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Paperback Book Publishing: A Survey of Content

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Rapid growth of the paperbound book has led to considerable comment and speculation about the content and effects of such material. In this article the author reports factual findings based upon a detailed analysis of 4,868 original works and reprinted titles which were in print in 1955.

PROBABLY NO RECENT ASPECT OF book publishing has aroused so much controversy as the rise of the paperbound book. Are these compact, brightly covered paperbacks raising literacy by making books cheaply and readily available to anyone within easy distance of drugstore or supermarket? Or are they lowering it because they must direct their quality toward a mass market in order to maintain sales volume?

Implicit in these questions are others. For example, what is the effect of this flood of softcover books on traditional publishing and on contemporary writing?

Speculation on these matters has appeared in various places, including trade publications and literary magazines. They have even been the subject of legislative and Congressional hearings. But most of the writing has been factual or impressionistic, with each author or witness viewing the industry from his particular vantage point as editor, critic, legislator or consumer.

Such treatment, of course, is valuable. Facts are necessary, and the subjective and impressionistic in the hands of a perceptive writer are often extremely penetrating. But from the universe of paperbound books all manner of illustrations can be found to prove a particular point.

To investigate the interplay between paperback and hardcover publishing and its possible relationship to reading habits and to contemporary writing, an over-all approach, detached yet fact-oriented, seemed to be needed. In the study reported here, 4,868 titles in print at some time during 1955 were analyzed to determine (1) from what sources paperbound publishers took their books, (2) who had written them, and (3) what their subject matter was. Texts, children's books and lines limited to special subject fields were excluded, but the English Penguin books distributed in this country and the higher-priced lines sold largely through bookstores were included in the study.

The 30 lines upon which this study is based are Ace, Anchor, Anvil, Avon, Ballantine, Bantam, Beacon, Berkley, City Lights Pocket Book Publishing, Evergreen, Dell, Falcon's Wing, Gold Medal, Crest, Gateway Books, Graphic,

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Great Seal, Harvest, Image, Lion, Meridian, Modern Library Paperbacks, New American Library, New Directions Paperbacks, Penguin, Pocket Books, Popular Library, Pyramid, Viking Paperbound Portables and Vintage.

REPRINTED TITLES

Publishers of paperbound books obtain material from three sources. They reprint works already published, they use original manuscripts, and they take titles from public domain. Of the 4,868 titles available in 1955, originals numbered 1,343, a total of 252 were from public domain, and 3,217—by far the largest proportion—were reprints. The source of 56 titles could not be traced.

The Publishers

The 3,217 reprints came from a total of 204 publishers who, for the purposes of this study, were classified into two types—those whose primary purpose is to sell books, and those whose primary purpose is to publish, with sales a secondary factor. In this first group are the unsubsidized or purely commercial publishers; in the second, the subsidized publishers, such as university, denominational and associational presses, vanity presses and government agencies. Ninety-eight per cent, or 3,136, of the titles came from 165 commercial presses. Sixty titles came from the subsidized group, mostly university presses, and 21 were from 18 firms which could not be identified.

If the study were brought forward to the present, titles from university and denominational presses presumably would constitute a greater proportion of the total. This is because a number of these firms have brought out paperback lines since 1955. Yet despite this trend, the majority of titles available in reprint came from commercial companies. The larger paperback houses which produce for the mass market have more in common with firms whose primary purpose is to sell than with firms whose primary purpose is to contribute to knowledge, to propagate a point of view or to allow the author self-expression for its own sake.

Actually, of course, commercial publishing is a combination of art and commerce, and no publisher, whether subsidized or not, can afford to ignore either of these factors. It becomes a matter of emphasis. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that most commercial firms must sell as many books as possible, as widely as possible, if they are to make the profits necessary for their existence. And for paperback publishers the necessity is greater; their method of printing and distribution necessitates even larger sales volume. It is inevitable that they should look to hardcover firms with the same problems and purpose to furnish them with materials.

