

**Enemies or Lovers: An Analysis of How BookTok Affects the Book Industry and Writers**

*To what extent has BookTok affected the book industry and the way authors create and market new books?*

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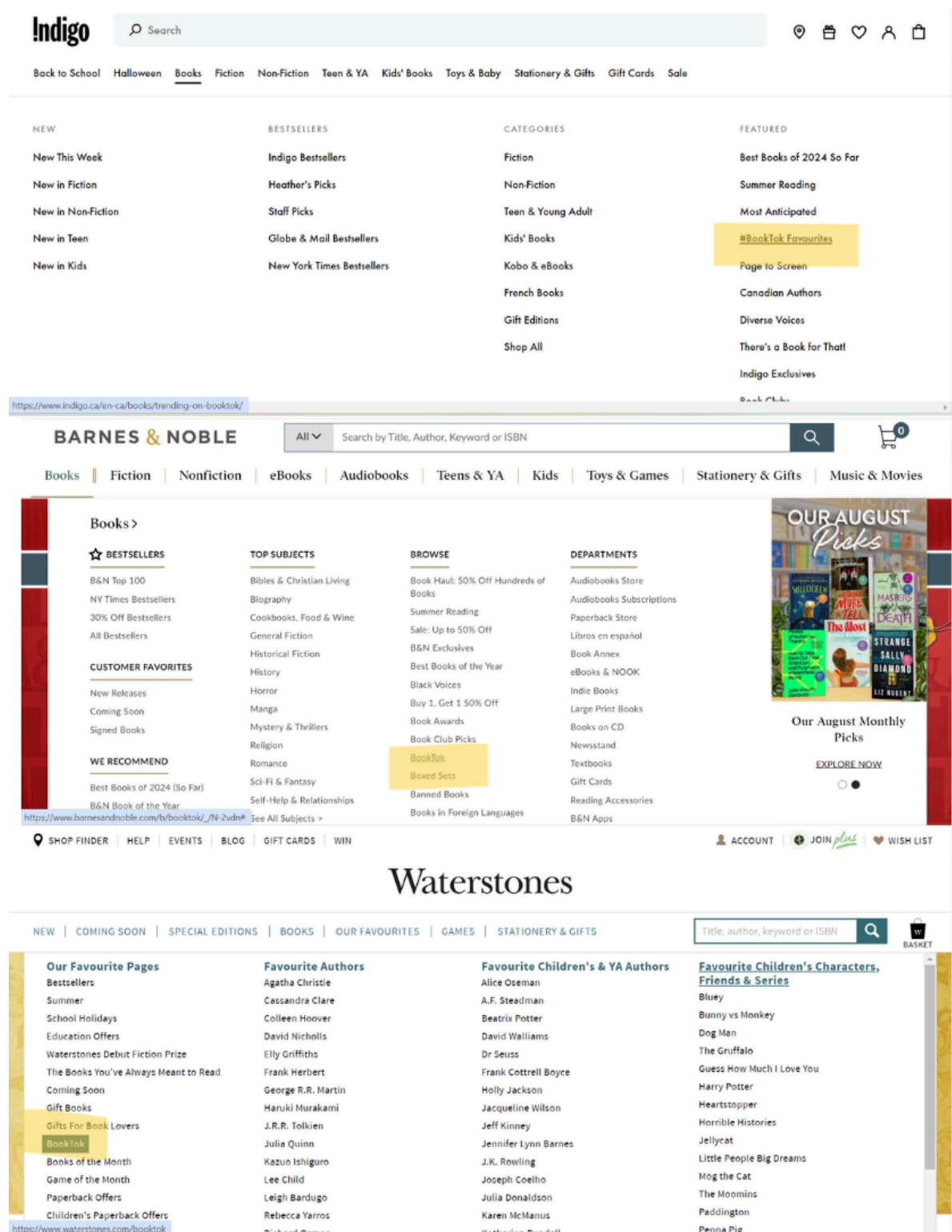
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## **Introduction, or Prologue**

BookTok, a community and subculture on the social media platform TikTok surrounding books and literacy, has helped the publishing industry make a comeback with the rise and newfound popularity of books, making bestsellers out of both new releases and books that have been on the market for many years. However, over the course of the past few years, BookTok has also presented numerous problematic qualities, concerning readers and writers alike. BookTok's increasingly limiting demands, as well as its unpredictability, bring struggles for many writers as they seek to either conform to its trends or succeed without having to directly pander their work to the demographic of readers on the platform.

