Book Club Publishing

DONALD E. STROUT

Thirty-two years ago, the first American book club sent out its first choice to 4,620 members. Multiply this one club by 100 and the 4,620 members by 1,500 and you have an approximate idea of the magnitude of the present-day American book club enterprise.

The book club finds its archetype in German book publishing. Conceived as an idea to bolster a sagging market and combat the chaos of the post World War I years, the German clubs were publisher-operated by mail on a set subscription basis—four choices a year in a distinctive format at a bargain rate. The first such was the Volksverband der Bücherfreunde in 1919. In 1924, the newly formed Deutsche Buch Gemeinschaft, destined for a 400,000 membership by 1938, offered the added inducements of alternates and a magazine for members.

Closely defined and often vertically operated by one firm from papermaking to sales, these clubs contained the seeds of later book club operation on the Continent and in the United States—mail-order distribution to members, club (as distinct from trade) editions, minimum number of choices yearly, and a bulletin for members. The British book clubs of today, aptly summarized by John Baker, are much more closely regulated and controlled than the American clubs, although, as in the United States, in both Britain and France one hears the booksellers lament the threat they pose, as they play their dual role of publisher (producing the product, guiding the sales effort, and setting the price), and (retailer selling direct by mail to consumer).

The middle 1920's in the United States found the once enormously successful sales of sets of books, door-to-door and by mail, dwindling. These sales had set the stage, and indeed provided the founders, for

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the first American book club, at once like its German predecessors in subscription by mail to members and yet unlike them in its emphasis on new books, chosen by a jury of experts, bought outright from various publishers, and sold by an independent organization. The story of Harry Scherman, Robert Haas, the beginnings of the Book-of-the-Month Club, and its subsequent history is too well known to need further mention. Thanks to the Club's numerous and detailed reports, studies of membership, and the statements and speeches of both management and judges, BOMC is the best documented and most often cited of any of the clubs, past or present.

Next to become active on the American scene, though incorporated by Samuel Craig five years before BOMC, was the Literary Guild of America, referred to at its inception as a "publishing book club" — a distinction which serves to emphasize how much more closely it resembled the German clubs than did BOMC. Club and publisher were synonymous; subscriptions were accepted and paid for on an annual basis—a practice also adopted but early abandoned by BOMC; and price comparison with the trade edition was emphasized. Like BOMC, the LG's choices were to be new, i.e., current, books. Unlike BOMC, which at first bought copies of the publisher's own trade edition at 70 per cent discount for distribution to members, LG rented the publisher's original plates on a flat fee basis and published its own club edition—a practice to which BOMC turned within four years, and which most of the later clubs followed.

By 1930, no less than fifteen clubs, not counting those issuing limited editions, were in operation. Of these, six (Book League of America, BOMC, Catholic Book Club, Junior Literary Guild, LG, and Religious Book Club), to which could be added a seventh (Limited Editions Club), are still in operation—a remarkable record of longevity, considering the rate at which clubs are born and die.

Sixteen years and another world war later, the book clubs had increased to some fifty or more and were collectively experiencing their best year of their twenty year history. The reasons for this appear numerous and involved, but certainly, as F. L. Mott points out, the increased wartime reading by civilians at home and (through the paperbound Armed Services Editions) by servicemen overseas, along with improved methods of fast printing and binding, were important related factors. The birth of seventeen clubs in 1946 attests the

* Hereafter referred to as BOMC.
** Hereafter referred to as LG.
vigor of the clubs; the disappearance of nine of the seventeen within two years is a sad but sufficient commentary on book club mortality.

