



The Best-Seller List as Marketing Tool and Historical Fiction

Author(s): Laura J. Miller

Source: *Book History*, Vol. 3 (2000), pp. 286-304

Published by: [The Johns Hopkins University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30227320>

Accessed: 06/03/2014 16:42

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Book History*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

THE BEST-SELLER LIST AS MARKETING TOOL AND HISTORICAL FICTION



Laura J. Miller

Each week, countless Americans lingering over their Sunday newspapers scan through the book pages' best-seller lists. Many people find it entertaining to see who's on top, what's newly hot, and whether long-entrenched titles have finally been dethroned. Ever since the first best-seller list was published a little over a century ago, the number of weekly, monthly, and annual lists has so proliferated that they are now a staple of most major newspapers and many news magazines. Occasionally, compilations of these lists even become books in their own right.¹

The popularity of best-seller lists certainly speaks to Americans' abiding passion for rankings of all kinds. Every year, the public snaps up the latest reports on the top colleges, the most livable cities, the highest-scoring athletes, and so forth. People and products related to the media seem especially conducive to being ranked. For instance, 1998 saw the much-publicized (and criticized) American Film Institute's list of the top 100 films ever made, and the Modern Library's selection of the 100 best novels (followed the next year by the 100 best nonfiction books). While such "best of" lists may spark furious debate over how judgments are made, best-selling or top-grossing lists attract less controversy. They appear to be straightforward devices that objectively provide us with interesting information about the actions of culture consumers.

Best-seller lists, however, do not exist simply to satisfy idle curiosity. These lists serve extremely important functions for members of the book industry, as well as for many historians and social scientists. While scholars have long relied on them to indicate literary tastes or social trends for a given period, best-seller lists are powerful marketing tools that book profes-

sionals use to sell more books. Among the many rankings now printed, the *New York Times* best-seller list is widely considered to be the preeminent gauge of what Americans are reading. Yet its methodology is highly problematic, and many people in the book industry assume that there are irregularities on the part of sources who report to the *Times*. Similar kinds of problems characterize the lists published by other print and online venues. At the same time, most members of the public, as well as scholars who peruse the lists, have little understanding of what they represent.

In this article, I examine the uses and abuses of best-seller lists in the United States. Along with explaining how some of the more prominent lists are compiled, I will discuss the role of these lists in the marketing efforts of book professionals. My intention here is to argue that despite general agreement in the industry that the lists do not accurately reflect what books are the country's top sellers, major publishers and booksellers have an interest in maintaining the authority of the lists. Therefore, those controversies over the lists that do occasionally arise are easily contained.

The Best-Seller in the Academy

The category of the best-seller has attracted increased scholarly attention in the wake of greater interest in popular culture and popular practices of all kinds. During the last few decades, historians, literary critics, and sociologists have been applying their different questions and different perspectives to a wide variety of popular literature.² While many have focused on a specific genre, some writers have explored the social significance of best-sellers in general. They have turned to these books for clues about a group's culture, or they try to discover why particular books resonate with so many people at a particular time. Related to this, by examining how readers approach best-sellers as well as critics' reactions to these books, researchers hope to better understand the place of popular literature in society and in readers' lives.³

Several of these scholars have noted the problems involved in identifying a book as a best-seller. As they suggest, the term "best-seller" not only refers to an empirically determined ranking, but is sometimes used to describe a particular type of book, one that is deemed especially commercial. For some, "best-seller" has long been a term of disparagement, signifying the mindlessness and conformity of a mass society. Indeed, at the same time as they consciously produce best-sellers, members of the book trade have been among the harshest critics of the best-seller phenomenon. The esteemed publisher Alfred Knopf undoubtedly represented the views of many of his

contemporaries when he remarked, “I think that best-sellers should be abolished by law. They’re just another example of running with the crowd.”⁴ Echoing this sentiment years later, a president of the Los Angeles chapter of the writers group PEN said, “I have always been opposed to any bestseller lists, because they undermine the book reviews by not being in the best intellectual interests of their readers. On the whole bestseller lists don’t represent the best literature in the country, but instead appeal to a mass market taste akin to television and records, the glib and sensational.”⁵

On the other hand, some find great virtue in keeping up with what everyone else is reading, and decry the elitism that underlies the contempt for best-sellers. As a paperback publisher stated in 1982, “In a sophisticated, affluent market like Manhattan, you can walk down the large bookstores along Fifth Avenue, and I defy you to find the week’s number one bestseller in the window—there’s something sick about that. People have demonstrated what they want to read through the bestseller list—why don’t book-sellers make it clear to people that they have that merchandise, to attract them into the store?”⁶ Certainly readers of best-sellers rarely feel the need to apologize for their reading choices. After all, if so many others have found a book worthy, it must be for a good reason. A bookstore customer who I interviewed made this logic quite explicit. After explaining that she grew up in Britain, she said that Americans are better readers than the English because in the United States everyone reads the best-sellers. The English, she told me reprovingly, do not read best-sellers, but instead will read “just anything.” For this reader, and countless others like her, familiarity with best-sellers is a sign of being literate and *au courant*.

