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Author(s): Joseph W. Kappel

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# Book Clubs and the Evaluation of Books

BY JOSEPH W. KAPPEL

*Books represent a mass medium of communication which has received comparatively little attention from students of public opinion. In this article an attempt is made to evaluate some of the effects of the recent mushrooming of book clubs on the publishing of trade books as a whole, and to this end an experimental method of comparing the merit of various classes of books has been devised. The results of this comparison may surprise both friends and foes of the book clubs: in general, it is found that the clubs do not lower literary standards, and may raise them in some cases, although much depends upon the type of public which each book club is attempting to reach.*

*The author is associated with the Bureau of Applied Social Research, Columbia University.*

Voltaire once said that books rule the world, and although today there are other media which compete with books for dominion, the continued importance of books in shaping ideas and attitudes is not to be disregarded. In discussions of the influence of books upon their readers, the assumption is made that "good" books will have a favorable influence and that "bad" books will have an unfavorable influence. But how does one know when a book is "good" or "bad"? The usual criterion is critical reaction to the book. When a book is written by outstanding writers of the stature of a Joyce, a Proust, or a Kafka, there is little doubt as to the nature of the critical reception of the book, and the book is universally considered "good."

The advent of the book clubs, however, has made this problem more complex because the large book clubs do not, with rare exceptions, distribute books

by such outstanding writers.\* Many of their authors are well known, but there is considerable disagreement about the quality of their writings, and the disagreement becomes even wider when a club's selections as a whole are considered, rather than an individual selection. The most outspoken critics of the book clubs have maintained that these organizations are lowering literary standards and reading tastes, basing their claim upon the assumption that the book club choices are of poor quality. Another criticism brought against the book clubs is that they have an unfavorable influence upon the publishing industry by encouraging the tendency toward "best-sellerism," which strives for higher sales for fewer books, thus neglecting the fine

\* *Ed. note:* The reader may be interested in comparing Mr. Kappel's observations on book clubs with those of Frank Luther Mott, author of *Golden Multitudes*, which is reviewed by Cedric Larson in this issue.

book of limited appeal. That the book clubs have had a very important effect on the publishing industry is an opinion shared by most publishers, but exactly what this effect has been and how it operates has not been clearly stated.

When one attempts to evaluate the impact of book clubs on the publishing industry, two questions immediately present themselves. First, how do the clubs affect sales and the business side of publishing?, and secondly, how do they affect the *quality* of the new books which appear each year on publishers' lists?

#### How the Book Clubs Operate

In order to answer either of the above questions, we must first describe briefly how book clubs operate. This is by no means a simple task, since there are now nearly a hundred book clubs of all types, many of which show distinct variations from the basic pattern. For the purposes of this study, however, we may safely take the Literary Guild, with its 1,250,000 members, and the Book-of-the-Month Club, with its 890,000 members, as our models, since they have more than two-thirds of the total book club membership.

Of the several functions these book clubs fulfill, the most important are: (1) they make books easily accessible to residents of rural and urban areas where bookstores and libraries are scarce; and (2) they offer current, popular books at a saving, either by giving extra books as dividends or by charging lower prices for their selections than the bookstores charge for the same book. A third function which has been attributed to the book clubs is somewhat questionable: that of providing expert advice on reading for their members. This is undoubt-

edly helpful for some members of the book clubs, but on the other hand, it has been shown that the most important reason why people drop out of book clubs is their disapproval of the selections.<sup>1</sup> The first function mentioned above is also open to question, since it has always been possible to order books through the mail. A reasonable statement would appear to be that the combination of these factors makes the book clubs popular, with the second factor, the dividend or lower price, the most important.

