

Booktok, Algorithmic Taste, and the Remaking of Contemporary Literary Culture

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Abstract

A short vertical video, filmed on a phone and scored to a trending sound, now sells more novels in some markets than a review in a national newspaper. This article examines BookTok, the reading community that formed on TikTok after 2020, as a genuine shift in how literary value is produced and circulated. Industry data collected by NielsenIQ BookData and by TikTok itself put the scale beyond doubt: more than 50 million recommended titles sold across European markets in 2025 alone. The argument here is not that a platform has replaced older gatekeepers. It is that BookTok has fused three functions which literary culture had kept apart for two centuries, namely reviewing, retailing and sociable reading, and has placed the fused product under algorithmic management. The article traces this through the sociology of taste, through platform studies, and through the commercial record of the romantasy boom and the backlist revival. Two consequences receive particular attention. The first is the narrowing of what gets amplified, since recommendation systems reward affective intensity rather than difficulty. The second is the fragility of a literary infrastructure that a single regulatory decision, or a single change to a ranking function, can dismantle overnight. BookTok is best read not as the democratisation of taste but as its relocation, from institutions that could be argued with to systems that cannot.

Keywords: - BookTok, Algorithmic Culture, Publishing Studies, Reading Publics, Literary Taste, Platform Economy.

I. INTRODUCTION

In 2021 a novel published seven years earlier began outselling almost every new release on the British and American fiction charts. Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* had received good reviews on publication and had won the Orange Prize. None of that explained the second life. What explained it was a wave of short videos in which readers filmed themselves weeping, holding the book to camera without saying a word. The pattern repeated with Colleen Hoover, with Taylor Jenkins Reid, with Sarah J. Maas. A hashtag had become a distribution system.

The term BookTok covers the reading content that accumulated on TikTok from roughly 2020 onward. It is not a genre and not an institution. It is a loose set of practices, video reviews, shelf tours, staged emotional reactions, and annotated reading, which the platform's recommendation engine sorts and delivers. TikTok's own reporting claims that more than 50 million books recommended by the community were sold across key European markets during 2025, generating in the region of 800 million euros in revenue, with German sales more than doubling between 2023 and 2025 (TikTok Newsroom, 2026). NielsenIQ, working from point of sale data rather than platform data, reaches a compatible conclusion: genre fiction boosted by BookTok is the main driver of growth in an otherwise flat market (NielsenIQ, 2025).

Literary studies has been slow to take this seriously, partly because the material is unprepossessing. A fifteen second video of a crying reader does not look like criticism. But the question of what counts as criticism has always been settled by institutions rather than by any property of the utterance itself, and the institutions have changed. This article argues that BookTok matters because it collapses distinctions that the modern literary field was built to maintain. Reviewing, selling and sociable reading were once separate activities with separate personnel and separate ethics. On

TikTok they are one activity, performed by the same person, in the same clip, under conditions set by a ranking function nobody outside the company can inspect.

The discussion proceeds in five movements. It first situates BookTok within the longer history of reading publics and their intermediaries. It then examines the commercial record. A third section reads the phenomenon against Bourdieu's account of taste and against more recent work on the literary middlebrow. The fourth turns to genre, in particular the romantasy boom and the strange resurrection of the backlist. A closing section considers what is lost, and what is structurally precarious, in a literary culture routed through a single commercial platform.

II. FROM THE COFFEE HOUSE TO THE FOR YOU PAGE

Reading publics have always been organised by intermediaries. The eighteenth century had the periodical essay and the circulating library. The nineteenth had the great quarterlies and the railway bookstall. The twentieth produced the book club, the paperback revolution, the broadsheet review page, and eventually the television book club, of which Oprah's Book Club was the most commercially consequential. Each of these arrangements decided which books reached which readers, and each was contested at the time as a debasement of something purer.

Squires (2007) makes the useful point that marketing is not something done to literature after the fact but a form of meaning making in its own right, one that participates in the construction of the literary field. Driscoll (2014) develops a related argument about the middlebrow, describing it as earnest, commercial, mediated, feminised, emotional and recreational, a set of attributes that the academy has historically treated as disqualifying. Anyone who has watched BookTok will recognise the list. The community is overwhelmingly young and female, unembarrassed about emotion, and entirely comfortable with commerce.

What changed with the platform was the mechanism of selection. A review editor commissions. A bookseller orders stock. A television host chooses a title. All of these are legible decisions made by identifiable people who can be praised or blamed. TikTok's For You page works differently. Content reaches an audience because a model predicts engagement, and the model is tuned to retention rather than to any account of literary merit. Striplhas (2015) named this condition algorithmic culture, meaning the delegation of the work of culture, sorting, classifying and hierarchising, to computational processes. Seaver (2019) puts it more sharply still: recommender systems are best understood as traps, designed to capture and hold rather than to inform.

The delegation is not total. Human curation persists inside the platform, in the form of publisher marketing budgets, agency placements and the ordinary social dynamics of a community. Bhaskar (2016) argues that curation becomes more rather than less important in conditions of excess, and BookTok is nothing if not a response to excess. Roughly a million new titles appear annually in English. Somebody has to choose. The novelty is that the choosing is now a hybrid of human enthusiasm and machine amplification, with the second component invisible to the first.

