

The Gen Z Book Review: BookTok and Its Evolution as a Genre

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In this article, Kayleen Haile uses her experiences as both a reader and a BookTok creator to explore the evolution of the genre of BookTok book reviews. Using research from rhetorical genre studies and activity theory scholars, Haile argues that BookTok itself is a complex and changing activity system, one impacted—for better or for worse—by consumers, producers, and commodification.

“And then I want to weep. To think I haven’t dressed appropriately for alien abduction” (Dixon). That quote is from the BookTok famous book, *Ice Planet Barbarians* by Ruby Dixon (Figures 1 and 2). This series was first independently published in 2015, but since it went viral on TikTok, it was bought by Berkley, an imprint of Penguin Random House, and is now being republished with fancy new covers and the same ole tentacle extremities. Now you may be thinking, “What might possess one of the five major publishers in the US to republish alien-focused romance novels?” And let me tell you, my friend, it is BookTok.



Figures 1 and 2: Two covers of the book *Ice Planet Barbarians*, the left being the independently published version, and the right being the traditionally published cover.



Figure 3: This QR code leads to a TikTok by creator @caitsbooks.

What Is BookTok and Why Should You Care?

Maybe you’ve heard of BookTok from the tables they have at Barnes & Noble, or from one of those videos that show up on your “for you page” (FYP) and you think they are telling you this crazy story about their life, but it turns out to be the plot of a book. But in case you haven’t heard of it, BookTok is the section of TikTok that posts—you guessed it—about books. BookTok was first started by the creator @caitsbooks at the start of the pandemic and quickly grew into a bookselling machine (Figure 3).

You may be thinking, “Why should I care about BookTok?” Or, “How is this even related to the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*?” Well, I’ll tell you. BookTok is a textbook example of the complicated evolution of a literate activity.

What first started as

- “Here is this book I *loved*, you should read it.”

Then evolved into

- “Here is this book I *wrote*, you should buy it and read it.”

Which then evolved into

- “Here is this book we are *publishing*, you should buy it.”

And I think that’s a really interesting evolution. Over the two years during which BookTok has become a thing, the way that people are using the platform has drastically changed. These changes are a great example of what happens when people and genres and new technologies and spaces get mixed up together in new ways.

When it was first created, there was no desire to make money by posting silly little videos. But when authors and publishers joined the platform, we entered the era of the commodification of BookTok, which the original creators didn’t want or expect. **Commodification** is the transformation of a “thing” into a commodity, which essentially means that people can now make a profit off of it (“Commodification”). Because the original BookTok creators didn’t start posting with the intention of generating a profit, they obviously had a reaction to the commodification of the platform. Some have embraced it, and these folks have sponsorships with publishers and work alongside authors. Some actively work against commodification by never

promoting sponsored content and refusing to interact with authors on the platform. Some, like myself, land somewhere in the middle.

As BookTok evolves, we are also witnessing the evolution of a genre. The term genre, at least in rhetorical genre studies, doesn't refer to a particular category of text, such as romance, science fiction, or true crime. Instead, genre is used to define ways that texts work in the world. For rhetorical genre studies scholars Anis S. Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff, **genres** work to “normalize activities and practices, enabling community members to participate in these activities and practices in fairly predictable, familiar ways in order to get things done” (79). But they warn that genres also have to change when the communities using them or the technologies used to produce them change, or they “risk becoming obsolete” (Bawarshi and Reiff 79). BookTok demonstrates the fairly quick evolution of the genre of book reviews. I think people tend to think of the book review as a pretty stable genre, because they are easy to spot. It doesn't matter where they are published, whether that be in a print publication or online somewhere. A lot of times they are even specifically labelled “Book Review.” They usually include a basic plot summary, describe the quality of the writing, and assess the general “value” of a book. These recognizable features are what one would call **genre conventions**. Part of the appeal of book reviews is that due to their easily spotted genre conventions, they are accessible to readers wanting to read a particular book and people trying to figure out what books they might like to read. In most cases, they aren't written by the actual author of the book that is being reviewed. In fact, often reviews published in newspapers or magazines (e.g., the reviews that have long been published in *The New York Times* or *Library Journal*) are written by someone who is a professional book reviewer. However, once book reviews moved into online spaces like Amazon, the book review genre changed, becoming more the territory of readers explaining what they like (or don't like) about a book, rather than being a more formal text written only by professionals. The spaces where book reviews by nonprofessionals appear have also evolved. For example, we've gone from book blogging, to BookTube (book-focused content on YouTube), to Bookstagram (book-focused content on Instagram), to where we are now, which is BookTok. These reviews all have their own alterations of the more “typical” form of the book review that one would see in *The New*

Activity System: Take 1

Activity systems are defined by Donna Kain and Elizabeth Wardle as being made up of “a group of people who share a common object and motive over time, as well as the wide range of tools they use together to act on that object and realize that motive.”