The fifty or more clubs involving three to four million members then, as now, ran the gamut in size from giant to midget, and to speak of an “average” size would be an absurdity. The “special interest” clubs were in evidence—indeed one or two, like Religious Book Club (1927), Catholic Book Club (1928) and Limited Editions Club (1929), had been around for some time. There were clubs for mystery and history readers, “one-worlders,” laborers, Negroes, and executives. Several clubs for the younger set—Junior Literary Guild (1929), Junior Heritage Club (1945), and Literary Guild’s Young People’s Division (1946)—were functioning; numerous others similarly conceived had been short-lived, despite such eye-catching titles as Surprise Package Book Club and Bread, Butter ’n Sugar. The newly formed TAB (Teen Age Book Club) combined an appeal to an age group with the burgeoning popularity of the paperback. Among the giant clubs, the prestige approach (“These are the best books in the eyes of the experts”) jockeyed with the price differential approach (“Let the club provide you with good reading at a bargain rate”) for favor, and the two approaches tended to become all but indistinguishable as the clubs sought to extend their membership lists. At least one club operator, having profitably tapped one economic level with an essentially snob appeal (Limited Editions Club), addressed the same appeal, couched in more popular terms, to a second level (Heritage Club and Junior Heritage Club), and finally approached a third level (Readers Club), all the while preserving the original dual emphasis on quality of content and quality of book design.

If the two decades prior to 1947 were years of formation and growth, they were years of dissension and controversy as well. As O. H. Cheney, in his now classic Survey, pithily expressed it, “The detonating question as to whether the selection of a title by a club helps or hinders the bookstore sales lights another of those flaming controversies which are fed with ‘if’ statistics.” Although that survey appeared twenty-seven years ago, none of the numerous later accounts of the bookseller-publisher-book club controversy with which the literature is replete approaches it in candor, color, and near clairvoyance.

From the outset, bookseller hostility was assured. BOMC’s initial offer of fifteen books for the price of twelve in one year—an offer quickly withdrawn—along with LG’s “antagonistic advertising” pro-
claiming bookish desolation throughout the land and emphasizing price comparison won them few friends in the retail trade.

The early days found publisher ranged alongside bookseller in protesting the upstart clubs as the latest "menace" to the industry. LG's club edition was an unwelcome competitor to his trade edition. Although BOMC managed to avoid that particular bone of contention by using the trade edition in its early years, it soon found itself under prolonged attack by Dutton's crusty John Macrae for its methods of selection as well as for its allegedly deleterious effects upon the reading public at large. Following Macrae's impassioned speech at the American Booksellers' Association 1929 convention, the A.B.A. issued what proved to be the first, and perhaps the most sharply worded, of a long series of protests against the clubs.

With the passage of time, publisher opposition diminished, a fact doubtless attributable to the very considerable financial advantage which the sale of rights to clubs with growing memberships represented. Meanwhile, for the bookseller, such developments as the exemption of book clubs from the fair trade contracts of the 1930's, the use or abuse of that exemption by department stores (Macy's et al.), and the clubs' increased emphasis on free books were new sources of friction. In the 1940's, except for sporadic outbursts, things took a turn for the better. One survey showed that, of 225 booksellers interviewed, 42 per cent felt that book clubs helped their sales, while only 25 per cent held the opposite view. However, the two-decade-old controversy, though softening, was not settled. It remained for the Federal Trade Commission's decisions of the 1950's to resolve, at least legally, issues raised years before. The A.B.A.'s "leased plates project" ended unsuccessfully when it was held that the exclusive leasing of plates by publisher was within the law. The use of "free books" by the clubs in advertising was upheld; the right of publisher to specify simultaneous release of trade and club edition was upheld; the right of club choices to price protection was denied—the last a kind of Pyrrhic victory for the bookseller who could now cut the price of his trade edition to the level of the book club price, if he chose.

