



# An Analysis of the Future of YA Print Fiction in Australia and America

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**Abstract.** With the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, sales of printed books have been affected to varying degrees worldwide. For a while, the future trends of the print book industry were met with concern. This paper uses young adult fiction sales in Australia and the United States as a study to analyse the impact of the pandemic on print book sales. The article also examines the question of whether e-book distribution can replace the print segment in the young adult fiction sector.

**Keywords:** YA fiction · print book · the Australian publishing industry · the American publishing industry

## 1 Introduction

In the past year, coronavirus has been spreading around the world. This has brought about some unexpected changes in the book market. During the lockdown period, any routine activities are shut down and people have to stay at home, so people need to find home-stay activities to kill the time and more print book buying happens than before. For example, when teenagers accept remote school learning in the spring, the demand for print YA fiction is strongly going up. According to the sales data from Nielsen BookScan, YA and educational selling in the Australian book market went up about 7 per cent from January to August 2020 [1]. American book sales in 2020 saw a big gain in YA fiction with a 21.4 per cent rising [2]. Though electronic books have been popular in recent years, a convention is e-books cannot replace printed books yet. The future development of the printed book is ultimately unknown. Here is a prediction that the printed book is here to stay.

## 2 The Sales Status of Paper Books in the Book Market

When the Covid-19 pandemic begins and book stores close in lockdowns, it is predicted that print book sales are poor in the early spring because of supply chain issues. But online book sales channels have filled the supply dilemma of offline book sales so that paper books certainly sell much better than the former book market's pessimistic prediction in early 2020.

According to Nielsen BookScan, the 2020 Australian book market is measuring over 835 million dollars, going up about 5 per cent in comparison to the 2019 same period market [3]. Here is an unremarkable start in the past hard year, a steep increase appeared between February to April after a hit in mid to late February, followed by a significant decline from Easter Monday to late October [3]. A reasonable explanation for the Australian book market sales fluctuation is that the official lockdown starts on March 28 and readers purchase books preparing for boring lockdown time. The book sales in the United States were up 7.8 per cent from January to September 2020, compared with the same period last year. Specifically, the hardcover sales revenue was 2.1 billion American dollars, up 9.3 per cent; Paperbacks sales revenue was 1.9 billion American dollars, up 3.9 per cent [3]. Publishers have been surprised by the boost to print book sales during the epidemic, but they are happy with the growth.

Though electronic books are becoming the mainstream publishing format in the book industry, it has not replaced printed books as predicted in the last several years. According to PwC Australia, print and audiobook revenues accounted for 80 per cent of the Australian publishing market in 2019, with e-book revenues reaching 20 per cent. The revenues for Australian print or audiobooks are predicted to make up 79 per cent market share in 2024, followed by a slight increase in e-books accounting for 21 per cent [5]. A preliminary judgment for the book market development can be made based on the PwC Australian data, physical bookstores and paper-printed books remain important in this country [5].

According to the statistics from the Association of American Publishers, the American e-book sales income had a slight decline to 983 million American dollars in early 2019, and e-book sales have seen double-digit declines for several years [6]. While during the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020, American electronic book sales were up 15.8 per cent coming in at US\$855.8 million, and e-book revenues in the Children's and YA category were going up 69.7 per cent standing at US\$96.8 million [4]. In particular, e-book revenues for Children's and YA fiction stood at US\$15.9 million notably jumping about 110.8 per cent during the month [4]. Thus, the coronavirus epidemic potentially has promoted the development of digital content and digital printing, and to some extent weakened the way printed books are produced, consumed, and shared in the US.

Except for a boost in the e-book market, American audiobook revenues had a 15 per cent increase this year, reaching almost US\$60 million in revenue [4]. The audiobook is a continuous growth download book format with a long-standing trend. According to Kozlowski, "On a year-to-date basis, downloaded audio was up 17.6 per cent as compared to the same period in 2019, with a total of US\$496.7 million for the year so far [4]." The popularity of movies and TV series also affects the sales of YA paper books. After all, movies and TV series that integrate sound and picture art can bring more audio-visual enjoyment to the audience than monotonous words and paper. Despite the influence of e-books, audiobooks, movies and TV series, printed books, paper printed books, especially YA printed novels, still have their special irreplaceable characteristics.

### 3 Australian YA Fiction and Print Books

Local bookstores and libraries usually overlooked Australian books but preferred overseas books. An assumption of Australian publishers is they try to particularly look at a

wide range of marginalized communities under high-profile advocacy worldwide. The Australian publishing industry is small compared with America and the UK, because of the influences of global publishing campaigns and international book releases [7]. Large publishing companies in Britain and America have the strong financial strength to carry out various online and offline global book promotion activities, which are more likely to attract the attention of local booksellers and readers in Australia.

