Mark McGurl

Criticism at Scale: *BookTube and Literary Hyper-Abundance*

Our understanding of the state of literary criticism today can be expanded by tuning in briefly to the online forum known colloquially as BookTube, which consists of videos of persons standing head and shoulders in front of a camera talking about books. The observations offered here will be largely descriptive if also modestly diagnostic, drawing tentative conclusions about what this eccentric subset of the fantastically large phenomenon of YouTube video streaming shows us about the popular culture of novel-reading in our time. The true interest of BookTube, I will suggest, is in the way it tries to manage the problem of literary hyperabundance already visible in the background of an image like the one in Figure 1, and in most BookTube videos, where one sees bookshelves packed full of primarily recently published works of popular fiction.

This abundance of books is met, on BookTube, with an abundance of channels devoted to reviewing and discussing them, there being few barriers to entry to this forum of criticism beyond access to the internet, a digital camera, and an inclination to talk about books. Numbering in the hundreds, they represent a tiny portion of the roughly 38 million total active YouTube channels, and do not amount to much in terms of viewership when stacked against the more popular entertainment-oriented YouTube content producers of our time, who count viewers in the tens of millions. And yet, relative to other fora of *literary criticism*, BookTube represents a phenomenon of considerable scale.

BookTube is large not just in the number of channels on offer. The reach of individual channels can also be quite extensive. Near the top of the heap one sees a few strikingly popular figures, including Haley Pham with her 2.6 million subscribers, and Jack Edwards with his comparatively modest 1.2 million. But their path to BookTube dominance has been unusual: both began as youthful lifestyle "influencers" of a more general kind, only swerving into the production of book-

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centric content belatedly and bringing their original viewers with them. Beneath those heights are channels that have centered on newly released works of popular fiction from the beginning. They top out at half a million subscribers or more, of whom roughly 15 to 25% of that number will watch any given video. These are the professionals of BookTube, with followings large enough for them to make a living from payouts directly from YouTube based on "engagement metrics," from product endorsements inserted midstream in their videos, or Patreon (a virtual tipping or "membership" payment service) contributions from their most ardent fans. Below this level BookTube is largely the product of unusually gregarious booklovers with other sources of income, whether as a high school Latin teacher, a dental hygienist, a former professional wrestler turned IT professional, a graduate student living on a stipend, etc. They would appear to be college graduates for the most part, otherwise demographically diverse, albeit with (to all appearances) a statistical over-representation of white women of various nationalities.

College graduates though they may be, one generally encounters little trace in BookTube videos of either the literary historical knowledge or modes of formal textual analysis they might have encountered in literature classes. In this forum of criticism books are neither historicized nor contextualized nor patiently explicated to draw out their subtle meanings. They are taken personally. They are judged for their greater or lesser success in providing readerly enjoyment. Videos uploaded by the professionals might easily reach 100,000 viewers in short order. For amateur content producers, by contrast, five or ten thousand viewers counts as an impressive outing. Those are relatively small numbers in the context of platform capitalism and social media, but cumulatively they represent quite a lot of book talk.

Indeed, it might be useful to compare the scale of a single example of the more popular channels with, for instance, the highly esteemed *New York Review of Books*, one of the few leading organs of book discussion in the English-speaking world. At half a million and counting, the channel "With Cindy" counts three times the number of subscribers of the *New York Review*, with its roughly 140,000, but Cindy's 100,000 view-count per video surely dwarfs to an even larger degree the presumably small percentage of *NYRB* subscribers who read any given review in any given issue. One could surely perform a similar deflation of the 1.2 million readers of *The New Yorker* or the 10 million readers, mostly skimmers, of the digital and print versions of *The New York Times*. There is a large gap between the number of people who have purchased or otherwise acquired potential access a given review and those who actually end up reading it.

Figure 1: A face in front of bookshelves: the BookTuber is a fount of personalized criticism. (Screen capture from YouTube, 2023).

