

# Twenty-five Cent Culture: *The Paper-Bound Book in America*

By ARTHUR McANALLY

THE CORNER DRUGSTORE throughout America has become everyman's bookstore. The drugstore, convenient for everyone, is open many hours a day, and it carries a considerable range of printed materials at prices within the reach of all, from the color books and cut-outs for the pre-kindergarten child, to comics and little books for juveniles, books and magazines for the adolescent, and books, magazines, and newspapers for the adult. Last year some 100,000 drugstores sold some 250,000,000 paper-bound books.

This method of selling books is a new development which seems wonderful indeed—a splendid forward stride in adult education and self improvement. But with this movement, now only fifteen years old, book publishing has acquired a brand new set of problems. Formerly, books were the aristocracy of communication. Now that they are on the edge of being mass media, they have become increasingly subject to influences and criticisms common to the other mass media: the newspaper, the national magazine, radio and TV, and motion pictures. Literature in the drugstore now must win the general sanction of our democracy, and therefore should be studied carefully and critically.

Cheap books for the education of the people has been a dream of many individuals for over 125 years, beginning with Lord Brougham of England in 1825. His book, *Observations on the Education of the People*, led to the founding of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, which had for its purposes the publishing of instructive books cheaply and the distributing of such books widely.

Nor is the cheap-book idea new in the United States. As a matter of fact, our current development in this field is the fourth or fifth effort to provide books for the multitude. Each of the efforts flourished for a time and then failed, for one reason or another. A brief review of these previous attempts will help us understand the current movement better.

The first attempt was made by the Boston Society for the Diffusion of Knowledge, founded in 1829 upon the British model,

with the objective "to issue in a cheap form a series of works, partly original and partly selected in all the most important branches of knowledge." In 1831, the Society began to issue paper-bound works in a series called the Library of Useful Knowledge; but the project was only moderately successful and after a while was abandoned. The failure may have been due partly to the competition of a series begun in 1830 by the Harper publishing firm. The Harper series, called The Home Library, consisted chiefly of non-fiction works in small format but sewed and bound in covers like regular books and priced at only 50c. The Harper series too fell by the wayside.

The second attempt at paper-backs occurred only a few years later, in 1841-43, when such books were issued for the first time as supplements to magazines. Fast magazine presses and magazine distribution plans were utilized. However, this movement was killed by cut-throat price wars—when the first magazine announced publication of the first supplement at 50c, a competing magazine a week later offered the same work at 25c—and also by the decision of the Post Office in 1843 to charge book-rates for the supplements. The magazine had hoped to avoid the higher book-rate by issuing in paper covers.

A kind of prelude to the third development was the beginning of the dime-novel series by Beadle in 1860. These were the famous yellow-backs or dime and half-dime novels. They were numbered in series and sold chiefly through newsstands and to Union soldiers during the Civil War—a picture of a dime was printed on the cover to prevent overcharging by the sutlers. Mass-production publishing methods were used, and there was almost mass production by a stable of authors.

However, the third major development really began in 1873 when the *New York Tribune* began a series of book reprints as occasional supplements to the newspaper. Sales were through newsstands, and the prices ranged from 5c to 15c. This idea, very popular almost immediately, was taken up by several publishers within two or three years. The books were issued in uni-

form size, numbered in series, and called libraries. As is true of most of today's cheap books, they were usually reprints. The works of European authors were not subject to copyright and therefore formed the bulk of most of the series. The Lakeside Library was one of the most famous, selling perhaps 10,000 copies of each title and issuing upwards of 1,000 works. These libraries were so popular that they issued over one-fourth of all titles published in 1885. Eventually, cut-throat competition set in; the quality of printing and paper became miserable; and the quietus was given the movement in 1891 by the passage of the international copyright act which removed from the public domain the works of European authors who had provided at no cost to the publisher the chief works he published. The end of piracy meant the end of this particular phase.

Following the bankruptcy of the cheap-book combine that was formed in the 1890's, there was no real cheap-book industry in the United States for almost fifty years. However, two noteworthy developments took place during this time: the rise of the Little Blue Books and the beginning of the book clubs.

