

Why Are British Classics Trending Again? The Role of Netflix in Literary Revival

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Abstract

This paper will explain this by exploring the reasons for the renewed interest in British classic literature in general and in the novels of Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters and the Regency romance tradition that inspired them, since the mid-2010s and will argue that Netflix's adaptation approach is a major contribution to this trend. Using data on sales from trade-industry outlets, publisher statements, official Netflix reports and the peer-reviewed scholarship in adaptation and television studies, the study demonstrates that streaming adaptations like *Persuasion* (2022), *Bridgerton* (2020- present) and *Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story* (2023) have consistently resulted in sales of print books, e-books and audio books of the adapted works and their literary originals.

The paper frames this phenomenon in the context of adaptation theory, which suggests that adaptations do not simply reproduce a source text but re-circulate and re-legitimize it in new circles for new audiences and draws on scholarship in the media industry on the so-called "Netflix effect", which theorises that the algorithmic reach and global simultaneous release model of a platform can generate demand on a scale not matched by the earlier generation of film and television adaptations. In the study, the reported figures include a film adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* (Emily Brontë) which saw its sales levels increase by 469% year-on-year since its release, a rise in *Bridgerton* book sales of three-fold since a 2026 Netflix adaptation and a consistent trend in British tourism statistics for screen-led visits to Austen and Regency related heritage sites. The analysis also takes into account the power of BookTok and other social media platforms in maintaining these book revivals after their launch. The paper ends by arguing Netflix's adaptation model is a highly effective, repeatable process that is a form of canon renewal, albeit one that engenders continuing issues over fidelity and representation and the commercial transformation of literary heritage for a streaming generation.

Keywords: Netflix, British classics, literary adaptation, Jane Austen, *Bridgerton*, BookTok, streaming, publishing industry

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Streaming has been replacing network TV and cinema as the main medium for connecting literary texts to mass audiences since the first original commissioned series premiered on Netflix in 2013 (Bullard, 2023). British classic literature, such as the novels of Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters, has been particularly well adapted to this new distribution model and the early nineteenth-century explosion of English fiction as a genre is no exception. Its familiar settings, class-based romance concepts and public domain position have made it appealing and risk-free to be a supply for adaptable material that can journey throughout many nations at the same time (Netflix, 2026). This has led to a series of high-profile British classis, including Netflix's 2022 film *Persuasion* (also original but heavily influenced by the conventions of the

Regency period, two hundred years earlier, that Austen popularised) and the multi-season Regency drama *Bridgerton* and its prequel, *Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story*.

This revival isn't just on screen. When a Netflix show is based on an original piece of literature – and when it is simply announced – publishers and booksellers have repeatedly seen measurable sales increases for the books themselves, as well as for the shows themselves and that's now becoming a pattern that has come to be known as the "Netflix effect" on backlist books (Publishers Weekly, 2026). But alongside that, classic authors have also found their second chance at being discovered thanks to an audience hungry for books on TikTok: BookTok (Waterstones, 2023).

This change is a very large one and has to be put in perspective. Previous adaptations of British classics — as in the 1995 BBC *Pride and Prejudice*, or the series of literary films that Merchant Ivory adapted, starting in the 1980s and continuing through the 1990s — were broadcast to larger audiences but in a nationally limited way and over a span of weeks and months, depending on the timing of broadcast and theatrical release (Bullard, 2023). Netflix's model is different in many ways: a content is released to a global subscriber base of hundreds of millions, it is not time-limited, but is actively surfaced towards the individual user via its algorithmic recommendation engine, long after its initial release date (Netflix, 2026). Scale, permanence and targeted recirculation is how industry watchers increasingly refer to this and is the central topic of investigation in this paper, known as the "Netflix effect" on backlist and classic titles.

Image 1: Why Are British Classics Trending Again?



Source: Created by Author

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The study pursues four objectives:

1. To document the extent of the sales and cultural-interest revival experienced by British classic authors and texts following Netflix adaptations since 2020.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theories of Adaptation and the Literary Canon

Adaptation studies has long passed the stage in which screen versions were considered as “derivative” and “lesser” versions of the source text. The concept of adaptation is better understood as a practice of re-vision than just transpositioning a source text for a new cultural moment, as is the case in the practice of appropriation, which is an even stronger departure into a new cultural product (Sanders 2016). While *Bridgerton* is not a direct adaptation of any of the Austen novels, it is a genre and convention appropriation of Regency romance, through Quinn's novels and the production sensibility of Shonda Rhimes (Sanders, 2016; Taddeo, 2023).

