

Simon & Schuster Turns 100 With a New Owner and a Sense of Optimism

The milestone comes after a particularly turbulent period, when the publisher was put up for sale and bought by a private equity firm. Since then, investments have boosted morale and helped it grow.



By Alexandra Alter and Elizabeth A. Harris

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More than 1,000 people came out on Tuesday night in Manhattan to nibble on steak, dance to Britney Spears and play pingpong in celebration of the 100th anniversary of one of largest book publishers in the United States, Simon & Schuster.

The company's milestone, reached this week, comes amid a growth spurt and new sense of optimism after one of the most tumultuous periods in its history.

"We are going to have to sell a lot of books to pay for this party," Jonathan Karp, the company's chief executive, joked in a speech on Tuesday night. "But that's OK!"

Last fall, the publisher was acquired by KKR, a private equity firm, for \$1.62 billion. The deal marked the company's seventh change in ownership in a century, and some in the industry were wary of a private equity firm taking the reins of one of the country's oldest and most prestigious publishing houses. But KKR has invested in the company, starting new imprints and hiring editors, which has boosted morale and set Simon & Schuster apart at a moment when most publishers are looking for ways to cut costs.

To mark its centennial, Simon & Schuster also held a town hall in Midtown Manhattan on Monday night, with appearances by 35 of its most notable authors. The lineup included award-winning novelists like Jennifer Egan, John Irving and Anthony Doerr; best-selling nonfiction authors, among them Walter Isaacson, Bob Woodward, Doris Kearns Goodwin and Susan Orlean; and a sprinkling of public figures that included Jerry Seinfeld, Charlamagne Tha God and Hillary Clinton, who was briefly heckled by a protester who called her a war criminal before being escorted out.

Before the event, dozens of literary luminaries mingled in an upstairs lounge.

"I lost my mind when John Irving walked in," said Lauren Billings, who writes best-selling romances with Christina Hobbs under the pen name Christina Lauren.

"I started tearing up when we talked to Judy Blume," Hobbs added.

Blume, for her part, was equally star struck by the guest list. "The best thing is meeting all these writers whose books I sell in my bookstore," said Blume, who has a bookstore in Key West, Fla., and was mid-conversation with the novelist Jesmyn Ward, standing a few feet from where the novelists Colm Toibin and Jennifer Egan were chatting.

"It's a room full of famous nerds, basically," Jason Reynolds, a blockbuster children's and young adult novelist, said after surveying the crowd.

Judith Viorst, the author of more 40 books, among them the children's classic "Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day," joked when she was onstage about being almost as old as Simon & Schuster. "It's one of the rare occasions these days when I'm a little younger than the honoree," said Viorst, who is 93.

Simon & Schuster was founded in 1924 by Richard L. Simon, a piano salesman, and Max Lincoln Schuster, an arts and culture columnist. (The pair became friends when Simon tried and failed to sell Schuster a piano.) Their first title, a book of crossword puzzles, became an instant best seller, and the company quickly expanded, eventually growing into a sprawling publisher with 50 imprints and a backlist of treasures like the works of Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry James and Edith Wharton.

In 1944, the company was sold to the department store magnate Marshall Field III. About three decades later, it was bought by Gulf & Western, which was restructured into Paramount Communications in 1989, and then acquired by Viacom. Viacom later merged with CBS, making Simon & Schuster a small corner of a huge multimedia conglomerate.

In 2020, ViacomCBS, which later became Paramount Global, agreed to sell the company to Penguin Random House for \$2.175 billion, but the deal was blocked by a federal judge on antitrust grounds.

Last year, when KKR swooped in and bought the publisher, the sale was initially met with skepticism in industry circles. Some wondered whether a financial firm that makes money by buying and selling companies would be a good cultural fit for a 100-year-old company that sells books.



Suzanne Gluck, a literary agent at WME, said she's been encouraged to see Simon & Schuster hiring editors and launching new publishing lines.

"What's happening over there is wonderful for the overall publishing ecosystem because their mandate is to grow," she said. "It feels like a very good place to put your authors right now."

Richard Sarnoff, the chairman of media for KKR and the chairman of the Simon & Schuster board, said KKR plans to grow Simon & Schuster by acquiring other media businesses and publishers, expanding its audio and distribution businesses and increasing its footprint internationally. Karp, Simon & Schuster's C.E.O., said the company is hiring editors in the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada, and plans to publish more local authors in those countries and in India.

Simon & Schuster has relaunched its Summit Books imprint, hiring Judy Clain from Little, Brown to be its publisher, along with Josefine Kals from Knopf as associate publisher and Laura Perciasepe from Riverhead as executive editor. In the past three months, it has also created a handful of new publishing imprints, including Simon Acumen, a business imprint, and Primero Sueño Press, a bilingual English and Spanish imprint dedicated to fiction and nonfiction works by Latino authors.

Michelle Herrera Mulligan, the vice president and associate publisher of Primero Sueño Press/Atria, said she was encouraged by KKR's commitment to expanding the company. "The last thing I expected was that there would be this real openness to investment," she said.

After the deal with KKR was struck last year, Herrera Mulligan met with Karp to discuss how to reach more Latino readers, an underserved market, and together they came up with the idea for Primero Sueño. She brought on two new editors for the imprint, and has acquired high-profile books like Keila Delgado Shaheen's previously self-published book "The Shadow Work Journal," which has sold more than a million copies.

Herrera Mulligan said there is more confidence across the company than she had felt in recent years, when Simon & Schuster was for sale and in limbo.

"The tumult of the transition sent people into a place of uncertainty," she said. Now, "there's an energetic feeling of full steam ahead."

KKR's mandate to grow could also put pressure on Simon & Schuster at a moment when the industry is facing stagnant print sales and rising supply chain costs. Simon & Schuster has posted record profits in recent years, with huge blockbusters from best-selling authors like Colleen Hoover and political exposés on former president Donald J. Trump. But those gains have been hard to maintain, and in the third quarter of last year, the company saw its sales and operating income slide, according to its last full public earnings report. It's unclear how much more growth KKR can engineer.

Still, some in the industry have expressed relief that Simon & Schuster was not gobbled up by a larger media company.

Michael Korda, who joined Simon & Schuster as an assistant editor in 1958 and worked there for some four decades, rising through the ranks to become editor in chief and working with authors like Larry McMurtry, Mary Higgins Clark and David McCullough, said he was alarmed by the possibility that Simon & Schuster might be absorbed into a bigger publishing house, potentially losing its identity.

"I'm relieved that Simon & Schuster has gained a safe place and future," said Korda, who is retired but retains the title of editor in chief emeritus at Simon & Schuster.

The growth spurt is strategic for KKR, which will eventually sell the publisher. But it also sets Simon & Schuster apart at a moment when most publishers are streamlining operations and shedding jobs through layoffs and buyouts.

"We didn't buy this so we can slice out a whole bunch of costs, curtail frontlist publishing and bleed the backlist," Sarnoff said.

"To some extent, that is the fear around private equity, that they're going to do what, maybe, the 1980s version of private equity was reputed to do," Sarnoff continued. "But that's not how you deliver a return on investment in the current world. You do it by making a business better — by growing, not shrinking."

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Elizabeth A. Harris covers books and the publishing industry, reporting on industry news and examining the broader cultural impact of books. She is also an author. Her novel, "How To Sleep At Night," will be published in 2025.

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