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DEMOCRATIZE PUBLISHING: 21ST CENTURY READING PRACTICES AND THEIR POTENTIAL TO UPLIFT THE INDEPENDENT PUBLISHING HOUSE

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DEMOCRATIZE PUBLISHING: 21ST CENTURY READING PRACTICES AND THEIR  
POTENTIAL TO UPLIFT THE INDEPENDENT PUBLISHING HOUSE

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## ABSTRACT

Literature is a cornerstone in societies the world over because of the power it holds to change the way people view their lives. It is easy to pick up a book; what is not so easy are the processes that get that book into the hands of readers. Publishing trends in the United States and United Kingdom change with the wind, and at no time is this more present than in the 21st century as social media impacts trends. This ever-changing market means that there is often little space for large publishers to take a risk on non-traditional books — that is, books that break literary expectations. While this gap can be filled by independent presses, these do not always have the resources to market the non-traditional literature they publish, and in many cases these books do not end up well-liked by the general public because they break from the form that many expect from modern literature. Through an analysis of modern book social media circles and publishing trends, the ways in which non-traditional literature can be promoted to a much wider audience with the intention of popularizing non-traditional literature will be examined. A literature review of various publications regarding the state of modern publishing and past research on the state of the US publishing industry will also be taken into account.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	1
Acknowledgments .....	2
Introduction .....	4
How Did We Get Here? .....	9
BookTube Killed The Book Blogging Star .....	12
Long Live BookTok .....	16
Nothing Gold Can Stay .....	18
Independent Publishers: A Break From All The Noise .....	20
The Weirder, The Better .....	23
The Harms of the Big Five .....	25
The Harms of Big Five Hype on Social Media .....	26
How Do We Fix This? .....	27
References .....	30

## Introduction

“Just because it’s all you know don’t mean it’s all you’d enjoy.”

So says the character of Augustus “Gus” McCrae to his ranch hand Pea Eye in Larry McMurtry’s Pulitzer-winning 1985 Western novel, *Lonesome Dove*. Though this sage advice is doled out to chastise Pea Eye for forever wanting to be a bachelor, this quote could also be quite aptly applied to the numerous people who partake in book-related social media and often define themselves by a single genre. This phenomenon is not new in the book world; a simple scroll through the pages of most book content creators on YouTube will show you whether they are a fantasy, literary fiction, manga, science-fiction, nonfiction, or YA based channel. These sectarian splinters have continued into the now-popular short content app TikTok, with numerous groups of genre-lovers coming together under Book TikTok, better known under the portmanteau BookTok.

What BookTok has given readers that places like BookTube (the nickname given to Book YouTube, which predates BookTok by a good five years or so (Doulami)) were unable to, is that of quick shareability. To be able to discuss the new book that you just finished reading in a minimum-15-second video with a small number of followers revolutionized the sharing of books on social media. The more forum-like structure of the YouTube video meant that interaction between book lovers could be, and indeed still is, a bit slow-paced. BookTok’s pseudo-immediacy can launch a conversation about a book in mere seconds in comparison. Book reviews are now not simply relegated to more static spaces like Goodreads or YouTube comments sections, but instead are vibrant videos that people can comment on and engage with in almost real time.

With this quick shareability and intense interaction, it's no wonder why even more subgenres have cropped up as readers are able to both advertise and become aware of subgenres that were nebulous at best previously; one needs only to spend a few minutes scrolling through a book hashtag on a short-content sharing site to see the terms "dark academia", "dark romance", "one bed trope" and many more thrown around – all now staples of online book world vernacular. And because readers are more easily than ever able to share their favorite books, their least favorite books, their beloved and most despised tropes, another phenomenon has become obvious – publishers are taking notice.

Although the publishing industry has generally been understood throughout most of American history to be the tastemakers, since the advent of the Internet Age the industry has fretted about the state of books and the people who read them. Fearmongering from journalists about the introduction of e-readers meaning the death of print and the much more real and frightening fact that about half of the adult population reads below a sixth-grade level (Literacy Gap Map) have meant that publishers have been fretting about how to turn profits for their wares for a while now. But with the rise of bookish spaces online – book blogs, Facebook groups, and videos – reading began showing signs of being more democratized by readers than had previously been seen.

Although publishers have always followed trends, trying to capitalize on one best seller or the next (fantasy publishing certainly was never the same after J.R.R. Tolkien released *The Fellowship of the Ring* into the world in 1954), this desire to really give the reader what they want is best seen in the mid-to-late aughts, with the release of Stephanie Meyer's 2005 YA vampire romance, *Twilight*, and Suzanne Collins' 2008 dystopian bestseller, *The Hunger Games*.

The Internet gave fans the opportunity to interact with each other the way no medium ever had previously; indeed, Grateful Dead fans were among the first non-academic or military individuals to use the fledgling Internet in the 1970s, for the sole purpose of discussing the band with one another (Tiffany). Foo Fighters fans have had a forum on and off since 1999-2000. And of course, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series reached readers across ages and generations, amassing a fandom that likely had only been seen surrounding the Beatles. *Harry Potter* forums cropped up on the 90s internet, catapulting fan interactions to new heights.

