

Publishing Sector Overview: Memoirs in the U.S

Introduction

2020 has been a great year for the memoir sector of the publishing industry. More specifically, political, pandemic, and celebrity memoirs have thrived this year. When a memoir is mentioned, it's hard not to group it with the autobiography genre. They are muddled in some cases, but they have a slight difference. Memoirs are meant to illustrate only part of an author's life while an autobiography covers an author's entire life and is usually about a famous person (Hussey, 2018). This overview will focus on memoirs and how the sector has prospered in key areas.

History of Memoir

The meaning of "memoir" has changed throughout the centuries, but currently, we know memoirs as "literary representations of memory" (Kihlstrom, 2020).

One of the oldest memoirs/autobiographies is *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* by Julius Caesar, which illustrates firsthand accounts of war between 49 and 48 B.C. that's written in third-person. A more recently notable memoir is *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* by Henry David Thoreau (1854). His novel paved the way for modern-day memoirs in the publishing industry by highlighting the notable characteristics of the memoir genre as we know it today: personal experiences over a set time frame and written in a first-person narrative. The time between these two works, memoir writing has transformed from a literary and historical document to a personal legacy.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, memoirs were usually written about someone else. It wasn't until the late 20th century that people began writing memoirs about themselves in the first person (Kihlstrom, 2020). In the 20th century, war memoirs and memoirs about the Holocaust

were popular. Now in the 21st century, memoirs written in a first-person narrative are a defining feature of the literary genre.

For the next 150 years, memoir has evolved from documenting one's experiences to recalling memoirs and stories as a way to incite inspiration and give readers a sense of community.

Key Authors

Based on bestseller lists on Goodreads and Amazon, many of the key memoir authors published in 2020 are celebrities. With 2020 being a particularly political year, the popular books have elements of memoir with a deeper focus on politics.

Celebrity memoirs include: Woody Allen, Mariah Carey, Matthew McConaughey, and Jerry Seinfeld. These books are depicted more so as biographies because their personal experiences span over their lifetime and not one moment in time. Celebrity memoir appeals to the paving of one's legacy as opposed to a historical document.

Memoirs focused on politics include: Barack Obama, John R. Bolton, and Michael D. Cohen. These books have elements of memoirs with the main focus on major political events of the past and future. These authors have contributed their credible takes on political and social injustice issues and serve more as a historical document.

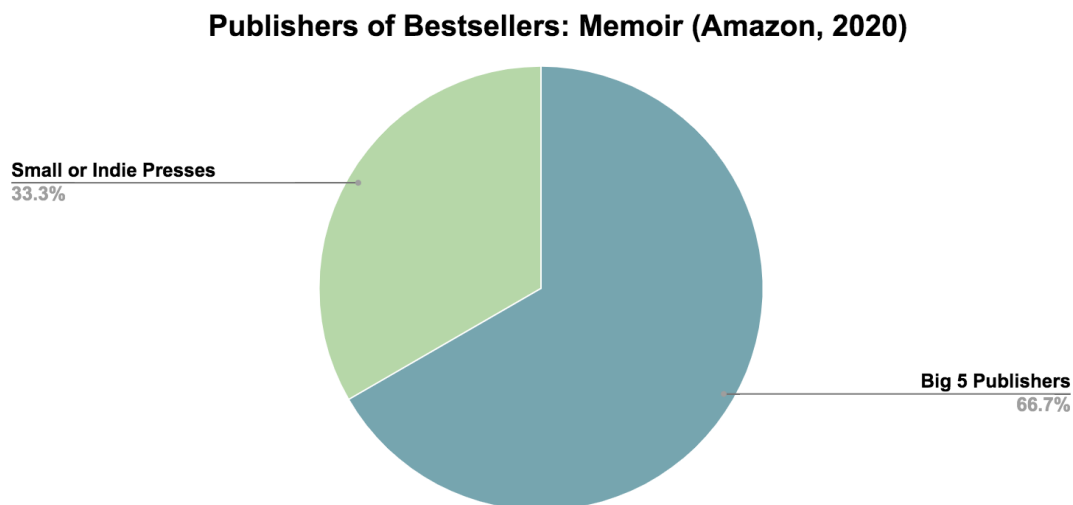
A major author who set records for her memoir was Michelle Obama. Her memoir, *Becoming*, was reported to have sold 10 million copies as of late March 2019 (Reuters, 2019). Her memoir was published in November 2018 and is currently ranked number 13 in Amazon's top 15 best-selling memoirs list.