Do paperback publishers draw the majority of their 3,217 titles from a few of the larger publishers, or do they distribute their subsidies among many? *Publishers' Weekly,* the journal of the book trade, classifies publishers into three size categories: those which issue 100 or more titles a year; those which issue between 50 and 100; and those which issue fewer than 50. Ninety percent of the reprints came from 99 extant American firms out of a total of 204. The remaining 10% represent 46 extant British firms responsible for 86 titles (here it must be remembered that many British titles are published later in American editions by American houses); 40 inactive American firms were responsible for 206 titles; and 19 unidentifiable publishers were responsible for 24 titles.

Of the 99 extant American publishers providing 90% of the titles, 1,717,

or 53% of the output, came from 18 companies in the group issuing 100 or more titles. Twenty-three per cent, or 731, came from the second group of moderately large publishers, and the remaining 14% (453) came from the 58 small firms with fewer than 50 titles yearly.

The 1,717 reprints were fairly well distributed over the largest group, although at first sight this may not appear to be the case. Some of the biggest firms in the country contributed very few titles. McGraw-Hill, for example, had only 26; Oxford 6; Prentice-Hall 25; Vantage 2; Columbia University Press 3; and Exposition Press, Wiley and Philosophical Library none. But all of these—with the exception of Exposition and Vantage, both "vanity" presses —are highly specialized, issuing texts, medical books, scholarly works and similarly narrowly defined subject areas.

On the other hand, firms like Doubleday, Simon & Schuster, Harper's, and Dodd, Mead and other houses with popular, diversified lines aimed toward a general public were well represented. This was also true of the medium-sized and small firms. The "rule" seems to be that paperback publishers tend to draw the majority of titles from the hardcover publishers most closely resembling themselves in policy and output.

The Authors

It has become something of a cliché among critics that hardcover publishers in their eagerness to sell subsidiary rights frequently reject otherwise excellent manuscripts which do not conform to what they conceive to be mass market standards—that is, no subtlety, and emphasis on plot, fast action and simple characterization. Cecil Hemley comments in an article in *Commonweal* that in contemporary writing the reprinter must follow fashion—"not contemporary fashion but large popular currents of taste. He must seek to reprint books that have demonstrated their appeal by selling widely in more expensive editions. Or, when this is not so, he must fall back on genres, such as the mystery or the western, which have wide, ready-made audiences waiting for them."[1]

An analysis of the titles in print shows undeniably that paperback publishers, like their hardcover counterparts, prefer established authors when they can get them, just as they prefer established publishers. Not all of these writers are famous, of course. But the vast majority are recognized (for better or for worse) by (1) reviewers, in genres like the straight novel which are reviewed, or (2) by their fellow authors of mysteries, Westerns and science fiction—books which are reviewed less frequently.

In nonfiction the writers are generally professional freelancers or subject specialists. Also, as far as older works and classics go, paperback editors generally stick to books whose stature has grown rather than diminished with the years. There are inevitable exceptions, but the publishers ordinarily do not resurrect and repackage forgotten potboilers from the 1920s and 1930s.

The charge has been made that by sticking as closely as possible to the tried and true within their various genres, paperback publishers are contributing to the difficulties that beset today's serious writer, especially the beginning novelist. To answer this we must know the content of paperback publishing, especially the proportion in which publishers use each literary form and the proportion in which they create their own titles.

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[1] Cecil Hemley, "The Problem of the Paperbacks," *Commonweal*, 61:96 (October 29, 1954).

Literary Forms

Although fiction constituted only about 14% of the year's *new titles* in 1955, it accounted for 76% of all paperbacks *in print* in 1955.[2] Not only were novels the main fare of paperbacks; well over half of them were judged to be light reading, designed to provide escape rather than to provoke thought. Nineteen percent of all paperbound titles in print (902) were mysteries, compared with 1.5% of all hardcover titles issued that year; 14% (702) were Westerns, compared with slightly less than 1%; and 3% (149) were science fiction, compared with .5%. In addition, about 400 "straight" and historical paperback novels belong in the category described in the following manner in a letter from a former editor of a paperback line:

> In the jargon of the trade, there is a whole school of fiction known to newspaper dealers as "the sexies." They sell well. They're created (sometimes reprinted) especially for newsstands. They range in quality from incompetent, through professionally hack, to downright esoteric. The thing they have in common (there are exceptions) is a kind of empty-headedness—their only *raison d'etre* is commercial.