That said, it bears noting that clicking to subscribe to Cindy's content is free, while renewal of subscriptions to the *NYRB* and the others require periodic payments, as their subscribers are likely to be reminded quite frequently. There is no monetary cost for watching Cindy's videos, as entertainingly caustic and frequently insightful as they are, working at the intersection of contemporary popular fiction and contemporary identity politics as seen from the perspective of a self-identified queer Asian American woman. A subscriber could tire of Cindy's way of talking about books but take no action reflective of that fact, simply skipping over her videos when they show up in their YouTube queue. Still, the number of views accumulated per video, visible beneath the thumbnail image and title announcing its availability, is harder to discount. It probably represents a capture of "mindshare" in the book market as large as any commanded by an august print publication, albeit one focused in this case on different kinds of books than one typically sees discussed in the *New York Review*. The question of course being: is what BookTubers offer their viewers something professional critics would recognize as "literary criticism" at all? Or is it something else, something like mediated sociality, or perhaps simply entertainment, anchored by books?

Where is BookTube on the map of contemporary criticism? The image in Figure 2 is what I saw when, inspired by the theme of the conference for which this paper was written, I sat at my computer and started to diagram my sense of the U.S. "fora of criticism" *in toto*,

which I have organized into three categories. On the left are what I have labeled "legacy" fora, those which preexist the internet. I have further subdivided that space into the academy on the left, with its scholarly literary critical monographs and journals, and traditional public "fora of criticism" in the middle, which I've broken into several different print categories. And yet, if our definition is generous enough, we'd surely want to count the classroom as a forum of criticism of a certain kind, in some ways the most important of them all, insofar as it is the place where the habits and skills of literary reading are introduced to countless millions of persons, some of whom will continue to read books for pleasure for the rest of their lives. Medially, if not substantively, a BookTube video is distantly reminiscent of the classroom inasmuch as the latter is the occasion for the conjoining of the lively person of the teacher with the book they are teaching. On the right of the diagram are digitally native fora of criticism, including the *Los Angeles Review of Books* and others, but also things like BookTube, Bookstagram, and BookTok, which are nicknamed subsets of hyperscale social media platforms.

I find a diagram like this clarifying in a lot of ways, even if it is highly artificial in its topographical distinctions given that most of the entities on the left now circulate on the internet as well as in print. If one takes the common medial substrate of our fora of criticism seriously, perhaps even as determinative, one gets something (quite impressionistically) like what I have depicted in Figure 3.

In other words, a somewhat flattened landscape with ample opportunities for inter-access across the network via linking, although one still striated to some degree by reputation, paywalls and the like. Which is to say, a confusingly "postmodern" mishmash of different sources of authority and sensibility. This linkage was crucial to enabling expressions of outrage among the BookTuber community in 2022 upon the publication, in the traditional magazine *Wired*, of a disrespectful feature article on Brandon Sanderson, one of the more widely read epic fantasy authors of the present day. Its author was puzzled that such a mediocre writer, whom most of his friends and colleagues had never even heard of, could command such vast audiences for his loosely Tolkien-esque fare. Taking umbrage, BookTuber Merphy Napier, an ardent fan of Sanderson, declared to her 400,000 subscribers and other watchers that the *Wired* article she had read online is "NOT JOURNALISM" but a snobby hitjob. All of the other BookTubers (among whom ardent fandom of Sanderson is widespread) who entered the fray concurred.

While these direct crossovers between distantly spaced fora are rare, more local connections across platforms are crucial in many

