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The British Book Society and the American Book-of-the-Month Club, 1929-49: Joint choices and transatlantic connections

In September 1933, the American *Book-of-the-Month Club News* advertised “Two Books at One Price in October”. Making one of their rare “dual” selections, the judges chose works by an American and an English author, made available to their members at the combined cut price of \$3. In dramatic style, the lead advert framed the texts as contrasting wildly:

One is American, as racy as it can be; the other is of the finest vintage of modern English writing; one is by a young man, who still has his wide public to win, [...] as one of the few most promising writers of the younger Americans; the other is by an Englishwoman whose work is already appreciated the world over.¹

The American novel was *The Woods Colt* by Thames Williamson; a previous Book-of-the-Month Club author, and “an exciting book about Arkansas hill-billies”. The English title was Virginia Woolf’s *Flush: A Biography*, also that month’s Choice for the Book Society, the Book-of-the-Month Club’s (BOMC) counterpart in the UK. Significantly, this made *Flush* one of thirty-three joint choices chosen by both major “book-distribution institutions” during the first twenty years (1929-49) of their shared existence.²

As an insight into the cultures of reading that the American BOMC sought to create interwar, the editorial and lead reviews of September 1933 are telling. Coding national temperaments (and stereotypes), it’s clear different modes of reading are offered to members here. Invoking diametric rhetoric, BOMC members are positioned as eclectic and wide-ranging in their tastes, interested in the most “thrillingly American” novel as well as its “most curious contrast”.³ A kaleidoscope of textual and affective responses are made available: *The Woods Colt*, according to judge Christopher Morley (1890-1957), “takes the reader out and away”, while *Flush* is “an indoor and civilized fantasy”, a smartly observed social and

historical satire. Importantly, both books are worth reading. “The glamour of the present is upon them”, as club advertising messaged, meaning both will look good on the shelf.⁴

This article begins with this rhetorical staging to introduce the overlooked transatlantic dimensions to the operations and cultures of reading of the American BOMC and the British Book Society during their first two decades. It is well known that both clubs were major distributors of new books to wide audiences through the mid-twentieth century, disrupting previous patterns of consumption, with a significant impact on book sales and global distribution (the BOMC still survives, albeit in different form; the Book Society folded in the late 1960s).⁵ Yet while existing studies on the BOMC and its British counterpart have relied largely upon national frameworks of reading and print culture, this article takes seriously Corinna Norrick-Rühl’s argument that “book clubs are central to the global history of the book” and are “intertwined internationally”.⁶ Recent work in institutions and commodities, transatlanticisms, and transatlantic print culture has indicated the many exchanges – “imaginative, mythological, material, and political” – between American and British authors, publishers and readers in the twentieth century, while scholars have traced the increased internationalisation of Anglophone print culture through the nineteenth century.⁷ Writing with reference to turn-of-the-century periodical culture and the Anglo-American feminist press, for instance, Lucy Delap and Maria DiCenzo suggest that “British and American readers might be understood to be inhabiting not just overlapping ‘reading communities,’ but a single reading community that transcended national boundaries”.⁸

Yet apart from Norrick-Rühl’s study (which looks at several international book clubs structurally, as institutions and cultural phenomenon), the American BOMC and the British Book Society have not been examined side by side. This is a curious gap in the literature – caused perhaps partly by the lack of direct correspondence between the two sets of judges as well as the imbalanced nature of surviving archives, which has resulted in some rich

scholarship on the BOMC compared to a relative paucity of work on the Book Society (I am writing a group biography of the judges involved in the latter club). Surviving records for the BOMC – now housed across several prestigious institutions in the US – have preserved a level of detail pertaining to the club’s operations which is more difficult to parse for the Book Society, whose archives didn’t survive when the business collapsed.⁹ Nevertheless, this essay explores what remains of the Book Society via several publishers’ archives, in judges’ diaries and letters, and in its monthly magazine, alongside the published record of the American BOMC and its unpublished preliminary readers’ reports, to show how the clubs worked not in isolation during their first two decades, but as part of a broader transatlantic print culture of distribution and reading. The interwar period was a key moment in the development of literary institutions in the UK and US, designed to promote education and reading.¹⁰ Drawing on a methodology inspired by Sydney Shep’s model of situated knowledges in book history, this essay unpicks some of “the complex, dynamic intercrossings between people (prosopography), places (placeography) and objects (bibliography)” as revealed in the archival evidence of exchanges among authors, judges, publishers, and texts, to demonstrate how the BOMC and the Book Society were part of a transatlantic publishing ecosystem that shaped interwar and mid-twentieth century reading patterns across the Atlantic and wider Anglophone world..¹¹

The Book-of-the-Month Club and the Book Society: institutions and people

While the professional, cultural, and aesthetic links between the BOMC and the Book Society have long been ignored, this is not true with regard to the latter’s formation. The monthly book sales club came originally from Germany, but it was the American character of its distribution model that was seized upon in Britain by contemporary detractors when the Book Society was set up in London late 1928.¹² For many journalists and critics, the establishment

of the Book Society was a sign of American commercialism, evidence of a worryingly anti-intellectual shift in the production and distribution of literature. “Book clubs, which advise wide circles of members as to the best in current literature, exist in the United States of America,” noted a column in *The Times* explaining the formation of the Book Society to its readers, “but the organization which has just been formed is the first of its kind in Great Britain”.¹³ “An even more efficient standardization of taste is suggested by the activities of the Book Society,” wrote Q. D. Leavis in her notorious critique of “The Middlemen” in *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932): “The former was started on the model of the American Book-of-the-Month Club”.¹⁴

As curated book-distributing institutions, the BOMC and the Book Society had much in common *as clubs*: both were fronted by popular celebrities and literary experts, and both cultivated a sense of group identity with members via monthly mail-outs and newsletters. But the Book Society was distinctly different to its American counterpart because it sent members a publisher’s first edition of the club’s chosen title at retail price, not its own special book club edition (this changed during the turmoil facing British publishing in WWII). Part of the fear in British bookselling circles in the late 1920s about the impact of the American BOMC was that it sold its own editions of chosen titles at cut prices, shortly after first publication. Though it looked to the American BOMC in many aspects of its operation, the Book Society modelled a different approach to material culture (at least in its beginnings), and was not intended to undermine the UK’s Net Book Agreement. The model of cut-price, deep discounting that distinguished the BOMC came slightly after the Book Society in the UK, via clubs like Victor Gollancz’s Left Book Club (1936-48), and the Readers Union (1937).¹⁵

It is not surprising that industry moves were afoot in Britain mid-1928 in response to the tremendous success of both the American BOMC and the Literary Guild (begun 1927) across the pond. As Joan Shelley Rubin and Janice Radway have shown in now classic

studies, the BOMC created by advertising agent and entrepreneur Harry Scherman (1887-1969) in New York in April 1926 was phenomenally successful, contributing to a broad pedagogic and democratic investment in what BOMC Chair Dr Henry Seidel Canby (1878-1961) described as “sound” reading cultures.¹⁶ Within a year, the BOMC had over sixty thousand members and over ninety thousand by 1928.¹⁷ The corresponding effect on the spread and distribution of chosen texts was substantial, with huge increases in the trade sales of selections.¹⁸ The American sales of British writer Sylvia Townsend Warner’s *Lolly Willowes* (1926) – the BOMC’s first choice in April 1926 – are a case in point. Prior to the BOMC nomination, Viking, Warner’s American publisher, had warned her British publisher Charles Prentice of Chatto & Windus that they didn’t think the book would sell well in the US. With the BOMC selection, however, American sales topped ten thousand by early June 1926 (4500 copies were ordered by the club for their own distribution).¹⁹ “The Book-of-the-Month ticket is certainly some institution” Prentice wrote Townsend Warner that month. “We have sold only 2716 copies in this little country so far”.²⁰ As the BOMC expanded, weathering both the Depression and WWII, sales of its monthly choices in the bookstores regularly topped the tens of thousands and sometimes pushed at the hundreds of thousands.²¹ Publication dates were moved to fit in with the club’s demands. As Richard Aldington reported to Chatto & Windus regarding the decision of his American publisher Covici-Friede over the publication date of *Death of a Hero* (1929): “If by any fluke of luck the novel were selected by the American Book of the Month I gather from his cable that this would mean further delay. But as that means selling 90,000 copies anyway, it doesn’t matter.”²²

