

THE CAMBRIDGE
COMPANION TO
THE NOVEL

EDITED BY
ERIC BULSON
Claremont Graduate University

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CONTRIBUTORS

- MARK ALGEE-HEWITT Director of the Stanford Literary Lab and Assistant Professor of English and Digital Humanities at Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA
- JAN BAETENS Professor of Cultural and Literary Studies at the University of Leuven, Leuven, Belgium
- ALEXANDER BEECROFT Professor of Classics and Comparative Literature in the Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC, USA
- ERIC BULSON Professor of English at Claremont Graduate University, Claremont, CA, USA
- VILASHINI COOPAN Associate Professor of Literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz, CA, USA
- MARTA FIGLEROWICZ Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature and English at Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA
- CATHERINE FLYNN Associate Professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley, CA, USA
- ERIK FREDNER Ph.D. candidate in the English Department at Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA
- HUGO FREY Department Head and Chair in Cultural and Visual History at the University of Chichester, West Sussex, UK
- DAVID JAMES Professorial Research Fellow in the Department of English Literature at the University of Birmingham, UK
- PRIYA JOSHI Professor of English, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA, USA
- SUZANNE KEEN Thomas Broadus Professor of English and Dean of the College at Washington and Lee University, Lexington, VA, USA

LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

JOSEPH KEITH Associate Professor of English at Binghamton University, State University of New York, Binghamton, NY, USA

JESSICA PRESSMAN Associate Professor in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at San Diego State University, San Diego, CA, USA

KENT PUCKETT Professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley, CA, USA

MICHAEL SAYEAU Lecturer in English at University College London, UK

ROBERT SPOO Chapman Distinguished Professor of Law at the University of Tulsa, OK, USA

ROBERT T. TALLY JR. Professor of English at Texas State University, San Marcos, TX, USA

HANNAH WALSER Junior Fellow at Harvard Society of Fellows, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA

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Finis.

PART III

Where is the Novel Going?

The Novel as Commodity

This chapter analyzes the novel as a particular kind of commodity as it circulates in global markets. Forms of prose fiction had existed well before the word “commodity” entered parlance around 1400 CE when, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term initially indicated “a quality or condition of things in relation to the desires and needs of men.” Later, when “desires and needs” became aligned with opportunities for economic exchange, commodity began to indicate property, then profit, and finally, its current usage: “a kind of thing produced for use or sale.”¹ The early reference to desires and needs reveals how much a commodity relies both on consumers (desires) and on commerce (needs). A commodity has a market *because* it addresses the desires and needs of its purchasers.

In such a context, the novel is several kinds of commodities. It is a material product, like others, that is fabricated both in small batches and mass produced, in workshops and sometimes in factories, processed, assembled, and eventually purveyed in a dizzying array of outlets and platforms. Beyond its circulation in the market as a “thing produced for use or sale,” however, the novel also enjoys a symbolic value that is frequently disaggregated from the market economy and might even be antagonistic to commerce, as sociologist Pierre Bourdieu notes. A novel’s symbolic value is created by its content, its readers, and its social presence in different cultures where it is ratified by the surrounding world of ideas. In these contexts, a novel’s symbolic value often outlives its market value. To study the novel as a commodity, therefore, includes studying its circulation in both material and symbolic realms as an object that trades both in commercial and in cultural capital.

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This chapter supplements literary critics' attention to the novel's symbolic value with attention to the material conditions behind its production and circulation. Doing so provides a fuller understanding of the novel's long half-life as a commodity in the global marketplace. Such an approach foregrounds methods typically pursued by book historians that demonstrate that the technologies of production have always played a significant role in the circulation and consumption of the novel. In eighteenth-century England, for instance, the novel was a commodity like others whose circulation was enabled by new technologies of print and emerging attitudes toward the individual, sealing the form's engagement in markets where content allied with means of production. In nineteenth-century Britain, meanwhile, the novel was initially regarded with suspicion for its questionable moral content. By midcentury, however, most regarded the novel a modern "classic" and developed it for colonial markets and domestic universities, ensuring enduring readership and sales. Today, the novel is a global commodity that is widely produced and purveyed across numerous platforms where it enjoys readers and influence, its popularity and prestige often in a competitive *pas de deux*.

This chapter analyzes the novel's multiple lives as a commodity. It describes the historical contexts behind the production of the modern novel and details some of the contemporary elements of its circulation and production. Further, it queries the novel's destinies in different moments and markets beyond the Anglo-French belt. Thus, though the focus in this chapter is on the English novel, in some cases "English" refers to the novel produced in England and in others, to the novel produced in the English language in places such as Nigeria, India, Ireland, and the United States. The focus on different contexts and cultures provides a more global dimension for understanding the novel's commodification that an exclusively European emphasis obscures.

