

# The Neo-Classics:(Re) Publishing the Great Books in the United States in the 1990s.

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## The Neo-Classics: (Re)Publishing the "Great Books" in the United States in the 1990s

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The Neo-Classics

(Re)Publishing the "Great Books" in the United States in the 1990s

# Rebecca Rego Barry

In the summer of 1998, I had been working as a publishing assistant at Simon & Schuster for six months when the executives decided that, in preparation for the company's upcoming seventy-fifth anniversary the following year, they would issue a line of classic editions. As I was already compiling the corporate history book for the same occasion, I was asked to manage the production of what would become the Simon & Schuster Classic Editions. It was a great opportunity, as I had long been fascinated by the many series of classic books on the market.<sup>1</sup> My job entailed amassing a list of books published by S&S that could be considered "classic"—award winners and major bestsellers of decent literary quality—and from this list executives would choose the first three books in the new line. The classic editions would be artifacts of prestige to distribute at the anniversary party and would also turn a steady profit by reviving the company's backlist.<sup>2</sup>

It seemed to me that there was a sense of routine in the creation of these new classic editions. After title selection, we contacted introduction writers, **[End Page 251]** and our art director created a uniform jacket design for the series. We used old plates or reset the text, printed three to five thousand copies of each title, and sat back. They certainly were not a company priority, and I admit I was ambivalent when the first three books were chosen: *All the President's Men* by Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, *Where Are the Children?* by Mary Higgins Clark, and *Father of the Bride* by Edward Streeter. The first book might have a legitimate claim to historical importance as a chronicle of Watergate reportage, but the Clark novel (her first with S&S, published in 1974) was chosen to flatter the author and complement her newest mystery, while *Father of the Bride* was selected for its heightened status in popular culture following two film versions. Why did these selections disturb me? It wasn't because there were more deserving books to choose from (although that may have been the case); it was because we were packaging these books as "classics," labeling and marketing them as such, and in doing so elevating them into a category usually reserved for "great literature."

So I began to study reprint editions of the classics in twentieth-century America with particular attention to the role of the publishers as arbiters of the literary canon. Historically, canonization has been viewed as a process of exclusion; in the case of reprint publishers, the sales imperative is to *include* as much as possible. By labeling a book a "classic" and incorporating it into a uniformly designed series—which in a complete form might be seen as the manifestation of the illusory Canon of Great Books—publishers have used their cultural power to redefine a book's history, to uphold and *manufacture* classics, often for economic advancement. In doing so, they have also participated in the erosion of the potency of the classic as a marker of timelessness, high aesthetics, or universality, and have shaped public perceptions of the classic book. And although the Simon & Schuster Classic Editions is just one example, this trend became increasingly apparent during the 1990s.

The notion, as asserted by Jane Tompkins, that the formation of classic books is governed by power relations and the external circumstances surrounding the publication of a given text is integral.<sup>3</sup> Often publishers soft-pedal their role as arbiters of the canon, but when they do, they refuse to acknowledge the inherent power in repackaging and reprinting texts.<sup>4</sup> The very process of reprinting is undertaken to give a book new life, whether in the form of cheap paperback, revised hardcover, or leather-bound collector's edition; in short, a reprint can resuscitate or prolong the life of a book, sometimes artificially. The...

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*Rebecca Rego Barry*

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I would like to thank Prof. Brett Gary and Prof. Jonathan Rose for their support and guidance during the research of my master’s thesis, from which this essay is excerpted.



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