

ON THE ROAD



Pelts from the Culture Hunt

"Living with the Kindle," by University of Alberta professor Ted Bishop, for Alberta Views. Bishop's Riding with Rilke: Reflections on Motorcycles and Books was a finalist for the Governor General's Award for Non-Fiction and won the Edmonton Book Prize as well as the MAX Award at the Motorcycle Awards of Excellence.

Enchiladas: juices drip out the bottom and run down your wrist and drool off your forearm onto your newspaper. When you want to turn the page you have to lick your fingers and use part of your napkin, and even then you're going to smear the page. After dinner, dogs will follow you down the street because your *Times* smells like chipotle.

However, as I discovered last year in Texas, on my new Kindle I could change pages by pressing a bar. You can press this bar with your finger, or a knuckle, or even your elbow—either elbow because there are bars on each side. So if one elbow is a bit mucky with enchilada juice you can still read your book or magazine. Wonderful.

But the poetry. You can get Seamus Heaney but you can't get Wallace Stevens; you can get sheet music for Leonard Cohen but no verse; and when I searched for award-winning Alberta poet Bert Almon, Kindle asked me, "Did you mean Best Almond?" and offered me *Tempting and Tasty Chinese Recipes*. (You actually don't want to read poetry on a Kindle because it is formatted in a way that runs all the poems together.)

Even with prose the selection is spotty. You can find Eric Soblin's *Cello Suites* and Annabel Lyon's *Golden Mean*, but no Fred Stenson, no John Ralston Saul.

Yes, the ink is terrific. I read a whole Louise Penny mystery novel on the plane back from Texas without eye fatigue. And I think e-readers are brilliant for textbooks. Students staggering under backpacks as big as they are will be able to skip along with a whole semester full of books in a slim e-reader. Another great thing about the e-book, I'm told, is that you can read trash or porn in public and nobody knows.

What bothered me was something else, external to the reading. Every time you hit "Menu" and go back to the table of contents you have to scroll down past a line that says, "Shop Kindle Store." It's not just an opportunity, it's an imperative: [You] Shop Kindle Store. You're always in the mall. They knew I was loading up on the free samples and not buying much. Not only are they tracking your choices, I had the feeling they

could tell how far along I was in a book. They knew I'd bogged down in Stevenson's *Travel Essays*. Paranoid? Maybe, but last summer Amazon discovered it was selling an unauthorized edition of Orwell's *1984* and so they not only dropped it from their store, they zapped it without warning from customers' Kindles.

The great thing about the physical book is that it's physical—a memento, a pelt bagged in the great culture hunt, a coaster for a coffee mug—and you can lend it to as many people as you like. It's not a tracking device. The e-book reminds you why people value books in the first place: a book is not just a carton of information, it's a psychic space. A place of solitude, private, unconnected, free of digital noise. I met a young woman excited about the family ranch in Cypress Hills because it's "off-grid." Now "getting away from it all" does not mean going to Dharamsala, which has both the Dalai Lama and excellent Internet connections, but finding someplace where you're not entangled in the Web. For this, the book will endure.

Of course I'll buy another e-reader. (Though why can't they come up with a good name? Kindle sounds like firewood, iPad has prompted jokes and legal briefs and my publisher friend Jerome refuses to own something called the Nook eReader.) At this stage, whatever you buy is an 8-track. E-ink, based on tiny capsules filled with white and black particles, can't do colour or video, and LCD screens hurt your eyeballs.



Biker/author Ted Bishop (l) with biker/Minister of Infrastructure Ray Danyluk.

There's new technology on the way: Qualcomm, maker of mobile phone chips, has developed "mirasol" that reflects ambient light through rows of tiny mirrors; Pixtronix uses tiny shutters that can switch 1,000 times per second, fast enough for video; and Pixel Qi uses a new screen that can function in colour or in monochromatic mode with the backlight turned off.

So I'm waiting. I have my priorities now. Watching the video of the iPad I thought, "Great. But can you turn pages with your elbow while eating an enchilada?" ■