And then *Twilight* and *Hunger Games* happened. Meyer's debut was a cultural phenomenon with such rapidity that four other books were written for the series, and a fandom of young teen girls and older women alike were enamored of the protagonist Bella and her paranormal romances. When Collins' debut released, fans were quick to do what *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* fans had before them – coming up with scenarios for the characters in fanfiction, discovering what District they would be part of, and debating what attractive white man most deserved the protagonist, Katniss Everdeen. What made these debuts different than even the meteoric rise of a boy wizard was that *Twilight* was released about seven months after the first ever video was uploaded to YouTube. Although coincidental, what would follow would be fandom migrating into video format – both long and short. *Twilight*, *Harry Potter* and *Hunger Games* fans were able to take their love for these books and characters from forums and instead interact in a much more interactive way with one another – and thus, the rise of BookTube began.

Publishers noticed this. The Young Adult boom truly targeted the audience of teenaged-to-young-20s readers in a way that hadn't been fully marketed to before and was ripe to sell to. If there's two things Big Five publishers — that is, Penguin-Random House, Macmillan,



Simon & Schuster, HarperCollins, and Hachette — covet, it's publicity, and books that sell. And paranormal romances, and dystopian worlds became what the reading world was raving about online, publishers were quick to follow. Maggie Stiefvater's *The Wolves of Mercy Falls* series and Veronica Roth's *Divergent* trilogy are only some examples of these genres being capitalized on by publishers, and are certainly not the only examples that could be given of the paranormal romance/dystopian YA fiction boom that occurred in the 2010s. And although every publisher likely dreams of their own *Harry Potter*, the British boarding school trend that the series was an offshoot of remained a perennial classic that is now seen in "dark academia" fare today.

As publishers watched what grew popular with readers online, it didn't take a business major to understand that the way trends in the industry shifted were now irrevocably tied to the Internet. And now, as of writing, BookTok has the reins. If a Colleen Hoover romance is popular, publishers will snap up any comparative titles to try to emulate her success and feed the ravenous romance market — a market that has not always been so appreciated, a topic that will be discussed later. If people are demanding more Greek retellings, then Greek retellings these readers shall have. This isn't just how Big Five publishers are marketing their works, mind you; self-published authors are doing similar things, and many are now finding overnight success that is landing them coveted traditional publishing deals.

But a notable part of the publishing industry — one that is also producing paranormal romances, although perhaps of the satirical kind, or dystopian fiction by authors who have lived in places where tyranny and desolation are daily circumstances — are independent presses. They are normally run by grants, universities, or, more typically out of the pockets of their founders. Essentially, independent (indie) presses are not imprints of — that is, owned by — larger corporations. Nor are they typically owned by even more massive media conglomerates like the

Big Five are — that said, there are a number of ridiculously wealthy people like Elizabeth Koch who get involved in the small publishing world.

These houses are not putting out one hundred books a quarter, and some are lucky to put out more than ten in a whole year. They focus on niche works – the novels that wouldn't be picked up by a large press, the more academic pieces that might only engage a select audience, the poetry collections that often don't even have a spine large enough to be published by a larger press. Indie publishers fulfill the important role of diversity in the fast-paced world of publishing. This is not necessarily a diversity of authors, although historically small presses have been where marginalized groups have been able to see their written work bound and printed. It is rather the diversity of stories, which diversity of authors and backgrounds indeed plays into. Although it would be disingenuous, if not an outright lie to say that the Big Five don't care about also publishing works that are of the “literary merit” that is so esteemed by book critics, it also would be disingenuous to not mention the fact that most of the Booker Prize winners of the last few years have been published by independent publishers – not the massive ones bulging with imprints.

Although indie publishers do sometimes get love and appreciation on social media – often from HorrorTok – that is, horror book enthusiasts – and literary fiction-centered accounts, they are still often overlooked in favor of the big releases. The average reader may not even be aware of the existence of independent publishers at all, with the dichotomy of publishing often being seen as either Big Five or self-publication — no in-between. This capstone seeks to argue that with the immense democratic power that readers now hold on social media platforms, literature produced by independent publishers should begin to be the primary focus of reader's platforms. In the United States, the publication of independent literature through presses not

owned by large corporations should be the primary source of book production the reading public chooses to support. By doing this, the ideal goal would be to provide a future of literature that is more diverse, more creative, and more engaging. After all, as McMurtry put it, just because Big Five romance, dark academia, and other trends are all readers might currently know, does not mean that ultimately it will be all that they will enjoy.

### **How Did We Get Here?**

To understand how we got to publishing as it is today, one must look at all the other writings of people scratching their heads on how publishing got to where it is today — and today is the last century or so.

