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The Dog-Eared Paperback, Newly Endangered in an E-Book Age

by JULIE BOSMAN • SEPT. 2, 2011

These are dark and stormy times for the mass-market paperback, that squat little book that calls to mind the beach and airport newsstands.

Recession-minded readers who might have picked up a quick novel in the supermarket or drugstore are lately resisting the impulse purchase. Shelf space in bookstores and retail chains has been turned over to more expensive editions, like hardcovers and trade paperbacks, the sleeker, more glamorous cousin to the mass-market paperback. And while mass-market paperbacks have always been prized for their cheapness and disposability, something even more convenient has come along: the e-book.

A comprehensive survey released last month by the Association of American Publishers and the Book Industry Study Group revealed that while the publishing industry had expanded over all, publishers' mass-market paperback sales had fallen 14 percent since 2008.

"Five years ago, it was a robust market," said David Gernert, a literary agent whose clients include John Grisham, a perennial best seller in mass market. "Now it's on the wane, and e-books have bitten a big chunk out of it."

Fading away is a format that was both inexpensive and widely accessible — thrillers and mysteries and romances by authors like James Patterson, Stephen King, Clive Cussler and Nora Roberts that were purchased not to be proudly displayed on a living room shelf (and never read), but to be addictively devoured by devoted readers.

"In those days, you could easily ship out a million copies of a book," said Beth de Guzman, the editor in chief of paperbacks for Grand Central Publishing, part of the Hachette Book Group. "Then shelf space started decreasing and decreasing for mass market, and it has especially declined in the last several years."

For decades, the mass-market paperback has stubbornly held on, despite the predictions of its death since the 1980s, when retail chains that edged out independent bookstores successfully introduced discounts on hardcover versions of the same books. The prices of print formats are typically separated by at least a few dollars. Michael Connelly, the best-selling mystery writer best known for "The Lincoln Lawyer," said he worried that book buyers would not be able to discover new authors very easily if mass-market paperbacks continued to be phased out.

“Growing up and reading primarily inexpensive mass-market novels, it allows you to explore,” he said. “I bought countless novels based on the cover or based on the title, not knowing what was inside.”

The growth of the e-book has forced a conversation in the publishing industry about which print formats will survive in the long term. Publishers have begun releasing trade paperbacks sooner than the traditional one-year period after the release of the hardcover, leaving the mass-market paperback even further behind.

Cost-conscious readers who used to wait for the heavily discounted paperback have now realized that the e-book edition, available on the first day the book is published, can be about the same price. For devoted readers of novels, people who sometimes voraciously consume several books in a single week, e-books are a natural fit.

“It’s a question of, do you still want to wait for the book?” said Liate Stehlik, the publisher of William Morrow, Avon and Voyager, imprints of HarperCollins. “The people who used to wait to buy the mass-market paperback because of the price aren’t going to wait anymore.”

That could be good news for authors who make up for a loss in mass-market sales with increases in e-book sales. Generally speaking, authors make more royalties on an e-book than on a paperback.

E-book best-seller lists are packed with the genre novels that have traditionally dominated paperback best-seller lists.

“In some ways, the e-book is yesterday’s mass market,” said Matthew Shear, the executive vice president and publisher of St. Martin’s Press, which currently has books by Janet Evanovich and Lora Leigh on the paperback best-seller list in The New York Times.

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Mass-market paperback sales have been sliding since giant bookstore chains and later Amazon.com started heavily discounting hardcovers in the 1980s and 1990s. The decline has deepened in the last two years, said Kelly Gallagher, the vice president of publishing services for Bowker, a research organization for the publishing industry.

“You can’t list a single thing that has caused its demise,” he said. “But as e-books become more affordable and better aligned to the mass-market reader, I would have to say that I don’t think there are encouraging signs that print mass-market books will rise again. When all these things align against a certain format or category, it’s hard to recover.”

Ms. de Guzman said that Barnes & Noble used to keep a large display solely for mass-market paperbacks in the front of its stores, but that has disappeared. Borders, once a strong seller of mass-market paperbacks, especially romance, is in the process of liquidating all of its stores.

Several publishers said Wal-Mart, a major seller of mass-market paperbacks, has been quietly revamping its book selection to include fewer mass-market paperbacks and more trade paperbacks, which have higher production values: better-quality paper and larger covers.

Even airport stores, traditionally a mainstay retailer of mass-market paperbacks, are shunning them more frequently in favor of hardcovers and trade paperbacks.

Sara Hinckley, the vice president of book-buying and promotions for Hudson Booksellers, said that the stores had gradually decreased their selection in recent years, while increasing their array of hardcovers and trade paperbacks. Sales in trade paperbacks, she said, have continued to increase in recent years. Last fall, in 60 of its stores, Hudson cut the display space for mass-market paperbacks in half.

“With less demand and less retail shelf space for the format, and higher retails on the trade papers, there simply isn’t as much publishing into the format, which in turn creates declining sales,” Ms. Hinckley said in an e-mail.

Some publishers have responded by releasing books in trade paperback format before the mass-market edition. Grand Central Publishing plans to release trade paperback versions of “The Sixth Man” by David Baldacci and “Lethal” by Sandra Brown — the first time those authors’ thrillers have been published in trade paperback.

After 20 years as a best-selling author, Mr. Connelly will experience a first this fall: his latest legal thriller, “The Fifth Witness,” will be released as a trade paperback by Grand Central.

“From my standpoint, which is probably pure vanity, the trade paperback edition is often the way of publishing more literary novels,” Mr. Connelly said. “So for me, it’s a cool ego thing — I get to be in the trade edition. But beyond that, I’m hoping it works.”

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