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Book Pricing Update

A Good Book is Good to Find
by Celia Scher Wagner (Blackwell)

You could be reading a good book right now. Failing that, you could take this quick quiz on pricing in Literature. The works considered are trade titles only — mass market titles have been excluded.

1) Which cost more in 1993:
   A volume of poetry
   A book of essays
   A collection of short stories
   A play
   A novel

2) In the past five years, which of the above categories has shown the greatest price increase?

3) Adjusting for inflation, which categories (if any) cost more now than they did five years ago?

4) Within trade fiction, novels can (arguably) be classified as “Literary”, “Popular”, or “Genre”. Do “literary novels” cost any more than their popular/genre counterparts?

5) Of the genre fiction published in hardcover, which category is the least expensive?
   Science fiction
   Horror
   Mystery
   Spy/Thriller
   Fantasy
   Western
   Historical
   Biographical
   Other

6) Name any four wonderful novels you have read in the past five years. Approximately what did they cost per page?

7) Name any four current novelists whom you consider to be awful. What do their novels cost per page?

8) Is it silly to look at novels on a price-per-page basis?

9) In what price-per-page range do Sci/Tech/Med titles fall?

10) Aren’t you glad literature is still priced to sell to individuals?

Answers:

1) Plays cost the most, at $25.47. Short stories collections cost the least, at $20.41.

2) The price of a volume of poetry has gone up 22% over the past five years. Plays, while the most expensive, have seen the smallest jump in prices, only 3% from 1989’s $24.83.

3) Novels, poetry, and short stories had price increases higher than inflation, though all were less than 10%. Factoring for inflation, essays and plays cost less in 1993 than in 1989.

4) Yes, trade literary novels average about $1.40 more than trade popular or genre novels.

5) Mysteries are still the least expensive fictional genre, averaging less than $19, even in hardback. The most expensive (over $26) are “biographical novels”, fictional treatments of the lives of real people. Recent biographical novels have treated, among others, Genghis Khan, Christopher Marlowe, Sarah Bernhardt, and Catherine of Braganza.

6) I chose Possession, by Antonia Byatt; Mating by Norman Rush; Gospel, by Wilton Barnhardt; and The Fever, by Wallace Shawn. Three are hefty books with one-word titles, while the last is an intense 68-pages. The prices per page: Possession: four cents; Mating: five cents; Gospel: three cents; The Fever: twenty-nine cents.

7) No names, but I picked four household words: two popular-general, one genre, and one literary. Prices per page, respectively: four cents, four cents, six cents, ten cents.

8) Yes. Some things don’t quantify very well, and some quantifications are not very enlightening.

9) The range is broad, but upwards of thirty-five cents per page is not at all uncommon.

10) I am.