The Australian publishing industry, especially the Australian YA fiction (young adult fiction) market, has been affected by the larger overseas markets in the long term [8]. The group of people most affected by this situation is Australian YA book bloggers, who usually share reading experiences about new novels on social networks. According to Booth and Narayan in 2018, “While many YA book-bloggers are university students rather than teenagers, they come from all walks of life and professions including book-selling, publishing, and libraries, but they can be defined as readers and online reviewers of YA fiction [8].” The book review part from bloggers is vital in the contemporary publishing process, and strong connections between international publishers and Australian YA book-bloggers are formed through communication on social media. And Australian book bloggers can receive the newly-published YA fiction from overseas publishers for free. The YA fiction has three key characteristics being recognized by readers, authors, publishers and booksellers: (a) the book’s hero is a teenager, aged between 12 to 18 years old; (b) the target audience of the fiction is a teenager, or seen teens as the primary audience; (c) the novel features for strong emotions and live in the present character life attitude [10]. So the audience of YA novels is very targeted, or the people who read YA novels are interested in young people’s stories. Because of the limitations of market size, Australian YA novels mainly target Australian teenagers. Familiar ground, beautiful natural things and unique local history and culture in Australian YA fiction can be found by local readers if they read the books carefully.

However, ALIA (Australian Library and Information Association) reported in 2015 that “only two YA novels by Australian authors made it into the top ten most borrowed list from Australian public libraries in 2014” [9]. This has led to concerns that Australian voices are being drowned out by the international market in YA fiction. Thus, Australian book practitioners are trying every means to support the local YA novel for several years. As Booth and Narayan narrate, “This revelation brought together authors, librarians, and readers to support Australian young adult fiction under the hashtag “#loveozya” and created a surge of audience attention towards this area of Australian publishing” [9]. The result of the #loveozya hashtag is the continuous promotion of Australian YA fiction novels.

In general, due to the small output of Australian-made YA novels, foreign works such as the US and the UK are the main sales force. The YA book market in Australia puts more emphasis on the promotion of novels with local characteristics than on the controversy over the storage or abolition of paper books. As for the popularity of eBooks and audiobooks driving down the sales of printed YA novels, this was a major headache for book practitioners worldwide before the coronavirus pandemic. The truth is the popularity of printed books during the epidemic has fully demonstrated their irreplaceability. Therefore, e-books are an available option to book consumers, not a “gravedigger” for

paper books. With the re-emergence of the Covid-19 epidemic in Australia, it is possible to be optimistic about printed YA novels sales in the coming year.

#### 4 YA Fiction Sales, Millennials and Print Books' Future in the US

YA fiction sales remain strong in the US, especially those of traditionally popular series. The YA fiction in the American market increased by 25 per cent in 2019 driven by the new entries in the “Twilight” and “Hunger Games” series [11]. With the promotion of YA fiction shift to the online short video platform Tik Tok, the Tik Tokers share reading the feelings with tag #BookTok on the platform and are influential to YA book readers. And two bestselling YA novels shared widely under the tag #BookTok in several months are “We Were Liars” and “They Both Die at the End”, written by E. Lockhart and Adam Silvera respectively [11]. The common feature of these two books, “We Were Liars” and “They Both Die at the End”, is past publications, not new ones.

The continued increase of YA book sales in the US is probably based on millennial (people born between 1981–1996) reading habits, though the worries about a decline in such reading have persisted for years. According to Turner in 2018, “In fact, more young adult books were purchased by adults than by teenagers, most of whom were shopping for their reading – not for the teens in their life – and 28 per cent of YA books were purchased by 30- to 44-year-olds [13].” As is called YA fiction, books written for teenagers are increasingly popular after the Harry Potter boom era. While in this year’s book market, the growth of young-adult novels is occurring without movies or TV series as a driving force because the Covid-19 outbreak forced many crews to halt filming. Since the coronavirus pandemic to April 2021, the YA fiction category has risen 68 per cent in the US compared to the last year. According to The NPD Group, “The 10 million YA fiction copies sold during this time also outpaced the 8 million units sold during the same period in 2014, which was the previous best-selling year for the category [11].”

Another reading habit of Millennials in the US, in addition, is preferring reading paper books over electronic books. About 72 per cent of American Millennials who participated in the reading survey say they have read printed books, while only 35 per cent of respondents read an e-book in the last year [12]. Paper books are notably more popular than e-Books among American Millennials according to the above survey data. Millennials grow up as the first generation of “digital natives” with unique generational growing experiences. They are growing up at a time when the Digital Revolution has brought about huge lifestyle changes. And effects of the technological revolution have changed Millennials’ daily lives on every level. Theoretically, Millennials should rely more on e-books as they adapt to the new digital age, but that is not the case.

