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Chapter 12 - Revolution of Printing Technology and the Development of Paperbacks

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Revolution of Printing Technology and the Development of Paperbacks

-Braden Shribbs-

The shift of the reading population in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from a primary focus on religious texts, to a wider consumption of fiction titles was predicated on an improvement in the machinery within the printing industry. The change, which included the Linotype and the Monotype machines, allowed for a quicker production of printed materials, such as newspapers and books.

Increased mechanization also resulted in the rise of the paperback as a new and easier way to absorb knowledge. This was a distinct improvement over the past. The paperback book disrupted the established way of manufacturing the printed word that had remained relatively unchanged, for the most part, since the time of Gutenberg.

The Machines: Linotype and Monotype

Two machines developed in the late nineteenth century were influential to the advancement of the worldwide printing industry. Both are equally important, but for different reasons. The first of these was the Linotype, invented and patented by Ottmar Mergenthaler in 1884. The development of this machine heavily influenced the newspaper printing industry to the point where remnants of the changes can be seen in the present day¹.

The Linotype produced a band of paper, which corresponded to indentations that represented the letters. These letters would then be decoded by the machine. They were punched into hot metal to create the template². Because

of the advancements in printing speed afforded by the Linotype, the efficiency and production of printed material changed significantly.

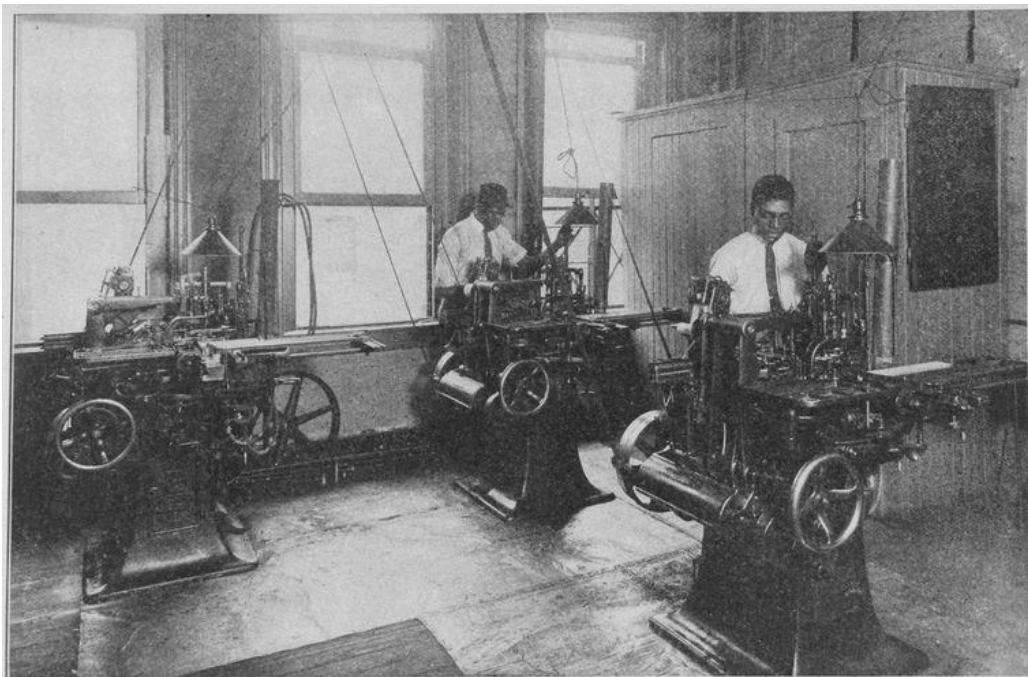
The changes in the printing process were disruptive in that they changed the way printing occurred. Originally, letter blocks were arranged to form lines of text. With this new technique, printed materials could be created at a faster rate. Another way in which the Linotype served to disrupt the printing industry was that it changed the amount of skill fundamentally required to print. The Linotype did not have the need for specialization in the movement of letters that was required by traditional printing techniques.



An Example of the Linotype Machine¹

The Linotype, however, was severely limited in what could be edited after the point of “setting the type.” Setting the type refers to the phase that revolves around the creation of the line of type that would then be inked and pressed onto the rolling sheets of paper. It was more difficult to correct mistakes that were made in the production of the printed material. This was later corrected by the introduction of the second machine. The Monotype was

created and patented between 1887 and 1889 by Tolbert Lanston³. The goal was to produce lines of perforated type on a strip of tape through a keyboard-like contraption. Once this was completed, the operator would rip off the tape and feed it into another casting machine that would create a mold of the indented letters. When compared to Linotype casting, Monotype casting had the clear advantage of being far easier to edit and correct. This was because one could remove a single letter of type, rather than recasting an entire line of type. This was more effective for book production than the Linotype machine, which was better equipped for newspaper production, as news is time-sensitive. This was because it was focused on producing material as efficiently as possible, which suited the function of the news media rather than the function of the fictional media.



