

A Dove Grey Renaissance: Persephone Books and the Neglected 'Middlebrow'

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Abstract

Launched in 1999, at a time of radical change for the publishing industry, Persephone Books has become a successful independent publisher of neglected female authors mainly from the 20th century inter-war period. As an industry primarily shaped by the differential distribution of symbolic and economic capital (Bourdieu 1996, 9), competing principles of cultural legitimacy within an increasingly commercial climate clarify the position of modern publishing at the intersection of culture and commerce (1993, 27). This article will explore how Persephone Books' understated assertion of the publishing 'middle ground' and commitment to the historically reviled 'middlebrow' genre has reconciled the perennial tension between culture and commerce to create a thriving, yet unintentional publishing brand.

Keywords

Middlebrow; Bourdieu; symbolic capital; culture; economic; feminist; Persephone Books

Introduction

On the brink of a new millennium, the consolidation of publishing houses, the expansion of chain booksellers and the rise in the internet's power had created an industry in flux (Stewart 1999). To start an independent publishing company in 1999 with a list of out-of-

print titles by female 'middlebrow' authors from the inter-war 20th century period might have been considered a precarious, perhaps even foolhardy, undertaking. Bound into this scenario are Bourdieu's theories of capital and the 'structural ambiguity' of a publisher as a 'businessperson objectively invested with some power of cultural consecration' (1993, 27): namely, the perennial tension between culture and commerce.

Beginning as a small mail-order publishing business founded on personal literary leanings, Persephone Books (hereafter, Persephone) has since become a commercial and editorial success by publishing books as 'a two-faced reality: a commodity and a symbolic object' (Bourdieu 1993, 1) to become 'The nearest thing British publishing has to a cult' (Cooke 2012). This article will argue that, facilitated by its resolutely independent stance, Persephone's success lies in its understated, yet unapologetic, assertion of the 'middle ground': between publishing monolith and independent, notions of high and low culture and Bourdieu's theories of economic, cultural and symbolic capital (1993).

The see-saw of capital

'A book, before it is published is like a lottery ticket, it may turn out a blank or a prize' (Murray in McClay 2018, 4). Expressing the inherent vagaries of publishing, this 1880 perspective also underlines the fundamental importance of economic capital to an industry culturally considered as 'Gatekeepers of Ideas' (Cosser 1975). During the 20th century, the publishing industry underwent radical structural change. The plurality of independent, family-owned, 'gentlemanly' firms where publishing was prioritised as a profession, not just a business (Schiffrin 2010, 1) were subsumed by bigger publishing groups that propelled the industry into a landscape of the multimedia, globalised conglomerates that proliferate today. As an industry fundamentally shaped by the differential distribution of economic (financial value) and symbolic (cultural prestige and reputation) capitals (Bourdieu 1996, 9), the seismic shift in the way publishing businesses were run created a dominant fiscal focus.

Yet, the economies of scale created by conglomeration have mitigated certain economic risks and contribute to an industry view that the profitability of trade publishing

may have increased by as much as one-third (Solomon 2018). However, following Bourdieu, the commodification of symbolic goods, such as books, has a tangible influence on how they are created, the combination of economic and cultural capitals impacting or even hampering artistic creativity (1993, 3). The danger for large publishing groups is that the creative editorial work upon which their future ultimately depends must be rationalised against an acutely competitive drive to find 'the next big thing' (Thompson 2010, 126). As such, large publishers are financially constrained by the market itself, their shareholders, their competitors and their own imprints. Thus, in attempting to balance the increasingly unpredictable see-saw of culture and commerce, a major consequence for corporate publishers is the erosion of editorial control: tantamount to censorship and literary 'contraception' and one where the suppression of unprofitable books fuels growing conformity (Schiffrin 2010, 6).

So how, in the pressure cooker of late 20th century publishing, does an independent publisher of forgotten literary niches survive? From the outset, founder of Persephone, Nicola Beauman considered excessive choice as one rationale: 'there are simply too many books from which to choose: one ends up buying a hugely-hyped book because it has a familiar name or no book at all.' (*The Persephone Quarterly* March, 1999). In a contemporary world where the fight for consumers in a saturated market means that reinvention and a standardised 'winning formula' appear the publisher's holy grail, existing as a small independent may indicate dangerous exposure. But, unfettered by the heft of a large parent company, Persephone's ideal critical mass has empowered its agility: an entrepreneurial flyweight versus a corporate heavyweight, with autonomous fiscal accountability and agency of editorial control. While the see-saw of culture and commerce provides a perennial challenge to all publishers, Beauman's expectation to never become a multimillionaire (Cooper 2008) and enjoyment of small economic benefits have undoubtedly sustained the company over the last 20 years: 'The whirring of the credit card machine is unexpectedly enjoyable [...] we are making money, not a huge amount and not enough to be in profit yet. But a respectable beginning.' (*The Persephone Quarterly* June 1999).