British authors and publishers had long looked to the American book market with envy. The size of the reading public in America was much larger than in the UK, and the book-borrowing, circulating-library habit that remained important to British readers up until WWII was less ingrained.²³ The sale of serial rights to American periodicals and magazines

was an important source of income for British writers and achieving American book sales shored up many an author's success. "A great number of books in America are sold direct to readers" wrote Chatto's Percy Spalding to an aggrieved Cosmo Hamilton in January 1914: "whereas the English libraries are almost the only distributing agents of fiction [...] here [...] there is practically no purchasing public for books".²⁴ This was a popular perception that British authors and publishers were keen to redress, and partly what the Book Society was set up to challenge. "There is a deep rooted idea in the ordinary English mind", author H. G. Wells wrote in W. H. Smith's new *Guide to Book Buying and Book Reading* in 1927, "that it is extravagant and wrong to own books. That had its origin in the social conditions of more than a century ago."²⁵ Like the American BOMC, the Book Society was set up both to boost book sales and to educate and enfranchise a segment of society who felt excluded from contemporary reviewing and book cultures, so that the "golden formula" of the BOMC was keenly taken up by British and Anglophone readers.²⁶ The Book Society remained smaller than its transatlantic counterpart, with 10,000 members on its ten-year anniversary (a significant proportion were based overseas, in colonies or other Anglophone reading markets). But 9-10,000 copies as a guaranteed order was hugely significant to British publishers, when first edition sales for a new author in the interwar period were on average between three and four thousand copies.²⁷

When popular novelist Hugh Walpole (1884-41) was asked to assemble a selection committee for the Book Society late 1928, he followed closely Harry Scherman and Dr Henry Seidel Canby's lead. Alongside Canby (an ex-Yale Professor of Literature), the initial BOMC included Vermont-based popular novelist and educational reformer Dorothy Canfield Fisher (1879-1958) as well as journalists and writers Heywood Broun (1888-1939), William Allen White (1868-1944) and Anglophile Christopher Morley.²⁸ White and Canfield Fisher were robust champions of small-town America and the Middle West; Broun and Morley

signified urbanity and sophistication as metropolitan personalities with extensive journalistic networks.

For the British club, Walpole first approached J. B. Priestley, a writing friend and co-author whom he described in his diary as “cocksure and determined,” and who – like William Allen White – was a renowned non-metropolitan critic.²⁹ Priestley held similar views on literature to Walpole, both broadly invested in books for the “Man in the Street”, as Walpole put it in a series on “These Diversions” edited by Priestley; “that criticism should address itself to intelligent men and women of the world”, as Priestley argued, “asking for many different kinds of pleasure from many different kinds of books and authors”.³⁰ Academic expertise as signified by Canby’s role on the BOMC was provided for the Book Society through the contributions of George Stuart Gordon, Professor of English Literature at Leeds then Oxford, and President of Magdalen College from 1928 until his death in March 1942. Gordon was a university moderniser with a democratic outlook on his subject who sought (like the non-academic members of the Book Society) to engage with a broad public audience through literary journalism and BBC radio broadcasts. “Literature is always wider than the class of works which we call literary”, Gordon wrote in a 1931 lecture published posthumously. “Wherever a man has set down the best that he knows about the thing he knows best, and in words that tell his meaning, there, always, will be literature”.³¹

Gender parity was noticeably stronger on the Book Society than its American counterpart. While Canfield Fisher remained the only woman on the editorial board of the BOMC for twenty-five years, the Book Society boasted several prominent women writers and critics as judges, including Sylvia Lynd (1888-1952), Clemence Dane (1888-1965), and later Margaret Kennedy (1896-1967). As a writer and well-known judge of literary prizes, plus President of the *Prix Femina Vie Heureuse Anglais* (in 1929, and in 1938-9), Sylvia Lynd shared the seriousness of purpose and spirit of Canfield Fisher and developed a close

writerly relationship with Walpole, similar to what Canfield Fisher shared with Canby.³² Like Walpole and Priestley, Clemence Dane was a prominent transatlantic celebrity whose varied writing career (as novelist, playwright and screenwriter) often took her to Hollywood.³³ As with its American counterpart, the names of the Book Society judges were intended to “reassure the public”. They were, as Walpole put it in a letter to one of the Book Society’s first directors, “people who are not cranks nor like to drive always in the direction of a special clique”.³⁴

The critical independence between judges that was crucial to the clubs’ brands and relationship with readers was especially important to maintain once the Book Society (so clearly modelled upon its American counterpart) was established. Nevertheless, we know from the archival record that personal connections between the British and American sets of judges existed, and they seem to have been closest through the writerly networks of Hugh Walpole and Christopher Morley. Walpole became friends with Morley after being asked to write a preface for the British edition of the latter’s *Thunder on the Left* (1926), and it was Morley who brought Walpole into the fold of Canby’s *Saturday Review of Literature*.³⁵ Morley flattered Walpole on his prolific journalism and regular transatlantic letters for American publications including the *Herald-Tribune*. They “are genuinely serviceable,” Morley wrote him in 1933, “and do much to promote Anglo-American health and curiosity”.³⁶ Prior to the formation of the Book Society, we know Morley discussed individual BOMC titles with his friend. For instance, Morley wrote to Walpole in April 1926 of what would become the BOMC’s second choice: “This spring’s crop of American novels is pretty thin. There was one that had great promise, a book called TEEFTALLOW by T. S. Stribling – a tale of religious fanaticism and village herd-poison in Tennessee. The first half of it is magnificent, really magnificent, but then it petered out into bosh” (Morley’s words stayed with Walpole: Stribling would later become the first American author to be selected

by the Book Society).³⁷ Evidence of such detailed correspondence on club titles between the two sets of judges is rare, but social intercourse between them was frequent, with names and recommendations often shared in person. On an author trip to New York in 1930 for instance, Walpole reports singing the praises of British writer Margaret Irwin's new historical novel, *None so Pretty*, to Canby and members of the selection committee of the Literary Guild.³⁸

The decisions and debates that took place in Manhattan and in Walpole's Piccadilly flat each month were central to the sense of literary culture the groups promoted and sold to their members. In a judging committee of five time-pressed writers and critics, personal whims, powerful voices, and authorial alliances were always likely to hold sway. Some decisions were led by a particular individual. Canfield Fisher was a vocal supporter of Pearl Buck for instance; Sylvia Lynd won the day on Virginia Woolf.³⁹ The biographies and personal correspondence of the first sets of judges that survives leverages important insights into the cultures of reading the clubs' created. The next section of this essay turns more closely to the chosen texts and publishing cultures the clubs' worked within, considering in particular where their selections aligned to shape a transatlantic reading community. The quantitative part of this analysis is based on datasets of early BOMC titles compiled by Charles Lee (covering the period 1926-57) and Daniel Immerwahr, plus my own dataset of Book Society Choices (1929-69) compiled from surviving copies of the *Book Society News* and other materials in publishers' archives.⁴⁰ For full lists of the clubs' joint choices by date and publisher, see Appendix 1 and 2.

National/transnational cultures of reading

Despite the interpersonal networks between the panels of judges, the comparable day-to-day operations of the clubs, and their shared cultures of distribution and reviewing, both groups sought to preserve their own distinct lists. Typically, the date of publication between British

and American first editions differed by a few months in this period, and therefore the judges could decide whether or not to follow the other club's widely advertised lead (as Book Society members received a publisher's first edition of the club's chosen title, not a special book club edition, Book Society Choices were announced on publication; the American BOMC sold chosen titles at cut prices, shortly after first publication, developing its own manufacturing arrangements much earlier than their British counterpart). On the whole, joint choices – where a title was both a Book Society Choice and a BOMC Selection – were avoided so that where they did occur, they were utilised for additional publicity and made publishers' advertising copy. The nomination of Major Francis Yeats Brown's *The Lives of a Bengal Lancer* was announced in the *BOMC News* as “a unanimous choice of our judges, also of the judges of the English Book Society”, for instance.⁴¹ “[O]ne of the few books to be selected by *both* American and English Book Clubs,” boasted an advertisement in *Publisher's Weekly* announcing the nomination of Thornton Wilder's *Heaven's My Destination* as January 1935 selection of the BOMC.⁴² The blurbs on cheap reprints and paperback editions also called attention to the rare double whammy.

Concerns around the fostering of national reading cultures and choosing works that were of perceived interest to local audiences played into the relative scarcity of joint choices between the two clubs. A key part of the judges' remit was to aid the work of new and unknown writers and both clubs sought to foster home-grown talent. “So began the steady march into American homes of good authors who had never been there before”, notes William Zinsser in his study of the early days of the American BOMC: “Most of them, of course, were Americans”.⁴³ American writers who came to prominence with the BOMC included Stuart Chase, Pearl Buck, Margaret Mitchell, John Steinbeck and Richard Wright. Key British authors sponsored by the Book Society (those who had three or more titles as

monthly choices over the club's forty-year period of existence) included Ann Bridge, Dorothy Whipple, Evelyn Waugh, George Blake, Iris Murdoch, and Margaret Irwin.

On both sides of the Atlantic, the judges faced a constant tussle between choosing texts of the broadest, transnational, literary interest and bringing the writing of local authors to their readers' attention, particularly where certain audiences and regions were deemed not well established on the literary map. Conceiving themselves as contributing to the growth and reputation of contemporary American literature interwar, the BOMC judges were particularly attentive to this dynamic. One of the reasons Canby professed leaving Yale, for instance, was so he could champion contemporary American writers as a literary journalist.⁴⁴ Stribling's *Teeftallow* – though slammed in private discourse by Morley – was backed by Canfield Fisher as a rare book about the South “which completely broke away from the ‘magnolia tradition’”.⁴⁵ Significantly, Stribling became the first American writer chosen by the Book Society two years in (*The Forge* was Book Society Choice in August 1931), an accolade partly provoked by international interest in the racialised violence in America (explored in a historical context by Stribling) made apparent in that year's notorious trial and appeal of the Scottsboro Boys.