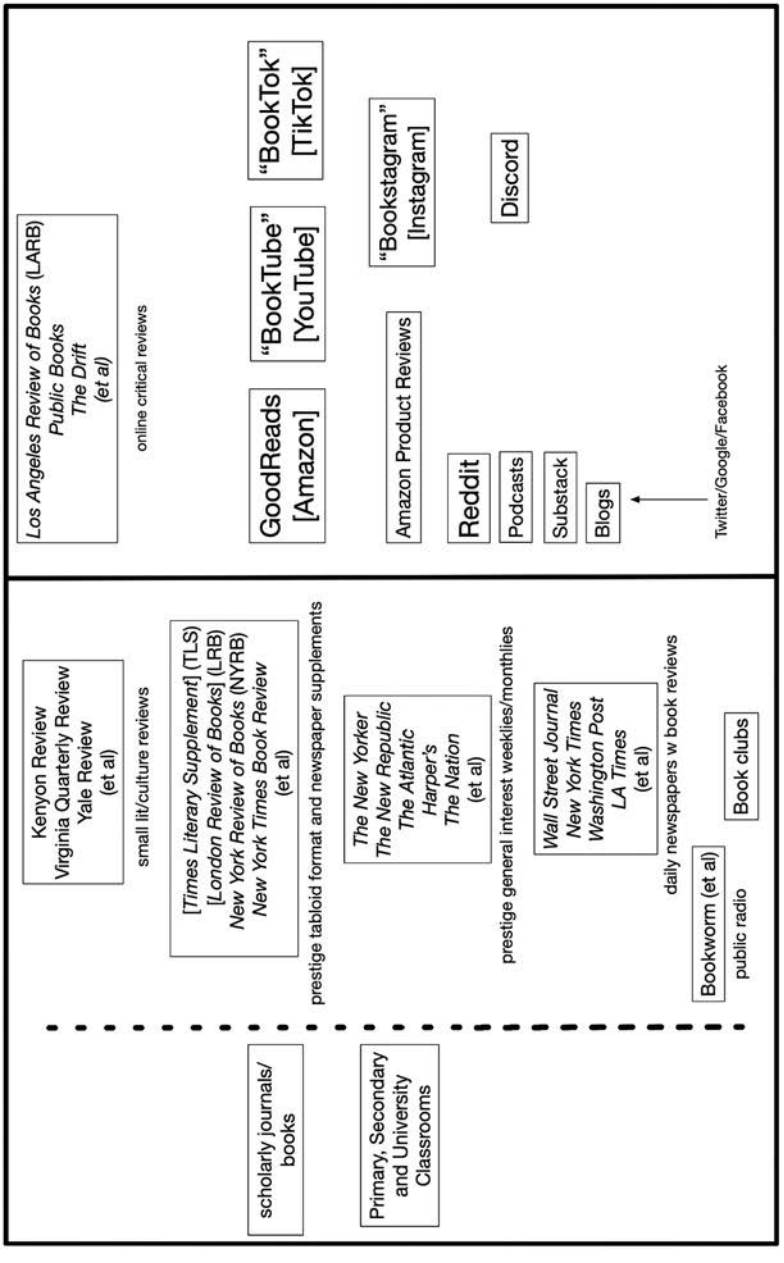

Figure 2: The fora of contemporary criticism from the U.S. point of view, ranging from scholarly journals on the far left, through tradition print venues in the middle, to new internet-based fora on the right. (Mark McGurl, 2023).