IN 1919 a gentleman in Kansas named Haldemann-Julius conceived the idea of printing small books cheaply and selling them by mail. After various experiments, he settled upon a uniform length of around 15,000 words, a very small size, a blue paper cover, and a standard 5c price. The works were written by authors commissioned by Mr. Haldemann-Julius. At intervals he would advertise in newspapers and sell through the mail. He was successful; millions of Little Blue Books were sold far and wide. He was possibly the world's shrewdest student of the book market and of what makes for success in a title. His autobiography, in 1928, revealed fully and frankly the secrets of his business; his studies undoubtedly were drawn upon later by other publishers.

While his books covered a wide range of subjects and included many excellent if brief works, he had one sure-fire formula



for a best-seller—he discovered sex. He said in his autobiography, “one broad generalization can be made without any possibility of contradiction. High or low, rich or poor, read or unread—the interest in sex—the relationship between men and women, the attraction of male for female and vice versa—is universal . . . the dominance of this subject is inevitable.” More of this theme later.

The second event during this interim period was the beginning of book clubs, with the founding in 1926 of the Book-of-the-Month Club. It was modeled after a German club begun in 1921. Book clubs were very successful and they remain today a major factor in book publishing. They represented an effort to reach a mass audience by getting around the limitations of traditional techniques of distribution through bookstores; but otherwise book clubs have contributed little to the development of the following paper-bound movement.

The present cheap-book epoch really began in 1939, following very careful studies made the year preceding. Cheap books were said to be selling in England at a rate of 50 million a year. The name of the first firm in the United States, Pocket Books, often is applied to the whole industry now. Over a million copies of these 25c pocket books were sold the first year. Other publishers, alert to the opportunities, entered the field quickly and the industry mushroomed. Last year some 250,000,000 paper-bound books were sold, chiefly through drugstores.

Like all of you, I have been in many a drugstore and bought quite a few books and magazines from them, without paying much attention to the drugstore as a source for the spread of literature. Yet the drugstore has become an important purveyor of the printed word, distributing hundreds of millions of books and billions of magazines and newspapers each year. But just how good is its influence? Is it really as wonderful as it sounds? What kinds of materials does it handle? Who buys them? What effect do the drugstore sales have on other distribution agencies?

In an effort to find the answers to some of these questions, I visited a number of both chain and independent drugstores in Oklahoma and Illinois. I considered only what they had in stock at the time of my visits.

My first question was, what do they have for sale? I knew the reported national distribution pattern but I wanted to see if it were actually correct. I found that the average drugstore offerings might be divided into several different categories: 25c books

and up, juvenile books, magazines, comic books, and newspapers. Each of these groups was analyzed and counted separately, but the paper-back books are my theme in this paper.

The average drugstore displays between 300 and 500 copies of pocket books. About 50% of them are general fiction, 18% are detective and adventure stories, and 18% are westerns. Some 7% are miscellaneous, such as poetry, humor, and short stories, and only 6% are non-fiction. The distributions in both Illinois and Oklahoma provide 18% more detectives and westerns than the national pattern. It is obvious from these data that most of these books are published primarily for their entertainment value and not for educational purposes. The production of pocket books is a business, and the business of the publisher is to issue not what he himself might prefer but what will sell in quantity; he publishes what people want. The quality of the titles available in the drugstore, therefore, is more of an indictment of the interests and tastes of the general public than of the publisher himself. If he cannot sell above 150,000 copies of a book in a given time, to take advantage of mass production and mass distribution techniques, he cannot afford to publish the item.

**A** GREAT DEAL of rubbish has found its way into print in pocket books. Still, the reader, whatever his tastes, has for his selection a vast selection of inexpensive literature.

The largest group of these pocket books consists of fiction. Works of almost all prominent writers and many of the more popular classics are available in paper-bound. Good fiction in this group is not in the majority, but there are titles by Sinclair Lewis, Thomas Wolfe, Erskine Caldwell, Blasco-Ibañez, Thomas Mann, etc., etc. Nobel prize winners are represented,

as well as classical authors—not all at any given time but all at one time or another. You can get leading novels by standard authors, but the odds are against getting them by random choice. In fact, the publishers of pocket books have discovered that the author's reputation and the promotional campaigns of standard publishers do not have much influence upon the sale of paper-bound books. The audiences are different. Instead, the sales of pocket books are affected more by showmanship and by the covers of the book, about which I will speak shortly. I should mention that I have found in current studies an increasing number of fiction titles dealing with current social problems and controversial subjects, although the number still is not large.