In the early days of BookTok, the object(ive) and goals of the group were primarily just to share ideas about books they loved to read.

York Times or on Amazon, because a part of growing on these platforms is personality. People don't really care *who you are* on an Amazon book review, but on BookTube for example, half of the battle to get people to care and watch your review is the personality and the brand that you've created. Out of all of these video-review platforms, BookTok is the only one that has seen such a dramatic change in audience and creators since its conception and contains content created by both the consumers and the producers—the producers in this scenario being both authors and publishers. The evolution of the genre of BookTok can be mostly blamed on the producers joining the platform, which changed how people consumed and created content on BookTok.

BookTok: The Activity System in the Early Days

When BookTok first started, it was made up almost exclusively of fans of reading, not so much any of the people that do the writing or work on the business side of publishing. According to Donna Kain and Elizabeth Wardle's definition of an **activity system**, this community could be understood as being focused on the "object" of sharing stories about books they had read. They did this through making short videos using the shared platform of TikTok. At first, BookTok was a platform that hadn't been polluted with paid promotions or authors trying to promote their own books in weirdly cringey ways. It was just people who love to read, posting about the books that they loved or making jokes about books. BookTok started off as a community of readers, for fellow readers. BookTokers, people who post on BookTok, didn't start posting in hopes of getting noticed by their favorite authors or getting deals with publishers. Instead, they saw a cool, short video medium where they could talk about the books they loved.

@BookaPlenty (Alias–Me): The Activity System (and Genre) Evolves

As you may have guessed or sussed out, I am a BookTok creator. I started on the platform pretty early into the pandemic and have been posting fairly consistently since then. Because I am on this platform and have been for years, that offers me a fairly unique perspective on this topic. And some of the information I can share involves specifically what I do with my videos to increase my viewers and followers. This is a fairly natural evolution of the genre of BookTok reviews and the activity system of making, sharing, and viewing reviews. That is, as users started posting more and more videos, a

new goal for creators evolved: to get more people to view and use the videos they made. And to do this, creators had to make choices in how they composed the videos that would, hopefully, lead to more viewing and more specific kinds of viewing.

In terms of my own content, my form of the BookTok review is a lot different from other creators. I find that the videos where I actually physically hold up a book and talk about it eloquently don't do as well as when I let my personality shine and just make a joke about a quote or an aspect of a book that I like. Due to the nature of the platform and how the algorithm works (for me at least), the shorter the video and the more text I use, the better it does (Figure 4). This is because people often have to watch the video multiple times to read all the text, therefore making my post have a longer view time, which puts my video on more FYPs. Sometimes, a video does even better if I don't mention the specific book at all, just a quote. This is because people become interested and comment asking for the title, which increases engagement, and once again makes the algorithm push my content more. That is what a lot of creators do, especially if they promote mainly romance novels. A lot of their promotion is just posting a really good quote to get people interested, and then not mentioning the book, so they get more engagement. I feel like that is taking advantage of your audience a bit, so if I don't mention the title explicitly, I mention it in the caption, usually through the hashtags, so if people care that much, they can see it there. Due to the content I post, usually I just talk about something I liked in the book, not citing anything really of substance except for the tropes and a quote that I really like. That is enough to get people excited to read the book. So, as it evolved, BookTok not only became a place where people shared information about books; it also became a place where creators made changes to the genre, such as how we talk about books, what we quote, and how we try to get viewers and keep them engaged.



Figure 4: This QR code leads to a TikTok post by @BookaPlenty.

How Authors Change Reader Spaces

As BookTok grew in both size and popularity, it became more appealing to both authors and publishers. Here was a new social media platform to promote their books, and since it was still fairly new, there wasn't much competition. In the first few months of BookTok (March to May 2020), posts were made almost exclusively by readers, but then authors started to join the

platform. At this point in time, it was only a handful of authors, but it was enough to make a difference.