This chapter proceeds in three sections. The first reviews book history's contributions to understanding the novel as a commodity and the circuits through which it circulates. The second section details the commercial success of the modern novel in previous centuries, and the final section analyzes the material and symbolic conditions that produce the novel as a global commodity in the current moment. The conclusion regards the shrinking space between metropolis and margins in the circulation of the contemporary global novel.

The Novel and Book History

In 1982, the historian Robert Darnton observed what he later recalled the "fissiparousness" surrounding the history of books. "Experts were

The Novel as Commodity

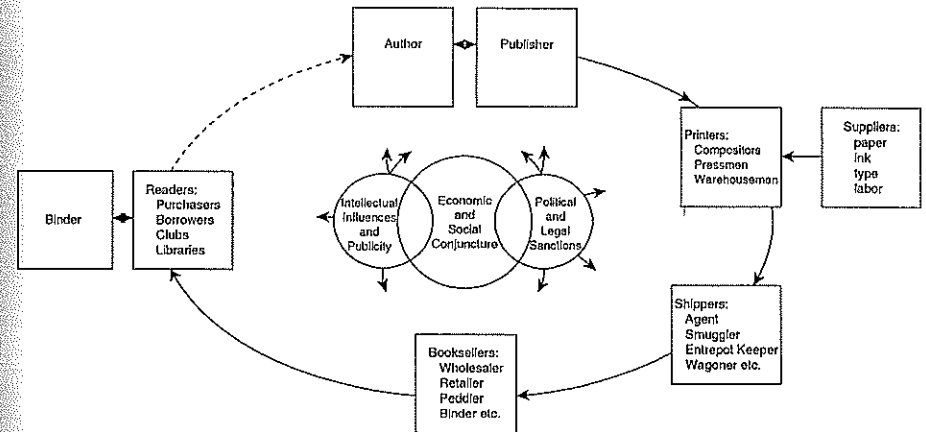


Figure 12.1: The communication circuit.

Source: Robert Darnton, "What Is the History of Books?," *Daedalus*, vol. 111, no. 3, 1982, p. 68.

pursuing such specialized studies," he wrote, "that they were losing contact with one another."² In order to circumvent the scholarly pointillism of specialized study and to understand how modern books circulated, Darnton sketched a communication circuit (see Figure 12.1). In it he attempted to show connections between the many components that constituted the production, circulation, and consumption of a book. An author wrote books, a publisher published them, booksellers sold them, and readers read them. Intellectual, economic, and political matters – such as the French Revolution in Darnton's research – influenced the circuit in numerous ways by affecting the cost of paper or ink (thus affecting publishing and print) or transport (thus affecting bookselling and readerly access).

Readers have a less clear influence on authorship in Darnton's circuit, as the dotted line in Figure 12.1 indicates: readers receive print rather than initiate its production. In this, Darnton implicitly adumbrates Karl Marx's notion of consumption as the terminus in a cycle that begins with production. In contrast to this view, figures such as Michel de Certeau and Roland Barthes proposed that consumption is "another production"³ and that readers, not authors, produce the books they read ("the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author," in Barthes' phrase⁴). The claim is largely theoretical, especially in Barthes' and de Certeau's versions, because stepping outside an empirical archive and reflecting on the particular alchemy that occurs when the human eye encounters ink on a sheaf is a fairly abstract project. Here even book

historians have little to say. Thus, while book historians such as Darnton have urged research on contact in the communication circuit, they have been less insistent on researching specific forms that constitute the circuit, remaining reticent on matters of textual taxonomy. Darnton's circuit reveals *how* the trade in books occurs, not *why*. It reveals much about the alchemy of production and circulation, less about the alchemy of consumption.

The fissiparousness that Darnton observed in 1982 has receded in recent decades. Yet somewhere between revealing the fortunes of a single text (the Bible, for example) and those of large aggregates – forbidden bestsellers in pre-Revolutionary France, as Darnton did – the extensive midrange calls to be studied more fully. Above all, the alchemy of consumption remains a frontier in book history: who reads, what they read, why, and how urge further study. “What fundamentally we study,” challenged bibliographer D. F. McKenzie, “is not so much the history of the book as the sociology of texts.”⁵ Doing so, he insisted, provides the opportunity to “consider the *human* motives and interactions which texts involve at every stage of their production, transmission, and consumption.”⁶ Thus alongside the social context in which books circulate is what McKenzie calls the “human presence” in consumption. Together the two help to explain the specific forms in which a wide variety of “books” (the term, for McKenzie, could include the codex, pamphlets, broadsides, printed lectures, discography, and digital forms) circulate around the world.⁷

Literary scholars have long viewed book history as the domain of historians and librarians, eschewing its methods and emphases when studying the production of literary forms. Histories of the novel, in particular, have tended to focus on the novel's symbolic capital (what's *in* a novel, who it is by, and so on) rather than its circulation as a commodity in markets where the novel's prosperity or decline is, in fact, a function of both economic and human forces. Observing the opportunities provided by book history, literary scholar Franco Moretti described its practices as “a new field, full of surprises: that however hasn't yet really bitten into literary history . . . There is a great diplomacy between book historians and literary historians, but true intellectual engagement is still to come,” he concluded in 1998.⁸ Those literary scholars who have “bitten into” book history have begun to savor insights that significantly renew the study of the novel from one focused on its symbolic value (broadly, its content) to a scrutiny of its production and consumption (i.e., the economic and social contexts behind its circulation). Together they provide new ways of understanding the novel as a commodity in a global marketplace.