Being myself a detective story fan, and a buyer of western stories written by those authors I knew personally when I lived in New Mexico, I used to consider that my time was not entirely wasted on recreation or self-indulgence when I read such books. I told myself that I frequently picked up interesting and useful information. I decided to investigate this pleasant theory, and went through some 30 paper-bound detective and western stories and listed some of these interesting facts. Here are a few of them:

- How to break jail
  - How to use a blackjack properly
  - How a communist agent works
  - How to cheat at poker
  - Courtroom procedure, spectacular
  - The difference between “accidental death” and “death by accidental means”
  - U. S. Customs procedures
  - Fingerprint routines
  - Gambling ship operations
  - Blackmail procedures
  - How to escape a sheriff's posse
  - All about poisons
  - How to blot a cattle brand
- After making this tabulation, I concluded

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



*Dr. Arthur McAnally, '33ba, '35Lib. sci., '36ma, Ph. D. (University of Chicago, 1950), returned to Norman in 1951 as Director of University Libraries and Professor of Library Science. His experience as a librarian had extended from Edinburg Junior College, Texas (1935-38), to the assistant directorship of the University of Illinois Library (1949-51). In 1948 he was Acting Director at the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos in Lima, Peru. He is a member of the Council of the American Library Association, and has published a number of articles, such as "Co-ordinating the Departmental Library" in the Library Quarterly (April, 1951).*



that I would have little use for this information unless I changed my occupation, and have therefore resigned myself to consider detectives and western a luxury, recreation, and perhaps an iniquity.

Outside of the fiction, detective stories, westerns, and miscellaneous, 6% of the total left is non-fiction. The subject-range in this group has spread in recent years from isolated editions of reference, self-help, and how-to-do-it books to an abundance of titles on philosophy, religion, history, science, the arts, classics, anthropology, and economics. Especially noteworthy is the recent appearance of experimental or *avant-garde* anthologies, such as New World Writing, now in its sixth number, and a variety of similar collections. Science fiction also is expanding. There can be little but praise for most of these non-fiction titles, selling in millions of copies to a clientele that never would have bought them otherwise. In time, the proportion of westerns and classics may recede, and the quantity of good novels and non-fiction take its place as public taste changes.

What has caused this mushrooming of the publishing industry into the mass market? Two main factors are responsible: first, technological improvements and the use of mass production methods in the printing and binding of books; and second, the adoption of merchandising methods developed by the magazine industry. A third factor, too, has been the existence of an enormous untapped backlog of original books for which reprint rights could be secured at a very low cost per copy—50 years of accumulations.

**T**HE PAPER-BOUND BOOK of today is printed on rubber type in high-speed magazine-type rotary presses at the rate of 12,000 copies of a 192-page book per hour. The pages are not sewed and then fastened into a cover as in ordinary books, but are bound together only with glue in high-speed machines which likewise can turn out 12,000 copies an hour. The binding is of thick paper; it will take a color illustration; and it is given reasonable protection by a glossy coating or outer layer. By mass production methods, the cost per copy of a 25c book is less than 15c. The author receives a 1c royalty, the wholesaler receives 4c, and the retailer 5½c, leaving only 14½c to pay for production costs, display racks, and profit. This is really very little indeed, but many times less than the cost of manufacture of the original edition in hard covers.

Fewer than 1,400 retail outlets—bookstores—exist for regular books in this country, and their appeal to the mass market is definitely limited. However, national mag-

azines already had around 100,000 outlets—drugstores—which have been adapted readily to book sales as well. Paper-bound books like the magazines are distributed promptly by the American News Company and a large number of independent wholesalers. The pattern of distribution of book titles to the retail outlet follows very closely the pattern of publishing—that is, throughout the country we tend to get what was published the week before. A drugstore can exert some influence on the book titles it receives just as it can on the magazines, but for the most part the wholesaler supplies what he himself has received.

These paper-bound books are merely displayed by the drugstore, and the patron buys or not as he chooses. There is no national or local advertising. Unsold copies are returnable for credit. Each title stands or falls on its own. Unfortunately, however, most of these books are bought on the spur of the moment, and the selling of the work has to be done largely by the advertising on the cover itself. During the early years of the pocket-book industry, these covers, though in color, were restrained and in good taste as well as related to the contents; but as time went by and competition became keener, the tendency was to use more and more lurid covers. A great many were clearly offensive, but even the most conservative of the publishers had to fall in line to meet competition. At first these covers were silent salesmen; later on they shrieked for attention.

