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## Periodicity, Subscription, and Mass Circulation: Mail-Order Book Culture Reconsidered

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# Periodicity, Subscription, and Mass Circulation: Mail-Order Book Culture Reconsidered

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## ABSTRACT

Connections between periodical studies and book history run deep. Building on this existing work, this contribution discusses untapped potential at the cross-section of book studies and periodical studies, especially when considering mass-market periodical and book formats. Several popular magazines, among them *Psychology Today* and *Playboy*, created book series and even book clubs, expanding their brands and diversifying their income streams. The article offers a case study of the mass-market book club ‘Reader’s Digest Condensed Books’, launched by the magazine *Reader’s Digest* in the 1950s. This popular club reached millions of households in the second half of the twentieth century and still continues to play a role in the book industry today with the series ‘Reader’s Digest Select Editions’.

## KEYWORDS

book clubs, book culture, popular formats, mass-market formats, Reader’s Digest Condensed Books

Connections between periodical studies and book history run deep.<sup>1</sup> When Leslie Howsam writes in *Old Books and New Histories* that the practitioners of book history ‘think about the reception, the composition, the material existence, and the cultural production of what is called the book only for lack of any better collective noun’, she emphasizes that the book is not limited to the codex format, and explicitly mentions periodical formats as part of the study of book culture.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Claire Battershill describes book history and periodical studies as ‘occup[ying] adjacent but separate corners of the scholarly field’, arguing for an integration of the two approaches.<sup>3</sup> In addition, Laurel Brake’s nuanced understanding of ‘serials’ and her analysis of the intersections between books and serials are illustrative of the productive overlaps.<sup>4</sup> Building on this work, this article will show that there is still untapped potential in the cross-section of book studies and periodical studies, especially when considering mass-market periodical and book formats.

Anecdotally, the interconnections between periodical reading and book reading were illustrated in the 1949 chart ‘Everyday Tastes from High-Brow to Low-Brow’ (Fig. 1).<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of this article, the grouping on the right is instructive. Under the category heading ‘READING’, we see ‘Little magazines’ as reading material for highbrow readers.<sup>6</sup> In the chart, ‘Solid nonfiction, the better novels, [and] quality magazines’ are listed for upper middlebrow readers, and magazines like *Vogue* and *Harper’s* are hinted at. As indicated, this article focuses on potential overlaps in mass-market formats for wide audiences. Accordingly, the reading material categorized as lower middlebrow is interesting here: we see ‘Book club selections’ and ‘mass circulation magazines’ grouped together. In the lowest category, pulps and comic books — incidentally often also serial publications — are shown. Using this figure as a starting point, this article will discuss the ways that book publishing met (and still meets) periodical publishing in the realm of mass culture, and within multimedia conglomerates typical of the later twentieth century; in particular, it will focus on a case study of the book club *Reader’s Digest Condensed Books*.

- 1 I would like to thank the organizers of the 2021 ESPRit conference; conversations with Nora Ramtke in particular helped shape this article. Chandni Ananth contributed comments and Yannick Sömer (both Münster) provided editorial assistance with formatting. The Ransom Center Distinguished Fellowships Endowment from the Harry Ransom Center (Austin, Texas) provided support for my research. In the footnotes, I use the following abbreviations: RDCB = Reader’s Digest Condensed Books; HRC = Harry Ransom Center; AAK Inc. = Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.
- 2 Leslie Howsam, *Old Books and New Histories: An Orientation to Studies in Book and Print Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), p. 3. Ursula Rautenberg argues similarly in her definition of our discipline in *Reclams Sachlexikon des Buches* (2015) by including ‘periodische Publikationen’ [‘periodical publications’]. Ursula Rautenberg, ‘Buchwissenschaft’, in *Reclams Sachlexikon des Buches*, ed. by Ursula Rautenberg, 3rd edn (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2015), pp. 100–03 (p. 100).
- 3 Claire Battershill, ‘“Tricks of Aspect and the Varied Gifts of Daylight”: Representations of Books and Reading in Interwar Women’s Periodicals’, *Women’s Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1918–1939: The Interwar Period*, ed. by Catherine Clay et al. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 14–27 (p. 15).
- 4 Laurel Brake, ‘The Serial and the Book in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Intersections, Extensions, Transformations’, *Mémoires du livre/Studies in Book Culture*, 8 (2017).
- 5 Sargeant Winthrop, ‘Everyday Tastes from High-Brow to Low-Brow’, depicted in Russell Lynes, ‘High-Brow, Low-Brow, Middle-Brow’, *TIME* (11 April 1949), 99–102 (pp. 100–101). While the problematic history of the terms ‘highbrow’, ‘middlebrow’, and ‘lowbrow’ is one we will not be able to adequately discuss here, David Carter has offered a nuanced analysis of middlebrow book culture: David Carter, ‘Middlebrow Book Culture’, in *Routledge International Handbook of the Sociology of Art and Culture*, ed. by Laurie Hanquinet and Mike Savage (London/New York: Taylor & Francis, 2015), pp. 349–69.
- 6 ‘Little magazines’ have received ample attention from print culture and literary studies scholars. For contexts, see e.g. Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker, eds, *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

