

The book year: Trouble and more trouble

HOW fared the book world in 1980? On a scale of 1 to 10, its fortunes rate a limping 4.

The big news wasn't that Walker Percy produced his finest novel, or that Justin Kaplan and Ronald Steel turned out two of the best biographies in years, or that 1980's most promising first novel, *A Confederacy of Dunces*, appeared 11 years after its author, John Kennedy Toole, committed suicide. Of course many good books were born, as they are every year.

What was most striking about 1980 is that fewer worthy books were published, and for an unprecedented reason: The publishing world found itself in

One for the books

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deep trouble. Not for a lack of writers or manuscripts—there are more of both than ever before—but for the loss of financial stability. Books are no longer recession-proof.

IN THE BOOKSTORES, sales declined markedly (how much won't be known until Publishers Weekly finishes its calculations well into 1981) for both hardcovers and paperbacks. And as shopowners found keeping slow-moving books on their shelves intolerably expensive, returns of unsold books to publishers shot up. Ever-increasing shipping charges for returns added to the burden for independent bookstores, who could not, as the big chains did with their economies of scale, win attractive discounts on the prices paid to the publishers for their wares.

Meanwhile, at paperback houses, the "blockbuster mentality" brought on by the bottom-line psychology of conglomerate ownership meant the houses put all their financial eggs into what they hoped would be fast-moving super-best-sellers. But sales were stagnant, leaving even less money for the houses to buy paperback rights to not-so-spectacular clothbound books.

Hardcover publishers discovered that without selling paperback rights, they could not make money on high-quality but slower-selling books. Even raising cover prices and cutting production costs with cheap paper and shoddy bindings didn't have much impact on bottom lines. As a result, many publishers reorganized, slashing the numbers of books they planned to bring out and firing much of their staff.

Worse, later in the year the Internal Revenue Service wiped out depreciation tax breaks on backlists of previously published volumes kept in warehouses. This meant that publishers could no longer keep many slow-selling books in print, but were forced to remainder them—or worse, send them to the pulpers.

Thus durable literature—good books that don't make the best seller lists or sell right away—was and is in trouble. Fewer and fewer authors will be able to make livings as full-time writers; more and more will be forced into teaching (a career with its own share of troubles) or non-literary pursuits. The reader will have less and less variety to choose from.

HOW CAN THESE woes be overcome? Ought the industry just ride out the recession, waiting for times to get better? That could be fatal. Times are changing too fast.

Some in the industry think mass-market paperback houses ought to build up the hardcover lines some of them have started, but don't expect much quality from these wares in the near future. Most of it so far has been schlock.

A few hardcover houses are printing books simultaneously in cloth and quality trade paperback, but so far sales have been less than spectacular. This is one way to cut production costs, however, and look for more hard-and-soft issues in the near future, as well as other experiments in marketing.

But the likeliest trend: It's going to get worse. Fewer titles will be published by a smaller number of publishers as a general industry shakeout grows.

Don't look to university presses to pick up much of the slack in durable literature, although the University of Illinois Press and Louisiana State University Press have tried mightily with new fiction. Scholarly presses have enough problems peculiarly their own.

Nor can small presses be expected to help; the perennial problem of getting their wares before the public is almost insurmountable.

THE PICTURE is not totally bleak. Certain intelligent and scrupulous publishers have thrived while bucking the schlockbuster trend.

One is the small Boston firm of David R. Godine, which topped the \$1 million mark in sales this year, up from \$630,000 in 1979, while publishing splendidly manufactured books of high intellectual quality and broad, though not mass, appeal.

That might be one of the secrets to survival.