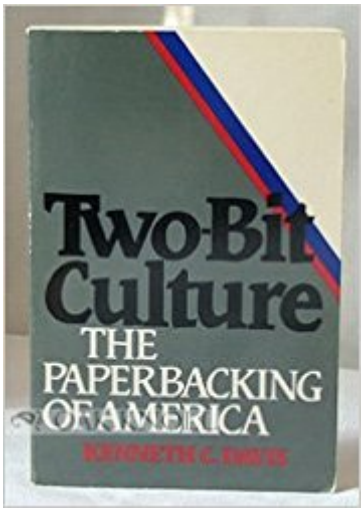
Two-Bit Culture: The Paperbacking Of America



Synopsis

Discusses the innovation of paperback printing in the mid-twentieth century. The advent of paperback books revolutionized reading in America after World War II. xviii , 430 pages. stiff paper wrappers. 8vo..

Book Information

Paperback: 430 pages
Publisher: Mariner Books; First edition (June 18, 1984)
Language: English
ISBN-10: 0395355354
ISBN-13: 978-0395355350
Package Dimensions: 8.9 x 5.9 x 1.4 inches
Shipping Weight: 1.5 pounds
Average Customer Review: 3.6 out of 5 stars 3 customer reviews
Best Sellers Rank: #870,031 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #150 inÃ Â Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism > Books & Reading > History of Books #168 inÃ Â Books > Reference > Writing, Research & Publishing Guides > Publishing & Books > Book Industry #1126 inÃ Â Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism > Books & Reading > General

Customer Reviews

Discusses the innovation of paperback printing in the mid-twentieth century. The advent of paperback books revolutionized reading in America after World War II. xviii , 430 pages. stiff paper wrappers. 8vo..

Great history of the paperback book industry, but too much information about the years immediately preceding the publication date. Book was in OK condition but adhesive has dried out, leading to loose pages -- not unexpected and not a problem.

A great book for bibliophiles who like to know the in and outs of the paperback and book businesss in general. It is out of date and in badf need of an updating but people who read a lot in past decades nefore the interney came along.

Two-Bit Culture: The Paperbacking of America is a history of paperback publishing, written by Kenneth Davis in 1984. I enjoyed it, but I wouldnÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t recommend it to the modern

reader.I picked this up in a used bookstore while on vacation this summer. Cultural history is my secret pleasure.Davis opens with an introduction that announces his intent: he means to show that Americans will read ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“goodÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• books, if they are nearby and cheap. Also, that mass-market books influence culture. Mission (sort of) accomplished. Davis proceeds to go through 45 years of paperbacks, in great detail. He highlights many ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“goodÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• books, and calls out their impressive sales numbers. He makes a number of attempts to tie these big-sellingÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•goodÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• books to the wider culture.But, at the end of the book, as he discusses the 1970s, he all but concedes that the mission of elevating the culture has given way. The book ends on a note of despair.He also struggles to justify the sales of Mickey Spillane and Erle Stanley Gardner, who became rich and famous with their pulp fiction crime novels. In fairness, he gives it the olÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ college try, using many pages to attempt to link their work to the zeitgeist of the times.Davis makes a curious choice at the outset: he picks June, 1939 as the the start of the ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“paperback revolution.ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• This struck me as odd, because there clearly were books with paper covers long before then. Indeed, Davis touches briefly on the history of paperbacks - going back to the early 19th century. Since he didnÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t explicitly say it, I will: Davis is interested specifically in paperbound books of literary significance. Edgar Rice Burroughs may have been the first rich-and-famous ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“paperback writerÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• (as the Beatles put it), but his books are not part of the literary canon.Starting in 1939 is fair enough, on DavisÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ terms. But he does struggle to explain the success of authors like Spillane, Gardner, Harold Robbins and others.Another tip-off that Davis is a ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“litÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• fan is in his coverage of literary periodicals. Apparently, there was a recurring series of attempts to use the paperback format to publish the equivalent of a literary magazine. The longest effort lasted a decade, though it had to hop among 3 publishers to last so long. Davis lavishes inordinate attention on these (mostly short-lived) journals.With his history beginning in 1939, a book published in 1984 is either brief, or heavy on small details. Davis went for the latter. The comings and goings of executives, publishers, and editors is recounted in great detail. For all its impact and sales, paperback publishing was a small world, with a cast of players that numbers in the low dozens. At some point, my eyes glazed over, and I just skimmed the names as they were recounted, as if I were reading the ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“begatÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• sections of The Bible.But after all, this is cultural history. Just as the order of battle is recounted tediously in a WWII history, it is important to put all those names and places on the record.The fun parts of the book come in two parts: where Davis highlights an individual author, and when he covers the noble

free-speech fight taken up by the paperbackers.The 20th century can fairly be called the high-water mark for novelists. In addition to the enduring names (Joyce, Hemingway, et al), there were a bunch of big-selling, and therefore culturally-important, authors that we have forgotten. Davis reminds us.The other lesson I took from this book is the key place paperback publishers played in the on-going battle for free speech. Many novels of the early-and-mid-20th-century had explicit sex scenes. Which, obviously, was not well-aligned with the overt tenor of the times. But then again, the books sold well. Davis points out that hardcovers had limited distribution, exposure, and sales. A hardcover with sex scenes might fly right under the Puritan radar. Not so with paperbacks.Paperback publishers fought a running legal battle with a collection of local and state governments. There was even a nasty Congressional inquiry, though little came of it. In the end, publishers staked more than a prudent amount on legal expenses that blazed new precedent in the courts. And, to DavisÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ point, the (prurient) paperbacks surely had an influence on mass culture.Maybe, ten years from now, someone will produce a companion edition that details the second 40 years of paperbacks. A lot has happened since the book ended in 1984. We witnessed the rise-and-fall of the big-box bookstores, along with the rise (so far) of ebooks.For a skimmable recap of readable 20th-century authors, highly recommended. But for the modern reader, it leaves too soon.