

A novel idea

Reading Pasternak on a PDA or Steinbeck on a smartphone may seem gimmicky, but it's a growing trend. Simon Williams examines the best ways to read while roaming

Books have served society well for hundreds of years. They're hard-wearing, relatively cheap to produce and reasonably portable. However, we are now seeing an evolution as the novel embraces a new form of written expression. The electronic book provides a library's worth of reading on a paperback-sized device.

Agreed, carrying a conventional book around is not exactly onerous. But there are times and places where an electronic version is more convenient and enables you to travel light, whereas few paperback novels – and even fewer large reference books – will fit comfortably in a jacket pocket. They will sit happily in a PDA, though – even one with only a modest specification.

Electronic books, or e-books, are taking off in a big way. As with most new technologies, they come in a number of formats. But if you add together the titles available for the different e-book readers, you'll find literally thousands of books and periodicals out there.

There are several commercial formats for e-books, usually tied to specific pieces of software. The best-known readers are those from Microsoft and Adobe, with the latter recently combining its Acrobat PDF and e-book readers into a single product known as Adobe Reader 6.0.

Lesser-known formats include Mobipocket, valued for the wide variety of platforms it supports, while HandStory has a reader with a particularly attractive interface. Most of these readers are available in desktop versions, but when it comes to handheld devices some are limited to specific operating systems or processors. Adobe Reader, for instance, is available for Palm PDAs but not yet for Pocket PCs. With Microsoft Reader it's the reverse.

In all this jostling for prominence, we shouldn't forget Project Gutenberg (<http://ibiblio.org/gutenberg>). This is a 14-year-old, altruistic attempt to get all non-copyright books into an ASCII text format so they can be read with the simplest of electronic devices or printed out on paper as needed. Staff have just finished converting the Magna Carta, the project's 10,000th electronic book.

If you're mainly interested in the classics – or just older books in general – Project Gutenberg can be an extremely quick and inexpensive way to gather your reading material. There are any number of ASCII text readers, but if you want the extra niceties of a commercial e-book reader there are several tools for converting ASCII to proprietary e-book formats.

E-books began to become popular three or four years ago when there were several dedicated hardware e-book readers. Units such as Franklin's eBookMan and RCA's REB1200 are no longer sold in the UK, having been usurped by software readers that can be installed on desktops, notebooks and the increasingly popular PDAs or smartphones.

These make up the majority of the readers reviewed here, offering the greatest versatility for reading e-books at home or on the move. E-book prices vary from completely free to almost the cost of their paper-based equivalents. Generally speaking, the newer the text, the more you will have to pay for it.

Adobe Reader 6.0

- free download
- www.adobe.com
- supports Windows, PalmOS

Recently renamed from Acrobat Reader to Adobe Reader, this well-designed program combines Adobe's PDF file and e-book

There are times and places where an electronic version is more convenient and enables you to travel light, whereas few paperback novels – and even fewer large reference books – will fit comfortably in a jacket pocket

readers in a single application. It's available for Windows-based PCs but, oddly, not yet for Pocket PCs. The only PDA format it supports is PalmOS.

The e-book side of Adobe Reader is heavily tied into Adobe's digital rights management. So much so that you can't download an e-book you've bought from the company's own site unless Reader is activated. That's a bit like not selling you a book in a bookshop without demanding your name, home and email addresses.

Adobe e-books are PDF files but with added protection so they can only be read after payment is made. The reader can't handle other proprietary formats or even ASCII text files.

This is the most sophisticated of the readers reviewed here and it has a longer history than most. It can reproduce text and graphics in a format close to the paper equivalent. There's also a text-to-speech converter built in to the full version of Adobe Reader, which is good enough to listen to without referring to the screen.

Adobe Reader is designed as a general-purpose tool and e-books are just one strand of its functionality. It offers extras such as a thumbnail-based navigator and the ability to annotate what you read, which may commend itself to you where the more basic readers wouldn't. It's ideal, for example, if you're making notes on reference texts as part of a project or thesis.

The program maintains a catalogue of the e-books you buy, characteristically calling the dialog My Bookshelf. You can bookmark your e-books to keep your place in each one simultaneously. If you don't have a PalmOS-based PDA you're restricted to reading your e-books on your desktop PC. It's still one of the more pleasant ways to handle an electronic book, though – and the price is certainly right.

