Kobo’s great color e-readers are held back by lock-in

The problem with most e-readers is they’re not really intended for reading books. They’re meant to sell you books. Amazon, which has the biggest market share in the US, is especially notable for doing this, but Barnes & Noble is guilty of the same thing. Kobo is perhaps the least offensive about this — it’s got Pocket and Overdrive integration! But oftentimes, when I found myself totally enamored with Kobo’s gorgeous new color e-readers, I’d suddenly get slapped with the reminder: this thing is here to sell me books.

Which is a shame because Kobo’s new Libra Colour and Clara Colour are the closest we’ve gotten to a perfect e-reader lately. Both the $219.99 Libra Colour and $149.99 Clara Colour are ridiculously light, but with a sturdiness that makes them feel comfortable and not flimsy. Both include Kaleido 3 displays, which means book covers are rendered in actual color. Both flip pages and navigate stores much quicker than the $249.99 Boox Page (the bigger, slower sibling of the Palma) — impressive, given the fact that the Kaleido 3 display is a little slower than a more traditional monochromatic E Ink display found in the Page.

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I did find myself liking the more expensive Libra because I prefer asymmetrical e-readers with dedicated buttons to ones that function more like traditional tablets. That it also has stylus support for note-taking is a plus. Yet, either one is a charming and enjoyable-to-use e-reader, and over the last couple of months, I repeatedly found myself reaching for the

Libra over the Boox – which, until now, has been my primary e-reader. I just like the feel of reading on it more. Sure, Boox gives me every reading app available (it’s an E Ink Android tablet), but the Libra doesn’t have any of the weird little hiccups typical of Android on E Ink.

$ 220

The Libra Colour is one of the newest e-readers from Kobo and one of the first with color. With both Overdrive and Pocket support it give readers considerably more options that e-readers from bigger brands like Amazon.

Both Kobo e-readers also support highlighting text in color, and their touchscreens feel much snappier and more responsive than the Boox Page. Those highlight colors aren’t particularly vibrant, though. The Kaleido 3 display found in both gets you color, but the color is akin to what you see in a newspaper left in the sun for a few days. Plus, that color comes at the cost of both making the black-and-white reading experience a little less crisp. It’s still infinitely better than previous color E Ink technologies, which often gave the whole display a green cast.

My real issue with these devices isn’t the color displays. It’s the lock-in.

Kobo’s e-readers feel built more for buying books than reading them. They’re tied to the Kobo bookstore, which is powered by Rakuten, a Japanese retailer that is often called the “Japanese Amazon” or the “Japanese Barnes & Noble” when people want to quickly summarize the company. Rakuten is very good at moving books, and Kobo’s built-in bookstore is similar. It doesn’t have quite the same library as Amazon; Amazon has more self-published books and carries more niche content from boutique publishers. Yet, Kobo’s bookstore has a decent

spread. If it’s a remotely popular book, you’ll find it on the Kobo.

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Unlike other non-Android e-readers, Kobo e-readers also have a more traditional library built in via Overdrive. If you’ve got a library card from a library that works with Overdrive you can borrow ebooks. Unfortunately, this is when you start to run into Kobo’s bookselling business butting heads with its e-reader business. To borrow books, you either have to use your phone to find them on an app like Libby, or you have to use the Discover tab, then choose the Overdrive tab, and hope you can browse for the book you want. Or you have to search for the book on Kobo’s store, and when you find the book, you have to tap the More Options button next to the much larger Buy Now and Wishlist buttons and then actually tap the Borrow From Overdrive button to see if the book is borrowable from your library. It is miserable, and when I asked a generally very clever friend to try to borrow a book, she couldn’t even figure out how.

You also can’t have more than one library card active on the Kobo at a time. Instead, when you finish a book and want to read another one that’s tied to a different library card, you have to log out and log in with the other card. I had to switch repeatedly between my New York Public Library and Jersey City Public Library cards and was left deeply annoyed. I don’t have to do this when I use the Libby app on my Page or iPad.

You run into the same issue using the built-in “experimental” web browser Kobo has. I can navigate to websites just fine, and if I want to try and read a book over the web, I can theoretically do that. No app necessary. Only the browser is

painfully underdeveloped. It would be nice if I could scroll or paginate using the Libra’s built-in buttons as I can with the EinkBro browser on Android e-readers.

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Getting ebooks from other stores onto the device is also a hassle. You have to plug the e-reader into your computer and drag and drop files (though Calibre, the ebook management app, does make it a scootch easier). But that problem isn’t unique to Kobo. Amazon and Barnes & Noble also insist you sideload books. But after years of the Boox ecosystem (and the iPad), it feels weird that these systems all insist you stick so closely to their bookstores. It’s a degree of lock-in that seems absurd, and with Kobo’s ecosystem, it feels more absurd because in so many other respects it really seems like the company is trying to do e-readers right.

The Kobo Libra Colour and Koko Clara Colour are fast and nearly perfect for getting out of your way when you just want to read a book. Their color displays aren’t as sharp as an iPad Mini’s LED one — or even a monochrome E Ink display — but the color gives a welcome zest to the experience that black and white cannot. The fact that they even offer things like a web browser and Overdrive and Pocket support is very welcome when compared to what Amazon is doing. But the lock-in, man. The lock-in might be the norm in the e-reader world, but it shouldn’t be.

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