Just before that, as the American economy chugged its merry way towards the Gilded Age in the 1800s, inventions like the telegram and an improved postal system meant that Americans immediately found themselves in a world where the written word was now part of their everyday lives (Postman). People read more and publishers began to capitalize on these newfound markets; illegal rings selling copyrighted English serials were rampant in the post (Radway, *Reading The Romance*) and people couldn't get enough of mysteries and other genre books, which were consumed almost faster than nascent publishing companies were able to put out (Radway, *Reading The Romance*).

The publishing industry, as it was starting out and grew into the 20th century, soon began to show behaviors that are still commonplace in the publishing marketplace today. When one publishing firm had a bestseller, the others clamored to see if they could find a similar story to match such success in order to draw the readership, and the readership's precious dollars, over to their company. What Janice Radway refers to as “cheap books” (Radway, *Reading The*

*Romance*) became a staple, and genre fiction set itself a stage that formed a second consistency in the American literature: that of denigrating the existence of genre fiction, and the scapegoating it for the ills of America.

These beginnings would be catapulted out of America's Victorian-tinged era into the century that brought much tumult to the world at large — a trend which reflected in the publishing world, and literature itself. This was the century that saw the publication of L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* in its first year and the publication of the third installment of the *Harry Potter* series in its last. The 20th century saw numerous literary movements; the rise of numerous political and philosophical movements; the establishment of the Pulitzer, Booker, and Caldecott Prizes; not to mention two world wars, McCarthyism, a smattering of other wars that definitely had no impact on the psyches of writers nor the general American public, the rise of television, the rise of consumerism, the rise of consumption, and, of course, sliced bread.

The publishing world knew better than to remain stagnant. As the minds and worlds of everyday Americans began to change, publications emerged to provide the growing market of readers. America prided itself on its budding literary tradition, and publishers founded themselves with the desire to give literature to the masses in a way that had never been possible before. Random House was founded in 1927, and the future looked as bright as any future must have before the most devastating financial crisis the country had ever seen. HarperCollins started out nearly a century previously as a small family-owned bookshop ("HarperCollins at 200"). Prior to the 1950s, the publishing landscape was dedicated to putting out work that people wanted to read, certainly, but it was hardly the cannibalistic sector it would become.

Two world wars came and went and the publishing industry welcomed those who had stories to tell after surviving such trauma. Meanwhile, a war was brewing in the publishing

industry. The 1950s ushered in a new era of American life after the country had proved itself top dog in WWII. Wallets were fat and leisure time was abundant. Television and rock ‘n’ roll began to replace radio as national pastimes that corrupted the children, but despite worries that *I Love Lucy* was turning everyone’s brains to mush, people still read. In fact, they were still reading quite a lot. Indeed, the publishing industry was starting to get big enough that they felt so charitable as to pick up smaller publishers into their ranks to keep them from floundering (Schiffirin). The introduction of prizes meant that literature had to be prestigious enough to satiate critics while still selling enough books to turn profits; the natural way to boost output was to buy imprints, who would put out books for the lead company under their own names (Schiffirin).

As publishing houses merged, the imprints often got to keep their names, since many were well-respected for putting out certain kinds of literature. To the untrained eye, a reader might assume that the book they are reading is coming from an independent publisher — the book’s spine will display the imprint’s name, after all, and only people dedicated enough to peruse a copyright page might notice that the logo of the imprint is placed alongside that of their main company, or see “X publishing company is an affiliate of...” in small plain text. This tactic isn’t necessarily sneaky, but it does mean that if a reader is excited about supporting independent presses, they have their work cut out for them to learn what is an indie press and what is no longer.

This process of conglomeration has not stopped as the world moved into the 21st century, and acquisitions have now become large enough to make the news of those outside the publishing world. Throughout 2022, Penguin-Random House, which itself used to be two separate entities buying other publishing houses up, was federally barred from acquiring Simon

& Schuster (The Associated Press), which would have made the “Big Five” into a “Big Four.” The publishing house was snide about the ruling, reportedly dismissing it as “an unfortunate setback for readers and authors” (The Associated Press), but it was hailed by most everyone else for ensuring that a monopoly on publishing isn’t completely achieved. Of course, all the acquisitions the publishing house(s) made previously were certainly not attempts to monopolize whatsoever, so they were of no concern to the federal government.

The odd reality of publishing is that despite the wild highs and lows that can happen in a year (a blockbuster bestseller, a fan-favorite author getting canceled online), the industry is quite static (Thompson). Although it is a cutthroat industry, where authors and editors and agents poach one another left and right, the big stage of publishing ultimately has little consequence to the lives of readers who are not incredibly online. If a favorite mid-list author of women’s literature puts out a book that only sells a few thousand copies, the only thing that the reader of said mid-list author’s women’s literature is going to care about is that their favorite author released said book in the first place. The numbers games and the like that happen in publishing are likely not what someone cares very deeply about if they’re a casual reader.

