

The Sociological Review

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“You wake up and suddenly, a story is right in front of you”

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Kip Jones

In the eighth part of our special section on Sociology and Fiction, Kip Jones reflects on the pleasures of physical books and our emerging culture of analogue nostalgia.

A very formal email from the Editor of the [International Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods](#) greeted me first thing this morning: it's their pleasure to officially accept my manuscript for the Encyclopedia. I have been working on this entry for about a year now, yet still must wait another year for its publication.

[Breakfast at Tiffany's](#) came out in the year I graduated from high school. My parents were both proud high school graduates from large families where a 12-year education was at a premium, yet achieved by both of my parents in the middle of a depression.

But I was going off to college next, a dream of our father's—that we all got more education than he ever had. So I headed for the unofficial high school graduation party, got drunk for the first time that night, and drove my Dad's Caddy home—very slowly, very carefully. At the end of the summer, I went off to a small liberal arts college, more to please my father than me.

My favourite scene in *Breakfast* is where the young author takes Holly to the library and shows her his name in the card catalogue. I waited nearly half a lifetime for that experience for myself, then they got rid of the card catalogue and everything turned electronic.

My father bought the [World Book Encyclopedia](#) for us as children. We would use it to write homework assignments for school. Later, in my teens, he bought the [Great Books of the Western World](#) as well. The two sets of volumes sat in a low bookcase opposite the front doorway to our ranch house in the countryside. I would lie on the floor in front of the bookcase, often flipping through incomprehensible volumes by Homer or Thomas Aquinas, enjoying the smell of print on paper, and playing with our French bulldog, Jackie.

I liked the *World Book* better because there were pictures and it spoke in plain English to this unsophisticated country boy. I still prefer books with pictures to this day. Actually, I included one in my manuscript for the *Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*, but things got complicated along the way about rights and then, finally, how apropos the photo was for the text, so it was left out. I think an illustration should draw the reader into the text, create the possibility of an encounter with it. Trick the left side of the brain to engage with the right.

The previous edition of the 12-volume set of these compendia ran about £2500 so I cannot see myself owning a full set of the *Encyclopedia of Communication* myself. Perhaps the single volume *Research Methods* will be available and more affordable on its own. Thank god I forgot to have children so I won't suffer the guilt of not having the set to show them. I am not even sure at this point if I would be able to convince my University's library to buy the whole set. I can imagine the scene, though, going to see it for the first time myself, perhaps taking a friend, and fingering my 4,000-word entry on “Performative Social Science” in its assigned volume, enjoying a sniff or two

of the paper, the ink, and the glue of it. An electronic version, to which I will be privileged to have access is promised, but could never be the same as a volume in my hands.

At this very same time, we are upon a (yet another?) retro period in mode, fashion, lifestyle, cinema and even television series. Suddenly, the disgust generated by Brutalist architecture has turned rather strangely to a kind of warmth, even fondness for it in retrospect. “Mid-Century Modern” — everything is popping up everywhere. Suddenly advised to be suspicious of electronic recording, vinyl is once again hot, hot, hot. Even cassette tapes seem poised for a rebound. Get your pencils and pens ready to tighten those tapes!

Perhaps it is time to think about “analogue” in publication as well. Completely turned off by PowerPoint presentations *ad nauseam*, an undergrad class recently cheered in unison when I introduced a lecture with, “Today, there will be no PowerPoints”. On another occasion, opening a workshop, I passed around some materials printed on paper and commented, “This is a piece of paper. There are words on it. You can hold them in your hands. Enjoy the sensation.” What if there was a sudden wistfulness and renewed respect for the Dewey Decimal system, the card catalogue, and printed books with spines and hard covers? Or perhaps at least electronic publications will come with an accompanying scratch n sniff card, à la John Waters? Could all this be a popular nostalgic trend?

Will Audrey Hepburn be making a trip to the library card catalogue with me after all?

Tiffany's salesman: Do they still really have prizes in Cracker Jack boxes?

Paul Varjak: Oh yes.

Tiffany's salesman: That's nice to know... It gives one a feeling of solidarity, almost of continuity with the past, that sort of thing.