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Publishers Give Classics a Makeover

By BILL GOLDSTEIN

Forget about agents and auctions and multimillion-dollar contracts. The stiffest competition in the book business may be among the many publishers staking claim to Dickens, Austen, Herodotus and Plato.

Selling the classics is one of the few areas of significant growth in an otherwise stagnant business. Major publishers, including Penguin Group USA and Bertelsmann, are aggressively defending their lucrative share of both the consumer and academic markets by investing heavily in redesigning and expanding their classics lists.

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Naum Kazhdan/The New York Times
New covers of classics: first "The Portable Sixties Reader" (Penguin), "Jane Eyre" (Corgi World's Classics) and "The World's Classics" (Modern Library).

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Imprints like Penguin Classics, the market leader, as well as Modern Library and Bantam Classics, two units of Bertelsmann, depend heavily on literary works in the public domain. In a very competitive market, where one copy of "Pride and Prejudice" can seem the same as any other, they vie not only with one another but with [Barnes & Noble](#), which sells its own editions of classics and displays them at the front of its stores.

Last month, Penguin Classics began a \$500,000 promotion to kick off a two-year global program under which its entire 1,300-book list of

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classics, the industry's largest, will receive a complete facelift.

"Penguin Classics has always been a sizable percentage of our business," said Kathryn Court, president of Penguin Books, a unit of Pearson. "We determined in the last couple of years to reinforce our brand identity." Ms. Court would not provide sales figures but said 2002 revenue for Penguin Classics was 13 percent higher than in 2001.

Sales of the classics have risen, retailers say, because of reading groups and an aging population. Increasingly, many editions include reading group guides.

"I hate to bring the boomers into every discussion, but a lot more adults are going back to the classics because of reading groups," said Bob Gray, bookseller and buyer at Northshire Books in Vermont. "In the last couple of years it seems like the classics went from being an afterthought to being news."

"People shopping the classics have been seeing the same books for what may be their entire lives," Mr. Gray added. Because of Penguin's redesign, he said, "Now their eyes will no longer glaze over; it will probably make them stop."

For the first time, Penguin will also publish many modern classics, by John Steinbeck, Jack Kerouac and others, under the Penguin Classics imprint, discontinuing its Twentieth-Century Classics line.

"Three types of Penguin books are now one type of book," said Penguin's marketing director, John Fagan. "Moving to one spine increases the presence of the line visually."

The stakes are getting higher. In 2000, Modern Library introduced a series of paperback classics that many in the industry saw as an attempt to chip away at Penguin's dominance. But the bigger threat may be Barnes & Noble's editions.

"B&N classics — that's where Penguin is probably feeling the pressure," said an executive who insisted on anonymity. Barnes & Noble would not comment on its publishing program, but Bob Weitrak, the retailer's director of merchandising, said: "We've always carried Penguin Classics. They are extremely good sellers." Many larger Barnes & Noble stores, he noted, have display areas dedicated to Penguin.

With classics, said Irwyn Applebaum, president and publisher of the Bantam Dell Publishing Group, "there is usually no royalty, the returns tend to be modest, and though price is comparatively low, the profit, on a percentage basis, not dollars, is greater than with most books."

Penguin's edition of "Pride and Prejudice" sold over 17,000 copies in 2002, according to Nielsen Bookscan, whose data represents about 70 percent of sales but does not include academic sales. The new Penguin edition has sold nearly 4,500 copies in a month.

There are about a dozen other paperback and inexpensive hardcover editions of "Pride and Prejudice," which sold more than 110,000 copies in 2002, according to Nielsen Bookscan (this does not include Barnes & Noble's editions because that retailer does not report sales of these books).

Cheaper editions of classics are more likely to be assigned in high

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schools. Trade paperbacks, from Penguin, Oxford University Press and other academic imprints, with introductions by scholars, have more notes and are more likely to be assigned at universities. Modern Library has introductions from popular writers "who can write intelligently for the classroom," said David Ebershoff, its publishing director. The Modern Library edition of "Pride and Prejudice," for example, has an introduction by Anna Quindlen. Bertelsmann also publishes classics in its Everyman Library imprint.

"There is no question Penguin is the market leader," said Ellen Chodosh, vice president and publisher of the OUP trade division, who estimated that Penguin controlled about 70 percent of the trade paperback classics market.

The paperback Oxford World's Classics, from Oxford University Press, appeared in 1980. "When we first started, stores would only stock titles that Penguin didn't publish," Ms. Chodosh said. World's Classics accounts for about 20 percent of Oxford's total paperback revenue, and sales for the series have "grown consistently," though they "flattened a little last year," she said.

It is "difficult to compete with Penguin at the retail level," Ms. Chodosh said, "especially as stores are reducing the shelf space given to multiple copies."

Oxford, like Penguin and increasingly Modern Library, aggressively promotes itself in the academic market. Oxford publishes about 800 titles. Modern Library publishes about 300.

Mr. Ebershoff said that Modern Library paperbacks, which were introduced with 36 titles two years ago, have become profitable quickly. "There wasn't much I could do with the hardcover business because that wasn't going to take us back to the classroom," he said. "And that is the heart of the classics business."

The biggest change has come not from competitors but from Congress. The 1998 Copyright Extension Act sharply limited the works that were scheduled to fall into the public domain. The legislation ensured publishers' continuing exclusive rights to seminal works of modern literature like "The Great Gatsby" and "Mrs. Dalloway," both first published in 1925.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Great Gatsby," published in paperback by Simon & Schuster, sold 500,000 copies in 2002, figures that would have helped rivals' bottom line, even divided many ways. Virginia Woolf's "Mrs. Dalloway," published by Harcourt, was the inspiration for the novel "The Hours," by Michael Cunningham, and with the success of the film version of "The Hours," sales of "Mrs. Dalloway" have risen sharply. Last year, it sold 53,000 copies in paperback. Since Jan. 1, it has sold about 85,000.

"The first thing you'd do in classics publishing was keep a list — a rolling schedule of what was going into the public domain," Mr. Ebershoff said. "That was item No. 1. Now it's not only not item No. 1; it's not an item."

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