

BRIEFING 4: SOCIAL MEDIA

How BookTok went bestseller

TikTok is shaking up the literary world and the publishing industry at large, with its users helping to boost books to bestseller status, reviving classics and championing niche genres. But how long will the trend last, and how can publishers harness the power of a viral video?



New release of life

In the US, 826 million books were sold in 2021, up from 694 million in 2019, with BookTok and Bookstagram contributing to the rise.

BOOKTOK EXPLAINED

Two years ago, YouTuber and TikToker Jack Edwards (@jackbenedwards) wasn't sure about making content about books. 'I was buying heaps and reading a lot as an English major, and it was the one thing I wouldn't post about,' he says. 'I thought: who cares what I think of a book?'

It turns out more than 1 million people do. That's the number of followers that Jack has amassed on his YouTube channel, which ballooned during the pandemic after he switched to exclusively making videos about all things books and reading. 'It's really quite bizarre, but it was the right timing and just took off,' Jack says from his home in Paris. Last year, he read and reviewed 164 books, also chronicling his thoughts on TikTok.

Jack is just one of many content creators in a buzzing niche on TikTok known as BookTok. It's a wholesome corner of the internet where primarily young people act as unstuffy book critics. Videos tend to be less than 60 seconds and discuss plot overviews and the emotional impact that a book has had. Scroll through #BookTok and it's common to see books being thrown across the room or BookTokers shedding a tear. While it may be considered niche, TikTok's bookish corner is proving a hit, with the hashtag having nearly 70 billion hits.

INDUSTRY OUTLOOK

According to industry experts, the platform is having a clear impact on book sales. In the UK, the Publishers Association said book sales rose 5% in 2021, a record attributed to the effects of TikTok. Nigel Newton, the CEO of Bloomsbury Publishing, credited his business' profit growth of 220% in the first half of 2021 to the

'phenomenal' impact of TikTok. It's the same in the US, where 826 million book copies were sold in 2021, according to publishing data company NPD BookScan, which tracks book sales across the country (this was the highest number since the platform started to follow the figures in 2004).

'We can't attribute it entirely to the platform, but TikTok has been

adult bestsellers in the UK in 2021 had viral moments on BookTok, while James Joyce's classic novel *Ulysses* had a renaissance after similar viral buzz.

'You'd expect to see new releases or books tied in with films or TV shows to be the front runners. They're still there but, suddenly, we saw older titles on the rise,' says Kristen. 'You can see the correlation between what's on TikTok and the sales.'

'TikTok has been a factor in book sales, especially in young adult, adult fiction, romance and fantasy categories.'

a factor in book sales, especially in young adult, adult fiction, romance and fantasy categories,' says Kristen McLean, executive director at NPD BookScan.

Publishing experts first became aware of the trend in mid-2020, when books published years ago suddenly started to make their way upwards on bestseller lists. According to the Publishers Association, four of the top five young

BookTok took off during the pandemic, when people were stuck indoors and started to rediscover the joys and escapism of reading. Simultaneously, people were looking for human connection – and BookTok satisfied both. And, unlike stuffy literary circles, this platform was relatable: people in their bedrooms and living rooms, chatting to you about what they've read and enjoyed.

GOING VIRAL

Making a book go up the charts is a peculiar alchemy – and the fact that the platform has lifted so many still intrigues publishers, authors and TikTokers themselves. 'You can't take credit necessarily, but you post something and then you can almost see in real time the sales go up on Amazon,' says Jack. 'But, to take off on bestsellers, it needs to be organic. You can't predict when that'll happen – it just does.'

In August 2020, Selene Velez, a then 18-year-old senior in high school, posted on her TikTok (@moongirlreads_) about some of her recent reads. She recommended *The Song of Achilles*, a reimagining of the *Iliad* – an ancient Greek epic poem – in this case, as a love story between heroes Achilles and Patroclus. The novel by Madeline Miller was first published in 2011 with an initial run of 20,000 copies. After Selene's video went viral, with hundreds of TikTok videos of readers in tears at the ending, the novel emerged on the New York Times bestseller list. As of this year, it's sold more than 2 million copies.

Selene (below) recalls interviewing its author Madeline after the viral video. 'She was just like: "Wow – I never saw this coming, and neither did my publisher," Selene recalls. 'It was cool to play a part of that.'



