

Company of the Month: Penguin Books

In this month's Company of the month we are going to look at Penguin Books. Penguin is one of the most recognized brands in the world of publishing. Penguin started as part of the Bodley Head publishing company in 1935, so this year Penguin celebrates its 70th birthday.



In 1935, if you wanted to read a good book, you had to have either a lot of money or a library card. Cheap paperbacks were available but they were of very poor quality – the paper and printing were poor and the quality of the text was poor.

“Allen Lane did not invent the paperback, but he did realise its potential.”

One weekend in 1935, Allen Lane travelled from London to Exeter where he would have a meeting with Agatha Christie, the writer of crime stories. In 1935 the train journey to Exeter took more than four hours. When Allen Lane was at Exeter Station for his return journey, he was looking for something to read on the train. All he could find were popular magazines and reprints of Victorian novels.

With nothing to read during the journey, Allen Lane thought about the publishing business and his problems at Exeter station. He decided to produce a series of cheap, modern books which might be suitable for travellers.

Back in his office he explained his idea to his secretary Joan Coles and asked her to suggest a name for the series. He said he wanted something ‘dignified but flippant’, perhaps the name of an animal or bird. Joan Coles suggested a penguin. An artist was sent to London Zoo to do some sketches of penguins. Soon one of the most popular logos was created.

The first Penguin books were a risky business venture. In 1935 most serious books cost about 8 shillings. Allen Lane wanted to sell his books for sixpence – one sixteenth of the price of a normal hard cover book.

Allen Lane told the *Bookseller* magazine in 1938.: “*I would be the first to admit that there is no fortune in this series for anyone concerned. ... These Penguins are a means of converting book borrowers into book buyers.*”

Allen Lane was referring to the fact that many readers borrowed their books from public libraries. They did not buy books for themselves.

The reactions from authors varied.

If a book is any good, the cheaper, the better. George Bernard Shaw.

The Penguin books are splendid value for sixpence, so splendid that if other publishers had any sense they would combine together and suppress them.

George Orwell.

These Penguin Books are amazingly good value for money. If you can make the series pay for itself, you will have performed a great publishing feat. J. B. Priestly

Well, the first Penguins were a great success. Within twelve months Penguin had sold a staggering 3 million paperback books.

Allen Lane claimed he was not surprised by the success. *“There are many who despair at what they regard as the low level of people’s intelligence. We, however, believed in the existence in this country of a vast reading public for intelligent books at a low price.”*

In 1937 Penguin Books moved to new offices and a warehouse at Harmondsworth, near what is now Heathrow Airport . From this enormous warehouse, they could distribute books to railways stations and shops around Britain .

As World War II drew closer Penguin published special books to inform and educate the public. *Searchlight on Spain* and *What Hitler Wants* achieved record-breaking sales. After the war started *Aircraft Recognition* was a popular handbook for both the military and civilians. Through the war, despite shortages of paper, Penguin continued to publish.

A Penguin could fit into a soldier’s pocket or kitbag. It was especially prized in prison camps. Martin Bell.

Penguin books made up for the shortage of entertainment during the war years.

In the years after the war had ended Penguin continued to publish controversial books. In 1960 Penguin Books was charged under the Obscene Publications for publishing *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, a novel by D. H. Lawrence. This novel contains detailed descriptions of sexual games between Lady Chatterley and her gamekeeper Mellors. In the court, the prosecuting lawyer asked the jury ‘if this is a book you would let your wife, your daughter or even your servants to read.’ The jury (who probably had no servants) clearly thought the prosecution was out-of-date and decided in favour of Penguin Books. In six weeks, Penguin sold 2 million copies of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*.

Penguin has continued to be one of the most successful publishers in Britain . As it celebrates its 70th birthday, tributes have come from many parts of the world.

“Penguin has done more for the education and cultural uplift of the country than all the universities and their teachers combined. “



“Penguin paperbacks offer high culture at low cost.”

“I went to a good school and two good universities, but I learnt more from Penguin than from any teacher or lecturer.”

Activities

- *Read the text as quickly as you can and find the answers to these questions.*
- How old is Penguin this year?
 - 20
 - 50
 - 70
- Who did Allen Lane go to Exeter to see?
 - Agatha Christie
 - Joan Coles
 - George Orwell
- What did he want to buy at Exeter station?
 - Something to drink.
 - Something to eat.
 - Something to read.
- Who thought of using a penguin for the series?
 - Agatha Christie
 - Allen Lane
 - Allen Lane 's secretary
- How much were the first Penguin Books?
 - one sixteenth
 - six pence
 - 8 shillings
- Did Allen Lane expect to make a fortune?
 - Yes
 - No
- Who said Penguin Books were “amazingly good value”?
 - George Bernard Shaw
 - Allen Lane
 - J. B. Priestly.
- How many books did they sell in the first year?
 - 25
 - one million
 - three million

- Where is Harmondsworth?
 - in London
 - near Exeter
 - near Heathrow

- Who was Lady Chatterley's lover?
 - Mellors, her gamekeeper
 - George Bernard Shaw
 - D. H Lawrence

- *Now read the text again more carefully and answer these questions.*
 - How did most people who had little money manage to read good books in 1935?
 - Why were Penguin books 'a risky business'?
 - Why do you think George Orwell said publishers should suppress Penguin Books?
 - How did Allen Lane want to expand the market for books?
 - Why did Allen Lane think he would succeed?
 - Why did Penguin sell so many copies of Lady Chatterley's Lover?

- *Discuss:*
 - One of the normal principles of business is that you should charge the highest price the market will bear whilst giving you the turnover and profits you require. Did Penguin follow this principle? If not, why was it successful?
 - Some people say the book is dead. In future all text will be distributed on line digitally. People will download and print their own books. Do you think this will happen?
 - It was said that the technological invention which has changed the world in the invention of the book – cheap, portable, easily accessible knowledge. Do you agree?