These "newsstand sexies" have in a sense replaced the light romances that flourished in lending libraries in the 1920's and the 1930's. In the light romantic novel sex was sugar-coated; in the present-day paperback it is frequently portrayed in its more violent and twisted aspects. But in both it provides a basic formula for sales.

Most paperback fiction published from original manuscripts is of the lighter sort. Twenty-three percent of all mysteries, 38% of all Westerns, and 45% of all science fiction in print in 1955 were originals, in contrast to 15% of the straight novels, practically all of which were "sexies" except for 35 anthologies. Underlying this, no doubt, is the fact that the straight novel offers greater scope for serious writing than the specialized genres, and that a writer in this field presumably wants to establish a reputation with the critics. For this he needs the prestige of reviews and of bookstore sales, the chance for book club selection, and the permanence of a place on library shelves. There are, however, exceptions—Richard Wright, James M. Cain, Benjamin Appel, David Karp and Evan Hunter, all of whom had one or more paperback originals in print. Karp and Hunter, in fact, started this way and switched to hardcovers. In the few cases where the transition occurred, however, it was usually the other way around, although a few writers use both mediums.

Advantages to Authors

On the other hand, paperbound originals offer certain advantages, mostly financial, to authors of mysteries, Westerns, science fiction and "sexies," which are unlikely to be book club selections and are seldom reviewed in major periodicals. Also, because of the prevalence of magazines devoted exclusively to such fiction, their readers are habituated to newsstands rather than to bookstores and book clubs. Authors in these areas have much to gain and little to lose in the way of sales by appearing first in paperback; and by so doing they avoid having to split royalties with their hardcover publishers. Many of the younger

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[2] In comparing these figures one should note that the bases of comparison differ. Statistics on the number of hardcover books in print in 1955 were unavailable; on the other hand, paperback books could not be identified by year of issue. But the figures do reflect a major difference in the two mediums.

mystery, Western and science-fiction writers are coming up through the school of paperbound originals, just as in former years they came up through the school of pulp magazines. The new authors fostered by the editors of paperbound books are in these genres rather than in the serious novel, and thus far the nearest to a new genre the paperback publishers have created is the "sexy."

But even though the industry does not nourish its own crop of serious novelists, there is the possibility that it may influence hardcover writers and editors with the lure of reprint subsidies. Such speculations are too intangible to answer accurately through a content survey. Nevertheless, an analysis of fiction in print in 1955 shows a number of writers of recognized merit.

Many, of course, like D. H. Lawrence, Farrell, Hemingway, Faulkner and Aldous Huxley, are authors of contemporary classics. But as many others are lesser-known writers who might fall into Hemley's "coterie fashion."[3]

Authors of limited appeal whose works have appeared in *avant garde* magazines and sophisticated slicks as well as mass market paperback reprints include Paul Bowles, John Collier, Nadine Gordimer, Robert Graves, Francis Carco, Vercors, Robie Macauley, Jean Doutourd and William Styron. Although all of them won acclaim from critics, not many of them command a large group of followers and their small publics are more likely to frequent bookstores than newsstands. Furthermore, these writers are often experimental in style and subject, and plot is seldom their basic interest. Yet their presence shows that paperback editors do, from time to time, elect to publish writers who are outside the large, popular currents of taste.