The book clubs are able to offer books at lower prices because of their large memberships. Publishers estimate that they begin to make profit on a book when sales approach 10,000, but the Book-of-the-Month Club guarantees a publisher whose book is selected a minimum sale of 333,333 books which, at thirty cents a copy, nets the publisher and author each \$50,000, and the Literary Guild guarantees a minimum sale of from 500,000 to 600,000 copies, with a royalty of fifteen cents a copy.†

Almost all publishers submit proofs of books which they consider likely candidates for selection to the Literary Guild and the Book-of-the-Month Club prior to publication. The Book-of-the-Month Club has its well-known board of judges which chooses books on the "Quaker principle of concurrence"<sup>2</sup>—all five judges must agree on the selection. In the case of the Literary Guild, one

<sup>1</sup> H. C. Link and H. H. Hopf, *People and Books*, New York: Book Manufacturers' Institute, 1946, p. 91.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Seidel Canby, "How the Book-of-the-Month Club Began," *The Atlantic Monthly*, May 1947, p. 133.

† *Ed. note: Publishers' Weekly* for April 17, 1948, notes that effective March 5 the Book-of-the-Month Club reduced its minimum guarantee for single selections to \$80,000.

man, John Beecroft, is solely responsible for the selections. The Book-of-the-Month Club has spread its selections quite widely among publishers, but the Literary Guild selections are concentrated on fewer publishers, with Doubleday, the owner of the Literary Guild, far in the lead.

#### Book Clubs and the Publishing Industry

From the standpoint of the publishing industry, the book clubs are often considered nothing more or less than a new contribution to the technique of distributing books. But distribution is so important to this industry, and the contribution of the book clubs has been so outstanding, that today they are considered by many publishers to be a dominating influence in the industry.

It should be noted, however, that the large clubs really affect only one segment of publishing: the non-specialized books, usually known as "trade books." This represents a very small industry in the United States. The total volume of sales of trade books published in 1945 was about 99 million dollars. A comparison of this figure with the figures for sales of magazines is particularly significant. For example, the Curtis Publishing Company, publishers of the *Saturday Evening Post* and the *Ladies' Home Journal*, had gross sales of 100 million dollars in 1946, thus exceeding the sales figure for all trade books in the preceding year. Time, Inc., grossed 96 million in 1946, and Crowell-Collier grossed 58 million in the same year.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the fact that the publishers' market is so limited, it is also indefinite. A publisher can rarely, if ever, predict how many copies of a book he will sell, even when the book is by

a noted author. Each book he publishes is an entirely new product, and must be presented to the public on a speculative basis. Here we find the cause of many of the ills of the industry. Because he cannot know which book might become a best seller, the publisher is reluctant to refrain from publishing a book which might sell well, and, therefore, too many books of questionable value are published. O. H. Cheney estimates that only four books in ten sell over 5,000 copies, and only two in ten over 10,000.<sup>4</sup> Because so many books have poor sales, prices must be kept high, too high for most readers, and this in turn acts to keep sales down. Furthermore, because sales are so unpredictable, the publisher must spend much more on advertising than most other producers. R. L. Duffus estimates that 10 per cent of the retail price of a book is spent in advertising, and he compares with this the automobile manufacturer's 1 to 3 per cent, the candy manufacturer's 3 to 5 per cent, and the grocery trade's 1 to 4 per cent.<sup>5</sup>

The book clubs have affected this situation in several respects. In the first place, there is unanimity of opinion throughout the industry that the book clubs have brought about more buying and reading of books. *Time Magazine* estimates that there were 1,000,000 regular book buyers in the United States before the book clubs became active, and that in 1946 there were 3,000,000 members of book clubs alone, to say nothing of book buyers who belong to no club.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Jerome Ellison, "Selling Dreams in Marble Halls," *New Republic*, Oct. 13, 1947, p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> O. H. Cheney, *Economic Survey of the Book Industry*, National Association of Book Publishers, 1930, p. 204.

<sup>5</sup> R. L. Duffus, *Books*, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1930, p. 51.

<sup>6</sup> *Time*, March 18, 1946.

Even the book sellers, traditional enemies of the book clubs, agree that the book clubs increase sales of books in the book stores.<sup>7</sup>

By virtue of the fact that book clubs must aim for large memberships, their selections must have wide appeal. Thus they cannot be expected to choose books of rare literary merit. But this by no means proves the assertion that the book clubs stifle fine literature, for the devotee of Franz Kafka will not turn to Zane Grey merely because a book club makes one of this author's books a monthly selection. On the other hand, there is some evidence that the Book-of-the-Month Club, at least, has encouraged new talent. For example, it has been shown that in 1935, the only year for which figures of this type are available, 36 per cent of the Book-of-the-Month Club selections were first novels, compared to the publishing industry's general average of 24 per cent of first novels for that year.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the first novels chosen by the Book-of-the-Month Club had much higher sales, were advertised more widely, and received more reviews than first novels published without book club sponsorship.