## **Chapter One: How BookTok Began**

#BookTok has 45.2 million posts as of February 2025. (Source: TikTok). Well-known chain book-sellers have sections of their websites dedicated to books that have gained popularity across this online book community (see Figure 1). Even in person, some bookstores have tables stacked with these so-called "BookTok Books" (see Figure 2).



(Figure 1: A collection of screenshots of various booksellers' websites with a BookTok hyperlink highlighted. 2024-08-16)



*(Figure 2: Pictures of various “BookTok tables” in an Indigo Chapters bookstore. Photo Credit: Khaperska, 2024-08-25)*

BookTok gained popularity in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. As people started having more time for hobbies and entertainment, a lot of people turned to books. This period of isolation pushed people to go online to interact socially, so this global book club of sorts was very welcome amidst TikTok’s users and readers.

BookTok’s original activity consisted mainly of book reviews and recommendations. People would film themselves crying over a book as they read it, or record themselves talking about a book they loved, with informal speech patterns and a “messy authenticity” (Wiederhold). This, in its turn, persuaded others to pick up the books that elicited such strong reactions and experience the story and emotions for themselves.

People across the world were able to talk about books they liked or disliked and why, and for a good few years, BookTok was a more-or-less safe online environment. There was less shame surrounding books that weren’t considered “literary”, and one could find books they truly enjoyed from people that shared their tastes, no matter what they were (Nagy). Other trends that emerged, besides book reviews, were annotations, book and reader culture memes, and fan-content of popular books. Some BookTok community members made their entire platform

dedicated to creating book content, while others interacted with the content without making any of their own. (Asplund, Stig-Börje, et al.)

On top of the boon to readers that BookTok was becoming, it also became a boon for writers. They were now able to find their audience and their niche, posting content about their books. It allowed self-published and debut authors, or authors who wrote outside of traditional genres, to find people who were interested in their work. As well, BookTok allowed for the stories of marginalized voices to shine, and readers could find books with more representation that might not have had the chance to get popular otherwise. (Nagy)

The most popular book genre in this early era of BookTok was fantasy, with books such as *Shadow and Bone* by Leigh Bardugo, *The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue* by V. E. Schwab, and *Red Queen* by Victoria Aveyard making their mark on the BookTok community (O’Sullivan). Other popular books at the time were *Red, White, and Royal Blue* by Casey McQuiston, *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* by Taylor Jenkins Reid and *The Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller (Paul).

One of the most interesting aspects of BookTok’s ability to popularize books at a mass scale was that it wasn’t just new books that were gaining popularity. While *Addie LaRue* and *Red, White, and Royal Blue* were recent releases at the time, (2020 and 2019, respectively), there were many books that had been released years before BookTok’s introduction that were suddenly gaining a massive fanbase. *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, for example, was released in 2017, and *The Song Of Achilles* was released in 2011, almost a decade before BookTok began. (Paul)

The “fifteen seconds of fame” phenomenon also didn’t seem to apply to those books. *The Song of Achilles*, for example, started selling 10,000 copies a week in March 2021, “roughly nine

times as much as when it won the prestigious Orange Prize” in 2012 (Harris). *Red, White, and Royal Blue* got a movie deal with Amazon Prime, which was released in 2023, after being labelled a “bestseller” and a “beloved book”. (Thompson)

Bookstores and publishing companies started to notice this growing interest in books. In 2021, 2.4% of all book sales (or 20 million books sold) were influenced by BookTok (Saladino). In 2022, Bloomsbury, a British publishing house, saw their profits rise 220%! They attribute some of that success to BookTok (Wiederhold). In 2023, Simon and Schuster, an American publisher who publishes some of the biggest names in Young Adult (YA) and Adult fiction, saw one of their authors, Colleen Hoover, publish 8.6 million copies of her books after gaining popularity on BookTok (Paul).

