

Broadbrows and book clubs

Dr Nicola Wilson introduces us to the Book Society and its cultural influence



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How do we choose the books that we read and decide to put on our shelves? What does it mean to follow the advice of a book club judge or selection committee? What were the most popular book club choices of the recent past?

I have been exploring some of these questions through my research on the Book Society, the first monthly book sales club set up in Britain, which ran between April 1929 and the late 1960s. Each month, the Book Society sent a new full-price book through the post to its tens of thousands of members living in the UK and overseas. Facing protest from the bookselling industry initially and lambasted by the critics, it nevertheless enabled a wide reading public to consider themselves book-buyers and to build up collections of newly published books at a time when book-buying was still considered privileged and rare.

Many well-known works of the mid-20th century – including E.M. Delafield's *Diary of a Provincial Lady* (1930), Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) – were pushed toward bestseller status by the Book Society and its readers. A Choice title meant mass sales. Records in publishers' archives show that a Choice nomination from the Book Society meant a guaranteed additional order of 7,000 copies for the first edition – an enormous amount when typical hardback sales to bookshops and libraries were on average between 3,000 and 5,000 copies. Like Richard & Judy and Oprah

today, the Book Society's influence went beyond that of their paying members, as monthly choices were widely advertised in the press, in libraries and bookshops. Many more people subscribed to its monthly journal, *The Book Society News*, than bought books directly from it. Boots Booklovers library explained to their staff after the Second World War that the Book Society's 'choice has become a standard of literary advice very well respected throughout the country. Even people who do not belong to the Book Society, are prepared to order these volumes through libraries, so that most publishers are exceedingly pleased to have one of their titles chosen.'¹

The Book Society was modelled on the phenomenally successful American Book-of-the-Month Club, set up by adman Harry Scherman in 1926 to encourage greater book-buying among a reluctant-to-purchase reading public. In the United States, Scherman had found that readers could be persuaded to buy a new book each month if consumer loyalty and brand recognition were carefully cultivated. In Britain, the 'pernicious habit of book borrowing', as H.G. Wells put it, was firmly entrenched in the inter-war period, and booksellers were sceptical that readers would follow an American lead.² But they did. By 1939 the Book Society had over 10,000 members, and was viewed as a useful means of getting the latest books out to those living in the country or away from a major town, and without ready access to bookshops. Between 30 and 40 per cent of the club's members lived overseas. Empire and its decline is an important aspect of the Book Society's founding, its textual choices, and ultimate redundancy in the late 1960s.

We know a lot about the American Book-of-the-Month Club thanks to the extensive preservation of its records and the seminal research of Joan Shelley Rubin

1. Boots Booklovers Library, First Literary Course, 'Ninth Paper: Publishers and Bestsellers', box 460, Alliance Boots Archive & Museum Collection, Nottingham.
2. H.G. Wells, 'Interviews with Famous Authors', *The Book Window: A Guide to Book Buying and Book Reading*, 1:1 (July 1927), 3–4.

and Janice Radway.³ It is widely seen as an important part of 20th-century American literary culture. But the significance of the Book Society has not often been recognised. This is partly due to the loss of the club's records, and the fact that it is no longer, unlike the American Book-of-the-Month Club, a going commercial concern. One of the areas my research has focused on is the connections between the two clubs, and to what extent the joint choices they made over a 40-year period (where, that is, a text was nominated as a Book-of-the-Month on both sides of the Atlantic) may have contributed towards a shared sense of reading community. The clubs operated separately in financial terms and were generally careful to differentiate between their choices, but there were many textual cross-overs as well as personal connections between the two sets of judges. Especially popular book club authors on both sides of the Atlantic include Rosamond Lehmann, C.S. Forester (author of the Hornblower series), John P. Marquand (later a judge on the Book-of-the-Month Club), and Winston Churchill.

Broadbrows

When the Book Society was set up at the end of the 1920s, debates about the politics of reading, public standards, and the so-called stratification of literature and publishing were rife. With its model of distribution and guided reading, the Book Society didn't fare well in contemporary rhetoric of the battle of the brows. The most vicious critique came from Cambridge academic Q.D. Leavis, wife of F.R. Leavis and part of the powerful Scrutiny group, who argued that new methods of book distribution and the rush of 'middlemen' between author and reader were promoting ever-widening 'levels of reading public' and helping to 'standardize different levels of taste'.⁴ In a damning assessment for her *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932), Leavis wrote that the Book Society 'confer[red] authority on a taste for the second-rate', organising and setting up 'a middlebrow standard of values'.⁵

There is now a great deal of academic work on the messy contours of the middlebrow.⁶ This research has worked to reclaim its pleasures and complexities, its differing aesthetics and politics, rejecting the too easy dismissal of its readers and, by extension, their tastes. The Book Society and its judges were actively involved in such debates, upholding conservative, anti-modernist values from the 1930s to the late 1960s. In their monthly choices and recommendations, the Book Society offered an eclectic but fundamentally traditional programme of

readable literary fiction, historical novels, travel literature, and biographies. They were 'Broadbrows' as judge J.B. Priestley put it, those 'who snap their fingers at fashions, who only ask that a thing should have character and art, should be enthralling, and do not give a fig whether it is popular or unpopular, born in Blackburn or Baku'.⁷ Chairman of the selection committee Hugh Walpole fired regular shots at the literati in the club's monthly journal: 'It would be amusing suddenly to defend a statement,' he wrote, 'that the half-dozen best living novelists in England are not the well-known and customary names, Woolf, Huxley, Maugham and so on, but rather, Forrest Reid, Charles Marriott, L.H. Myers, Elizabeth Bowen, C.S. Forester and Helen Simpson. The thing is not so preposterous as it sounds, and a good case could be made out.'⁸ The choices and recommendations of the Book Society were deliberately varied and included the 'well-known' (and highly respected) like Woolf. But there was a sustained push to reassure readers that there was continued value in apparently old-fashioned forms and tastes.