**EVERYDAY TASTES FROM HIGH-BROW TO LOW-BROW ARE CLASSIFIED ON CHART**

	CLOTHES	FURNITURE	USEFUL OBJECTS	ENTERTAINMENT	SALADS	DRINKS	READING	SCULPTURE	RECORDS	GADES	CAUSES
<b>HIGH-BROW</b>	 TOWN COUNTRY Razzy Razzy Razzy Razzy no hat	 Sensit Karl Marx lamp	 Discounter and with tray from chemical supply company	 Ballet	 Greens, olive oil, vine vinegar, ground pepper, garlic, crushed salt bowl	 A glass of "vintage style" red wine	 "Little magazines," critique of criticism, avant garde literature	 Cubist	 Rock and roll, jazz and other	 Go	 Art
<b>UPPER MIDDLE-BROW</b>	 TOWN COUNTRY Bookish Bookish Bookish Bookish hat hat	 Elegant modern contemporary vintage lamp	 Silver cigarette box with smoking accessories	 Theater	 Same as high-brow but with tomatoes, onions, Romaine dressing added	 A very dry Martini with lemon peel	 Solid nonfiction, the better recent, quality magazines	 Modernist	 Symphonies, concertos, operas	 The Game	 Planned parenthood
<b>LOWER MIDDLE-BROW</b>	 TOWN COUNTRY Slightly Slightly Slightly Slightly absolutely broccoli and	 Grand Rapids Chippendale chair, kitchen lamp	 His and hers towels	 Musical entertainment films	 Quartered iceberg lettuce and dressing	 Bourbon and ginger ale	 Book club selections, mass circulation magazines	 Front yard sculpture	 Light opera, popular favorites	 Bridge	 P. T. A.
<b>LOW-BROW</b>	 TOWN COUNTRY Lack of Lack of Lack of Lack of Lack of Lack of	 Real estate overstuffed chair, fringed lamp	 Bibulous stuffed pillow	 Western movies	 Coleslaw	 Beer	 Pulp comic books	 Folksy sculpture	 Jukebox	 Craps	 The Lodge

Fig. 1 Sargeant Winthrop, 'Everyday Tastes from High-Brow to Low-Brow', depicted in Russell Lynes, 'High-Brow, Low-Brow, Middle-Brow', in *TIME* (1949).

### Book Clubs, Periodicals and Mail-Order Book Culture

*Quality Paperback Club, Círculo de Lectores, Bertelsmann Lesering, France Loisirs Le Club* — these names will ring a bell with anyone who has sifted through the shelves of a second-hand bookstore, cleaned up a dusty attic, spent time book-hunting at a flea market, or leafed through twentieth-century magazines, where ads for book clubs abounded, always offering so-called 'loss leaders' to prospective new members: offers that only paid for themselves if people actually retained their membership status.<sup>7</sup> While the book clubs' ads filled twentieth-century magazines, the books they produced and distributed in the twentieth century are legion.<sup>8</sup> Book club editions certainly do not excite a rare book dealer — in fact, today, book club editions, formerly the pride and joy of a middle-class household, are being sold as 'Books by the Foot' for interior decorating purposes.<sup>9</sup> But they are very much part and parcel (pun intended) of twentieth-century book and reading cultures, and enmeshed within twentieth-century periodical culture, though their ubiquity and popularity, their innate 'middlebrow-ness', have led them to be mostly overlooked by scholars.

In keeping with Ted Striphas's understanding of 'everyday book culture' from his book *The Late Age of Print*, I use the term 'mail-order book culture' to describe the practices and practicalities at play when books are distributed by mail, through book clubs, on a subscription-based monthly or quarterly schedule.<sup>10</sup> Book clubs, first

7 'loss leader', in *A Dictionary of Business and Management*, ed. by Jonathan Law, 6th edn (2016) [accessed 17 February 2022].

8 Cf. especially Janice Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997) and Nicola Wilson, 'Middlemen, Middlebrow, Broadbrow', in *British Literature in Transition, 1920–1940: Futility and Anarchy*, ed. by Charles Ferrall and Dougal McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 315–30 for US and UK contexts.

9 Cf. Corinna Norrick-Rühl, 'Two Peas in a Pod: Book Sales Clubs and Book Ownership in the Twentieth Century', in *Reading Books and Prints as Cultural Objects*, ed. by Evangelia Stead (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2018), pp. 231–50; 'Reader's Digest Condensed Books', *Books by the Foot* [accessed 17 February 2022].

10 See Ted Striphas, *The Late Age of Print: Everyday Book Culture from Consumerism to Control* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 6.

established in the 1920s, have been an outlet for book distribution for a century now. Book clubs were able to learn from historical forerunners such as series and even ‘libraries’ of uniformly bound classics that were published and distributed through subscription models, marketed via magazines and newspapers or via door-to-door salespeople.<sup>11</sup> Looking further afield, book peddling (also known as colportage) can be considered forerunners because they, for the first time, reached new groups of readers who did not have access to book infrastructure such as bookstores or (circulating) libraries.<sup>12</sup> Since book clubs were first established in the 1920s, they have been one of these outlets or platforms for book distribution. The book clubs were responsible for the mass distribution of texts via mail, reaching a customer base well beyond those readers who were able to frequent the traditional brick-and-mortar book trade. While the clubs all have their individual structures, the central selling points — convenience and concessions on the retail price, curation, and fostering a sense of community among members — were similar across a wide scope of markets and cultures.<sup>13</sup> In a nutshell, book club selections were guaranteed a larger audience than trade editions, and the publisher as well as the author received sizable additional income. The book clubs also made reading material and the prospect of book ownership available to people living outside of urban centres, who otherwise had limited or no access to new books. All of this relates to mail-order book culture.

This article will consider mail-order book culture as adjacent, or even tangential, to periodical culture. At the 2021 ESPRit conference, Ruth Mayer’s keynote brought the three terms uniformity, recognizability, familiarity into play, and I think all three apply to *Reader’s Digest* and their *Condensed Books*.<sup>14</sup> To begin with, however, I’d like to describe more generally two points of overlap between mail-order book culture and periodical culture.

A first, obvious point of overlap between book clubs and periodicals is the fact that book clubs themselves produced members’ magazines. The b2c (business-to-consumer) book club members’ magazines were published in print runs, and delivered to millions of doorsteps and mailboxes. For millions of readers, these magazines were the equivalent of the smaller literary or cultural magazines we spend valuable research hours on. US examples of these magazines include the *Book-of-the-Month Club News* and *Wings (Literary Guild)*. These and other book club members’ magazines were standard fare for middle class readers, blending sales and advertising with taste-making reviews and even, somewhat oddly, depictions of art and architecture.<sup>15</sup> The German club *Büchergilde Gutenberg*, founded in 1924 and still active today, is the longest-running club I have evidence of and still publishes its quarterly magazine *Büchergilde* in a print run of over 60,000 copies, which is a high print run for a bookish magazine.<sup>16</sup> In comparison, the German literary quarterly *Lesart* has a print run of 20,000; a smaller literary magazine

11 Graham Law and Robert Patten, ‘The Serial Revolution’, in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, ed. by David McKitterick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 144–71 (p. 145); for contexts, see e.g. Michael Hackenberg, ‘Subscription Publishing’, in *Getting the Books Out: Papers of the Chicago Conference on the Book in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century America*, ed. by Michael Hackenberg (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2005), pp. 45–75.