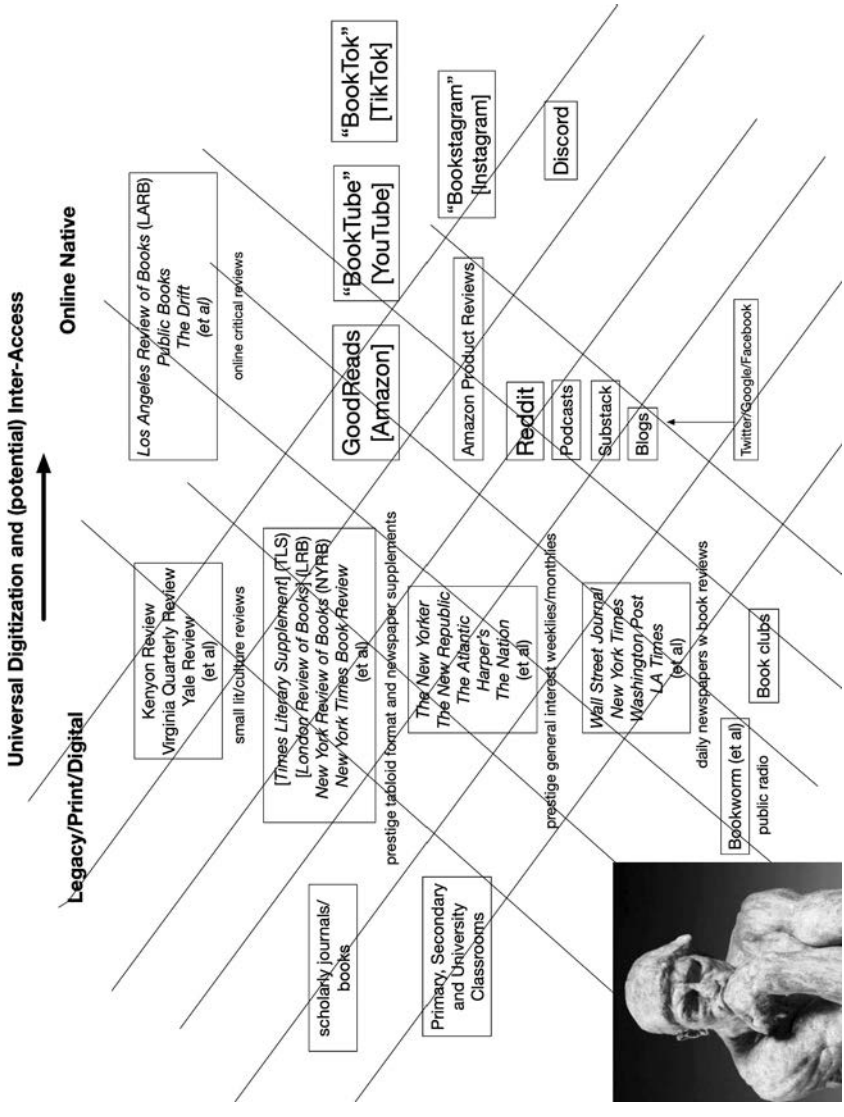

Figure 3: In practice, the fora of contemporary criticism are not separate but connected in a complex media ecology. (Mark McGurl, 2023).

ways to the daily functioning of BookTube. For instance, any given BookTuber trying to monetize his or her channel is surely present not just on YouTube, but also Instagram and TikTok. The book-centric subsets of YouTube, TikTok and Instagram are distinct even from a large-scale online book forum like Goodreads (a social media site

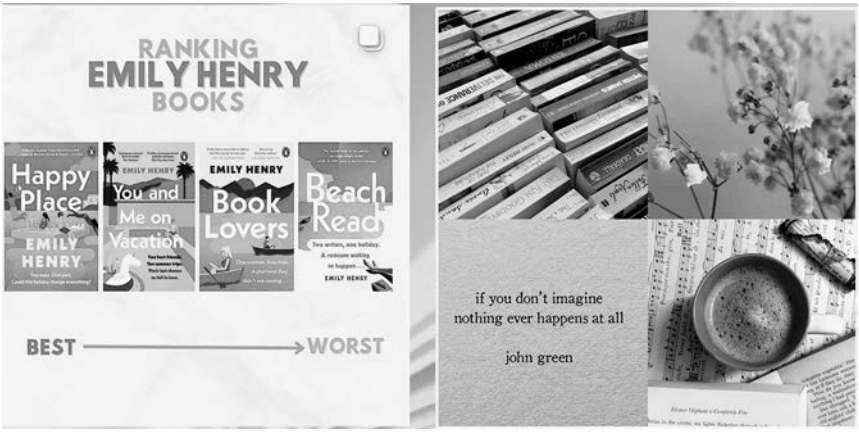

Figure 4: On Bookstagram, the book-centric subset of Instagram, the book-as-object is integrated into a lifestyle image. (Screen captures from Instagram, 2023).

now owned by Amazon where users post reviews and keep track of their reading) in essentially leaving textuality behind for presentations of voice and image. Bookstagram and BookTok feature, not texts so much as images of texts, as in one Instagram post ranking the books of popular romance writer Emily Henry without explanation (more on this ranking impulse anon). Or one might encounter books integrated into a bookish lifestyle image. (See Figure 4.)