A brief example from a prize-winning Nigerian novelist illuminates book history's promise for the study of the contemporary global novel. Early in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), two high schoolers engage in a mating ritual. The exchange that seals their bond occurs during a conversation about the books they read. “I saw you holding James Hadley Chase, near the lab. And I said, Ah, correct, there is hope. She reads,” remarks Obinze. He continues, “What about other books? Which of the classics do you like?” “Classics, *kwa?* I just like crime and thrillers,” replies Ifemelu, the young woman who, reading preferences notwithstanding, grows up to become a public intellectual writing a blog on race that inspires dissertations at Yale and Princeton.⁹

The exchange efficiently captures the destiny of the novel in the twenty-first century. Ifemelu's reading secures her status in the hierarchies of a Lagos high school where few insist on the distinction between “classics” and genre fiction as Obinze does when he inquires about “other books . . . you also have to read *proper* books.”¹⁰ The novel's symbolic value is such that simply reading one is what matters, not which forms one reads. Yet the exchange invites one to ask why novels by James Hadley Chase (1906–85), the son of a colonial Indian Army officer who wrote lurid thrillers set in 1930's America, ended up in a Lagos high school in the 1990s. Why was Ifemelu reading Chase? And how did his novels get to Nigeria in the first place?

Ifemelu's affection for the best-selling James Hadley Chase (whose first novel George Orwell described as a “cesspool”) indexes a world where the novel circulates around the globe in popular forms such as crime and thrillers, romances and melodramas.¹¹ Book historians who have researched publishers' sales reports testify that the fortunes of the modern novel are secured through enduring sales of popular forms that flourish long after their sell-by date has passed. Most critical accounts of the novel, however, have fetishized its “literary” forms and marked them as “classics,” worthy of extended curatorial attention. Ifemelu read Chase in part because his works were widely available in Nigeria half a century after they were first published in London. The high costs involved in developing a domestic Nigerian print industry meant that British books circulated most amply there in well-produced copies, and Chase enjoyed “unequalled sales in Nigeria,” according to Ibadan publisher Olaiya Fagbamigbe.¹² In wartime England, meanwhile, Orwell ruefully concluded that Chase's novels were “one of the things that helped to console a people for the boredom of being bombed.”¹³

The two reports reveal the kind of nuance book history provides literary history. Chase's novels rose to the top in certain markets due to the exigencies

of production and circulation.¹⁴ He remained a phenomenon there and elsewhere because of what D. F. McKenzie called the “human presence,” namely, his ability to appeal to the desires and needs of readers across time and space (as Orwell adumbrates). Attending to the material conditions of production and circulation helps to demystify the story of the novel, even as it enables scholars to identify the specific forms of the novel that enjoy widest circulation.

The novel is a particularly stable staple commodity, with different forms thriving in a global publishing ecosystem alongside other media such as film and the attractions of the Internet including on-demand content. A brief history of the modern novel provides context before developing some of these observations further.

The Novel and the Marketplace

In many accounts, the story of the modern novel begins with Englishman Samuel Richardson, a man of modest means who made a living in the trades as a printer. In between printing serials and parliamentary papers, Richardson published an epistolary novel, *Pamela: or, Virtue Rewarded*, in 1740. With *Pamela*'s commercial success, the rise of the novel was assured: Richardson had captured readers and markets that were keen for more of the new form. The past became prologue.

The triumphalist story of Richardson and *Pamela* obscures a matter hidden in plain sight, namely, the close relationship between the technology of print and the commodification of the modern novel. As a printer, Richardson owned a letter press, which meant that he controlled novelistic production in the most literal sense. Moreover, as a job printer with long-term contracts from the House of Commons, Richardson was assured a steady income that allowed him to take risks on other print jobs, as he did with *Pamela*. The story of the modern novel thus is closely aligned with the story of its production. Richardson's ownership of a press played no small role in supporting his experiment in producing the modern novel, a largesse he extended to other contemporaries, including Daniel Defoe, whose later works Richardson printed.