National sentiment was valued by both sets of judges and perceived as an important motivator to members, particularly those based overseas. This was especially true for the Book Society which, by the late 1930s, had between thirty and forty percent of its membership based abroad, distributing books to readers in officers' clubs and the colonial civil service across what was then the British Empire.⁴⁶ We know from surviving correspondence that Walpole and Lynd were keen to have an English rather than an American title chosen as the first selection of the Book Society, opting for Helen Beauclerk's whimsical *The Love of a Foolish Angel* (1929) over American Joan Lowell's *The Cradle of the Deep* (1929). Walpole went along with the Beauclerk vote even though it was in “a genre

that I generally detest” he confessed to Lynd.⁴⁷ It was not as thrilling, amusing, or likely to be as popular as Joan Lowell’s work, Walpole pointed out, but “I think we should start with an English book”. The Book Society’s first choice was not encouraging in terms of sales as it turned out, but it was fortuitous at least in avoiding the controversy courted by the American judges in backing Lowell.⁴⁸ It was not unusual for the judges on either side of the Atlantic to perceive books as having only limited appeal because they were “too English” or “too American” in content or style, a bias that continued into the postwar period.⁴⁹ “Our reports on *The Go-Between* were appreciative of its virtues”, the BOMC explained to L. P. Hartley’s American publisher, Blanche Knopf, in 1953 – anticipating a possible Book-of-the-Month after her author had been chosen by the Book Society – “but indicated that the novel is likely to be too English and cricket-matchy for our audience”.⁵⁰ This is not to say that either club was parochial in its selections. A significant proportion of the thirty-three joint choices in the period 1929-49 – especially in the clubs’ early years – are translations, from a variety of languages: Russian, Norwegian, German, French, Gaelic.⁵¹

As monthly distributors, the BOMC and the Book Society had a temporal as well as a textual life, and pace and variety – on all fronts – was important.⁵² Sending out twelve chosen books to their members each year (and recommending each month roughly a dozen others), the need to balance their lists is as significant to understanding eventual choices as any individual decision based on close reading. This clouds too easy a judgement of the clubs’ lists and complicates discussion as to why certain American or British authors do not feature on the other clubs’ selections. The preliminary BOMC reports for Dorothy Whipple’s *The Priory* (1939) are in this sense illuminating. The readers’ reports clearly show that both first readers admired Whipple’s book and recognised its likely popularity with the American public. “This is a novel of quiet but excellent merits” wrote Amy Loveman in her report for the judges.⁵³ “The book is as English as veal-and-ham pie and it’s a great pity we don’t get

more like it,” noted her colleague Avis, comparing it to works by other British bestsellers like J. B. Priestley and D. E. Stevenson.⁵⁴ Both however recognised that the judges’ recent selection of another British novel as Book-of-the-Month for July 1939 precluded *The Priory*’s nomination:

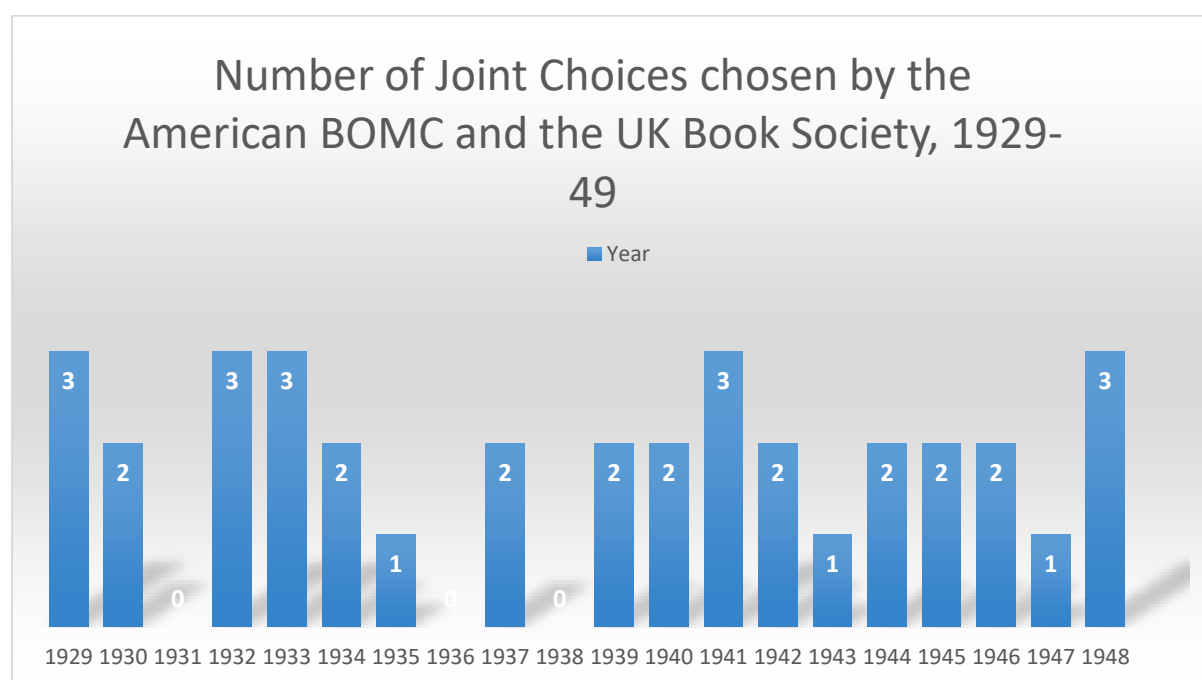
In England it was a first choice of the Book Society, and I firmly believe it should be very popular here. If the Book Club hadn’t just picked an Angela Thirkell for first choice, I’d say this was a book that could very well occupy that spot. It deserves, at any rate, a hearty recommendation and a position well up on the list.⁵⁵

Despite such enthusiasm behind the scenes, none of Whipple’s works were chosen as American Books-of-the-Month, though they were often recommended.⁵⁶

Joint Choices

The number of joint choices shared by the BOMC and the Book Society during the first twenty years of their shared existence (1929-49) was subtle, averaging one a year overall, but with up to three shared titles (a quarter of the books chosen) occasionally (in 1929; 1932; 1933; 1941; and 1948: see Table 1 below). Some of the most recognisable texts chosen by the two clubs include Virginia Woolf’s *Flush* (1933) – with which this essay started – alongside Enid Bagnold’s *National Velvet* (1935), Pearl Buck’s *The Patriot* (1939), Graham Greene’s *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), and Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). Translated works chosen by both clubs include Valentine Kataev’s *The Embezzlers* (1929); Sigrid Undset’s *Kristin Lavransdatter* (1929/30); Jean Schlumberger’s *Saint Saturnin* [English title *The Seventh Age*] (1932/3); Jules Romain’s *Verdun* (1940); and Franz Werfel’s *The Song of Bernadette* (1942). During WWII – as we can see with both clubs choosing *Verdun* after the Fall of France – Allied joint choices become more evident, the book clubs contributing their own efforts towards the timely ‘Books Across the Sea’ initiative, established in 1941.⁵⁷

Statesman Winston Churchill and Pulitzer-prize winning John P. Marquand both had two works selected: *Into Battle: Winston Churchill's War Speeches* [American title *Blood, Sweat and Tears*] and *The Gathering Storm*; and *H. M. Pulham, Esquire* and *So Little Time* (See Appendix 1 and 2).⁵⁸ Ten choices were shared between the clubs during 1944 and 1948 inclusive. This was due both to continuing material restrictions and a convergence of Allied feeling around topical wartime and postwar titles that included H. E. Bates's *Fair Stood the Wind for France* (1944), Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), and H. R. Trevor Roper's *The Last Days of Hitler* (1947).⁵⁹



[**Table 1.** Data compiled by author. Where texts were published in different years in the UK and US, I have included that title in the figures under first publication date.]

Particularly successful BOMC and Book Society authors – those who had one joint choice and several other selections made by either club at different points in time – were novelists Rosamond Lehmann and C. S. Forester. Lehmann – often seen as an accessible literary novelist – had a winning book club run, with all of her first six novels published

between 1927 and 1953 made Books-of-the-Month or Book Society Choices.⁶⁰ The fact that there was only one joint choice among these (*The Ballad and the Source*, 1944/45) confirms both selection committee's reluctance to follow each other's lead and avoid excessive cross-over in the books they sent out. Historical novelist C. S. Forester was one of the most popular authors across both clubs, enjoying eight Book Society Choices and five BOMC selections during a prolific writing career.