On BookTok, where the preferred form of content is the very short video clip, one encounters a certain sentiment about a book or books, and then a "reveal" of their covers. An entirely typical video would be one that advertises "books that left my jaw on the floor" (see Figure 5).

First one sees the stacked fore-edges of these books, replete with tape flags used to mark the particularly good or meaningful parts. These tape flags are presumably meant as a kind of visible stand-in for the intensity and authenticity of the reading experience, even as there is no discussion whatsoever about how or why these particular books left this reader's jaw on the floor. Then we see their covers revealed in quick sequence, and that's all. No doubt to the delight of the publishers of those books, this video has (as of this writing) been viewed 23.5 million times.

And indeed, in the story of contemporary publishing, it is BookTok that looms largest among these platforms, dwarfing the importance of BookTube as a marketing phenomenon. The BookTok video is essentially a free ad for the books it portrays, formally convergent

with a 30-second TV commercial. This is why, if one walks into a large chain bookstore in the U. S., one might see a table near the front explicitly devoted to "BookTok Books": which is to say, books that have become massively popular by going viral on BookTok. But is BookTok even a "forum of criticism"? From the scholarly perspective, surely not. Indeed, even for BookTubers, BookTok can seem a bridge too short. It's all relative. The normal length for a BookTube video is something like 20 minutes, give or take. To fill that time requires that a lot of words be spoken about a given book or books. As the *New York Review of Books* is to BookTube, we might say, so is BookTube to BookTok: an increasingly "old school" medium with reason to worry about its future in the attention economy. Hence the existence of numerous BookTube videos looking across the way at either BookTok or Bookstragram and pondering their meaning for books and for BookTube. One is titled "Is BookTok Okay?," as though the taste-profile revealed there leaves one worried about the platform's sanity.

Is BookTube maybe *too* substantive in its relation to books? While it rarely even quotes from the books it is discussing, preferring to generalize about them, the typical BookTube video does at least make time to conduct a practical assessment of the success or failure of a given book. Here is Emily of "Books with Emily," a French Canadian more severe in her judgments than most, explaining why the second volume of Patrick Rothfuss's *Kingkiller Chronicle* failed for her:

> There is like a ten-chapter section that I wish I could erase from my memory. Like, literally. [mimics physical pain]. We'll not talk about spoilers in this video so I won't mention it but [...] awful. Even if you didn't care about that part, that affects the rest of the story, makes it awful, too [...]. I (also) feel like it was so choppy. In the beginning of Book One the author's narrator mentions that, okay, this is going to be my life story to get where we are at right now and he will recount his whole life story in three days and each book is a day. And then when we get to day two, Book Two, you realize, oh I didn't go anywhere near far enough, like, we took our time and then we're still at the same spot in Book Two and there's just this rush. That's why it feels so choppy, and it just skips ahead and it's just *not good*. Just not good.

Necessarily brief as it is, this partial transcript is a fair representative of the form. There is a book and there is a face; a lively face staging her visceral personal reaction to a sexually explicit section of this hugely popular fantasy novel, while also observing something about its, for

Figure 5: On BookTok, the book-centric subset of TikTok, the short video converges with the form of the 30-second TV commercial. (Screen capture from TikTok, 2023).

her, awkward pacing. This is not James Wood writing in *The New Yorker*, God knows, but the longer form of the BookTube video draws forth evaluative language and even "formal analysis" of a kind.

That said, the books discussed on BookTube are rarely the kind that show up in classrooms, even if the *Kingkiller Chronicle* is, in fact, obsessed with schools, as a great many fantasy novels (most notably, the *Harry Potter* novels) are. Instead BookTube is centered on recent releases in popular or "subliterary" genres: fantasy, romance, and young adult novels are the heart of the matter, although there are a handful of channels devoted to the discussion of literary fiction. The most popular among latter would appear to be Benjamin McEvoy's. It boasts some 80,000 subscribers. With videos titled, for instance, "How to Read *War and Peace*," it is a wonderfully high-minded channel, not at all tied to new releases and in that way, too, somewhat discordant with BookTube norms. Even so, the video "How to Motivate Yourself to Read" has been viewed 111,000 times, representing an influence on reading habits presumably larger, if perhaps less intense because more passive, than any classroom teacher could ever dream of having in a whole career. Elsewhere on BookTube the discourse of cultural self-improvement we see here becomes more overtly therapeutic in nature, with countless paeans to books as vehicles for emotional well-being. These videos are sometimes quite moving and one imagines, or at least hopes, that lots of people have found their way to the books they need by means of BookTube.