The artisanal, small-batch printing of the novel in the eighteenth century – *Pamela* and Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (1742) had first printings of no more than 1,500 copies each – is a story in numerous chapters.¹⁵ By the nineteenth century, however, the arrival of more efficient print technologies ushered in changes for both printing and the novel. The eighteenth-century British job printer that Richardson embodied gave way to Victorian publishers who now selected content that they, in turn, “jobbed” to a printer. British

publishers – not printers – became arbiters of content, increasingly careful in the products they pursued. Access to overseas markets enabled by an expanding Empire in the nineteenth century endowed global ambitions to the one-time small-scale artisans of London's Paternoster Row. The story of the British novel thus went from having a few chapters in its eighteenth-century telling to three volumes in the nineteenth century, and a symbolic and physical transformation in which both publisher and reader played key roles.

In 1886, Macmillan and Company launched a Colonial Library series made up almost entirely of new fiction titles intended for sale in India and other colonial markets. Pragmatic and thrifty, the family firm had conducted extensive market research, first building their brand in India as publishers of education titles, then establishing sales outlets there, and eventually launching the Colonial Library with novels exclusively for sale overseas, a venture that eventually underwrote much of Macmillan's profits and prestige in fiction in Britain. The nineteenth-century British novel, heralded in critical accounts for its close contact with domestic readers, was in fact always already a global form. The profits enjoyed by London publishers were as reliant on global readers as they were on British ones, a point that Macmillan's account books from the period reveal.¹⁶

The story of the nineteenth-century novel thus adumbrates its circulation as a global commodity. Indeed, the novel's status as a commodity helped to enhance its global presence. The form circulated widely, was reproduced beyond the putative text belt of Britain and France, and had a thriving local presence across numerous reading cultures. The “rise” of the novel that Ian Watt had described for the eighteenth century is actually many rises, a serrated set of ascents rather than a single Olympus or Everest.

In this context, of course, James Hadley Chase had to travel from London to Lagos, though why his novels might continue to be read there through the century remains to be answered.

The Novel as Symbolic Commodity

This chapter has referred to desire and need as twin strands that ensure the circulation of commodities. The final section reviews specific forms of the novel that fabricate need and desire. The sociology of the novel incorporates a circulation history, shaped by content – where desires are inked – and context – where the ink is consumed. As a commodity, the novel is an outlaw of a special kind, vaulting over established borders, sneaking around barriers

of taste and tastemakers, thwarting exchange-rate mechanisms as it travels globally, equally a refugee and a native, holding a key to unclaimed histories and unwritten futures. It has become the common property of those who come into contact with it, as James Hadley Chase's novels became for Ifemelu in Nigeria. This section reviews the nexus between desire and market in the circulation of the contemporary novel. It attends closely to specific forms of the novel and the stories that these forms reveal and conceal.

Midcentury theorists of the novel such as Ian Watt have claimed formal realism as the dominant procedure by which the novel establishes intimacy with its readers. Realism's focus on individuals and their subjective experiences ensured its enduring way in the world. It was not the subject matter as such but the novel's delivery that enabled its reach. "The novel's realism," Watt explained, "does not reside in the *kind* of life it presents, but in the *way* it presents it."¹⁷ Realism's focus on the subject found wide expression throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, where novels were frequently titled after individuals (a practice that even twentieth-century modernism never fully eschewed in novels such as *Ulysses*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *Du côté de chez Swann*, *Buddenbrooks*, etc.). In line with claims such as Watt's, to speak of the novel was implicitly, for many, to speak of the realist novel, referring to its most "successful," even "classic" form. Yet readers across the globe had tastes for a far greater variety of forms than the term "realism" conveys. "Classics, *kwa*? I just like crime and thrillers," replies Ifemelu when Obinze exhorts, "Which of the classics do you like? . . . You also have to read *proper* books."¹⁸

As the novel's production in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has gone global, it has established markets and factories worldwide that consume and produce forms that outpace European theories of the novel. Three examples help to illuminate the vivid gap between the novel's practical life and prevailing theoretical explanations about it.

One of the extraordinary discoveries that British colonial archives yield is the sustained rejection of realism among nineteenth-century Indian readers. The very details of the everyday that sustained Victorian readers in London alienated them in India. Indian critic Ram Chandra Bose reported in 1890:

I hurry over graphic descriptions of scenes which to me are outlandish; inventories of articles of furniture which it will never all to my lot even to dream of buying; vivid pictures of costumes which I scarcely expect to see; and portraits equally realistic of drawing rooms in which I should probably feel myself and be felt to be a fish out of water.¹⁹

Meanwhile, explaining the failure of the realist novel in Ireland, scholar Terry Eagleton explains:

[C]lassical realism depends on the assumption that the world is story-shaped – that there is a well-formed narrative implicit in reality itself, which it is the task of such realism to represent. The disrupted course of Irish history is not easily read as a tale of evolutionary progress, a middle march from a lower to a higher state, and the Irish novel from Sterne to O'Brien is typically recursive and diffuse, launching one arbitrary narrative only to abort it for some other equally gratuitous tale, running several storylines simultaneously, ringing pedantically ingenious variations on the same few plot elements.²⁰

