



# The Wonder of the Written Word

A testimony to the astonishing consequences  
of the greatest technological invention ever

BY LARRY THIESSEN

There is something undeniably wonderful about opening a new book, isn't there? What will be learned? How will the story end? How will I change? The possibilities are endless.

And for most readers, the simple act of turning the physical pages, whether in a quiet café, or some other favoured location, evokes special memories. It doesn't seem possible that something electronic could ever be a suitable facsimile for the tactile sensation that books give. For that reason, the 'age-old book' can sometimes seem to be at odds with new technologies.

In the late 1990's, as a bookstore manager, I often heard the rhetoric that the electronic book would

soon make the physical book obsolete. With equal certainty we book-lovers hollered back, "No it won't." And the story continued.

Let's take a moment to think about books and technology.

There is no question that the pace of technological change can make your head spin. Who can keep up? So much data flying around at such incredible velocity.

In my experience, it is generally the speed of change, and not

the change itself, that makes us nervous. We wonder if we will ever be able to adjust to these changes. But when it comes to books, where would we be today without technology? Think back, to what could be argued, was the greatest technological breakthrough ever.

As a book-lover, try to imagine life prior to the mid-fifteenth century. Truth be told it would have been hard to be a book-lover back then with books being handwritten,

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often taking years to reproduce.

A very few could even read and for those who could read, finding books was a challenge. Scholars would travel hundreds of miles to visit a library that might house twenty books. All that changed around the year 1440\* with the invention of the printing press.

With that invention (a.k.a. technology), multiple books could be printed and distributed at once. This breakthrough had such a powerful impact it is estimated that by the turn of the century, a mere sixty years later, 2,500 European cities had printing presses and there may have been up to 15 million books in print. Talk about the speed of technology!

This technology changed everything, and not only in the fact that you could print books faster and make them more readily available. Literacy rates increased dramatically with new ideas being transmitted faster and farther.

But like all technology, this printing breakthrough had a shadow side. Now it became more difficult to control ideas, as books and even small pamphlets could be produced easily and more affordably. Soon inventive, breathtaking, seditious, and even heretical ideas were flowing everywhere. The genie was out of the bottle, and knowledge and learning were set loose upon the masses.

Fast forward to the 21<sup>st</sup> century and one can understand today's struggle over the transmission of ideas. Now we can 'go anywhere' in a matter of seconds and read the thoughts and ideas of anyone. Now we can read a physical or electronic book, listen to an audio book, or catch a book summary on our MP3 players.

We can even get 'print on demand' which in some ways is the

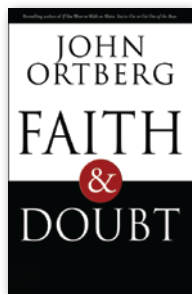
modern version of the old way of printing out one book at a time. We might want to stop, or at least slow down, the onslaught of technological inventiveness, but we do well to remember where it all started and be grateful for all we have.

So what's next? So far there has not been any e-book standard, so the electronic format has been slower to gain traction than was prognosticated in the '90's. But that will likely change and electronic formats will improve. Today, online chat groups have become a good way to keep a book going.

Will these formats replace the good old-fashioned book? Hard to imagine that, isn't it? But then I'm sure no one could have foreseen what would happen when the printing press was invented.

Who knows, sometime in the future, we might have the books downloaded right into our minds! Wherever it goes, and whether or not the 'good old hard copy book' gets replaced, the good news is that today, there are still good books being written.

Here are some new recommendations that you might want to 'read, listen to, or download.'



view of God. He candidly describes grappling with his own personal doubts and celebrates the 'gift of uncertainty' that can allow the right kind of doubt to actually deepen our faith and intimacy with God.

## FAITH AND DOUBT

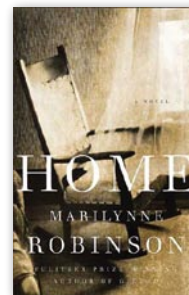
by John Ortberg

In this new book, Ortberg takes an honest look at the misgivings and uncertainties that often obscure our

## HOME

by Marilynne Robinson

This beautiful novel follows *Gilead* for which Marilynne won the prestigious Pulitzer Prize. It is a moving and healing book about families, secrets, and the passing of generations, about love and death and faith.



An unforgettable embodiment of the deepest and most universal emotions.

## THE FURIOUS LONGING OF GOD

by Brennan Manning

Hold on tight as you discover the most powerful force in the universe: God's furious longing for you. This

'ragamuffin' takes us on a journey to show us that there are no boundaries to where God's love will take him in order to find us, embrace us, and take us home.



Just remember, if technology brings change, what shouldn't change is our desire to learn, think, discuss, and be challenged. No matter what format you use, you still have to discipline yourself to read (or listen). There is no getting around that. So go ahead, make time to pick up, plug in, download, and engage. There has never been a better time to 'read'.

Read on!

Larry Thiessen lives in Calgary, Alberta and is the former manager of Christian Publications bookstores

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\* The historical record shows that the Chinese likely had some kind of moveable type as early as 1041 AD. Even so, most scholars regard Gutenberg's 1440 version as the beginning of the printing press revolution as we know it.