MONOTYPE OPERATORS

Modern typesetting machines. A. M. Sunday School Publishing House, Nashville, Tenn.

An Example of Monotype Machines²

Paperbacks

The introduction of the Monotype machine caused a surge in the number of books that were printed on a daily basis. This allowed for books to be produced with the least expense on the part of the publisher, and would in turn be available to the masses at a cheaper price than in the past. Hardcover books were seen as a mark of wealth and class because of the expensive materials they were made from, including gold embossing and stiff cardboard. Hardcover books had been the industry go-to because of their reputation and the wealth they signified. However, a revolution to increase the availability of printed materials to the masses was soon to take place in the printing industry.

Two crucial elements caused this revolution and disrupted the present climate: design and price. The first idea was manufactured in the mind of entrepreneur Robert de Graff, who bought out a one page ad in *The New York Times* that read “OUT TODAY—THE NEW POCKET BOOKS THAT MAY TRANSFORM NEW YORK’S READING HABITS⁵.” The so-called ‘Pocket Books’ were more aptly referred to as paperbacks. It is important to note that the idea of Pocket Books was pitched towards American publishers. They rejected a part of de Graff’s original ad idea, specifically the wording of “will,” which was apparently seen as too much of a risk with American publishing companies⁵. In other words, the American publishing companies did not think that selling cheaply produced books with everyday items would benefit them financially.

The other avenue that revolutionized the book printing industry was the matter of price. Hardcovers were far more expensive to produce, with a price of \$2.50⁶. Size was also an issue. The bulky nature of hardcover books made them nearly impossible to carry around if you were out doing errands or travelling for a long period of time. Robert de Graff miniaturized the novel, condensing the wider and more cumbersome format into a petite 4 by 6 inches, and reducing the price to 25 cents⁶. At the time, no one in America thought this was going to catch on. The American publishing companies were wrong; they were not able

During the late 1800s and early 1900s, \$2.50 was the equivalent of \$40 in today’s currency. During the late 1800s and early 1900s, \$2.50 was the equivalent of \$40 in today’s currency.

to keep up with the demand for the new form of reading. This cosmetic change may have appeared simple, but it revolutionized the paperback book industry. The paperback paved the way for innovation through American publishing companies in the growing market of small-form novels.

Paperbacks were influential and disruptive for a variety of reasons. Location and availability proved to be the most important disruptive features of their existence. At the time of de Graff's proposal of Pocket Books, there were only 500 bookstores in America, which resided in only the most populated cities. Not everyone had the time or patience to go to bookstores and spend hours sorting through books to find the perfect book to buy. They wanted the process to be far quicker, like at the grocery store.

By placing the Pocket Books in places where large numbers of consumers were guaranteed to regularly gather de Graff placed the product directly in the hands of the customer, rather than forcing the customer to go out of their way to interact with his product. This was part of the reason that American publishing companies were wary of marketing Pocket Books. Bookstores would already attract those who were literate and had the time to go out of their way to get books for entertainment. This, however, was not the goal with Pocket Books and paperbacks. The Pocket Books, with the assistance of the magazine distribution industry, were marketed at drugstores, grocery stores, and airport terminals. These specific places received the bulk of the marketing because that was where people of the lower classes were known to shop and visit on a regular basis. This marketing decision proved to be a success for de Graff, resulting in 17 million books sold within two years of beginning his venture⁶.

The success of de Graff's business deal has been noted by many people. Historian Kenneth C. Davis, author of *Two-Bit Culture*, commented that they couldn't keep up with demand for the product and that they had