But with the rise of the internet, publishing grew more competitive than ever. And the hands of the people publishers wanted to push their latest releases into were the hands of people who were developing platforms dedicated to reading online.

### **BookTube Killed The Book Blogging Star**

When the internet was still an optimistic place where people connected with one another, the book blog found a sure foothold. There does not seem to be any evidence online of the first person who started book blogging. It’s likely that this person, whoever they may be, might have

simply had a personal blog upon which they mentioned what they were currently reading and that was that. There also were almost certainly others who coalesced around the burgeoning internet and swapped their favorite stories, or shared them online. Stephen King notoriously bought in on the hype of the internet, making his 2000 story “Riding The Bullet” available online (Epstein), which is considered the first-ever ebook that was mass-downloaded. Things were starting to change shape on the internet for book lovers, but quite possibly the most infamous alteration of the bookish internet space was the creation of YouTube in 2005, which allowed for the eventual rise of the “Book YouTuber” in the early 2000s.

The creator of the YouTube channel Polandbananasbooks is credited with being the first BookTuber, especially the first one to grow to prominence. From there, a craze was sparked; many of the largest BookTuber channels today are ones that have been going since the creation of this subculture. Like many YouTube subcultures, this one grew far more than book blogs had the ability to, because YouTube was all about visuals. Looking through most early BookTube videos, it is clear that there was a very strong aesthetic force at play. Among some of the many things that BookTube is credited for are: the coining of the term “TBR (To Be Read) pile,” “shelfies” or taking photos of a beautiful bookshelf, color-coding bookshelves in order to make those shelfies aesthetically pleasing, and a major boost in the readership of YA fiction. Books were taken out of the historically stuffy, uppity space they had long existed within despite frequent bouts of penny dreadfuls and cheap sci-fi publications, and were instead transformed into objects to be desired, to be bragged about and shook across the screen by a bubbly, blonde twenty-something.

With this new visual medium and almost terrifyingly exuberant hosts, publishers had a new frontier upon which to hawk their wares. As BookTubers grew up a fanbase — or failed to

do so — publishers knew who would be the most likely person to have an audience that would want to buy a book they had purchased. And so began the era of publishers sending books, both solicited and not, to bookish content creators.

Since many BookTubers and their audiences were, and are, young women, they were the target demographic for the YA genre. YA, which has always arguably existed in some form, did not become the incredibly popular and marketable genre it is today until around the time that *Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and other series started seeing immense popularity. As fandoms rallied around these books and other forms of media thanks to sites like Twitter and Tumblr in ways that fandom had never been able to before, publishers capitalized on this opportunity to get more books out. The popular “unboxing video” meant that it was lucrative for publishers to treat their free advertisers to extra goodies in addition to an early copy of an upcoming book (Daspin). The long-standing Book of the Month Club began to advertise in a similar way. Other bookish crates would follow suit, gifting boxes to BookTubers full of stickers and glitter and shiny packaging, in order to promote an upcoming release or ask that the audience subscribe in order to be on the level of their favorite creator.

The impact of this cannot be overstated. What we see now in today’s TikTok book community was pioneered by BookTubers. The same handful of bestseller books were talked about by the biggest channels. Meet-ups and collaborations between BookTubers became common, and if they fell out the resulting conflict could divide fanbases. BookTubers would get sponsors upon sponsors if they were lucky enough; everyone would rave about this book or the other, or rant about the same book. Smaller BookTubers would try to butt in every now and again, but if they were people of color or if they didn’t read much YA, they were notably left out of the community that the subculture had tried to become more well-known for. Some lifestyle



subcommunity members and StudyTubers made the leap into BookTube, and over time the space became saturated with mostly white faces talking about books by mostly white authors, all with the publishing industry gifting fun boxes to unpack in the meantime.

There were, of course, consequences. Some discontent from the watching public. Some disliked how many books some BookTubers claimed to read in a year. Others snarked on the forays a few BookTubers tried to take into publishing themselves. Racist viewers rallied to try to keep POC creators, who discussed racism in the bookish community, out of the community. Some complained about how “woke” BookTube was becoming as readathons of books by Black, indigenous, LGBTQIA+ and other marginalized groups began to be hosted. Authors, mostly self-published, tried to platform themselves on YouTube to varying degrees of success. All of these threads would later be distilled into short form content on BookTok.

At the time of writing, BookTube is very much alive and well. Although among the larger creators there is not much diversity, there are now many smaller channels run by POC, or people who only read thrifted books, or only read classics. There is a niche that anyone of any reading taste can slot into; if they can’t find one, they often create a channel themselves. This new wave of BookTube, that functions in tandem with TikTok, does not make or break the publishing industry the way it used to. A good majority of channels, even the smaller ones, will discuss the summer’s biggest bestseller. But the problems it developed are still engendered within other bookish spaces as well as BookTube itself.