Should the Indian and Irish cases suggest that readers' reticence toward classical realism was a colonial phenomenon, scholar Franco Moretti's research on the novel's circulation and translation in nineteenth-century Europe reveals that the form's European readers too "were unified by a desire, not for 'realism' (the mediocre fortunes of Stendhal and Balzac leave no doubts on this point) – not for realism, but for what Peter Brooks has called the melodramatic imagination: a rhetoric of stark contrasts that is present a bit everywhere and is perfected by Dumas and Sue."²¹ Ifemelu's preference for "crime and thrillers" in twentieth-century Lagos echoes desires that, archival findings reveal, were over a century old, widely shared among readers in London and Londonderry, Lucknow and Lyon. It is this reading preference that speaks for the future of the novel, as well as urges a revision of its current theories.

The cleavage in *Americanah* between "classics" and everything else is conveyed by terms such as "literary fiction" versus "genre fiction," both categories somewhat revealing if not altogether coherent. Genre fiction today would include crime and thrillers – Ifemelu's favorites – along with science fiction, children's literature, young adult, chick lit, lad lit, romances, westerns, fantasy, historical fiction, and adventures. Literary fiction, however, is not so easy to pin down. Some claim that literary fiction is complex, requiring sustained contemplation rather than yielding immediate entertainment. They point to its hybridity: a literary novel is often genre bending and stylistically innovative, demanding serious attention from readers. Thus Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), characterized by elements of fantasy, historical romance, and political commentary, is considered a pinnacle of literary achievement, worthy of earning its author a knighthood that its mongrel morphology might not fully anticipate.

The gulf between the literary novel and its popular counterpart emerged and widened in the early decades of the twentieth century when the novel and its reading publics expanded dramatically. "When a Mrs. [Eliza] Haywood [1693?–1756] sat down to write a novel she could produce admirable fiction, because she was in touch with the best work of her age," explained scholar

Q. D. Leavis in 1932.²² In contrast to the eighteenth century, Leavis observed, “[t]he bestsellers of the twentieth century do not change their courses because D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, or James Joyce has written; indeed, they have probably never heard of these novelists, and as we have seen, their readers certainly have not.”²³ For Leavis, the “insatiable demand for fiction – now the publisher’s mainstay – had to be satisfied by the second rate.”²⁴ “Worthless fiction” emerged, and the once homogeneous marketplace saw a cleavage: the common reader now read common novels; the more sophisticated read other kinds that got variously labeled literary or classics, largely ignoring that once upon a time in the West, popular and classic were the same as they were in the eighteenth century with Richardson, or in the nineteenth century with Scott and Dickens.²⁵ Anchored by research on reading and public library borrowing patterns, Leavis’ account conveys the historical demand for the novel, though she does not pursue why “second rate” novels became – and remain – such a mainstay for publishers and readers across the globe.

Leavis’ blindness to this phenomenon captures an insight that has come sharply into focus in the present century in worlds where both the novel and readers have seen substantial growth in numbers. Starting in 2014, after a decade spent lamenting the deaths of publishing, of print, of reading, and even of the book, Nielsen BookScan, the sales data provider, reported a rise in print book sales that has continued. Accompanying the rise in overall sales, fiction is seeing “more book sales than ever,” reported Nielsen’s president, Jonathan Nowell, with marked rises in “niche genres” such as juvenile fiction.²⁶ Markets such as India are anticipated to be the future for English-language book sales, with some observing that the country is poised to become “the biggest English-language book-buying market in the world” by 2020.²⁷

What readers of fiction desire in the world’s emerging markets for the novel does not appear to be high-literary fiction. Genre fiction proliferates in this landscape, its sales underwriting the risks that publishers undertake to pursue lower returns of higher-profile literary novelists. As publishing has shrunk from independent and family firms such as Macmillan to global corporations (once called the “Big Six,” there are now just five), vanguard publishers of the modern novel such as Macmillan are now owned by the German company Holtzbrinck. Publishers such as Penguin, which created the mass-market paperback revolution in 1935 by democratizing print so that literary fiction stood alongside genre titles, Hemingway nestled beside Dorothy Sayers, saw a million Penguins in print in less than a year, the sheer diversity of titles matched by the firm’s wide distribution in drug stores and railway stations. Today the majority stake in Penguin is owned by another German behemoth, Bertelsmann, and it is hard to expect the corporation to

initiate the entrepreneurial daring Penguin did during the 1930s under Allen Lane that succeeded despite the Depression and the Second World War.

Meanwhile, many of the popular titles that Penguin published in the 1930s and 1940s are today marketed as Penguin Classics, revealing the porous border between literary and genre fiction. It would be tempting, if not entirely accurate, to suggest that “classics” refers, at least in part, to especially successful literary novels rather than their canny commodification. Yet, as Pierre Bourdieu notes, classics are simply “lasting bestsellers which owe to the education system their consecration, hence their extended and durable market.”²⁸ Assigning certain titles in classrooms ensures that they remain in print – and thus become “classics” – even if they are not always read by reluctant students assigned to do so.

