The Influence of Lending Libraries on the Sale of Novels (1884)

Abstract

Lending libraries exerted a strong influence on German reading habits throughout the nineteenth century, but, as this document shows, their impact was not uncontroversial. In these years, a typical novel might be published in an edition of 700–800 copies, approximately 90% of which would be sent to lending libraries. The following text appeared in the *Börsenblatt für den deutschen Buchhandel* [*Financial Newspaper for the German Book Trade*], the German publishing trade's most important journal. Author Albert Last tries to defend lending libraries against the charge that they constrain the production and sale of novels. He explains, correctly, that the production of books in the 1880s was higher than ever before, and he musters plenty of statistics in support of his argument. He also notes that novels were becoming more and more important and edging out theological books, which had been the best sellers at mid-century.

Source

Among booksellers and writers, there is a widespread belief that lending libraries are to blame for the decline in book sales. Based on this error, various efforts have been made in support of the goal of pushing aside or replacing the institution of the lending library.

This goal was frankly stated in the program of the *Romanzeitung* [*Fiction Magazine*]. Its lead was followed by the *Romanbibliothek* [*Novel Library*], the monthly periodical *Vom Fels zum Meer* [*From Rock to Sea*],[1] various cheap collections, and most recently *Ost und West* [*East and West*],[2] as well as by countless illustrated and non-illustrated weekly periodicals and family journals. Virtually all political newspapers raised the issue of the novel in their columns.

Just as writers had to come to the gradual realization that their daunting descriptions of the [supposedly poor] condition of books in lending libraries failed to direct readers away from the lending library and toward buying, adversarial booksellers who make similar efforts are just as unlikely, as we see it, to encounter even the slightest degree of success. Although we cannot argue that the overall number of lending-library patrons has increased substantially over the last ten years, there is no sign that this number has declined either.

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From the publishing enterprises, we see that each new monthly journal, each fiction magazine, as well as each family journal and collection of cheap novels, only creates competition within its own group and does not take any territory away from the lending librarian. In fact, the latter is not even reluctant to see these efforts; rather, he uses them to increase the profile of his reading circle even more. Perhaps we will even come to a point in Germany when the lending librarian will profit more from these types of publications than from lending books. Why then should a sensible lending librarian be opposed to these efforts, as many people believe him to be? To be sure, no evidence can be produced to contradict the argument that the clientele of lending libraries would be more numerous in the absence of these efforts; yet, we cannot share this opinion, since we believe instead that they direct more readers towards lending libraries than they take away from them.

Before we answer the question of whether the lending library is responsible for the decline in book sales, we believe it is necessary to examine whether sales of *belles lettres* have decreased at all. It is so easily claimed that the public no longer buys novels, that publishing novels is no longer possible without lending libraries.

However, this view, which is almost generally accepted, is fundamentally wrong. No other period has seen more fiction sold to the reading public than ours.

Until ten years ago, we would never have witnessed any novel selling up to four, ten, or even twelve editions; today it is no longer a rare occurrence at all. This certainly proves that the public's desire to buy has not stopped but has increased. To be sure, it concentrates on the products recognized to be good; but who would regret that? It is a result of overproduction.

What right do we have to demand that the public pay our usual high prices for books of questionable merit? For books that one leafs through and never picks up again? It is certainly undeniable that the majority of our recent publications belong in this category. Is it not enough that the lending librarian uses his own hard-earned money for this purpose, and is he not compelled to regret this later in many cases? The hundreds of periodicals and daily papers [that we have] generate an enormous amount of novels and novellas. Must every last one of them return to the market in book form? The author should content himself with magazine royalties, which are generally decent, rather than squandering them on a book edition, whose lack of success he will then blame on the public and the lending librarian.

The writer complains that reading today is done in haste, that books are no longer calmly enjoyed and digested. This is true, but who is to blame for this other than the writer himself and his publisher, for it is they who present the public with new products on a daily basis. The copiousness of the mediocre has generated this rapid turnover, transforming the thoughtful and enthusiastic reader of the past into a superficial one.

