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## From Penny Dreadfuls to BookTok: How Technology Influences Reading and Publishing Practices

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# From Penny Dreadfuls to BookTok: How Technology Influences Reading and Publishing Practices

by

**Emma Grace Kirby**

An Honors Capstone

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Honors Diploma

to

The Honors College

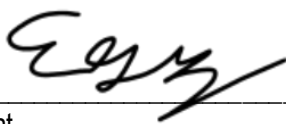
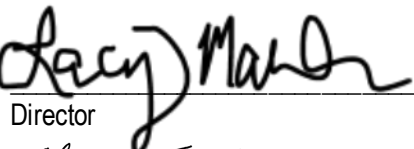
of

The University of Alabama in Huntsville

06 Apr. 2023

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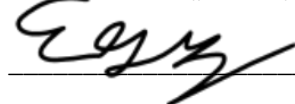
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**Dedication:**

I would like to dedicate this to my family who has always supported me especially during this research process.

I would also like to thank Dr. Alanna Frost and Dr. Lacy Marschalk-Brecciaroli for their encouragement and guidance.

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to examine the effects changing technology has had on both the readership and publishing of literature across the past three centuries. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were many changes made to the printing process of literature, which caused an increase in readership. Moving into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more changes were made to the book's physical format to make it more durable and portable because they were being donated to fighting soldiers in World War II. These changes were kept to benefit the general public as well. Finally, the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw the very first electronic book, which is the most recent addition to the different kinds of book formats. However, the main cause for the increase in readership in this century is BookTok, a highly influential subsection of the popular app TikTok. As we can see by examining these three centuries, technology has had and will continue to have a positive effect on both the readership and publishing of literature by affecting how and what books are being read. Past technological advances indicate new technologies will continue to change the way literature is read and published in the future.

## Introduction



**Figure 1**

If you were to enter your local Barnes and Noble, you would more than likely find a small table stacked with an eclectic selection of books similar to the one seen in Figure 1. The genres can range from backlist young adult to recently released romance to New York Times bestsellers. What do these titles all have in common? They were heavily talked about and thus popularized on a subset of TikTok called BookTok.

BookTok is just one of the latest examples of how technology can affect book publishing and readership.

Going as far back as the invention of the printing press, technology has always had an effect on literature, whether it be the actual publishing process or the readership of books. .

Beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, new inventions such as the metal press and wood paper helped make the book printing process easier and able to be done on a massive scale (Rose and Eliot 454-455). This allowed for more books to be printed and created more variety in the books being printed ranging from nonfiction to penny dreadfuls (Raphael 12). Transitioning into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, publishers began reprinting books in a paperback format to help combat high book prices and low readership (Haugland 233). Paperback books were especially popular amongst soldiers during WWII, which also helped increase their popularity among civilians who wanted to read the same things as the soldiers were reading to show support (Manning). Now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a new way to consume books came in the form of eBooks. More recently, BookTok is another technology that has affected literature, but it has mainly influenced what readers read

and not how as previous technologies have. In short, technological advances have always had a profound influence on literature by improving publishing practices and increasing its readership.

As it has done in the past three centuries, newer technologies will influence the books that are being read and how for future centuries. While the ways they will affect books are unknown, it can be assumed that the changes will continue to benefit both the readers and publishers of books as they have done in the past.



## 19<sup>th</sup> Century

### Major Technological Changes in Bookmaking

From the fifteenth century to the eighteenth century, there were very few changes made to the process of printing and publishing books. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, there were many new inventions that helped the publishing of books to grow on a massive scale.

One such invention was wood paper. Until the mid-nineteenth century, paper was made from cotton and linen rags; however, due to a shortage of these materials and a cost increase in paper production, other materials were sought to replace cotton and linen. Two materials were found: esparto grass and wood pulp. It took many tries to perfect wood pulp paper, but it was done through experimentation performed in the United Kingdom. Although wood pulp and esparto grass produced more fragile paper compared to cotton and linen, they were more abundant in supply and helped facilitate lower production costs of paper (Rose and Eliot 454). As a result of this, publishers were able to print a higher quantity of books. Although the quality of the pages was lower, the higher quantity of books being printed meant readers and nonreaders alike had more books available for them to consume at a lower cost than books printed on cotton or linen paper.