By 1947, the basic pattern of the book club in America was set. Either for price or for prestige, adults and juveniles were exhorted to join. Their reward for joining was a "premium" book or books; their reward for remaining, a "dividend," based on the number of books they chose, usually one dividend for every two to four books chosen.
Most clubs offered choices on a monthly basis; most required a minimum purchase, usually four books, yearly. Many offered “alternates,” which, like the “selections,” counted toward dividend credit. Some clubs were selling memberships through bookstores—a practice later to be abandoned by virtually all clubs save the LC. Except for a few of the smaller clubs, members of the clubs selling new books were receiving a club edition which was essentially a reprint or pre-print of the publisher’s trade edition, with differences centering on such physical matters as binding and paper; perhaps “side-print” or “extra print” or “special run” would actually describe this process more exactly. BOMC, with a board of judges, and LG, with a single editor, exemplified the two major methods of selection, though marked variants in this pattern were discernible in the “people’s choice”-Gallup poll-based method of choosing for Sears Roebuck’s People’s Book Club and the student-panel method used at the start by TAB.

Except for the magazine-operated book clubs, most, if not all, of the other methods of club operation in 1957 were observable a decade ago: several clubs operated by one publishing house, dealing in both reprints and originals from all publishers; a giant independent corporation dealing in the choosing, production, sales, and distribution of new books to members; a club or clubs operated by one publisher to distribute principally, if not entirely, titles from his own list; clubs operated as part of a giant mail-order house—all furnishing books by mail to persons whose divergence in age was exceeded only by their disparity of interests.

The avoidance of statistics prior to 1947 has been not only deliberate, but necessary. The failure of the book industry to provide reliable comprehensive figures up to that time for its total operations—let alone the detail of book clubs—has been lamented by virtually every writer from Cheney to William Miller, whose phrase “the obfuscation of trade publishing statistics” is all but classic. Thanks largely to the efforts of the American Book Publishers Council, statistical data are somewhat more available for recent years.

At the end of 1956, there were 108 clubs in operation, excluding foreign language and import clubs, according to A.B.P.C. and Literary Market Place. The records of these 108 clubs constitute the sole primary source on the present-day book club picture. Therefore questionnaires were prepared and sent to each of them, requesting details of the club’s history and current (1956) operation, and assuring anonymity of treatment. Information, some of it too fragmentary
or generalized to be useful, was furnished by fifty-five clubs, representing an estimated 80 per cent of the book club business; twenty clubs declined to furnish information as “delicate,” “contrary to company policy,” “sensitive,” or “not available”; thirty-three clubs failed to acknowledge either a first or a second request.

The results of the questionnaire along with other relevant data from reliable, though secondary, sources are presented in the sections that follow.

**Management and operation of clubs.** Management of the 108 clubs was centered in 52 offices, with 1 (Doubleday) operating 21 clubs, 1 (Yoseloff) operating 8 clubs, 5 others operating 3 or more each, and 7 operating 2 each. It has been estimated by A.B.P.C. that 90 per cent of the book club business is concentrated in 70 clubs operated by 27 publishers.

The last decade witnessed the advent of magazines as successful book club operators. Most massive are *Reader’s Digest* (Condensed Book Club) and *Scholastic Magazine* (which took over TAB from Pocket Books); less spectacular, though successful, are *Weekly Reader* (Children’s Book Club), *Christian Herald* (Family Book Shelf), *Parents’ Magazine* (Book Club for Children), and *Jubilee* whose book club is characterized by them as “essentially a remainder operation.”

**Methods of selection.** Replies from 32 clubs (24 adult, 8 juvenile) indicated preliminary screening by staff and/or outside readers, with an increasing preference for centering the final choice in one staff editor rather than in an outside board of judges. Even in BOMC, management balances the judges’ monthly “selection” with an “alternate” of its own choosing. Doubleday’s literary czar, John Beecroft, determines the regular reading fare of more than two million adults. Yoseloff reported “all selections . . . made internally” for 8 clubs. Several juvenile clubs embellish this method with an outside board of editorial consultants.

**Alternates.** The 12 reports (9 adult, 3 juvenile) reflected no uniformity in the practice of offering alternates. Of the 12 clubs, 6 (3 adult, 3 juvenile) reported they offered no alternates. The other 6 reported that from 2 to 20 per cent of membership took alternates; the average was 10 per cent. All replies except one were from smaller clubs. Statistics on this point are lacking in the literature.

