



The First Year of the Paperback Revolution

Author(s): Warren French

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Science has rescued us from the tyranny and ignorance of the past, and given us (or at least restored to us from the Greeks) those values Mr. Bronowski spoke of. It has also deprived us of the myths which once shaped religions and gave men significance and spiritual energy; but all unaware, it has replaced the old myths with its own, as our sacrifices to it show. Spirituality is measured by the amount of energy we expend, and ours is largely devoted to science. Under the stimulus of the war economy energy is being burnt with more than usual fervor at its altars, located in secret laboratories or in caves, much like the old sacred places of the barbarians. This law of spiritual devotion may be expressed as an equation: $S=E$, with S as spirituality and E as energy. And since science is pure spirit, energy is thus

being regularly converted into a finer form. Happily, science is endowed with all the properties of a mystery religion: predictive, prophetic powers; a priesthood; a priestly language unintelligible to the laity; sacred vestments; and spiritual devotion—the bent back of the scientist has replaced that of the priest as a symbol of devotion. Its unfolding of natural history is much like the old unfolding of Providential design; and if this includes the possibility of our extermination, why in this too it is like Jehovah. The difference is merely that of a superior technique. Soon, perhaps, the priests of science will conduct the mystery rites of the atom in sacred cave and cell. Waving slide rule in benediction, they will lead us in the atomic chant: one, yet not one; invisible, yet divisible. Amen.

The First Year of the Paperback Revolution

WARREN FRENCH

Never again need you dawdle idly in reception rooms, fret on train or bus rides, sit vacantly staring at a restaurant table. The books you have always meant to read "when you had the time" will fill these waits with enjoyment.

FROM THIS alluring promise and accompanying encomia from such literary arbiters as Nicholas Murray Butler, Christopher Morley, Lowell Thomas, Clifton Fadiman, Will Durant, Hendrik Willem Van Loon, and Dale Carnegie, which filled the back page of the *New York Times* on Monday, June 19, 1939, the public learned of the advent of Pocket Books, perhaps the most revolu-

tionary event in the history of American book publishing.

Those born since World War II, accustomed to finding racks of small paperbound books a feature of almost every supermarket and drug store, find it as difficult to imagine a time when there were no such books as one when there were no TV dinners or even TV's. Yet we celebrate this year only the silver jubilee of these seemingly indispensable fixtures of the American scene.

I can still recall vividly that summer day late in the depression when, an impecunious and indiscriminate enthusiast for books just graduated from high school, I was awed by the first flashy rack of Pocket Books that confronted me as I was browsing through one of Philadelphia's department stores. At last,

Mr. French, associate professor of English at Kansas State University, is a member of the editorial board of CCC and author of A Companion to "The Grapes of Wrath."

just as the publisher promised, I could own at a price that even I could afford, handy, readable copies of books that were often on long waiting lists at libraries. I purchased at once a copy of Number One of the series, James Hilton's then much discussed and enormously popular *Lost Horizon*. My addiction to the paperbacks had begun.

For the pleasure that this book and its successors brought, I and millions of others were indebted to Robert Fair de Graff, whose imagination and ingenuity had brought a new kind of book into being during a stagnant era notably inhospitable to unconventional ideas. De Graff had long been associated with the reprint book business. He had first gone to work for Doubleday, for whose subsidiary, The Garden City Publishing Company, he had originated in 1925 the "Star Dollar" reprints. From 1936 until early in 1938, he had been president of Blue Ribbon Books and had pioneered in producing hardbacked reprints of popular titles that retailed (in the Triangle series) for as low as thirty-nine cents. Even these books that were distributed through regular trade channels reached, however, only the small number of communities that boasted bookstores. De Graff felt that there was still a large untapped market for good reading in the vast book-starved areas of the country, and he set about devising methods to reach this market.