This brings us to our second question: What effect have book clubs had on the *quality* of recent literature?

#### A Method for Evaluating Books

In order to answer this query, it was decided to devise a rough measure of quality and then to apply this measure to book club selections, to best sellers, and to new books in general. For the purpose of comparison we shall use all of the Book-of-the-Month Club selections from the time the club was organized, in 1926, to 1946, and all of the Literary Guild selections from its be-

ginning, in 1927, to 1946. The best seller lists were obtained from *Fifty Years of Best Sellers*,<sup>9</sup> and from this volume we chose twenty best sellers of each year (ten fiction and ten nonfiction) for the years 1926 to 1944, the last year covered. In addition, a random sample of other books was chosen, according to a procedure which will be described below.

Since no objective criterion exists whereby one may evaluate a book, it has been decided to base this evaluation upon the reactions of book reviewers. Certainly there is a limitation here in the fact that so many reviews are biased or unduly influenced, and this will be discussed briefly after the method has been described. It is believed, however, that the use of a large sample tends to reduce this limitation. In view of the long period covered, from 1926 to 1946, and the large number of books involved, it was decided to use the *Book Review Digest* rather than refer directly to the reviews. The validity of the *Digest's* ratings was checked by Berreman. He rated a considerable sample of the reviews independently, and found a close correlation between his own ratings and those of the *Digest*.

The number of books covered by each yearly edition of the *Book Review Digest* naturally varies with the number of books published. There is no statement as to the completeness of the coverage, but inspection reveals that almost, if not all, books published during the year are included, from cookbooks and technical

<sup>7</sup> H. C. Link and H. H. Hopf, *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> J. V. Berreman, *Factors Affecting the Sale of Modern Books of Fiction*, Ph.D. thesis, Stanford University, 1940, p. 271.

<sup>9</sup> Alice Payne Hackett, *Fifty Years of Best Sellers, 1895-1945*, New York: R. R. Bowker Co., 1945.

works to books of poetry and philosophy. The authors are listed alphabetically, and there is a brief factual description of each book published by each author during the year. The description is followed by excerpts from various reviews of the book, the purpose being to give a rounded picture of the critical reaction to the book. A plus sign is placed next to the excerpt if the review was favorable, a minus sign if the review was unfavorable, and a plus and a minus sign if the reviewer favored some parts or aspects of the book and did not favor others.

Thus by counting the plus signs and the minus signs under each book one may calculate the reaction of principal book reviewers to that particular book. Since it was intended to plot these reactions on a yearly basis for several lists of books (See Chart 1), the plus and minus signs were counted up for a whole year for each separate list of books. For instance, in the case of Book-of-the-Month Club selections, the total amount of plus and minus signs received by all the selections for each year was determined, and an index number for the year was derived by dividing the total plus value by the total minus value. Algebraically, this procedure would be expressed by the following formula:

$$\frac{\Sigma a}{\Sigma b} = X, \text{ the yearly index number,}$$

where  $a$  equals the plus values of the individual books, and  $b$  equals the minus values.

This procedure was followed for Book-of-the-Month Club and Literary Guild choices, for the selected best sellers, and for the random sample. Approximately eighty books from each yearly volume of the *Book Review Digest* were

included in the random sample, taking the first book on each tenth page.