A lot of my research has focused on this question of the middlebrow dimensions of the Book Society, considering how the club sits in more established literary-critical narratives and histories of popular reading and tastes. I have also been drawn to the lives of the individual judges involved with the club, all of whom were influential taste-makers, critics, and literary celebrities, whose views and opinions were crucial in capturing the club's many thousands of paying members. The initial set of Book Society judges were writers Hugh Walpole, J.B. Priestley, Clemence Dane, Sylvia Lynd, and Oxford academic George Stuart Gordon. Later came Compton Mackenzie, Edmund Blunden, Cecil Day-Lewis and, in the post-war period, William Golding, Daniel Gordon and Isobel Quigly. The first group of judges, assembled by novelist Hugh Walpole when he was asked to be Chair, were associated with the Hampstead set circulating around the Irish writers Robert and Sylvia Lynd. Robert Lynd was a well-known newspaper critic and essayist, his wife Sylvia a poet, critic and formidable literary judge (her work for the Book



3. There are readers' reports in the Beinecke and the Library of Congress, and materials relating to the Club's judges at the Universities of Vermont and Columbia. See Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Janice Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (University of North Carolina Press, 1997).
4. Q.D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (Harmondsworth: Peregrine, 1979), p. 31–2.
5. Q.D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932; Peregrine, 1979), p. 34.
6. See for instance *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: The Battle of the Brows, 1920–60*, edited by Erica Brown and Mary Grover (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); and Faye Hammill, 'Middlebrow: An Interdisciplinary Transatlantic Research Network', www.middlebrow-network.com/About.aspx
7. J.B. Priestley, 'High, Low, Broad', *Saturday Review* (20 February 1926), 222; reprinted in *Open House: A Book of Essays* (Heinemann, 1930), p. 166.
8. Hugh Walpole, 'Review: November Choice. Flying Colours by C. S. Forester including A Ship of the Nile', *Book Society News* (November 1938), 9–11 at 9.

Society carried over into her suggestions for the *Femina Vie-Heureuse* literary prize, which she twice chaired). The writers, publishers, and critics that partied at the Lynds' Friday night salons were of a different set to the high-brows of Bloomsbury. Priestley's 'broadbrows' is a witty, affectionate term for the Book Society judges and their aesthetic choices, capturing both the diversity of the club's monthly reading and satirising the rigidity of these lines in the sand.

Revisions

A lot of my previous research has focused on the extent to which influential book-buyers and distributors, like circulating libraries in the first half of the 20th century, were able to exert influence upon writers and in publishing houses.⁹ Records in publishers' archives can reveal the tangible changes made to texts in deference to certain sections of the reading public. The Book Society is illuminating on this score. I first became interested in the impact of the Book Society because of the various changes in pricing and production made to Virginia Woolf's *Flush* (1933) to meet the demands of the Book Society (these changes involved choice of paper, number of illustrations, size of the first edition).¹⁰ Further research has revealed a significant editorial impact on some of its selections. The Book Society selection committee – like the American Book-of-the-Month Club – received

copies of new and forthcoming books from publishing houses in proof form. This meant that the judges could make important interventions on the text before it went into print. Previous critics examining the readers' reports of the American Book-of-the-Month Club have shown the interventions of the club's judges on iconic American texts, including Richard Wright's *Native Son*, a Book-of-the-Month in March 1940, where sexuality was toned down so as not to offend the club's more

conservative members.¹¹ For the Book Society, it is Irish writer Sylvia Lynd who seems to have had a close eye on questions of morality and the general readers' tastes. We know for instance from surviving correspondence that after reading the publisher's copy in proof form she personally suggested changes that were then taken up in George Blake's *The Shipbuilders* (1935), Eric Linklater's *Juan in America* (1931), and Vita Sackville-West's *The Edwardians* (1930). This challenges the view that the Book Society was only a book distributor (even if a particularly influential one) aiding the spread and distribution of works already in print, by showing that the

club and its judges had an important influence on the pre-publication of texts as well.

I have had a great deal of fun reading and discovering Book Society Choices for this project and am steadily building up my own collection. Some of these books, all of which were publishers' first editions (part of the cultural cachet of membership) still carry the Book Society bookplate sent out with each copy and names of their original owners. The clubs' records of membership have been lost but individual stories emerge, like that of Dr Mary M.G. Hooper (1892–1954), an early medical student at St Andrew's who was a Book Society member in the 1930s when she was living and practising in Northern Alberta, Canada.¹²

I have recently started a blog to highlight the diversity of Book Society Choices and some of their most interesting, bestselling reads, as a potential resource for book clubs and anyone interested in our recent reading past: 'The Book Society 1929–69: A guide to the bestselling monthly book club authors of the twentieth century'.¹³ Please get in touch!¹⁴ ■

The club and its judges had an important influence on the pre-publication of texts.

The piece of Book Society publicity material reproduced on page 45 is from the John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera, Bodleian Libraries, Oxford.

9. See www.reading.ac.uk/english-literature/Research/ell-novel-project.aspx

10. See 'Virginia Woolf, Hugh Walpole, The Hogarth Press and the Book Society', *ELH*, 79:1 (Spring 2012), 237–60.

11. See for instance Radway, *A Feeling for Books*, pp. 286–7; Jaime Harker, *America the Middlebrow: Women's Novels, Progressivism and Middlebrow Authorship between the Wars* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), pp. 164–5.

12. With thanks to Luath Grant Ferguson, who made contact through the project blog.

13. <https://thebooksocietysite.com/>

14. n.l.wilson@reading.ac.uk