A more pathological version of this genre of video, however, can be found in the ones emphasizing the sheer quantity of books one can get through if one learns to read more and read faster, as in Elizabeth Filips's much-watched video, "You Don't Hate Books: The Simple Method I Use to Read 100 Books a Year." And here is where, even if you are not disturbed by what counts as "criticism" in this online forum, the entire enterprise of reading a good book can start to seem, not a quiet oasis in the rough and tumble of modern life, but something entirely wired into that life; not an antidote to but instigator of the modern problem of time-famine. For all the rude health of literary life as we see it activated on BookTube, I think we are not wrong to feel some disquiet about its implications for that life; indeed, for the sheer awkwardness of the novel, with its demand for 10 or 20 or 30 hours of one's time, as a cultural commodity in the hypermediated present. This, no doubt, is partly why audiobooks loom ever larger in the publishing economy: they remediate the book so that it can be consumed while also doing something else, whether driving or doing laundry or getting exercise. Several BookTubers use this method to meet the quota of reading required to run their channel.

Hyperabundance. A literary milieu governed not so much by the cost of books as the opportunity cost of reading them in a situation of time-famine. This is the context in which we might understand one of the most ubiquitous and most predictably successful genres of video on BookTube, the ranking video. (See Figure 6.)

I don't have the space to conduct a full analysis of ranking as a form of literary judgment. Instead let me simply say that it fascinates me on several grounds, not least for its violation of the protocols of aesthetic judgment in the Kantian tradition, which is a judgment outside comparison. For Kant, that is, the issue is whether something is beautiful or not, not whether it is more beautiful than something else. The top-ten video lends support to the sociological decoding of "disinterested" aesthetic judgment as a technology of social distinction, as we have it most famously from Pierre Bourdieu, while also making a mockery of it. Why? Because ranking mania is nothing if not a thoroughly populist enterprise, even an embarrassingly *déclassé* one. It is a game-like popularity contest, occasioning a collision between the faux-rationality of the numerical-ordinal with the semi-arbitrariness of subjective taste.

To be sure, the ranking video is of a piece with a wider world fundamentally structured by ranking regimes, from Google's page-rank search algorithm to university rankings and tennis rankings and top-ten vacation destinations and on and on. And yet, the point to be made about ranking mania is that it is not the product of a society

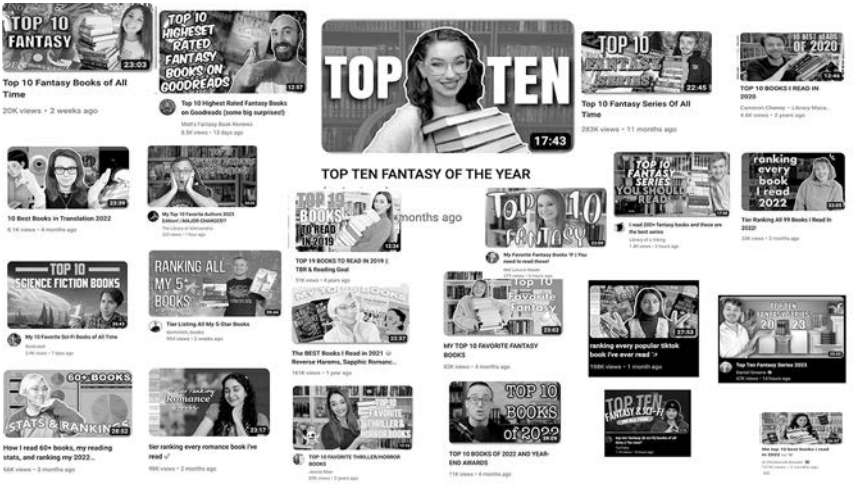

Figure 6: The ranking video is one of the most reliably successful genres of BookTube content. (Screen captures from YouTube, 2023).