The printing press had a similar change in raw materials. Originally, books were printed on paper using a wooden handpress. Near the beginning of the nineteenth century, an iron press was invented. It was able to produce a greater pressure more evenly and more quickly without as much physical strain on the person working the press. Despite these advantages, it was more popular for wood-engravings rather than book printing because of its larger size. The biggest change to the printing press was steam-power. These types of presses were able to print paper more quickly than handpresses and required fewer people to work them. Unfortunately, these

were incredibly expensive, and they were not largely adopted into the publishing industry until the mid-nineteenth century. Some larger industries were able to buy them initially, but many smaller publishing houses were forced to use handpresses for some time (Rose and Eliot 454-458). While the newer mechanized presses were able to print books at a faster rate, not all publishing houses were able to use them initially because of their costly prices. Publishers and readers could not fully benefit from the faster printing presses until more publishing houses were able to afford them, but once they could, publishers were able to print and publish books at an exponentially faster rate. Since books were being printed at a faster rate, there was a larger quantity of them for people to consume, which benefitted both readers and publishers.

Another process of book making that evolved from being done by hand to being done by a machine is bookbinding. At the beginning of the century, publishers sold books to be bound by either booksellers or the consumer. This changed when the rolling press replaced the hammering process, which was typically used to flatten book's pages before binding. Although this machine was integrated into most binding factories by 1830, it would take another twenty years before folding machines would be as well. Until 1850, the gathering and folding of pages would be done by hand, but this changed with folding machines. Following the rolling press and folding machines were better solutions for book binding. To replace sewing, different adhesives were being experimented with to achieve better flexibility and durability. The nineteenth century solution was rubber adhesive, but by the twentieth century, many other adhesives were being explored and used. Adhesives were also helpful for attaching covers to books, which is the final component of bookbinding.. Many books were bound in cardboard sleeves or cheap paper that was meant to temporarily protect the books before being sold to the consumer. After 1830, books could have pressed and lettered cloth covers attached to them before being sold to booksellers or

consumers. With so many new innovations, bookbinding was fully mechanized by the end of the century (Rose and Eliot 460-461).

The physical quality and aesthetic of book covers and binding greatly improved with these innovations. Consumers and booksellers were also no longer forced to bind their own books since the process became fully mechanized by publishers. Although publishers had to spend more time and money binding and covering the books themselves, readers benefitted from not having to spend time binding and could simply begin reading the books as soon as they bought them.

All of the technological innovations and inventions mentioned thus far were both discovered and utilized in the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, lithography would not be fully realized until the mid-twentieth century. It was first discovered near the beginning of the nineteenth century, and it used a stone as the main mechanism for printing. Any words or markings made on the stone could be easily reprinted onto pages as opposed to letterpress printing which needed specially made metal blocks to reproduce works. Despite this newfound freedom, letterpress printing was more popular because it was mechanized and therefore faster. It would not be until the middle of the century that lithography was mechanized, and even then there were some issues with its mechanization. Letterpress printing was also preferred because the actual print and type had more depth as opposed to lithography's grayer colored font. Even though it had a late start, lithography has now passed letterpress printing in terms of popularity and use (Rose and Eliot 464-465). Similar to mechanized and metal printing presses, lithography was not used by all publishers when it was first introduced. However, when it was fully developed and mechanized, it did help printing books become a much easier and less time-consuming process for publishers. Printing books at a faster rate means publishers can print more

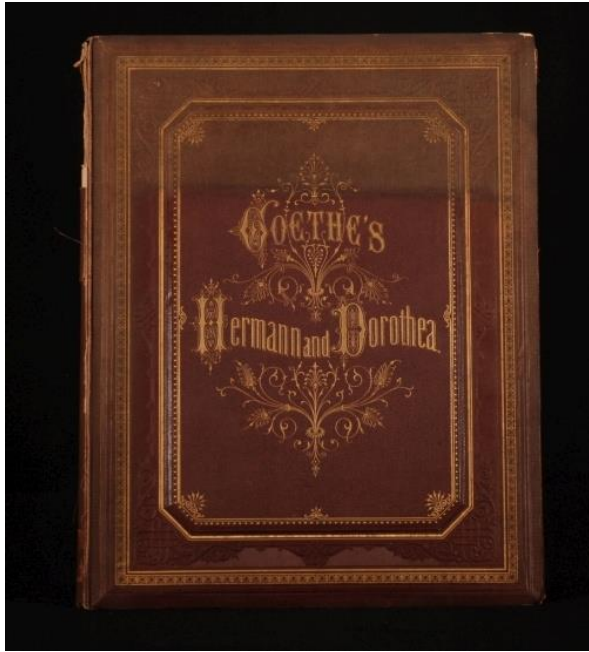
books for readers to consume. Unfortunately, the full advantages of lithography were not realized in this century but the next.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, all forms of book production were done by hand. By the end of the century, each process in the printing of books had become mechanized, which allowed books to be published on a grander scale. Although some changes were expensive at first, most publishing companies benefitted from the higher book production rates at lower costs. This was especially helpful when the demand for books increased during this century.