In the past, family members came together every evening, needlework in hand, to read and discuss a few chapters of a book. They occupied themselves with a novel by Paalzow[3] or Bulwer for eight to 14 days. Even today, we see the after-effects of this, since a very large percentage of the novels that appeared 40 years ago are still being passed around today from one lending-library patron to the next; no lending institute can manage without these works.

A novel absorbed in such a way remains in the consciousness of readers, is passed on from parents to children over generations, to this very day. And isn't it true that new editions of these novels are still being published in our day? Why then were lending libraries unable to prevent this?

Literary production in those days allowed the reader the leisure of calm enjoyment. If those very same novels that have held their own over 40 years were published today for the first time, they would soon be forgotten or achieve no prominence at all.

Lending libraries that are up-to-date or, to put it better, that meet the demands of their readers, carry those old, established novels, a selection of the best works of recent decades, and the new books of the season, the majority of which can no longer be found in the next catalogue that appears. This also explains the aversion of some authors who search the catalogues in vain, looking for their names. So far, we have hardly found any writers of significance on the opposing side. Important writers know from experience just how much lending libraries have done to spread their reputation among all strata of the population; they know that of the ten editions of their works, barely more than one has gone to lending libraries, and that this one has certainly helped bring about the other nine.

One can readily admit that the circulation of mediocre novels by lending libraries deters the reading public from buying them, but one can hardly reproach libraries for this. We at least prefer to think that

[this circumstance is] greatly to their credit.

The accusation against the lending library only surfaced after book production took a turn for the worse. Here, people fail to consider that transformations in the area of social relations have had a far-reaching impact on the sales of novels.

Let us emphasize just two factors.

Austria used to be the El Dorado for the German fiction publisher. Until the year 1848, Austria's nobility was among the wealthiest. In the summer, Austrian aristocrats resided on their country estates; in the winter, they lived in the capital, close to the court. We always found them to have a vivid interest in literature, but we only seldom saw them in the lending library.

After the abolition of the corveé[4] and the tithe, however, their incomes decreased dramatically. Today you rarely see aristocrats on their estates, where the monotony of life had once prompted them to read in the past. Their estates are now largely in the hands of leaseholders or the plutocracy; the nobles themselves travel or visit spas during the summer; in the winter, they also spend less time in the capital than they did in the past, since residency at court has become less steady because of the division of the empire. That the aristocracy no longer has a steady domicile, as it did in the past, and that its income has decreased are the reasons why nobles are gravitating toward lending libraries and shying away from purchasing books on a regular basis.

The second decisive factor was the crash of 1873. What happened here was a complete change in the distribution of capital property. The prosperous, rich bourgeois who belonged to the best of book buyers was caught in a situation that forced him to relinquish his proclivity; his domestic libraries gradually went to the second-hand bookseller. In those circles to which capital has migrated, however, we do encounter the most active interest in literature, music, theater, and art, but not the kind of delight in a book that would generate the wish to own it.

Now people want everything. They visit every art exhibition, would not miss any première, any concert, and they sail through any new literary publication indiscriminately. They live everywhere, just not in the quiet of their house; so what good is a private library? It is enough to have a few fine specimens on tables in salons and some classic works with magnificent covers on the bookshelf. The feverish striving to know everything—even if only superficially—leads [them] to the lending library, which was the province of this class all along.

But even if financial conditions were such that these lending-library patrons could obtain their reading materials in bookstores, some serious considerations would still speak against this. Can a reader satisfy his own needs by ordering something from the bookstore every day, as he can from the library? Perhaps, but only if he were sure to get something decent; at the lending library, unsuitable books can be returned an hour later. The need for reading materials is simply too enormous—and once books are purchased, where should the whole lot of them end up? Only rarely is a book read twice here; one reads it in the first place to learn what's inside it, or to be able to fall asleep. Besides, one can encounter the "Meyer family" described by Franzos[5] in countless instances here. Perhaps this will change over time; perhaps at some point in the future it will be a fashionable to buy novels just like paintings and sculptures.