Now while this seems all good and dandy, it was not always fun and exciting for BookTok creators. In online book reviews, one rule of politeness that reviewers often follow is that they don't tag authors in negative reviews. But TikTok is an algorithm-based platform. If you are an author posting about your book, using the hashtag for your book, and tagging the tropes, your algorithm is going to show you content that is related to that. So now someone could post a negative video about your book, and even if they don't tag you, there is still a decent chance that you would see the video.

Coming from someone who has been on BookTok since the start and frequently posted videos calling out authors, this terrified me. I have a friend who posted a negative review for a book that they were provided with, and the author saw it and then made a whole post about it on Twitter and sent their fan base after my friend, so this fear wasn't unwarranted. At first, because BookTok was mainly made up of readers, it was a safe space to post your opinions and jokes about books without fear that the wrong people may see it. But when authors started joining, I began to censor what I posted based on whether that author had joined TikTok or not. This was one of the earliest examples of both commodification and the evolution of the genre. Authors obviously joined the platform to sell books. This wasn't the intention of the first creators on BookTok. Physical sales of books weren't necessarily a goal. But for whatever reason, and I am still not totally sure how it happened, BookTokers were affecting real, physical sales of books. Books that were published decades ago were climbing back onto *The New York Times* Best Sellers list. Books that had their hype back in 2012 got popular again and went into new printings. Even @caitsbooks, the original creator of BookTok, didn't know this was going to happen. It's clear to see why authors saw BookTok as a platform that they *had* to jump onto. Social media having this much power over book sales had never happened before, and the platform still didn't have many, if any, authors on it. It was the perfect time to join and take advantage of being one of the first authors on the platform to try to make your book go viral. Authors need to sell books to make money, and if their books go viral, this leads to a massive increase in book sales. They wanted to take advantage of that before the platform became overrun with authors, which is definitely something that has happened at this point. Before BookTok was a thing, an author would do a guest post on a blog or a collab for a YouTube video or Instagram post, but it never went as far as authors permanently joining the platform and making content that promoted their books.

Conflicts Emerge as the Activity System Expands

Having authors join the activity system of BookTok might not seem like it would make all that much difference. I mean, we're all still book lovers, right? Wrong. Authors being so intertwined with these review spaces turned out to be not so good for reviewers, or for the authors. When authors entered the space, possibly with the idea of promoting their books, they also encountered negative reviews, and some definitely didn't know how to handle that very well. Take Becky Albertalli, the author of *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, which the movie *Love, Simon* (2018) is based on. Albertalli faced a lot of criticism for her writing about a gay male teen, when it was assumed she was a straight woman. Eventually the hate she received became too much and she posted a coming-out post where she announced that she is bisexual and was forced out of the closet. This situation is obviously terrible, but Albertalli really ran with it anytime she received any criticism. For example, there is a lesbophobic line in *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, and when users simply stated that they didn't like the book because of that line, Albertalli responded and instead of apologizing, defended the line and labelled people who objected to the line as homophobic.

While this is an extreme example, small instances like this happen all the time. As a person who has participated in fandom spaces since I joined the Internet, one belief that I will always defend is that creators shouldn't be a part of fandom spaces. Individuals take whatever meaning from a story, and what they chose to do with it is not the author's business unless they are explicitly tagged with the intention of them seeing and commenting on it. In a fandom activity system, carrying out motives, goals, and objectives requires a certain kind of freedom—both the freedom to adapt the text to the fans' own experiences and the freedom to comment on the text as they choose.

BookTok Activity System: Take 2

When authors got involved in BookTok, the activity system became more complex, because the goals of the community of users and creators were no longer as unified. Different users, using the same space, were trying to achieve different object(ive)s.

As a result of the evolution of the book review genre on BookTok, authors are being forced to confront both negative and positive content about their books. They may join the platform because, from the outside, it looks like the perfect way to market their book. But what I think a lot of authors on BookTok fail to realize is that they are joining a previously reader-dominant activity system and are therefore going to be forced to see people both talk about and interact with their book. This actually points to an important and contentious way the review genre evolved on BookTok.

