

Parea: democratizing publishing for authors and readers

CASE STUDY | 29 Sep 2022

Online communities are transforming the way people engage with books, with reading habits influenced by digital creators, viral posts, and guided discovery. But with the world of books dominated by large publishing houses, Parea is aiming to democratize the industry for authors and readers alike.

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HIGHLIGHTS

- 01** Parea is aiming to develop a fairer publishing ecosystem, where authors find bigger audiences and readers help in conceptualizing the books they want to read
- 02** The brand is opening up publishing to diverse and underrepresented authors, challenging the established processes of the Big Five
- 03** Social media influencers are reinvigorating the publishing industry, and starting conversations with them at the production stage can help build audience anticipation and interest

DATA

- Publishing statistics show that 90% of titles sell fewer than 2,000 copies
- Only 11% of published novels in 2018 were written by minority ethnic authors
- Only 7% of books have a corresponding audiobook, despite audiobooks being the fastest growing segment in publishing

SCOPE

In August 2022, the Justice Department carried out an antitrust trial to block Penguin Random House, the largest publisher in the US, from merging with rival Simon & Schuster, intending to prevent a dominant and monopolizing force in publishing. [1] With the industry failing to recognize the appetite for authors that don't come with large, ready-made audiences, new online communities are spurring interest in books that usually float under the radar, enabling them to gain mainstream appeal. As industry statistics show that 90% of titles sell fewer than 2,000 copies, can these online communities help to drive a fairer, more democratized space? [2]

Parea is one venture aiming to create a fairer book publishing ecosystem where authors find bigger audiences and readers get more input in conceptualizing the books they want to read – leading to an increase in sales and opportunities for authors and publishers as engaged book communities drive growth in the sector. Amy Snook, the CEO and founder of Parea, wants to bring her experience of building social media communities in retail to the publishing industry in order to create a more democratized landscape. [3] Most authors don't have the time, skill, knowledge, or desire to be one-person marketing teams, and at Parea, Snook believes that leaving such a crucial part of book sales to authors is ineffective. By opening up publishing to diverse, underrepresented authors and by involving readers in the journey, the brand is changing the book ecosystem, ensuring that it benefits all involved.

Parea's business model inverts the order of the publishing life cycle. Instead of publishing a book and then finding readers, Snook begins by identifying communities of readers who are underserved and bringing books to them that she knows they're eager to buy. By focusing on readers first, Parea can bypass industry assumptions and an over-reliance on what has already worked to identify both fresh genres and new audiences eager to see themselves reflected in their reading choices. But can consumer involvement and a focus on underrepresented authors change the future of publishing?



Parea identifies underserved readers and brings them books they want to read

Parea Books | Instagram (2022)

CONTEXT

CATERING TO UNDERSERVED READER COMMUNITIES

College-educated Black women are among the most likely demographic to be readers, and yet, when it comes to publishing books, Black authors remain largely unrepresented. [4] In 2018, only 11% of novels published in the US were written by non-White authors – an unsurprising figure, considering that 85% of publishing professionals identify as White, which tends to skew not only which books are purchased, but how they're marketed and who they're marketed to. [5][6] This gap is starting to be filled by readers themselves. Book clubs and reading groups are emerging, such as the Noname Book Club, which specifically focus on championing texts by authors from minority ethnic backgrounds. [7]

HELPING AUTHORS FIND READERS

Even when minority ethnic authors are published, they get fewer promotional dollars and less say in how promotional campaigns are structured. [8] The Big Five publishers – Penguin Random House, Simon & Schuster, HarperCollins, Hachette, and Macmillan – who control roughly 80% of the trade market for books in the US, routinely acquire books based on an author's existing audience and reach so they can be assured of sales when the book releases. [9] "It's not the author's, but the marketing team's job to create noise about their book," says Georgia Henry, a senior campaign manager

at digital marketing agency Rocket, and an early innovator in the world of BookTok. “An author is not the brand unless they want to be.” [10] However, most new authors who don’t have pre-existing audiences are left to market their books on their own, and this lack of support can result in low sales and less engagement.

INVOLVING BOOK BUYERS IN THE CREATION

When Snook starts work on a book, she taps into reader communities on TikTok and Instagram and gives them early versions of the manuscript. The goal is to invite influencers to provide feedback and help them feel invested in the success of a book. This is crucial because, as research shows, it’s not the average book buyer that discriminates against women and Black authors, but the perception among publishers which causes such disparities in publishing opportunities for minority ethnic writers. This is why, even though an author’s gender made no difference in how interested readers were in purchasing a given book, and why even though participants were willing to pay a premium (about 50 cents more) for books by Black authors in a PLOS One study of 9,000 people, publishers continue to pay minority ethnic people smaller advances and claim a lower market appetite for their books. [11] By involving book buyers early on, Parea is able to both give authors a level playing field and connect with audiences that are hungry for those specific styles and subjects.



Social media can be an effective way to build anticipation around upcoming titles

Parea Books | Instagram (2022)

INSIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

PUBLISH BOOKS FOR NEW READER DEMOGRAPHICS

The two groups of Americans most likely to read books are those who have a bachelor’s degree and those who earn more than \$75,000 a year. According to The New York Times, the percentage of Americans over 25 who have earned bachelor’s degrees has more than doubled since 1970, but in today’s landscape, this demographic looks different from previous generations – they’re more likely to be women, Black, Asian, or Latino, but their lived experiences and interests

aren't represented in the reading landscape. [12] Neglecting to cater to these reading audiences means publishers are leaving millions of dollars on the table. By catering to underserved readers and giving them books they're excited to read, Parea is not replacing existing reader choices, but adding a whole other market that will reflect in publisher profits.

USE SOCIAL MEDIA TO CREATE ANTICIPATION

Taking a page from the retail playbook, Snook thinks about audience and marketing first to increase Parea's appeal. Instead of waiting until pre-publication to start a campaign, publishers can start conversations with influencers and social media creators at the production stage to build audiences' anticipation and interest in future releases. "The best thing to do for creator-led partnerships is to trust the creator," says Henry. In a TikTok campaign for *They Both Die at The End*, for instance, she worked with [abbysbooks](#), a Booktokker with almost half a million followers. The brief was simple: Talk about the book and show it a couple of times. "Abby read the book in a day and documented each part of the book, and at the end, she was crying. [That video](#) got over five million views." [10] [Bookinfluencers](#) on TikTok are also reinvigorating the publishing market in Argentina – driving interest in novels among teens and helping younger authors gain mainstream appeal.

DIVERSIFY AND ELEVATE READING EXPERIENCES

Each published title is not only a print book but also has the potential to be a hardcover, a paperback, an ebook, an audiobook, and more. A print book that does well in the US could take off in Japan as an audiobook and in India as an ebook, and most publishers, when buying the rights to a book from an author, fail to tap into this cross-cultural and potential global appeal. For instance, while audiobooks are the fastest growing segment in publishing – the \$1.6 billion of audiobook revenue in 2021 marked the tenth straight year of double-digit growth – only 7% of books have a corresponding audiobook. [13][14] Taking advantage of these additional assets in global markets can open up new markets and revenue streams for publishers, as well as opportunities for authors. [AR is also infiltrating traditional print media](#), with augmented reality books enabling readers to bring pages to life with their smartphones or tablets. [Kiss & Fly's coffee table book](#), for example, enables people to scan images of holiday scenes, resulting in an immersive experience featuring interactive and moving pictures.