Thus, on the one hand, the transformation of our social conditions has had an impact on the sales of novels; on the other hand, German publishers have also contributed substantially to destroying them. The price reductions that have become common since the early 1850s have thoroughly destroyed any illusion the reading public may have had about the monetary value of a novel. In the past, one regarded a private library collected over time as saved capital that, while not accruing interest, would keep its value, which might then be converted into cash in an emergency, or left to heirs. Moreover, in those days,

novels often fetched better prices at estate auctions than they did at the original time of purchase. To put it briefly, one did not run the risk of seeing one's possessions devalued overnight, and therefore, as we experienced, it could happen that an honorable cabinetmaker would buy the novels of Paul de Kock, little by little, initially intending them for entertainment and then, as he said, bequeathing them to his children.

The big question is whether the publisher of old, who sold his remaining stocks to the spoilage dealer after tearing out the title page and first sheet, was not acting far more in his own well-understood best interest than today's publisher, who either throws these leftovers onto the market himself or via an export bookstore at knockdown prices. In doing so, the publisher has thoroughly destroyed an area of sales for his new publications, just as he is now partly ready to close himself off to sales to lending libraries by using paper of inferior quality.

If we nevertheless argue that at no time were sales of novels higher than in ours, we will certainly be able to provide proof later in this text. To be sure, private libraries are established only very rarely nowadays; the delight in doing so is virtually restricted to our youth, but it seldom outlasts grammar school. This private library usually only includes the *Universalbibliothek*, but this also provides the student with excellent study materials at the same time. We should not be too hopeful, however, that this boyhood habit will carry over into manhood as well. During the university years, a metabolic change occurs—book to beer—and experience has shown that the money students spend on the desired quantity of beer seriously outweighs that which they once spent on books. Accordingly, the youth decides to buy only those books required for his chosen profession.

If only people would end their complaints, which are directed at the wrong address; if only people would finally realize that the causes of evil are to be found among those who actually raise the complaints! Among those people who hurl accusations at the reading public and the lending librarian, and who do so with such moral indignation, have we ever seen any one of them set a good example themselves by buying novels for 10–15 marks a piece for a private library? What they fail to do themselves, having 100 excuses ready by way of explanation, they actually feel entitled to demand of others.

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If entire strata of the population abstain from the regular purchase of novels nowadays, if the private library is also becoming an increasingly rare phenomenon, then we have a replacement in other types of buyers and methods.

For one thing, we have the occasional purchase of gifts and of books for traveling. Did we not see that numerous editions of the new novel by Ebers were sold as gifts before every Christmas in recent years? Do we not see that it is becoming increasingly fashionable to use the good novel to this end? Of course, one cannot bring the novel by Schmierowsky[6] to a friendly family to whom one wishes to pay one's respects, even if advertisements for it are in full swing.

Apart from that, we have the book lover (who only buys after careful selection, however), and all those whose requirements are so low that the lending library is unsuitable for them. At least in sum total, the latter make a difference.

Now for the numbers, which were compiled in a report by a retail book trade company in Leipzig and published in the *Magazin für Literatur* [*Magazine for Literature*]. In that business, sales of novels from October (1883) to the end of January 1884 amounted to: 71 volumes by Dahn, 101 by Ebers, 111 by Eckstein[7], 186 by [Gustav] Freytag, 7 by Hopfen[8], 11 by Marlitt[9], 28 by Keller, and 55 by Meyer. The same period saw sales of 60 copies of Scheffel's *Ekkehard*, 20 of Spielhagen's *Uhlenhans*,[10] and 35 of Wolff's *Sülfmeister*.[11] If that amount were sold in a bookstore in a four-month period, one would

certainly be unable to claim that the public was no longer buying novels. That buyers are restricting themselves to fewer items, but ones of good quality, and to works by known writers, should serve as a warning in our opinion, however.

This instructive report proves at the same time that lending libraries are not an obstacle to sales; for all of the novels mentioned are circulated chiefly, and in greater numbers, by lending libraries; even the smallest lending library cannot do without these works. Moreover, the fact that they are selling so well today is in no small measure due to the lending libraries.

