

The Rise And Rise Of Print Books

Sam Upton | Two Sides

The pandemic has driven sales of print books to their largest figures in a decade. We find out why more readers are turning to print, and what titles they are reading.

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The importance of print books to people in a year of lockdowns and uncertainty has been brought home with news that sales have soared in 2020, with no sign of slowing down. According to the latest figures by Nielsen more than 200m print books were sold in the UK last year - that's the most amount of books in a 12-month period since 2012.

Nielsen estimates that the volume of print books sold increased by 5.2% compared to 2019, which equates to 202m books sold, worth a whopping £1.7bn. With high street and independent book shops having a tough year, suffering from mandatory closures and financial hardship, these figures represent a remarkable resurgence for print books.

An Escape From Reality

On the face of it, such a rise in print book sales is astounding, but when you consider what people are currently going through it becomes less of a surprise. With many stuck at home with time on their hands, books are a key source of entertainment, comfort and escapism, offering a different time and place for the reader to dive into.

"So many people have turned to books for sustenance, information and joy through this difficult year," Waterstone's Kate Skipper told The Guardian.

If you need a glimpse at the collective mood of the population and what they are turning to for comfort, you only need to look at the top-selling titles of 2020. In third place is the cookbook Pinch of Nom - Everyday Light, with Richard Osman's cosy crime thriller The Thursday Murder Club in second. First place goes to Charlie Mackesy's The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse, an illustrated tale of friendship and life lessons described as "a book of hope for uncertain times."

Stateside Reading

But it's not just Britain that's been rediscovering its love of print books. Sales in America have been soaring, going up by 8.2% to reach 751m books sold, making 2020 their best year since 2010. Every book category went up, with big areas including children's fiction (11% increase) and children's non-fiction (a massive 23% increase).

"Sales growth came in waves, from the sudden need to educate kids at home to the super-heated political cycle," said Kristen McLean, books industry analyst for NPD, to The New York Post. "All of the additional time people spent at home created a big appetite for reading, including huge spikes in sales of cookbooks and do-it-yourself books, which helped people stay entertained and engaged."

Big sellers in the US were Mary Trump's Too Much And Never Enough about her uncle Donald Trump, Where The Crawdads Sing by Delia Owens, and Midnight Sun by Stephenie Meyer. But top of the pile was Barack Obama's memoir A Promised Land, which sold over 2.6m copies - and is still selling well.

Real Page-Turners

Given the popularity of e-readers, it's heartening to see the resilience and continuing success of print books. Whether it's an increased feeling of connection a reader gets to a story, the haptic nature of touching a physical object, or simply the pleasure of turning a real page, print books have an important role in helping people to step out of real life for a while and lower levels of stress and anxiety. Perhaps someone should write a book about it.