Leaving aside the ways in which “best-seller” has become a generic term, and the corresponding debate over the social worth of such books, there are further definitional difficulties involved in specifying what qualifies as a best-seller. Mott points to the inconsistencies in how this term tends to be used. A best-seller of the week is probably not the same as the year’s best-seller, and surely is not identical to one of the all-time best-sellers. Mott constitutes his list by calling a book a best-seller if it had sales figures equivalent to one percent of the total continental U.S. population for the decade in which it was published.⁷ In contrast, Hart finds this definition problematic and prefers to call a book a best-seller if it was among the most widely read in the years immediately following its publication.⁸ Escarpit attempts to gain precision by distinguishing between the fast seller, which starts with rapid high sales and then falls into oblivion, the steady seller, which starts slowly but has enduring popularity, and the best-seller, which both starts fast and continues to maintain steady sales.⁹

Despite these sorts of academic debates, for most people, as Resa Dudovitz notes, the best-seller is above all a book that appears on a best-seller

list.¹⁰ And not infrequently, researchers also look to one or another list as a guide to their study of popular literature. Indeed, many have advocated the lists as sources of sociological insight. For instance, in 1935, an editor of *Harper's Magazine* suggested, "Some well-equipped scholar really ought to go back over the best-seller lists, month by month and year by year, and search them for evidence of the flow of American public opinion, the turns and twists of public sentiment and taste."¹¹ Those who have subsequently taken this advice are often aware of the lists' limitations. But others assume that they make for accurate and transparent data. A British study asserted that the best-seller list is one of the most reliable of indices: "There is no way of fudging it."¹² More recently, a researcher who used the *New York Times* list to determine what titles to examine claimed that "[c]learly, compilers' methodology has become more complex and more accurate."¹³ In an era when electronic technology can perform amazing feats of surveillance and calculation, readers and scholars assume that the lists are a meaningful reflection of popular demand.

As methodological tools go, the best-seller list may indeed serve researchers' purposes well by providing a logical means to select some sample titles to study. But I would like to address the greater authority and power that these lists have. By looking more closely at those documents that certify a book as a best-seller, one can uncover the ways in which the best-seller list is actively participating in the doings of the book world rather than just passively recording it.

Compiling the List

The first published American best-seller list appeared in 1895 in a new monthly magazine called *The Bookman*. This magazine was imitating its London counterpart, also called *The Bookman*, which had been publishing a best-seller list for several years. The American *Bookman* contacted the leading bookstores in sixteen cities (later extended to thirty cities in the United States and Canada) to gain information for its list of the six best-selling titles for each town. In 1897, it also began to publish a national summary. After *The Bookman* was sold in 1918, its successor in compiling lists was the trade journal *Books of the Month*. Another important outlet for disseminating best-seller information was *The Publishers' Weekly*, which launched its list in 1912, reprinting rankings first from *The Bookman* and then from *Books of the Month*. Before long, several other newspapers and magazines, aimed at both the book industry and the reading public, were also publishing best-seller lists.¹⁴

Today, the best-known and most widely consulted lists are those published by the *New York Times*. The *Times* quietly inaugurated its weekly reports of best-sellers in October 1931 when it printed a small list of five fiction and four nonfiction best-sellers for New York City.¹⁵ The following month, the *Times* expanded its coverage to include reports on best-sellers in eight cities. That first chart not only displayed the best-sellers for each city separately, but in half of the cases did not even have a city summary, as the best-sellers for each reporting bookseller were displayed separately.¹⁶ Before long, there was a summary report for each city, though the sources of the *Times*'s information—usually the major bookstores, department stores, and wholesalers for a city—were also noted. Gradually more cities were added and by the 1940s fourteen of the largest cities from around the country were represented.

