

Read between the lines

by Gianni Anchois

**Books are never going to be
the same again.**

I'm a reader. I read a lot for work, for research, for entertainment, for fun. A lot of the reading I now do online, but I still love reading books. It's only relatively recently that I switched medium from paper to e-books, and I must admit that things have improved a lot.

E-books are good for you

As much as I cherish printed books, the e-format is clearly superior in so many areas: portability, flexibility, storage, immediate access to new titles. There is a not negligible downside in terms of lack of physical appreciation of course: the feel of the paper, the smell of the ink, the richness of the cover. But all in all e-books are clearly the future for heavy readers, so I'm now a convert.

The next step was to look at audio books as a way of enjoying reading books when you can't really be reading.

In principle I thought that audiobooks could be a good solution to my lack of time for proper reading. There's plenty of resources on the web

where you can download free materials and just listen to those in your car, on the tube on your way to work or in a number of other circumstances when actual reading is just not possible. Of course you can also simply buy the latest bestseller in audio format and enjoy it anywhere, anytime.

I wanted to believe I found the solution.

Too fast!

Unfortunately, it sounded like a great idea until you actually tried to listen to one. It seems a simple enough proposition, but reading a book out loud actually requires a serious set of skills. This is clearly not the same as reading a bedtime story (although my grandma would have kicked ass!), not anybody can do it, and the best professionals are obviously expensive.

When you read a book on your own, the words you silently read echo in your head, they reach your inner self and little by little they bring alive the story according to your personal feelings, emotions and current state of mind. Your imagination fills the blanks.

*When you read a book, your
imagination fills the blanks on the page.*

Reading out loud is difficult

When you read to others, everything changes. If you don't possess the ability to read in an involving and passionate way, you cannot actually hope to reach your audience. You need to develop the ability to read between the lines, bring out something that is not written down but that represents a key element of the listening experience.

I've listened to audio books where readers had a strange or unfamiliar accent that made it difficult to follow or — worse — to understand, especially for non-native speakers of the chosen language. Sometimes I even got computer-read passages. Very often, the book reader would

feature no empathy, no emotions, almost no involvement with the story being told.

Beyond those skills, the real breakthrough for audio books will happen when we will be provided with stories and not simple readouts.

Even better if some sort of “dramatisation” is built into those stories, for example by using multiple readers for different characters, and adding ambient noises and sounds to build a deeper, richer narrative fabric.

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I fondly remember when I was young, my two sisters and I used to take one of our favourite books and each choose a character. I usually would be the hero or the villain, my twin sister would be the princess in danger and my older sister would be the wise old woman or something like that.

Then we would read pages after pages trying to get into our chosen roles, occasionally adding noises like horse galloping or thundering, to add drama to the story. It was enormous fun, it brought the whole book alive and we would go on for hours, never wanting the book to end.

Exactly the same feeling we want book readers and listeners to enjoy every time they choose a new book.

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Gianni Anchois is a writer, blogger and technology enthusiast, with a background in electronics engineering, computer science and marketing. He has worked at Olivetti, Italia Online, Yahoo! and Hewlett-Packard, holding international responsibilities across IT services, business management, e-commerce, sales and marketing.

<http://twitter.com/giannianchois>

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/giannianchois>

<https://medium.com/@giannianchois>