But what mattered most here, above all else, was not just that BookTube was the springboard upon which BookTok would be crafted. It was also the first time that publishing truly had a space where they could communicate semi-directly with what readers wanted. In semi-real time, publishers could see what readers were most interested in; a dystopian YA here, a

high school romance there. Genre fiction took the stage, which was honestly quite a good thing after being seen as ‘lesser literature’ for many decades. But with these hype machines churning, publishers want to do what publishers do best, which is capitalize even more on that hype. And so begins the cycle of pushing out so many books of a popular genre that the market becomes saturated and people are gasping for something else.

Although Booktube certainly didn’t cause this cycle of saturation, it cannot be wholly freed of blame, as it definitely exacerbated it. But the exorbitant book hauls, color coded shelves and tiring promotion of bestsellers would at least be spread out over the course of a five or twenty minute long video.

### **Long Live BookTok**

Short-form content sharing site TikTok hardly needs an introduction, as it seems that few people of a certain age demographic don’t have it downloaded. From the start, it advertised itself as a place where people could form communities, and of course it didn’t take long for books to find their niche. What this platform had that BookTube doesn’t, however, was the ability to give anybody fifteen minutes of fame. Instead of building up a fanbase and hoping the nebulous YouTube algorithm or a benevolent larger content creator would draw eyes to your channel, TikTok’s even more chaotic algorithm could make any video go viral overnight.

This kind of algorithm has the potential to be, and indeed has been, life changing. The algorithm being like this means that self-published authors like Alex Aster, Piper CJ, and Olivie Blake have found overnight success as self-published authors, receiving traditional book deals as a result. It has catapulted books published 5-10 years ago into even greater success, such as *Song of Achilles* by historian Madeline Miller, and *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* by poet Ocean

Vuong. Already-established author Colleen Hoover went from a household name to an oh-my-god-she's-*everywhere* name. And those are just a handful of BookTok's big dogs. Leigh Bardugo, Sarah J. Maas, Emily Henry, and Ali Hazelwood are also authors who have seen their works become BookTok darlings, with some of their books even reprinted with stickers declaring their success on the platform, which further makes their achievements known to the public.

It is a well-known publishing tactic to pay through the nose for a coveted front-of-house display table in bookstores like Barnes & Noble. While this tactic is still common, what is often seen when you walk into any big-box bookstore is that BookTok darlings are front and center, sometimes alongside recent National Book Award or Booker Prize Winners at the next table, depending on the season. Although it's almost impossible to assume that publishers *aren't* paying at least a little money in order to have these bestsellers be front and center, it's obvious that BookTok is doing the heavy lifting of publicity in order to ensure these books will sell. Getting those books piled high on a Barnes & Noble front table is just a perk — both for publishers to keep selling books, for authors to keep making sales, and for readers to not have to dig through the shelves to find the Current Big Thing..

That's where BookTok is able to succeed where even BookTube wasn't able to: it is able to advertise books to readers at an unprecedented pace, and get those readers to show up and buy those books (or, if the recent newstalk on Gen Z is true, checking it out *en masse* from their local public library).

This kind of turnout for a new book is unheard of at any point previously, except perhaps with the release of *Harry Potter's* sequels. A book can quite literally become viral overnight thanks not only to the way TikTok's algorithm works, but also because of how many eyes are now on BookTok. It's estimated that BookTok made 20 million books sell in 2021, or 2.4% of all

books sold that year; what's more, 62% of American readers have picked up a book at the recommendation of someone on BookTok (Curcic). That kind of publicity is utterly mind blowing and something that not even the most skilled publicist at a big publisher could have dreamed up. It's arguably one of the biggest shake-ups in publishing history, where a decades-old book can be launched back into the public consciousness, or a book can become a bestseller before it's even released — author Rebecca Yarros's 2023 romance-fantasy book *Fourth Wing*'s 2023 sequel, *Iron Flame*, being a prime example.

### **Nothing Gold Can Stay**

With this monumental hurtling to the top, however, has come criticism of BookTok that many in the book-o-sphere might find quite familiar to the criticisms that used to be directed at BookTube. BookTok has faced critique for using its immense power to promote books mostly by white authors — white women, in specific, which is not the win for feminism that some BookTokkers try to claim. When looking at the books that have gained the most adoration on TikTok, the figures are overwhelmingly white; of all the authors listed prior as BookTok darlings, only Ocean Vuong is a person of color. Although efforts are being made by people of color to diversify the BookTok offerings, the fact is that the algorithm on TikTok will promote certain people, and they very often are white and conventionally attractive, and talk about the same books as everyone else.

Other controversies have sparked up, such as the complaint that most BookTok books are “bad”. This is of course a subjective term, and all big books often face a point where people question the hype that was built up around them. But many people who read BookTok books are left scratching their heads at mediocre writing, plot holes, and other breaches of the writer-reader

contract. Many have the feeling of YA books despite being directed at a more adult audience. And, notably, all of these stories often feel the same. The romance books are boy meets girl (although now, increasingly more common in a small win for diversity, boy meets boy or girl meets girl) and everything is peachy until the third-act miscommunication. The horror books seem to be hitting on the same tropes that everyone has come to expect. The line between romance and fantasy grows increasingly more blurred, but where the fantasy shines through it often is recycling some kind of Tolkien-esque basis or more focused on the central romance than any kind of worldbuilding. If one looks at the popular books on BookTok, and the ones that keep getting compared in the publishing industry to other big titles, it's difficult to not get deja vu to a time when the market was flooded with werewolves, vampires, and teenage death tournaments.