Building on this theoretical trajectory, Kar (2024) investigates how streaming companies more specifically influence the canon boundaries of the literary themselves. When a canonical text is rendered into a popular, non-pedagogical screen format, it's not being diminished by the shift, but rather its constituency is being redistributed and this "nonacademic, popular-culture ecology" is a new place where readers are drawn to the text who otherwise might not have encountered it through formal education. This reframing helps to account for the way that Netflix's classics-adjacent programming appears as a kind of canon renewal instead of just entertainment: by moving culturally prominent texts to a place of “everyday, algorithmically mediated consumption” (Kar, 2024).

This is especially useful for comprehending the Netflix British classics, which includes a number of the most commercially successful British-classic-adjacent shows, such as *Bridgerton*, that are not adaptations of Austen per se, but appropriations of the world and genre conventions that Austen helped usher in. According to a fidelity-based approach such productions would be wholly beside the point for the study of Austen; according to Sanders's (2016) approach they are active continuations of the same literary tradition, which could (and often does) take very different forms in tone, content and plot, but are able to bring audiences back to Austen's work without any effort on the part of the producers.

2.2 The Netflix Effect: Streaming and the Publishing Industry

The streaming industry's impact on book-to-screen adaptation is best captured at the industry level by Bullard's (2023) report. Examining the adaptations made by the streaming companies and seeing how they subsequently find success on the bestseller list, Bullard is able to conclude that there is no close parallel to the theatrical or broadcast-only periods of adaptation to the now unprecedented “freedom to create” and “freedom to distribute” that streaming services provide and that has enabled “backlist” books that were published years or even decades ago to be successfully brought out onto the bestseller list. Netflix's own reporting backs that up at a granular level: “We've reported seeing book adaptations show up on our Global Top 10 lists

weekly for the past few years and that publishers have documented specific, quantifiable sales lifts around book adaptations when the content has been released on Netflix” (Netflix, 2026).

These lifts are large and regular. The Duke and I, the first novel, sold 750,000 copies in the weeks after the series premiered in December 2020 and topped the New York Times bestseller list for four weeks – twenty-one years after its initial publication – according to Publishers Weekly (2021). The show's fourth season led to a further triple in sales of the Bridgerton books and a companion Agatha Christie miniseries boosted the original novel's sales by four times (Publishers Weekly, 2026). Similar trends have been observed in the sales of the film tie-in edition of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which experienced a 180% increase in sales during the week following its release on Netflix (Penguin Random House) and in the novel's ranking for the most-searched book on Google for 2026 (Jensen, 2026). Even counterfeit adaptations by other studios have similar consequences for iconic texts, as Penguin Classics UK reported a 469% sales surge for *Wuthering Heights* ahead of a 2026 adaptation that it claimed was “driven by the Netflix-style book-to-screen model” (Roeloffs, 2025), which Canadian retailers explicitly described as an “influence of the Netflix-style model of ‘Book to Screen’” (CBC Books, 2026). A few of these reported sales gains are summarized in Figure 1.

