
The Revival of the Paperback in the 21st Century

Deanna Russell

Abstract

This article will look at the paperback revolution of the early 1930s, how it affected the “masses” in the 1900s, and how this has impacted consumers and the publishing culture in the 21st century in a sociological context. The purpose of this article is to explore the extent to which there has been a revival of the paper revolution in the 21st century. There has been rapid growth in the technological innovations that have influenced how one reads, for example, e-books and/or audiobooks, which is based upon the socio-cultural transformation of readers in the 21st century. Using a comparison of sales figures from the book publishing industry reports as well as analysis of the social norms and reading culture of people in the 21st century, this article will conclude whether there has been a revival of the paperback in the 21st century.

Key Words

Paperback Revolution; 21st century; Fiction; Penguin; 1930s; Digital Revolution.

Introduction

European publishing house Albatross Books were the first to mass-produce paperbacks in the 1930s. In 1932, they published affordably priced reprints in Europe. Their books were uniform and colour-coded to specify the genre, such as orange for fiction. Albatross Books' success provided a blueprint for Allen Lane. In 1935 in the UK, Lane formed Penguin Books, publishing high quality and affordably priced fiction books. The idea came about when Lane was looking for something to read at a train station yet could not find anything aside from magazines. Penguin Books became a commodity and were sought and found in the UK (Mercer 2011, 615). Penguin Books were quickly mass-producing high-quality titles. Lane had to sell around 17,000 paperbacks to break-even so he sold titles for sixpence, making them inexpensive and easily accessible in high street shops like Woolworths for lower-

income earners. Paperbacks were also sold from the same trucks used by magazine distributors throughout entire neighbourhoods to ensure it reached many people. Penguin Books sold three million copies in their first year of business.

Penguin Books followed the colour-coded method by also delineating the fiction genre as orange. Fiction was available in libraries for the working-class reader. Moreover, while the public libraries focused on middle-brow and high-brow readers, the creation of two pence libraries made fiction titles accessible for lower-income clientele. There were book clubs that formed in the early 1900s, but the “[...] clubs were attacked by literary snobs for lowering tastes and moving toward homogenization in literature” (Young *et al.* 2002, 151). Nevertheless, the book clubs became tastemakers that influenced a title’s high demand and the size of print runs for publishers. In addition to driving the sales of books, paperbacks revived the bookstores by the 1950s. One of the driving forces behind the paperback revolution were publishers, as a reflection that the rising education level of the population would provide them (publishers) with new opportunities (Houle 1962, 658).

The Masses

In the early 1900s, the world was divided into readers and non-readers. Gasset ranked society into two orders: the illustrious and the vulgar (Carey 2002, 17). Penguin Books provided paperbacks for the masses who were considered to be non-readers, as well as an intrusion upon the best people of civilization. Anyone other than intellectuals or the elite, according to W. B. Yeats, were deemed the masses; and here is where Lane, I believe, could capitalize off the masses because of their lack of inclusion in culture and not being afforded the privilege of education (Carey 2002, 14). Children that are born into the unintelligent class are one of the same and reproducing must be limited due to the alarming speed in which it is happening, Yeats adds (Carey 2002, 14). Yeats wished for the extermination and sterilization of the masses so that the intellectuals could continue to control who could read and write. In 1939, in his book *On the Boiler*, he supported eugenics as well as being highly grateful for his family lineage that had allowed him to inherit the purity of intellectualism

(Carey 2002, 15). Education for the masses was not a birth right; Nietzsche expressed that it should remain that way, and campaigned against universal education (Carey 2002, 15). For Nietzsche, universal education would lead the literate masses to ruin writing and thinking, which could be avoided if they did not learn to read.

Furthermore, in his book, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell said that tinned food destroyed the health of the British (Carey 2002, 22). This was because it was mass-produced, mechanical and soulless and therefore offensive to the intellectuals. Lane, however, published mass-produced and high-quality paperbacks that provided the masses with high-quality reading material, so they were getting a taste of literary culture that was not primarily for them (Carey 2002, 21). Through mass-circulation some of the first batch of books included works from Agatha Christie. Lane's business strategy, I believe was not solely for profit as he had the start-up capital for Penguin Books and thus Lane was not short of money; he was doing this for the masses and ultimately to keep them updated with the culture.

Digital Revolution: E-books

In the early 2000s, the socio-cultural transformation caused by an increase in internet usage changed the reading culture of people. This was somewhat of a digital revolution that birthed online consumers and e-readers.