The BOMC and the Book Society operated in a global publishing industry and were broadly invested in selling the "best books of the day", so the occasional joint transatlantic choice is not surprising, especially when the publishing field constricted during and immediately after WWII.⁶¹ British and American publishers and agents were keen to court both sets of judges and the clubs' aesthetic values and branding were perceived as sufficiently similar to warrant publishers' hopes for a double whammy. When for instance Eric Linklater's *Juan in America* was chosen by the Book Society for March 1931, publisher Jonathan Cape placed great hope in the American edition. He wrote to Linklater with misguided optimism after a trip to New York that he had "glowed about the book" and got advance copies into the hands of Christopher Morley and Henry Seidel Canby as well as of the Literary Guild judges.⁶² Some genres were clearly of interest to both committees and their readers. Historical fiction (like that of C. S. Forester) was popular on both sides of the Atlantic, as was a penchant for romance and the family story. These generic markers broadly unite such eclectic texts as Virginia Woolf's "dog's eye-view" of the lives of the Barrett Brownings in *Flush*;⁶³ Charles Morgan's story of internment in Holland in *The Fountain*; Sigrid Undset's tales of medieval life in *Kristin Lavransdatter*; and Pearl Buck's epic portrait of Chinese-Japanese relations in *The Patriot*.

Such variety was of course partly the point. Continued membership of the Book Society and the BOMC relied upon believing (and financially investing each month) in the

diversity of the best contemporary titles. Club members could specify if they wanted to receive only fiction or non-fiction, with tailored packages that stipulated preference for particular genres, but the business model relied upon subscribers being open-minded, and generally willing to keep that month's book. Both sets of judges championed the progressive, humane qualities of an eclectic mainstream, repurposing the dismissive terms in which they and their members were often criticised as part of an unthinking "middlebrow".⁶⁴ Priestley for instance spoofed the contemporary culture wars and its great divide with his celebration of the "Broadbrow" "who snap their fingers at fashions, who only ask that a thing should have character and art, should be enthralling, and do not give a fig whether it is popular or unpopular, born in Blackburn or Baku".⁶⁵ In his review of Vicki Baum's *Grand Hotel*, meanwhile – a joint choice for the two clubs (BS Sept. 1930; BOMC Feb. 1931) – Christopher Morley noted the universal, levelling, nature of the novel's appeal: "There is in it [...] the dissolved pearl of brilliant characterization and wise tenderness. It will give enormous pleasure, and both high and low foreheads will find it equally irresistible".⁶⁶ Both clubs were well adept at manoeuvring in the complex literary waters of the period, able to explore the contours and permeate the boundaries of a rich transatlantic middlebrow that could absorb celebrated literary "modernist" writing as well as thrillers, romances, biographies, and travel.⁶⁷

Priestley's and Morley's stresses upon characterisation and art here, upon the pleasurable and personally transformative and affective, are widely regarded hallmarks of a middlebrow culture of reading. Radway's framework for reading the largely middlebrow nature of BOMC choices is still perceptive: "They sought out titles that would capture the regard of their readers and that would involve them in heightened emotional response. [...] Only books that revealed their affectively distinct identities by absorbing readers totally in their felt worlds were truly compelling".⁶⁸ Even if we bear in mind the local variability,

internal dynamics, and temporal flows of the two clubs, it is not controversial to describe the broadly shared elements in their textual choices as indicative of a transatlantic middlebrow pattern of reading. What is key to understanding this convergence is the stress in the clubs' published discourse and reviews upon the creation of convincing fictional characters; the importance of plot and storytelling; and the validation of a reassuring, not overly complex, textual form and aesthetic. Preliminary readers' reports for the BOMC confirm the rejection of the text deemed "too special, too regional, for a Book of the Month", either too light or lowbrow (westerns for instance were out), too technical or highbrow.⁶⁹ Books that might nevertheless, as Basil Davenport put it in a review of Ethel Vance's *Escape* (a joint BOMC and Book Society selection), "give its readers some of the pleasures of melodrama while seeming more respectable", were passed on to the judges.⁷⁰ The high proportion of shared BOMC and Book Society choices made into successful realist films (this includes *The Lives of a Bengal Lancer*, *Grand Hotel*, *National Velvet*, *Brideshead Revisited*)) indicates the importance of narrative tension, an absorbing plot, and a form that doesn't call attention to itself as important attributes of the clubs' choices.

One shared concern in the monthly columns of the *BOMC News* and the *Book Society News* is a stress upon the continued pleasures of reading in light of the challenges of the modern (or modernist) novel. Canby's review of Priestley's *The Good Companions* (a BOMC choice for October 1929) is typical of this stance, mirroring as it does Walpole's own critical comments on modern writing in his columns, on transatlantic lecture tours, and in his *Letter to a Modern Novelist* (1933, commissioned as a polemic by the Hogarth Press).⁷¹ Harry Scherman's editorial explained the significance of the reading values championed by Canby for the club:

"It has been many years now," writes Dr Canby, in his report upon the book on behalf of the Committee, "since we have had a novel in English that was penetrating,

truthful, and interesting to the fully adult mind, yet dealt with characters, not complexes, a probable story, not a psycho-analysis, a broad contemporary scene, not a tiny slice of experience. In their desire to be modern, psychological, impressionistic, the novelists seem to have lost sight of personality and the excitement of external living: they have thrown the baby out with the bath".⁷²

Time and again similar comments would fill the columns of the *Book Society News*, most often penned by Walpole, reassuring the aspirant reader that value remained in a more traditional formal aesthetic. As he declared to readers:

It would be amusing suddenly to defend a statement that the half-dozen best living novelists in England are not the well-known and customary names, Woolf, Huxley, Maugham and so on, but rather, Forrest Reid, Charles Marriott, L. H. Myers, Elizabeth Bowen, C. S. Forester and Helen Simpson. The thing is not so preposterous as it sounds, and a good case could be made out.⁷³

Both sets of judges saw themselves as performing an important cultural task in preserving the readerly values of character, story, and external, material life. As Walpole put it in a letter to Priestley, congratulating the latter on his appointment as book critic to the *Evening Standard* (a high-profile and well-paid role that meant Priestley left the Book Society selection committee to follow in the footsteps of the influential Arnold Bennett): "[W]e are really doing something to counteract the crankiness of Stein, Joyce, and the bitter egotism of Aldington and Co. More power to you!".⁷⁴

Another concern uniting the reading cultures of the BOMC and the Book Society was the clubs' investment in contemporaneity and topicality, whether that be expressed creatively in nonfiction or travel literature, or via an authorial celebrity. In her study of middlebrow culture, Rubin demonstrates how the BOMC developed the news approach to book reviewing characteristic of journals like Canby's *Saturday Review of Literature*, making "the news

value of recent publications the core of a marketing strategy that fostered the equation of culture with information”.⁷⁵ BOMC advertising stressed the services of the club as intended for “those individuals who are anxious to keep *au courant* with the best of the new books as they are published”, while publicity material for the Book Society struck a similar note.⁷⁶ In one pamphlet from the late 1930s titled “Book Premieres,” the “genuine thrill in attending the first performance of a remarkable play” and “the pleasure of reading what others think of an event in which you have participated” is equated to receiving that month’s Book Society title through the post:

A similar pleasure can be imparted by new books. Membership of the Book Society brings you, in approval and before the reviews appear, what is likely to be the outstanding book of the coming month. You can compare the opinions, and talk of it while it is still “news”.⁷⁷

On both sides of the Atlantic, the clubs’ advertisements and literature addressed an aspirant, culturally literate reader but one who, as Walpole put it in one of his novels, was sometimes made to feel stupid – “behind the times” – by certain aspects of modernity.⁷⁸

A book’s “news value” rested on a complex interplay of factors, but might include already-evident international success, or be led by cultural capital consecrated by other literary selection committees and prizes. Chosen by both clubs, Vicki Baum’s *Grand Hotel* (originally published in German as *Menschen im Hotel* (1929), translated into English by Basil Creighton) was, as the *BOMC News* pointed out to its members, already a continental bestseller by the time the American first edition came out, while the stage version was that season’s hit on Broadway. The Nobel Prize was a significant external motivator. Both the BOMC and the Book Society selected Knopf’s collected three-volume “Nobel Prize edition” of *Kristin Lavransdatter* by Norwegian writer Sigrid Undset, after Undset was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1928 (see Figure 1 and 2). *The Patriot* became another joint

choice after Buck received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1938 (her work had previously been selected by the BOMC).⁷⁹

