted below the Nook format pricing point. In short, it pays to comparison shop because NOOKbook pricing is not necessarily better than print.

Conclusions

Having used the Nook for a few weeks now, I am a believer. The Nook (like its cousin, the Kindle), does deliver a reader experience that is comparable to a printed book when the e-book conversion is done well.[7] However, what this means for theological librarians at the current time is debatable. The Nook device is only of limited use if good-quality religious e-content is still scarce. Although William Douglas Woody and his colleagues report "…most publishers of introductory-level textbooks in higher education now offer e-book alternatives to the vast majority of their titles,"[8] religion texts are lagging behind. This is probably due, at least in part, to difficulties with specialty fonts like Greek, Hebrew, Arabic, and other languages that crop up because of the original languages of sacred texts. Furthermore, at the graduate level the convention of reading a single textbook for a course is less frequent, especially for upper-division classes offered in seminar format or for research-based courses. Certainly, graduate students in religious studies will have to rely on the physical books housed in libraries for quite some time to come as it would be extremely unlikely that there are sufficient e-books to allow most papers to be completed by consulting only that format.

On another point, libraries should be very concerned about the lack of publisher support for features that allow libraries to loan content to users, like the Nook's LendMe feature. Publishers and book sellers are quite anxious to eliminate middlemen and boost sales. While their main target has been the used textbook sellers,[9] libraries too are being cut out of the loop. In essence, publishers are now selling access to content, not objects. Thus, publishers control not only what is being produced, but are acting as pay-per-use libraries for those titles. How should theological libraries respond? Perhaps it is time for theological libraries to take on the role of publisher. Certainly, digitizing books that are in public domain is one way to do this. But, it would be interesting if consortia of theological libraries banded together to actively solicit and "publish" other content. One target might be books where our own faculty members hold copyright and, upon review of their contracts, discover that the publisher's

---

[6] http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc.i.html, http://www.apostolic-churches.net/bible/mhc, http://www.studylight.org/com/mhc-com/. See also a comparable work available in both .epub and PDF versions that might be downloaded to the Nook at http://www.studylight.org/com/mhc-com/.

[7] Studies of college freshmen who used e-books indicate that learning outcomes are similar to those with paper, but that those reading e-books are less inclined to read captions or tables. William Douglas Woody, David B. Daniel and Crystal A. Baker. "E-Books or Textbooks: Students Prefer Textbooks," *Computers & Education*. 55 no. 3 (November 2010), 947.

[8] Ibid. 945.

[9] Richard Hull and Michael Lennie, "Why E-Textbooks Just Make Sense. An Academic and a Literary Agent Explain," *Publishers Weekly*. (November 15, 2010), 60.

"right to publish" has expired. These books could be given new life, with their copyright holder's consent, as e-books for theological libraries. Likewise, encouraging and collecting items issued through creative common licensing[10] would help to circumvent the limitations on access that occur when libraries are dismediated from the information cycle.

E-books and e-book readers like the Nook are not the future. They are the present.[11] It is time to figure out how to embrace them and make them work for theological libraries.

---

[10] www.creativecommons.org

[11] Amazon now sells 115 Kindle books for every 100 physical books. Julianne Pepitone, "Amazon Sales Pop as Kindle Books Overtake Paperbacks," *CNNMoney*, January 27, 2011 http://money.cnn.com/2011/01/27/technology/amazon_earnings/index.htm?source=cnn_bin&hpt=Sbin