### **Penny Dreadfuls and the Consumption of Books**

In the nineteenth century, there was a higher demand for books and other printed material due to some of the effects of industrialization like an increase in literacy and education (Rose and Eliot 454). Fortunately, the newly mechanized publishing industry was now able to print books on a massive scale. In turn, readers were consuming books at a greater rate than in previous centuries. The publishing industry took advantage of the new cost-effective ways of printing books and the readers' increasing hunger for new literature to print cheaper books. Two examples of these types of books were pocketbooks and penny dreadfuls. Although they were printed similarly, their content differed greatly.

“Literary Pocketbooks” or pocketbooks for short, were very popular during the nineteenth century (Rauen 33). They were meant to be small and easy to carry on one's person. They contained a variety of topics such as essays, almanacs, poetry, and music. The real appeal of pocketbooks was how beautiful they were. A popular example is Goethe's *Hermann and Dorothea*, which was published in almost ten editions. Figure 2 on the next page shows an edition of it from 1870 (“Seller Image”). Publishers would often publish the same book in different editions so readers could have multiple options to buy what they thought were the most



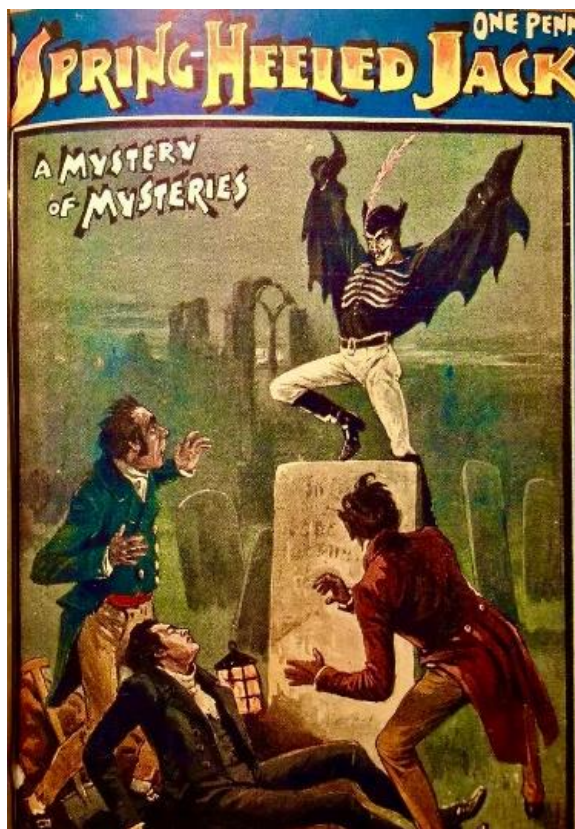
**Figure 2**

aesthetically pleasing. Unfortunately, their beauty did not equate to their quality. Pocketbooks were not meant to be read multiple times as they were prone to becoming damaged over time. Instead, readers were meant to read them once and purchase the new editions that were published every year. They were similar to serialized novels in how quickly they were published, but unlike serialized novels, they were meant to be collected (Rauen 33-36). The new technologies developed in this century and the demand for more reading

material helped publishers to profit more than they had before in previous centuries. Publishers took advantage of the newly mechanized book printing process to print more books even if the physical quality, not aesthetic, was substantially lower. In spite of the lower quality, since the demand for books and reading material was so high, readers were willing to buy anything being printed, even if the books were the same just with a different packaging. Publishers were able to use lower cost production of books and the high demand of reading material to make a profit. Readers and readership benefitted from this publishing boom even if some of the same books were being printed multiple times in multiple editions and covers. Although literary pocketbooks were very popular at the time due to publishers marketing them as collectors' items, they were not the most popular forms of books at the time.

The most popular form of literature in the nineteenth century was the penny dreadful, also known as a dime novel. Using new printing practices, penny dreadfuls could be printed as

serialized stories, pamphlet novels, or weekly short stories. They were not bound beautifully like



**Figure 3**

pocketbooks, and they were often printed on very cheap paper. As a result, they could be sold for incredibly low prices. Due to their low prices, their main audience was the middle and working classes. The “dreadful” term from their name came from the type of stories that were printed; they were often cheap, sensationalist plotlines that were used as a form of distraction and escapism (Dennings 1-3). One popular series was *Spring-Heeled Jack*, which was based on a real serial killer from London as seen in Figure 3 (Durn).

The stories varied in violence, romance, and

action, but they were often seen as immoral and

trashy for the time period. One reverend named Jonathan Baxter Harrison said, “They have usually no very distinct educational quality or tendency, good or bad. They are simply stories, - vapid, silly, turgid, and incoherent... [readers of penny dreadfuls] feel a necessity for it in much the same way that others feel that they must have whisky or opium” (Dennings 3). Many people also believed they were the cause of violence in American society. At the time, a young boy named Jesse Pomeroy claimed penny dreadfuls were an indirect cause of him becoming a child murderer (Dennings 4). While many literary reviewers heavily criticized literary novels as well and recommended nonfiction as a superior choice, penny dreadfuls and other forms of fictional literature were still incredibly popular (Raphael 12).