III. THE COMMERCIAL RECORD

Scepticism about platform hype is warranted, and the trade press has supplied it. The Bookseller reported Nielsen research finding TikTok's influence on direct book sales to be relatively small in absolute terms while growing very fast (The Bookseller, 2023). Both halves of that sentence are true and they pull in opposite directions. Against a total market, BookTok attributable sales remain a minority share. Measured as growth, they are close to the whole story.

The genre distribution is where the effect becomes unmistakable. NielsenIQ's international market analyses for 2024 and 2025 record fiction rising while non-fiction declines across most territories, with crime, fantasy, science fiction and romance carrying the increase (NielsenIQ, 2024; NielsenIQ, 2025). Romantasy, a portmanteau that barely existed as a category before 2022, became a substantial commercial segment concentrated among readers aged roughly thirteen to thirty four. More than a third of British readers between sixteen and thirty nine now report discovering new books through the hashtag.

Publishers responded with the speed one would expect. Imprints appointed BookTok specialists, acquisitions began citing platform traction alongside comparable titles, and covers were redesigned for legibility at thumbnail scale. Sprayed edges, once a collector's flourish, became a mass market feature because they photograph well. Thompson (2021) had already described the publishing industry as caught between the logics of the book trade and the logics of the technology sector, and BookTok accelerated that squeeze considerably.

There is a measurement problem underneath all of this which deserves more scepticism than it usually gets. Attribution is hard. A reader who encounters a title on TikTok, adds it to a Goodreads list, and buys it in a supermarket three months later registers nowhere as a platform sale. Publishers Weekly noted early on that the boom's durability was unclear and that the industry was building strategy on a measurement base it did not fully control (Publishers Weekly, 2023). The honest position is that the direction of the effect is certain and the magnitude is contested.

IV. TASTE, DISTINCTION, AND THE ALGORITHMIC MIDDLEBROW

Bourdieu (1984) argued that aesthetic preference is a mechanism of social classification, that taste classifies the classifier, and that the disinterested appreciation of difficult art is itself a marker of privilege. The apparatus he described depended on institutions with slow clocks: schools, academies, prize juries, review pages. Cultural capital accumulated over a lifetime and converted into other kinds of capital at predictable rates.

BookTok scrambles this. Consecration is fast, and it flows from below. A creator with no credentials beyond a camera and a reading habit can move tens of thousands of copies, which means that the legitimating authority has moved from a small body of accredited critics to a large body of unaccredited enthusiasts. This looks like democratisation and is

often described that way by the platform. The description is too generous. Authority has not been distributed. It has been transferred to an unaccountable ranking system that decides which enthusiast gets an audience, and the criteria of that system are proprietary.

Gillespie (2014) argued that algorithms acquire their power partly through a claim to objectivity, presenting themselves as neutral conduits while making editorial choices of real weight. Bucher (2018) extends this to the affective experience of platform users, who develop folk theories about what the system wants and shape their output accordingly. On BookTok this is entirely visible. Creators speak openly about what the algorithm rewards, and adjust their thumbnails, their hooks and their emotional register in response. The result is a kind of anticipatory conformity, a community writing towards a reader it cannot see.

A study of Goodreads reviews found that online readers articulate intimacy, attachment and identification rather than judgement, and that this vocabulary has its own precision (Driscoll & Rehberg Sedo, 2019). BookTok pushes further in the same direction. The dominant critical gesture is not evaluation but testimony. I could not put it down. This book destroyed me. Read this if you liked that. Such statements are not weak criticism. They are a different practice, closer to the affective sociability of the reading group than to the assessment of a review, and they answer a question that criticism has largely stopped asking, which is what a book does to a person.

V. GENRE EFFECTS: ROMANTASY, THE BACKLIST, AND THE COMPRESSED BESTSELLER

Three commercial patterns follow from the affective turn. The first is genre concentration. Books that produce a strong, describable emotional response travel well in a fifteen second format, and books that reward slow attention do not. Romance, fantasy and their hybrid are structurally advantaged, since both operate on promise and payoff, and both have devoted readerships already organised around series.

The second is the backlist revival, which is genuinely new. Publishing economics had long assumed a title's commercial life peaked within months of release. BookTok broke that assumption. Miller's *The Song of Achilles*, Hoover's *It Ends with Us*, and E. Lockhart's *We Were Liars* all reached their sales peaks years after publication. For the industry this was welcome revenue with an uncomfortable implication, since a market in which old books can be resurrected cheaply is a market with a weaker incentive to acquire new ones.

The third pattern is compression at the top. McGurl (2021) reads contemporary fiction through the logic of Amazon, arguing that the platform reorganises the novel around service, genre satisfaction and reader retention. Recommendation systems tend towards concentration because they optimise for predicted engagement and past engagement is the best predictor available. This is a general property of platform societies, in which datafication and selection reinforce each other (van Dijck et al., 2018). On BookTok the visible consequence is that a small number of authors occupy an enormous share of attention while the long tail stays where it was.