This is where publishing and BookTok strongly intersect into the worst of the worst. Say BookTok likes a book. It's a romance set at a mysterious English university. The Big Five publishing houses scramble to find another mysterious English university romance just like it to keep building on the hype. BookTok either loves or hate-reads the copycat. Rinse and repeat. Suddenly you have a popular book market clogged with dragon romantasy, Colleen Hoover rip-offs, and people wondering why some books aren't getting popular, even when they're well written.

### **Independent Publishers: A Break From All The Noise**

Amid the self-publishing superstars and the shining Big Five deals that every author dreams about, there is an often-overlooked branch of publishing that does not deserve to be: independent publishing. Some view independent publishers (indies) as a sort of halfway-point between self-publishing and traditional publishing, but this is not always the case. Some

independent publishers focus on a certain kind of genre — say, leftist political nonfiction, like Haymarket Books — or focus on publishing overlooked work in a certain geographic area — like ECW Press, which focuses on publishing literature and nonfiction by Canadian authors. But most indies whose core commitment is to stay independent have a main goal of simply publishing the stuff that the Big Five passes up on for one reason or another. Although of course Big Five wants to publish work of merit in order to maintain their often illustrious reputations and bolster their meaningful backlists (Thompson), indies have been known to take on the experimental, “weird” work that often finds an audience among readers with a taste for something different than usual Big Five fare.

What makes an indie publisher independent? In this paper, indies are defined as any publisher that is not owned by, nor an imprint of, a Big Five publisher. Indies can range in size, from larger ones like Graywolf Press, to as small as someone working out of their own home printing things off their own computer. A broad interpretation of this term could even encompass self-publishers, but for the sake of clarity in this paper “indies” will only be used regarding any publisher that is not owned or operated in any way by a large publisher.

Because they are not owned or operated, and even further often not even associated with Big Five publishers, indies don’t always have the capital to promote their books. Social media such as Instagram and email newsletters can work as sounding boards, but those still require people actively choosing to follow online or to sign up on the website of the publisher. There has to be some personal or emotional investment present in order for the consumer to feel compelled to keep up with an indie’s releases. This is difficult work — people often feel inclined to follow someone, or an entity, that they feel personally invested in, like a favorite celebrity or clothing brand. The same goes for publishing houses; one look at the follow counts of Penguin Random

House or HarperCollins and one sees 775K and 522K followers, respectively. In contrast, two small publishers like Dead Ink Books or Two Dollar Radio have 7,513 and 12K followers, respectively. While still quite large followings, they are not on the level of social media reach that two of the Big Five are — and that’s just comparing two well-established indies against them. Many indies are much smaller than that and despite gaining acclaim may be relatively underground to the general public.

Social media posting may be free, but endorsements and advertisements often are not. Big publishers have the capital to make splashy campaigns in Book Riot sponsorships, social media campaigns, and the now-rare authorial book tour depending on how well the author has done previously or is expected to do. Increasingly, big publishers are also leaving authors up to do their own marketing via TikTok — because that’s where all the readers are, and where the readers are the publishers feel inclined to go. They also have the money to put into promotional boxes and material to send to big BookTubers and BookTokkers, to place ads in magazines that the book’s target audience is likely to read, and much else. Indies don’t have that kind of money to throw around. They don’t even have the money, most of the time, to afford a table at the front of Barnes & Noble where everyone can see their latest release — although accordingly, Barnes & Noble has ceased this practice as part of their new marketing strategy (abookolive). In this system of publishing and reading, where every customer’s eyes count, indies are given a major setback by nature of being smaller and having less money.

While they may have less money, they are not necessarily lacking in the production of talent. Faber Publishing has produced seven Booker Prize winners, considered the most prestigious award that any book written or translated into English can win. So, while big publishers keep their quotas high and continuously put out bestsellers, bestsellers don’t always

equate to some level of prestige. Although there are numerous book awards now that acknowledge greatness in publishing across publishers of all sizes, when it comes to great prestige, those books are found in indie backlists much of the time. The best example of this can be found in the International Booker Prize, which launches numerous international authors into stardom, inspiring the translation of their backlists into English.

Translation in and of itself is an industry that has only in recent years attracted more mainstream US/UK attention, although it has been important in moving US/UK bestsellers into countries that do not speak English. With recognition from the Booker committee it has the ability to launch these presses into notoriety that they might not have had previously. With all that being said, however, indies often get boosts for the major and minor awards that they win, but can fail to attract any long-standing attention due to the lack of capital.