The *Times* did not try to compile anything resembling a national list until 1942, when the Sunday Book Review section added a new feature to supplement the individual city reports that appeared each Monday. This new chart showed seventeen fiction and sixteen nonfiction titles ranked according to the number of cities that reported them as among their best-sellers.¹⁷ While this chart still allowed the reader to see how a title fared in each city, a few years later the breakdown by city was eliminated and only the national summary remained. The *Times* now referred to its list as “[a]n analysis based on reports from leading booksellers in 22 cities, showing the sales rating of 16 leading fiction and general titles, and their relative standing over the past 3 weeks.”¹⁸ By the 1950s, the *Times* list was considered *the* list for book professionals to watch (though *Publishers Weekly*'s list certainly remained important) because it was the national list most widely read by Americans.¹⁹ However, as the *Times*'s list gradually became more prominent, the newspaper became more mysterious about how the list was compiled.

Various other modifications to the *New York Times* list have been made over the years. In 1977, the newspaper revamped its data collection and analysis techniques, a process that included computerization. Whereas it had previously phoned about 250 bookstores inquiring about their week's best-sellers, the *Times* started to send questionnaires to a stratified sample of 675 reporting units representing 1,400 stores. Computerization of the information was meant to ensure that irregular reports would now be spotted.²⁰

But despite the *Times*'s claim to be ever more scientific, the way in which it compiles its list still largely follows the practice originated by *The Bookman*. Each week the *Times* surveys a sample of bookstores and wholesalers across the country by sending them a report sheet that lists a number of titles that the *Times* is tracking.²¹ The paper then asks respondents to indi-

cate how many of each title were sold during the week. The survey also includes a blank line in which respondents can indicate other titles that are top sellers for them, but industry personnel assume that these write-in candidates do not amount to much. Obviously, the initial composition of the report sheet is critical. As about most aspects of the list's methodology, the *Times* is tight-lipped about how the report sheet is compiled, but it is surely influenced by how much promotion different books have received. One marketing expert advises publishers who want to get a title onto the list to advertise in the trade magazines well before a book's publication, to send out review copies to important media outlets, and to issue a steady stream of press releases, both before and after publication, that prominently mention the book's successes. By generating a buzz among industry personnel and the media, the title is more likely to attract the attention of the *Times*.²²

The choice of establishments to survey also matters for determining what books make the best-seller list. Different outlets specialize in different kinds of books and attract different clientele. Thus, the best-sellers for a Borders are likely to be different from the best-sellers for an independent women's bookstore. In the 1970s, the *Times* was polling about two thousand bookstores. By the early 1990s, this number had increased to more than three thousand outlets,²³ and today the *Times* claims to poll close to four thousand bookstores as well as an unstated number of wholesalers. The *Times* refuses to disclose which stores make up its sample, simply stating that it includes a geographically representative mix of chain and independent stores, along with book wholesalers. However, the data received by the *Times* is also "statistically weighted to represent all outlets nationwide." Apparently this adjusting of data is done in order to give more weight to sales from independent stores, which are reportedly underrepresented in its sample. But because the *Times* considers its formula proprietary information, it is impossible to evaluate its validity.

Another possible source of inaccuracy in the list is that by including wholesalers among those who are surveyed, books may be double-counted. That is, wholesalers report how many books they have sold to retailers, and retailers report how many books they have sold to consumers. Retail sales, of course, include some books that the booksellers purchased from wholesalers and that the wholesalers may well have already reported to the *Times*. An additional problem with using wholesaler figures is that, like publishers, wholesalers may see books returned months after they left the warehouse. Despite perennial calls for reforming the practice, the book trade continues to allow retailers to return unsold copies to their suppliers. Returns, which for mass-market paperbacks can run as high as forty percent, add a considerable measure of uncertainty to the assessment of sales. Especially in the case of new books, wholesaler sales are not necessarily final sales.

The *New York Times* list is worth particular scrutiny for reasons I will explain below. But the best-seller lists of other major newspapers and journals are prone to similar problems. *Publishers Weekly*, which produces probably the second most watched lists, also polls a group of chain and independent bookstores each week. Unlike the *Times*, *Publishers Weekly* does not supply respondents with a preselected group but allows stores to specify their best-selling titles. *Publishers Weekly* does poll wholesalers but only factors that information into its mass market list because bookstores are not the venues where most mass-market sales are made.²⁴ Reflecting its book industry audience, *Publishers Weekly* also differs from the *Times* in that it divides its paperback list into mass-market and trade categories, rather than the *Times*'s fiction and nonfiction paperback distinction. And unlike the *Times*, *Publishers Weekly* does not separate out advice and how-to books. The *Times* used to distinguish between paperbacks in the same way that *Publishers Weekly* now does, but it changed that practice in 1984, stating that the mass market-trade distinction is not important to its readership. While it is true that consumers often do not care whether a book is a mass market or trade paperback, the kinds of books published in mass market format tend to sell in much greater numbers. Therefore, it is now more difficult for trade paperbacks—often the so-called literary books—to make the combined paperback list.²⁵