None of this is a moral failing of the readers involved. Radway (1984) demonstrated four decades ago that the dismissal of popular romance readers as passive consumers could not survive contact with the readers themselves, who used the form deliberately and read it critically. The same courtesy is owed here. What is at issue is the shape of the infrastructure, not the sophistication of the people using it.

VI. BEYOND THE ANGLOPHONE FRAME

Most commentary treats BookTok as an American phenomenon with British and Australian annexes. The sales data does not support that framing. German language markets recorded the steepest growth of any territory, with recommended titles rising from roughly 12 million copies in 2023 to more than 28 million in 2025, and comparable effects appear in Brazil, Spain, Italy and Poland (TikTok Newsroom, 2026). The hashtag localises. Each linguistic community develops its own canon, its own creators and its own vocabulary of praise, while the underlying recommendation architecture stays identical.

In India the pattern is different again, and instructive. English language romantasy travels, but so does a substantial regional language book culture that had almost no presence in the conventional review economy. Creators posting in Malayalam, Bengali, Marathi and Tamil have built audiences that no metropolitan literary supplement ever served. Whether this constitutes a genuine widening of the field or simply a parallel enclosure depends on questions that cannot yet be answered, chiefly whether regional publishers can convert visibility into distribution.

Libraries occupy an awkward position in all of this. Public library systems in several countries report holds queues driven almost entirely by platform trends, which means that a public institution with a statutory duty to serve the whole community is having its acquisition priorities set by a commercial recommendation engine. Librarians have generally welcomed the increase in young borrowers while noting, with some unease, that the collection is being reshaped by a process they cannot observe or influence. That tension has no obvious resolution and is likely to sharpen.

VII. WHAT THE PLATFORM CANNOT CARRY

Certain kinds of book do badly on BookTok, and the pattern is not random. Translated literature, poetry, essays, formally difficult fiction and most non-fiction other than memoir are underrepresented relative to their share of publishing output. The reason is mechanical. The format rewards immediate emotional legibility, and a novel whose interest lies in its sentences or its structure cannot be conveyed in a clip. Murray (2018) had already noted that the digital literary sphere tends to privilege the personality of the reader over the properties of the text, and short form video intensifies that tendency to its limit.

There is also a labour question. Creators who generate substantial sales for publishers are compensated erratically, usually in free copies and occasional sponsorship. Srnicek (2017) describes platform capitalism as a model in which value produced by users is captured by infrastructure owners, and literary promotion has become a clean example. Publishers receive marketing they did not pay for. TikTok receives the advertising revenue. The creator receives a proof copy.

The deepest vulnerability is political. A literary ecosystem routed through one application owned by one company and subject to national security legislation in several jurisdictions is an ecosystem with a single point of failure. Napoli (2019) argued that social platforms have assumed public interest functions without accepting public interest obligations, and the recent history of regulatory action against TikTok in the United States and elsewhere shows what that means in practice. A ranking change, a ban, or a corporate sale could remove the principal discovery mechanism for young readers with no notice and no appeal.

Finn (2017) warns against treating algorithms as either neutral tools or malign agents, proposing instead that they be read as cultural artefacts encoding particular assumptions about what people want. Applied to BookTok, the assumption encoded is that reading is a consumption experience to be optimised for intensity and repetition. That is one true thing about reading. It is not the only true thing, and a culture that hears only this one will eventually stop producing the books that cannot be sold this way.

VIII. CONCLUSION

BookTok is the most consequential development in Anglophone literary circulation since the paperback, and it deserves better than either the celebration it receives from the trade or the disdain it receives from the academy. The commercial evidence is solid. Tens of millions of books have been sold, a generation of readers has been brought into the market, and publishing economics have been rearranged around a discovery mechanism that did not exist six years ago.

The critical account offered here is that BookTok relocates literary authority rather than distributing it. Old gatekeepers were few, narrow and frequently snobbish, and they could be named, criticised and replaced. The new arrangement substitutes a system that cannot be addressed at all. Readers argue with each other in the comments while the actual editorial decision, which video reaches which person, happens elsewhere and answers to a different set of objectives entirely.

Three lines of research follow. Sales attribution needs independent methodology rather than platform self-reporting, since the industry is now allocating capital on the strength of figures it cannot audit. The affective vocabulary of platform criticism deserves serious descriptive study rather than dismissal, because it is doing real interpretive work in an idiom scholarship has not learned to read. And the fate of the literary forms that BookTok cannot carry should be tracked deliberately, since their decline will be gradual, unannounced, and easy to mistake for a loss of public interest rather than a loss of infrastructure.

Reading has always been shaped by whatever technology delivered it. The scroll, the codex, the cheap reprint and the paperback each rearranged the relationship between text and reader, and each was mourned by somebody. What distinguishes the present arrangement is opacity. Earlier intermediaries had visible interests that could be discounted accordingly. This one does not disclose its interests, and the community it hosts has organised a great deal of its cultural life around a mechanism it is not permitted to see.

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