12 Cf. John Spiers, ‘Introduction’, in *The Culture of the Publisher’s Series, Volume One. Authors, Publishers and the Shaping of Taste*, ed. by John Spiers (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 1–61 (p. 44).

13 Corinna Norrick-Rühl, *Book Clubs and Book Commerce* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 39–40.

14 Parts of this keynote appear in this special issue as Ruth Mayer, ‘Girls Girls Girls Girls Girls: The Trans-Atlantic Mass Magazine Culture of the 1920s as a Gendered Affair’, *Journal of European Periodical Studies*, 7.2 (2022), 53–74.

15 For a more detailed criticism of this juxtaposition, see Radway, pp. 319–20.

16 ‘Geschichte der Büchergilde’, *Büchergilde Homepage* [accessed 17 February 2022]; cf. ‘Wir sind Buchgemeinschaft seit 1924’, *Büchergilde*, 2 (2021), 130.

like *allmende* (published bi-annually) has a print run of only 2,000 copies.<sup>17</sup> Hence, the members' magazines used to, and still do, reach a widespread public, far beyond the reaches of more traditional literary magazines, informing them about new trends and authors (as well as selling books). The only larger research project that has been conducted on these magazines, though, is Vera Dumont's work, which focuses on the *Lesering-Illustrierte* of the West German mega book club *Bertelsmann Lesering* (later: *Bertelsmann Der Club*).<sup>18</sup>

A second point of overlap can be seen in the activities of magazine publishers, who sometimes chose to create their own book clubs as a branding and marketing strategy. A striking example is the *Playboy Book Club*, founded in 1973, which certainly could be interpreted as an attempt to reinforce the assertion that *Playboy* was 'read for the articles'.<sup>19</sup> In this advertisement (Fig. 2), the *Playboy Book Club* was being cross-marketed to readers of *Oui*. *Oui* was the American version of the French magazine *Lui*, which had been purchased by Playboy Enterprises in 1972. This is, in essence, a reciprocal branding strategy, with additional layers and reinforcements, since titles which were also branded as Playboy books (*Playboy's Host & Bar Book*) were among those available to club members.<sup>20</sup> It is important to note the loss-leading strategy here: new members are being invited to join with an unbeatable 'any 4 books for only \$1.95' offer. A second, at least somewhat less racy example is the *Psychology Today Book Club* (Fig. 3), marketed to readers of *Psychology Today* in the magazine itself and in other similar outputs. As seen in the ad, this club promises to 'save you a bundle on the most provocative and illuminating books today... and tomorrow' with an initial offer of 'any 3 books for only \$3.95'.

These two areas of overlap, briefly sketched out, are a first indication of how much untapped potential there is for book club research when incorporating the periodical perspective.

### The Reader's Digest Success Story

In order to understand these interplays of markets, publishers, periodicals, and book clubs, I have been conducting archival research, focusing on materials from marketing and sales departments, as well as licensing and production. While a few major book clubs are still in existence, at least as derivatives of their twentieth-century mass culture iterations, the availability of archival materials is limited. Corporate mergers and corporate interests have prohibited researchers from accessing book club archives. Further research on these clubs must thus work with book publisher's archives, which document the correspondence between publishers and book clubs. An example of a large US publisher which has readily accessible archives is A. A. Knopf, Inc, held at the

17 'Mediadaten 2022 für den herstellenden und vertreibenden Buchhandel', *Unabhängiges Journal für Literatur Lesart* [accessed 17 February 2022]; cf. base circulation rate information in 'Mediadaten', *Allmende: Zeitschrift für Literatur* [accessed 17 February 2022].

18 Vera Dumont, 'Buchgemeinschaft statt Volksgemeinschaft: Zum Identifikationspotential der Lesering-Illustrierten in den 1950er Jahren', in *Buch macht Geschichte: Beiträge zur Verlags- und Medienforschung*, ed. by Patricia F. Blume, Thomas Keiderling, and Klaus G. Saur (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Saur, 2016), pp. 101–12. In this context, it is important to explicitly acknowledge that the success of the *Lesering* and its derivatives gave Bertelsmann the wherewithal to be what it is today: the world's largest multimedia conglomerate, dominating trade publishing across continents and languages. Cf. Siegfried Lokatis, 'A Concept Circles the Globe: From the *Lesering* to the Internationalization of the Club Business', in *175 Years of Bertelsmann The Legacy for our Future*, ed. by Helen Müller (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 2010), pp. 132–71.

19 See, inter alia, Justin Caffier, 'Reading Playboy for the Articles: 13 Essential Journalism & Literature Pieces from Playboy Magazine', *The Hundreds* (25 June 2018) [accessed 17 February 2022].

20 As far as we can deduce from the cover, the book shown here is Thomas Mario, *Playboy's Host and Bar Book* (Chicago: Playboy Press, 1971).

Fig. 2 Double-page advertisement for the Playboy Book Club, in *Oui* (1973).

Fig. 3 Advertisement for the Psychology Today Book Club (1975), as depicted on Flashbak.com (2017).

Harry Ransom Center for the Humanities at the University of Texas, Austin.<sup>21</sup> These documents shed light not only on the inner workings of the publisher, but also indicate the significance of book clubs to the publisher's bottom line.

A. A. Knopf's archives are illuminating — there are reams of documents relating to the Book-of-the-Month Club, but also to other clubs and firms. For our case study at hand, the material relating to *Reader's Digest* — the magazine, but also its subsidiary book club — are of interest. The magazine was and still is a mainstay of American periodical culture and beyond, though its influence and print circulation have waned considerably in the past decades. *Reader's Digest* published excerpts from new books, whether fiction or non-fiction, catapulting them into the wider public's eye and offering publishers and authors a lucrative additional source of income. The *Reader's Digest* brand is probably one of the most recognizable and long-lasting brands in the global media industry. The magazine was founded in 1922 and was thus able to celebrate its centennial in 2022, though not without having encountered some financial complications during those one hundred years.<sup>22</sup> By 1951, the *Digest* was being published in fifteen languages in forty-eight countries, with the highest circulation of any magazine in the world: 15,500,000 subscribers received the *Digest* in 1951; the actual number of readers will have been significantly higher.<sup>23</sup> Later in the century, the *Digest* was also published in Braille, digital, audio, and in an accessible large type edition called 'Reader's Digest Large Print'.

