

Book Club

Reviews and recommendations from critic Ron Charles.



By Ron Charles
✉ Email



(Two Trees Press)

I may need physical therapy after hauling around a copy of “Among Friends.” Weighing in at more than eight pounds, this gigantic anthology offers “an illustrated oral history of American book publishing and bookselling in the 20th century.” It’s a labor of love edited by Buz Teacher, the co-founder of Running Press, and his wife, Janet Bukovinsky Teacher. They set out to chronicle “what was once a business and is now an industry.”

“Among Friends” is not so much a book as a treasure chest of memories and images of our modern literary culture exploding — in good ways and bad.

John Sargent, Jr. describes his hilariously clueless start at Macmillan. Nan Talese mourns the corporatization of publishing. Robert Gottlieb recalls the excitement of revitalizing a moribund imprint called Knopf. Dick Snyder claims that the first draft of “All the President’s Men,” by Washington Post reporters Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, was “an unreadable disaster.” And Pennie Clark Ianniciello, a longtime book buyer for Costco, misses “the glamour of the book business.”

Jane Friedman remembers meeting “a young man from Seattle who believed that people would buy books without seeing them, holding them and smelling them.” By the time Jeff Bezos left the Random House headquarters that day, “I had drunk the Kool-Aid,” Friedman says. “This was the future.” (Amazon’s founder, Jeff Bezos, owns The Washington Post.)

There are dozens of others — more than 100 in all — talking about the history of mass market paperbacks, independent publishers, booksellers and more. There’s a lot of bragging (and humble bragging) and a tendency to discount privilege and family money, but that, too, is a crucial element of postwar publishing.

Designer Alex Camlin laid out “Among Friends” to take full advantage of its huge pages. The book is packed with classic dust jackets — from “Chicka Chicka Boom Boom” to “The Satanic Verses” to “The Feminine Mystique” — along with decades of advertisements, author photos and newspaper clippings.

Yes, this is an expensive tome. But what’s \$200 among friends? Given the enormity of the project and the quality of the production — each book comes in its own die-cut clamshell box — I suspect the publisher is losing money on every one of the 1,600 hand-numbered copies (**more information**). If you give this book to any reader interested in the history of modern literature and publishing, you won’t see them for weeks.