Reviews, for the most part, are not for authors but for readers. And on other social media platforms, authors can avoid reviews or comments in which they've been tagged. But due to the switch in platform and the algorithm that aided this genre's evolution, authors can be forced to see reviews of their own book without ever wanting to or seeking them out. A collaboration of sorts was starting to begin with authors and BookTokers. BookTokers previously held all the control over what books became popular, what content was being made, and how people promoted books on BookTok. But with the addition of authors to this space, BookTok creators lost some of this previously held control. Authors and BookTok creators both had similar content on the platform, but entirely different goals. They were using the same tools and platform, but they were actually engaged in different, often competing, activity systems. Authors specifically wanted sales and pre-orders of their own books. That's really all an author can ask for. But BookTok creators don't really care about actual sales. We aren't getting a commission for every copy of a book that we sell. A lot of us just want more people to read and enjoy a book that we liked. I know a lot of people on BookTok, including myself, don't really have friends in real life that like to read, so we wanted to talk to people who read and like the same books as us. If you noticed that no one had read a book that you loved, you posted about it hoping that more people would read it and you could talk about it together. The evolution of this genre, and the competing activity systems, created friction for both authors and BookTok creators that hadn't previously existed.

Publishers on BookTok (aka Capitalism Ruins Everything Once Again)

Once BookTok gained popularity and started affecting book sales, publishers saw a cheap and efficient way to market their upcoming books. BookTok, in the early days, was made up mostly of teenagers who were bored during quarantine and had no idea how much money to ask for in exchange for a post, so publishers could get a lot of free advertisement and make creators feel as if they were lucky to be getting an ARC (advance reader copy) as a form of payment (ARCS are early copies of a book sent out to reviewers before publication). This is still a fairly common practice for publishers. Instead of actually paying for marketing, they instead send you a finished copy of the book, in exchange for you posting about it. While this is nice, because then you don't have to buy the book, it is not a fair exchange for the number of people who see your video about the book and who then go out and buy it themselves. With the addition of paid posts and posts in exchange for a book, a new problem arose—another change in the genre and activity system that had some negative consequences, for readers and for creators.

When BookTok first started, you knew that if someone was posting about a book, they actually enjoyed it. No one was getting sponsorships yet, so everyone was recommending books that they would genuinely stand behind. But with the addition of sponsorships and paid posts, it became harder to figure out if someone enjoyed a book or if they were just getting paid to say that they liked it. What made BookTok so great at first was that people were giving out genuine recommendations and those recommendations made a book blow up to the point where it could get on *The New York Times* Best Sellers list years after its initial publication. This aspect of the activity system, its grassroots power, was tainted when publishers joined the game. This is an example of the idea of commodification that I wrote about earlier in the article. Publishers wanted to use the activity system for still another, different object(ive): they wanted participants to review specific books, as a way for them to make a profit, which is a commodification of both the people (BookTok creators) and the platform and genre. What started out as an activity based on fun and shared interest started to morph into a way to make money—although not for the creators themselves. This also had an impact on the activity system as a whole, because viewers of content on BookTok had a lot of suspicion and distrust related to the idea of sponsored content, so it changed the way they interacted with reviews on the platform.

Book of the Month (BOTM) Barges In: Activity System Take 3

This next evolution of the activity system of BookTok, in which publishers became involved, worked to change the activity system and the genre of the BookTok review even further. Book of the Month (BOTM) is a monthly book subscription box that markets itself toward nonreaders who aren't up to date with new releases. Participants who pay a yearly fee are allowed to choose books from a list. A bare bones subscription box only comes with the one book that you choose out of five selected releases. BookTubers (book-focused YouTubers) were some of the first paid supporters of the service a couple of years ago. But when BookTok started to gain more and more popularity, BOTM knew that they had to take advantage.

See, BookTok is one of the first, if not the first, book-centered social media platforms that is accessible to both readers and nonreaders. If you don't already read and aren't specifically searching out new recommendations, you aren't going to find Book Twitter or BookTube. Because of TikTok's algorithm, the people that are seeing BookTok recommendations are both readers that just want new recommendations and people innocently scrolling on TikTok when suddenly a BookTok video popped up and now they are

excited because they had previously convinced themselves that people stopped reading with the invention of cell phones.

BOTM saw this level of reach and ran with it, sponsoring a *ton* of different BookTokers to promote their box. BOTM is one of the most popular sponsored posts on BookTok (Figure 5). Creators that work with them have to post three videos each month and are brought on month by



Figure 5: This QR code leads to a sponsored post for Book of The Month (BOTM).

month. Some creators only work with BOTM for one month if their posts don't do well, and some work with them for months at a time. If you want to keep getting paid and receiving five free books each month, you have to have a consistent and growing reach with these videos. Having to post three videos every month for a subscription box that may not even have a book that interests you can get quite exhausting. Some of my friends on BookTok often talk about running out of ideas for original content to make and having to resort to creating very weird videos like seeing how high you can stack all your BOTM editions.