When yearly indices for all the four book groups were calculated and plotted in graph form, however, a most surprising discovery was made. It appeared that the random sample, including as it did cookbooks and detective novels in large numbers, rated as high as and sometimes higher than the Book-of-the-Month Club selections, and consistently higher than the best sellers. This did not seem entirely logical, and it was obvious that lack of proper weighting was responsible for this discrepancy. A light mystery story, for instance, written well and amusingly, might receive four plus signs and one minus sign in the *Book Review Digest*, whereas a serious novel might receive ten plus and three minus signs. There are two important points to note here. In the first place, books are reviewed on their own plane: a mystery novel is criticized in terms of its ability to hold interest and amuse, whereas a book on a serious social or political problem is considered in the light not only of the serious problems involved but also in the light of the reviewer's own opinions on the subject. In the second place, a careful examination of the *Book Review Digest* reveals that the more serious books consistently receive more reviews.

In view of these two points, a weighting system based upon the number of reviews received by each book seemed to appear the best solution. (In actual practice, the number of signs—plus and minus—rather than the total number of reviews listed, was used for weighting, since some excerpted reviews have no plus or minus sign. A scatter diagram for a random sample showed a high correlation between number of reviews and

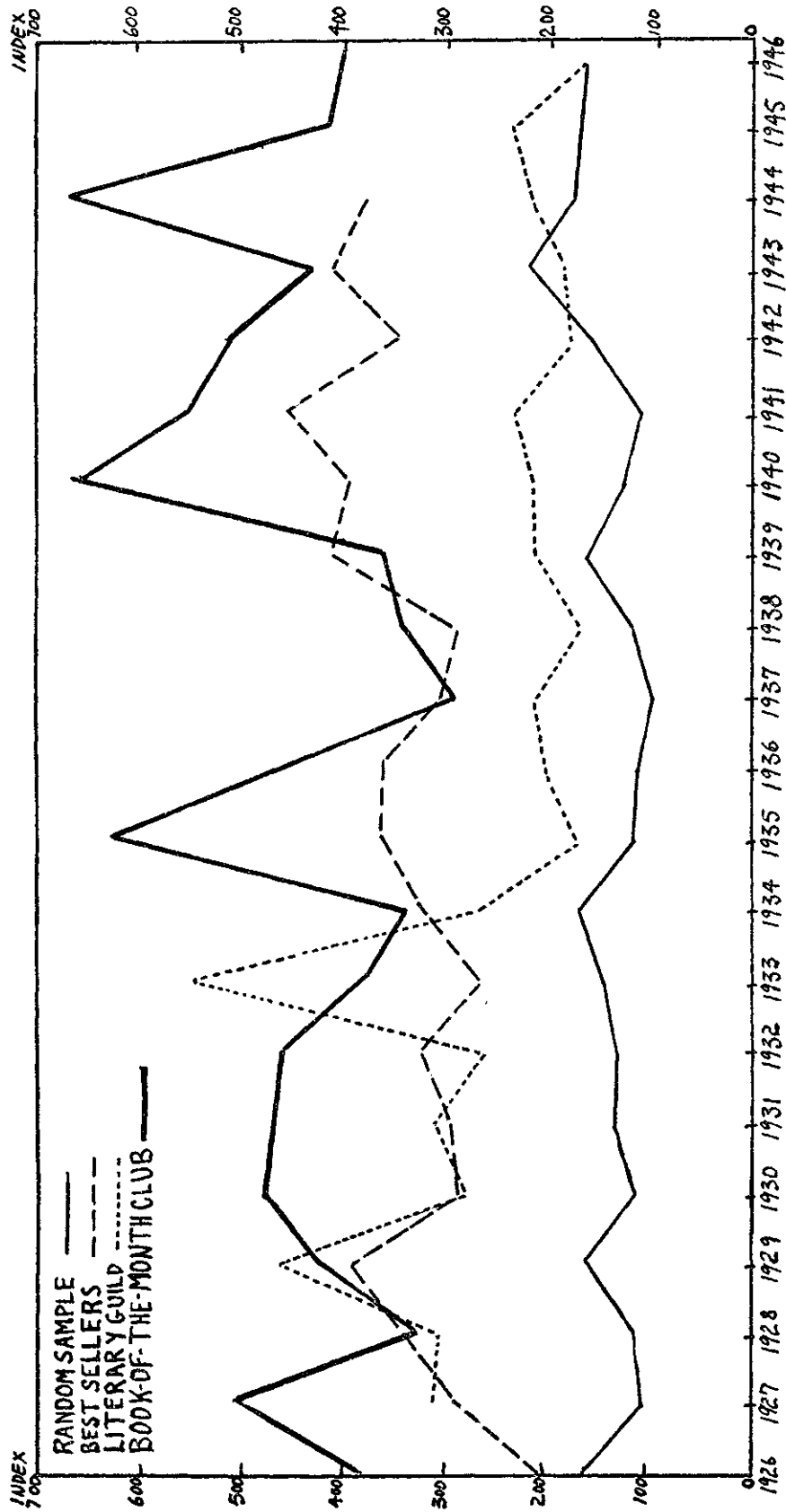


CHART I

YEARLY INDICES OF BOOK-OF-THE-MONTH CLUB SELECTIONS; OF A RANDOM SAMPLE, 1926-1946; OF BEST SELLERS, 1926-1944; AND OF LITERARY GUILD SELECTIONS, 1927-1946.

number of signs.) By using such a weighting system, the higher degree of favorableness for lighter books would be counterbalanced by the larger number of reviews received by the more serious books. In the case of the two hypothetical books mentioned above, the detective novel and the serious novel, the procedure would be as follows: The first book received four plus and one minus signs: therefore the index number (unweighted) would be four divided by one, or four. To weight, we would multiply by five, or the number of reviews received, and the resultant weighted index number would be 20. The second book would have an unweighted index number of 3.3 (ten divided by three), and a weighted index number of 42.9. To express this algebraically, let  $a$  equal the number of plus values, let  $b$  equal the number of minus values, and let  $n$  equal the number of reviews. The formula would then be:

$n \left( \frac{a}{b} \right)$  = the index number for an individual book.

For the yearly index number, computations were made for all books as a group rather than separately for each book, so the formula would be:

$N \left( \frac{\sum a}{\sum b} \right) = I$ , the yearly index number (uncorrected).

