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Essential? Different? Exceptional? The Book Trade and Covid-19

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Biography

Claire Squires is Professor of Publishing Studies at the University of Stirling, and Director of the Scottish Graduate School for Arts & Humanities (SGSAH). Her publications include *Marketing Literature: The Making of Contemporary Writing in Britain* (2007), the co-edited *Cambridge History of the Book in Britain Volume 7: The Twentieth Century and Beyond* (2019), and with Beth Driscoll, *The Frankfurt Book Fair and Bestseller Business* (2020). With Driscoll, she is founder of the [Ullapoolism movement](#).

‘Essential? Different? Exceptional? The Book Trade and Covid-19’

For many - probably all readers on this platform - a book is an essential Christmas gift to give or receive. Those [rectangular objects](#), so bibliographically obvious nestled in their wrapping paper under the Christmas tree, also form delightful seasonal and familial traditions around the world (Gadd 2018). Notable among these is Iceland’s [Jólabókaflóð](#) (Christmas book flood), in which Christmas presents are exchanged on 24 December and the books are immediately consumed alongside hot chocolate, or other suitably festive drink (Norris 2017).

But in 2020, where will we buy these books?

As the second wave of Covid-19 plunged countries around the world into another lockdown, in November 2020 the UK Booksellers Association (BA), along with James Daunt, CEO of Waterstones, made a plea to Government that bookshops should be categorised as ‘essential’. Further justifying this claim, Meryl Halls, managing director of the BA, was reported as saying that bookshops were “lanterns of civilisation and, for many, beacons of hope” (Flood 2020a).

Hope has been an essential commodity in the past few months, and many of us - as rapidly assembled sociological research and industry data have evidenced - have clung to cultural activities as a means of succour, escapism and time filler. Books, and reading, have been prominent among the ways in which [we have occupied our lockdown](#) hours (Bakshi 2020), with one survey reporting [the doubling of reading time](#) (Flood 2020b). Certain genres, publishers, and platforms have benefited more than others: classic literature, crime and thrillers, self-help, cookbooks, hobby and activity books (Flood 2020c; Moss 2020; The Reading Agency 2020). Indeed, some publishers, particularly the larger conglomerate groups, have seen turnover and profits increase over the course of the year (Chandler 2020; Jones 2020). Bookshelves have also been thoroughly scrutinised as socio-cultural backdrop phenomena to numerous home-based, Zoom-mediated media appearances, as the Twitter accounts [@RateMySkyeRoom](#) and [@BCredibility](#) have affectionately satirised, numerous newspapers opined (e.g. Hess 2020), and an academic conference, [Bookshelves in the Age of the COVID-19 Pandemic](#), has already explored.

The argument for bookshops as essential, however, despite all the claims for civilisation and hope, is as much economic as cultural: the book as commodity as well as beacon. As Halls continued, forcing bookshops to close while other retailers which also sold books (e.g. supermarkets) was “potentially ruinous commercially and is also morally problematic” (Flood 2020a). The elision of *books* with *bookshops* is evident in this argument. Books are available in bookshops, books are good, ergo bookshops are good. And indeed bookshops - large and small - can provide comforting and welcoming social spaces to some; with their latterday inclusion of espresso machines, events programmes and play spaces for children. But of course, so do libraries, which have a much greater role in social inclusion, not least in terms of digital accessibility and warm dry spaces for the homeless.

Nonetheless, the occasional sighting of a supermarket screening off its book aisles following the Welsh Government ruling against the sale of non-essential products in ‘essential’ shops, occasioned much social media comment (though surely meriting it less than [the temporary decision by one shop not to sell sanitary products](#) (BBC 2020)). ‘[But... books ARE essential!](#)’ protested one media report (London Daily News 2020). The [zero-VAT rating of print books](#) in the UK consolidates the point, as they fall into the same category as food and young children’s clothes. Perhaps not essential, but so important to the fabric of our society that additional tax should not be applied.