By 1990, *Reader's Digest* had a US circulation of 16.3 million copies. Though numbers declined rapidly after that — to 12.6 million in 2000, 8.2 million in 2009, and by now 3 million in 2020, it is still considered a 'direct-marketing powerhouse' and has an incredibly wide reach.<sup>24</sup> Its print and digital products reached 'nearly 1 in every 4 adults in the U.S.' in 2019.<sup>25</sup>

Given these numbers and their reach, the impact of *Reader's Digest* in popular culture during what David Sumner called the *Magazine Century* (2010) can hardly be overstated. However, as a mass cultural output, it was (and sometimes still is) ridiculed and criticized for its 'conservative content, middle-class appeal, and lack of literary style'.<sup>26</sup> Dwight MacDonald's critique of masscult and midcult is just one instance of this type of disparagement.<sup>27</sup> Hans Magnus Enzensberger off-handedly criticized digest magazines in his text 'Bildung als Konsumgut', building on Adorno and Horkheimer's ideas of the culture industry and applying their principles to what he called the 'apparatus' of industrial publishing, in particular to the mass-market paperback.<sup>28</sup> Enzensberger noted the periodicity of paperback production with a regular monthly production cycle; he credited the periodicity with contributing to the mediocrity of the output. He also mentioned the staggering print runs, the standardization of formats and the advertising, emphasizing the industrialization of print culture. These criticisms of

21 For historical context on the publisher, see e.g. the *Dictionary of Literary Biography vol. 355: The House of Knopf, 1915–1960: A Documentary Volume*, ed. by Cathy Henderson and Richard W. Oram (Detroit: Gale Cengage Learning, 2010).

22 For instance, the company was forced to declare bankruptcy in 2009 and 2013.

23 Cf. David E. Sumner, *The Magazine Century: American Magazines Since 1900* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), p. 59.

24 Numbers for 1990, 2000, and 2009 are taken from Sumner, p. 218.

25 Barbara Booth and Christopher West Davis, 'How Reader's Digest Went from Life Support to Modern, Digital-First Multimedia Brand', *CNBC.com* (6 March 2020) [accessed 17 February 2022].

26 Sumner, p. 60.

27 See Dwight MacDonald's criticism of book clubs in Dwight MacDonald, 'The Book-of-the-Millennium Club', *The New Yorker*, 29 November 1952, pp. 171–88.

28 Hans Magnus Enzensberger, 'Bildung als Konsumgut: Analyse der Taschenbuchproduktion', in *Bewußtseins-Industrie*, ed. by Hans Magnus Enzensberger (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1964), pp. 134–66, see in particular pp. 138–44 ('Der Apparat').

early German mass-market paperback publishing highlighted similarities between magazine publishing and paperback publishing. In his text, Enzensberger satirically posited that digest extracts are contractually confirmed before one line of the hoped-for bestseller is written, before even one blank sheet of paper has been inserted into the typewriter. While archival research indicates a different workflow, these bitter and pointed cultural judgments from leading intellectuals of the twentieth century emphasize the entangledness of periodically published mass cultural outputs within our social histories: as much as thinkers such as MacDonald and Enzensberger would have liked to, they could not, and did not, ignore mass culture completely.

Beyond the extracts in the *Reader's Digest* magazine, and more firmly located in the cross-over area between periodicals and book publishing, lies the book club known as *Reader's Digest Condensed Books*.<sup>29</sup> *Reader's Digest* began publishing condensed books — mostly non-fiction — in 1934. At this point, the publishing project was framed as a feature of the magazine, which '[a]lmost invariably [...] led to a wider audience for the complete work', though this type of argumentation about exposure and its positive sales effects was certainly not new.<sup>30</sup>

In 1940, the company made further inroads into book publishing with its compilation *The Reader's Digest Reader*, contracted with Doubleday.<sup>31</sup> This anthology was followed by three more titles with Doubleday before *Reader's Digest* decided to create an in-house book brand. In 1948, fourteen *Reader's Digest* books were published. Sales amounted to about 600,000, which had been sold to about ten per cent of the magazine's subscriber base, with a profit of half a million dollars.<sup>32</sup> These highly promising developments triggered the establishment of *Reader's Digest Condensed Books* as a subscription book club with a clear focus on entertaining trade fiction. As Evert Volkersz writes, this was 'a natural evolution, combining the idea of a book club with Reader's Digest editorial, direct-mail marketing, and recent book publishing successes'.<sup>33</sup>

### ***Reader's Digest* Book Club: Economies of Scale and Transfer**

While *Reader's Digest* magazine has been considered by scholars from a variety of disciplines and perspectives, the firm's book publishing activities have received much less academic attention, with only one older article in *Publishing Research Quarterly* by Evert Volkersz from 1995, and a recent article by myself with a law and literature angle, published in 2021.<sup>34</sup> This lack of research stands in stark contrast to the impact of the book series on authors, publishers, and readers since 1950. If we focus on output numbers and print runs, *Reader's Digest Condensed Books* was certainly one of the most productive hardcover publishers in the world. Even if we adjust our standards to compare the club to other mass-market book clubs in the second half of the twentieth century,

29 See Trysh Travis, 'Reader's Digest Condensed Books/Book Club', in *The Oxford Companion to the Book*, ed. by Michael Suarez and Henry R. Woudhuysen, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), II, p. 1082.

30 James Playsted Wood, *Of Lasting Interest: The Story of the Reader's Digest*, 2nd edn (Garden City: Doubleday, 1967), pp. 56–57.

31 *The Reader's Digest Reader: Selected by Theodore Roosevelt and the Staff of the Reader's Digest* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1940).

32 Evert Volkersz, 'McBook: The Reader's Digest Condensed Books Franchise', *Publishing Research Quarterly*, 11 (1995), 52–61 (p. 54).

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., pp. 52–61; Corinna Norrick-Rühl, 'Contracts, Clauses, Controversy: John Hersey, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. and Reader's Digest Condensed Books', *Symbolism*, 23 (2021), 35–54.