Other publications that have recently decided to capitalize on the interest in best-seller lists make far less effort to gather representative information than either the *New York Times* or *Publishers Weekly*. In 1994, when the *Wall Street Journal* launched its list (no doubt, as a response to wider recognition that books are potentially good business opportunities), the paper boasted that its data were more current than that of any other list. But the *Journal* accomplished this by polling only the major chains; no independent bookstores were represented.²⁶ This omission prompted a statement of protest from the American Booksellers Association,²⁷ but the *Wall Street Journal*'s sources still include only chains and the online bookseller Amazon.com. *USA Today*'s list, started in 1993, is also heavily biased toward the chains. At its inception, the list surveyed only 158 independents along with all the major chains.²⁸ Currently *USA Today* is more vague about its source list, simply stating that the list is based on an analysis of sales from three thousand independent, chain, discount, and online booksellers.

Most of the major national and regional lists are also now available on the World Wide Web. And the profusion of best-seller sites has made for some rather strange attempts to claim an aura of scientific accuracy. One web site, TopBestsellers.com, bills itself as “a one-step authoritative source for bestsellers.” This site provides a range of reviews and news on best-sellers, along with links to a number of best-seller lists. But TopBestsellers.-

com arrives at its own subject and format best-seller lists by averaging together the lists of three national publications, five regional publications, and Amazon.com into a single composite index. It is probably not a coincidence that TopBestsellers.com is also an Amazon affiliate.²⁹

Along with questionable sources of information, one might also ask which sales are or are not being counted when the lists are compiled. Almost all the best-seller lists reflect fast sales rather than steady sales. In other words, the lists tend to report which books have sold the greatest quantity in a given week or month. They rarely take into account cumulative sales, which is why the Bible, the all-time best-seller, never makes the lists. *Publishers Weekly* does publish an annual list reporting the year's best-sellers. But again, its data source is problematic. The annual list is not based on retailer reports, but on publisher figures for books shipped and billed. These are not final figures, because retailers and wholesalers may return books considerably later.

Furthermore, some types of books are not always reported. While it featured a list of best-selling paperbacks for the first time in 1962, the *New York Times* expanded its regular weekly lists to include paperbacks only in 1976.³⁰ *Publishers Weekly* also did not regularly include paperback lists until 1976.³¹ However, the treatment of paperbacks as a lesser category has not disappeared altogether. In 1988, the *Los Angeles Times* dropped paperbacks from its list, claiming that softcover best-sellers are not news. This move prompted the accusation that the *Los Angeles Times* was simply making a value judgment about the kinds of books which are worthy of being read.³² The *Los Angeles Times* finally restored its paperback list in 1995.³³

Even when paperbacks are included, list compilers and reporting outlets do not consistently report all types of books. Cookbooks, textbooks, and manuals, for instance, are categories that are frequently not tallied.³⁴ Genre books, such as romance novels, also tend to be discounted.³⁵ The logic behind such omissions is not always so clear. The compilers of a 1934 *Publishers' Weekly* list displaying the best-sellers for a period of over fifty years decided to exclude major sellers such as the *Fannie Farmer Cookbook* and the *Boy Scout Manual* because they were used, not read. At other times, the reasoning for leaving certain books off a list is made quite explicit. In 1961, the *Chicago Tribune* announced that it would no longer give the free publicity generated by its best-seller list to books that were "sewer-written by dirty-fingered authors for dirty-minded readers." As a result, high-selling books by Harold Robbins and Henry Miller were not included on the list.³⁶

The methodology employed in compiling the best-seller lists thus casts doubt on their accuracy. But beyond this, the lists can be easily manipulated. Because of its importance, the *New York Times* list is a particular target. Stories circulate of enterprising authors or publishers who discover which

stores in given areas are *Times*-reporting, and who then cause large buys to be made from them. Perhaps the most repeated story concerns the author Jacqueline Susann, who, determined to get *Valley of the Dolls* on the list, tried to butter up *Times*-reporting booksellers, as well as personally buying large quantities of her book. Wayne Dyer, author of the 1970s best-seller *Your Erroneous Zones*, also purchased thousands of copies of his own book.³⁷