Both literary pocketbooks and penny dreadfuls show how the publishing industry was taking full advantage of their technological innovations in book printing and making. Since they were able to print literature at faster and cheaper rates than in previous centuries, publishers chose to print stories that could be produced just as fast and cheap. They wanted to keep up with the readers' need for new reading material, but writing stories of literary merit in the timeframe they needed to publish them was next to impossible. As a result of this, they were either publishing more sensationalist stories that often did not have a deeper meaning or republishing earlier works in better covers or editions. Both types of books were meant to be read once and collected as they were being published because of their lower quality in terms of physical format. In spite of these limitations of reading material, readership never wavered during this time, which encouraged publishers to print more of these types of books. If anything, readers' want of new books carried over well into the twentieth century (Rose and Eliot 467).

## 20<sup>th</sup> Century

### **The Popularization of Paperback Books**

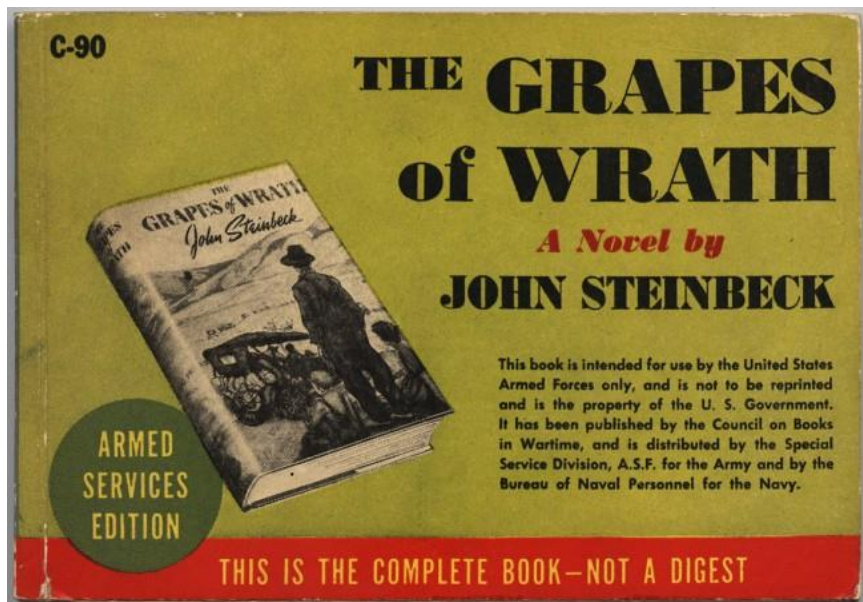
Beginning in the late nineteenth century, paperback books were beginning to gain some popularity, but it was not until the twentieth century when paperback books and their successors, mass-market books and Pocket Books, were printed on a grander scale.

The first company to begin seriously printing both mass-market paperback and regular paperback books was Penguin Books in 1935. They had a rough start, though; they had to sell almost 20,000 books before becoming profitable, and it took the company twelve years before being able to consistently print books without major typesetting and printing issues. Despite these setbacks, by the mid-twentieth century, other publishers were printing more paperback books than hardcover books. Other publishers were also using Penguin's guide to print their own paperback books more consistently (Rose and Eliot 467). The main reason companies were beginning to focus more on printing paperback books during this time was because it was cheaper for the readers and themselves. Although many of the technologies developed in the nineteenth century stayed relatively the same in the twentieth century, they were further innovated to help decrease costs for the publishers and readers. These innovations were exemplified in Pocket Books.

One of the more popular forms of paperback books was published by Pocket Books, which are different than the ones previously seen in the nineteenth century. The main reason publishers chose to publish books as Pocket Books was because of World War II. Before Pocket Books, librarians attempted to host book drives to send American soldiers in Europe used books to read. At the time, Nazis were banning and burning books wherever they could in Europe, so there were not many reading options over there. Unfortunately, these book drives were not very



successful as people donated books that soldiers would probably have very little interest in reading. This caused publishers to begin trying to come up with an alternative. Thus, Pocket



**Figure 4**

Books, or Armed Services Editions of books, were invented. They were small enough that soldiers could keep them on their person, and they were designed to withstand some damage which was perfect for the battlefield. Figure 4 shows an advertisement for the Pocket Book edition of *The*

*Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck (Oram). Also, since Pocket Books were reprints of popular hardback novels, soldiers were actually interested in these books, unlike those from the book drives. Many books had waiting lists of up to thirty people, although the physical books were estimated to withstand six reads. Fortunately, they were able to last longer than originally thought. Some popular titles were *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* by Betty Smith, *Chicken Every Sunday* by Rosemary Drachman Taylor, and *Strange Fruit* by Lillian Smith (Manning). Pocket Books' popularity amongst soldiers only helped boost their popularity amongst civilians (Appelbaum). As seen in Figure 4, many publishers were smartly advertising Pocket Books as "Armed Services Editions" to label the consumption and reading of these books as a patriotic act, which worked. These editions were of a higher quality than civilian readers were used to

consuming, so both soldiers and civilians benefitted from the technological and topical changes made to the printing and publishing of paperback books. Publishers were able to improve their printing techniques of paperback books to better service readers and earn a profit during this tumultuous time. The physical changes made to the format of paperback books by Pocket Books also changed how people viewed paperback books as a whole.

Before Pocket Books, most people still associated paperback books with penny dreadfuls and dime novels from the nineteenth century. This association was mostly true as they still mainly contained stories about adventure and mysteries aimed at younger audiences. Some publishing companies tried to change how paperback books were viewed by printing more intellectual books in the paperback format, but this was not really profitable until they raised the books' prices. It was at this time Pocket Books entered the market and greatly changed the perspective of paperback books by having differing, and often better, features. Their smaller size allowed readers to be able to travel with them more easily than paperback books because they could readily fit into pockets and handbags. Since they were meant for easy travel, they also had a durable, waterproof cover which many paperback books at the time still did not have. Also, in spite of their smaller size, they still had a sizeable font meant for easy reading. Pocket Books also had two main advantages over the other paperback books being sold at the time. One was their price, which was approximately ten cents less than other paperback books. Another was their content. Pocket Books decided to reprint novels that sold well in the hardback format, which proved to be profitable. Some popular titles were *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* by Agatha Christie, and five of Shakespeare's tragedies. Another aspect of Pocket Books that helped their popularity was where they were sold. At the time, the popular books at bookstores had high prices, and the lower-priced books sold at nontraditional

places like department stores and drugstores were penny dreadfuls and dime novels. Pocket Books was able to sell for a lower amount at nontraditional stores while containing the popular stories most often seen at bookstores (French 255-258). Although many of the printing techniques were still the same ones from the nineteenth century, publishers innovated certain printing technology to print higher quality yet lower-priced books in the form of Pocket Books. These qualitative changes along with the lower prices encouraged a higher consumption and readership of books, which increased the profits made by publishers. Pocket Books were a huge success and inspired other publishers to reprint their more popular novels in paperback format. However, there were some concerns about the longevity of Pocket Books.

Although Pocket Books were immensely popular, publishers were worried book sales would decrease after the end of World War II. During World War I and after its end, book sales were abysmal, so they feared when American soldiers returned home, they would no longer be interested in reading. This is when Pocket Books started being sold in nontraditional stores on magazine racks. Publishers believed if books were being sold in more accessible and visited places, both civilians and returning soldiers would be more likely to purchase and read them. In the first year after the war ended, paperback books did decrease in sales, but only the lighthearted stories. Publishers started focusing more on the serious works, and began exploring other genres and works such as “literary novels, histories, collections of poetries, and books about science” (Appelbaum). This is not to say they neglected the lighter works, but with the steady demand of more serious works, they were able to print a broader range of genres. With the increasing amounts of genres and stories, readers no longer held paperback books in the same category as the disreputable penny dreadfuls. Publishers were now able to sell more paperback books than they had in previous years. Readership also increased to include students, book clubs, and

middle-class workers because of the new affordability and accessibility that came with paperback books (Appelbaum).