**Age, birth and mortality rate of clubs.** 45 clubs (35 adult, 10
juvenile) reported. Of these, 33 (27 adult, 6 juvenile) had started after 1946, 19 of them in the last 5 years. It is notable that only 8 adult and 4 juvenile clubs of the 45 were over 10 years of age.

*Literary Market Place* and *Publishers’ Weekly* yielded information on the beginning dates of all except 4 of the remaining 63 clubs. This information, combined with that reported above, shows that, of 108 clubs (90 adult known, 4 adult unknown, 14 juvenile) 71 (64 adult, 7 juvenile) started after 1946, 46 of them within the last 5 years; only 33 (26 adult, 7 juvenile) were over 10 years of age. An analysis of the clubs by the decade in which they began reveals the startling fact that whereas only 6 were formed in the 1920’s, and 4 in the 1930’s, 32 were formed in the 1940’s and 62 in the 1950’s.

A few other figures from the last decade may illustrate the relatively undocumented birth and mortality rate of clubs. Between 1947 and 1956, a total of 109 clubs (97 adult, 12 juvenile) were born; 37 of these (32 adult, 5 juvenile) died. Deaths were recorded for an additional 22 born before 1947, bringing the total deaths to 59 for the decade. Of these 59, 44 had a life span of 3 years or less; only 7 had a life span of more than 5 years.

Information from publishers and the 1957/58 *Literary Market Place* shows the birth and death cycle continuing. During 1957, 10 clubs (all adult) died, merged, or became inactive; 10 new clubs (2 juvenile and 8 “special interest” adult) were formed.

The letters from publishers reporting clubs discontinued shed some light on the reasons clubs fail to survive. The interests of members change; the rate of rejections becomes too high; the supply of titles for special clubs proves limited or self-exhausting, as in the “how-to” clubs; clubs reach a point where the cost of extending their membership becomes prohibitively high.

*Membership in first year of club, year in which membership was highest, and membership for that year.* Because of the small number of clubs reporting (13) and the disparity in their ages (from 1 to 30 years), it is impossible to generalize as to whether clubs grow by any consistent pattern. The phenomenally rapid growth of the early clubs was often noted in the literature; the clubs formed in the 1950’s have been largely ignored—perhaps, with but two or three exceptions, because they are “special interest” clubs, who must be content with small and steady, rather than massive and spectacular, memberships.

*Current membership.* Based on replies from 23 clubs (20 adult, 3 juvenile), club membership in the United States can be safely esti-
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estimated to exceed 7 million. The 23 clubs reported 6,797,869; of the 85 not reporting, at least 3 are major clubs, with 5-figure or 6-figure memberships each. Almost half (3,077,866) were in 13 clubs formed after 1946. The section on Subject emphasis of clubs contains further details on membership.

Publishers' Weekly estimated the 1947 membership of 51 clubs to be 4 million.34 In the next decade, membership in individual clubs fluctuated drastically, with some older clubs reporting sharp declines. BOMC reported 464,000 as of January 1, 1954,35 as against their all-time high of nearly twice that figure in 1946.36 By contrast, the new clubs reported sharp gains. TAB's 70,000 of 194737 had grown to 850,000 by 1956;38 Weekly Reader Children's Book Club, formed in 1953, had nearly 300,000 members by 1957;39 Reader's Digest Condensed Book Club went from 450,000 in 195140 to a currently advertised 2.5 million.