There are several possible reasons for this. The paperback-book industry constantly needs new material to feed its many outlets of distribution. And although the situation is less acute than it was in the early 1950's, the pressure still remains. Demand could outrun supply, and publishers are alert for books with certain ingredients. In the straight novel, these include sex themes and violence. This explanation, however, does not cover the works of writers like Flannery O'Conner, Jean Stafford and others who seldom make sex or violence the dominant theme. Here, publishers may be motivated by a shortage of available titles and may count on lurid blurb and cover to put the book across.

A less cynical explanation is a desire on their part to issue titles that can sell at bookstores as well as on newsstands. This latter factor is achieving increasing importance. According to the editor of a paperback line which is a branch of a large pulp magazine and comic book company:

> When a firm that begins with escape reading wants to expand there aren't enough new newsstand outlets. So it has to move up into the bookstore, especially the college bookstore. And that means literature.

Thus, good literature can be sound economics.

It is true that most of the titles issued with this in mind are classics, anthologies or novels by standard authors like Fitzgerald, Hemingway and Steinbeck. But this broader type of program, which most of the large firms now have, allows for the presence of reprints by serious writers with small followings. It does not, however, permit paperback editors to sponsor original novels by talented unknowns. Westerns, "sexies,"

[3] Hemley, *op. cit.*

mysteries and science fiction can be placed on newsstands without prior build-up, but serious new novels by unknown writers need advertising, reviews and a careful nurturing that does not fit into the structure of the paperback book industry.

The Bookstore Lines

If authors with coterie followings are to be sponsored as paperback originals, the logical place for them might at first glance seem to be the more expensive lines selling primarily at bookstores in smaller editions. Yet out of the 590 titles from these lines, only 67 were novels, 47 of which came from public domain. Not one was original.

Sir William Emrys Williams, an editor of Penguin, states his firm's position on the subject. Penguin, he says, has never published new novels and does not intend to do so. The royalties a novelist who published first in Penguin might earn would be insufficient for a man who lives by his pen. However, Penguin nonfiction, written by subject specialists to whom earnings from authorship are secondary, is another matter. Here earnings from a moderately successful Pelican are a welcome supplement to their income.[4]

The key to the situation probably lies in the fact that the higher-priced lines publish in editions of from 25,000 to 100,000 while the mass-market lines aim at around 250,000. Even allowing for the differences in price between them, the serious novelist would not profit, whereas authors of mysteries, Westerns, science fiction and "sexies," who never had a large hardcover market, may make more money by publishing directly in the cheaper, more widely distributed originals. Indeed, it is conceivable that the lighter genres might switch over entirely to paper covers.

Undoubtedly the paperback book is responsible for the revival and probably the survival of the Western novel. Without its economic stimulus, the Western story might exist almost wholly through television and the movies. In short, where fiction is concerned, paperback publishing seems to have its greatest impact on the lighter forms rather than on the serious novel.

In both hardcover and paperbound publishing, drama and poetry are more rare than novels. Yet here figures are in much closer proportion. In 1955, about 1% of all paperbacks were poetry and about 1% were drama, whereas a total of 4% of all hardcover titles issued that year fell in these two types. (No figures were available on the breakdown of the 4% into poetry and drama.) Whereas most paperback novels are contemporary, over half the poetry and drama—55 titles out of 91—came from public domain. Here, too, are a number of anthologies—16 in poetry and six in drama.

In selecting their authors and editors, both past and present, paperback publishers generally choose well-known literary figures. This tendency to take top names has both its good and bad aspects. On the one hand it presents the best at a reasonable price, but on the other it brings very little contemporary drama and poetry (though more of the former than the latter) to the public, even in reprint. However, the fact that the weight of numbers favors the older and well-established does not tell the entire story, especially for poetry. The few titles of an interesting young firm connected with a San Francisco bookshop consisted entirely of the works of poets, "both American and foreign, known and unknown." Another was publishing original poetry and reprints

[4] Sir William Emrys Williams, *The Penguin Story*, (Great Britain, 1956), pp. 47-48.

of its own hardback editions at $1.00 and $1.25. Both of these ventures are somewhat altruistic.