The lists vary in size, however. The Literary Guild has twelve books on each yearly list, the Book-of-the-Month Club has twelve to sixteen books a year, the best seller list has twenty books on each yearly list, and the random sample consists of eighty books each year. It was thus necessary to use the number of books on the yearly list as a correction factor, and the final formula became:

$\frac{N}{X} \left( \frac{\sum a}{\sum b} \right) = I$ , the corrected yearly index number, where  $N$  represents the total number of reviews received by all the books on a yearly list,  $(\sum a)$  represents the total number of plus values,  $(\sum b)$  the total number of minus values, and  $X$  represents the number of books. In 1940, for example, the Book-of-the-Month Club had fourteen selections, and these selections received 138 plus signs and 24 minus signs. Applying the formula, we have the following calculation:

$$\frac{162}{14} \left( \frac{138}{24} \right) = 66.$$

This index was computed on an annual basis for four lists of books: The Book-of-the-Month Club selections, the Literary Guild selections, best sellers, and a random sample. The time series of the above lists are plotted as curves and shown on Chart 1.

#### Reviewers Approve B.O.M. Choices

The curve of the random sample may be interpreted as revealing an estimate of the critical reaction to the average book published. It is evident from Chart 1 that the critical reaction to the random sample of books is distinctly lower than the reaction to selections of the Literary Guild, although the latter books have fallen quite low in recent years. The best sellers have maintained a consistent standard which is distinctly higher than the random sample, and higher than the Literary Guild selections during the past fifteen years. Highest of all are the Book-of-the-Month Club selections.

The lowering of standards of the Literary Guild selections coincides almost exactly with its sharp and enormous increase in membership, which began its



upward climb in 1934. It was during this period that the present editor-in-chief of the Literary Guild was installed.

An interesting characteristic of this chart is that the Book-of-the-Month Club curve and the curve for the Literary Guild in its early years exhibit very marked cyclical variations in comparison with the curves for the best sellers and for the random sample. There is at present no explanation for this phenomenon, and one can only speculate about it. One possible explanation might be that the Book-of-the-Month Club and the early Literary Guild were actually trying to reach two different publics, one with higher reading standards than the other, so that a reputation for choosing fine books would be built up one year for the more discriminating public, and in the next year concessions would be made to the other segment of the membership. The reason for changing from year to year rather than offering a variety during each year would be that the reputation for one kind of book established during a year might be expected to carry over during the downward swing of the cycle. But such an explanation assumes that the Book-of-the-Month Club officials and board of judges are aware of the yearly variations in critical reaction to their selections, and at present there is no evidence for this other than the chart developed in this study.