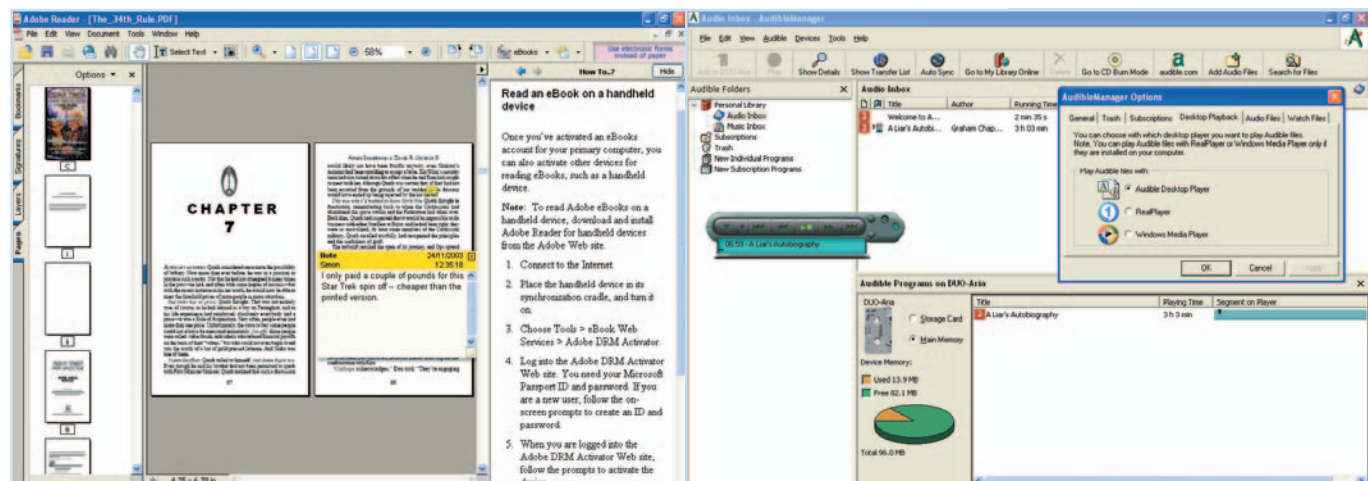
Audible Manager 4.0 and players

- free download
- www.audible.com
- supports Windows, Pocket PC, PalmOS

Anyone who has walked in to a branch of WHSmith in the past few years will be aware of the volume of audio books on cassette. These tend to be famous novels read by well-known actors and they are recorded for those who don't have the time to curl up with a good book but still want a good read.

Audio e-books are digital versions of the same service that have been pioneered by Audible (www.audible.com). Audio books converted into one of the four Audible formats can be played via the company's software player on a PC, Pocket PC or PalmOS-based PDA. There are also some Audible-ready MP3 players available, such as the Digiset Duo device reviewed on page 88.

When you purchase an Audible audio book, you download the Audible Manager and one or more Audible readers for the devices that you want to play the files on. Audible Manager handles the transfer to your PDA or MP3 player and then shows what you have



available, although the interface is not as neat as Adobe's My Bookshelf.

Audible's different formats balance file size with audio quality, giving you the best chance of fitting an audio book on a player with limited memory. Typical sizes run into megabytes, so Audible's claim that it can download books in minutes implies either a broadband connection or a lot of minutes.

File sizes for different formats vary - substantially. A sample book we downloaded was 6MB in Format 1 and 10MB in Format 2. On a mobile player you'll hear little difference between the two, but on the desktop version Format 2 sounded less 'phased' than Format 1. Audible offers a wide - if a little idiosyncratic - range of audio books, although there are few classics included in its lists.

HandStory 2.3

- basic version free download, full version \$30 download (about £16)
- www.handstory.com
- supports Windows, Pocket PC, PalmOS

HandStory is unusual in that it is entirely PDA-based. There are versions for Pocket PC and PalmOS but there is no HandStory reader for your PC. However, there is a conversion program that will take a good variety of text and graphics file types and convert them for transfer to your handheld.

The HandStory reader is a versatile piece of software. It can display HTML, JPG and other graphics images as well as text files and its own proprietary HPB e-books. There's a good range of e-books at reasonable prices on the HandStory site.

The HandStory converter is a clever idea. You load files of various types into a desktop applet and it adjusts them for display on your PDA, changing the size and colour depth for compatibility with the particular device on

which you've installed the software. The full version of the product enables you to view and crop images before converting, while the free version simply transfers the full picture, although it changes the number of colours.

The final part of the suite is a clip organiser. HandStory enables you to clip relevant sections out of web pages straight to your PDA in a format and size where the information makes sense. The company has a list of sites, including Reuters and Random House, that prepare their content in a compatible format. You can also clip material from 'regular' websites.