In the American YA novel market, Harry Potter is generally regarded as an epoch-making work. As Turner says, “Younger Millennials might as well be called the Harry Potter generation [13].” The profound significance of the Harry Potter series in the literary market lies in that it breaks the traditional age limit of YA novels, and many adults are still loyal readers of the series. And Most of these loyal adults Harry Potter readers are Millennials. Today, Millennials are playing a key buying power in shaping the book industry in the United States. As American Millennials grow older, they have already gained steady influence in the book industry and have decided on the developing

direction of the book market in the next few decades [14]. The reading habit preferences of the younger generation indicate that print books will still exist for the foreseeable future, and e-books will mostly coexist alongside paper publishers. Though publishers predict in the 2010s that e-books would entirely replace paper books in a short period [14], it's unlikely to come true based on the Millennials' direction book market. Paper novels are still the sales champion in the American YA novel market compared with young-adult e-book sales.

## 5 The Future Prospect of Paper Books

Compared with the cold ebook, the paper book is irreplaceable. For example, the exquisite binding design of paper books will make readers stop at bookstores to buy. And the smell of fresh paper and printing ink when new books are unsealed is so fascinating. Based on the foregoing, while the book industry has been fretting about the future of print books, the past few years in both the US and Australia have not been as bad as pessimists might have expected.

Specifically, it is difficult to compare print and e-book sales in the Australian book market. Mostly, Australians purchase e-books on offshore platforms, such as Amazon, so it is hard to use a single source to find combined sales data [15]. One thing that can be confirmed from the sales data of the Australian book market listed above is that the sales of printed books are significantly higher than those of other categories. As Throsby et al. say, "The dominance of print books over eBooks is striking, even after accounting for the lower turnover of eBooks relative to traditional formats. Print books' dominance is driven by paperback books, which readers are more than twice as likely to read paperbacks often as hardbacks [15]." The notable difference between paperback and hardback books is price, and the price is the important factor that induces consumers to buy books. The survey from Throsby et al. also indicates that 90 per cent of respondents are paper book readers, and almost 65 per cent of Australians purchase books in print format for themselves on average; about 97 per cent of print format books are bought for children as gifts [15]. Based on good sales data, it is clear that paper books will have a good future in Australia. Not to mention the YA novel category, which is booming in Australia. The print book is popularly evidenced by the explosion in sales during the 2020 lockdown period.

As for the United States book market, according to the former data discussed the future for paper books and printed YA fiction in this country is optimistic just like the Australian book market. Not only print book sales were strong in 2020, but the first quarter of this year's sales figures show that Americans continuously buy printed books. As Anderson says in 2021, "Today's executive summary from NPD BookScan on the first quarter of 2021 sees the volume of sales of in-print books in the United States growing 29 per cent over the same quarter in 2020. YA, the smallest super-category with 8 million units sold, was up 60 per cent in Q1 2021 compared to Q1 2020, selling 3 million more units [16]." The YA buying patterns described here are in the print book market. When comparing the print book sales data at the beginning of 2020, it's clear that American print book sales growth is not just a blip.

Besides, the marketing of American paper books mainly relies on the network channel at present. A typical example of online book marketing is the young-adult novel sales

driver by #BookTok hashtag relying on the Tik Tok platform. The short videos for book reviews posted on Tik Tok use an unprecedented way to influence print book sales. For example, the sales boost on Adam Silvera's *They Both Die at the End* and E. Lockhart's *We Were Liars* was driven by an increase of 700,000 units related to YA fiction posts in #BookTok [16]. Technological developments in the past few years have changed the way print books are promoted, but people's reading habit for printed books still exists. People still have a special attachment to ink and paper when they read books.

## 6 Conclusion

In conclusion, the development prospects of printed YA novels in both Australian and American book markets are considerable. Among them, printed YA has a good developing future in the Australian book market due to Australians' preference for printed books. However, printed YA fiction sells well in the US mainly because of the printed reading habits of Millennials. Though American Millennials grew up in the Digital Age, about twenty years ago YA e-book is not competitive enough in price when compared with the printed format. Millennials, in this way, have not been accustomed to reading e-books in their teen life. Therefore, American Millennials as the main audiences for young-adult novels in a factual sense prefer to buy paper books.

The Digital Age has not changed the traditional publishing process; it has merely changed the carrying body of the book to present to readers from paper pages to electronic devices over the past decade or so. E-books appear in the book market as a form of text carrier for publishers and readers to choose from, and e-books do not replace paper books completely. It is predicted that the printed book is here to stay. In the book industry, the meaning of the digital age is that it has changed the promotion and sharing ways of print books. Now, these promotion and sharing processes are mainly relying on social network platforms.

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