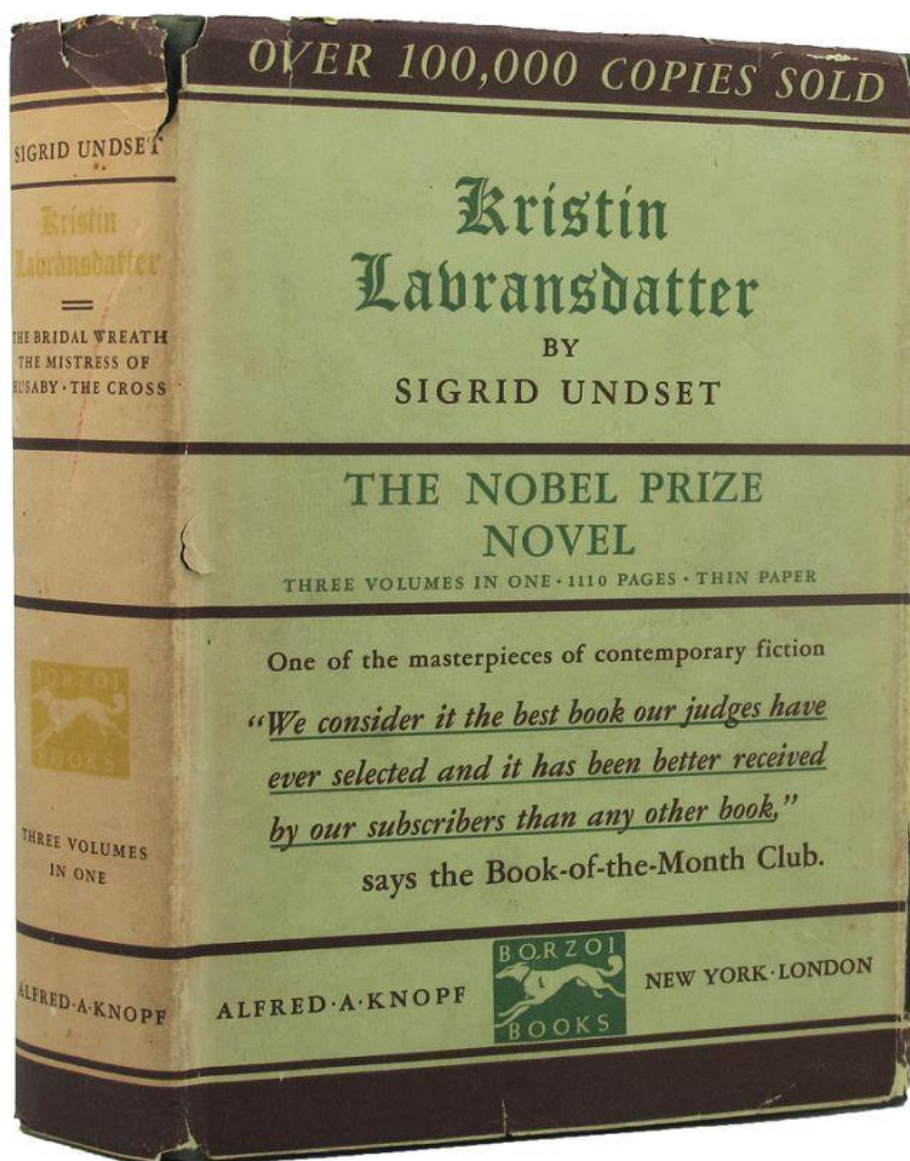


Figure 1. The American “Nobel Prize edition” of *Kristin Lavransdatter* by Sigrid Undset, published by Alfred A. Knopf (New York) in 1929, with BOMC endorsement on the paper wrapper (there are variations of this wrapper). Translated by Charles Archer and J. S. Scott. Dust jacket image shared by bookseller on Abebooks [kristin lavransdatter knopf book of the month club](#) - Bing images> [accessed 11 July 2023]

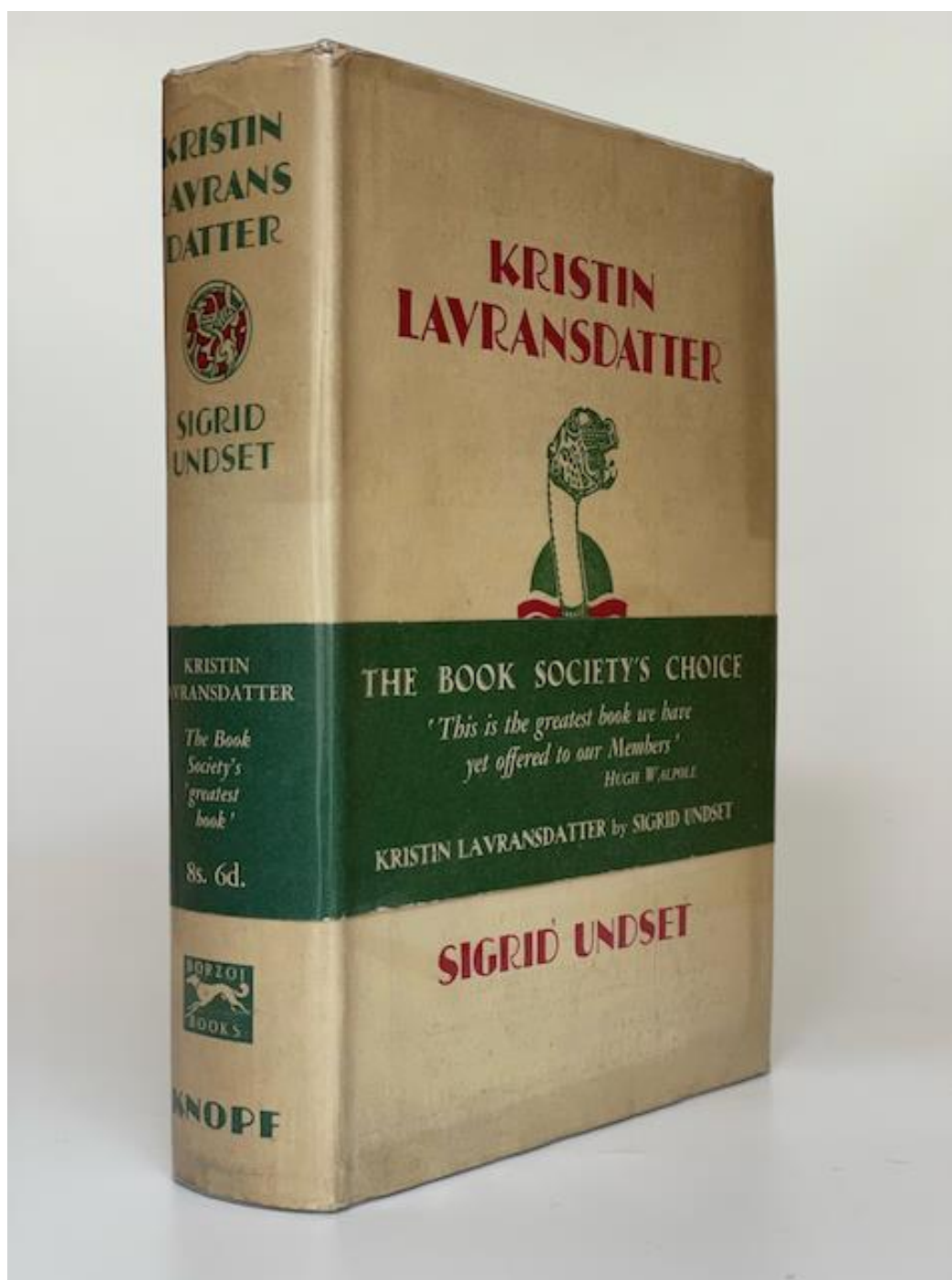


Figure 2. The English “Nobel Prize edition” of *Kristin Lavransdatter* by Sigrid Undset, published by Alfred A. Knopf’s London office in 1930, with Book Society bellyband.

Translated by Charles Archer and J. S. Scott. Dust jacket available < [Kristin Lavransdatter](#)

Translated from the Norwegian by Charles Archer & J. S. Scott. by Undset, Sigrid: (1930) |

Anthony Smith Books (abebooks.co.uk)> [accessed 11 July 2023]

Other joint choices struck a chord due to current events. Both clubs chose Ethel Vance's *Escape* in 1939 as a dramatic novel that dealt with Nazi Germany in a relatively entertaining way. "*Escape* takes hold of the reader's attention before it is reasonable that any book should," wrote Sylvia Lynd in her review for the Book Society. It is "a good yarn apart from its more significant implications," Amy Loveman agreed in her internal report for the BOMC.⁸⁰ Prominent joint choices by John P. Marquand, Winston Churchill, John Steinbeck, Pearl Buck, and H. E. Bates explored Britain and America's wartime engagement and the experience of occupied countries during WWII. Postwar, both clubs selected Hugh Trevor-Roper's analysis of *The Last Days of Hitler* (1947), as well as titles reckoning with changing ideas of social class, religion, and Empire including Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945/6), Margery Sharp's *Britannia Mews* (1946), and Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* (1948). As an insight into the curated reading of subscribers and the wider audiences who followed the clubs to make up their library lists, the joint choices indicate what the BOMC and the Book Society judges deemed important, timely books to help navigate the turmoil and devastation of WWII.

