

# PUBLISHING NOW

## Has the impact of coronavirus affected people's reading habits? Kathleen Whyman asks the publishers

In these uncertain times when we're all worried about health, the economy, mental wellbeing and where we can buy toilet rolls, it's comforting to know that of the few things continuing to thrive, reading is one.

But what are we reading? Are people looking for complete escapism with cosy crimes and romantic comedies or seizing this opportunity to work their way through literary classics? Are people seeking out dystopian novels they now feel they can relate to or are they using this time to improve their knowledge with non-fiction works? The latter would certainly prove handy with all the Zoom quizzes we're taking part in.

I'm definitely in the escapism category and am turning to books that make me laugh and take my mind off lockdowns and pasta shortages – but what about the rest of the nation?

Hannah Smith, editorial director at Aria and Aries, says: 'For every reader this will be different, but we've certainly seen an uplift in our commercial fiction that gives readers the chance to escape, or at least to remember a world where we weren't living through Covid. People seem to want stories full of hope and courage and communities coming together in the face of adversity.'

'That said, we're definitely seeing people comment on how odd it is to have characters

who are freely hugging or not wearing masks, so we may see this feature in books soon as it begins to re-present.'

Hannah Todd, commissioning editor at HarperCollins, feels that many people are reading as a means of understanding.

'As part of my role I do a weekly breakdown of the Amazon UK Kindle charts,' she says. 'During this time I've been tracking a change in people's reading habits, shown through the popularity surges in self-help, escapism and even pandemic-related fiction.'

To illustrate this, she lists *Lockdown* by Peter James (*the crime thriller that predicted a world in quarantine*), *The Rules of Contagion* by Adam Kucharski and *A Bit of a Stretch*, *The Diaries of a Prisoner* by Chris Atkins as titles that made it into the charts during lockdown.

Todd also expects to see the publishing industry discussing 'pandemic fiction' for quite some time.

'It's definitely something I'm interested in,' she says. 'Over the lockdown period I had a romance book submitted set in a locked-down block of flats: a *Love Actually* meets global pandemic romcom. And I loved it! It was relatable and I could see myself in the characters, who were thrust into 24/7 company with partners and family.'

'We're living through a situation unlike anything we've ever experienced before and there's a level of comfort brought from the universal.'

### The great escape

Sara-Jade Virtue, brand development director at Simon & Schuster finds a level of escapism in the novels she loves most, 'whether that's a romance or a comedy, a historical novel, a total weepy or a gritty thriller,' she says. 'But I equally enjoy novels where I can relate in some way to either the characters or their story.'

'What we've seen during 2020 is that brilliantly well-written stories across all genres are continuing to thrive and find an audience, and novels that offer a strong sense of escapism are selling really well.'

'It also depends on people's mood,' says Janet Gover, New Writers' Scheme co-ordinator for the Romantic Novelists' Association. 'Some days I want escapism; some days I don't. A lot of readers are like



Hannah Smith of Aria and Aries

that – that's why we have such a range of books out there.'

'At first, everyone seemed to be speculating that we would all need escapism to counteract the difficulties of the real world,' reflects Todd. 'Netflix started pushing escapist reality TV to viewers, especially after the unifying effect of almost everyone watching *Tiger King*, and "books to make you feel better" / "books to make you laugh" were popular search terms in the Amazon Kindle Store.'

'Yet to me it feels as though most people are still sticking to their preferred genres. It's not like a quarantine is going to make a crime reader into a romance reader or vice versa.'

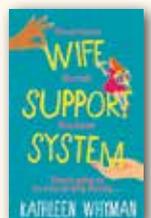
'Some people like a gritty crime story with gory murders and some don't,' agrees Gover. 'Some want to read about Covid, some don't. Personally, I wouldn't put down a book because it had Covid in it, nor would I read a book just because it had Covid in it. I want a good story and I don't set boundaries.'

A factor that could have been detrimental to the industry was the closing of bookshops and libraries, but luckily readers didn't let this minor detail deter them.

'This period has definitely changed how people discover books,' confirms Genevieve Pegg, publishing director at HarperNorth. 'There have been far fewer commuters and holidaymakers grabbing a new read for the train or the plane. Bookshops have been hugely resourceful in finding ways to connect with buyers while high streets are shut, and we need to keep that spirit of innovation as we see what 2021 brings.'

So let's embrace the Christmas spirit and support our bookshops by buying books for everyone as presents this year!

• Kathleen's comic novel *Wife Support System* is published by Hera Books and is available in Kindle format from Amazon



HarperNorth's Genevieve Pegg