In 2020, books may be claimed as ‘essential goods’, but in previous decades, the argument was made - including in a Restrictive Practices Court case over the Net Book Agreement (NBA) in 1962 - that books were ‘different’ to the mass of consumer products (Stevenson 2019). For much of the twentieth century, the NBA regulated fixed prices for books, prevented discounting, and sustaining small bookshops. As Allen Lane, founder of Penguin Books stated in interview a few years after the NBA Restrictive Practices Court case, ‘A book is not a tin of beans’ (Squires 2005).

This tinned staple of the British breakfast has frequently been summoned in book trade discourse to differentiate its products from such mass-produced (if essential) units. This claim is despite mass production by companies including Penguin itself, the business model for which was premised on sales in the hundreds of thousands with cover prices initially set at the rate of a packet of cigarettes. The uniformly warehouseable and packageable shape of books would later make them an ideal choice for Amazon’s original product offering.

When the NBA finally ended in 1997, independent bookshops were no longer protected against the supermarkets and large chains. The latter could afford to sell books at heavily discounted rates to consumers, and led to a demand for increasing discounts from publishers, cutting into publisher and author profits as well as jeopardising independent bookshops.

Over the Channel in France, independent bookshops are still supported by a much more protectionist environment via the [loi Lang’s price fixing rules](#) (Noël 2018). France thereby retains a much more diversified bookselling sector than the UK. Nonetheless, the enforced bookshop closures of late 2020 led to similar calls for French bookshops to be classed as ‘essential

services', premised on the seeming importance of reading (Flood 2020d). The refusal of the French Government to accept this argument led to the slightly ludicrous situation of a number of authors and publishers taking to the Seine on a boat to "defend literature". It was reported that 'Police forced the vessel to dock and those onboard were asked to disperse' (Willsher 2020). Perhaps not the most revolutionary moment of French literature...

Of course, behind all these claims to be both essential *and* exceptional (as essential as our daily bread; exceptional to other shops and cultural venues also forced to close) is the lurking threat not just of the supermarkets, but of Amazon. As James Daunt and the BA knew all too well, there really was no threat at all to our access to books under lockdown - they are only ever a few clicks, [some terrible employment practices, and a substantial amount of tax avoidance away](#) (Trades Union Congress 2020). But while keeping high street bookshops open in the short term is a purely a commercial argument, it could be claimed that supporting a more diversified book trade is crucial to the preservation of the cultural landscape of the book.

This may well be true, but - alongside some of the more urgent demands for protest in 2020 (Black Lives Matter; democracy in the US, Hong Kong, Belarus) - the degree of special pleading here does not do the book trade any favours in the face of the extremely high Covid-19 death figures in both the UK and France. It looks a little removed from the urgencies of the global pandemic.

And while many independent bookshops - and smaller publishers, and authors - have suffered substantially under the economic pressures brought about by Covid-19, despite some [inventive adaptations](#) (Chu 2020), the position of the book trade overall has not seem the absolute crisis undergone by other art forms and sectors of the creative economy: live music, performance and theatre, for example, with many freelance creative practitioners struggling to earn at all (Banks and O'Conner 2020).

Rather, what Covid-19 has evidenced are the longer-term infrastructural challenges of the publishing industry, including the amount of economic and algorithmic power developed and seized by Amazon (and at some points over the past few years, willingly granted by publishers). The excitement around the opening of [Bookshop.org](#) in the UK last month - which provides an online portal for independent bookshops and publishers - demonstrates the stranglehold certain very powerful brokers otherwise hold. In France, one of the 'grandes surfaces' (supermarkets) created a similar proposition. Intermarché, part of Les Mousquetaires 'musketeers) group, built a platform for bookshops - 'Solidarity Alley' - that announced 'Sorry, Amazon' in its advertising (Adamowski 2020).

Such solidarity might well be symbolically significant as well as providing some practical solutions to the challenges of unequal power in book distribution. But I would also argue that - while we wrap or unwrap our books in the next couple of weeks - we should also think about how some of the values we might claim to have learned from them enable us to show solidarity to other sectors (of cultural life, and society more generally), and not to overstate the case for book(shop)s as either essential, or exceptional. To do the former is more clearly indicative of

civilisation and hope. To do the latter is both culturally and commercially instrumental, but in the end perhaps does the book, and its readers, no good.

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