Conclusion

There are many overlooked connections between the American BOMC and the UK's Book Society up to and including WWII. While they have been studied previously in terms of national cultures of distribution and patterns of reading, the links between the two clubs indicate the transatlantic bent to middlebrow institutions of pedagogy and taste, underscored by the personal networks and connections among the people involved. The books the judges of the BOMC and the Book Society chose and recommended each month reveal a series of nuanced, negotiated textual and aesthetic choices; decisions taken by individuals who made a

name for themselves as critically independent, but decisions nevertheless rooted structurally in the crossovers and connections between British and American publishing professionals and industries interwar. Whether individual BOMC and Book Society members saw themselves and their growing book collections as part of a broader, transatlantic reading community is open to debate. Joint choices between the two clubs were managed carefully, with club messaging using the other selection committee's example to validate the members' own judges' lead. But from our vantage point, with access to publishers' archives, the preliminary BOMC readers' reports, and the judges' diaries and personal correspondence, it's clear that the reading cultures of the two major Anglophone mid-century book sales groups were richly intertwined. This relationship is a much-overlooked aspect of mid-twentieth century reading patterns, demonstrating the profound impact of the BOMC and the Book Society in shaping trade publishing and transatlantic print culture.

Appendix 1.

Joint choices of the American Book-of-the-Month-Club and the British Book Society between 1929-49, by date. Data compiled by author.

Author	Title	Book Society Choice	BOMC Selection
Valentine Kataev	<i>The Embezzlers*</i>	May-29	Nov-29
Francis Hackett	<i>Henry the Eighth</i>	Jul-29	Apr-29
Sigrid Undset	<i>Kristin Lavransdatter*</i>	Feb-30	Feb-29
Francis Yeats-Brown	<i>The Lives of a Bengal Lancer</i>	Jul-30	Nov-30
Vicki Baum	<i>Grand Hotel*</i>	Sep-30	Feb-31
Charles Morgan	<i>The Fountain*</i>	Feb-32	Jun-32
R. H. Bruce Lockhart	<i>Memoirs of a British Agent</i>	Nov-32	Feb-33
Jean Schlumberger	<i>The Seventh Age or Saint Saturnin*</i>	Feb-33	Aug-32
Maurice O'Sullivan	<i>Twenty-Years A-Growing</i>	May-33	Aug-33
Virginia Woolf	<i>Flush</i>	Oct-33	Oct-33
Marguerite Steen	<i>Matador*</i>	Mar-34	Jul-34
Thornton Wilder	<i>Heaven's My Destination*</i>	Dec-34	Jan-35
Enid Bagnold	<i>National Velvet*</i>	Apr-35	May-35
Stuart Cloete	<i>The Turning Wheels*</i>	Oct-37	Nov-37
Kenneth Roberts	<i>Northwest Passage*</i>	Jan-38	Jul-37
Pearl S. Buck	<i>The Patriot*</i>	Apr-39	Mar-39
Ethel Vance	<i>Escape, a novel of Inside Germany *</i>	Nov-39	Oct-39
Jules Romains	<i>Verdun*</i>	Apr-40	Jan-40
Ernest Hemingway	<i>For Whom the Bell Tolls*</i>	Mar-41	Nov-40
Winston S. Churchill, compiled by Randolph S. Churchill	<i>Into Battle: Winston Churchill's War Speeches</i>	Feb-41	Jun-41
John P. Marquand	<i>H. M. Pulham, Esquire*</i>	Feb-42	Mar-41
John Steinbeck	<i>The Moon is Down*</i>	Jun-42	Apr-42
Franz Werfel	<i>The Song of Bernadette*</i>	Nov-42	Jun-42
John P. Marquand	<i>So Little Time*</i>	Jan-Feb 1944	Sep-43
H. E. Bates	<i>Fair Stood the Wind for France*</i>	Nov-44	Jun-44
Rosamond Lehmann	<i>The Ballad and the Source*</i>	Sep-44	Apr-45
Evelyn Waugh	<i>Brideshead Revisited*</i>	May-45	Jan-46
Jim Corbett	<i>Man-Eaters of Kumaon</i>	Jul-46	Apr-46
Margery Sharp	<i>Britannia Mews*</i>	Aug-46	Jul-46
H. R. Trevor-Roper	<i>The Last Days of Hitler</i>	Mar-47	Sep-47
Graham Greene	<i>The Heart of the Matter*</i>	May-48	Aug-48
C. S. Forester	<i>The Sky and the Forest*</i>	Sep-48	Sep-48
Winston S. Churchill	<i>The Gathering Storm*</i>	Oct-Nov 1948	Jul-48

*denotes fiction

Appendix 2.

Joint choices of the American Book-of-the-Month-Club and the British Book Society between 1929-49, by publisher. Data compiled by author.

Title	UK publisher	US publisher
<i>The Embezzlers</i>	Ernest Behn	Dial Press
<i>Henry the Eighth</i>	Jonathan Cape	Horace Liveright
<i>Kristin Lavransdatter</i>	Alfred A. Knopf (London)	Alfred A. Knopf (New York)
<i>The Lives of a Bengal Lancer</i>	Victor Gollancz	The Viking Press
<i>Grand Hotel</i>	Geoffrey Bles	Grosset & Dunlap
<i>The Fountain</i>	Macmillan	Alfred A. Knopf
<i>Memoirs of a British Agent</i> \$	G. P. Putnam's (London)	G. P. Putnam's (New York)
<i>The Seventh Age or Saint Saturnin</i> \$	Victor Gollancz	Dodd, Mead
<i>Twenty-Years A-Growing</i>	Chatto & Windus	The Viking Press
<i>Flush</i>	Hogarth Press	Harcourt, Brace & Co.
<i>Matador</i>	Victor Gollancz	Little, Brown & Co.
<i>Heaven's My Destination</i>	Longmans, Green	Harper & Brothers
<i>National Velvet</i>	William Heinemann	William Morrow & Co.
<i>The Turning Wheels</i>	William Collins	Houghton Mifflin
<i>Northwest Passage</i>	William Collins	Doubleday, Doran & Co.
<i>The Patriot</i>	Methen	John Day
<i>Escape, a novel of Inside Germany</i>	William Collins	Little, Brown & Co.
<i>Verdun</i>	Peter Davies Ltd	Alfred A. Knopf
<i>For Whom the Bell Tolls</i>	Jonathan Cape	Charles Scribner's Sons
<i>Into Battle: Winston Churchill's War Speeches</i> \$	Cassell & Co.	G. P. Putnam's
<i>H. M. Pulham, Esquire</i>	Robert Hale Ltd	Little, Brown & Co.
<i>The Moon is Down</i>	William Heinemann	The Viking Press
<i>The Song of Bernadette</i>	Hamish Hamilton	The Viking Press
<i>So Little Time</i>	Robert Hale Ltd	Little, Brown & Co.
<i>Fair Stood the Wind for France</i>	Michael Joseph	Little, Brown & Co.
<i>The Ballad and the Source</i>	William Collins	Reynal & Hitchcock
<i>Brideshead Revisited</i>	Chapman & Hall	Little, Brown & Co.
<i>Man-Eaters of Kumaon</i>	Oxford University Press (London)	Oxford University Press (New York)
<i>Britannia Mews</i>	William Collins	Little, Brown & Co.
<i>The Last Days of Hitler</i>	Macmillan (London)	Macmillan (New York)
<i>The Heart of the Matter</i>	William Heinemann	The Viking Press
<i>The Sky and the Forest</i>	Michael Joseph	Little, Brown & Co.
<i>The Gathering Storm</i>	Cassell & Co.	Houghton Mifflin

\$ different US title: *Memoirs of a British Agent* [US title: *British Agent*]; *The Seventh Age or Saint Saturnin** [US title: *Saint Saturnin*]; *Into Battle: Winston Churchill's War Speeches* [US title: *Blood, Sweat and Tears*]