The first public intimation of what he was up to came in the April 22, 1939 issue of *Publishers' Weekly*, which contained a letter from De Graff, dated April 17, asking if anyone had considered printing special cheap editions of books for the numerous book borrowers who had been discussed in an editorial, "More Book Owners Wanted," in the previous issue of the magazine. The person who had considered such printing was, of course, the questioner himself. He further insisted that such cheap editions would provide revenue to both

authors and publishers without interfering with the sales of regular editions of their books. Even before casting this straw upon the wind, De Graff had sent a questionnaire to 25,000 book and magazine readers, actually asking for orders for specific books in the unusual paperbacked format he proposed. From the answers, De Graff claimed that he had learned two things: "There is an enormous unsatisfied demand, not only for good books at low cost, but also for smaller sized books, provided large type and good paper could be retained." *Publishers' Weekly* announced on May 27, 1939, that the public was about to see the results of De Graff's months of questioning and experimentation. A line of "Pocket Books" was to be released shortly in drug and cigar stores and hotel and railway newsstands in metropolitan New York.

Cheap paperbound books were by no means unprecedented on the American market. Series of them had begun to appear more than a century before the De Graff experiment, when the improvement of the high speed rotary printing press had made possible, for example, Harper's Franklin Square Library of inexpensive paperback reprintings of popular works of the period. During the next decade a steady stream of twenty-five and thirty-five cent paperback books poured from presses in the major Eastern cities. Most of the books were sensational adventure stories by such prolific authors as Joseph Holt Ingraham and Sylvanus Cobb, Jr., many of which had first appeared serially in the popular "story papers" of the time, like the *New York Ledger* and *Flag of Our Union*.

During the Civil War, these first paperbacks, which were printed on surprisingly good stock in readable type, were supplanted—largely as a result of the efforts of Erasmus Beadle—by the famous "dime novels." These were published first in small pamphlets; but later, to take advantage of cheaper printing

and mailing rates, they appeared in tabloid newspaper form, printed in microscopic type on paper that has since largely turned to dust. By the 1880's, the market was glutted with the much condemned dime, half-dime, and quarter "books," designed principally for an adolescent audience and consisting largely of reprintings and imitations of the sensational "Story Paper" novels and of the prototypes of the modern detective and western stories. Constantly criticized by the respectable, the mania for dime novels gradually faded as the nineteenth century ended, although their successors continued through the early years of the twentieth and at least one firm, Ogilvie Publications, was still providing paperback books about Buffalo Bill and other American demigods to railroad news butchers as late as 1936.

Sporadic efforts were made during the teens and twenties to develop a market for more artistic paperback editions of literary classics and avant-grade productions, but none of these schemes fared as well as the still surviving Modern Library, which first appeared in limp leather bindings. Librarians and book lovers disliked paper bindings, while Main Street still associated "paper books" with the supposedly disreputable wares of the Beadles and their competitors.

Paperback books were, however, already on sale on the newsstands at the Philadelphia subway-elevated stops and similar establishments at the time of the appearance of the first Pocket Books. I remember most clearly the provocative publications of Modern Age Books and the monthly "Mercury Mysteries" with their bright covers. Mercury aimed simply at providing commuting detective-story fans with the work of a reliable tale-teller every month, but Modern Age made a more ambitious effort to inform as well as please the public. Using the Rumford Press between printings of the *Reader's Digest* in order to cut costs,

the publishers tried to develop a mass audience for reprints of such then rather "highbrow" authors as E. M. Forster, William Saroyan, and Ignazio Silone and for original works about social and political problems of the period, such as Professor Henry Fairchild's *Economics for the Millions*. The venture lost heavily, however, until prices were advanced from twenty-five and thirty-five cents to fifty to ninety-five cents.

Pocket Books, when they burst upon the public, proved to be different from any of the earlier series. First, De Graff concentrated at the beginning on reprints of works that had proved extremely popular in hardbacked editions with the general public. Second, the four and one-half by six and one-half inch books were genuinely pocket-sized, so that men could carry them in their coats and women in their handbags and read them easily while sitting or—as more likely—standing in a subway or trolley car. Third, despite their diminutive size, the books were printed in type large enough to be genuinely readable; and fourth—and very important—they had waterproofed "Dura-Gloss" covers that gave them a durability that even the truly softbound Mercury and Modern Age books lacked. Although De Graff tried to placate traditional publishers by stressing that the first Pocket Books could be traded in on more expensive library editions of the same works, his books were themselves durable enough to provide the foundations of a private library for those who at the time had neither the money nor the space to collect standard editions.

Old hands in the publishing trade were, nevertheless, skeptical about the venture. One publisher even announced with that peculiar perversity that has frustrated much experimentation that if he thought the enterprise would prosper, he would be unwilling to cooperate. Pocket Books were successful, however, even beyond De Graff's anticipation.