organized by traditional social rank. It is instead the product of a *differentiated* society preoccupied by the *lack* of any consensus on rank; on social rank, certainly, but also, and more importantly to the phenomenon of BookTube, on the relative worth of cultural materials in a situation of practically infinite offerings. Where once was canon, a collective if no doubt elitist enterprise, now a top-ten list must be, a personally curated ranking of books typically offered with abundant warnings about its being *just my opinion*.

For all its much-discussed faults, one of the benefits of a relatively secure canon of literature was its reduction of the complexity of an over-populated literary field. Against the pure fragmentation of attention in a world inhabited by too many books for any one person to know about let alone read, canons enable certain works to be objects of shared concern and sustained discussion. This is the benefit of the top-ten list, too—with the caveat that top-ten lists are themselves so numerous on BookTube that tuning into all of them might take a lifetime.

Imitating each other, sometimes appearing as guests on each other's channels, converging (depending on the genre emphasis of the channel) on roughly the same sets of books as objects of discussion, BookTubers tend to produce a handful of different kinds of video which they will rotate through from week to week, obedient to the evidently exhausting need for would-be successful channels to upload new content

regularly. While they are certainly there to be found, videos devoted to reviewing a single book are not the staple of BookTube, which specializes instead on the omnibus review of many books at once. This reduces the quantity of insight required for the discussion of any given book and maximizes the potential sources of appeal to viewers looking to be informed of their options for reading in any given genre, even as it makes hosting a channel burdensome in the sheer numbers of books one is making oneself responsible for. Following the career of any given BookTuber, one frequently detects a condition of burnout setting in, as the quantum of attention they have secured proves less than lucrative, and no wonder. A recent video in the minor genre called "transparency video," where the BookTuber discusses the finances of their channel in detail, makes it clear how little even a relatively successful BookTuber can make from their work. The one calling herself "Bookborn" has more than 40,000 subscribers, with each of her videos garnering between a few thousand and 20,000 views, but after running the numbers she reveals her "hobby" to have netted $3215 for the 260 total videos she has uploaded in the life of the channel.

Central to almost all channels is the so-called "reading vlog" or wrap-up video in which the BookTuber, as model reader and life-liver, casually recounts their reactions to the books they have been reading in *medias res*, detailing how much or how little they have been enjoying them. Also popular is the so-called "book haul" video. In the book haul video, the BookTuber goes through the books they have acquired and discusses how much they are *looking forward* to reading them, and why. These are the books that are joining the so-called "tbr" pile, "to be read." If they prove especially bad, they might be "dnf'd" (did not finish), an eventuality reported on in due course. The book haul video fetishizes the sheer quantity of books the BookTuber has acquired: an image of oneself carrying a precariously large stack of books is apparently irresistible, since all of them seem to do it. (See Figure 7.)

The more dignified twin of the book haul video is the "bookshelf tour," in which the BookTuber takes the opportunity of the full bookshelves behind their head to discuss the range of their literary interests, the different editions of books they own, the systems of organization they have come up with, and so on. It represents the reasoned disciplining of literary hyperabundance, but it has its limits. Hence the inevitable complement of the book haul video, the "book un-haul" video, where the BookTuber, having no more space in their apartment to store the books they have hauled, talks you through their decision-making process in getting rid of some of them.

Figure 7: As evidenced by these images, an underlying theme of the "book haul" video is the problem of literary hyper-abundance. (Screen captures from YouTube 2023).

It is surely one of the glories of the modern culture of the book, as compared to other media forms — the cinema, most obviously — that books are relatively inexpensive to produce, with electronic publishing only making them cheaper. This enables them to serve as vehicles of a practically infinite variety of individual authorial sensibilities and readerly interests, high and low and in between. It's only when this numerousness becomes overwhelming that our thoughts might properly turn to its hidden costs.