Before publishers devoted vast budgets and legions of staff to engage consumers with targeted marketing based on behavioural studies, Beauman's deceptively simple formula to 'only publish books that we completely, utterly love' (Persephone Books n.d) follows Greenberg's concept of the editor as 'the, yet absent reader' (2015, 1) to explicitly symbolise literary taste as embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu 1993). This has proved vital in the publisher's success: reading 'rejected' as 'neglected', the editorial instinct of small independents seemingly favours the successful acceptance of a previously rejected book (Thompson 2010, 128). From the outset, Persephone asserted its editorial independence in being unconstrained by 'accountants' in not 'always chasing a bestseller' (*The Persephone Quarterly* March 1999). Coupled with this determined stance between culture and commerce, their decision to exclusively publish out-of-print titles may be viewed as the ultimate backlist: a vital resource to publishers, backlists provided £1.06bn or 63% of total sales in 2019 (Nielsen n.d.).

Of course, a publishing conglomerate appears strikingly diverse in terms of literary genres; Penguin Random House, for instance, is now parent company to a startling 365 imprints worldwide (Maher 2020). Yet, the modern existence of uncurtailed editorial freedom to exercise cultural choice warrants skepticism: that the true independence of a media subsidiary is, at best, a dispensable luxury (Bagdikian 2000, 21). Persephone's self-declared stance as 'a feminist press without being overtly "Feminist" [publishing books that] are realistic not idealistic, everyday not outrageous, sympathetic not alienating and domestic not angry' illustrates its deliberate editorial balance that has undoubtedly attracted new readers during the current resurgence of the feminist movement (*The Persephone Quarterly* March 1999). However, by straddling the line between literary and commercial it has also positioned itself within an historically castigated genre.

'Middlebrow' and the editorial 'middle ground'

Criticised as 'fiction that requires the least effort to read', ideas of what constitutes 'middlebrow' literature are linked to Bourdieu's theories of culture and commerce using a 'dialectic of cultural distinction' (Leavis 1932, 17; Bourdieu 1993, 5). Situated within the field

of restricted production, high-brow art and intellectual capital are separated from the general public by the self-evaluation of their own cultural legitimacy (Bourdieu, 4). However, that the value of works produced in the large-scale cultural field is determined by the mass public, Bourdieu asserts that '*Middle-brow art* [*J'art moyen*] [...] is aimed at a public frequently referred to as "average" [*moyen*]' (17). This concept can thus be applied to 'middlebrow' literature in its creation of 'a permeable space between regions and forces otherwise kept conceptually distinct' (Radway 1997, 112).

The commercialisation of book publishing and reading in the 20th century became a battle-ground for self-appointed cultural elites whose growing panic against the rising tide of 'middlebrow' literature was based on principles of culture, money and class. Railing against 'middlebrow' culture as 'mixture of geniality and sentiment stuck together with a sticky slime of calves-foot jelly', Woolf's searing criticism is based on its perception as a product of the field of large-scale production defined by mass consumption (Woolf 1943, 115; Bourdieu 1993, 17). Extending her damnation to its literary genre as 'not well written; nor... badly written... not proper, nor... improper — in short it is betwixt and between', Woolf also demonstrates the cultural contempt in which it was held by some powerful quarters of the literary world (Woolf 1943, 115).

Beauman's unashamed embrace of 'lost' books by long-forgotten women writers ('what academics would call middlebrow [...] I would call a good read.' [Beauman in Lyall 2019]) and her open intention to emulate The Book Society of 1929 asserted Persephone's literary and publishing 'middle ground' (*The Persephone Quarterly* March 1999). As the first monthly book sales club in Britain, The Book Society's curated, mail-order model was highly efficient in creating new book readers and collectors but was lambasted for the ways in which it employed both cultural and economic capital (Wilson 2017). Criticised for its literary selections in 'confer[ring] authority on a taste for the second-rate', Leavis argued against the so-called damaging effects of such 'middlemen' in promoting ever-widening 'levels of reading public' that created 'a middlebrow standard of values' (Leavis 1932, 23, 24). However, just as The Book Society successfully curated a diverse yet conventional selection of 'middlebrow' books, the same format has also contributed to Persephone's

success - its curation becoming an indicator of uniform quality, a respected standard of literary advice and whose symbolic capital has facilitated positive public recognition:

The idea at the beginning was that if you like one of our books, you'll like them all. That has worked almost entirely. It's quite rare for someone to dislike any of the books. I hate to use the word brand, but we are something of a brand.