*Reader's Digest Condensed Books* was a commercial juggernaut, reaching 450,000 US subscribers within one year and 2.2 million US subscribers by 1957.<sup>35</sup>

An obvious reason for the success was that *Reader's Digest* had already perfected the principles of mail-order marketing. Other book clubs had to learn how to handle big amounts of customer data; for *Reader's Digest*, these amounts of subscriber data were all in a day's work. In fact, synergetic effects could easily be achieved because subscribers of the magazine would also become members of the book club. The *Digest* was ahead of its time regarding customer satisfaction and market research, mailing questionnaires to their subscribers to 'help the company design books that w[ould] meet the company's sales goals'.<sup>36</sup> Their professionalism and deep-seated understanding of subscription publishing led to sales expectations that no other book publisher or book club could compete with. Book publishing is usually considered a risky business, with insecurities about market success and serendipity a large factor in the (literary) attention economy. In 1985, an executive was quoted in the *New York Times* saying, 'We do 150 book ideas a year [...] and we have never been wrong.'<sup>37</sup> Perhaps this no-nonsense attitude came from the fact that there was no real competition in the 1980s, at least not for these very specific condensed, periodically published books. The book publishing activities profited from the immense subscription numbers, which offered a low-risk venture atypical of book publishing. The economies of scale at play when the first printing was, for instance, 2.2 million copies, made the per-copy costs incredibly low.

In the 1980s, *Reader's Digest* was still the leading print magazine in the US, with a market share of almost six per cent based on total circulation. After a circulation decrease in 1985, *Reader's Digest* was still printing a minimum of 16.25 million copies for the US market, making it the second largest magazine, right behind *TV Guide* (circulation over 17 million in 1985).<sup>38</sup> Magazine industry experts actually had trouble believing that the *Reader's Digest* would cut its base circulation rate, given the fact that 'media people [...] knew that the association had been making money from the publication's subscribers by using them as a mailing list to sell its books and records'.<sup>39</sup> With its book publishing activities, it was solely responsible for 2.1 % of the US book industry's revenue (for comparison: Random House, in 1984, was responsible for 4.9 %, Simon & Schuster for 6.3%).<sup>40</sup>

If we move away from questions of competition to think about economies of transfer, the *Reader's Digest Condensed Books* series was a successful transnational phenomenon, just like the magazine, profiting from publishing contacts around the globe. *Reader's Digest Condensed Books* were available in thirteen countries, with English versions published in the UK, South Africa, and Australia from 1954 onward, as well as several foreign language editions, particularly in Europe and in countries where European languages were spoken, like in Brazil. The brand and its mass distribution of books continue today under the name of *Reader's Digest Select Editions*. In Germany, for instance, the brand is called *Reader's Digest Das Beste*, and while the operations were

35 As elaborated upon in my recent article (Norrück-Rühl, 'Contracts, Clauses, Controversy', p. 42 note 34), this was one million more members than the two major US clubs working together as the US version of Book Club Associates (Doubleday), the *Dollar Book Club* and the *Literary Guild*, and their big competitor, the *Book-of-the-Month Club*, had among them in the late 1950s.

36 Philip H. Dougherty, 'Advertising; Reader's Digest Campaign', *The New York Times*, 20 June 1985, section D, p. 20.

37 Richard F. McLoughlin, quoted in *ibid.*

38 Cf. Philip H. Dougherty, 'Advertising; Reader's Digest Cuts Rate Base', *The New York Times*, 10 September 1985, section D, p. 24.

39 *Ibid.*

40 Numbers from Eli M. Noam, 'Media Concentration in the United States', in *Who Owns the World's Media? Media Concentration and Ownership around the World*, ed. by Eli M. Noam and The International Media Concentration Collaboration (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 500–72 (p. 504).

sold to the Spanish direct marketing firm Grupo CIL Marketing Directo, the brand is still very much marketed as belonging to *Reader's Digest*.

The main strategy of the club was to combine three to six (usually four) texts in one thick, hardbound volume with a faux half-leather binding. The texts had to be edited — 'condensed' — into shorter versions to fit into one volume together. Abridgement as a practice has a long tradition. Abbreviating and simplifying texts to fit into different formats, from chapbooks to children's books, is certainly a practice typical of a book industry looking to reach different target audiences. Bowdlerization and epitomization also deserve mention as established practices. For the purposes of this article, we can draw upon the brief definition of condensation practices by Evert Volkersz, who was looking at the *Reader's Digest* specifically. He defines the type of 'condensation' performed by *Reader's Digest* as

an extended hierarchical editorial process of abridging and summarizing text by retaining both style and substance (known as 'cutting'), omitting quotation marks from verbatim passages, replacing deletions with transitions made in the manner of the author, and toning down or excising excessive violence and explicit sex scenes, without changing vocabulary other than inserting dashes following the first letter of a profanity.<sup>41</sup>

The editors at *Reader's Digest* also kept their eyes peeled for overtly political content. The texts were supposed to appeal to a broad base of middle-class readers, and this meant falling somewhere between progressive and conservative, with a slight lean towards a more conservative worldview. The etymology of the word 'digest' already hints at the arrangement and curation of information (*digerere*, Lat. – to separate, divide, distribute, arrange), and in fact, according to the *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology*, *digesta* was a 'collection of writings arranged under headings' and first entered English in the fourteenth century.<sup>42</sup> Our contemporary association of digest with food and eating also dates back to the fourteenth century, and is productive here because the texts in the magazines and books were not only arranged and curated under headings, but also made more palatable — more easily 'digestible' — for a wide audience. This, in turn, underscores a well-established metaphor of reading: 'reading as eating', as described for instance by Catherine Sheldrick Ross. As she reminds us, the metaphor is well-established in discussions about reading and reading material: '[S]ome readers are gluttons for detective stories, or voracious (*vorare*, Lat. – to swallow), avid (*avere*, Lat. – to crave), or hungry for books. Some readers have refined, discriminating palates. Others have no stomach for reading.'<sup>43</sup> Anecdotally, the metaphor and nod to 'digestion' are further reinforced in an ironic 1966 article titled 'Of Books and Booze' in which journalist Tony Swain suggested a coupling of *Reader's Digest Condensed Books* with sending out 'miniature bottles of appropriate liquors along with each quarterly volume' as a 'Drinker's Digest'.<sup>44</sup>

While the volumes themselves were clearly targeted toward a broad readership, *Reader's Digest* also incorporated texts by serious authors, with a wide range of genres and forms. In the first two decades of the club, original texts by Conrad Richter, William

41 Volkersz, p. 58.

42 Qtd. in Patricia T. O'Connor and Stewart Kellerman, 'On Digesting Food and Fact', *Grammarphobia.com* (15 May 2017) [accessed 17 February 2022].