The boom in sales that BookTok provided to these publishing houses led them to reach out to popular BookTok creators. They would send free copies of new releases so that the creators could post about the new books and help the publishers with marketing. These creators, such as Selene Velez (@moongirlreads\_) and Jenna Starkey (@jennajustreads) would be given deadlines and would be paid anywhere from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars per post in order to help publishing houses push their new releases into the public eye. (Harris)

Books were becoming “culturally relevant again” (Paul) and people were starting to get into reading for pleasure again, instead of seeing reading as something boring that one only did for school (Asplund, Stig-Börje, et al.).

### **The Sour and Spicy “Act Two”**

BookTok’s popularity continued to grow, but the demographic and the types of books that were getting popular were changing. Younger people got exposed to books with either really

distressing content, or otherwise overly erotic content (Paul). The top genre went from fantasy to romance, which isn't altogether a bad thing, as it removed the stigma surrounding romance novels that had been in existence for a while (Darbyshire). But as major publishers started to notice this change, they started to change their marketing strategy to accommodate it, which limited the reach of any other genre. This meant that authors who wrote other genres wouldn't be able to get the same kind of attention, and people who liked genres other than romance and fantasy wouldn't be able to find the books they'd have enjoyed as easily (Browne).

Romance has also started to push boundaries in terms of what people consider "romantic". The lines between romance and erotica have started to blur, and the slow introduction of romantic taboos (such as step-sibling relationships) are lacking nuance in the way they are presented. The BookTok audience, primarily young girls and women, being introduced to unhealthy dynamics and having it being presented as "romance" is dangerous if there is not enough media literacy to understand how dangerous these dynamics are (Vermont Cynic).

This has led to "dark romance", a genre filled with these sorts of taboos and borderline illegal or harassing behaviour labelled as "romantic". Typically filled with brooding, anti-villain male leads and quiet, pushover female leads, these books feature themes of abuse, dubious consent, and more. Some readers use these types of books to work through their own trauma, or to read a story where, despite everything that happens to these characters, there is a happy ending. However, there's no doubt that the harmful gender-based stereotypes, along with the severe lack of anyone other than white people, perpetuate a romanticized image of toxicity in relationships. (Crutcher)

As well, a new genre emerged: romantasy, a blend of romance and fantasy (Mackey). It rose to fame so fast that it replaced the "Middle Grade" section of the Goodreads Choice Awards



in 2023 (see Figure 3). Goodreads is a database of books of all genres, owned by Amazon since 2013. At the end of each year, users are allowed to vote on their favourite books of the year across genres in the Goodreads Choice Awards. This meant that authors who primarily wrote in the Middle Grade genre wouldn't be able to get the recognition they deserved.



(Figure 3: Goodreads Choice Awards categories 2022 and 2023, 2024-08-16)

Simultaneously, as the BookTok community got bigger, it seemed that the demographic was getting smaller and more precise. Literary agents and publishers have admitted that if a book has romance, they are more likely to pick up the book to be published, and books that aren't fitting the genres or tropes that BookTok's community deems popular don't get enough recognition no matter how well-written they are (Browne). And not just romance: the representation throughout YA literature that we loved to see and uplift in the early days of BookTok is slowly deteriorating as authors like Sarah J Maas and Colleen Hoover's books take to the top of the bestseller podium. (Saladino)

A phenomenon emerged of books being reduced to tropes, or the writing of books simply by using tropes in order to market to a wide audience who understands what these tropes entail. For example, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald is a well-studied novel in most Canadian or American high schools. Reducing it to tropes would be if someone tried to market *The Great Gatsby* by saying it had ““pining”, “exes to lovers” and [a] “love triangle,”” and ignoring “the

themes of social class, cynicism toward the American Dream and glamorization of certain problematic/abusive themes”. (Madruga)

This made it both easier to market books (people know what to expect if a book has the “enemies to lovers” trope, for example) but if a book doesn’t fit, it can make it harder for the author to find their audience. If people also only focus on the tropes and ignore the rest, it can make it harder for readers to branch out into new genres and learn new things, or experience new perspectives. (Madruga).

