



Naomi S. Baron. [Words on Screen: The Fate of Reading in a Digital World](#). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. vi, 304p. ISBN 9780199351765. US \$24.95.

Book lovers have been worrying about the fate of reading in an age of computers since at least 1955, when the University of Chicago Library School convened a future-of-the-book conference under the shadow of cybernetics. In [Words on Screen](#), Naomi S. Baron's worries reside in the present (ca. 2014), and she addresses a general audience. SHARP members will be gratified to see the ways her book historicizes reading, writing, and information overload, making reference to Robert Darnton, Leah Price, Geoffrey Nunberg, Ann Blair, and others. Adept at gesturing toward the many complexities of her subject, Baron nonetheless accedes to popular discourse, which today distinguishes "print" from "digital" reading materials primarily in reference to the mass market codex and the handheld screen. Her book is a readable and by all appearances teachable account of "the debate" (xv), which seeks to "understand the potential consequences of" reading more and more on screens everyday (153).

Baron synthesizes the social science literature on reading and does a good job encapsulating statistics drawn from the NEA, the book and eBook trades, and elsewhere. She also conducted survey research of her own in 2010 and 2013, focusing on university students in the United States, Germany, and Japan. These admittedly non-random samples ("largely drawn from classes that my colleagues or I happened to be teaching," 81) help her to refine questions of preference in relation to the diverse functions of reading, noting the appeal of screen-based reading when reading for pleasure, one-off reading, reading in snatches, or reading in transit. Like a good number of her subjects, Baron affirms the advantages of paper-based reading when reading long, complex material that one needs to analyze, annotate, and remember, such as when reading for school. She worries that the seductions of search and of multi-tasking will lead to less productive reading habits as more and more reading happens on screen.

Especially valuable is Baron's comparative work on the print/screen alternatives, presented in chapter 9. Here she is concerned with reading as a culturally specific practice that is shaped by—even as it helps to shape—relevant political and economic conditions. The popular acceptance or rejection of eBooks in Europe, Africa, East Asia, or North America cannot be understood merely in reference to cultural differences, then. Market structures need to be accounted for, including things like price controls, taxation, intellectual property, and other



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regulations. It is a good reminder that questions about media are always also questions about socioeconomic and sociotechnical conditions. In the end, Baron sees a future for printed books, but she is also willing to admit that “where you stand on the question of who wants eBooks really does heavily depend upon where you sit” (188).

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