43 Catherine Sheldrick Ross, 'Metaphors of Reading', *Journal of Library History*, 22.2 (1987), 147–63 (p. 155).

44 Tony Swain, 'Of Books and Booze', *The North American Review*, 251.1 (1966), 14–15 (p. 15) [accessed 17 February 2022].

Faulkner, Pearl S. Buck, and John Steinbeck were condensed and juxtaposed with texts by other contemporary authors who may or may not have become canonized.

### Condensation Practices and Their Implications

In my short book on *Book Clubs and Book Commerce*, I proposed a four C model' to delineate the reasons why readers (or would-be readers!) joined book sales clubs. These 'four Cs' are: convenience, concession, community, and, perhaps most importantly, curation.<sup>45</sup> If we remain within this parsing, condensation serves as a particular curatorial practice targeting certain groups of readers.

At the Harry Ransom Center, in the Alfred A. Knopf archives, there is a folder filled with advertising material from book clubs. Among other materials, the original advertising leaflet for *Reader's Digest Condensed Books* has been preserved. This was sent out to 200,000 *Reader's Digest* subscribers and energetically emphasized the perks of condensation to its potential 'Charter Subscriber[s]': 'All who enjoy good books wish they had MORE TIME for reading, because they realize how many of the very best books they are missing. NOW, CONDENSATION, as skillfully done by DIGEST editors, provides a delightful, time-saving means of at least doubling the number of books one can enjoy.' The leaflet further detailed that the 'skillful condensations bring you the full story-power, flavor and climactic excitement of a novel'.<sup>46</sup> As indicated above, cultural critics had already picked apart the 'digest' strategy of *Reader's Digest*, and they were also already on the prowl for book clubs, ridiculing their commodification of the book, their mass cultural appeal, and their 'middlebrowness'. When *Reader's Digest* founded its own book club, then, further ridicule ensued. A particularly scathing critique came from *The Nation*, where David Cort tore down the club: 'Reader's Digest Condensed Book Club simplifies the battle for the reader's mind to its essence, or travesty.' In the article, Cort went on to criticize the book club editions as 'evaporated books'. He even took the time to compare a condensation with an original line-by-line before concluding: 'Wherever the author assumes any intelligence on the reader's part, the editors paint signposts all over the place.'<sup>47</sup>

Those entrusted with teaching literary texts also showed concern that students, given the choice between a condensation and a full text, would choose the condensation. In 1966, Otis McBride, for instance, in the *Peabody Education Journal*, stated, 'I am opposed to condensed versions of books. Whether they are abridged, rewritten, shortened, expurgated, melted down, I do not care for them. I never have. My preference is for the student to experience the whole work, as the author did it.'<sup>48</sup> Of course, McBride's approach here reveals a certain naiveté about the way texts are published. It can safely be assumed that the published text is a polished version of the way the author 'did it', which has since run through a multi-step process of editing through literary agents as well as editors and copy-editors in the publishing house. But that is not a discussion to be explored in more detail here.

As Sydney Shep indicates, '[b]ooks as texts can be translated, repurposed, remediated, their intellectual content appropriated, adapted and transformed over

45 Norrick-Rühl, *Book Clubs and Book Commerce*, pp. 39–40.

46 RDCB, 'The Readers Digest Announces A NEW editorial service...', leaflet enclosed in letter from Ralph E. Henderson (RDCB) to Blanche W. Knopf (AAK Inc.) (24 January 1950), HRC AAK Inc. Records box 75, fol. 15.

47 David Cort, 'Culture Once a Month . . . The Book Clubs', *The Nation*, 6 February 1957, 133–36 (p. 135).

48 Otis McBride, 'The Problem of Condensed Books', *Peabody Journal of Education*, 44.3 (1966), 132–35 (p. 132).

time and space'.<sup>49</sup> These processes are usually connected to economies of transfer. In the case at hand, condensations were also repurposed and remediated. Contractually, *Reader's Digest Condensed Books* held the so-called 'condensation rights', which would have been negotiated with the original publishers. The condensation was then considered its own text, to which *Reader's Digest Condensed Books* held the copyright. They could then repurpose, translate, and republish this condensation under the *Reader's Digest* brand, for instance in foreign club iterations. The original publisher would always be informed and usually, when further use was planned, a fixed honorarium was offered or a per-copy royalty was agreed upon.<sup>50</sup>

The club was an unprecedented economic success, and shaped twentieth-century book and reading culture in ways that have yet to be studied. For publishers, the condensations led to additional rights income, which was split with the authors.<sup>51</sup> The publishers had often already established good working relationships with *Reader's Digest* as a magazine, which also would reach out to publishers for extracts and quotations from books, especially contemporary non-fiction. Publishers were accustomed to receiving ample royalties for these publications. In general, visibility in *Reader's Digest* magazine was considered as publicity which might lead to book sales. When the condensed book editions came into play, publishers seemed to gauge the situation similarly. My recent archival research at the Harry Ransom Center and at Mainzer Verlagsarchiv has suggested that condensed editions were not considered to be competition for the (full-)text edition.<sup>52</sup> Given the separate sales channels and publics, the publishers did not fear a cannibalization of traditional sales through the brick-and-mortar book trade.

