

Third World Problems: On Breaking My Kindle in Africa

by Jürgen Fauth

I blame the fucking mosquito net.

I hated the damn thing from the moment we got to Dakar, four weeks ago: tenuously strung up overhead, from window frames, light fixtures and, on the foot end, the extended grips of our suitcases, now hanging from a ramshackle wooden frame assembled by a local carpenter. You'd be surprised how many times one needs to get up during an average night— especially as a man of a certain age— each time having to perform the mosquito net routine, pulling it up from around the mattress, ducking underneath, and then carefully tucking it back in. It's a pain in the ass, making sure you get a good seal even in the dead of night. But given the threat of malaria, the net's protection is essential.

And so it happened that earlier this week, feeling a little queasy in the stomach after having perhaps not been quite careful enough with the tap water, climbing into bed and wanting nothing more than to curl up with a book, I tossed my Kindle onto the mattress along with the book light, lifted the netting, ducked underneath, and thoughtlessly put my hand on the device's protective cover, leaning on it ever so slightly as I shifted my weight inside.

That was all it took. A tiny crack, more felt than heard.

I knew right away.

I'd broken a Kindle before, in a swim bag thrown in the trunk of a family van outside of an overcrowded public pool in Germany. I'd seen those same thin, crosshatched lines that were now quickly spreading over the disappearing face of Jane Austen, as if Piet Mondrian had gotten hold of an Etch-a-Sketch. Then, in Germany, I'd called Amazon.de, learned that the damage was irreparable (or

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rather, deemed unworthy of repair) and, through some odd combination of warranties and corporate lock-in loss-leader strategy, was sent a free replacement.

Now, five years later, on the sandy outskirts of Dakar, there was no one to call.

But hey—the thing was outdated anyway, on the order of several generations, one of those keyboard models without a light-up screen. I've been wanting a Paperwhite for a while, now there's an even slicker model called the Voyage—or maybe a Kobo, after all? These days, five years is a solid lifespan for any device.

Trouble is: I'm in Senegal, and there's no Amazon.sn. It's unlikely local electronics stores offer reasonable prices. I trawl expat-dakar.com for *livres électroniques*, and used Kindles older than mine command astounding sums. I've heard rumors of a family that flies to New York several times a week, to return with suitcases full of pre-ordered consumer goods along with, presumably, enough bribes to move them through customs. But how to get their number?

Sure, I could switch back to old fashioned books, but I haven't discovered any English bookstores yet. There are backpacker's cafes with leave-one, take-one libraries featuring all the usual suspects, and the better-stocked shelves of expat friends. I could resort to my cracked iPad or my phone's hi-def screen.

But why do I miss that damn eReader so much?

Kindle-less, I'm realizing that my outsized sense of loss isn't just about what to read next: it's also about what I read *last*. That little crack under the mosquito net didn't just destroy an easy-to-replace \$100 device but took with it my entire library of the last 5 years, favorites I reread and refer to regularly, books and manuscripts by friends and clients, a bigger chunk of self-help and spiritual guides than I'll readily admit, my own work in various iterations, and a to-read list that could've kept me busy for months to come.

The files are all still there, of course, backed up in the cloud, but what this moment drives home to me is that the peculiar magic of books lies not just in the information they hold but in their dual

nature: they're at once physical and imaginary, both objects and dreams, charged with the time and love we've invested in them.

A Kindle, I've had to discover, is a close-enough approximation to serve as a stand in not just for any individual book but for an entire library, in ways other devices don't. Tablets, laptops and phones all can open ebook files, but because they're not dedicated, single-purpose devices, the books' auras don't attach to them in the same way. I'll finish the book I was reading on my iPad's Kindle app, but I doubt I'll start anything new on it.

As the physical gateway, a Kindle absorbs some of the love we bring to our books, love that clings to the device like cum wiped too hastily from a lover's abdomen. Somehow, the books invest this piece of plastic and silicone with some of their distilled power until it becomes a magically charged artifact itself.

Elsewhere, I would've replaced and upgraded the thing already, at Prime speed, and the interim would've barely registered. In Senegal, the interruption in my reading affords me a moment to consider what exactly it is I lost.

What I'm missing, now that it's gone, is one of the fundamental things I've always sought in a book, from the time I devoured all of *The Neverending Story* in a single day as a feverish adolescent because it distracted from the sweaty, miserable reality of being sick: a place of refuge, an imaginary world to withdraw into fully, shutting out a reality that may be unpleasant or uncontrollable. As a reader, you deliver yourself to the author but you also take control in a way you can't outside of a book—you become complicit in its shared world and the book becomes a safe haven.

When you're traveling, overwhelmed by novelty and strangeness, a book can provide an extraordinary source of comfort, a place to withdraw into. One month into my first stay in Africa, I could use this comfort well: the shock of the new is too fresh, too intense, to be absorbed entirely without help, and a good book is a source of strength in a situation where the outside is as alien as anything I've encountered before.

“What's the weirdest thing?”, a friend asked the other day. I didn't have a good answer because it's not any one thing: culture shock is made up of the sum of individual moments that, in and of themselves, can be understood and anticipated. Yes, the language is French, with a healthy side of Wolof and other African languages. The dominant religion is a local brand of Islam, so there's chanting from the mosque before dawn and drums after dark. Hygiene and infrastructure aren't up to western standards, and from the balcony, I regularly watch people pissing on the back wall of a food stand. There are open sewers running through our village, and the smells are an ever-changing melange of exhaust, fish guts, coal fires, rot, feces, goats, mangos and ocean spray.

Many of the faces in the street are those of people who survive on less than a \$1 a day, and it's clear that many of them see you as a kind of walking ATM—but the sun is shining every day, so their smiles are genuine when they hit you up for money. Others drive luxury sedans to shiny downtown clubs for sophisticated music and French champagne, their exuberant moods just as genuine. As William Gibson famously noted, the future's already here but unevenly distributed, and this must be one of the places where the gradient is especially steep. Yes, that one-legged guy piloting a donkey cart past peanut vendors and dusty children playing soccer with a half deflated ball was, in fact, wearing a bluetooth headset. “Can't tell.” “Tell what?” “Whether I'm getting used to it. It's weird, then it's the way it is, then it's weird again.” —The Peripheral

Speaking of William Gibson: his latest book, *The Peripheral*, was the last thing I was reading before I climbed under that mosquito net. I'd spent the afternoon at the circular pool of a decommissioned Club Med, out on the continent's westernmost tip, with a view of hollowed-out luxury suites while large birds of prey circled overhead. Gibson's vision of a doubly broken world felt almost as appropriate for this scenery as *The Sheltering Sky*, the first book I'd read upon my arrival.

A cliché, perhaps, to be an expat writer reaching for Paul Bowles—but also, I felt, a necessary foundation, *comme il faut*. So

far, I've only suffered an upset stomach and am duly vaccinated against the typhoid that carries off Port in the book. I don't fear nothingness the way Bowles' characters do—but I do feel that my Kindle afforded me shelter from the peculiar world outside. With the Kindle busted, I am left exposed, as if Africa were peeling layers off of me, bringing me ever closer to the immediate experience of a world that is at once more familiar and far stranger than I could have anticipated.

Someone once had said to her that the sky hides the night behind it, shelters the person beneath from the horror that lies above... At any moment the rip can occur, the edges fly back, and the giant maw will be revealed.—The Sheltering Sky

My first words in Wolof were the traditional greeting, *"Na nga deff?"* ("How are you?") The proper answer is *"Mangi fi,"* which translates to "I am here."

And that's how it is: my books are gone and I am here.