As readers gobble up books, the expectation for how long a book should be in production before publication has gotten skewed. It’s pretty natural for books to take over a year before publication: especially with major publishers. However, books are being released faster and faster as readers await sequels, even if they’re not ready. *Fourth Wing*, a BookTok chart-topper by Rebecca Yarros, had its sequel, *Iron Flame*, come out just six months afterwards (Vermont Cynic).

And finally, some BookTok-ers aren’t even reading the books they buy! “Book hauls” became prevalent in terms of what kind of content is being featured, and these BookTok-ers are simply buying books for the sake of having them, akin to trophies rather than something they’re going to actually use (Ducote). The authors still benefit: the money goes to them either way. However, from what I know and have experienced, the act of reading one’s book is more important than the money one gains from someone purchasing a copy.

### **What Do The Authors Think?**

Readers seem to be enjoying the evolution of BookTok. But these changes are negatively affecting writers of all ages.

There seemed to be mixed reactions from the authors whose books seem to have blown up so quickly in the early days of BookTok. Emily Lockhart, the bestselling author of *We Were Liars* (2014) got a video from her daughter where a reviewer on BookTok was talking about her book, six years after it had been released. It was back on the bestseller list the next month, understandably shocking Lockhart.

More recent is the story of author Alex Aster. She published her debut, *Curse of the Night Witch*, in 2020, which was fairly successful, but after publishing her novel *Lightlark* in 2022, BookTok helped it soar to popularity, and it sold almost 25,000 copies in its first week. Aster credits BookTok for *Lightlark*'s success, saying "TikTok has changed my life".

Other bestselling authors that seem to have gotten successful on BookTok are Tiffany D Jackson, author of *The Weight of Blood* (2022), and Aiden Thomas, author of *Cemetery Boys* (2020). They both have said that they enjoy how BookTok has become a part of their life, with Jackson stating "It took a while to get the hang of it and now I love it". Thomas talks about interacting with and sharing all sorts of BookTok content, even when it isn't related to his book, and how it's a great tool for authors who want to get to know what modern teens are like.

The problem, however, is that TikTok's algorithm is wildly unpredictable. Follower count doesn't matter, so anyone with a catchy, attention-seeking video can go viral and reach a massive audience. So it's really a matter of luck more than anything else about whether or not an author can succeed on BookTok. And with publishers and other writers looking for sales and more readers, the struggle to go viral is very real (O'Sullivan).

Emma Berquist, an author who came out with her dystopian novel *Devils Unto Dust* in 2018, is not in favour of BookTok, at least for her own use. She says that she is "not super comfortable with being on camera", and feels a sense of guilt for it. She says that it feels like "a

burden” but that if she’s not using BookTok, then she could be “losing out on sales” (O’Sullivan).

Alternatively, we have Xiran Jay Zhao, bestselling author of *Iron Widow* (2021). They have a history of being in cosplay and fandom communities, so they know how to navigate social media spaces. However, they don’t enjoy directly promoting their book and would rather make content they enjoy.

“If you see me promoting my book, respect the hustle. It’s tough out here for a queer Chinese author writing very queer Chinese books.” (Zhao)

As more and more authors choose to market on BookTok, with varying levels of success, more and more publishers are pushing the marketing onto their authors. YA author Jenny Elder-Moke says “Social media is to socialize, not to sell” and that authors are quickly having to become a sort of literary influencer: promoting their books to get sales more than anything else. Zhao says that they disagree with this idea of authors having to become TikTok stars in order to be successful as well.

Book blogs have become almost obsolete in the rise of BookTok: Briana from a book blog called *Pages Unbound*, who has been blogging since 2011, says that when applying for Advance Reader Copies, or ARCs, there isn’t even an option to disclose that you are a book blogger. (O’Sullivan).

