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# E-media can rob us of that human connection

It was a strange moment of realization visited upon me in the library of a mansion in Fremont Place, a historic midcity L.A. enclave so exclusive almost nobody knows about it.

As a friend of a friend who only vaguely knew the host, I was gratefully free to nose around the joint until I stumbled into a wood-paneled library that was exactly the kind of room monied men of an earlier era would have required.

Books, after all, were the outward measure of a man's intellect even if it was all front. And you'd be hard pressed to find a mansion of the pre-income-tax-era that didn't have a room dedicated to the cult of the written word.

This particular 1920s library had parquet floors peeking out around the edge of an enormous Persian carpet, a hand-knotted affair that shone like an animal pelt in the firelight, in a room walled floor-to-ceiling with oak book shelves holding precisely three books, two by Tom Clancy and "Alnilam" by James Dickey.

Alnilam is the middle star in Orion's belt. And Dickey was one of my college creative writing teachers. He was also a man made famous by his novel, "Deliverance," and by a scene in that novel (later a movie) that no man can ever forget.

I later mentioned Dickey to the library's owner thinking I'd fire up a conversation. Only what I got was this, "Oh those, they were here when we moved in."

So I might have had better luck with the previous resident, who, the new new owner informed me, "lost it all in some stupid condo complex deal."

For as long as they have been with us, books have been a kind of jumping off place to a better life. As a child, I thought that book ownership was the mark of classy, educated people who made erudite jokes and wore dinner jackets at home.

Later, I discovered a superior reality. Books, in addition to offering grand entertainment, are a kind of road map to the brains of the people who own them, to their likes, dislikes, hopes and dreams.

There was a long stretch of time when I regularly found kinship through books



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held in the hands of complete strangers. Somebody in a departure lounge reading a French translation of "The Right Stuff" or a German "Catcher in the Rye" could be counted on for decent conversation.

I once knew a woman whose father had owned a fish camp down on some wild bit of Central American coastline. On a living-room bookcase I found three long rows of classics that included Twain, Faulkner and Fitzgerald. Oddly, they were all autographed by Ernest Hemingway, even though none of the books was by Hemingway, one of dad's fishing pals. The books were signed merely because he owned them before passing them along to a friend.

These days we buy fewer books. This isn't news. But there is a huge difference between hearing such things and finding yourself in a lovely but dead home library.

Add to that iPod books, Kindles and the coming iPad and I can suddenly see just beyond the spill of the headlamps a world where there are no paper books at all.

The science fiction writers imagined this years ago, predicting that in a world where all information is committed to a database, those who control the database also control the world.

Ratcheting that argument down a few decibels, it's maybe far easier for me to envision a not-so-sinister time when nobody reads anything that isn't visible on a screen. Killed off by this transfer away from the printed page will be the feel and smell of the things and how their jacket covers turn shelves into impressionistic swaths of color.

This while supplying us with visible shorthand, with some small insight into who we are based upon what we read.

And it isn't just the transformation of books that's changing the way we interact. For two decades, we were able to walk into homes and actually see racked and stacked galaxies of videotapes in great big plastic containers plastered with colorful movie art. At a glance you could tell where the tape owners spent their fantasy time.

These were replaced by DVDs in cases too thin to easily and voyeuristically read. But even these are passing.

Netflix and others make it so you can instantly view thousands of movies on your computer and TV screen. You can also order and return discs in envelopes. It's a small thing maybe, but there goes those shared video store moments when one could go Roger Ebert on any stranger's selection.

And record albums? Sure, they still exist, but gone are the days when we'd paw through LP collections at parties, judging their owners by their tastes and forging lasting friendships over a shared love of Leo Kottke or Tosca.

For a time we at least had CDs in cases. Cases far too small to showcase the album art that once graced the walls of our lives. Now even these have become quaint reminders of a time before downloads and music storage devices could hold thousands of songs that are never handled by human hands.

Sure, it's all good and grand, the iPod being exactly the kind of music delivery system that we dreamed of in the days of 8-track tapes the size of bricks.

But I once heard it said that the invention of the player piano helped transform us from music makers into music consumers. Still, we at least consumed our music in a very public way.

Same as with books, movies, magazines and newspapers. The things that inspired and connected us were all right out there in the open where we could share them and, by extension, share ourselves.

Now all I can do is watch you watch your dim gray screen or listen to your music in disconnected silence.

I want to hear your comments. Connect with me at [john.bogert@dailybreeze.com](mailto:john.bogert@dailybreeze.com).