Because of this particular commodification of BookTok content, there is definitely an oversaturation of BOTM content on BookTok. Everyone who is seeing these videos and would be interested in subscribing, already has. I can tell which day BOTM asks creators to post about the first book in that month's box because my following page will suddenly become a BOTM ad. Every creator on BookTok knows that these are sponsored posts and many of the creators don't even read the books they are promoting for the box. What once was a place where people could talk about and recommend books and services that they genuinely enjoyed and wanted more people to be aware of has now become infiltrated with sponsored content by people that don't even really enjoy the products or books that they are promoting. This ultimately means that BOTM is making BookTok less trustworthy because of these sponsorships.

The Distrust of Sponsored Content

To show an example of this, I'll talk about my recent posts about season two of *Bridgerton*. Netflix and Avon Books, the publishers of the *Bridgerton* books, sent me a massive package to promote the upcoming season. I didn't know that they were sending me this box, but I do love *Bridgerton*, so I was excited nonetheless. I posted a video in which I open the box and do a little bit about being all fancy watching the show. This post currently has 500

views and only seventy-eight likes which is pretty low for me. The day after season two of *Bridgerton* came out, I quickly made a video in my car as I waited to go into work about how I related to the characters of Kate and Anthony. This video that was not sponsored and that was made in about five minutes currently has 64.3k views and 6.9k likes (Figure 6). If this doesn't show how viewers value personal opinions rather than sponsored ones, I don't know what will. This is a clear example of the consumers themselves rejecting the commodification of BookTok. They see when someone is paid for a post or sent free stuff, and from that fact alone, they don't trust the content that they are watching. BookTok and the genre of the book review has generally been something that could be trusted. But because of this commodification, the level of trust in BookTok creators decreases with every sponsored post they make.



Figure 6: This QR code leads to a TikTok about the Netflix series *Bridgerton*.

Final Thoughts

BookTok, while not without its faults and failings, is a platform that is truly changing lives. Not only for the authors whose books go viral, but for the creators as well. BookTok is a space that emphasizes and supports diverse creators and content. There is a Muslim BookToker who posts mainly about smut in romance books. There are many disabled BookTokers that I am friends with who share books with positive representations of people with physical, sensory, or mental disabilities. And there are so many queer creators that post about the lack of representation in books and share upcoming books *with* representation. At its heart, BookTok is a truly amazing place. But it's at its best and has the most success *without* the intervention of authors and publishers. Books don't go mega viral because they are already bought by a major publisher and have a big enough budget to pay people to post about it. Books go viral because they have everything set up against them, but then someone reads them, posts about them, and the fates of those books and their authors are changed forever. The evolution of a genre doesn't *have* to be a bad thing. It can have its positives and negatives, and that's something that especially happens in the evolution of writing in online spaces. For example, we can focus on how the evolving commodification of BookTok is both a positive and a negative. It's amazing that book reviewers are being paid, something that is still fairly new in the publishing industry, but we also need to look at how this commodification interacts with the honesty of the book review that we have been able to trust for such a long time. While the

activity system of BookTok will continue to change and be commodified, the platform will also continue to support the underdogs of the publishing world.

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Notes

Scientific Name

For naming plants there is usually 3 parts

[genus] [species] [family],

however some names don't include the full 3 part name. For example the Boston Ivy's scientific name:

Parthenocissus tricuspidata

Fertilizer

Plant supplements for elements like nutrients, Boston Ivy should be fine without it though

Soil

The soil will help the plant grow. This plant requires loamy soil, not too picky.

ceramic material

Location

When picking a good location taking into account sun, temp., and likelihood of being knocked over (if indoors). This plant however is unique because it grows and spreads, making the surrounding environment its own so moving this plant, even just the pot will probably break the plant's vines and roots permanently

Label (Front)

This label shows the name as well as the plants look when it grows in full bloom

Label (Back)

This label shows how much this plant must be watered how hot or cool it must be and how direct the sun light must be

This plant, a Boston Ivy, needs a healthy amount it's first season to make strong roots, but after that is just regular water just when thirsty. This Boston Ivy grows between partial to full sun exposure, and temperature can not be too cold or in the negatives.

Ceramic Pot

This plant will be indoors so it can not stay in its plastic container.

This cute one from Target will do very well since it is well ventilated for water.

ventilation will make sure that the plant not only doesn't drown.

but so mold won't grow killing the plant.

Even raising the pot on top of a nonobstructing height will guarantee that water will not be backed up if it is laying on the ground directly. Be careful of wooden floorings.