Fifty-four of the 91 poetry and drama titles were in the higher-priced brackets and were unlikely to be found except at bookstores. For those who contend that paperback books make the best in literature available to a mass audience, it is significant that less than half the small amount of poetry and drama published finds its way to the newsstand at popular prices.

Adult Nonfiction

Twenty-four percent of all paperback books in print, representing 1,144 titles, were adult nonfiction. In hardcover fiction the situation was reversed. Here 72% of all new titles were adult nonfiction.

The proportion of originals in nonfiction is much greater than in fiction—43% compared to 23%. Though the basic reason for the creation of originals is the same for both—paperback editors need more titles than they can obtain from hardcover publishers—the causes that prevent them from securing sufficient titles differ in the two areas. Hardcover publishers are generally more eager to sell reprint rights for fiction, especially in the escape genres where sales are limited and possibility of best sellers scarce, even for the most popular writers. And this is also true, though to a more limited extent, of straight novels. One reason is that, except for the rare novel that becomes a classic, time works *against* fiction and *for* nonfiction. A novel, even a best seller or a near one, tends to lose in popularity unless it is revived by a motion picture or a play. Consequently, it benefits the publisher to sell reprint rights.

On the other hand, nonfiction sales often gain impetus with time or at least maintain themselves profitably, so that hardcover houses are much more likely to retain them for backlists. Kurt Enoch, president of New American Library, a paperbound firm which does much with original nonfiction and little with original fiction, probably refers to this situation when he comments that the release of reprint rights is controlled by the trade publisher, and the paperbound publisher must fill the gap for what he cannot obtain by originating titles he considers important to his market.[5]

Quality of Nonfiction

There is little difference in quality between paperback nonfiction originals and their hardcover counterparts. The ability of the writers is about equal; often the same people write for both. Some of them are free lancers, others are subject specialists. The average nonfiction author has less to lose than the serious novelist by not publishing in hardcovers first. As Sir William Emrys Williams has said, writing is a secondary interest and a secondary source of income for many of them.[6] Also, free lance writers who specialize in nonfiction have a wider non-book market than novelists. General magazines (exclusive of pulps), which were heavy with fiction during the 1920's and '30's, have consistently cut down on short stories content until by the 1950's it comprised only a quarter of the content. Thus, nonfiction writers frequently have either their professional reputations or their magazine articles to bolster their mass appeal and are less in need of reviews than the novelist whose

[5] Kurt Enoch, "The Paper-Bound Book: Twentieth Century Publishing Phenomenon," *Library Quarterly*, 24:220-21 (July 1954).

[6] Williams, *ibid.*

market is more limited and whose reputation depends primarily upon his books.

The percentage of nonfiction in the higher-priced lines distributing through bookstores—and here Penguin is included—is much greater than fiction. Almost half of the titles, 472 out of 1,144, or 41%, fall into this category, in contrast to 67 out of 3,633 novels. In studying the pattern of nonfiction content in relation to cost, it becomes apparent that the weightier the subject matter the higher the price, and, probably more important, the less the availability.

In history 67 books out of 101 were from the more expensive lines, in science 41 out of 79, in philosophy 34 out of 50, in fine arts 45 out of 82, and in law eight out of 11. On the other hand, in biography there were only 25 out of 145 (much paperback biography is about entertainers). In cartoons and in fact crime there were no titles from the more expensive lines, in humor there were 2 out of 26, and in sports, 2 out of 25. Although by no means all of the serious titles come from these more expensive, bookstore-distributed lines, they—rather than the cheaper paperbacks sold at newsstands—seem likely to give hard-cover non-fiction competition and perhaps influence its structure.

SUMMARY

About three-fourths of all paperback titles in print in 1955 were reprints, drawn from a variety of well-known hardcover publishers. The majority of reprints and of originals were the works of established authors. The greatest influence of paperback publishing is probably upon light fiction, its main fare, and serious nonfiction, a smaller but important segment. Although there are many exceptions, especially in fiction, the better quality paperback titles are generally higher in price and less readily available to the public.