If individual publishers such as the Macmillan brothers and Allen Lane appear as heroes in the story of the novel during past centuries, today’s publishing paradoxically enjoys less symbolic capital even as the economic returns from commodifying the novel have greatly increased. Publishing today savvily manages the shape and size of the novel to ensure greatest profit at lowest cost outlay. Genre fiction enjoys its own bound size (the mass-market paperback, akin to a Renaissance duodecimo), literary fiction, a larger trade size (akin to the octavo), each priced accordingly with a differential of up to 50 percent that creates a rewarding economy of scale. Thus a novel translated from the Swedish might first appear in cloth priced at \$30, then a trade paperback priced at \$15, both targeted for readers who are not intimidated by reading a translation. Should the title secure wider appeal, it is reissued in the mass-market size and priced to move at \$10, as Stieg Larsson’s *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* (2005) was by its US publisher (2008, 2010). The nimbleness with which publishers produce, print, and price a novel underscores its commodification and reveals at least part of the story behind the novel’s global circulation.

Meanwhile, the proliferation of digital platforms has introduced new challenges for publishers. Glossy covers with prize-winning art, canny sizing, expensive layout, and book design are all rendered irrelevant in an e-book. Publishers of the contemporary novel have therefore settled on length as a new opportunity. According to a report in *The Guardian*, a study of over 2,500 titles appearing on the *New York Times* bestseller lists and Google’s annual survey of most-discussed books found that the average length of a commercial novel has increased by 25 percent in the twenty-first century, from 320 pages in 1999 to over 400 pages in 2015.²⁹ Reportedly, “people who love to read appear to prefer a long and immersive narrative, the very opposite of a sound bite or snippets of information that we all spend our lives downloading from Google,” observes literary agent Clare Alexander, citing

long novels by Donna Tartt, Jonathan Franzen, and Hanya Yanagihara and concluding: “clearly the literary establishment loves long books too.”

But the “literary” establishment is only a small corner of the global publishing market for the novel, which includes far more names than Clare Alexander cites in *The Guardian*. On the more commercially sustainable end is the publication of genre fiction, exemplified in the United States by James Patterson, whose prolific writing factory includes dozens of coauthors (including former president Bill Clinton) who have collectively published over 150 titles that have sold more than 325 million copies worldwide.³⁰ In 2016, Patterson inaugurated a new line of novels called BookShots each under 150 pages and priced at \$5 (“life moves fast; books should too,” his website announces).³¹ Patterson has a clear vision of what commercial fiction means: seventy BookShots titles have been published in little over a year, described as “pulse-pounding thrillers . . . [i]mpossible to put down,” in forms such as crime, science fiction, mysteries, and romances in which Patterson is already well ensconced at the top of national bestseller lists.³²

Patterson’s BookShots bear a remarkable resemblance to Allen Lane’s venture at Penguin from almost a century ago. In 1930s England when libraries and lending clubs still thrived, Lane defied prevailing market logic and chose to sell Penguins at an extraordinarily low price (6 pence) through Woolworths and transport hubs, places where people naturally congregated, though not necessarily to purchase novels. Similarly, Patterson uses the widely frequented retail opportunities offered by drugstores and grocery checkout lines to vend his novels for the price of a cup of coffee. Also like Lane, whose short Penguins were necessitated by historical context – in Lane’s case, the paper to print long novels was heavily rationed in wartime Britain – Patterson’s BookShots are produced in a moment when many readers already gravitate toward short-format prose widely available on e-reader ventures such as Kindle Singles. In both examples, novels are the low-hanging fruit placed in reach of readers who need make no special effort to acquire them. Patterson’s product placement further recalls the pulp-fiction trade in the United States in the 1930s. Titles priced for a dime were sold in gas stations where an out-of-work oil executive named Raymond Chandler discovered them during a Southern California pit stop, and a new kind of hard-boiled detective fiction took off shortly thereafter.

Penguin and Patterson – publisher and author – illuminate the extent to which publishing is a business, one in which the novel is a commodity that can be traded much as futures and options, staples and discretionaries. It appears to be a particularly resilient durable good that is both managed by and itself manages the market: it is both shaped by and shapes the contexts

of its circulation. The novel plays these dual roles largely because of what D. F. McKenzie called the “human presence.” It attracts a range of readers, transporting them and itself across real and imagined borders, often oblivious to regimes of prestige and fashion. Its fortunes rest on both its literary and its popular forms and on the readers who pursue them.