But where that lack of capital lies, indies thus have the ability to rely on one another, or freelance artists, to help them out and even give them favors at times for art and formatting (Thompson). The missions of these presses as well regardless of size can also mean they're more willing to connect their authors to small speaking opportunities at libraries or other small venues. The result is this kind of niche coziness and passion that is present in so many indie publishers — people rely on one another for favors as necessary, and are open and excited about sharing their work with the public.

Indies often fall on the left-leaning side of the political spectrum as well. This is not always the case, but it is definitely something that one notices across publishers. Books of leftist thought are not always being put out by the larger publishing houses; the more radical leanings are found published by university publishers or indies who are dedicated to disseminating diverse voices. This is an important gap that is still present today which the indie market fills



regularly. Of course, there are right-leaning indies who can't get their extremist work published by larger houses, but most indies are committed to diversifying the landscape of literature — not just with whose voices they publish, but with the stories they put out too.

### **The Weirder, The Better**

One of the most consistently intriguing elements of media — both its production and consumption — is the concept of the “cult classic”. These are films, books, and artists even whose work is rejected at first for being too “out there”. Maybe there's poor acting, or the plot is too cheesy, or the piece of media was too ahead of its time to be properly appreciated. Most of the time, these cult classics are some kind of genre fiction, especially horror: Films like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *Repo! The Genetic Opera*, and *Carrie: The Musical* are all stage and film pieces that have gained beloved followings that rival even the most popular media. There's something about the campiness, the lore behind the creation of these pieces, their absurdness that makes them endearing to just the right kind of audience to kickstart a fanbase.

Publishing is littered with cult classics as well. Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, originally an indie publication (1996, W.W. Norton), Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000, Pantheon, which is owned by Random House but has editorial independence), and even Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962, originally published by William Heinemann which has since been an imprint owned at some time by much of the Big Five) have all gained status as “cult classic” books, with the first and last owing their rise in fame in no small part to the film adaptations by David Fincher and Stanley Kubrick, respectively. *House of Leaves* incorporates elements of the film world into its story, but would probably be wholly impossible to adapt to the screen.

Regardless of the film adaptations, these books themselves are unapologetically weird and still got themselves published. Palahniuk writes in gritty detail and allegory, Danielewski crafts a mind-bendingly meta narrative, and Burgess writes in a made-up language and sticks to it throughout the entire book, not even wavering once. But these books aren't just gruesome, challenging, and peculiar, but also explore something new in regards to the human psyche that leaves readers with something that they might not have expected going into the book.

Missouri Williams' *The Doloriad* (2022, Dead Ink [independent, UK] and Farrar, Straus and Giroux [a subsidiary of Macmillan, US]) deals similarly with an incestuous, rotting family in a post-apocalypse period, exploring uncomfortable elements of humanity's darker tendencies. Although not published by an independent press but rather an imprint of Random House, Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* is a rare case where a particularly weird and violent book was picked up by a large press.

While most of these books discussed here are well-known, they each reveal something interesting about the nature of the publisher they were acquired and printed by. W.W. Norton is the oldest independent, employee-run publisher in the United States, which has a hefty backlist of important titles. Pantheon had and continues to have an illustrious history and present of authors thanks to its editorial independence despite being under Random House. And *American Psycho*, *Clockwork Orange*, and the American distribution of *Doloriad* all prove that sometimes those weird, frightening, non-traditional books can break through the red tape of mainstream publishing and become immensely popular all the same.

This, however, is the exception and not the rule. More often than not, the indies are obtaining and publishing those books that are outside of the norm, and most of the time they see poor ratings from the general reading public as a result. This is one of the largest problems with

our reading public today — books that challenge what it means to be a book, or deal with disturbing subject matter, are often cast aside by readers as not worthwhile because they are objectionable or hard to read. Even worse, they can face censorship from school districts or politicians who believe that no one should have access to such content — which is another discussion outside of the scope of this paper.

### **The Harms of the Big Five**

When the Big Five focus on putting out the same kind of books over and over, they are satiating their audience and making money. But when an unexpected book becomes a bestseller, and the market becomes flooded with similar books even more, an issue starts to arise where readers might not necessarily expect more or better from the big publishers of books. As stated previously, it can be difficult for the casual reader to even pick up on where they are getting their books from, because of the way that imprint logos work. There then is also the issue of when publishers keep catering constantly to a certain genre, which can pigeonhole readers and prevent them from feeling interested into branching out to read other genres. Why read other genres when there is enough to read in their favorite genre, after all?

This ultimately can harm books, whether indie published or something different from the usual offerings put out by the Big Five. When people are not exposing themselves to new books, they won't know how to engage with books that break conventions, and if they do happen to take a chance on a book that is indie published or non-traditional, it can make the general consensus on these books seem like it is lower than usual, which can further deter other readers from picking it up. This is not to say that people cannot dislike a book simply because it's "not like the

other books”, but it is worth asking if this kind of genre echo-chambering is unnecessarily harming weirder books.

