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S681 The Book
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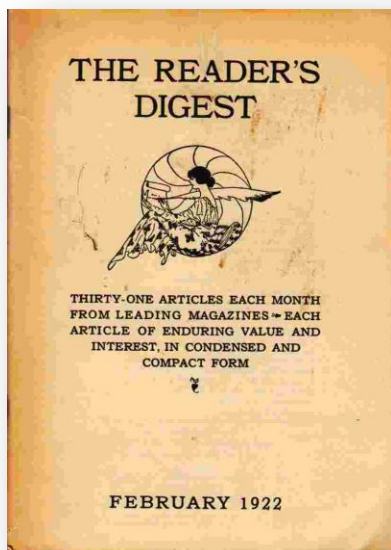
**Readers' Digest Condensed Books;
in which a Spy Comes in from the Cold 100 Pages Sooner**

We've all seen them. They may be displayed on the bookshelf in your mom's living room, or stacked up on your grandfather's nightstand. They sell like hotcakes at a garage sale, but librarians aren't sure how to treat them. I've always wanted to do a bit of research on this unique book form, and here's my chance to do so.

In 1922, Dewitt Wallace and his wife, Lila Acheson Wallace, founded *Readers' Digest*, a monthly compendium of shortened articles, short stories, and humorous anecdotes. Wallace theorized that the average person didn't have time to read and absorb all the informational offerings available, and would therefore appreciate a compact source of condensed articles. Evidently, he was correct. The venture became profitable almost immediately.

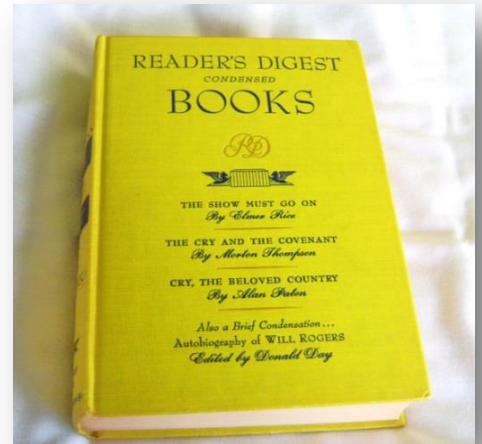


The idea was also based on a sound business model. It was far less expensive to pay a writer a royalty fee for re-printing an edited version of an already published article, than it was to purchase the same material for initial publication. Today, *Readers' Digest* has a global circulation of nearly 17 million, with editions printed in 21 languages reaching more than 70 countries (Clifford, p. 1). The franchise includes other popular magazine titles, such as *Taste of Home*, *Family Handiman*, and *Every Day with Rachael Ray*, and online brands such as AllRecipes.com.



The same condensation process that had worked with articles and stories was applied to a full-length book in 1934, when Arnold Bennett's *How to Live on Twenty-Four Hours a Day* appeared in *Reader's Digest* magazine as a "Book Supplement." Subsequent book supplements were not only popular, but in some instances, had the power to influence book sales. *Wake Up and Live* by Dorothea Brande had sold only 1,407 copies when its condensed version appeared in *Readers' Digest*. It went on to sell over 100,000 copies (Volkersz, p. 54).

Since the abridged book feature was so popular, the logical next step was to market a whole line of condensed books. In 1950 the Readers' Digest Association (RDA) printed the first volume of Readers' Digest Condensed Books. This direct-mail series combined several abridged titles into a single volume. The premier volume contained shortened versions of the following selections: *The Show Must Go On* by Elmer Rice, *The Cry and the Covenant* by Morton Thompson, *Cry, the Beloved Country* by Alan Paton, and *Autobiography of Will Rogers*, edited by Donald Day.



