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The Death of the Midlist Novel



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Written by Thomas Wilkinson

Walk into a bookshop and you can usually tell, within thirty seconds, which books the industry has decided matter that month. A romantasy tower by the door. A celebrity memoir with the face taking up half the cover. Something described, inevitably, as “for fans of Sally Rooney”. I am not immune to any of this. Sometimes the popular book is popular for a reason. Still, I keep wondering about the novels that do not arrive with a drumroll.

The midlist novel has always sat in that less glamorous space. Not a disaster. Not a phenomenon. A book that sells decently, finds its readers slowly, and maybe gives an author enough momentum to write the next one. That sounds modest, but modesty used to matter more in publishing. Careers could grow crookedly. A first novel might do fine, a second slightly better, a third finally catch. Now? There is less patience around.

BookTok has sharpened this feeling. Bayley (2022) writes about publishers turning towards TikTok while still admitting that the platform’s sales power is difficult to predict. That uncertainty is part of the attraction, oddly. One video, one emotional reaction, one reader sobbing in their bedroom, suddenly an old paperback is alive again. For publishers facing pressure, who would not want that? But the chase changes the room. Once a few books explode online, everyone starts looking for the shape of the next explosion. The next romantasy. The next sad, clever young woman. The next book that looks good when someone holds it up to a phone camera. Meanwhile, quieter novels have to make their case without sparkle, without an obvious hook, without the comforting promise that they will become a “moment”.

Money sits underneath all this. It always does. Deahl (2022) describes a publishing industry strained by burnout, low pay and impossible workloads. Add rising costs and nervous sales expectations, and caution starts to look sensible. In an acquisitions meeting, a book that resembles last year's hit is easier to defend than a strange little novel that may need time, luck and patient booksellers. That is the bit I find sad. Some books are not built to shout. They sit there. They wait. I have found favourites that way: a library copy with a cracked spine, a second-hand paperback bought because the first page sounded odd, a recommendation from someone who said, "I don't know if you'll like this, but try it." These are not always books that dominate charts. They stay with people differently.

Midlist fiction has not vanished. Independent publishers still take risks. Good booksellers still hand-sell quiet novels with more conviction than any algorithm. But the space feels tighter now, and the clock feels louder. If publishing only backs books that already look like winners, it will get plenty of winners. It may also get fewer surprises. And literature needs surprises. Not only the midnight-release book, not only the viral one. Also the awkward, quiet, slightly uneven novel that finds you at the wrong time and somehow becomes yours.

Bibliography

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