A key author this year is Barack Obama. His memoir, *A Promised Land*, is set to be released in November 2020 and was a part of a book deal with Penguin Random House. Michelle and Barack Obama signed a book deal with Penguin Random House for about \$60 million. Penguin Random House has already ordered three million printed copies (Shepard,

2020). His writing has elements of personal and political memoirs that have made his book popular amongst a variety of people.

Key Publishers

The Big 5 publishers have always dominated the publishing industry, but more specifically, they have published 66.7% of the 15 popular memoir books on Amazon. This illustrates an adequate assumption that Penguin Random House is prosperous in this sector. In regards to small or independent publishers, SkyHorse Publishing has done relatively well in the memoir sector. SkyHorse has 19 imprints ranging in topics from travel to children's books to memoirs. This year, their published book, *Disloyal: A Memoir* by Michael D. Cohen, had a political focus and ranked in the top 15 of favorites on Amazon. Before this book, SkyHorse had about 50 books on the New York Times Bestseller's List in the past, some of which were memoirs.

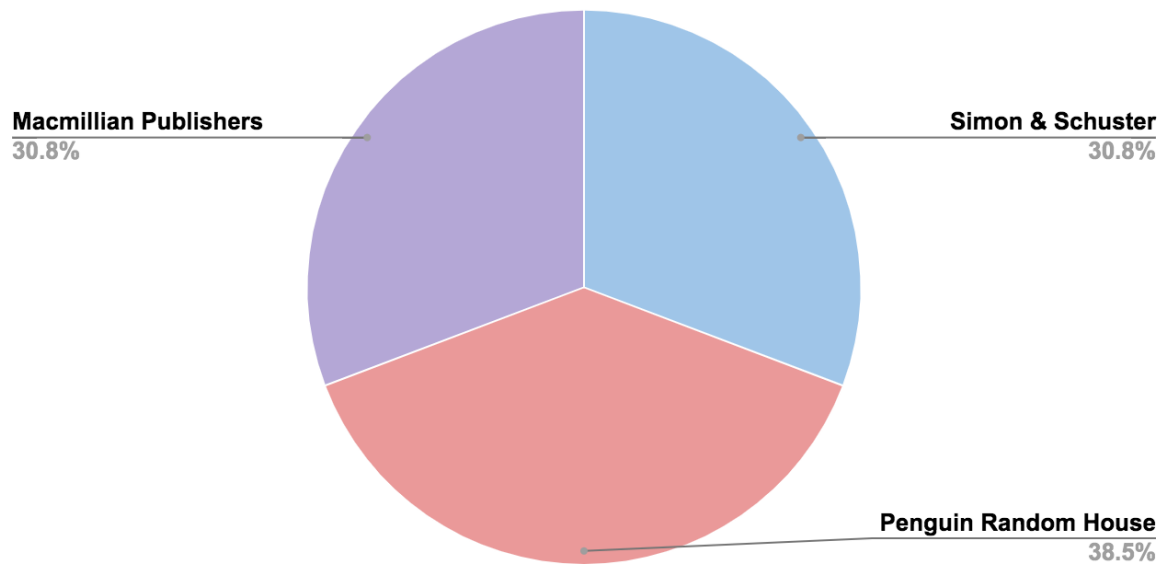


Amazon. (2020, Oct. 20). *Books: Memoir and Biographies*.

Here is a breakdown of the top publishers, Penguin Random House Publishers has done relatively well this year in comparison to their Big 5 competitors, based on top Amazon memoir books of 2020. While the key publishers illustrated below don't highlight the memoir sales of the

entire publisher, it gives an adequate indication of who has thrived in the sector.

Big 5 Publishers of Amazon Bestsellers: Memoirs



Amazon. (2020, Oct. 20). *Books: Memoir and Biographies*.

Current Market Trends

With the rise of technology and the curiosity of genealogy, memoirs centered on DNA evidence/testing to track family roots have become popular. Books like Dani Shapiro's *Inheritance* and Randy Lindsey's *The Milkmaid's Son*, both published this year, shed light on family drama as a result of DNA testing. The fascination with DNA memoirs is part drama and part mystery ("9 publishing trends," 2020). Currently, on the NYTimes bestsellers list for non-fiction, 8 out of 15 books are memoirs and autobiographies with a political focus.

Celebrity memoirs have been popular since the early 2000s'. They are a part of mainstream entertainment and have surged during the Covid-19 pandemic because of people's elevated fascination with the notorious. On the other hand, there has been a surge in pandemic memoirs; people have had more time than ever to catch up on hobbies like reading and many have needed to turn to something in a time of crisis. Whether it be words of advice, a good laugh,

wanting to be educated about racial injustices, or desiring relatable experiences with the global pandemic, memoirs have been a genre that people have turned to.