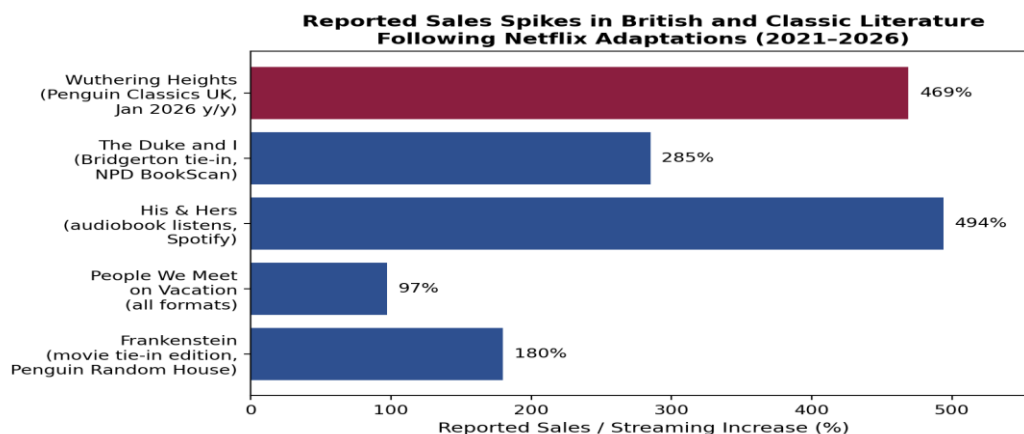


Figure 1. Reported percentage increases in sales or streaming activity for selected British and classic literary titles following screen adaptations, 2021–2026. Data compiled from Publishers Weekly (2021, 2026), Jensen (2026) and Roeloffs (2025).

This is an industry-level pattern and is similar to, but on a larger scale than, adaptation effects observed prior to the streaming period. Publishers have been seeing sales boosts in the lead up to film and television tie-ins for a long time, but what really makes the Netflix-era data stand out are the size of the business and the uniformity of the gains, whether on film, limited series, or ongoing — maturing a new television program or game is nearly as easy as one for film and both kinds of two-dimensional products are seeing the gains (Bullard, 2023; Netflix, 2026). Deadline and other outlets in the industry have also reported that the impact extends beyond English-language markets: Netflix' own reports have highlighted that the adaptations often simultaneously kick off on the Top 10 lists in over eighty or ninety countries around the world, meaning that a sales boost in one country is likely to be replicated, in varying degrees, in many others at once (Netflix, 2026). This simultaneity is no accident, but a structural

component of the platform and is one reason why British classics in particular, which have already been adapted and translated into many English-speaking and European languages and introduced into school curricula, have reacted to this mode of dissemination.

2.3 British Classics on Screen: Austen, Brontë and the Regency Revival

The novels of Jane Austen have a special place in this revival, in part because they are a classically taught piece of literature but also because of their immense popularity as a romantic novel. The film *Persuasion* (2022) starring Dakota Johnson, was split on whether it was a betrayal or an improvement on Austen's style and language, as it was set in a modern world and broke the fourth wall, a reference to *Fleabag*, a style that Austen would never have used (Benchetrit, 2022; Colleen, 2024). However, in spite of the critical response, the film's release sparked widespread public discussion of Austen's work and led to increased attention paid to Austen's literary legacy in other cultural and tourism venues in Britain (Benchetrit, 2022).

The revival of Austen extends into original but genre derivative space in *Bridgerton* and its prequel, *Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story*. In a special issue of the *Journal of Popular Television*, scholars have examined the ways in which the series "reworks" Regency romance conventions set in place by Austen and popularized in the twentieth century by Georgette Heyer to appeal to an audience of women in a streaming medium, including the sexuality of the characters and the casting of them as such (Davisson & Hunting, 2023; Froide, 2023). *Bridgerton* fundamentally shifted the larger period-drama discussion, leading to much scholarly and popular reengagement with *Bridgerton*'s source novels and the broader Regency-set literary tradition. Overall, *Bridgerton* sparked a renewed scholarly and popular interest in period drama and in the larger Regency-set literary tradition from which *Bridgerton* is drawn. (2023) In *Queen Charlotte*, Calhoun (2025) focuses on this reimagining of British history in the Regency era and the way the narrative of the Great Experiment has been recounted in contemporary terms of race and authorship to generate new public interest in the Regency era and its literary contexts.

This screen-based interest has tangible impacts in addition to publishing. British heritage attractions linked to Austen and the Regency, such as Bath's Royal Crescent and the Holburne Museum, have experienced continued growth in direct engagements with visitors to the city that are clearly related to the filming locations of *Bridgerton* which the City of Bath estimates will contribute millions of pounds to the local economy following the first season of the series. The Netflix revival period has also seen literary tourism operators start to combine Austen with *Bridgerton* tours, as a testament to the extent to which the two have become mixed up in the revival period (VisitBritain, 2024).