An important point to be noted is that the Book-of-the-Month Club selections include best sellers. In some years there were only one or two best sellers, but in other years, and this is especially true of recent years, there are as many as six or seven best sellers on the Book-of-the-Month Club list. (The Literary Guild

rarely has more than one best seller on its yearly list of selections.) In view of the fact that the present discussion includes an attempt to discover what differences may be found between book club selections and best sellers, the Book-of-the-Month Club list was divided into selections which were best sellers, and selections which were not best sellers. The results of this operation are shown in Chart 2.

On the basis of these results, one may say conclusively that the Book-of-the-Month Club has chosen with great consistency the best of the best sellers. While it still remains to be proven that the Book-of-the-Month Club has raised the level of the best seller, it seems safe on the basis of this evidence to state that this club has chosen and encouraged the best among those books which were destined to become best sellers.

#### **Influence of Advertising?**

It must be recognized that a reviewer's reaction to a specific book may be conditioned by factors other than the merits of the book. Many reviewers or book review editors, consciously or unconsciously, may possibly be influenced by such elements as size of the publisher's advertising budget and other more subtle factors. For the purposes of this paper, we will restrict ourselves to the possible influence of advertising on critical reaction to a specific list of books. A careful analysis of this would require a great deal of study of advertising budgets and policies regarding publication of specific books. This method, however, involved too many calculations and too many dubious assumptions to be of use in this study.