### **The Harms of Big Five Excitement on Social Media**

The space where this gets even more frustrating is Big BookTok. Although the algorithm is meant to adjust to the tastes of the user, the popularity boom of a handful of big books, which then leads to more copycats cannot be denied. Following the pandemic, more people than ever dedicated their time to reading or even making bookish content based on what they were reading. “BookTok” became a genre in big chain bookstores when they were able to function more normally. The fare is usually illustrated, cartoon-y romance books, or anything to do with Greek mythology, or anything regarding a kind of sad-girl malaise. And as these books get popular and in some cases, like Sally Rooney’s *Normal People*, get acknowledged by the Booker, big publishing is tipped off to continue to find and publish more books that are exactly like it in order to capitalize on the hype or even keep it strong. This is part of why, although trends come and go at a remarkably fast rate in video sites like TikTok, subgenres still find a huge following, and publishing can continue to keep pushing new books into the space as long as the genre is relevant.

This kind of market cycle, however, is harmful in two crucial ways: as discussed previously, it keeps the market saturated with a certain kind of genre for a long time, and in doing so it further pushes indie publishing to the sideline, especially if the indies are smaller and certainly not following along with any of the trends. This also contributes to the sidelining of marginalized voices as a result.

This kind of cycle of demand (or perceived demand) from readers makes big publishers desperate to continue pushing out the next big thing in these popular genres, and readers consume them, and indie publishing can get lost in all the noise. Even if readers end up hating a book that gets extremely popular, “hate reading” — as the name implies, reading a book knowing that you won’t enjoy it — still is engagement with the book, which continues to contribute to its publicity and indeed can popularize it as other people hate read it or engage with content creators who hate read.

Hopefully, this is coming across as a huge mess, and a broken way for readers to be utilizing their voices to influence publishing in this unprecedented way. Publishing continues to create a lot of noise, and although indies carve out space for themselves in a variety of ways, they are often overlooked or derided for not sticking to what’s popular.

### **How Do We Fix This?**

Which leads to the point of this paper: how do we, as a reading public, utilize this newfound power in order to influence publishing for the better? How can we guarantee a future that platforms not only diverse authors, but diverse stories — fiction stories that dare to be weird and even ridiculous; nonfiction that engages critically with the reality of our world today that is not oriented for a pop-science audience; memoirs of radical people who don’t always get placed in the public eye?

It would be easy to say that we all should stop giving in to big publishers and reading what they put out. Such a thing is idealistic and generally impossible, and would be dismissing the truly great books that are put out by amazing authors that are so lucky to get Big Five contracts.

It would also be easy to say that readers should simply start highlighting books by indie presses more often than they do Big Five releases. But this is not as simple as it sounds either, because keeping on top of indie releases requires a lot of research that not every reader is willing to put time into, which is understandable.

This does not mean that readers should not try to demand better, however. Some fixes that could be requested would be more clarity on if a book is coming from a Big Five imprint, for instance; something that could make the fact that the book is not from an indie press but rather an imprint would do wonders for transparency, and make it easier for readers to identify what presses are truly independent.

Although the average reader might not necessarily have time to dig through catalogs and find indie books that interest them, people who are heavily engaged in the online bookish world like BookTubers and BookTokkers can take it upon themselves to incorporate indie presses into their monthly wrap-ups or their shorter content. Some content creators have actively taken it upon themselves to do just this, highlighting their favorite indie publications so more people know about them; they have the potential to be the forerunners of this movement, making more people aware of these presses and authors. Short form content has the ability to go viral overnight, as we have seen in the last few years alone, and BookTok has the incredible potential to launch a years-old book back into orbit. If it can be done for classics and build hype for new releases, why can't it also be used in order to highlight the incredible work being put out by independent presses?

Generating buzz intentionally for indie books, even though indie presses don't have the monetary ability to compensate reviewers the same way that Big Five can, is a charitable act towards helping the reading community discover more weird fiction, and get used to weird

fiction in the world of literature. In theory, an indie book could overnight be catapulted into fame.

Although this could eventually lead to Big Five taking notice of these kinds of books, it's also worth noting that because many indies don't follow trends, it might be hard for Big Five to capitalize on anything in the first place; it might snap up some books that read similarly, or have similar content to, an indie book that hypothetically gets popular, that kind of trend-building could not be as easily replicated. This could even lead to less saturation of the market, and if nothing else at least quiet down trend cycles as we see them in the present day, which would leave even more room in the market for indie books and even less-traditional Big Five releases to make a splash.

At this point in history, readers have more power than ever to democratize publishing and make the reading world a space that includes all books, rather than mirroring and creating trends *ad nauseam*. By helping indie publications get bigger thanks to built-up social media audiences, or building authentic hype in the reading community for underappreciated books, the online reading community has the potential to revolutionize publishing by centering indie voices, better-quality literature, and open our minds to a world of English literature that encourages creativity rather than following trends.

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