Figures always speak most clearly; therefore, it should be mentioned here that 441 volumes were published in 1883 at a total retail value of 1,347 marks—and this number only includes [first editions of] novels and novellas; second editions and dramas, poetry, and youth journals etc., were excluded.

The production of 441 volumes far exceeds even the needs of lending libraries. This can be proven by the fact that, of this total, the Last Literary Institute in Vienna only purchased a selection of 208 volumes for its collection; 181 volumes were purchased in numbers of 7–15 copies each; 20 volumes in 20–40 copies each, two volumes in 60 copies each, another two volumes in 80 copies each, and three volumes in 110 copies each.

Among Berlin's lending institutes, only the Nicolaische Buchhandlung [Nicolai Bookstore][12] acquires new publications in greater numbers than Last. Of all the other lending libraries in Berlin, barely 300 purchase new volumes from the press at all; these acquisitions, however, are mainly limited to new publications by recognized authors, and only rarely do they put up more than one copy of any work.

Are these few hundred copies of a book really supposed to destroy all desire to buy? — "Yes," we hear the argument, "the lending librarian is able to satisfy a thousand readers with one copy!" Oh, if those dear gentlemen would only once look at a book that has passed through just 50 hands, and then decide whether it is still usable. In the case of many works printed in recent years, 20 readers often suffice to render further use impossible.

Authors, publishers, booksellers, and lending librarians all work together in the service of literature; so why the discord? The disadvantage of one cannot be the advantage of the other. Friendly cooperation, however, may help the author's claim to royalties against the lending librarian succeed.[13]

NOTES

[1] A family magazine established by J[oseph] Kürschner (1881–1905) with a large circulation. [All footnotes are from Max Bucher, Werner Hal, Georg Jäger, and Reinhard Wittmann, eds., *Realismus und Gründerzeit. Manifest und Dokument zur deutschen Literatur 1848–1880*, 2 vols., vol. 2, *Manifeste und Dokumente*. Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1975, pp. 669–71.]
[2] Also an illustrated family journal, albeit with lower circulation numbers, edited by C. Guerdon and Franz Scherer, Vienna, 1880ff.
[3] Henriette Paalzow (1788–1847), a popular storyteller of the *Vormärz* [pre-1848] period (*Godwie-Castle*, 3 vols., 1836), whose writings were among the preferred reading of the Prussian court.
[4] Unpaid peasant labor.
[5] The article in question is probably: "Autorrecht und Leihbibliothek" by Karl Emil Franzos, *Börsenblatt für den deutschen Buchhandel*, 1884, pp. 179–80, 217–19.
[6] Possibly an invented name for a knockabout novel—trans.
[7] Ernst Eckstein (1845–1900), novelist and feuilletonist, 1874–82 editor of the *Deutsche Dichterhalle*.
[8] Hans Hopfen (1835–1904), mainly a novelist, member of the Munich Poets' Circle, ennobled in 1888.

[9] Eugenie Marlitt (actually E. John, 1825–1887), author of socio-critical novels that were extremely successful both in preprint in the popular journal *Gartenlaube* and in book editions.
[10] Appeared in 1884.
[11] Appeared in 1883 (2 vols.).
[12] As a lending library, it went under the name F. Borstell.
[13] After 1882, the *Allgemeine Deutsche Schriftstellerverband* [General German Authors' Association] discussed the introduction of a charge for lending libraries to compensate for the commercial use of intellectual property. As a representative of lending libraries, Albert Last agreed to such a subsidization of authors in principle, but the ensuing media controversy about the relevant provisions failed to produce a concrete result.

Source: Albert Last, *Der Einfluß der Leihbibliotheken auf den Roman-Absatz*, in *Börsenblatt für den deutschen Buchhandel* 51/162 (1884), pp. 3246–49; reprinted in Max Bucher, Werner Hal, Georg Jäger, and Reinhard Wittmann, eds., *Realismus und Gründerzeit. Manifest und Dokument zur deutschen Literatur 1848–1880*, 2 vols., vol. 2, *Manifeste und Dokumente*. Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1975, pp. 669–71.

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