In this century, five global corporations manufacture and market the novel, but it is in the end the reader who produces it. When publishing has been indifferent to emerging trends in the novel, readers turn writers literally, quite beyond Roland Barthes’ evocation, and use prevailing technologies to produce new forms of the novel in a phenomenon media scholar Henry Jenkins calls “participatory culture.”³³ Rather than serving as ellipses to shade in a communication circuit as Robert Darnton’s model conveys (see Figure 12.1), readers today fundamentally define the circuit in a variety of ways. Stephenie Meyer’s 500-plus-page vampire romance *Twilight* (2005) defied publishing logic about genre fiction (that it must be short) and made Hachette millions in sales, inviting enthusiastic readers to its thriving fan sites that incubated their own successful forms of the novel. One novel initially “published” in a *Twilight* fan fiction site was the erotic romance *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011), which migrated as a print-on-demand title by an Australian outfit before being picked up by the mainstream imprint Vintage, where it had sold over 125 million copies by 2015.

Twilight and *Fifty Shades of Grey* are examples of popular novel forms that appeal to devoted readers but that publishing’s “Big Five” initially ignored. Readers’ viral passions rewired long-established circuits of publishing and print in order to make these novels available to others. In this context, readers became “authors” in literal and Barthesian senses, and they exploit digital technologies to also become agents, composers, publishers, and retailers of the novel. A revised communication circuit for the novel today would need to embed readers at its center as agents who propel authors and, in cases such as Meyer and James, bypass printers, publishers, shippers, and booksellers, all totems in Darnton’s book circuit (see Figure 12.1). Book historians Padmini Ray Murray and Claire Squires have proposed a revision to Darnton’s communication circuit for the digital age (2013), though their remixed model preserves the publisher’s power and prestige rather than recentering it on the reader, where it belongs.³⁴

Reframing the communication circuit around the reader enables the possibility of uncovering relationships that do not simply confirm the prevailing model but rethink it. Above all, a reader-centered circuit urges the study of the novel as a special kind of commodity that commands market share because it addresses the shifting desires of consumers. Trade and profit are

to be made from the novel, to be sure, though it is the human presence, in the form of readers, who are the arbiters of this communication circuit.

Conclusion

The novel's ascent in the economy of prestige (James English's phrase) has been enabled in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by what book historians have long identified as a book culture composed – beyond publishing – of thriving outlets for sales, reviews, book festivals, literary societies, and prizes.³⁵ An established book culture supports publishing and the forms that emerge from it. It acknowledges production and inspires it as well. In the twenty-first century, the culture of reviews and prizes has been a largely metropolitan phenomenon, with a clear preference for highbrow forms of the novel. The economy of prestige has ignored the novels of James Patterson, E. L. James, and Stephenie Meyer, even though their titles command a market share far in excess of that enjoyed by their literary counterparts such as Salman Rushdie and Chimamanda Adichie.

In a widely circulated polemic, the editors of the magazine *n+1* excoriate what they identify as the metropolitan conditions that favor certain forms of today's global novel, forms, they insist, that "can't help but reflect global capitalism, in its triumphs, inequalities, and deformations." They continue: "In the English language, World Literature has its signature writers: Rushdie and Coetzee at the lead, and Kiran Desai, Mohsin Hamid, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie among the younger charges. It has its own economy, consisting of international publishing networks, scouts, and book fairs. It has its prizes."³⁶ Despite the symbolic capital that the global novel summons in its particularly metropolitan economy, the *n+1* polemic is skeptical about its influence: "World literature . . . canonized by the academy, has become an empty vessel for the occasional self-ratification of the global elite, who otherwise mostly ignore it."³⁷ In short, *n+1* underscores the view that a chronicle of the novel that focuses just on its "classics" misses the real plot.

Theories of the modern novel that flourish to date have, perhaps unwittingly, tended to echo the cultural priorities toward their object that *n+1* observes. These theories absorb attitudes toward production and vigorously exercise what scholar Pascale Casanova calls a critical "right to legislate literary matters."³⁸ Spaces and countries "highly endowed with literary resources," Casanova writes, tend to determine what gets published, translated, circulated, reviewed, prized, and discussed.³⁹ The concept of literary prestige that modern theories of the novel inadvertently purvey originates in cultural hierarchies that are invisible to most. The "classics" that Obinze

covets are part of a "republic of letters" (Casanova's title) that praises Graham Greene as "proper" and relegates James Hadley Chase otherwise. The republic that Casanova is intent on revealing is a bit like the one in ancient Rome with a small minority ruthlessly restricting access to and determining participation in a treasured public culture.

Paradoxically, however, metropolitan book culture embodies a strange and inadvertent inversion: it advocates forms of the novel that are largely ignored outside a narrow self-ratifying economy of prestige, while large swathes of the novel that its metrics ignore enjoy a truly global base of readers whose support underwrites the economy of print in the first place. Ifemelu's preferred crimes and thrillers are an unacknowledged economic base for the "classics" that Obinze covets in Lagos. Casanova's and *n+1*'s gloomy descriptions of the novel and how they got this way thus has refreshing sparks from spaces outside the cultural core.