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- ¹ “Two Books at One Price in October”, *BOMC News*, September 1933: 1.
- ² “Book-distribution institutions” is Corinna Norrick-Rühl’s definition. See Norrick-Rühl, *Book Clubs and Book Commerce* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 5.
- ³ Christopher Morley, “BOMC Review”, *BOMC News*, September 1933: 3.
- ⁴ *The Book-of-the-Month Club. An outline of a unique plan for those who wish to keep abreast of the best books of the day 1926* (BOMC, 1926). Harry Ransom Center (HRC), The University of Texas at Austin, Christopher Morley collection. Box 575, 117.
- ⁵ For major studies on the impact of the BOMC see Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992) and Janice A Radway, *A Feeling for Books. The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997). On the present-day form of the BOMC see Norrick-Rühl, *Book Clubs*, 73-4. On the Book Society see Nicola Wilson, “Virginia Woolf, Hugh Walpole, The Hogarth Press and the Book Society,” *ELH* 79.1 (Spring 2012): 237-60.
- ⁶ Norrick-Rühl, *Book Clubs*, 2.
- ⁷ David Barnes, “Introduction: New Transatlanticisms,” *Modernist Cultures* 11.1 (2016): 1-7 (1); Ann Ardis and Patrick Collier, eds, *Transatlantic Print Culture, 1880-1940. Emerging Media, Emerging Modernisms* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). See for instance Alison Rukavina, *The Development of the International Book Trade, 1870-1895: Tangled Networks* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Michael Winship, “The Transatlantic Book Trade and Anglo-American Literary Culture in the Nineteenth Century”, in *Reciprocal Influences: Literary Production, Distribution, and Consumption in America*, ed. Steven Fink and Susan S. Williams (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1999).
- ⁸ Lucy Delap and Maria DiCenzo, “Transatlantic Print Culture: The Anglo-American Feminist Press and Emerging ‘Modernities,’” in *Transatlantic Print Culture, 1880-1940. Emerging Media, Emerging Modernisms*, ed. Ann Ardis and Patrick Collier (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 56.
- ⁹ Preliminary readers’ reports for the American BOMC (assessing whether books should be sent on to the judges, or not) are preserved at the Beinecke and at the Library of Congress in Washington.
- ¹⁰ On ‘The Institutional Turn’ in recent Anglo-American scholarship, see Jeremy Rosen, ‘The Institutional Turn’, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* (2019, June 25). Retrieved 10 Jul. 2023, from <https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-1028>. Joan Shelley Rubin and Janice Radway’s scholarship on the American BOMC are early forerunners of this ‘turn’.
- ¹¹ Sydney Shep, “Books in global perspectives”, in *The Cambridge Companion to the History of the Book*, ed. Leslie Howsam (Cambridge: CUP, 2015), 53-70 (66).
- ¹² On the Book Society’s formation see Rupert Hart-Davis, *Hugh Walpole* (1952; Stroud: Sutton, 1997), 298-99; and Nicola Wilson, “‘Five’s better than one’: Hugh Walpole and the Book Society”, *The Hugh Walpole Review* 3.2 (Autumn 2022), 5-14.
- ¹³ “An Aid to the Busy Reader,” *The Times*, December 29, 1928, 6.
- ¹⁴ Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), 33.
- ¹⁵ See Sheila Hodges, *Gollancz: The Story of a Publishing House, 1928-78* (London: Gollancz, 1978), 127-43. On the wider landscape for cut-price book clubs in the UK see E. H. H. Green, “The Battle of the Books: Book Clubs and Conservatism in the 1930s” in *Ideologies of Conservatism: Conservative Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 2002; online edn, Oxford Academic, 1 Jan. 2010), <<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198205937.003.0006>> [accessed 11 July 2023].
- ¹⁶ Henry Seidel Canby, *American Memoir* (Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1947), 275.
- ¹⁷ Charles Lee, *The Hidden Public. The Story of the Book-of-the-Month Club* (New York: Doubleday, 1958), 30.
- ¹⁸ According to publishers’ records, a BOMC nomination was widely seen to boost the sales of an author’s other, non-book club titles as well. See Lee, *Hidden Public*, 206-11.
- ¹⁹ Lee, *Hidden Public*, 32.
- ²⁰ Charles Prentice to Sylvia Townsend Warner, June 5, 1926. University of Reading Special Collections (UoR), Chatto & Windus archive, MS 2444, CW A/114, 360.
- ²¹ Membership of the BOMC stood at 137,010 in 1935; 362,585 in 1939; and 573,589 in 1948. See Lee, *Hidden Public*, 70, 78.
- ²² Richard Aldington to Charles Prentice, May 16, 1929. UoR, CW 48/3.

- ²³ On the persistence of the circulating library market in the UK through the first half of the C20 see Wilson, “Libraries, Reading Patterns, and Censorship” in *The Oxford History of the Novel, vol 4, The Reinvention of the British Novel 1880-1940*, eds. Patrick Parrinder and Andrzej Gasiorek (Oxford: OUP, 2011), pp. 36-51; F. R. Richardson, “The Circulating Library”, in *The Book World*, ed. John Hampden (London: Nelson, 1935), 195-202; Basil Donne-Smith, “Commercial Libraries”, in *The Book World Today*, ed. John Hampden (London: Allen & Unwin, 1957), 180-86.
- ²⁴ Percy Spalding to Cosmo Hamilton, January 21 1914. UoR, CW A/83.
- ²⁵ H. G. Wells, “Interviews with Famous Authors,” *The Book Window: A Guide to Book Buying and Book Reading* 1.1 (July 1927): 3-4 (3).
- ²⁶ Lee, *Hidden Public*, 31.
- ²⁷ On the willingness of British publishers of all shades to work with the Book Society see Wilson, “Virginia Woolf, Hugh Walpole.”
- ²⁸ For extensive discussion of the BOMC judges see Radway, *A Feeling for Books*; and Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow*, 110-43. Jaime Harker, *America the Middlebrow. Women's Novels, Progressivism and Middlebrow Authorship between the Wars* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007) has a useful chapter on Canfield Fisher, 24-52.
- ²⁹ Hugh Walpole, *Diary*, 24 September 1925, qtd in Hart-Davis, *Hugh*, 265.
- ³⁰ Hugh Walpole, *Reading* (London: Jarrolds, 1926), 88. J. B. Priestley, *Margin Released: A Writer's Reminiscences and Reflections* (1962; London: Reprint Society, 1963), 154.
- ³¹ George Stuart Gordon, *Anglo-American Literary Relations* (Oxford: OUP, 1942), 21.
- ³² On Sylvia Lynd's role on the Book Society and interwar print culture more broadly see Nicola Wilson, “‘So now tell me what you think!': Sylvia Lynd's Collaborative Reading and Reviewing”, *Literature & History*, 28.1 (2019), 49-65.
- ³³ See Alexis Weedon, “Writing Across Media: The Techniques of Clemence Dane” in *The Origins of Transmedia Storytelling in Early Twentieth Century Adaptation* (Cham., Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 55-76; and Louise McDonald, *Clemence Dane: Forgotten Feminist Writer of the Inter-War Years* (NY: Routledge, 2021). For Walpole's transatlantic career see Elizabeth Steele, *Sir Hugh Walpole and the United States: A Novelist's View of 1919-36 America* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006). Priestley's transatlanticism is discussed by Lisa Colletta, “Intermodern Travel: J. B. Priestley's English and American Journeys,” in *Intermodernism. Literary Culture in Mid-Twentieth Century Britain*, ed. Kristin Bluemel (Edinburgh: EUP, 2011), 93-110.
- ³⁴ Hugh Walpole to Arthur S. Frere, May 1928; qtd in Hart-Davis, *Hugh Walpole*, 299.
- ³⁵ Rubin points out the close institutional links between the BOMC and the *Saturday Review of Literature*. In addition to Canby and Morley, Amy Loveman and several of the BOMC's preliminary readers worked for both venues. See *The Making of Middlebrow*, 123.
- ³⁶ Christopher Morley to Hugh Walpole, June 11, 1933. The New York Public Library, The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature (Berg), MSS Walpole.
- ³⁷ Morley to Walpole, April 1 1926. Berg, MSS Walpole.
- ³⁸ This is reported in a letter from Margaret Irwin to Harold Raymond, January 22, 1930. UoR, CW 35/11. None of Irwin's books were to become BOMC selections, but she had 5 choices from the Book Society: *Royal Flush* (June 1932); *The Proud Servant* (Nov. 1934); *The Stranger Prince* (Jan. 1937); *The Gay Galliard: The Love Story of Mary Queen of Scots* (Dec. 1941); and *That Great Lucifer: A Portrait of Sir Walter Raleigh* (June 1960).
- ³⁹ For Canfield Fisher's support of Buck see Peter Conn, *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Biography* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), 122-3. On Lynd and Woolf see Nicola Wilson, “Virginia Woolf and the Book Society Ltd.,” in *Virginia Woolf and her Female Contemporaries*, ed. Julie Vandivere and Megan Hicks (Liverpool: Clemson UP, 2016), 48-55.
- ⁴⁰ Lee, *Hidden Public*, 161-94; Daniel Immerwahr, ‘The Books of the Century, 1900-1999’, <[The Books of the Century, 1900-1999 \(berkeley.edu\)](https://www.berkeley.edu/the-books-of-the-century-1900-1999)> [accessed 14 February 2023]; dataset of titles chosen by the Book Society (1929-69) available in institutional repository [nb* this dataset will be published and made publicly available during 2023].
- ⁴¹ Advertisement, “The Lives of a Bengal Lancer, Major F. Yeats-Brown,” *Book-of-the-Month Club News*, February 1930: 8.
- ⁴² Advertisement, “Heaven's My Destination,” *Publishers Weekly*, December 1934: 128-9.
- ⁴³ William Zinsser, *A Family of Readers. An informal portrait of The Book-of-the-Month Club and its members on the occasion of its 60th anniversary* (New York: Book-of-the-Month Club, 1986), 13.
- ⁴⁴ Canby, *American Memoir*, 258-66. Walpole and Gordon were vocal supporters of contemporary American literature in their published journalism and criticism. See Steele, *Hugh Walpole and the United States*; and Gordon, *Anglo-American Literary Relations*.
- ⁴⁵ Lee, *Hidden Public*, 161.