Membership turnover. Clubs were not asked to report on this point. Over the years, only BOMC has reported meaningful figures. In February 1949, it reported 503,253 U.S. members, of whom only about 28 per cent had been members for more than 3 years, and less than 1 per cent for more than 15 years.41 Later that year, it was reported that 4 million had joined since the club started,42 a number which had increased to 6.6 million by 1955.43 On another occasion a BOMC spokesman indicated that 50 per cent cancel out each year.44 It is widely stated in the literature that about as many people drop out as join a book club, an assertion apparently deriving from a BMI finding that 13 per cent of the persons interviewed had formerly been book club members while 14 per cent held current memberships.45

Historical record of total books SOLD (choices, alternates, extras) and DISTRIBUTED (gifts, premiums, dividends and/or bonuses).* Data were so fragmentary (10 clubs replying) as to be inconclusive. It is regrettable that 98 clubs were either unwilling or unable to furnish information on this point, since the massive impact of the clubs—both large and small—over the years is hinted at by the reply of one small club alone which, although only four years old, had already sent over 74,000 books to its steady 2,000 membership, as well as by an earlier (1949) report from BOMC of 100 million books sent to its members over a twenty-three-year period.

Current record of books SOLD and DISTRIBUTED: copy and

* These are the categories as used by the American Book Publishers Council in compiling its annual statistics.
Dollar volume. Reports from 9 clubs showed their total copies sold and distributed in 1956 as 11,843,838, with 9,227,161 (77.9%) sold, and 2,616,677 (22.1%) distributed. Incidentally, the percentages varied by only one-tenth of 1 per cent from those reported by A.B.P.C. for the 65,978,000 copies sold and distributed by 70 clubs in that same year. Reports from 2 other clubs on sales show how wide the range in volume of business is—from 25 copies to 2.5 million copies of a single selection.

Dollar volume of total book club sales increased from an estimated $65,400,000 for 1947 to $93,161,000 for 1956, as compared with an increase in copies from $54,400,000 to 65,978,000.\(^{45-46}\) In 1947, book club sales accounted for 15 per cent of receipts from all book sales; for 11 per cent of the estimated total sales in 1956.\(^{\dagger}\)

From 1954 to 1956, annual dollar sales of general books which ("all types of books except textbooks and encyclopedias") increased 25 per cent; book clubs as a part of general books held their own, with an increase of 24 per cent.\(^{47}\)

The 1954 Census of Manufacturers revealed that book club sales of their own editions and publisher sales of bound books to the clubs totalled $65,761,000, or 31.9%, of trade book sales receipts for that year.\(^{48}\)

Canadian and foreign sales more than doubled from 1952 to 1956, both in copies (from 1,929,000 to 4,001,000) and in receipts (from $2,326,000 to $5,468,000).\(^{46}\) Reader's Digest Condensed Book Club alone currently claims approximately a million subscribers to its foreign editions.

Rejections. The book club publishers were particularly reticent on this point. Only 9 reported. The range was 13 per cent (for a club with 24,000 members) to 60 per cent (for a club with 29,000 members); the average was 40 per cent, a figure in line with an earlier BOMC report of 40 per cent to 60 per cent.\(^{49}\) All replies except one were from smaller clubs. Perhaps it should be noted that there are practically no references in the literature to this aspect of club operation.

Subject emphasis of clubs. The following summary combines 50 replies (38 adult, 12 juvenile) with information from other reliable sources. Membership breakdown, based on 23 replies, is furnished except where club identity would be revealed.

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\(^{\circ}\) "Sales" as used by A.B.P.C. includes books sold and distributed.

\(^{\dagger}\) Based on figures in Frase, ref. 48.
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*Format and treatment of club choices.* The range in format is very wide, running the gamut from finely printed limited editions of classics, specially designed for members, through popularly priced fine editions, hard-bound club editions similar to or identical with trade editions,\(^{42}\) and publishers' originals bought for club distribution, to inexpensive hard-bound and paperbound originals and reprints.

Until the 1950's, clubs had been largely content to deal in uncut versions. The overnight success of Reader's Digest Condensed Book Club (450,000 members after one year) sparked the formation of at least 6 others (Books Abridged, Classics Appreciation Society, Best-in-Books, Condensed Classics, Condensed Religious Books, Catholic Digest) presenting in a single volume excerpts, adaptations, condensations, and sometimes complete texts, in any combination. This is perhaps the decade's unique contribution to the book club idea.