The Logic of the Field

The “logic of the field” summarizes “a set of processes that interrelate in definite ways,” which is illustrated mainly in the dynamic of the sector (Thompson, 2013). The memoir sector of publishing relies on a dynamic of symbolic and social capital. Penguin Random House, for memoir books, has relied on the symbolic capital of the Obamas’ to gain prestige and status within the publishing industry specifically in the sector of memoir. This type of capital allows the publisher to strengthen positions in order to acquire new content and networks. This is also where social capital plays a part. In the past, Penguin Random House has published other celebrity memoirs like Anna Farris, Lauren Graham, Carol Brunett, and many others. While those celebrity authors didn’t have a strong political background or narrative, unlike the Obamas’, Penguin Random House built their list of celebrity memoirs over time. Perhaps Penguin Random House is making a shift, and certainly a statement, with the Obamas’ combined book deal. Granted, Penguin Random House also pulls on their economic capital to be able to give the Obamas their \$60 million book deal, but the parent company has many imprints that have a memoir focus, taking Dial Press and The Crown Group as examples. Penguin Random House has networked and gained symbolic, and economic capital, to be able to sign the Obamas’.

While the various distinctive dynamics of the logic of the field give insight into how a publishing house thrives, it is only a small part of the larger picture of how the publishing sector thrives overall.

Current Debates

Earlier this year, there was a lot of debate surrounding certain celebrity memoirs.

The political memoir, *The Room Where it Happened* by John Bolton, was very controversial when it came close to its publication date earlier this year. The Donald Trump Administration sought to sue Bolton for defamation and disclosing classified information about Trump and any White House scandals so that his book publication would be delayed (Williams, 2020). The question is if the Trump Administration sued Bolton's book because of the upcoming presidential election or solely because of a breach in disclosing important information.

On a larger scale, an ongoing problem and debate have been fact-checking in non-fiction books, specifically memoirs. Many presses want to hire a job-specific fact-checker to ensure that events in books are factual, but others believe it should be a part of the duties of an editor. Many presses combine the work with other editorial work. When a non-fiction book gets multiple offers by publishers, a major deciding factor is if they employ their own fact-checker. The main issue lies in not having enough finances to hire a fact-checker and the inability to find a fact-checker with reliable experience. Many in the industry believe that "fact-checking will never be a standard part of the publishing process because of financial reasons" (Eisenberg, 2020).

Changes of Publishing

Memoir books in 2020 have shed light on the issues around fact-checking. With many celebrity and political memoirs coming out this year, the job of fact-checking has been crucial. We are slowly starting to see a change in the publishing industry, particularly with small and independent presses, where fact-checking is funded by the publisher and not the author. For many presses, fact-checking is the responsibility of the author while other presses take on the task and tack it onto other editorial duties (Eisenberg, 2020).

Effects of COVID-19

2020 has proved to be a challenge for everyone and the global events of Covid-19 will go down in the history books. The pandemic cannot be talked about without mentioning the presidential election and the rise of racial injustices, which all have a factor in the surge of

memoirs. Two significant aspects of memoirs have erupted because of the pandemic and upcoming presidential elections and those are: political memoirs and pandemic memoirs.

On the publishing side, Little, Brown, and Company acquired Dr. Rachel Clarke's memoir of her time as a doctor treating gravely ill patients with COVID-19, which was published earlier this year in January. Since then, it was received fairly well with a rating of 4.54 on Goodreads. It is expected that more memoirs and autobiographies will be published in the coming months and years that center around the Covid-19 pandemic experiences and hardships.

Other Features

With many people in quarantine, more have time to read and write. The memoir sector has been a stable, and surging, market throughout the pandemic. With the U.S in quarantine, a writing challenge became popular called, the "Six-word Pandemic Memoirs." While no one is publishing a memoir novel, there is a surge in people wanting to know others' experiences during a collective hardship. The small writing challenge could inspire people to write their own memoir with the purpose of being a historical document.

Conclusion

Memoirs have been loved, hated, and mocked, but that's why they have charmed people for centuries. It's a sector of publishing that will never die because people are social beings and will always be interested in other people. Memoirs have continued to thrive in the publishing industry because of the social, economic, and symbolic capital it brings to the table. This allows genre subgroups of the sector, such as pandemic memoir, political memoir, and celebrity memoir, to name a few. The publishing industry has already dipped its toes into Covid-19 memoirs and more is definitely to come. With the report in mind, the next phase in the memoir sector could be a "collective memoir" subgenre because of the global effects of Covid-19. Memoirs will take on various subgenres in the future and, no doubt, make great strides.

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