The insurgent, sometimes subversive popular forms characterized as genre fiction have been sidelined by the economy of prestige as well as by the prevailing metrics of scholarly analysis. Obinze's classics – "proper books" – were objects of study by Ian Watt and György Lukács, Roland Barthes, and others. Yet, despite being largely excluded from book culture and the mainstream economy of prestige, Ifemelu's popular novels shape and command a global circuit that draws readers who repurpose it as cultural *bricoleurs*. A brief example from outside the literal and figurative metropolis illuminates this phenomenon.

In 2013, the multinational consulting firm KPMG reported that "India is an outlier country, where print is still a growth area."⁴⁰ Annual revenues from print are a close second behind television and far ahead of film: print dominates in a country that some remark is poised to be "the biggest English-language book-buying market in the world" by 2020.⁴¹ A closer look at sales of the novel in India reveals that writers unheard of outside India, and largely sneered at within, have created an appetite for fiction that creates a significant part of these revenues. While sales of titles by literary novelists such as the Man Booker Prize-winning Kiran Desai languish at roughly 300 copies per year, those by Chetan Bhagat (b. 1974) catapult to the million within a few months of publication. Scoffed at for a colloquial style mixing Hindi and English, a reliance on far-fetched plot devices such as a cell phone call from God, and the prevalence of SMS texts and dialogue over narration, Bhagat's seven novels to date have earned him wide approval and sales among India's youth readers. He was repeatedly sidelined from the Jaipur Literature Festival, "the greatest literary show on earth," according to the former *New Yorker* editor Tina Brown, yet his novels outsell those of most

highbrow Indian writers featured there. When India's mainstream publishers rejected Bhagat's novels for not being "serious" or "literary," others speedily took their place to great profit, so much so that Indian publishing is now characterized in two phases: "BC" for before Chetan and "AC" for after.⁴² Like Penguin and Patterson, Bhagat (a former Goldman Sachs banker) developed a canny business model, pricing his novels at a fifth the cost of literary titles by Rushdie and Desai. Adaptations of his novels into the ruthlessly competitive Bollywood film industry have rendered those films top box office grossers for the new millennium. "The obvious dilemma," writes journalist Mini Kapoor, "is that [Bhagat's] writing does not have the complexity to be diced by the established instruments of literary analysis."⁴³ And yet this popular and even dissident figure has singularly become a mainstay in Indian publishing, even as the republic of letters looks on, nonplussed and contemptuous.

The culture industry in India is still obstreperous and unruly, and the "bourse of literary value" includes publics not fully socialized into metropolitan priorities that dominate elsewhere.⁴⁴ It is these publics that Chetan Bhagat's bestselling novels capture and preserve across the past decade. Ignoring a phenomenon such as this, in a market as big and deep as India's, is perilously myopic. Bhagat's command over commodity and content in the novel urges a wider lens in a study of the novel's future. In particular, the popular novel's mobility captures markets and readers across economic and geographic regimes, bringing new spaces into its purview as well as relocating itself to new ones.

In the current publishing world with its multiple platforms, the novel appears to combine a market once hopelessly divided between "classics" and everything else. It remains Hydra-headed, though with no single head leading its fortunes as a commodity. As media scholar Melanie Ramdarshan Bold notes, the digital public sphere has largely rewired how the novel circulates as a commodity today: "traditional publishers are no longer the sole gatekeepers of [literary] culture."⁴⁵ New forms of the novel emerge on social writing platforms such as Wattpad, where they are vetted by passionate readers and prove massively lucrative before a timorous publisher wakes to their potential, as St. Martin's eventually did with Amanda Hocking, the bestselling author of zombie romances. Wattpad's authors also include prestige novelists such as Margaret Atwood and the Nobel laureate Paulo Coelho, as well as Hocking and others less likely destined for lasting cultural memory. The platform, however, gestures to a culture where readers sustain certain forms of the novel and render them thriving economic commodities.

Ifemelu's passion for James Hadley Chase remains widely shared even today. Internet fan sites on Chase abound in Finland, France, Germany, India, Italy, Russia, Sierra Leone, and the United Kingdom, many providing extensive bibliographies of Chase's eighty-nine thrillers and commentaries on variants that convey an enviable amateur mastery typically reserved for "classic" authors.⁴⁶ Chase's novels traveled to Nigeria the way his titles did elsewhere: he remained in readers' affections and even helped develop them. In her first months as a university student in Philadelphia, Ifemelu replaced her reading of Chase's novels for those by James Baldwin and then William Faulkner: "as she read, America's mythologies began to take on meaning . . . And she was consoled by her new knowledge."⁴⁷

In the end, it is the attraction of new knowledge and consolation that keeps readers attached to the novel. Different forms of the novel purvey the combination differently in different proportions. As long as the novel addresses desires and needs, it will thrive as a commodity, both real and symbolic, and one day its theories will more fully detail the process.

NOTES

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