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| **JUVENILE**              |             |         |                  |            |
| General fiction, nonfiction| 6           | 6       | 2                | withheld   |
| Nonfiction only           | 3           | 2       | 1                | withheld   |
| Classics                  | 3**         | 2       |                  |            |
| Religious                 | 2           | 2       |                  |            |
| **Totals**                | 14          | 12      | 3                | 1,278,803† |

* Includes 6 “fine printing”  
** Includes 1 “fine printing”  
† Totals include figures withheld for individual clubs
Relations with publishers. Asked for information on royalty rates, plate rental contracts, and/or other agreements with publishers, 25 clubs (18 adult, 7 juvenile) replied. Of these, 4 (2 adult, 2 juvenile) use publishers' original editions, and 1 specializes in its own edition of condensed classics. The remaining 20 pay royalties to the publisher who in turn splits (usually on a 50-50 basis) with author. Eighteen of the 20 rent publishers' plates on contract and manufacture their own editions; 2 clubs, selling paperbounds and condensations, cannot, of course, use publishers' plates.

Book club royalties, according to C. B. Grannis, account for about one-half of the "subsidiary income" to trade publishers from sale of rights to the use of their books. Samples of contracts with publishers furnished by 5 major clubs reveal a royalty range per copy of from 5 to 15 cents; one club pays 10 per cent of the club's list price. A total minimum royalty is guaranteed, usually for major clubs running into five figures. It is unfortunate that smaller clubs failed to reply, since their part in the picture of subsidiary rights is far less known but to publishers with whom they deal no less important.

Relations with libraries. Clubs were asked to give the percentage of membership represented by libraries. Replies were received from 16 clubs (10 adult, 6 juvenile). All adult clubs reported library memberships as "insignificant."

However, the answers from the juvenile clubs reflect a variety of attitudes toward libraries. One small club is almost entirely a service to libraries; another club invites library memberships by offering books with reinforced bindings and water-repellent covers on annual subscription; still another gives free books to the library in ratio to the number of copies ordered by individuals; a fourth supplies special display and exhibit materials. By contrast, two clubs refuse to accept library memberships; as one club put it, "We consider such sales in the original publisher's domain. We encourage home reading, home ownership."

Book club choices, "best sellers," and "notable books." The surprising failure of over 100 clubs to supply titles of books sold and distributed for the last ten years forces reliance upon secondary sources—Alice P. Hackett's Best Sellers and the brief monthly lists of club choices in Publishers' Weekly, which afford useful, though fragmentary, information on book club choices and best sellers.

The exclusive identification of book club choices with best sellers* * "Best seller" as used throughout refers to bookstore sales alone.
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has been overemphasized. The clubs choose several hundred titles annually (214 titles for 16 adult clubs alone reported for 1957 in Publishers' Weekly); the listed best sellers number only 20. Moreover, the relationship between club choice and best seller is not so simple as it has been made to appear. A club may, by the act of choosing a new book, create a best seller. A book already a best seller without benefit of club choice may be selected by one of the reprint clubs. A “sleeper” for months or even years may be selected by a club, experience a kind of renaissance, and become a best seller. Miss Hackett cites innumerable examples where club choice and best seller are identical, and the industry generally recognizes that book club choices tend to help, rather than hinder, retail sales. It is safe to say that of any given annual list of 20 best sellers one-third to one-half have been sold or distributed by the clubs. A comparison of selections alone (excluding alternates and free books) listed in Publishers' Weekly for 1947 and 1957 with the best sellers for those same years shows that 9 of the 1947 and 6 of the 1957 best sellers were club choices.

The nagging question—whether there is any identification between book club selections and books of acknowledged merit—still remains. Subject to the limitation that the American Library Association’s annual Notable Books List, like the club selections, reflects an upper middle class intellectual level which places a higher value on conformity and conservatism than on creativeness, a comparison of the two for 1947–56 shows that there is. Of the 458 titles on these lists, 170, or 37 per cent, were selections of 22 book clubs. Clubs most often represented were BOMC (with 80 titles), Book Find (31), History (19), Nonfiction—now discontinued (11), and Family Bookshelf—started in 1949 (7). Publishers most often represented were Harper (21), Little, Brown (20), Houghton Mifflin (15), Doubleday (10), and Random House (10); the remaining 94 titles were thinly spread among 29 publishers. From the foregoing evidence, it would appear that book club selections are as well represented on quality as on quantity lists.

