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among Kindle readers. She believes that e-readers have given voracious consumers not so much license to stop, but the ability to dip in and out of books, depending on their mood. “So while you might stop midstream, you can also very easily go back to the book later,” she says. She herself gives a book about 25 pages to enthral her before putting it back on the digital shelf.

Leigh Haber, books editor at O, the Oprah Magazine, who suggests candidates to Oprah Winfrey for her consideration for the popular Oprah Book Club, says that while the obvious reasons for abandoning books are distraction and boredom, she attributes much of the behavior to a backlash against writing in which technique trumps storytelling.

Certain types of people are more likely to push through a book. Dr. Wilhelm theorizes that people with competitive, Type-A personalities might be more likely to abandon a book because they tend to be motivated by reward and punishment, and “if there are no consequences or public recognition, why finish?” Conversely, he says more laid-back, Type-B personalities may never start a book they know they won’t finish. The more important motivator of finishing a book, says Dr. Wilhelm, is social pressure, which is why book clubs are so good at getting readers to the epilogue.

Librarians like Mary Wilkes Towner, an adjunct lecturer at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, always gives readers permission to stop whenever they want, to disentangle the act from childhood associations of reading as a task. “I have found that people in their 30s, they feel guilted into finishing—just the same way that they were told to eat everything on their plate,” she says. “If you want to be culturally literate, skin. But we all have to give ourselves permission to quit.”

Choosing the right books lets people dramatically increase the number of books they can read in a lifetime, she says.

Some psychologists look at bailing on books on the spectrum of task persistence. Meena Dasari, a clinical assistant professor at New York University School of Medicine, works mostly with children in her private practice. She says that the ability to maintain a task even as any rewards and discontent fluctuate depends on what we attribute those feelings to. “If you say, ‘I’m not smart enough,’ then you’re likely to give up,” she says. “But if you say, ‘This is just a difficult book,’ you’re more likely to complete it.” Additionally, if your peer group or book club has finished the book, those outside forces can be powerful. “The time I finished the most books was when I was in a book club,” Dr. Dasari says.

That said, some books, notes Ms. Haber at the Oprah magazine, are in-surmountably difficult. “If you come to a book at the wrong time, it won’t connect,” she says. She started and stopped Jonathan Franzen’s “The Corrections” a few times before getting completely engrossed by it, and attributes her ability to finally finish the novel to trying it while on vacation. Reading it outside of her regular life, she says, gave the book new meaning.

“But there are also those magical books that you read differently at different points in your life,” she says, adding that a young woman might be swept away by the passion of “Anna Karenina.” A mother later in life might view the protagonist as selfish and irresponsible.

Publishers, says Ms. Haber, want readers to complete books so that they get hooked on the author and buy more of his work. But as a former book editor, she also understands the pressures on those inside the book industry to meet deadlines, and admits that many books need “more time in the nurturing process” of editing. When she gets to page 25 of a poorly edited book, Ms. Haber admits, even she will put it down. Like most of her friends and colleagues, she says she still feels guilty about it.
Guilt Complex: Why Leaving a Book Half-Read Is So Hard

By Heidi Mitchell

Until very recently, Michelle Ginder, a transportation planner in Seattle, forced herself to finish every book she cracked open. An avid reader, she says she felt “like a quitter” for giving up a novel halfway. Then, while plodding through John Sayles’s 2011 “A Moment in the Sun” and “still not knowing what it was about,” she made a conscious decision to put down the book. She moved on to something more gripping, reading “the Game of Thrones” series.

“It felt so good,” Ms. Ginder, 39, says. “There was so much guilt associated with quitting, but when I finally did it, it was liberating.”

In the age of the e-reader, dropping a book has never been easier. It doesn’t even require getting up to grab another off the shelf. But choosing to terminate a relationship with a book prematurely remains strangely agonizing, a decision fraught with guilt.

“It goes against how we’re built,” says Matthew Wilhelm, a clinical psychologist with Kaiser Permanente in Union City, Calif. “There is a tendency for us to perceive objects as ‘finished’ or ‘whole’ even though they may not be. This motivation is very powerful and helps to explain anxiety around unfinished activities.”

The idea of stopping midway is stressful, but still, we do it. And even brag about it. GoodReads, an online community of readers that was recently bought by Amazon.com Inc., allows its 18 million members to rank the most initiated but unfinished books all time; 7,300 members have voted. Top of the list: “Catch 22,” Joseph Heller’s American classic.

Books in the “Lord of the Rings” series finished a close second.

Readers, age 16 and older, average eight books a year, according to Pew Research Center data, with the median 17. That’s the pace Ms. Ginder used to read at. But using her new approach to reading, she says she is up to 31 books a year. She has about 10 books ready to begin on her shelf or Kindle at any time. When she drops one, she simply pulls up another in seconds.

Sara Nelson, editorial director of books and Kindle at Amazon.com, sees book abandonment frequently.

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Titles Most Often Abandoned

According to the website GoodReads, about 20% of the books read by the site’s 18 million members are left unfinished. Here are the books most reported to have been dropped midstream this year:


   This novel by the author of the Harry Potter books was picked up by fans of her earlier work, but likely dropped because it is nothing like the wildly popular series, says GoodReads spokeswoman Suzanne Skyvara.

2. *Fifty Shades of Grey*, by E.L. James

   The self-published erotic novel was the subject of much water-cooler chatter last year, but many found it to be far from the fiction they were comfortable with.

3. *Eat, Pray, Love*, by Elizabeth Gilbert

   Readers either found the author endearing or obnoxious (as one GoodReads member posted). Its popularity waned after the glow from the Julia Roberts movie wore off.

4. *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, by Stieg Larsson

   Many readers found this first book of the popular three-part series grueling to finish. They quit before trying the more exciting second and third books—which are impossible to understand without the foundation of Book One.

5. *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*, by Gregory Maguire

   The Broadway musical catapulted this book to popular fame, but when readers found it, they realized much creative license was taken to bring the book to stage. So, they dropped it.