As an alternative, another method of evaluation was used. A random sample

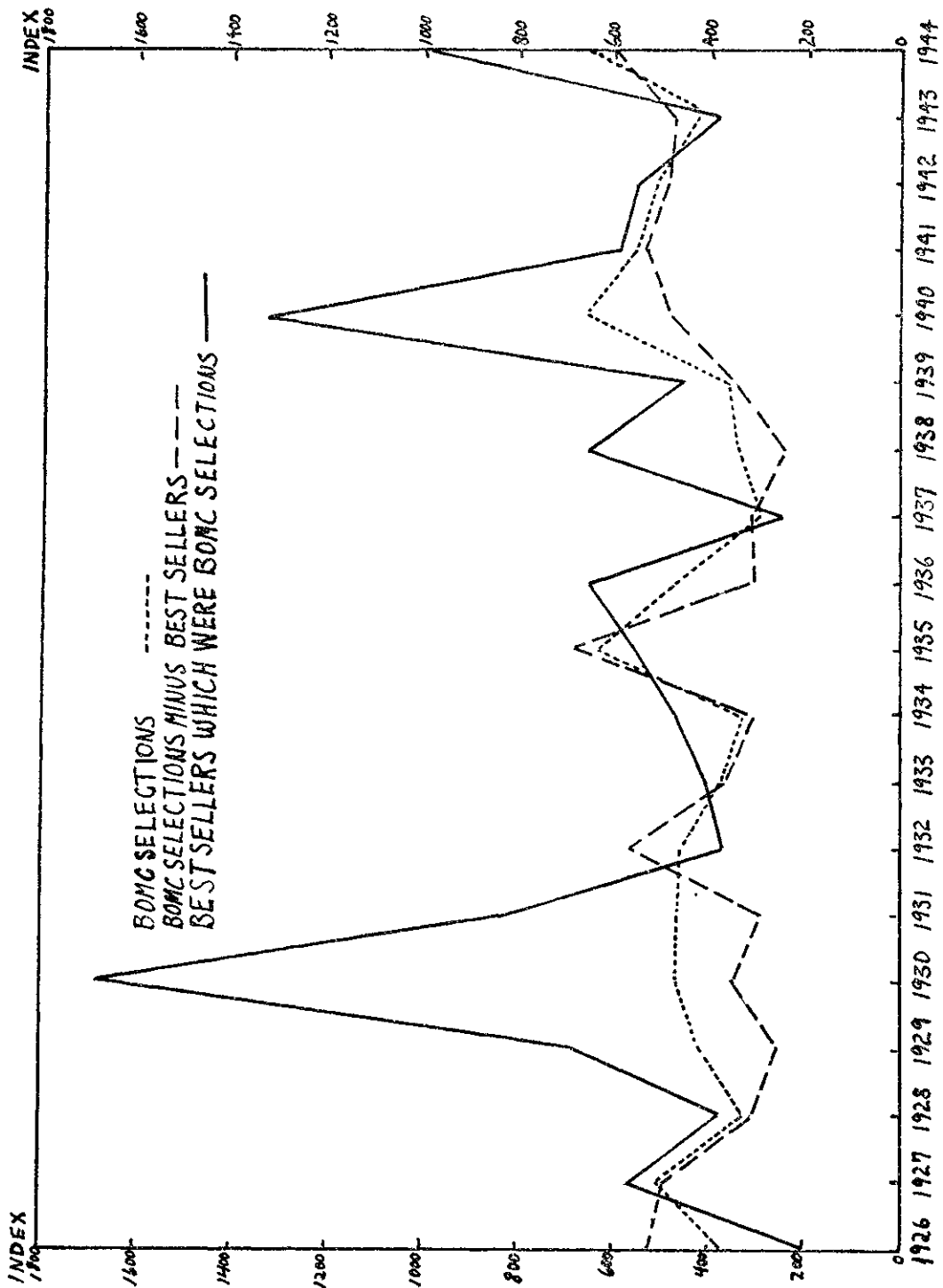


CHART 2

YEARLY INDICES OF BOOK-OF-THE-MONTH CLUB SELECTIONS; OF THESE SELECTIONS MINUS BEST SELLERS; AND OF BEST SELLERS WHICH WERE BOOK-OF-THE-MONTH CLUB SELECTIONS, 1926-1944.

of twenty books from the Book-of-the-Month Club list was selected. The critical reactions to these books were then divided into two groups, depending upon the type of medium the review appeared in. In group one were media largely dependent on book advertising, and in group two were media largely independent of book advertising. The percentage of favorable reviews in each type of medium was computed for each book, so that for each book there were two percentages: (1) the percentage of favorable reviews in media of group one; and (2) the percentage of favorable reviews in media of group two.

These percentages were then plotted against each other on a scatter diagram, with the percentage of favorable reviews in media dependent upon advertising on the vertical scale, and the percentage of favorable reviews in media not dependent upon advertising on the horizontal scale. A diagonal corresponding to an angle of 45 degrees was drawn on the graph.

If advertising played no role in critical reaction, we would expect that the two percentages would be roughly similar. On the chart this would be revealed by an equal number of points above and below the diagonal line. However, examination of the chart revealed that seventeen of the twenty points were located above the line, and only three below the line. This indicates that media depending upon advertising were almost invariably less severe in critical reaction to virtually all books on this list than media not dependent upon advertising.

Of course, there may be factors other than advertising which distinguish the two groups of media. Group one may have higher literary and critical standards and therefore tend to view long term values of a given book rather than the immediate, journalistic merits. Nevertheless, this in itself would not be sufficient to explain the proportion of points above the line. A corresponding result was obtained when a random sample of best sellers was tested.

### Conclusion

On the basis of this study, it would seem clear that the increase in book sales and readership which the book clubs have brought with them has not led to a general lowering of literary standards in the publishing industry. It is also clear, however, that it is difficult to speak of book clubs as a whole, since their criteria of selection may vary widely.

Although the method for evaluating books outlined in this paper was developed as a means of comparing book club selections with best sellers and with what might be called the average book, there are obviously many more uses to which the method may be applied. By means of an evaluative method such as this, publishers can compare their lists with those of other publishing houses, and libraries and schools can make up reading lists and select books more efficiently. Both for comparative purposes and for the purpose of book selection it offers an alternative to individual, subjective appraisal.