By 2016, smartphones and tablets were popular ways for book consumers to read and sales were driven by the fiction and young adult readers categories (Wood 2017). Since the turn of the 21st century and with the introduction of social media platforms many people are on their smart devices most, if not all of the time. With so much integrated into the smartphone, having e-books that were made accessible for the smartphone consumer did not seem a far stretch from the new reality. Consumers were those that read young adult fiction e-books like *The Hunger Games*, primarily the 18-24-year-old demographic (Wood 2017).

Furthermore, the Publishers Association's 2019 annual report recorded a 3 percent increase in digital sales and a 5 percent drop in physical sales in 2018. In 2018, there was a 43 percent surge in audiobook sales, however print book sales declined by 5.4 percent. Stephen Lotinga, chief executive of the Publishers Association believes that this was not the sole reason for the decline but this was inevitable (Sweney 2019). For example, Michelle Obama's autobiography, *Becoming* was produced in multiple formats: print, e-book, and audiobook. A consequence of this type of product promotion, is the cannibalizing of print sales for publishers. In turn, publishers have to set their book prices so booksellers are unable to apply their own discounts (Wood 2017). In other words, providing readers with mass-circulated alternative formats creates a contender to the paperback edition. To overcome this, publishers have altered their marketing strategies by making better cover designs for print books to entice consumers and to minimize the threat of other book formats.

The Paperback Contender: Audiobook

Similarly to e-books, yet further along the timeline, the socio-cultural transformation this time came from the rise of the audiobook. Lotinga states that podcast streaming platforms have indirectly helped the audiobook market by injecting \$500 million into supporting podcast companies (Sweney 2019). This is akin to music listeners streaming music as opposed to purchasing CDs and vinyl. However, vinyl has made a comeback, as have Polaroid cameras, and it is now considered retro to use vinyl and Polaroids. However, vinyl has not made a big enough impact that would tip sales revenue in its favour. Paperbacks are not yet considered retro and are nowhere near becoming obsolete.

The audiobook has continued to soar, and some authors are skipping writing content for print and going straight to audio. Moreover, publishers are dedicating more money, innovative methods, and studio time to producing audiobooks because there is a thirst for podcasts and people are becoming conscious of their screen time and would rather listen to audiobooks than read an e-book or print version. Publishers aim to factor in the visual

aesthetics for listeners to have the same or similar experience as if they were reading the print format. A-list actors and actresses are narrating classic titles with authors involved in the casting process (Thorpe 2020).

According to Nielsen, UK males aged between 25–44 years old is the demographic downloading audiobooks. Holbrook Jackson said that “Women habitually think in pictures, he explains, whereas men naturally aspire to abstract concepts. When men think pictorially they unsex themselves” (Carey 2002, 8). Jackson’s views were very much influenced by Nietzsche. Jackson was talking about pictorial journalism; could his theory be applied to audiobook consumers? This would suggest that the demographic of men that purchase audio books aspire to abstract concepts and women are buying print books for the pictorial covers. Conversely, men are typically voyeurs and women are usually the subject of their voyeurism. Laura Mulvey’s male gaze theorizes the sexual imbalance between men and women, where men have the pleasure of looking at strong visuals and women are the spectacle from pin-ups to strip-teases (Mulvey 1989, 19). The demographic for paperbacks such as Mills & Boon romance fiction have been women since the imprint formed in the early 1900s.

Nevertheless, this cultural shift that has occurred is not necessarily because of a preference for audiobooks; if print titles are unavailable the audio format is purchased instead says Richard Lennon of Penguin Audio, and those consumers make up 41 percent, whereas the other percentile buys audio titles for convenience (Thorpe 2020). Fionnuala Barrett, editorial director of audio at Harper Collins states, “The people that are sniffy about them [audio books] are the people who will be sniffy about anything.” (Thorpe 2020). On one hand, audiobooks may be a thorn in the print book's side. In the 21st century, society is heavily involved in the use of social media; they are one tweet, a Facebook post or an Instagram comment away from communicating with their celebrity idols. Their favourite A-lister narrating a book would increase audiobook sales even if they are not normally a consumer of audiobooks or, for that matter a frequent buyer of print or e-books. On the other hand, if a consumer purchases the audiobook title this does not take away their option to purchase the print version too.

Paperback Revival in the 21st Century

The growth of e-books and audiobooks, has given print books a turbulent journey with regards to sales and choice for the reader. It may be a new wave of the paperback revolution in the 21st century as it would appear that publishers have replicated the idea that Lane had when he was looking for something to read at the train station. Publishers have made titles easily accessible in different formats, like e-books and audiobooks for readers on the move.