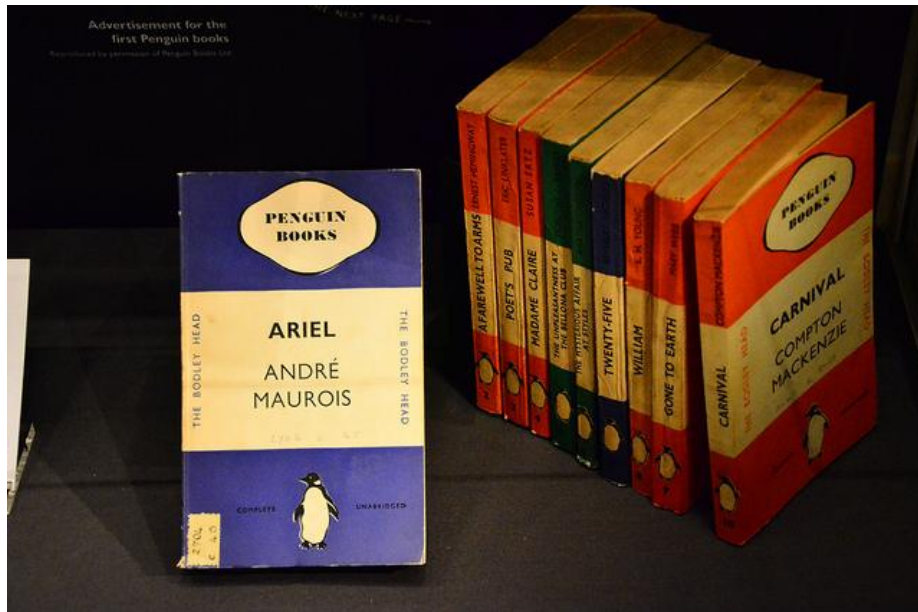
unknowingly tapped into a huge number of Americans who were not usually avid readers⁶. Following the early success of de Graff, numerous small publishing companies rushed into the new market. These smaller publishing houses merely wanted to cash in on an emerging trend and were not overly concerned with producing quality products that people wanted to read and own for long term reading pleasure.

The excitement of this new industry resulted in the production of a wide range of materials including mysteries, westerns, and poor-quality romance in order to exploit consumer curiosity. Many people, including intellectuals, referred to this specific growth within the market as a “flood of trash.” They did not believe these materials served to expand the knowledge and life experiences of the public. The inferior romances, mysteries, and westerns were also not seen as well-constructed due to the lack of prestige in the upstart publishing houses, as they did not have any widely-known authors. However, this resulted in the distinct American literary genres which are widely-known today.

Penguin Paperbacks

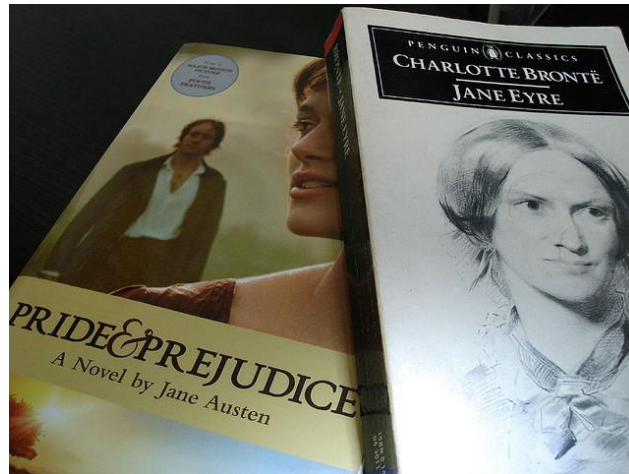
Penguin paperbacks resisted the belief held by the publishers of this era: the market for quality books was limited to a handful of elite readers. One man pioneered the way that changed how publishing companies thought about their readership. Allen Lane was working for another publishing company at the time and was coming back from a weekend meeting with Agatha Christie in Devon. Once in the station, he was annoyed and perturbed to find only Victorian reprints and popular magazines lining the railway station kiosk in Exeter. After observing this, he convinced himself that there was a need for moderately priced editions of good-quality contemporary writing⁷. He continued to ponder the idea of selling small, cheap fiction and non-fiction titles at the cost of sixpence apiece, which was less expensive than a pack of cigarettes⁴. This was of great significance when the public was not always thought to have had a desire to read. Allen Lane’s company, Penguin, was established in July of 1935

and radically changed the reading habits and lives of those who lived in the English-speaking world⁷.



The first 10 Penguin books³

The first set of paperbacks that Penguin published included: *Ariel: A Shelley Romance* by André Maurois, *A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway, *Poet's Pub* by Eric Linklater, *Madame Claire* by Susan Ertz, *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* by Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* by Agatha Christie, *Twenty-Five* by Beverley Nichols, *William* by E.H. Young, *Gone to Earth* by Mary Webb, and *Carnival* by Compton Mackenzie⁸.



Example of Penguin Classics⁴

Penguin set themselves apart as a company due to their revolutionary system of paperback classification. This system successfully broke new ground when it defined the differences between various genres. Each genre had its own respective color: orange for fiction, green represented crime novels, pink stood for travel and adventure, dark blue was for biographies, red signified drama, purple was for essays, yellow was for miscellaneous subjects like crosswords, and gray was for world affairs. When consumers were looking at someone who was reading, they would be able to see the Penguin symbol on the book, quickly observe the color, and determine what type of book they were reading. Penguin also employed a number of branches within their company to assist in specialized production of different material. Among these divisions were: Pelican who used light blue for non-fiction, Ptarmigan Books who published puzzles and word games, Puffin Books produced children's books under the Penguin banner, and Peacock focused on young adult readers⁹.