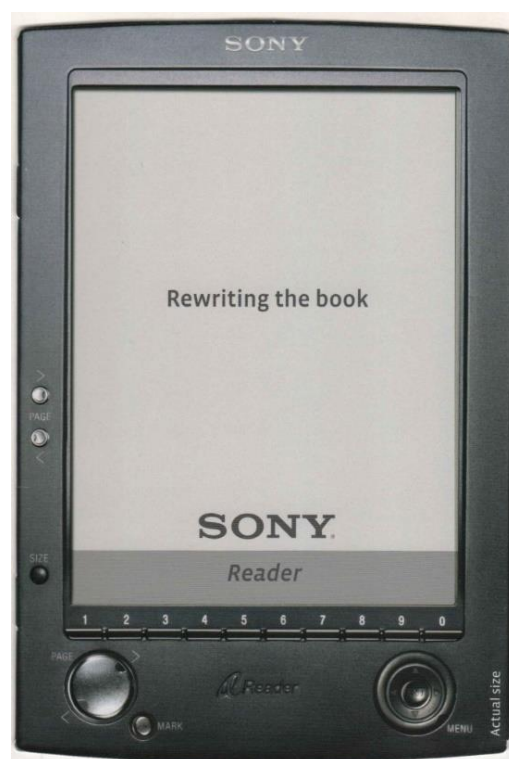
Although paperback books were not a new book format in the twentieth century, the innovations and changes made to their printing and publishing technology helped to increase readership. For the beginning of the twentieth century, most readers viewed paperback books in the same way as penny dreadfuls, which was not favorably. World War II and the need to send books to American soldiers forced publishers to change the paperback printing technology and format from flimsy to durable while maintaining the low printing and consumer costs. It also forced publishers to explore more genres as not all soldiers were interested in adventure stories or murder mysteries. Similarly in the nineteenth century, the demand for better quality books forced printing technology to be innovated to be able to print higher quality books. Due to the demand and new printing technology, publishers had finally been able to print a wider range of works in the paperback format. Readership increased because readers, both civilians and soldiers, were able to read higher quality—in literary merit and physical format—books. Before World War II, only the elite could afford the two or three dollars (now approximately forty dollars) for the new hardback books that ranged from literary fiction to Shakespeare (Haugland 233). The middle and lower classes had to wait for these books to be at libraries or read the disdained penny dreadfuls. After World War II, most of the American population could afford to buy new paperback books in a wide range of genres. After this period, not many changes were made to the printing and publishing of books until the twenty-first century.

## 21<sup>st</sup> Century

### The Rise and Stagnation of eBooks

Electronic books, or eBooks, are the newest type of book format to be invented. Initially, eBooks could only be read on electronic readers, or eReaders, but they can now be read on other devices, such as tablets and phones. Although first introduced in the late twentieth century, eBooks and eReaders were not really popular until the twenty-first century.

The first truly popular eReader was the Sony Reader introduced in 2006 (seen in Figure 5) (Kozlowski). Multiple other eReaders had been invented before the Sony Reader, but they were all unsuccessful (Smith 265). A year after the Sony Reader was released, Amazon came out with their own eReader called the Kindle. The Kindle is often considered the first serious attempt at an eReader (Zhang 10). The first Kindle was incredibly popular in spite of it coming out after the Sony Reader and being priced at \$400 (the price did begin to decline after its initial release with the newer models). Similar to Penguin Books with paperback



**Figure 5**

books, other companies began creating their own versions of eReaders modeled after Amazon's Kindle. With this new influx of eReaders from both Amazon and other companies, sales of them, and eBooks, skyrocketed from 2007 to 2010 (Smith 265-267).

Similar to other new book formats introduced in the nineteenth and twentieth century, eBooks and eReaders had many distinct advantages over their predecessors. They can store

thousands of books and can still be easily transported due to their smaller size. eBook shops sell books at relatively cheaper prices that can also be available on other devices like laptops and phones; for instance, many college students buy their incredibly expensive college textbooks as eBooks to read on their laptop (Zhang 7). eReaders are also being constantly innovated and updated.

Figure 6 shows the newest 2022 Amazon Kindle which retails for almost \$100 which is remarkably cheaper compared to the original Kindle's price of

\$400 (Kindle Paperwhite, Smith 265). With all of these advantages, publishers feared what this and their popularity meant for the sale of physical books. Fortunately, their fears were never fully realized (Smith 267).

Although millions of eReaders and eBooks had and continue to be bought every year, physical books are still preferred over eBooks by many. Recent publishing reports from 2018 show that physical books earned eighty-seven percent of sales of all books. Even a report as early as 2012, relative to the eReader's success in 2010, showed many readers still preferred physical books to eBooks. Furthermore, in a survey conducted about consumption of books both print and electronic, many readers who own eReaders still consumed books physically as well. They even believed they consumed the same amount of print as compared to the time before they bought an eReader, though they were often wrong. The survey concluded that readers still loved consuming physical books even with the advantages of an eReader (Zhang 12-13). Both from the



**Figure 6**

booksellers' and readers' perspective, physical books have been and are preferred over eBooks by most readers.

Why are eReaders and eBooks not dominating in sales and in preference? They seem to have many advantages over physical books. Nevertheless, physical books are still more popular than eReaders and eBooks, but this could be due to a multitude of other reasons. eReaders are no longer the newest piece of technology available. People may have lost excitement over it because of its relative age compared with newer technology like wireless headphones or the latest smartphone model. Screens are also more prevalent in our day to day lives than ever before with smartphones, computers, tablets, and televisions, so some readers may be feeling “screen fatigue” and prefer to read physical books. Readers may also choose physical books over eBooks based on the different experiences in buying and reading them. Many readers still like browsing bookstores and picking out books based on what they want in the moment. Buying an eBook just involves scrolling through different options until one sticks out. Readers also like owning a book. After reading an eBook, it cannot be returned or shared with others unless they have the same account. After reading a physical book, it can be shared, resold, or donated. Owning a physical copy of a book gives readers more freedom of what to do with them (Smith 269-272).

