The Sears, Roebuck and Co. mail-order catalog brought a full-service department store to more than 12 million homes in the United States by the middle of the twentieth century. Over one third of those households were rural, and the primary purchasers of mail-order items were women. This paper examines the history and the economic and cultural impact of the decision by Sears, Roebuck and Co. to establish a mail-order book club – the Peoples Book Club (PBC) – in 1943.

Since its introduction in 1896, Sears (later Sears, Roebuck and Co.) featured books and magazines in its catalog. But the introduction of the PBC by Sears, Roebuck and Co. in the July 1943 issue of its mail-order catalog marked a significant change in how the company offered books to its customers. The announcement came as a full-page color advertisement that included a self-addressed, postage-paid, sign-up card sewn into the catalog’s binding. The infrastructure behind the project was equally elaborate. The company not only marketed and distributed the books it sold but also established a publishing house in Chicago to design and print these special editions and the PBC’s monthly catalog, The Peoples Choice, that was sent to members.

By the time the PBC began, the Book-of-the-Month Club (BMC) had been operating with great success for 17 years. As Janice Radway demonstrated in her study of BMC, there was a distinct difference between those who selected the readings and the Club’s members. The selection process at BMC was directed by the presumed literary authority of individuals who were highly educated and thus, “experts.” In contrast, the PBC cultivated not simply the views of literary “experts,” but also the reading preferences of members in the selection of monthly reading choices. The PBC employed the services of George Gallup’s American Institute of Public Opinion to help gauge readers’ interest in a “scientific” manner in order to establish the worthiness of each book. The method of selection, plus the fact that these readers were overwhelmingly rural and female sets the PBC apart from other book clubs already firmly established in U.S. culture.

The PBC had 350,000 members at its peak, but there are surprisingly few references to it in any of the scholarly literature on book clubs, women’s reading, and American “middlebrow” reading during the mid-twentieth century. The PBC represents an opportunity to more deeply understand and situate the evolution mass culture in post-World War II America. Specifically, a critical history of the PBC will afford greater insight into the nature of women’s reading and corporate catering to and manipulation of what was perceived as women’s interests. The study draws on data from the Sears, Roebuck and Co. mail-order catalogs during this period, book club advertisements and mailers, and literature of the book trade. In addition, the work is positioned within the tradition established by the groundbreaking scholarship of Janice Radway and Elizabeth Long on women readers and reading.

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