HandStory is designed as a general-purpose browser and viewer as well as an e-book reader and could take the place of several other applications on your PDA. The full version has quite a bit of extra functionality, including the ability to save files directly to a PDA expansion card, but it is still cheap enough to be an impulse buy.

Microsoft Reader 2.11

- free download
- www.microsoft.com/reader
- supports Windows, Pocket PC

Microsoft's own e-book reader is part of the standard software in the Pocket PC version of Windows. There is also a version for desktop Windows but, perhaps unsurprisingly, there's no support for PalmOS.

Microsoft Reader 2.11 includes a number of innovations such as ClearType, an anti-aliasing technology that improves the clarity of words on LCD screens, and a facility to rotate the text to make the best use of landscape and portrait screens on the Tablet PC version.

The program can tie in to the Encarta Pocket Dictionary which contains 84,000 references so you can define words you don't recognise with a few clicks or taps. Like Microsoft Reader itself, this is a free download but you have to activate

Above: the simple file browser format of Audible Manager controls downloads of audio books from the internet and their transfer to your PDA or MP3 player

Above left: Adobe Reader 6.0 is a well-designed e-book reader that benefits from its history as Acrobat Reader, Adobe's general-purpose electronic document reader

Different types of readers

The most noticeable thing about these e-book readers is the mutually incompatible, proprietary nature of much of the content. All these companies have vested interests in persuading people to buy e-books in their own formats and none can read the formats of the others. Most of them won't even read ASCII text files.

The Open e-book standard aims to improve the situation by proposing a common standard that all e-book suppliers can

support. The standard doesn't govern the specific format of the e-book file, however, just its internal XML structure. This means the makers of e-book readers can still tie customers in to specific platforms by using non-compatible proprietary file formats.

Sales have now passed the \$10m mark (about £6m) and there will eventually be a dominant format for e-book content. For the moment, though, you may have to install two or more e-book readers to display the electronic media you want to read.

Reader so it can tie in with Microsoft's digital rights management. If you have a .NET passport you can use this for identification.

As with Adobe Reader, there are a number of ways to mark up the text in a Microsoft Reader e-book. You can add bookmarks, notes and annotations, make freeform drawings and highlight passages from the text.

There are also features for sight-impaired users, including the ability to create largeprint e-books and convert text to speech for playback. The text-to-speech facility sounds very similar to that used by Adobe Reader and in both cases the core reading voice sounds quite natural. However, an artificial overtone can make it difficult to understand.

If you want to use Microsoft's own proprietary e-books in LIT format you can download them from Microsoft's e-book site (www.msliit.com) or from others such as Amazon (www.amazon.co.uk) and Fictionwise (www.fictionwise.com). Only a few are free, but most attract a rather lower price tag than their paper counterparts.

There's little doubt that Microsoft wants to capture the e-book reader market as it has done in so many other product areas.

Mobipocket Reader 4.7

- Standard version free download, Pro version \$20 download (about £11)
- www.mobipocket.com
- supports Windows, MacOS, Linux, PalmOS, Pocket PC, Windows CE (2.x, 3.0), Psion Epoc32, Casio BE-300, Franklin eBookMan, various smartphones

The big thing about the Mobipocket Reader is the number of platforms it supports. This is a reader you can use with virtually any combination of PC and PDA.

It's also well-specified offering a variety of text sizes, the ability to flip text from portrait to landscape - ideal on tablet PCs - and even an autoscroll function. The latter turns the reader into a kind of mini autocue, which should keep budding newsreaders happy.

The reader enables you to add freehand drawings and bookmarks with annotations to your e-books. You can also link to several electronic definition dictionaries, although none is supplied free with the reader. It also supports ClearType, so you have the benefit of well-formed fonts in your desktop e-books.

The Mobipocket Reader comes with the Web Companion. This small, internet-enabled applet automatically downloads selected electronic periodicals such as *The Sydney Morning Herald* and FOXNews. They are downloaded each day and copied across to your PDA when you synchronise it, so you always have something to read on the train. And if the news Down Under doesn't inspire you, simply pick other sites from the Mobipocket news page and add them to the Web Companion list.

Mobipocket provides other useful software for e-book users and authors, including the Office Companion which exports Microsoft Office documents in a format suitable for your PDA. Publisher, meanwhile, helps create

Below: HandStory is a multifaceted viewer and reader. It comes with a useful PC-based converter for text, images and web clips



e-books in the Open e-book format (www.open-e-book.org). An Emulator is also included so you can see on your desktop PC screen how your newly designed e-book will look on your PDA. All these applications are available free in trial and sometimes full versions.