While they are not as popular as they used to be, eReaders and eBooks have still influenced both readers and publishers. Approximately thirty percent of Americans still use eReaders for the majority of their reading, and while their sales are still remarkably less than physical books, there has been an increase of reading eBooks over the last ten years (Faverio and Perrin). As stated before, eReaders have some major advantages over physical books. They can carry up to hundreds of titles in one small device, and they can sell most of them at a lower price than the physical copy. For many readers, owning an eReader is a much more effective way to

read than buying physical books. Publishers also benefit from eReaders and eBooks as well although they are not always the one selling the eReaders. It is significantly easier and less costly to publish eBooks than it is physical books. Writing books is mainly done through electronic means now as opposed to the previous centuries when authors had to either handwrite books or use a typewriter. Once an author and their team are finished with their book, the electronic version can be uploaded to the eBook shop with no issue. Publishing physical books, while easier than in past centuries, still requires a lot of time and work compared with publishing eBooks. Although eReaders and eBooks are not as popular as they were or as popular as physical books, they have still benefitted readers by providing them another format to read from and benefitted publishers by having another way for them to produce books even cheaper than paperback books.

### **The Influence of BookTok**

As of January 2023, the hashtag BookTok on TikTok has had almost thirty billion views (Macready). It is the latest technology influencing both the publishing industry and readership of books. Unlike previous technologies, BookTok has not affected how books are printed, but it has affected the popularity of certain books and reading as a hobby through marketing and promotion.

BookTok is a subsection of the popular app called TikTok; it is an online community tailored for and by readers to discuss what they love about reading. Within this subsection, there are also niche communities ranging from science fiction fans to lovers of dark academia, but the romance and fantasy communities are the two most popular out of all of them (Stewart, 2022). It features short videos where readers can discuss the books they want to read, recommendations of their favorite books, and basically anything pertaining to literature and their personal taste



(Jerasa and Boffone). The most popular videos are the recommendation style videos, and this is reflected in book sales. Many backlist titles such as *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* by Taylor Jenkins Reid, *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara, and *We Were Liars* by E. Lockhart have all seen a resurgence in popularity and book sales because of BookTok recommendation videos (Stewart, 2021).

While newer releases are discussed and promoted, BookTok creators and viewers mainly focus on backlist titles (*Word of Mouth; Books and Social Media*). The two most popular examples of backlist titles having a resurgence in popularity are *It Ends with Us* by Colleen Hoover and *The Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller. When *It Ends with Us* first came out in August 2016, it sold over 20,000 copies within its first month on sale. Since the start of 2021, it has sold well over 300,000 copies, and it is now getting a film adaption starring Blake Lively. This sudden spike in popularity is attributed to BookTok. In September of 2021, the hashtag “#ItEndsWithUs” had over 73 million views



**Figure 7**

(Stewart, 2021). Similarly, *The Song of Achilles* increased its sales by 240 percent in one week following recommendation videos being posted on BookTok (Roberts). The bookstore Barnes and Noble even published a special collectors’ edition of it as seen in Figure 7 (Kirby).

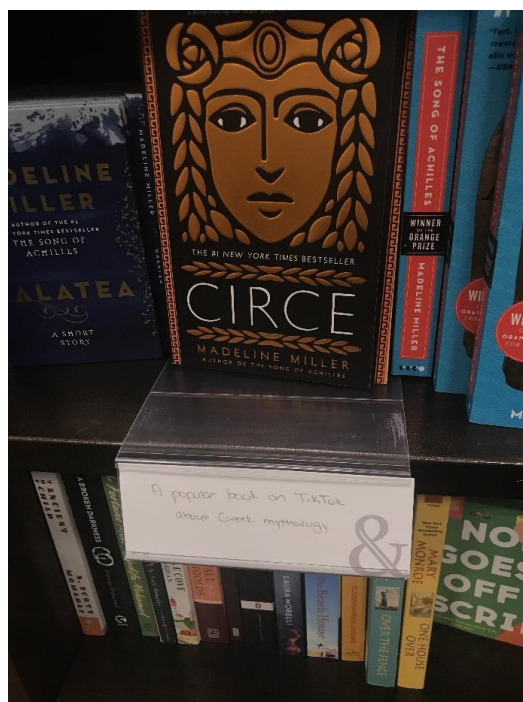
BookTok creators and viewers are also helping booksellers and publishing houses increase their sales by discussing and recommending books. Many readers will meet up at their local bookstore to film TikToks or buy the books they have been seeing most often on BookTok. These videos influence other readers to also shop or at least hang out at their local bookstores like their favorite BookTokers (Stewart, 2022). Publishing houses are also feeling the effects of BookTok's popularity on their sales. Bloomsbury noted a 220 percent increase in sales in 2021. The head of Bloomsbury gave full credit to BookTok and the creators on the app promoting their books (*Word of Mouth; Books and Social Media*). Many bookstores are responding to this promotion by supporting and promoting BookTok as well. They have dedicated tables and endcaps to popular BookTok books (Stewart, 2021). Their websites online have webpages full of BookTok favorites and bestsellers. BookTok has affected the publishing industry and readership in a way that has never been seen before.