The first printing consisted of ten titles diversified enough to provide a sound sampling of the potential market. The list was half fiction, including *Lost Horizon*, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Way of All Flesh*, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, and the then enormously popular Thorne Smith's *Topper*. There was also drama (five Shakespearean tragedies), poetry (Dorothy Parker's *Enough Rope*), mystery (Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*), inspiration (Dorothea Brande's *Wake Up and Live*), and even something for the kiddies (Felix Salten's *Bambi*). Five thousand of each title went on sale on Monday in New York City; on Tuesday the first reorder came from the Doubleday store in Grand Central Station. Within the first three weeks, 107,000 copies of these first titles had been sold, although the sale was still restricted to metropolitan New York. Second editions of all titles were on the press by July 1, and the publishers could not keep up with the demand.

By Saturday, July 29, enough copies were ready for the publisher to launch a national sales campaign in an area bounded by Boston, Washington, and Chicago. As a result of a one-hundred dollar ad in the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, all two thousand copies at Higbee's Department Store were sold on the first day of sale by four in the afternoon, and similar results were reported from other cities. By September 1, more than half a million copies had been sold. *Wuthering Heights*, probably as a result of the popularity of the then circulating motion picture version starring Laurence Olivier and Merle Oberon, led by 35,000 over the next biggest seller, *Lost Horizon*.

Overnight popularity was bound to attract competition. Early in August, as soon as the national demand for Pocket Books was manifest, the British firm that had for three years been producing Penguin Books announced that it would

open a New York office and place Ian Ballantine in charge of an American sales campaign. Fifty Penguins, twenty of the nonfiction Pelicans, ten illustrated classics, and eighteen volumes of Shakespeare were to be included in the first offering in the United States. Because of its longer list, Penguin might indeed have posed a serious threat to Pocket Books during the infancy of the American firm had not the outbreak of the European war at just the time the Penguins were first being shipped to this country reduced the British paper supply and caused shipping difficulties that prevented the British organization from carrying out its full plans for conquering the American market. Still, during 1939 Penguin was able to place 109 titles on sale in the United States against Pocket Books' thirty-three.

A threat closer to home came in October, 1939, when the Columbian Art Works of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, announced that it was launching a series of Red Arrow Books, which would be the same size as Penguin Books and would sell like Pocket Books for a quarter. This series, however, would be produced by offset lithography, which the manufacturers hoped might reduce production costs. Five mysteries, five travel and adventure books, and two novels went on sale on October 17; none of the titles was well known, although works by such popular authors as Van Wyck Mason (*Captain Nemesis*) and Ben Ames Williams (*Pirate's Purchase*) were included. Despite the publicity attending the launching of this series, little more was heard of it; after a few months it ceased to issue new titles, and I can never recall having seen any of the books.

About the same time, Mercury Books, which were published by the *American Mercury* magazine, decided to publish each month besides a mystery, another paperback, beginning in September, 1939, with a new edition of John Steinbeck's

first novel, *Cup of Gold*, a lurid romance about pirates that must have come as a great surprise to readers of the then best-selling *Grapes of Wrath*. The Public Affairs Press also decided to join the new trend with a series of pamphlets on major issues of the day; and Modern Age, spurred by the competition to new efforts, announced a thousand-dollar contest for a novel about American youth.

Meanwhile, the line of Pocket Books began to grow. Four new titles were added to the original ten at the end of August: Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth*, Edna Ferber's *Showboat*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and DeMaupassant's short stories. The familiar Kangaroo emblem ("Read as you Ride") appeared for the first time in September on four new titles. By November, the customary release on the tenth of each month was increased to six; and by December, the firm was ready to experiment with a seasonal special. For a limited period, a twenty-five cent edition of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* with special illustrations by Julian Brazelton was released in a specially prepared gift box that could be used in place of a Christmas card.

Although the venture was only six months old, two other developments in December indicated the effect that it was having. Modern Age discontinued its seventy-five and ninety-five cent paperbacks and shifted the titles to cloth-bounds, while Macmillan announced that it would experiment with a special sixty-nine cent edition of the fabulous best-seller, *Gone with the Wind*. In January, 1940, Mr. and Mrs. Charles E. Bacon announced in New York that they considered the paperback business sufficiently large and profitable to warrant the organization of a central agency that would deal in such books only and that would be geared to hitting the audience at universities. Besides Pocket Books, the Bacons would handle the Trailblazers series, Treasure Chest publications, titles

from the Creative Crafts Press House of Little Books, and the Leisure League of America.

