

Shorter E-Books for Smaller Devices

By JENNA WORTHAM

WE'RE barely two months into 2011, and I've already crossed the main New Year's resolution off my list.

It wasn't a pledge to join a running group or to call my parents more often, though those are important goals and I'm sure I'll get to them eventually. My aim was to read an entire e-book.

My failure until now had been a secret shame. After all, I've fashioned a career around a deep love for new technologies, and have even sunk \$30 into books for my iPad and iPhone. Still, I had yet to make it past the first chapter of a single one.

It's not that I don't read books. The various shelves and tables in my apartment are overflowing with paperbacks. But without a physical reminder of a book on a nightstand, it's easy to forget that an extensive digital library is at my disposal.

When I do remember to swipe open an e-book, it's usually such a pain to dive back into the narrative and remember all the plot twists that it doesn't stay open very long. Which is why the first e-book I devoured on my smartphone was no typical tome.

It was "Lifted," an article — at 12,000 words, a very long article — about a \$150 million Swedish bank heist. It cost me \$3.

The work was written by Evan Ratliff, a co-founder of the Atavist — a new digital publishing house that commissions and sells nonfiction articles written exclusively for distribution on smartphones, e-readers and tablet computers.

The Atavist is among the growing number of organizations that are cultivating a certain niche of writing — stories and articles that are longer than a typical magazine article but shorter than a novel — in the hope that they will find a comfortable home on the glassy screens of evermore prevalent mobile devices. "Word counts are getting shorter in most magazines," said Mr. Ratliff, who is also a contributing editor to Wired magazine. "On a mobile device, we shouldn't be bound by those constraints."

The attention spans of readers — many of us, anyway — are actually not getting shorter, Mr. Ratliff says. The problem lies elsewhere, he adds: "It's the platform."

The physical dimensions of mobile devices are, in some ways, quite limited. So it's important to exploit the advantages that the devices do have, he contends. Success, he says, depends on thinking beyond a "one-to-one transition from book to e-book," and on doing more than replacing paper with pixels.



The Atavist integrates clever tools into the text, like interactive timelines and character biographies to help a reader quickly find her place without spoiling the plots. I found that this helped me spin through “Lifted” without the digressions that have usually turned me off of e-books.

Mr. Ratliff did not share specific sales figures for his venture, which began in late January, but he said interest was “much higher than anticipated.” The Atavist isn’t the only boutique publishing house planning to exploit what it believes are readers’ nascent appetites for more medium-length material. Many digital boutiques, including Push Pop Press, Cursor and Byliner, are also promising to deliver new breeds of content primarily through mobile devices.

TED, an organization best known for the gatherings of intellectuals it holds in Long Beach, Calif., recently announced a new leg of the enterprise. Called TED Books, it produces short works based on the talks given at TED events.

In late January, Amazon introduced Kindle Singles, a catalog of one-off essays and short stories that cost \$1 to \$5 and are downloaded to the Kindle itself, as well as Kindle apps for smartphones and PCs.

Kindle Singles is Amazon’s attempt to “populate the no-man’s land between books and magazines with digital content,” said Russell Grandinetti, vice president for Kindle content at Amazon.

The rise of the digital format has allowed publishers to sidestep some traditional constraints, Mr. Grandinetti says. “Written works have either had to be short enough for a magazine or long enough for a paper book,” he said. “This is print on a diet.”

Another distinct advantage is a shortened turnaround time, said Tyler Cowen, an economist at George Mason University.

Mr. Cowen, who has written a dozen print books, released his most recent work as a brief e-book examining the current American economic slump, exclusively for the Kindle in late January.

“It got out much more quickly, in just a few months,” he said.

Mr. Cowen, a contributor to the Economic View column in Sunday Business, says the ability to swiftly release something with “a lot of intellectual content but without the padding of many books” harks back to a time when pamphlets discussing new theories and ideas about economics were churned out regularly.

Mr. Grandinetti declined to give details about how the first batch of Kindle Singles was faring. He said that several works, including “Leaving Home,” a short story by Jodi Picoult, have cracked Kindle’s top 100 seller list.

It might be easy to explain the emergence of these services as nothing more than a life jacket for publishers or writers seeking new and potentially lucrative outlets for their ancient craft.

Certainly, a struggle for survival is part of it. In fact, we may also be witnessing the gradual evolution of the notion of what a book actually is, said Matthew Battles, a librarian and historian at Harvard.

He compared the various efforts to adapt print and reading to mobile devices to the invention of the printing press in the 15th century.

“It took writers, authors, publishers a while to figure out how to use the press, how to organize information and tell stories in new ways,” he said. “It took awhile for the format to catch up to the new tools and technology.”

Of course, many much-lauded new-media formats have come and gone, or at least have faded into the background. Consider the genre of hypertext fiction that was intended to let readers navigate text by a series of Web links. Experimental works are still being produced, but the genre has hardly become a dominant form.

It’s also been hard to gauge the traction of ventures like the Vook, a hybrid e-book that embeds videos into electronic text.

But it’s much too early to know whether the Atavist and its brethren will become permanently rooted in our reading culture or become a “fossil, embedded in the archaeology of the medium of reading,” as Mr. Battles put it.

He added, however, that major changes are clearly under way.

“We are seeing a new category take shape,” he said, “that reflects a new paradigm of what it means to read on a new device.”