

Fantasy boom helps transform booksellers' dreams into reality

The rising number of shops is attributed to the appetite of buyers with specialist interests, **David Sanderson** writes

The so-called "grimdark" fantasy and "romantasy" genres have helped independent bookshops turn the page on their lean years and a rising number are now dotted across the country.

The growth in bookshops to the highest number since 2012 is being attributed to a surge in popularity of fantasy titles that has led to a series of specialist genre shops being opened.

Three booksellers who have opened new stores selling only fantasy and/or science fiction titles within the last year said they thought people were turning to writers ranging from JRR Tolkien to Sarah J Maas in search of escapism.

"People want to unplug and escape into a world that is not their current climate," Amanda Logan, who opened Ritual Reads in Whitchurch, Shropshire, last November, said. "It is escapism although not necessarily avoiding reality. They certainly don't want dystopia. We are living in that world."

Data from the Booksellers Association (BA) released for Independent Bookshop Week shows the number rose from 1,025 last year to 1,086 this year, only six below the 2012 high.

As recently as 2016 there were 867, as the trade struggled to cope with fierce competition from Amazon and the hollowing-out of high streets.

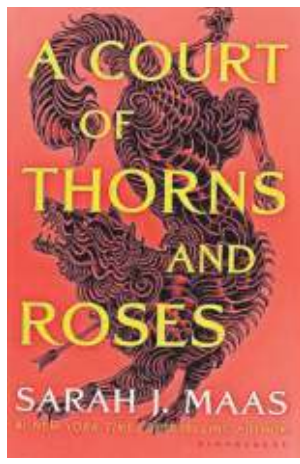
This year's rise has been fuelled by the growth in specialist shops, which with their single range of titles now account for one in four book stores.

Christian shops, while in decline, remain the most numerous of the specialists, followed by children's book stores, comics and fantasy/science fiction.

Meryl Hall, the BA's managing



Amanda Logan of Ritual Reads said customers wanted to "escape" into fantasy fiction by the likes of Sarah J Maas, left



director, said the figures were "really heartening" and testament to how "well valued" bookshops were in towns.

"They are a very good antidote for those who find the online world toxic," Halls added.

Sharron Carle, a former tax lawyer who opened Dragon's Nook in Newark, Nottinghamshire, two months ago, said the owners of indie stores had the freedom to "stamp their own personality" on their shops.

Carle said her store was

"more like a home library, with a William Morris Victorian gothic feel" and "soft *Lords of the Rings* music adding to the ambience".

She chose to set up a fantasy specialist because it was her favourite genre and said she was "discerning" about what she stocked.

"As a single-genre shop I know my stock and can really take customers down a rabbit hole," Carle said. "There is cosy fantasy, urban fantasy, romance — which has taken romance to another level — and then we have epic fantasy, high fantasy."

"We have a very personal feel. People are wanting something more out of their bookshops now."

Abby Munro, who opened Paper and

Word in Bebington, Wirral, last November, said there had been "such a buzz, such excitement" ahead of its opening. Aficionados, she suggested, had grown used to travelling to big cities for their fantasy fill.

"Everybody is excited about it being a little different," Munro added of the shop. "Fantasy is a genre that has been around for many years but there are new pathways of which romantasy is one. And then, when people have their foot in the door, they realise how brilliant it is."

The growing popularity of the fantasy and science fiction genres was illustrated by 2025 Nielsen BookScan data revealing a 23 per cent increase in sales to £103 million.

Men who go shirtless in France risk €150 fines

David Chazan Paris

Brigitte Bardot may have turned the Riviera into a shrine to sun-kissed toplessness in the 1960s, but the era of "bare as you dare" feels increasingly distant on French beaches.

Today few young women go topless, partly out of modesty but also to avoid unwanted male attention or body shaming on social media, or to minimise the risk of skin cancer.

France's newfound penchant for modesty is even more pronounced inland. Toplessness remains legal on most beaches, but a growing number of resorts now ban bare-chested men from their town centres on the grounds of hygiene and decency.