⁴⁶ Margaret Cole, *Books and the People* (London: Hogarth Press, 1938), 25-6. It is clear from offers to readers in the *Book Society News* that members living overseas were important to the club's identity. A high proportion of Book Society Choices explore life in expatriate society or as part of the colonial civil service. For recent work on this readership, see Sterling Coleman Joseph, Jr, *How Books, Reading, and Subscription Libraries Defined Colonial Clubland in the British Empire* (NY: Routledge, 2020). The vast majority of the BOMC's foreign subscriptions meanwhile came from Canada (see Lee, *Hidden Public*, 41).

⁴⁷ Hugh Walpole to Sylvia Lynd, March 15, 1929. King's School Canterbury, Hugh Walpole collection, MS Letters.

⁴⁸ It is well known that the BOMC were forced to issue an apology to their members and offer another book in exchange when Lowell's book was discredited as an autobiography. See Lee, *Hidden Public*, 46-9.

⁴⁹ Elizabeth West discusses the ideological and political differences between British and American publishers during and after WWII in *The Women Who Invented Twentieth-Century Children's Literature: Only the Best* (NY: Routledge, 2022), 40-42. On the increased internationalisation of the American book trade postwar see Beth Luey, "The Organization of the Book Publishing Industry" in *A History of the Book in America*, vol 5, *The Enduring Book, Print Culture in Postwar America*, eds. David Paul Nord, Joan Shelley Rubin, Michael Schudson (University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 29-54 (26-34).

⁵⁰ Ralph Thompson to Blanche Knopf, November 4, 1953. HRC, Alfred A. Knopf archive, Knopf – Gen. Correspondence – 1953 BOMC, 122.6.

⁵¹ For discussion and statistical analysis of the originally foreign-language books selected by the BOMC see Corrina Norrick-Rühl, "'Stimulating our Literature and Deepening our Culture': Translated Books as Book-of-the-Month Club Selections, 1926 to 1973", *Quaerendo* 47 (2017): 222-51.

⁵² For a useful discussion of temporality and book clubs see Rona Kaufman, "'That, My Dear, Is Called Reading': Oprah's Book Club and the Construction of a Readership," in *Reading Sites: Social Difference and Reader Response*, eds. Patrocinio P. Schweickart and Elizabeth A. Flynn (New York: MLA, 2004), 221-254.

⁵³ Amy Loveman, Readers' report on Dorothy Whipple *The Priory*, August 1939. Washington, Library of Congress, Book-of-the-Month Club records, 1939-67, Box 21.

⁵⁴ Avis, Readers' report on Dorothy Whipple *The Priory*, August 1939. Washington, Library of Congress, Book-of-the-Month Club records, 1939-67, Box 21.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Whipple still sold well in the US. Three of her titles were chosen by the Book Society: *Greenbanks* (1934), *The Priory*, and *They Were Sisters* (1943). Whipple's time has come again with book club distributors as a bestselling author for Persephone Books, a reprint publisher's founded by Nicola Beauman in 1998, whose lists consciously echo the Book Society.

⁵⁷ Books Across the Sea was set up by typographer Beatrice Warde and her mother, May Lamberton Becker, a reviewer for the New York *Herald Tribune*. Initially an informal transatlantic book exchange programme between readers, it became important to US/UK publishing trade and professional networks postwar. See West, *The Women Who Invented*, 38-42; and Jessica Glaser, 'Beatrice Warde, May Lamberton Becker, and "Books Across the Sea"', in *Women in Print*, vol 1, *Design and Identities*, eds. Artemis Alexiou and Rose Roberto (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2022), 273-94.

⁵⁸ Marquand would no doubt have had more titles chosen by the BOMC but was debarred from selection when he became a judge.

⁵⁹ On the gradual increase in rates of production postwar in the UK see David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery, "Publishing" in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, vol 7, *The Twentieth Century and Beyond*, eds. Andrew Nash, Claire Squires and I. R. Willison (Cambridge: CUP, 2019), 146-90 (168). For the US see Laura J. Miller and David Paul Nord, "Reading the Data on Books, Newspapers and Magazines: A Statistical Appendix", in *A History of the Book in America*, vol 5, *The Enduring Book, Print Culture in Postwar America*, eds. David Paul Nord, Joan Shelley Rubin, Michael Schudson (University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 503-18 (509).

⁶⁰ *Dusty Answer* (1927) and *Invitation to the Waltz* (1932) were BOMC nominations. *A Note in Music* (1930), *The Weather in the Streets* (1936) and *The Echoing Grove* (1953) were Book Society Choices. *The Ballad and the Source* was chosen by both clubs (BS Sept. 1944; BOMC April 1945). For more on Lehmann's connections to the BOMC and the Book Society see Wendy Pollard, *Rosamond Lehmann and Her Critics. The Vagaries of Literary Reception* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

⁶¹ *The Book-of-the-Month Club. An outline of a unique plan* (BOMC, 1926), cover. HRC, Christopher Morley collection. Box 575, 117.

⁶² Jonathan Cape to Eric Linklater, March 6, 1931. UoR, Jonathan Cape archive, MS 2446, JC, Eric Linklater, 1930-31, A27.

⁶³ Heywood Broun, "Flush by Virginia Woolf," *Book-of-the-Month Club News*, Sept. 1933: 4.

⁶⁴ There is now a huge literature reclaiming this term. See for instance Erica Brown and Mary Grover, eds, *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: The Battle of the Brows, 1920-60* (Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Kate

Macdonald, ed., *The Masculine Middlebrow, 1880-1950: What Mr Miniver Read* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Lise Jaillant, *Modernism, Middlebrow and the Literary Canon* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014); Tom Perrin, *The Aesthetics of Middlebrow Fiction. Popular US Novels, Modernism, and Form, 1945-75* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015)

⁶⁵ J. B. Priestley, "High, Low, Broad," *Saturday Review*, February 20, 1926: 222. Reprinted in Priestley, *Open House. A Book of Essays* (London: Heinemann, 1930), 162-67 (166). On Priestley's use of the "broadbrow" see Caroline Pollentier, "Configuring Middleness: Bourdieu, l'Art Moyen and the Broadbrow," in *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: The Battle of the Brows, 1920-60*, eds. Erica Brown and Mary Grover (Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 37-51; and Nicola Wilson, "Middlemen, middlebrow, broadbrow," in *Futility and Anarchy? British Literature in Transition, 1920-40*, eds. Charles Ferrall and Dougal McNeill (Cambridge: CUP, 2018), 315-30.

⁶⁶ Christopher Morley, "February Book-of-the-Month *Grand Hotel* by Vicki Baum," *Book-of-the-Month Club News*, February 1930: 7.

⁶⁷ On the attraction of celebrity modernist writers to book clubs see for instance Karen Leick, *Gertrude Stein and the Making of an American Celebrity* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 6; Wilson, "Virginia Woolf, Hugh Walpole"; Jaillant, *Modernism, Middlebrow and the Literary Canon*.

⁶⁸ Radway, *A Feeling for Books*, 280, 282.

⁶⁹ Yale, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, YCAL MSS 278, Book-of-the-Month Club records, 1946-1979. Series II. First-Reader Reports. Box 38, folder 338.

⁷⁰ Washington, Library of Congress, Book-of-the-Month Club records, 1939-67, Box 19.

⁷¹ *The Good Companions* was ineligible to be chosen by the Book Society as Priestley was on the selection committee, but it was nonetheless a bestseller in the UK. In the States the price was reduced from \$5 to \$3 because of the large sales guaranteed by the BOMC nomination. On Walpole's complex manoeuvring in these debates see Parker T. Gordon, "'Opposite Ends of the Bloody Stick': Virginia Woolf and Hugh Walpole, Intersections of the Highbrow and Middlebrow", *ELH*, 89, 4 (2022): 1107-1134.

⁷² Harry Scherman, "Book-of-the-Month selected for October is *The Good Companions*," *Book-of-the-Month Club News*, September 1929: 1-3 (2).

⁷³ Hugh Walpole, "Flying Colours by C. S. Forester", *Book Society News*, November 1938: 9-11 (9).

⁷⁴ Hugh Walpole to J. B. Priestley, July 18, 1931. HRC, Priestley, J.B.. MS Recip. [W-Z].

⁷⁵ Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow*, 93.

⁷⁶ BOMC pamphlet 1927, 5.

⁷⁷ University of Oxford, Bodleian Library, John Johnson collection, Book Clubs, Box 1.

⁷⁸ Hugh Walpole, *Wintersmoon* (London: Macmillan, 1928), 95-6.

⁷⁹ Alfred A. Knopf is an interesting example of an American publishing house which set up a London office interwar. On this episode in the company's history see Amy Root Clements, *The Art of Prestige: The Formative Years at Knopf, 1915-1929* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 74-79.

⁸⁰ Sylvia Lynd, "Ethel Vance – Escape," *Book Society News*, November 1939: 7-9 (7). Amy Loveman, Readers' report on Ethel Vance *Escape*, August 1939. Washington, Book-of-the-Month Club records, Box 19.