### **Writers of the Next Generation**

I sent out a survey on Google Forms to a few teen writers on Bookstagram or Writergram, a community of writers and readers on Instagram, which has a lot of overlap with BookTok: in fact, over a third of the writers I surveyed used both platforms. I was part of a writer's group chat with numerous members, and I sent the Google Forms link to them, as well as other teen authors on the space I was familiar with, in order for them to fill it out and let me know their opinions.

They've begun to notice the glorification of toxicity, the overexposure to erotica, and the way people tend to focus on trends instead of writing what they want. One writer, Kyrie, even explained how in one of her first works, she decided to make a lot of changes to suit what readers "universally would like to see in books" until she "lost the soul of the book" and "couldn't continue writing it - at least for now".

They've noticed the good parts as well. A marketing platform and a sense of community seem to be two major advantages to BookTok. Especially when it comes to newer authors or self-published/indie authors.

### **A Word on Self-Publishing**

Self-publishing is nothing new. In the twentieth century, there existed such a thing as a "vanity press", where an aspiring author paid certain presses to have their book published, so as long as one had the money and a manuscript, and enough motivation to get it published, they could. While some vanity presses produced good quality books, others didn't by any means, while continuing to collect money from the authors (Laquintano). This created the stigma around

self-publishing that was around for quite some time, and that self-published authors to this day are fighting against.

But the term *self-publishing* in the twentieth century meant something different. It meant that one singular author did all the work, from writing and designing the book to getting in contact with printers to get the book into paper-and-ink, and while there are some overlaps with this process and the one of a vanity press, they weren't the same thing. These two methods of publishing differ yet again from indie publishing. Indie authors are authors that work with indie (independent) presses. They tend to be smaller, with less titles in their catalogues and releasing less titles per year. Recently, the term "indie" and "self-published" have become interchangeable, though it is worth noting that they are not the same (Laquintano).

Nowadays, in the digital world, sites such as Wattpad (2006) have emerged, where authors can create a free account and release their work freely while being able to interact with their readers as well as other authors. Some authors start by getting their audience on Wattpad and then going the traditional or self publishing route later on (Laquintano).

However, having one's book in print is still appealing to many, if not all authors. Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP) program and similar platforms allow authors to write, format, and publish their work in both print and e-book formats, and has the advantage of large royalties of up to 60% (Paperback Royalty). As well, self-published books often don't have an ISBN (International Standard Book Number), (Hartiningtyas), which is required to get books in bookstores, for example, or simply as a method of identification. Amazon's KDP and similar platforms allow self-published authors to have an ISBN.

This digital method of self-publishing allows younger or debut authors to start and gain an audience as well. Almost half of the young authors I've interviewed either used or planned to

use these types of platforms. When asked their motives behind their preferred publishing method, the biggest ones were control, and valuing creative freedom.

“I could never imagine letting someone else decide what I do with my book, what I put on the cover, when I should publish, etc.” (Vil. N. Melling, author of *Steal From The Rich*)

“I like having complete control over my work. With self-publishing, I decide where and when my book gets published.” (Grace Layton, author of *Stain On The Soul: The Tranquil Eye*)

“Because I get to have a lot of creative freedom and I move at my own pace!” (I. R. Miller, author of *Soul Saviour* and *Siren Song*)

“I wanted my creativity valued and in hand throughout publishing, so after querying over forty agents and realizing that publishing houses weren’t for me (at least right now) I decided to go indie (...)” (M. N. Creekmore, author of *Frost*)

### **Other Anecdotes on Booktok’s Influence**

None of the authors I interviewed explicitly mentioned BookTok and its restrictive audience as a motive for self-publishing, however that doesn’t mean that they’re unaware of it. These authors have platforms where they market themselves and their work to the world, mainly

on Instagram, however there is a large overlap with Instagram and TikTok. Content from one platform will seep into another, whether intentionally or not.