This attempt to buy one's way onto the list is clearly not a simple feat for an individual acting alone. Group efforts are far more likely to be successful. In 1990, former Gannett head Al Neuharth was suspected of such a maneuver when it was discovered that the Gannett Foundation bought two thousand copies of Neuharth's autobiography. This would not have caused a stir except that instead of placing a bulk order with the publisher, as is typical for large buys, the Foundation asked Gannett editors around the country to purchase books from local outlets and then send the books back to the Foundation. Neuharth's book, *Confessions of an S.O.B.*, did spend several weeks on the *New York Times* list.³⁸ In another well-publicized example, *Business Week* charged two business authors with a similar scheme in 1995. A consulting firm connected to authors Michael Treacy and Fred Wiersema reportedly spent more than \$200,000 to buy about ten thousand copies of their book, *The Discipline of Market Leaders*, from dozens of outlets. The authors and their publisher denied that they had done anything wrong or that corporate sales were what caused the book to become a best-seller. The book made the *Times* list for fifteen weeks.³⁹

Authors and publishers are not the only ones who can manipulate the lists. What is probably more significant is that there is little to prevent retailers and wholesalers from deliberately or inadvertently misreporting sales, something that appears to happen with some regularity.⁴⁰ This is one reason for the odd but not-unheard-of situation of a title making a best-seller list before its release date. That phenomenon may become even more common now that major online booksellers are promoting their "Not-Yet-Published Bestsellers" (Amazon) and "Future Bestsellers" (Barnes & Noble) lists. The Barnes & Noble site, for instance, claims to "have looked into our crystal ball and seen the future" as it encourages browsers to place advance orders for a number of titles.⁴¹ While this feature is no less legitimate than any other marketing ploy, it stems from the same impulse as more fraudulent practices aimed at turning a book into a best-seller. As one former bookseller told me in an interview, "We were reporting to several best-seller lists, and if we had an awful lot of books to sell, we'd tend to put that one on there in hopes that people would see it, and [say], 'oh boy, gotta have that.'" In other words, reports to the list can be used to generate sales of a book a retailer has heavily invested in. Like other retailers, booksellers do

best when consumer demand is predictable. By helping to make a book a best-seller, booksellers manufacture predictability.

The List at Work

This is related to the real power of the best-seller list, especially that of the *New York Times*. While the ability of the *Times* list to reflect accurately which books are the country's top sellers is dubious, its ability to *sell* books is unquestionably tremendous. The cachet of the label "best-seller" has been evident ever since the early decades of the twentieth century when advertisements proclaimed books to be best-sellers somewhat indiscriminately. But the marketing power of being a *New York Times* best-seller intensified along with the development of the mall-based chain bookstores in the 1960s and 1970s. An important element contributing to the success of Waldenbooks, B. Dalton, and Crown Books was an emphasis on selling frontlist (new) books, especially best-sellers.⁴² Combined with the chains' use of mass-merchandising techniques and discounting, the *New York Times* list took on new significance.⁴³

Currently, once a book makes the *Times* list, the achievement is trumpeted in all further promotional material, the book is sought out by readers who habitually read best-sellers, and it is given special treatment by retailers. In their print and broadcast advertisements, publishers make the best-selling status of a book its most notable feature. Indeed, if the promotional machine was not already on before a title made the list, it soon goes into full force in order to capitalize on the book's apparent mass-market appeal. Furthermore, all of the major chains—both mall outlets and superstores—as well as many independents, Internet booksellers, and even bookstores in countries outside of the United States, create special sections just for the current *New York Times* best-sellers. Not only are the books displayed prominently, but they are usually discounted heavily, and therefore are one of the most economical buys available to book consumers. In addition, the only books that many nonbook retailers, such as supermarkets or discount stores, carry are *New York Times* best-sellers. With warehouse clubs taking an increasingly large share of the bookselling market, the power of the list to determine what books are likely to be bought grows accordingly.