Authors would clearly also profit from these economies of transfer, with a share in royalties amounting to several thousand dollars, and an increase in name recognition. As I have shown elsewhere, not all authors were thrilled with the prospect of *Reader's Digest* editors changing their prose, but many were swayed by the additional income.<sup>53</sup> In a 1963 ad, *Reader's Digest Condensed Books* actually quoted authors complimenting the club on its condensations. For instance, Richard Powell, author of the novel *I Take This Land* is quoted as saying 'The high quality of the work you people do at Pleasantville awes me, and I'm certainly happy to have your brilliant editing and publishing applied to my stories.'<sup>54</sup>

Even in the first half of the 1950s, before the club really took off, individual volumes could easily sell over a million copies, and sometimes significantly more. William Koshland, who was responsible for book club rights at A. A. Knopf in the second half of the twentieth century, once wrote to *Reader's Digest Condensed Books* '[y]our expected sale of more than a million copies is gratifying'.<sup>55</sup> In the later 1950s, with more regular subscribers, anticipated average sales rose to 2.5 million copies per volume

49 Sydney Shep, 'Books in Global Perspectives', in *The Cambridge Companion to the History of the Book*, ed. by Leslie Howsam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 53–70 (p. 53).

50 For more detail, see Norrick-Rühl, 'Contracts, Clauses, Controversy', p. 44 notes 43 and 44.

51 As Lynette Owen emphasizes, '[t]he additional opportunities afforded by exploiting various aspects of the intellectual property in a work include a wide range of possible licensing opportunities which [...] can provide a significant additional source of income for authors, literary agents, and publishers as well as bringing the work to a wider audience in a variety of forms'. Lynette Owen, 'Rights', in *Oxford Handbook of Publishing*, ed. by Angus Phillips and Miha Kovač (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 365–76 (p. 366).

52 For details, see Norrick-Rühl, 'Contracts, Clauses, Controversy', p. 45.

53 For details on John Hersey's resistance to the condensations, see Norrick-Rühl, 'Contracts, Clauses, Controversy', pp. 49–53.

54 The *Reader's Digest* headquarters are located in Pleasantville, New York; quoted in McBride, p. 134.

55 William (Bill) A. Koshland (AAK Inc.), Carbon copy of a letter to John Beaudouin (RDCB) (21 January 1952), HRC AAK Inc. Records box 113, folder 12. Qtd. in Norrick-Rühl, 'Contracts, Clauses, Controversy', p. 46.

per year, which could transfer into a staggering \$45,000 check for the condensation of one novel.<sup>56</sup>

## Material Considerations

While it is certainly fruitful to investigate the overlaps between mail-order books and periodicals, potential inquiries could also be comparative in nature, considering the material objects and their differences. A periodical is (usually) more portable (at least until bound), flimsier and more malleable, than a printed (especially hardbound) book. Depending on the type and contents, periodicals might include elements which encourage readers to interact with and write on the pages, a practice not necessarily considered as adequate handling of a book. Specifically, the *Reader's Digest* as a magazine is a small format, easily handheld, with elements like recipes and puzzles which hint at the everyday uses of the printed object. For instance, in the 1950s, there was a recurring section titled 'Let your mind entertain you'.<sup>57</sup> The book, at least the hardbound volumes under scrutiny here, are marketed as permanent, valuable objects to fill a middle-class bookshelf, emphasizing the book-as-object.<sup>58</sup> The *Reader's Digest Condensed Books* club editions were marketed to potential subscribers as coveted objects to own, collect, and present. In a nod toward the alleged collectability of the volumes, they contained a blank bookplate on the front right-hand endpaper. Multiple ads in *LIFE* in the 1950s described the book club editions thus: 'A de luxe clothbound volume; heavy backbone, gold-stamped. These beautiful matched volumes will form an impressive library you'll be proud to display in your home.'<sup>59</sup> In 1963, an ad in *LIFE* highlighted the fact that members received '4 [best sellers] in 1 luxuriously bound 504-page volume'. A membership benefit was the opportunity to 'build an impressive matching library' of 'de luxe illustrated volume[s]'.<sup>60</sup> Other book clubs even cross-marketed bookshelves and other furniture to their members, reinforcing the impression that book club editions were not only reading material, but objects for interior decoration.<sup>61</sup>

As I have quoted elsewhere, the eminent publisher Alfred A. Knopf once complimented *Reader's Digest Condensed Books* on 'know[ing] how to turn out a charming-looking book' (in this case, he was talking about the July 1959 US volume).<sup>62</sup> While we may consider the judgment 'charming' a bit patronizing, especially coming from a publisher whose books were traditionally very sleek and design-oriented, the comment does bring us full circle.

In her keynote, which led to the article in this special issue, Ruth Mayer discussed three characteristics: uniformity, recognizability, and familiarity. *Reader's Digest Condensed Books* offered readers all of those characteristics: uniform design, recognizable branding, and familiar set-up of four to six condensations. Subscribers knew what they could expect, and appreciated the consistency

56 This number relates to the condensation of Conrad Richter's *The Lady* (1957). Cf. William (Bill) A. Koshland (AAK Inc.), Letter to Ralph E. Henderson (RDCB) (26 September 1957), HRC AAK Inc. Records box 217, folder 8.

57 Greg Daugherty, '60 Reader's Digest Covers to Celebrate 100 Years', *RD.com* (13 January 2022) [accessed 17 February 2022].

58 Lydia Pyne has analysed the importance of the bookshelf in acute detail: Lydia Pyne, *Bookshelf* (New York/London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

59 RDCB, 'Just Send 10c to Reader's Digest . . .', *LIFE* (22 September 1958), 5; RDCB, 'Just Send 10c to Reader's Digest . . .', *LIFE* (24 November 1958), 11; RDCB, 'Just Send 10c to Reader's Digest . . .', *LIFE* (2 February 1959), 11.

60 RDCB, 'Reader's Digest Invites You to Accept . . .', *LIFE* (22 February 1963), 7 [emphasis in the original ad].

61 For further details, see Corinna Norrick-Rühl, '(Furniture) Books and Book Furniture as Markers of Authority', *TXT* (2016), 2–8.