When asked if they catered their writing to BookTok's audience, a strong majority of them disagreed or strongly disagreed. Its presence, however, did not go unnoticed. Tropes, as I've talked about earlier, are almost revered on BookTok. It allows for predictability and understanding of what's in a book, so readers can pick and choose based on which dynamics they enjoy reading about. The authors I interviewed found inspiration through learning about new tropes, even including them in their books. However, the younger generation of writers, as compared to the older, more established authors I've mentioned earlier, don't seem to be as influenced by the BookTok demographic or what's popular, while being conscious of its impact.

This brings us back to the positive side of BookTok that was mentioned earlier, the BookTok of 2019-2021. The community aspect and the ability to find one's niche definitely stand out as good aspects of BookTok, or in this case, Bookstagram as well. Some writers got inspiration directly from BookTok as well, from creators posting writing prompts, for example, which is a great way to continue to practice writing and to keep up one's creativity.

To elaborate on the community aspect, a lot of the writers I've interviewed, especially those who interact mainly with Bookstagram, support one another in their writing endeavours. There doesn't seem to be an aspect of competition between them, with authors buying one-another's books and discussing them as if they are in miniature fan-spaces for each other's books. Follower count doesn't seem to matter, as teens create writer group chats and share writing excerpts and poetry amongst one another, giving advice and encouragement when needed.



However, that doesn't mean that these authors see BookTok through rose-tinted glasses. Teen authors are authors who, while young, maintain professionalism on their platforms and understand that marketing themselves and their work is a thing to be taken seriously. As they seek to succeed as authors, and have to establish themselves online, BookTok and Bookstagram's problems affect them too.

"The algorithm of the internet is also frustrating and detrimental to people trying to use the bookish community. Some authors blow up while others don't, and there really seems to be no rhyme or reason to it." (M. N. Creekmore)

The algorithm's unpredictability is a concern to many, if not all of those who seek to promote themselves or create content on the internet. In a world where our attention spans have shortened, the race to grab the attention of our newest readers is quite a cutthroat one. If an author can get their book noticed, or have just one short video reach incredible success, it can change the entire trajectory of their career. (BookTok O'Clock).

"There is an oversaturation in the market, and some books that are supposedly written poorly are still seeing success because of the marketing that the author does. See, it doesn't become a "this book is great, go read it," but rather a "this book has x y z a b c tropes" that doesn't always guarantee its quality." (Kyrie Cahyadi, author of *Nophos: Memories of Cadleigh*)

On the flip side to “anyone can market their book and gain success” is the concept of oversaturation. With enough time on one’s hands and enough media presence, almost anyone can have their platform reach hundreds, if not thousands or follows, likes, and more. Where BookTok seems to have stopped prioritizing quality, and instead focusing on what the masses want (from cliché and trope-filled romantasy to sexual harassment and abuse labelled as dark romance), trying to market a book outside those genres is difficult, especially on a platform with millions upon millions of posts.

“It makes me worry about people’s perception of reading in general, and I [often worry] how the community may struggle. Otherwise I try to focus on writing what I like and not what’s trendy.” (Anonymous)

Books represent education, intellect, knowledge, and sophistication, as they have for a very long period of time. Books as props, brought with oneself anywhere they go, have also been around for a while. As BookTok becomes one of the biggest names in the book discourse, and people carry books around for no other reason other than the “aesthetic” (Paul), it does pose the question of how readers will be perceived in the near future, similarly with writers.

### **Conclusion, or Epilogue**

BookTok is here to stay, it seems, with the advantages it poses to debut authors, indie or self-published authors, and authors that don’t fit the binary genre boxes. With writers finding community and a sense of belonging among others that share their delight for storytelling, there

is no doubt that online book spaces will continue to prosper both as marketing tools and socialization platforms.

However, there must be caution when it comes to reading the books BookTok has deemed popular. Age-inappropriate or potentially disturbing content runs rampant, and writers are quickly becoming concerned: *if that's what gets popular, and I don't want to write such content or narratives, will I still be able to be a successful author?*

BookTok's influence is unlike any other when it comes to the book market and writer culture, and forces authors of all ages to conform, complain, or find creative new solutions.

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