Mobipocket is just about the most comprehensive offering around and, judging by the help it provides in creating your own e-books, it clearly wants to be the number one in this particular market.

Digisetite Duo.DX

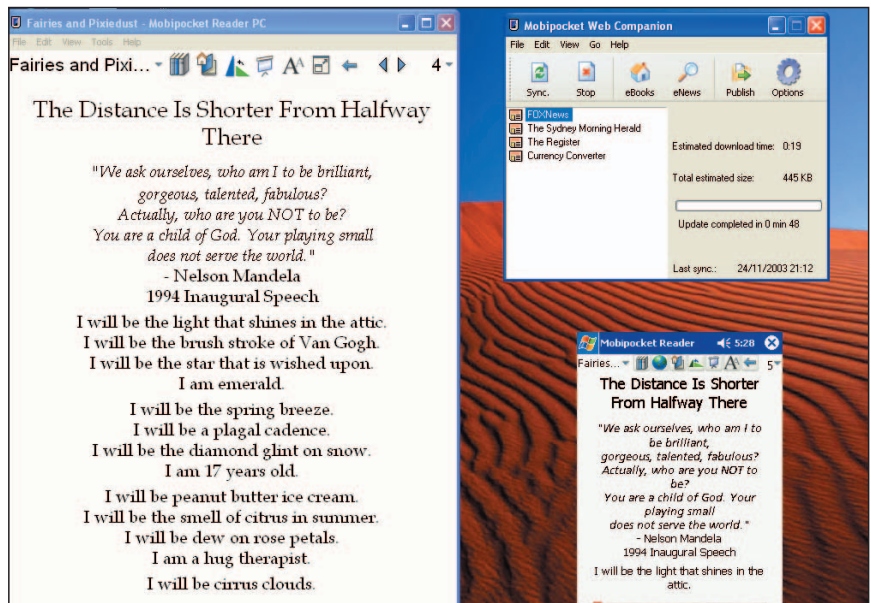
- £180 (£153 ex VAT)
- www.digisetite.com
- supports Windows, Audible ready

Without sounding too gushing, this is a remarkably clever device. Leaving aside for a moment the fact that its 96MB internal memory gives you an hour-and-a-half of MP3 or WMA music, Digisetite Duo.DX can play Audible audio books straight out of the box and even comes with a copy of the Audible Manager software. The really clever thing, though, is that it looks and acts like an aluminium-cased audio cassette.

Digisetite makes a range of Audible-ready digital recorders and players and the Duo.DX is at the top of the range. A quartet of operating buttons in its top righthand corner controls play, stop, rewind, forward and volume functions. With a pair of headphones plugged in at the side you can slip it in a pocket and listen to music or speech while out jogging or travelling to work.

The Duo.DX has a remote control and is powered by a rechargeable battery; two are supplied along with a charger. There's a multimedia card slot, too, so the available memory can be upgraded to a maximum of 224MB at reasonable cost.

But the most interesting aspect of the Duo.DX and all the Digisetite players is that you can slot them into any cassette deck and play back their contents through the heads of the player to whatever sound system is attached. It is equally comfortable in your car's cassette deck as in your hi-fi stack. And the transport



controls on your cassette machine work correctly with this digital alternative, making it extremely simple to use.

This model also provides real-time, direct-to-MP3 digital recording through any cassette recorder, which makes it the ideal tool for all kinds of audio content gathering. A brilliant idea superbly executed.

Choose your reader

So which is the right e-book reader for you? You need to look at the websites of those on offer and compare the selection – and their respective prices. Readers vary widely so, just as with selecting a book club to join, you need to pick the one that best fits your reading pattern.

There's no reason, of course, not to download them all. In their basic forms they're free, but what's really required is a reader that can cope with all content.

Of the current offerings we like HandStory because of its multiple uses and converter and Mobipocket because of the wide range of platforms it supports. The Digisetite Duo.DX also deserves a great deal of credit for its ingenious design. ☒

Above: Mobipocket offers a lot of free or inexpensive help to those who want to read e-books or create their own

Below: a remarkable piece of lateral thinking and some clever miniaturisation make the Digisetite Duo.DX an ideal audio e-book or musical companion



File type support

Software	Native file type	Other file types supported
Adobe Reader	PDF	none
Audible player	AA	MP3, WMA
HandStory 2.3	HPB	TXT, BMP, GIF, JPG, PNG, HTML via converter
Microsoft Reader 2.1.1	LIT	AA
Mobipocket Reader 4.7	PRC	TXT, HTML