

Reading Alone

E-Readers Arrive in a Small Town in the Middle East

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Rather like an advancing red tide, electronic readers have made their way to the small town in the Middle East where I live. People can talk about the effects of technology on society as an abstract idea but living in an ex-pat community means you see up close and personal how new technology changes the social landscape.

Living in a town which does not have a lot of ex-pats throws you into close (sometimes unwanted) contact with other people from your country or similar cultures. Recently I needed a stopper for my bath tub and that involved five different people and visits to four stores. I called people to ask if they had one and where did they get it? Two people said they didn't have one and wanted one so when I finally tracked down the right store – I bought three, one for me and 2 for the people who needed one.

It is not difficult, sometimes impossible, to live disconnected in a small foreign town. Many universities have on-campus housing for faculty, so your colleagues are your neighbors. And even if there isn't mandatory housing, most ex-pats often live in the same housing complexes with other foreigners. You end up not borrowing sugar but vacuum cleaners, medicine, cat food or spare bedrooms to house visiting relatives. Living in such close proximity, you know when your colleagues wake up, when they go to bed and most of what they do in between. Imagine going to a work meeting and all your colleagues got woken up at the same time (5am) from the same stray cat yowling.

Another difference is that in the States, no one has any free time. "Being busy" is a competitive sport – you can't admit that you have a free afternoon. In the Middle East, you usually work from 7 or 8 until 2 or 3 when it's time to go home and have lunch. Then it's nap time (and no use trying to fight that – all the stores are closed and everyone local is sleeping). Then up at 4 or 5pm, dinner at 8 or 9. There's always plenty of time to read.

In DC or Berlin, you would take a cab or public transport to the airport, or simply drive your own car. In my town, the airport is a four minute drive from the university. Everyone you know is happy to do a drop-off or pick-up airport run, especially as the entrance road is lined with tall palm trees and flowering bushes. And of course, any one who leaves town to go to the big city (Muscat, the capital of Oman, or Dubai) is given requests. I returned from a recent trip with flax seeds, a bundle of fresh baby asparagus, hair dye, mint candy and Scrabble for various friends.

But the most important item is books. My town has no movie theater and there are few English movies for rent. Mail delivery from the states takes 2-4 weeks, even DHL takes a week. Some people download movies, which can take up to eight hours, but books are king. One of the first questions for a friend who has returned from a trip or summer vacation is, "What books did you bring?" I sometimes feel like one of those pilgrims in Massachusetts, seeing a ship from England appearing on the horizon and rushing down to the shore to get the news. "Do you have the new Elizabeth George, the new Tara French, the new John Le Carre?"

One friend and I trade off buying Martin Cruz-Smiths; another friend and I have run through all the Louise Pennys. One friend shares my interest in anthropology and

I have passed on all my articles and books about Yemen and Oman: Lila Abu-Lughod, Wilfred Thesiger, Bertram Thomas, Unni Wikkan, Soraya Altorki, Mandana Limbert, Christine Eickelman, Anne Meneley, Jorg Jensen, and Freya Stark. She writes her notes in pencil in the margins and then we meet to talk about our impressions. Yet another friend discovered Robert Crais and that was the beginning of a two year Crais fest; we schemed to get copies of all his books, read them all and decided that Joe Pike was pretty much one of the most perfect fiction characters ever invented. One guy I know was in the army so we trade off George Mac Donald Frasers and I got him hooked on Lee Child.

This was even more interesting with Omani friends. When I showed one friend my new copy of Nizar Kabbani's love poems with English and Arabic on facing pages, he said "Thank you!" and appropriated it. The same thing happened to my second copy. Kabbani is not respected (i.e. never taught in schools) but much loved and a book of poems with the English versions to compare was a treasure. Similarly my books about Oman were passed around to my Omani friends so they could see different versions of their country's history and look at the photos from the 1970s.

Going to someone's house means a stop at the bookshelf to see what is there and what you might be able to borrow. Of course, I have to share as well. I can't remember who has my copy of *Little Women* or my Jennifer Cruises. Meeting someone in the one cafe in town meant they couldn't duck or lie – it was easy to see that one friend was rereading *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and another was trying the thriller, *Layover in Dubai*.

Of course I read academic journals and books in my field, but there is only one other literature professor at my university and his specialty is Shakespeare so we have totally different research fields. The nearest other literature professor is a 10 hour drive away. And a person can only read so much of Maifouz, Sophocles, Milton, Jahiz, and Austen without needing a nice tiger attack or defenestration. After a day teaching *Return of the Soldier* and *Our Town*, I am longing for easy reading, along the lines of Wilkie Collins' *The Law and the Lady* or *The Dead Secret* in which the weak women die and the strong, smart women live on to have happy marriages.

One summer, I was teaching summer school and did not have an adequate supply of 'fun' books (another pioneer metaphor – it's like Ma failing to can enough beets against the winter in *Little House on the Prairie*). I went to the one English language bookstore in town at the beginning of August and found a lot of British "yummy mummy" books, the Wordsworth Classics version of canonical novels (which I have either read or am never going to read – if they were the last books on earth, I could not get through *Aeneid*, *Middlemarch*, *Sons and Lovers*, or any Thomas Hardy novel) and Clive Cussler. I opted for Cussler and Dirk Pitt racing for Kublai Khan's treasure, Atlantis, Alexandria's treasure, the Titanic, Incan treasure, etc. When I was done with the Cusslers, as with all the mystery and thriller books I read, I donated them to the 'free book' shelves at one of the housing complexes and the one café in town.

Then came Kindle. My friend who read Crais got the new one, loved it and wanted to share but it was on her Kindle so she couldn't share it. Someone got addicted to Rider Haggard. She told me how thrilling they were but they were on an e-reader and couldn't be shared. Now you never know what someone is reading in the cafe. "Proust," says my friend with smile, while pushing a button to turn off the electric toy.

There was, already I think of it in the past tense, something important about handing someone the physical copy of the book and saying "READ THIS!" I did that with *Grayson* by Lynne Cox, Peter Allison's *Don't Run*, Julia Child's *My Life in France*, and James Hamilton-Paterson's *Amazing Disgrace*. I loved putting Zoe Ferraris' books about Saudi Arabia into someone's hand, knowing that given the limited entertainment options – it would get read. I thought of Kindles when I read "When neighbors are no longer forced by poverty to share things like cooking pots, they become socially 'deskilled'," in Turner's review of Richard Sennett's *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Co-Operation* in *London Review of Books*. In the fall, I imagine the new hires at my university arriving with their Kindles/ Nook/ i-whatever. We will talk books, but without a book shelf to peruse, how will we figure out that we both like, Jules Verne or Hugh Miles?

The Ted K Archive

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