Penguin books were disruptive because they truly provided a system of classification for their products that were recognizable at a glance. In addition, the name recognition that came with publishing well-known authors was beneficial in giving weight to the credibility of Penguin's high-quality paperbacks and novels.

Penguin is a great example of a relatively new company that was offering a wide selection of material for new readers at a fraction of the cost of traditional hardcover prices. And whose products later gained prestige because they were shown to be of superior quality to the previously made Dime Novels and chapbooks. What did this all mean for the American reading public?

It meant that they were able to choose books more confidently. They could now go up to a shelf in a convenience store, bookstore, or a railway station and clearly see from simply the color of the book what genre it contained. They might not know all of the details, like the plot and things of that nature, but they would have a far better understanding of what they were buying simply on face value. The average consumer was more inclined to casually pick up a book and start reading it because they already knew what they were purchasing: a good quality, well-written book. The paperbacks that were manufactured by Penguin were a vast improvement over the previous productions as they would not have to spend large amounts of time sorting through reading material that could possibly not be up to their expectations.



Penguin Paperbacks are still collected today.⁵

The Lasting Effects of Mechanization

Machine-led production allowed for quicker printing and distribution to the public for both newspapers and novels. The public was then able to consume this information at a faster pace and was hungry for more. When American publishers saw that books and newspapers were selling out quicker than previously thought they saw this as an increase in demand. Because of the rise in demand for printed materials, the publishing companies would produce more printed material to meet the wishes of the public. The public's hunger for new and interesting reading material would not be stifled now that it had been awakened. These changes resulted in a larger market for literature of all kinds that suited a wide range of tastes. The diversity of reading material available to people, including fictional books to escape mundane life and academic texts to enrich the mind, showed the paperback had done what it was meant to do: open up the world of reading to as many people as possible.

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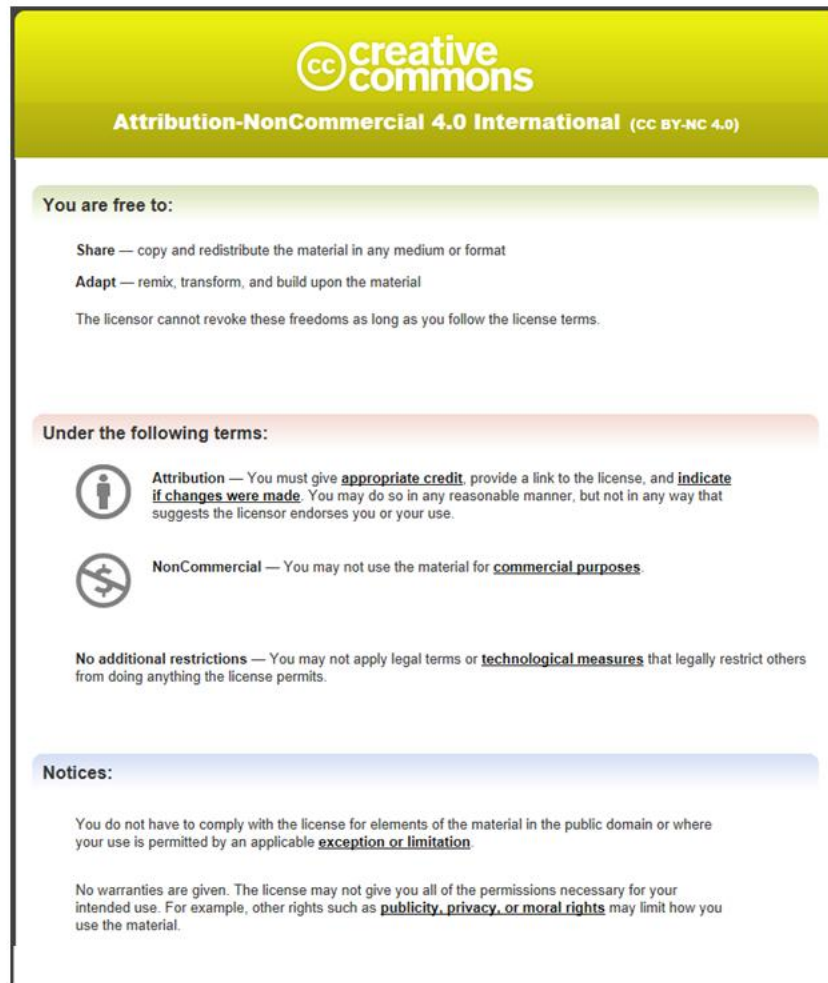
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