In 2014, a quarter of the UK population owned e-readers. Waterstones however, stopped selling Amazon's Kindle in 2015 as their sales fell due to consumer's reading culture (Wood 2017). By 2017, one fifth were reading on smart phones and tablets and this caused a spike in sales of physical books by 4% percent (Wood 2017).

The 21st century is a society of TV show binge watchers with platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime. According to the Publishers Association, 52 percent of the top 20 box office UK-produced films were based on material published between 2007 and 2016. The UK's box office contributed 1.5 billion in revenue, accounting for 61 percent box office domestic gross and 65 percent globally. Authors who are influenced by monetary gain from the film production companies who provide big deals, and cinemagoers who go to see the book to film adaptations, help contribute to the box office sales.

With the variety of formats and film adaptations of book titles, authors, publishers and actors are collectively making sales, but this leaves the paperback in a precarious position in the publishing industry. This is where publishers have found light and begun the revival of the paperback revolution by revamping the covers of paperbacks.

An *Independent* article recalled a time when Penguin paperbacks looked "terrible" with "grim and unsmiling" lettering, in addition to the titles being "hopelessly unpromising" (Walsh 2005). This was until Penguin's book cover designs became more aesthetically pleasing to the eye after the introduction of European designers Romek Marber and Germano Facetti who designed Penguin's titles using the Marber grid. The paperback cover

designs provided a brighter and more visually captivating look, which grouped books together that were in a series and/or written by the same author. Today, publishers have adopted similar methods. Meryl Hall of Booksellers' Association UK states that there are better book designs keeping print books alive which is how publishers combat the threat of e-books (Handley 2019).

Genette provides the formulae for paratext as peritext plus epitext, which includes the book's cover, title and appendages (Genette 1997, 5). The peritextual features have changed since Albatross and Lane's colour-coded paperback books. The publisher's emblem took centre stage, giving the titles a uniform appearance and provided an indication to readers of the book's content. Currently, publishers have revived the cover of paperback books by embellishing, prioritising and rearranging the peritext.

Journalist Alex Preston says that "It's hard to know whether to read these books or caress them." (Preston 2017). Hall describes people as "completists" and believes that they love to decorate their homes with "incredibly gorgeous books" (Handley 2019). Sweney states too, that people love physical books and sales are still up 8 percent over the last five years. This includes print academic and reference books which is driven by the consumer's hunger to escape the screen (Sweney 2019). Paperback book covers today, have the same format in terms of the size of the book but the book's title and author's name is much larger than it was in the 1930s; times have changed where consumers recognize the genre now by the author.

Conclusion

Based upon the research, it appears to be the case that there has been a revival of the paperback in the 21st century. However, there are some factors relevant to publishing culture in the 21st century that may still be challenging for the paperback in the future.

Book publishers will continue to have tumultuous times ahead because of the competition from e-books, audiobooks, and even augmented reality books. It is possible

that other formats will emerge as technology develops. In the meantime, publishers should be open to new opportunities but be cautious about cannibalizing their own sales.

With publishing companies strategizing to change the direction of how consumers read by making print books more aesthetically pleasing, it is important to consider how brick and mortar bookstores display and prioritise books. Hardcover reissues and collectables is another factor that has to be considered too as hardcovers have an advantage over the paperback. For example, Bloomsbury has published J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books as limited-edition boxsets and gift sets for collectors; the durability of the hardcover version is the unique selling point over the paperback edition.

Another challenge that the paperback may continue to face in the 21st century, is the amount of space for authors in the industry. The book industry could become oversaturated with authors casting celebrities to narrate their audiobooks. This may leave consumers waiting for the release of the audiobook over the paperback edition and furthermore, hoping that the book will have a film adaption.

Creative writing has become secondary in the production process, and it appears that the priority now lies in having the best illustrator or graphic designer to sell the paperback edition.

The paperback has a long way to go before it is obsolete but the socio-culture transformations of the 21st century presents a tough fight with the threat of e-books and audiobooks, and the paperback often struggles to keep its head above water. However, it may not be worth the fight to remain the dominant format. It would be fruitful to pursue research into the socio-cultural transformations that will occur in the future. At present, the existing formats are suitable for people's lifestyles, some of whom may listen to an audiobook on their drive to work as it is convenient for them. Similarly, a city commuter taking the train may prefer an e-book version as they will have less to carry on their journey than if they bought a paperback. There may be some who need a break from their screen and opt for the paperback edition.

In sum, it would be wise that the publishing industry continues to make paperbacks widely available and affordable. Publishers should accept new opportunities presented to

them, and ride the wave of the socio-cultural transformations in the 21st century by not fixating on competition between different formats and instead become one of the many formats that readers can choose from.

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