Resorts such as Deauville on the Channel, which began with token fines of just €17 (£15), have now raised them to €150 (£130). The number of towns imposing bans enforced by municipal police has risen from about ten to as many as 20 in the past two years.

In the Mediterranean resort of Narbonne, where the seasonal ban came into force yesterday, most residents and business owners appear to back the clampdown. "This isn't something the staff of our café can easily police on their own without getting into arguments with customers, so I think it's a very good thing," said Anthony Hill, 53, an Australian who runs Le 89 restaurant in the city centre. "Having bare-chested guys on the terrace can put off other customers."

Narbonne, which welcomes about 9 million holidaymakers a year, fined 15 people last summer, when the rules were introduced. People are also prohibited from walking barefoot or wearing just swimwear in the town centre.

Bertrand Malquier, the mayor of the tourist town, said: "It's about hygiene and avoiding exhibitionism."

Not everyone agrees. As the temperature nudged 34C, one man, identifying himself as Gabriel, complained on X that "Let people live a little. A bare chest never killed anyone."

In La Grande Motte, another resort with a similar ban, a local called Marie, 37, told French television: "If I'm out with my kids in the town centre I really don't want to see guys without shirts. It's a matter of decency — and there's also the smell when they walk past you."

There's no need to get shirty, leading article, page 27

Around the world three different ways

Lowri Lewis

A British adventurer has become the first person to circumnavigate the globe by air, sea and land.

James Ketchell, a children's motivational speaker, made history ten months after setting out to sail around the world in his 40ft boat.

He was greeted at Haslar Marina in Gosport, Hampshire, on Saturday by his parents Trisha and John and his fiancée Lisa Bulmer, who last saw him in Cape Town six months ago.

Ketchell, 43, from Basingstoke in Hampshire, said it was "luck" that made him the first person to achieve the feat.

He said: "It sounds crazy to say but I've now become the first person to circumnavigate the globe by air, sea and land, having already cycled around the world in 2013 and flown around the



James Ketchell climbing Mount Everest during his cycle world tour

world in a gyrocopter in 2019," Ketchell, who gave talks to children during stops in Lanzarote, Brazil, South Africa and Argentina, added: "All of these projects revolve around inspiring young people to pursue their own dreams."

In South Africa, the boat had to undergo emergency repairs before the longest leg of his trip to return to the

UK. It took 45 days to complete the final 8,700 miles.

"I think it's going to take a while for it to sink in but I'm very happy," he said. "I'm pleased to be back. It's been the hardest thing I've ever worked on."

In 2013, Ketchell cycled 18,000 miles around the world and, six years later, broke a Guinness World Record by flying a gyrocopter 27,600 miles.

The adventurer, who has previously climbed Everest and rowed across the Atlantic, plans to stick to terra firma next year and to marry his fiancée.

Ketchell, an ambassador for the National Oceanography Centre, said: "Every country, every school and every young person I have ever met reminds me that adventure means nothing unless it inspires somebody else to believe in themselves — more is always possible if you put your mind to it."

Rotherham band kicks off US tour for England fans

Lara Wildenberg

A rock band from Rotherham will play before each England match, despite their concerns about Fifa pricing out the "everyday" fan from the World Cup.

The Reytons have planned their first global tour to coincide with the Three Lions' group stage, beginning in Dallas tonight. The band reached No 1 in the official charts in 2023 with their second studio album, *What's Rock And Roll*, and have since played Wembley Arena.

The group, for whom the American market is unfamiliar territory, will play at smaller, academy-style venues during this tour. "We'll have a big party over here, whoever's come to join us," said Jonny Yerrell, 40, the frontman.

However, he said that his fanbase had been priced out of watching the tournament "100 per cent".

He said: "It's the way of the world, unfortunately, and it's sickening to see it happen ... to then price out the everyday men and women who go and enjoy the sport."

Yerrell said that England football shirts were also "ridiculously priced". He added: "How are you supposed to inspire people and young kids to want to be footballers when the reality is most people in the country can't afford to wear the shirt? It's disgusting, really."

There's no accounting for World Cup prices, Giles Coren, page 24 Sport, pages 58-64