2.4 Social Media, BookTok and the Amplification of the Adaptation Effect

TikTok's BookTok fandom is another, somewhat more autonomous, force behind the popularity of classic literature. Waterstones (2023) recounts the discovery of many classic works, such as Sylvia Plath and Emily Brontë, by BookTok, who have "rediscovered" these authors for many readers who may have first encountered these works elsewhere. Penguin's marketing of the trend also mentions that BookTok communities 'remix' and reinterpret classic

works from modern viewpoints, keeping them alive long after the initial screen adaptation comes out (Penguin Books UK, 2025).

And, most importantly, BookTok and Netflix seem to be complimentary rather than competitive outlets. BookTok discussion is often a driver of spike in sales and interest after Netflix releases and several of the classic books seeing boosted sales after being adapted for screen — including *Wuthering Heights* — had already been staples of the BookTok conversation for weeks and months before their recent adaptations were announced (Roeloffs, 2025; Waterstones, 2023). This dynamic can be seen in the survey data, which YouGov (2020) shows that only a small minority of younger British adults identify as frequent readers, compared to older groups, suggesting that the rediscovery through screens and social media may be having a disproportionate effect on those who don't read classics regularly. Simultaneously, YouGov (2016) discovered that those audiences who have read a book and seen its adaptation still prefer the original book overall, meaning that adaptations do not replace interest in the source work, but in many cases function as a facilitator to move the audience back to the source.

Image 2: Social Media, BookTok and the Amplification of the Adaptation Effect



Source: Created by Author

3. Research Methodology and Results

The above literature review paints a picture of the British classics revival that is not singular, but rather multi-faceted. Rather, it is a creation out of an interaction between a distribution system uniquely suited to global, algorithmic recirculation (Bullard, 2023; Netflix, 2026), a mass of source material, the Austen canon and the Regency romance tradition, whose class-conscious courtship plots transfer extremely well to the streaming era's craving for prestige romance (Sanders, 2016; Taddeo, 2023) and an ecosystem of social media communities that

extend and personalize the resulting interest well past any individual title's Top 10 list — past the point where it might even be considered popular (Waterstones, 2023). The approach and findings presented below analyze the frequency with which this pattern is found in the secondary data sources.

3.1 Research Design

This study is designed in a qualitative and secondary data approach, combining industry sales data, official statements from the various platforms, tourism reports and peer-reviewed adaptation and TV-studies scholarship. The phenomenon under investigation, the Netflix-inspired resurgence of British classic literature, is in essence time-sensitive and industry-centric, so primary evidence is not only to be found in peer reviewed publications, but also in an eclectic mix of trade and industry-oriented journalism (Publishers Weekly, Book Riot, industry-oriented news coverage), as well as academic journals.

3.2 Data Sources and Selection

The sources were chosen for three reasons: (a) they were directly relevant to Netflix's adaptations or examination of British classic literature or literary genres of the Regency period; (b) they contained specific and measurable statements of sales, streams, tourists or reader-interest statistics; and (c) they were published from 2015 to 2026 in a peer-reviewed journal, official platform or institutional source (Netflix or VisitBritain) or a recognised trade or news publication. 25 sources were selected that satisfied these criteria, covering the fields of adaptation theory, television and media studies, reporting by the publishing industry and public survey information.

3.3 Results

The collated evidence reveals four common trends. First, sales surges for adapted or adaptation-adjacent classics are huge, fast and repeatedly reported from independent publisher sources – from a 97% increase in sales for a modern tie-in to a 469% year over year increase for a classic set in the 1800s (Publishers Weekly, 2021; Roeloffs, 2025). Second, the spikes do not solely affect the adapted text, but rather the author's entire backlist as well as the generic field that the adapted text represents, as evidenced by the author's entire *Bridgerton* book series being tripled after the fourth season of the show and the general resurgence of interest in Regency romance and Austen scholarship across the *Journal of Popular Television's* special issue (Publishers Weekly, 2026; Davisson & Hunting, 2023; Froide, 2023; Prescott, 2023). Third, the impact is felt beyond publishing, as for example there has been measurable and reported economic impact at British filming sites linked to Austen and the Regency period (VisitBritain, 2024). Fourth, social media, in this case BookTok, is an amplifying and sustaining mechanism that helps the revival to last longer than the book's window of release on screen and seems to act in part autonomously from any particular adaptation (Waterstones, 2023; Penguin Books UK, 2025).