ILLUSTRATION: Maxim Usik.

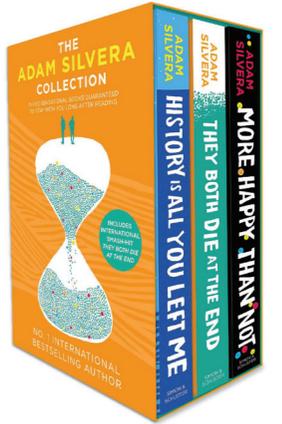
BOOKTOK IS ITS OWN NEW GENRE

Walk into a high-street bookstore and chances are you'll see a table advertising trending titles on BookTok. They're usually found at Waterstones in the UK, for example, and Barnes & Noble in the US.

James Daunt, CEO of Barnes & Noble and Waterstones, says that the TikTok phenomenon is unlike anything he's seen in his 35 years as a bookseller. 'It's beyond anything in my career,' he says, adding that it's helping the retailer gain momentum outside the TikTok demographic. 'Once you discover books, I think that endures through. We may have a generation who read more because they found books [early].'

The success of *The Song of Achilles* marked one of the first times that BookTok's influence extended beyond the young adult genre. 'While many BookTok videos are pushing young adult titles onto bestseller lists, the phenomenon has carried over into adult fiction,' according to Kristen from NPD BookScan. Popular adult sub-genres on the platform include romance, LGBTQ and poetry.

The past two years have seen adult fiction titles like *They Both Die at the End* (first published in 2017) and *It Ends With Us* by Colleen Hoover (2016) at the top of lists, much to the surprise of the authors and publishers who made minimal marketing pushes. Colleen stands out in the US charts, with four of her books featuring in the top 10 of bookstore Barnes & Noble's bestsellers for the year so far.

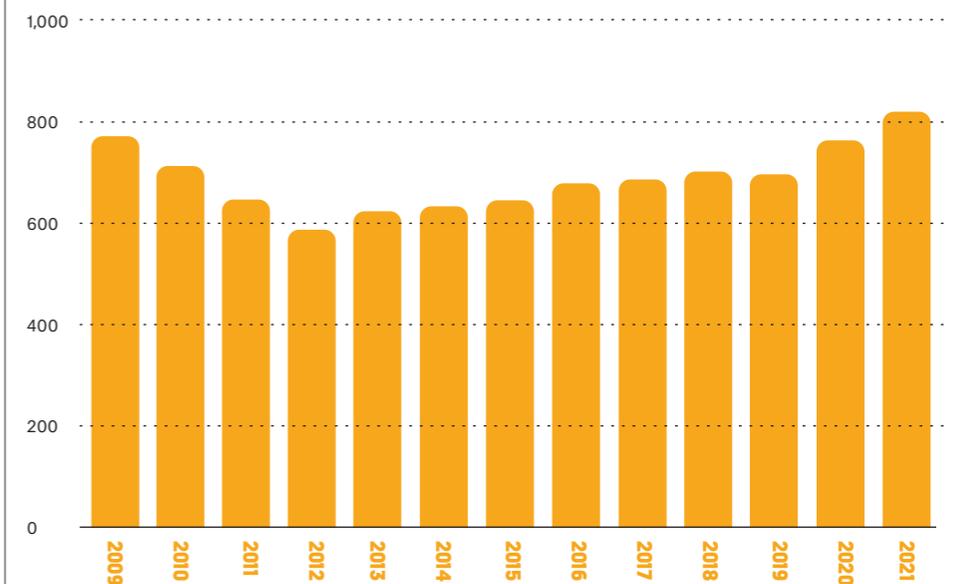


HOW TO SUCCEED ON BOOKTOK

For two years running, TikTok has impacted the books flying out of Amazon warehouses and bricks-and-mortar bookstores, proving it's more than just a passing novelty. Many publishers are now trying to embrace the BookTok crowd.

Significant publishing houses like HarperCollins Publishers, Macmillan

READING RETURNS



BookTok and Bookstagram, as well as people having more free time during the pandemic, have contributed to a resurgence in reading. According to survey data from insights company NPD BookScan, published in news site Publishers Weekly, US sales of printed books were at 825.7 million in 2021, up from 693.7 million in 2019. Before that, sales had been relatively slow-growing between 2012 and 2019. NB: Sales are in million units.