All of the Readers' Digest Condensed books follow a specific physical layout to enable mass production. The earliest volumes had solid colors on the cover, with the titles printed horizontally on the spines. In most cases, the paper book jackets displayed the original cover art of the books contained within the volume. Within a few years, the distinctively patterned covers began to appear, usually coordinated within a year – 4 volumes followed the same pattern but in differing colors, or 4 volumes used different patterns within the same color family. Decorative end papers were also used, with the frontispiece often featuring Impressionist art masterpieces from the RDA collection. Blank book plates were imprinted inside the cover for proud owners to sign their copy. A brief author profile follows the end of each individual book in the volume (usually 4-6 titles). Research shows that the mean length of each volume is 575 pages (Volkersz, p. 56).

I visited a friend who has an extensive – although nowhere near complete -- inventory of Readers' Digest Condensed Books and browsed his collection. When you see the books shelved in chronological sets, the appearance is very distinctive. The sight (I'd forgotten that many had gilt-edged pages), feel (more lightweight than I remembered them to be), and even the scent (book glue and dust) of the books is overwhelmingly nostalgic. Very few in his collection retained their original paper book covers. Some had dog-eared pages or underlined passages. Others were so crisp that the spine crackled when we opened them, causing us to speculate that they had never been read at all.

The original marketing plan for Readers' Digest Condensed Books focused on direct mailing. The intent of the shortened volumes was to appeal to magazine readers, rather than book readers. The cardboard packaging that held the book also contained dozens of promotional cards and flyers for other products offered by RDA and other companies. Occasionally, subscribers received free gifts in the box, such as inexpensive jewelry or candle-holders. Researcher Evert Volkensz referred to this strategy as a “holding effort.” The theory was that the possibility of future free gifts might discourage cancellations and help to retain readers (Volkensz, p. 57).

In 1980, Dr. Seuss penned this tribute, called "A Short Condensed Poem in Praise of Readers' Digest Condensed Books:"

**It has often been said
There's so much to be read,
you never can cram
all those words in your head.**

**So the writer who breeds
more words than he needs
is making a chore
for the reader who reads.**

**That's why my belief is
the briefer the brief is,
the greater the sigh
of the reader's relief is.**

**And that's why your books
have such power and strength.
You publish with shorth!
(Shorth is better than length.)**

Who am I to argue with Dr. Seuss? But I confess that I've always wondered about the process of condensing these works. What is being excised in the cause of brevity? Might there be another agenda at work? What kinds of skills are required for this kind of editorial task?

According to research by Frank G. Leonard in 1958, the process of condensing also requires that some passages are actually written by *Digest* editors. For the most part, this involves transitional sentences when it is necessary to bridge gaps where text has been removed. However, Leonard cites instances where editing also includes "changes made in the original wording – both the substitution of euphemism and alterations, evidently thought of as improvements, in the original author's choice or arrangement of words" (Leonard, p. 210). One of the sample books examined by Leonard is John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*. His research found multiple instances where the text had been sanitized by editors. In one example from the original novel, a distressed teen-aged boy confesses to his girlfriend that, "Our mother was a whore." The Readers' Digest Condensed Books version actually lengthens this sentence to, "You may have heard some terrible things about our mother. They were true." It's difficult not to feel concern that these substitutions are not as trivial as they may appear. In the early days of publication, the Condensed Books were reputed to be expertly culled to improve "accessibility" to readers. Leonard accuses the brand of "attempting to reach a wider and wider audience by appealing to a lower and lower common denominator" (Leonard, p. 218).

Volkersz described the Readers' Digest method of condensation as, "an extended hierarchical editorial process of abridging and summarizing text by retaining both style and substance, omitting quotation marks from verbatim passages, replacing deletions with transitions made in the manner of the author, and toning down or excising excessive violence and explicit sex scenes" (Volkersz, p. 57).

Readers' Digest does have a certain reputation for conservative values, but before drawing any conclusions regarding their abridgement techniques, I had hoped to find more quantitative research on the content of the condensed volumes. Unfortunately, little in the way of analysis appears to have been done. In earlier times, thorough quantitative analysis might have required a tedious and time-consuming process. Today, however, computer programs could easily be developed to keep track of the exact textual changes made to any individual book. I would find it very interesting to analyze the nature of these deletions and revisions.