This combination of results refutes the theoretical account of Netflix's adaptations proposed by Sanders (2016) and Kar (2024): Netflix's adaptations are not single commercial events but are mechanisms of canon renewal that appear repeatedly, reintroducing British classical literature into the contemporary cultural circulation, mediated by algorithms. Consistency

among sales and interest figures, no matter what text, genre, or release year, indicates that this is a structural aspect of Netflix's simultaneous release strategy across the globe and not a series of disconnected one-off cultural moments (Bullard, 2023; Netflix, 2026).

4. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to try to understand why British classic books are now enjoying a renewed popularity among readers and audiences since the mid-2010s and to assess the impact of Netflix's adaptation policy on the resurgence. The evidence presented — from publisher sales reports to official Netflix data, the British tourism data and peer-reviewed adaptation scholarship — backs up the claim that Netflix is a true and effective machine for literary canon renewal. It has been proven through measurable and independently-documented book sales, audiobook streams and heritage tourism, driven by Austen, the Brontës and the wider British classic tradition, to have a consistently strong impact on book sales globally and is already being distributed simultaneously in multiple markets around the world (Bullard, 2023; Publishers Weekly, 2021, 2026; VisitBritain, 2024). Adaptation theory can help us understand why this occurs, not just that it does (as Sanders, 2016 and Kar, 2024 suggest): adaptations are acts of cultural re-vision which move canonical texts from academic to popular circulation, but without diminishing their cultural weight. This can be seen most clearly in Netflix's *Bridgerton* series, which is an appropriation of Austen's Regency romance style, which has in turn made many people seek out Austen's novels and the broader historical-literary tradition it makes use of (Taddeo, 2023; Calhoun, 2025). This renaissance has been supplemented and in part detached from, a single book release, as social media communities, such as BookTok, have emerged to further drive the classic's resurgence and create an ecosystem of book streaming, publishing and social media platforms to support each other (Waterstones, 2023).

The results of the study also have practical applications. The data looked at here is very compelling about the publishers developing marketing and reprint strategies around expected or known screen adaptations. Literary tourists and tourist sites have also embraced the screen demand and incorporated it into their packages – rather than seeing it as an impediment to their business – Austen scholarship and *Bridgerton* fandom complementing each other (VisitBritain, 2024). The conclusions are relevant for English literature teachers: screen adaptations can be a legitimate and evidence-based entry point into engagement with canonical texts instead of an impediment to studying them, even if they are loosely appropriative like *Bridgerton*. The study has some limitations, as it uses secondary data on sales that are mostly from the industry, not from independent sources and the time period covered is fairly short (2015–2026), limiting the ability to draw conclusions on the long-term sustainability of the development. The numbers published by the publishers and the numbers provided by Netflix itself are also, by their nature, self-serving disclosures made in the context of promotional or investor communications and independent, peer-reviewed verifications of accurate sales data are rather atypical in the literature surveyed here. Future research could include an analysis of sales data over a longer period of adaptation cycles, along with the use of independently collected sales data like Nielsen BookScan or NPD BookScan and audience-reception data regarding whether those

who watched the adapted classic expand their reading habits to the full body of work of the original author, or whether they stick to the adapted or adaptation-adjacent work. Comparative research on the possibility of similar revivals in the non-British classic literatures, whether or not they have the cultural prestige of the British literary canon, would also help to shed light on whether the pattern described here is unique or a more general feature of Netflix's global adaptation approach.

Despite this, the evidence presented in the form of twenty-five separate sources of information, from publishing, tourism, to television studies and adaptation theory, provides a significant support for the central argument in the paper: Netflix has become one of the most influential influences on the modern re-popularisation of British classic literature. In effect, it has created a new and genuine public curiosity in Austen, the Brontës and the literature of which they are part, all through a strategy that was conceived at platform level with the aim of maximizing exposure to subscribers through content that is easily recognized and involves minimal rights risk—changing, in the process, the way that a new generation will engage with Britain's literary heritage.

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