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Title: The Scent of a Book : The Book and the Environments of Reading

Year: 2020

Version: Published version

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Please cite the original version:

Koskimaa, R. (2020). The Scent of a Book : The Book and the Environments of Reading. *Ethnologia Fennica*, 47(2), 129-132. <https://doi.org/10.23991/ef.v47i2.98225>

The Scent of a Book – The Book and the Environments of Reading
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Kajander, Anna. 2020. Kirja ja lukija digitalisoituvassa arjessa. [The Book and the reader in the digital everyday.] Helsinki: University of Helsinki. 229 pp. Diss. ISBN 978-951-51-5838-3 (print) ISBN 978-951-51-5839-0 (electronic) <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:ISBN978-951-51-5839-0>

The cultural position of the book has changed radically during the last couple of decades. Printed books are still read and bought regularly, even though audiobooks and e-books have claimed a part of the market. However, the book as a physical object has lost a great deal of the reverence it once had. This is seen especially in how the book has become disposable and does not hold much value after it has been read once. People do not collect books into their home libraries anymore, and bookshelves in general are quickly disappearing from both homes and offices.

Anna Kajander's research is situated in the subfield of ethnology related to material culture and focuses on the meanings of the book as a part of the cultures of reading. As e-books and digital literature have become more common, the position of the printed book has changed. In this situation, Kajander's study on the book and the meaning of its different forms is topical and necessary.

Kajander's research questions are "What does the book's materiality mean to the reader and what kind of factors affect the attitudes towards the book as an object?", "What kind of practical experiences and expectations relate to reading situations?" and "What kind of attitudes are there towards the reading possibilities created by digitalization and how are their acceptance or rejection justified?". The author aims to answer these questions by combining the ethnography of reading with the tradition of object research. Kajander examines reading as a practice, "in which material elements, such as the book, reading location and literary environments, have an important role" (p. 9). The research also brings together memories and sensory experiences.

Kajander's data consist of the texts sent to the call "Life as a reader" ("Elämää lukijana"), collected in 2014 by the Finnish Literature Society. In the survey, participants were asked to write about their life as a reader. The survey received 546 replies. Kajander describes her research as ethnographic with the aim to find and interpret different personal experiences. As the author herself notes, the study focuses on readers' experiences of books, not books as objects themselves, which is a significant exclusion.

The results of the research are presented in five chapters, each of which focuses on one of the main themes arising from the data. The chapter “Towards a life as a reader” (“Kohti lukijaelämää”) examines the birth of, and the support for, the desire to read. It discusses the significant status teachers, libraries, and bookshops, among others, have for stirring up the desire to read and directing reading interests. In addition, online book clubs, reading suggestions, and fanfiction websites are discussed. One important point of view that emerges especially from the memories of slightly older participants is that reading has not always been encouraged, but rather considered to be a waste of time, and many have had to make a great effort to have time and a place for reading. Many remember having an astonishing first-time experience with libraries: it was almost unbelievable to see such a huge number of books and have them all available for reading and loaning.

The concisely titled “Bookshelf” (“Kirjahylly”) chapter delves into bookshelves and their contents at home. It seems to be important that there are books displayed at home, and in many cases the bookshelf has had a significant impact for stirring up the interest in reading. However, the amount of space bookshelves need can easily become an issue. Nevertheless, many feel that giving up books is almost insuperable: “One who removes books from their bookshelves is not only losing books but also something from their identity as a reader” (p. 99). Virtual bookshelves offered by digital services are also mentioned in the data, although they are not discussed extensively.

The “Printed book” (“Painettu kirja”) chapter explores the material and haptic features of a book, as a book’s pleasantness is related to “the feel, the scent, and the sounds produced by the pages” (p. 119). The scent and the feel generate an experience of “the printed book’s materiality as an object you can enter” (p. 126–127). Similarly a female participant born in 1959 sees these attributes as essential parts of the reading *ritual*: “Reading a book is a ritual in which I need the touch and scent of the paper, the possibility to fold it and make notes” (p. 120). Books are often considered as concrete companions, which offer entertainment, comfort, and food for thought. Somewhat surprisingly, the (very material) split between hardback and paperback books did not come up in the data.

In the “E-book” (“Sähkökirja”) chapter, the experiences related to e-books and e-readers are discussed; furthermore, the charged relationship between reading and digital technology as well as the technologizing of the world is considered. Many of the participants did not appreciate e-books, either because they are missing some features of printed books, or because their selections, usability and other features do not offer a good enough user experience. Many of the descriptions of the printed book’s materiality came up precisely

when compared to the e-book. There were, however, some participants who valued e-books as well. They considered the e-book to complement the printed book, and as a good option for some kinds of reading habits and situations. For many, on the other hand, the printed book offers a valuable refuge from the all-encompassing information network and the continuous viewing of computer screens and display devices.

The “Atmosphere of Reading” (“Lukuhetken tunnelma”) chapter describes what the participants told about their own reading environments and the construction of their ideal reading situation. “For some, the book as an object works as a central mean for creating this space and moving into it” (p. 173). The reading environments were usually related to “warm coziness” and the location was often a couch or a bed. Some had organized special reading spots around a comfortable reading chair. A suitable relaxed position and a good reading light were a part of the deal.

As the result of her work, Kajander forms a rich and multifaceted description of reading cultures and habits. Many of the book’s essential dimensions are united in the way books represent the readers’ own reading and individual history, as well as cultural history in general. E-books are divisive as some see them as a bad or even a harmful replacement for a real book, whereas others see them as having advantages and possibilities a printed book is missing. The digital environment made possible by the Internet offers a novel way to network by sharing reading experiences with others and easily finding reading suggestions and new things to read. Overall, the data construct an image of a flexible culture of reading, in which a book can have a variety of forms, and in which there is, despite digitalization, room also for the values associated with the printed book.

The work includes important insights, one of which is that as digital devices are gradually used more and more in learning to read, the relationship with the book can change as well. It is excellent that Kajander does not position the printed book and the e-book as opposites of each other but rather as complementary phenomena. For example, blogs, fanfiction, and social media websites are seen as subjects that support the interest in printed books. It is also quite surprising that not a single literary critic from the past decades was mentioned in the data.

Kajander’s doctoral dissertation is a coherent and convincing treatise, but it has some issues. The data have apparent limitations, which Kajander herself also has recognized: the data did not really delve into students’ views on e-books; she would have liked to hear how websites and digital services as well as the possibilities they bring were taken into account in school teaching. In addition, the idea of virtual bookshelves raises many follow-up questions, which cannot be precisely addressed with the chosen data.

Kajander's book examines a contemporary topic, the changing cultures of reading. The topic has been discussed abundantly in the recent years, but Kajander succeeds in finding new perspectives by focusing on the material elements related to reading and the emotions they bring forth. She manages to draw a versatile and accurate picture of Finnish reading, which includes learning to become a reader, bookshelves and collecting books, book objects, e-books and e-readers, and building a reading environment. Kajander has done careful work and this fluently written book can be unconditionally recommended to everyone interested in books and reading.

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