Of course, condensation is a genuine editorial skill. Abridgement in any medium requires talent and a deep connection to both the material at hand and the creator's intentions. In a wonderfully frank article called "Confessions of (an) Abridger," Lynn Lauber writes about her career as an abridger of audiobooks. She refers to abridging as "a weighing, sifting sort of skill.... Both a loving and ruthless act" (Lauber, p. 39). Lauber makes a good case for readers to have confidence in the professional intent of all editors, reminding the reader that, "Abridging always has its limitations: I can't keep Jo from cutting her hair in *Little Women*" (Lauber, p. 39).

Sales of Readers' Digest Condensed Books have waned somewhat since their heyday in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1997 the product name was changed to Readers' Digest Select Editions. In 1990, RDA went public, and in 2007 the brand was purchased by Ripplewood for \$2.8 billion (Clifford, p. 2). In spite of slackened sales across all divisions – magazines, books, music – the company has a reputation for generous benefits and salaries (Volkersz, p. 53).

Analyst Neal Goff has proposed that the success of Readers' Digest Condensed Books and the direct-marketing methodologies of the previous century may become increasingly appealing again when applied to the eBook industry. On the simplest of terms, a customer contact name and address could be acquired for direct mail purposes, but each direct-mail proposal required a postage cost. Today, a contact email address can be re-used multiple times with minimal or no extra cost (Goff, p. 265). A fact of which most of us are all too aware.

Although the image of a Readers' Digest Condensed Book has become something of a pop-culture icon these days, columnist James Watts expresses dismay at all the uses people find for the widely-recognized books: "It almost makes you think that these volumes are the literary equivalent of cockroaches – once the mushroom clouds dissipate, the only things left on Earth will be cockroaches and Readers' Digest Condensed Books" (Watts, 2012). While this is certainly a humorous exaggeration, the distinctive appearance of the book covers makes them easy to spot in a wide variety of decorative and practical craft uses. Here are just a few samples:



Wall Art



Book marks & Jewelry



Boxes

**Centerpiece, frames
& bird house**



It's interesting to think of the unusual connections between Readers' Digest Condensed Books and Darnton's book cycle. Before a title has even been selected to appear in condensed form, it has already been around the circuit from author, publisher, printer, shipper, bookseller, reader, and back again to author. In most cases editors are aware of original sales figures, marketing campaigns, critical praise/vilification, and reader response to a potential selection before it is chosen. The publishing theory is that the Condensed Books version of a title will appeal to readers who were not part of the book cycle the first time around.

I decided to produce a quick informatic time capsule of my own. I used Wordle to create word clouds that represent some of the titles and authors of each decade of Readers' Digest Condensed Books from 1950 until today.

[Please open attached file RDCB Informatic. My graphic skills are rather limited, but I'm blushing proud of my simple poster.]

Readers' Digest Condensed Books were my first introduction to apartheid (*Cry, the Beloved Country*), Russian history (*Nicholas and Alexandra*), the glories of the Sistine Chapel (*The Agony and the Ecstasy*), teen suicide (*Ordinary People*), and cold war espionage (*The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*). They were also one of my first shared reading experiences (other than bedtime stories), because we passed the volumes around the family. I laugh now to remember that I was much too young to understand the 1970s vibe of *The Stepford Wives*. But I loved *The Great Train Robbery* and *Ring of Bright Water*.

Perhaps I'll never be in a position to know exactly what I might have missed by reading those condensed versions as a child. But I believe that they were instrumental in fostering in me an early love of good books.

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Photo of DeWitt and Lila Wallace courtesy of Doug Stern, at <http://doug-stern.com/blog/tag/lila-and-dewitt-wallace/>