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Feeling and sensing literature: Books as material objects in the digital everyday

I have recently been analysing a research material “Life as a Reader”, which consists of Finnish peoples written narratives about their reading habits. The material was collected by the Finnish Literature Society in 2014 and it focuses especially on reading as an everyday practice. One of the things the respondents discussed was the recent changes in reading. In this context, the issue of e-books was often mentioned. They were repetitively compared to printed books, and this made many think about the material aspects of reading. Elements such as the smell of books, feel of pages, or atmospheres of spaces with bookshelves were emphasised as positive aspects of reading situations and readership. However, the meanings behind these aspects were not explained.

This raised questions about sensory experiences in book reading. Why would one connect smell or touch to reading? How does the presence or tangibility of books affect reading habits? What should reading feel like? In this presentation, I will discuss the meanings of such sensory elements in the context of book reading. The theoretical focus is on ethnological material culture studies. I will ask how printed books as sensory and sensitive objects may support reading. I will also discuss, why these aspects are emphasised in the context of e-books and digitalisation of reading.