While BookTok may be the first online book community to affect the publishing industry and readers on such a grand scale, it is not the first online book community. There have been multiple other apps to host book communities similar to BookTok such as Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube (each dubbed Booktwitter, Bookstagram, and Booktube respectively). The popular app and website Goodreads is solely dedicated to bookish content like book reviews, interviews with authors and staff, articles listing the most popular books of the season, and a yearly awards season where readers choose their favorite books from each genre. All of these other apps and websites have been around much longer, but they have not received the kind of viewership and attention BookTok has been receiving. The main reason for this is timing. BookTok became popular at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic (Jerasa). Most people were stuck at home doing almost everything virtually from classes to work to communication with loved ones, so they

started spending more time on their screens and apps including social media. The newest social media app at the time was TikTok (originally called Musical.ly). It flourished under this newfound attention and environment. As stated previously, BookTok alone has almost 30 billion views; it is incredibly popular. Time spent on these other apps increased as well but not to the same scale as BookTok.

With this attention and environment, BookTok has also helped increase readership. TikTok will recommend different types of videos to its users, so nonreaders scrolling through TikTok may have a BookTok-related video recommended to them such as one where a reader is crying hysterically over *It Ends with Us* by Colleen Hoover (*Word of Mouth; Books and Social Media*). The creators on BookTok are exceptionally good at inspiring readers and nonreaders alike to pick up their favorite books just based on book sales.

BookTok is the only technology mentioned that has had a profound effect on the publishing industry and readership without having affected the mechanics and printing process of both physical and electronic books. It increased readership and book sales through word-of-mouth promotion and recommendations. Many of these recommendations featured backlist titles that would not have received a spike in book sales otherwise. It also became popular at a time when some people began having more



**Figure 8**

leisure time due to a global pandemic forcing them to stay home. After people started going into public places more, bookstores received a lot more business and customers because BookTok was promoting videos about shopping at your local bookstores with friends. Unlike the previous technological advances, the publishing industry and bookstores have mainly profited from BookTok without really having to change anything about the printing or making of books. Their increase in sales came from readers recommending books to other readers on a highly viewed platform. The most work that was done was bookstores featuring BookTok favorites on tables or as staff recommendation cards like *Circe* by Madeline Miller, as seen in Figure 8 (Kirby). Through the promotion of books, BookTok has increased sales for the publishing industry and increased readership for books. It is the most recent form of technology that has had this kind of effect on the publishing and readership of books, but it will not be the last form.

## Conclusion

Technology has had a profound effect on the publishing and reading of books. In the nineteenth century, technological improvements made to certain printing devices and machines helped the printing process of books to become much cheaper and easier than in previous centuries. In turn, publishers were able to print books more often at cheaper prices such as penny dreadfuls and pocketbooks. The prices of and types of books being published encouraged an increase in readership in this century. Publishers were able to maintain the inexpensive cost of books while still improving the design and format of them to make them more durable in the twentieth century. These improvements were mainly for the soldiers fighting in World War II, so they could read books that were able to withstand heavy travel and battle. During and after the war, the general public also benefitted from the new book formatting when publishers began selling them in drugstores and supermarkets. The latest change to the book's physical format came with electronic books in the twenty-first century. Although they have many benefits over physical books, they are not as popular as they were when they were first released. The most influential technology in the twenty-first century is BookTok. The creators on this app have influenced many people to begin reading and have even benefitted publishers and booksellers with their posts.

Every mentioned technological change made to the publishing and printing process of books has made the process easier and faster. These changes have also improved the physical book's condition which has encouraged readers both present and past to buy more books, increasing the readership of literature. In BookTok's case, it has increased the readership which then benefitted the publishing industry.

Technology will continue to influence and benefit the publishing and reading of books. The ways in which technology will influence books will continue to change. For the past three centuries, it has mainly influenced how books are printed, but with BookTok's emergence, technology is starting to influence books in other ways now. This pattern will continue as technology develops. The publishing and readership of books will continue to benefit from the new changes in technology as they have in the past whether it be through new book formatting or because of online influence.

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