(Beauman in Lyall 2019)

To publish almost exclusively female authors in 1999 was, and still is, considered both niche and a risk: something to which the fluctuating fortunes of feminist publisher Virago can attest (Murray 2004). Yet, Beauman's seemingly daring choice to publish 'middlebrow' literature was also based on the conviction that reflecting what women really wanted in a book was something that stood the test of time. Articulating a rationale for the literary and economic success of 'middlebrow' fiction, A.S. Byatt approved of 'middlebrow' author Monica Dickens' books' ability to offer 'information, insight, and a certain kind of artistic pleasure which is unavailable elsewhere, but are never seriously discussed because they were classified some time ago as bestsellers.' (1970 in *The Persephone Quarterly* June 1999). Dickens' novels include *Mariana* ([1940] 1999, 2008), a continually popular Persephone title nearly 80 years after its original publication with lifetime sales of £106,549 over 11,731 copies (Nielsen n.d.). Wryly acknowledging its 'middlebrow' status, it is promoted as a timeless '“hot-water bottle” novel, one to curl up with on the sofa on a wet Sunday afternoon [...] we would defy any but academics and professional cynics not to enjoy it.' (Persephone Books 2020)

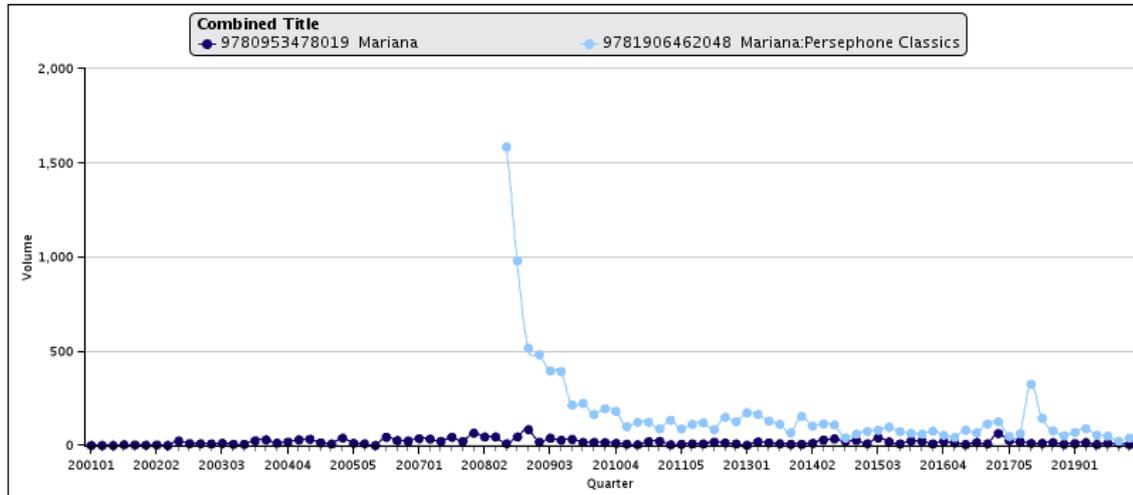


Figure 2: Sustained, 'long-tail' sales of *Mariana* titles published by Persephone Books, illustrating the continuing popularity of 'middlebrow' fiction. ISBN 9780953478019 (1999) & ISBN 978906462048 (2008) (Nielsen, n.d.)

The symbolic capital of paratexts

In the same way Allen Lane of Penguin Books defined the 'book as brand: the book as mass medium' (Hare 2013, 13) by using an instantly recognisable, modern design, Persephone has accrued symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1993, 9) through the design of its books. That a grey Persephone cover is 'a guarantee of a good read' (Persephone Books 2020) reflects the same brand recognition and customer loyalty cultivated by The Book Society during the early 20th century. As the 'shop window' of the publisher, the dove grey covers of Persephone's books symbolise a balance between paratextual decisions of aesthetic taste and commercial expediency and act as symbolic goods by transmitting both the publisher's cultural motives and conferring cultural cachet on their consumers: 'everyone loves the grey covers and jackets [...] their feel - very smooth and strokable' (*The Persephone Quarterly* June 1999). Counterpoint to the uniformity of their covers are the riotously patterned endpapers distinct to each book. Reproductions of fabrics relevant to a book's era, they are an implicit expression of Bourdieu's cultural capital (1993) in their nod to the neglected prominence of women designers; literally 'inside information', they have become

synonymous with the Persephone brand. In a modern landscape of extreme media reinvention their standardised design remains unchanged: as a 'threshold of interpretation' (Genette 1997), their distinctive paratext serves as a cultural and economic transaction that fulfils both aesthetic and commercial roles.



Figure 2: Book covers and endpapers (Persephone Books 2019-2020)

Conclusion

In curating a successful, yet unintentional brand devoted to the publication of the neglected 'middlebrow' by forgotten female authors, Persephone has developed the vital, intangible asset of a successful publisher: distinctive symbolic capital (Thompson 2010, 8). By occupying a cultural space that has been both overlooked and looked down upon, it has quietly cultivated a community of like-minded readers, metaphorically bound to its ethos between the elegant, dove grey covers of its books.

As an industry whose success was traditionally based on acquiring books that sold well over a long period (Thompson 2010, 37), the inevitable hyper-commodification of publishing in a modern capitalist society has created an unsustainable model of faster and more reliable book sales. Yet, just as the publisher's namesake reconciled her opposing forces as

both victim and mistress, innocent child and sage queen (*The Persephone Quarterly* March 1999), this article demonstrates that Persephone Books' autonomous declaration of the publishing 'middle ground' has enabled an equilibrium between Bourdieu's theories of cultural and economic capital that symbolically 'balances the books'.

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