A study of such covers in 1950 was given the title, "Give me Sex—or Give me Death!" It revealed that all of the publishers apparently believed that the most popular or at any rate successful covers dealt with some activity or relationship between the sexes, preferably between one man and one woman. One-fourth of the heroines were skimpily or inadequately clothed, and in addition, attention was riveted on certain feminine charms by overemphasis on 79% of the covers in which women appeared. Sex, direct or indirect, violence, or death were the activities displayed on over half the covers analyzed. For one particular publisher, 81% of his covers were focused on feminine charms; the lowest percentage was recorded by Pocket Books, Inc., with 40% of its covers thus offending. Since sales of paper-bound books are divided almost evenly between men and women, this peculiarity is difficult to understand. However, the whole idea is definitely a throwback to the maxim of Haldemann-Julius of Little Blue Book fame. All of the cover artists must have had fine Freudian training. However, I am happy to report that a definite improvement has taken place in the

last year and a half. Certain publishers have cleaned up their covers, though certain others have made no change whatsoever. Sex, sadism, and smoking guns have given way in many instances to still colorful but much more tasteful covers.

These covers, so often offensive to public taste, have proved dangerous to the paper-bound industry. Prior to the appearance of pocket books, books were, as I have said, the elite of the media of communication. Sales were limited and controversial books could be issued to serve a certain clientele without offense to the majority. But now that the books are mass-produced and made commonly available, they have tended to step from this privileged status out into the big world of mass media. As they have become prominent, they have tended to become subject to the same pressures and counter-pressures as newspapers, national magazines, radio, TV, and moving pictures. Radio and TV are subject to national supervision, movies have found it necessary to police themselves, and newspapers have long found it necessary to fight for freedom of speech. Newspapers, national magazines, radio and TV are supported in large part by advertising revenue and are subject to some pressures for this reason. Movies are not supported by advertising, but must strike a rather low common level of appeal.

Each book, however, makes its own way. A publisher can issue a book on one side of a controversial question and another on the other side, and both can be successful and his act a public service. If offenses of paper-back books should lead to pressures upon the book industry as a whole, to avoid controversy and conform to the average taste, the results would be serious. The Gathings Congressional Committee indicated public interest in the problem of paper-back publishing.

**E**NTIRELY ASIDE from the threats of some kind of censorship, which has been directed in large part at the covers rather than at the contents of paper-bound books, the mass-book industry is having other troubles. There has been over-production, unrealistic competition, timidity, and under-evaluation of American taste. All paper-bound publishers have accumulated excessive inventories of unsold books which have reached dangerous proportions, and as a result bankruptcies and consolidations have taken place. Returns of unsold books have been far too high during the last two years.

The publishers, therefore, have been compelled to reduce inventories, and some 60,000,000 copies were estimated to have been liquidated in 1954 alone. One pub-



lisher filled an abandoned canal with discarded books then covered them by the use of bulldozers. One great danger to any cheap-book movement has been avoided so far, the ruining of the market by "dumping." Along with this liquidation, several firms cleared up their covers, reduced royalty payments, adopted a stricter editorial policy, and in other ways tried to get their houses in order. The margin of profit to the publisher of a paper-back is so small that the return of just one unsold book can wipe out the profit from the sale of a dozen others. Incidentally, the author gets his 1c royalty on the basis of the number of copies printed rather than the number of copies sold.

Another problem confronting the paper-back publisher today is a shortage of titles suitable for mass distribution. The backlog of titles has been almost exhausted, and enough new titles of the right kind for reprinting are not being published currently. Some 11,000 new books are published each year in the United States, but most of them are not suitable for mass sales. Whole classes of books such as technical works and textbooks are not suitable, and many others are too limited in appeal for general distribution. One solution to this problem has been attempted by two paper-back firms, Gold Medal Books and Dell's Original Editions. These companies have gone into the new-book field and have published original works in paper covers at 25c. They appear to be reasonably successful in attracting manuscripts and selling the books. Perhaps others will have to follow their example, or else public taste will change so that more of the 11,000 titles published in hard covers will become suitable for mass sales. An increase in price for some series also has proved successful, especially for non-fiction works and for other works not available except at high royalties. The problem of how to find enough good titles is a knotty one that will not be easy to solve.