In 1931, Cheney wrote: “The book clubs do not constitute a ‘menace’ to the industry; they are simply another method of distribution—of minor importance. They are not helping appreciably to widen book distribution and have probably reached the limits of their economic and operating development.” Actually Cheney was wrong—and
right. The clubs have indeed proved no “menace,” but their importance is more than “minor” and their operations reach far beyond the limits which Cheney envisaged.

As of 1956, they have increased in number—to over one hundred, and in membership—to over seven million. They have increased in variety—with something for practically everyone from antique collector to yachtsman. They are born and die from year to year with astonishing frequency. The magazine-operated club has made its successful debut along with the phenomenally successful clubs offering abridgements and condensations. The juvenile clubs are experiencing unprecedented success. Multiple clubs, aimed at every economic and educational level and catering to a variety of interests, are centralized in one office. The “liberal” and “progressive” clubs, evident in the 1940’s, have all but disappeared. The old-line, long established clubs have witnessed a levelling off or a decline in their membership. Born of the intense competition for new members, the emphasis on price comparison and giveaways is greater than ever. The voices of opposition from publisher and bookseller are largely stilled, the former welcoming the income that a club choice brings and the latter seeing hope in the market-building qualities of some, if not all, of the clubs. Statistics on book club operation, though still imperfect, are much improved. In a word, to quote A. A. Knopf: “[The book clubs] have operated from the beginning on the assumption that the consumer is king . . . and book clubs, obviously, are here to stay.”

A look into the future is irresistible. One may argue that, since book clubs tend to attract persons who have attended college, and since the next decade will witness the greatest college enrollments in history, book clubs face a paradise of prosperity. But this new-found education, like other factors tending to favor the clubs—increased leisure, deurbanization, earlier retirements, may turn out quite the opposite, and may involve some entirely different set of values from the reading and ownership of books.

Mass magazines like Life may extend their penetration of the book industry to the book clubs as well. Certainly the success of Reader’s Digest’s club is not likely to go unchallenged. Some publisher or magazine may see in the success of TAB the possibility of a paper-bound book club for adults, at either the mass or the class level, in spite of the short-lived existence of the Paper Editions Book Club. Foreign markets in a shrinking world could prove as profitable to other clubs as they have to Reader’s Digest.
Whatever its future, the book club has established itself as a substantial segment of the book industry. To assess its total impact adequately is all but impossible. Perhaps here there are only questions—few, if any, answers. Club concentration has been on a few titles—but has this been at the expense of the many? Attention has been on the new book—but has this been at the expense of the old? Some of the clubs’ choices have been bad—but is an individual’s choice infallible? Clubs have attracted bargain hunters—but is the ownership of a book the less estimable because the owner got it free? Club choice by one of the giants may have meant a best seller—but are best sellers per se bad? Club selection to a publisher may mean the difference between red ink and black on the ledger but is he not enabled thereby to publish a few more books of limited appeal or by little-known authors for a smaller audience?

Undeniably, the cumulative millions who have belonged to clubs have included countless thousands to whom regular exposure to books was a new experience. But measurement of impact defies a solitary statistic. Impact is many things—not simply the joining of a club, nor the buying of a book. It is reading a promotion piece, seeing a title, going to a library, browsing among the paperbounds; it is seeing and hearing and half-remembering. And in all of these, book clubs have played a part—how great a part no one can say. Hard though it is to count, it is far harder to weigh.

References


Book Club Publishing

44. Link and Hopf, op. cit., p. 90.
49. Viewpoints in Book Publishing . . . , op. cit.
52. Cheney, op. cit., p. 279.