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Penguin celebrates its 80th birthday – and cashes in on its past

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Black, white and read all over. Penguin

Hanging “Established 1935” over your door does nothing to drive business. After all, 80 years is not a particularly long time for a publisher to have been in operation with many publishing companies having substantially longer pedigrees. Faber & Faber celebrated its 80th anniversary in 2009, and the origins of companies including HarperCollins, Hodder Headline, and most notably Oxford University Press, extend far back into previous centuries.

Yet Penguin has been a serial celebrator of its anniversaries. Its 80th, in 2015, provides no exception. This year it is undertaking a one-off project which re-enforces both the Penguin brand and its unique history.

The “Little Black Classics” – 80 little black-and-white books selling at 80p each – go on sale on February 26. The series celebrates one of Penguin’s most iconic lists as well as its anniversary – the

Authors



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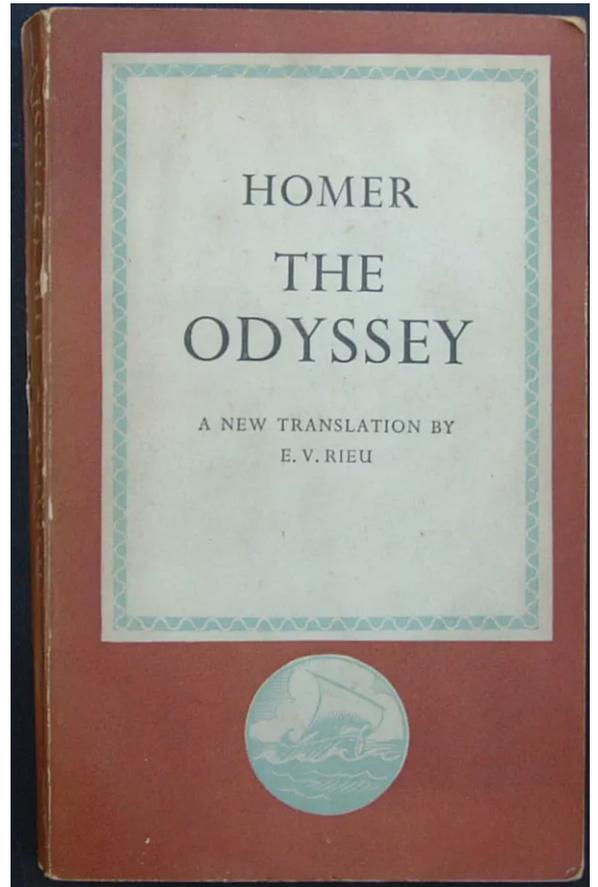
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Penguin Classics. With 2,600 titles, Penguin Classics sells 20,000 each day worldwide. In its press release for the series, Penguin claims that one in every 32 books sold in the UK is a Penguin Classic.

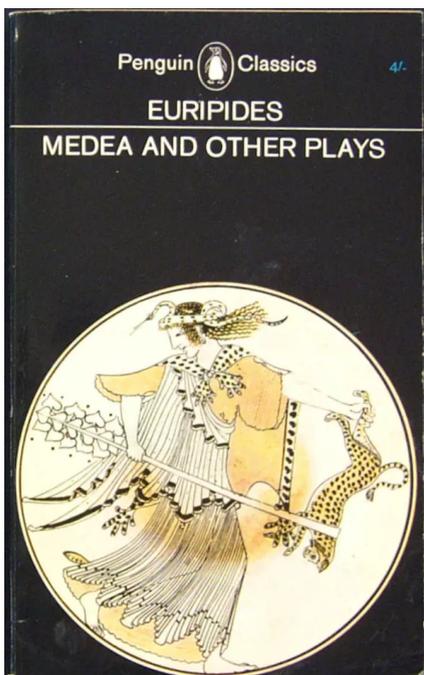
At 69 years of age, the Classics are a younger sibling. Launched in 1946, the series was a gamble by Penguin's founder Allen Lane, who appointed E V Rieu as editor of the series. Its first title, *The Odyssey*, was translated by Rieu himself, who worked on it while serving in the Home Guard during the Blitz. *The Odyssey* was an instant hit and, with sales of over 3m copies, became the most successful Penguin. That is, until it was eclipsed by D H Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* after the obscene publications trial in 1960.

The first Classics cover was designed by John Overton, and it was only in 1963 that Germano Facetti, Penguin's artistic director, changed them – against the wishes of Rieu – to what became known as the “Black Classics”. Rieu, rather grumpily, wrote to Lane complaining:



The original classic. Alec Spencer

I find it hard to believe that you would allow a newcomer to the firm, without discussion with me, its editor, to mutilate a series that you and I had created ... and have since made world famous.



The makeover. Alec Spencer

But others took to the new look and the cover design of Little Black Classics, designed by Jim Stoddart, echoes the earlier Penguin tri-band. The new list is eclectic, featuring short texts (the books are only 64 pages each) from authors including Boccaccio, Matsuo Basho, and Elizabeth Gaskell.

More than half of the titles are in translation, which is of particular note. This is a figure far higher than the more depressing estimate that only 3% of books in the UK market are translated. The original Classics were originally all translations (or from Old English), bringing literature from other languages to Britain.

All business no play?

For Penguin, this is another example of clever back-list publishing, turning existing assets into re-marketable

products dressed up in smart little outfits for a 21st-century audience. The pocket-money principle on which Penguin paperbacks were introduced to the 1935 marketplace endures in the low price point of the Little Black Classics.

Branding is a perennial challenge for the publishing industry. Customers' allegiance, if at all, is to individual authors or series rather than the publisher. Penguin's republishing, however, has branding at its heart. The press release for the new series even repeats the story of how Lane, in his search for a "dignified but flippant" identity, sent one of his staff down to London Zoo to make sketches of the penguins.

For a publisher with a well-established brand such as Penguin, the opportunity to say "Happy Birthday" provides a business opportunity. This keeps the brand at the forefront, celebrates its capacity to spot quality content and enables it to make more money. These go some way towards explaining why a publisher might be interested in its past and see a variety of different commercial and cultural values in it.



A whole lotta merch. mapurbanlinguisticlandscape, CC BY

Of course, the commodification inherent in such brand maintenance is not without its critics. One writer, commenting on Penguin merchandising ("bags, mugs, tea towels and deck chairs"), noted ironically how branded blank-page notebooks were more expensive than the books published under the "resurrected" 1935 Penguin design, deeming it a "once-radical publisher flogging its illustrious history". Penguin's historical role in providing cheap and yet good-quality books, particularly via its Classics and Pelican series, fed into a period of expanding education and changing societal mores – not least with the risky publication of the unexpurgated *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Looking at such a history, it is hard not to agree.

Yet Penguin – and its founder Allen Lane – was always highly commercial. It looked to take advantage of business opportunities wherever they arose. The new Little Black Classics are the same. While they could simply be understood as a commodification, keeping the Penguin brand in the minds of readers, they also extend to us an introduction to a range of lesser-known authors and texts: Baltasar Gracian, Pu Songling, and Nikolai Leskov, to name but three of the 80.

 Books Penguin

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