What has been the effect of these drugstore, newsstand, and other such sales of paper-bounds on the publication of regular editions? The publishers have found that the 25c reprints have little if any effect on the publication of regular editions. The conclusion has been reached that the drugstore reaches an entirely different clientele, which does not or would not buy books elsewhere, and which prior to pocket books may have read only slightly. The paper-bound reaches even the reader of only the telephone directory, and probably has created vast new groups of readers.

At this stage, I should point out that as fantastic as the figure of 250,000,000 books a year may seem, books are after all only a

small part of the mass media of information. About 90 to 95% of the adult population sees-listens to TV or radio every day. About 85 to 90% of the adult population reads one or more newspapers regularly. Some 45 to 50% used to see a motion picture every two weeks or oftener, though this percentage probably has changed lately. Finally only 25-30% of the adult population reads one or more books a month. This includes both books bought and books borrowed from libraries. Book sales have not kept pace with the increase in educational level that has taken place during the last fifty years. In time the potential market may become much greater, but if so, cheap books readily available are essential.

The establishment of Pocket Books back in 1939 was welcomed with great joy by the public and by leaders—ministers, educators, librarians, and critics. Good books at low prices were being brought to a wide audience and it was wonderful. It still is wonderful, but the praise often is now overshadowed by the criticism. Some of this criticism undoubtedly arises from what some allege is the increasingly dangerous tendency in our country to compel conformity to a common pattern and to stifle freedom of thought and inquiry. But this criticism also arises from an honest indignation, perhaps misguided and illogical, perhaps aroused more by the excesses of that shrieking salesman, the lurid bookcover, than by the actual average pocket book itself.

American democracy needs paper-bound books. Books meet certain cultural and educational needs of society not readily served by any other medium of communication. Complex ideas and groups of facts can be dealt with extensively and thoughtfully, at a pace suited to the reader. Books provide a voice for the different, with the thousands of titles which appear each year providing the means for expressing every point of view. Actually, some of the great virtues of books have risen from the fact that they have not been mass media. This very fact has given rise to problems which may become even more pressing in the future. But in a democracy growing as complex as ours, we must have better knowledge than can be secured from brief news reports and newspaper items. Books afford this means of educating for better citizenship.

Paper-bounds have become an important educational and cultural medium, providing relaxation and information for millions who otherwise would never have read at all. While it is true that paper-bounds do have their Mickey Spillane, they also have found over 4,000,000 readers for dictionaries, 4,000,000 for copies of a book on baby

and child care, and over 1,000,000 copies of perhaps 200 other titles. All of these sales were to new readers.

We must remember that the titles available in the paper-bound books are a reflection of the state of public interest and taste. Pocket books do not debase or retard the cultural level of the people; they only reflect it. The publisher issues what will sell; if he does not, he will not stay in business very long, for the mass-book business is a kind of quick-profit and also quick-loss proposition. Of course, the publishers issue a lot of detectives and westerns, and also a lot of fiction. But what harm is done by detectives and westerns, and besides most of the fiction is first-rate anyway? We should not criticize the other person for his poor taste and prevent him from reading detectives and westerns, if he gets pleasure from them, any more than we should prevent all persons from playing golf who are not skillful at it and do not beat par regularly. The level of reading ability and of taste varies widely in our country, but the reader should not for this reason be deprived of material suited to his interest and taste. If the public wants more non-fiction, it will buy more of it, and it will be only a few months until more is on the drugstore bookstand.

## Rubén Darío . . .

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to snatch the great secret is clearly manifested in *Prosas Profanas* in the form of a persistent search for the answer to the mystery of the universe. There are times when, forgetting his Catholicism, he becomes enraptured in the contemplation of nature with a pantheistic mysticism. At such times, nature itself seems to hold the clue to ultimate truth. In his poem "La Espiga" he attempts to interpret the language of the universe through a sensual perception of its beauty: "Behold the subtle signs made by the wind . . . They trace upon the blue heavens the immortal mystery of divine earth and the soul of things, which offers its sacrament in an eternal matinal freshness."

In the poem "Ama tu ritmo" (Love Thy Rhythm), the poet is eager to capture the various signs and sounds of nature in order to arrange them as the symbols of a hieroglyphic and then read the truth therein contained: "Listen to the divine rhetoric of the eolian song, watch the geometric brilliance of the nocturnal heavens, then string the pearls together, bead by bead, for there Truth pours forth its treasure."

In "The Colloquy of the Centaurs" he is overcome by the enigma of a double mys-