62 Alfred A. Knopf, letter to Ralph E. Henderson (RDCB) (6 July 1959), HRC AAK Inc. Records box 75, folder 15. Qtd. in Norrick-Rühl, 'Contracts, Clauses, Controversy', p. 45 note 49.

of the club's offerings. Even today, the uniformity of the books contributes to their appeal. For interior decorating purposes, Books by the Foot offers the books at a current price of \$29.99 per foot with a minimum purchase of 6 feet (1.83m), emphasizing that the books are '[u]niform and brightly colored'.<sup>63</sup> While it would be remiss to compare prices across decades without an eye towards such economic factors as inflation, the seemingly high price for books no one is planning to read stands in contrast to the initial cheap prices and loss leading of the club. (For comparison, the introductory offer for your first volume of *Reader's Digest Select Editions* in February 2022 was \$10.00 with free shipping.<sup>64</sup>) In fact, once attuned to the uniform look of the *Condensed Editions* and their progeny *Select Editions*, their ubiquity becomes clear. Whether in furniture stores, where they are still used as cheap props (Fig. 5), or on craft blogs and Pinterest, where ideas for upcycling them are proposed, *Reader's Digest Condensed Editions* still live on in serial perpetuity.<sup>65</sup> This, however, makes for another interesting connection to mass-market magazines, since upcycling instructions to make old magazines into jewelry, décor, envelopes, and even clothing also abound on the internet.<sup>66</sup>

Where does this leave us, then, regarding mail-order book culture and periodicity, subscription and mass circulation? Are these books periodicals? No. But they are, arguably, adjacent to periodicals, and were created with readers of periodicals in mind as an ideal target audience to market towards and glean new readers from. In essence, *Reader's Digest Condensed Books* were (and, as *Reader's Digest Select Editions*, still are):

- published periodically, on a quarterly basis;
- produced within strictly defined parameters which allowed for impressive economies of scale;
- sold via subscription to a subscriber base, handled by a highly professional and efficient data management system perfected by *Reader's Digest's* management and experience in mass-market publications.

Serendipitously, my recent archival research with a book studies focus, oriented toward the marketing, sales, production, and licensing documents within the book publisher's archive, has led me to see connections between periodical culture and book culture which I had not seen before, though they have been sketched out by, among others, Laurel Brake, in reference to other historical case studies and periods. As serially published products, these books easily fall under Brake's understanding of serials, and merit further analysis in regards to the explicit interwovenness of publication timelines, readership, and commercialization.<sup>67</sup>

As discussed in this article, there are interesting overlaps and consistencies which I believe deserve further study, in particular regarding the complex role of book sales clubs as mediators of mass-market mail-order book culture. Certainly, by sheer numbers, the audiences reached through crossover ventures between magazine and book publishing were vast, and the impact substantial, on a national and transnational level. If our goal

63 'Reader's Digest Condensed Books', *Books by the Foot* [accessed 17 February 2022].

64 Reader's Digest, 'Reader's Digest Select Editions', *RD.com* (3 February 2022) [accessed 17 February 2022].

65 Cf., for instance, Teresa Fischer, 'Repurposed Readers Digest Books', *Pinterest* (n.d.) [accessed 17 February 2022]; Cathie Holden, 'Reader's Digest Condensed Books Crafts', *Catheholden.com* (29 December 2011) [accessed 17 February 2022]; Sarah Ramberg, 'Book Decor with Reader's Digest Books', *Sadie Seasongoods* (11 August 2019) [accessed 17 February 2022]. This is just a random sample; there are countless other examples online.

66 Cf., for instance, Vanessa Beaty, '30 Crafty Ways To Repurpose Old Magazines [Trash to Treasure]', *DIY & Crafts* (22 July 2017) [accessed 17 February 2022].

67 Cf. Brake, esp. on 'Books, Serials and Time'.

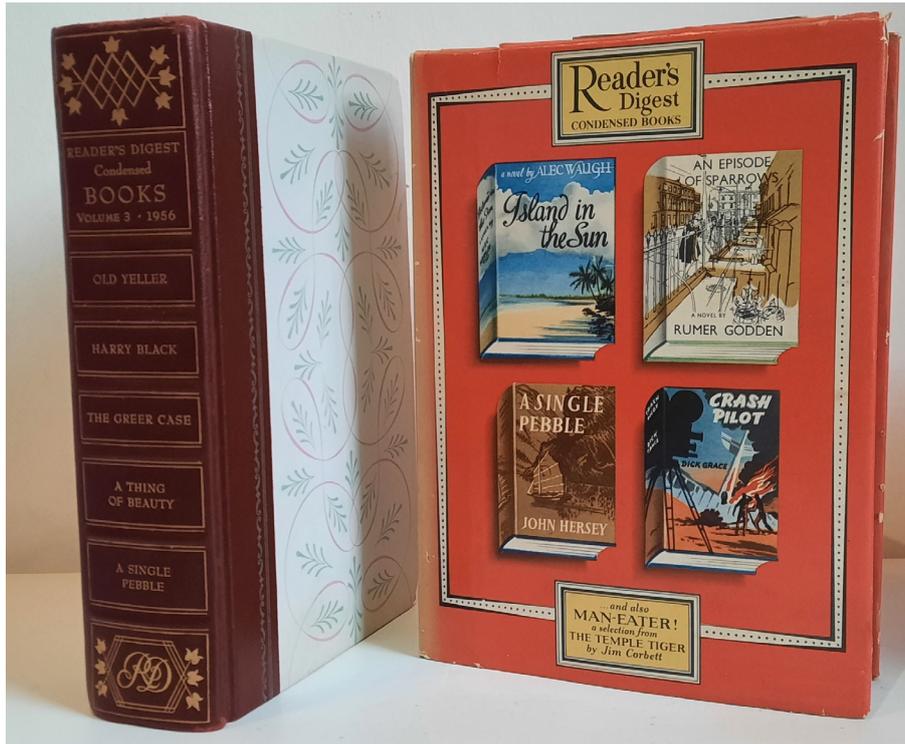


Fig. 4 Left: *Reader's Digest Condensed Books: Summer Selections: Old Yeller/Harry Black/The Greer Case/A Thing of Beauty/A Single Pebble* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader's Digest Condensed Books, 1956), without dust jacket; right: *Man-Eater!/A Single Pebble/Island in the Sun/Crash Pilot/An Episode of Sparrows* (London/Sydney/Cape Town: Reader's Digest Association Ltd., [1956]), with dust jacket.



Fig. 5 *Reader's Digest Select Editions* used as props at a furniture store near Worms, Germany, 2022.

is to understand reading cultures and the mass circulation of text-based media in the twentieth century more fully, it seems fruitful, necessary even, to set our sights on the common ground between mass-market periodical culture and mass-market book culture.

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