In February, 1940, just eight months after the first appearance of Pocket Books, the firm announced that it was moving May 1 to larger office spaces in the United States Rubber Company Building, the newest unit of Rockefeller Center. Seventeen hundred outlets were already handling the books, and stores reported that the paperbacks seemed to be spurring rather than interfering with the sales of higher priced books. De Graff was not content, however, to rest on his laurels. The original scheme to trade Pocket Books for higher priced editions had proved a nuisance and was dropped; slow-moving titles like *A Tale of Two Cities* and John O'Hara's *Appointment in Samarra* were already being pruned from the list.

The venture was so firmly established by the time it was a year old that the sponsors were ready to test the effect of a cheap paperback edition on the sale of a hardback that was still a best-seller. In collaboration with Simon and Schuster, Pocket Books placed on sale for two months in Texas only twenty-five cent copies of Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, still a leading seller at \$1.95. Sales of the more expensive edition actually increased. From this experiment developed not only the confidence that hardback and paperback editions marketed simultaneously could stimulate interest in each other, but also the first really sensational seller in the new format. Within two years the quarter edition of the Carnegie guide to glory had sold 900,000 of the total of *seventeen million* Pocket Books. Some readers may recall that as this pioneer "how-to-do-it" amassed its astonishing sales, copies were issued with individual numbers on them. Much publicized ceremonies attended the production of the millionth copy of this first

paperback to achieve this record. Robert de Graff had indeed learned "how to win friends and influence people" with his paperback bonanza.

As a result of the wartime paper shortage that obliged even De Graff to farm out some of his work to other houses (*The Steinbeck Pocket Book* carries a Blakiston imprint), the trail-blazer of the paperback revolution was able to operate for nearly six years without sizeable opposition. Of surviving lines, only the American Penguins and Pelicans (transformed in 1948 into Signet and Mentor) and the American News Company's Avon Books were introduced during the war. The stories of the emergence of rival lines (especially Bantam Books) after the war, of the creation of paperback textbook series (beginning with the Crofts Classics and Rinehart

Reprints), of the introduction in 1953 of the "elite" paperbacks (beginning with Doubleday's Anchor Books) lie beyond the scope of this commemorative essay. The "quarter book" is almost a thing of the past, but the paperback marches on to ever more surprising triumphs and apparently ever higher prices. The revolution that has put readable editions of meritorious books on sale in even the most remote communities owes much to Robert de Graff's skillful management of his pioneering series during its crucial first year. Because he outguessed the scoffers, we boast today not only "book departments" in grocery stores, but new bookstores devoted exclusively to the more than twenty thousand titles now available paperbound.

The Final Irony of the Pardoner's Tale

EDMUND REISS

WHILE THE Pardoner's Tale is one of the acknowledged masterpieces found within the framework of the *Canterbury Tales*, it and its teller have puzzled generations of readers. Because the piece shows such an ambiguous combination of honesty and viciousness, most of the critical work done on the Tale has been aimed at reconciling its various conflicting elements. Consequently, most writers have tried to examine why, in this monologue in the form of a combination confession-sermon, the Pardoner first reveals himself as charlatan and then at the end strikes the pose of honest man of God.

Edmund Reiss, associate professor of English and comparative literature at Western Reserve University, has recently written several articles on Chaucer and has completed a book on Sir Thomas Malory, to be published by Twayne Publishers.

From the beginning there has been no critical agreement.

In his near-classic investigation of the problem, George Lyman Kittredge writes that "the cynical frankness of the Pardoner is dramatically inevitable. He is simply forestalling the reflections of his fellow-pilgrims. 'I know I am a rascal,' he says in effect, 'and *you* know it; and I wish to show you that I know you know it!' Like many another of us poor mortals, the Pardoner is willing to pass for a knave, but objects to being taken for a fool. To deceive mankind is his business, but this time no deception is possible, and he scorns the rôle of a futile hypocrite."¹ Such an interpretation

¹*Chaucer and His Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass., 1946), pp. 214-15.