The self-fulfilling nature of the list thus comes from the fact that the reading public is constantly bombarded with information about, and opportunities and incentives to buy books on the list—and buy they do. The financial impact of making the list is so great that it has become formally incorporated into negotiations for literary properties. Since the early 1970s,

publishers have routinely included escalator clauses in major authors' contracts stipulating that an author be paid thousands of extra dollars if her book makes the *New York Times* list, and according to where it ranks and for how many weeks. Such escalator clauses are also frequently included in deals for movie or book-club rights.⁴⁴ Other indirect financial benefits may also ensue. The authors accused by *Business Week* of buying up their own book were able to charge significantly higher speaking fees once their book made the best-seller list. And of course, their best-seller status put them in greater demand on the speaking circuit. With so much at stake then, it is no wonder that enormous marketing effort goes into getting a book access to this major marketing tool.

It is also because so much is at stake that little has been done to reform the lists. From the earliest days of the best-seller lists, observers have been skeptical about their accuracy. In 1932, the publisher M. Lincoln Schuster of Simon & Schuster issued a call for the reformation of best-seller lists. He claimed that the lack of a systematic procedure for compiling best-seller lists had led to a number of abuses and had undermined the list's function as a historical index of public taste.⁴⁵ Schuster might have been reacting to a blistering attack on best-seller lists issued the previous year in the famous Cheney Report on the economic state of the book industry. Claimed Cheney:

Like all trade evils, the practice has developed insidiously. A bookseller, asked to report on sales, begins by trying to remember or he asks the friendly traveler what he thinks is the best-seller. Or else he sees a stack of a title which has been decreasing—and at the next step he sees a stack which he wishes would disappear—and then he remembers a title on which he ordered too many. The title becomes one of his best-sellers. And if the bookseller also happens to be a publisher, should he be expected to resist the temptation to push a book to the best-seller list—and to be a little lenient if it doesn't quite get there? And if two stores or a dozen stores or a hundred stores report in the same way, the result is not and can never be a list of best-sellers. The next step is in buying—"Yes, I'll stock up, if you'll give me a special discount," says the bookseller—and "I'll push the book if you give me a special deal or special cooperative advertising." He may actually push the book and it may actually sell and he may truthfully report it to be a best-seller in his store. But who knows if it isn't so? If a publisher gives a special discount, the book certainly deserves to be a best-seller and if it is called one for a few weeks, maybe it will become one. The logic seems to be almost impregnable—and it ends in a tissue of falsehood. It means,

literally, that a place may be bought for a book on several best-seller lists.⁴⁶

Faith in the lists did not increase in subsequent years. Another well-read report on the book industry published in the late 1940s stated that most best-seller lists are poor indicators of sales, both because they are based on misleading reports and because the lists were only measuring fast sales.⁴⁷ The criticisms of the best-seller lists have continued into the present. A respected marketing executive of a publishing house has called the rankings “smoke and mirrors.”⁴⁸ And in my interviews with book professionals, many people scoffed at the notion that the lists are accurate. Said one bookseller, “We report to the *New York Times*, and they give you a list of books, and then they say ‘Other.’ It’s sort of like saying, ‘who are you going to vote for, for President Bill Clinton or Other.’ So that’s not a very accurate way of doing it. But what it basically does is it validates the books that the *New York Times* thinks are going to make the best-seller list.” Despite the chronic cynicism toward the lists, critics have had very little effect on the way the lists are put together and have certainly not blunted their impact. At the most, list sponsors make occasional gestures toward fuller disclosure. For example, following the controversy over business authors Treacy and Wiersema, the *New York Times* began to place a dagger symbol next to those list titles for which bookstores report bulk orders. However, this has not diminished the practical worth of making the list.

One concerted attempt to skewer the *New York Times* list occurred in the early 1980s, when William Peter Blatty, author of *The Exorcist*, sued the *New York Times* for six million dollars. Blatty claimed that his latest book, *Legion*, sold enough copies to qualify for a spot on the fiction list but that through intentional negligence and injurious falsehood, the *New York Times* did not include it until weeks later, and then it appeared for only one week. The harm done, according to Blatty, was that by not making the list sales of the book had been damaged. Blatty was thus making quite explicit the selling power of the list, as well as questioning the methods that the *New York Times* used to compile it. The *Times* defended itself by saying that contrary to Blatty’s assertion, the list did not purport to be an objective compilation of information but instead was an editorial product. This was the argument that prevailed in the courts. Although he appealed all the way to the Supreme Court, Blatty’s case ended up being dismissed. The courts agreed with the *New York Times* that the list contents are protected under the First Amendment, and therefore the *Times* could not be sued for not putting a book on the list. Nevertheless, the *Times* did start to include in the fine print attached to its weekly list the information that sales figures are statistically adjusted.⁴⁹

Blatty appeared to be most upset about the *Times's* practice of weighing sales reports from independent stores differently from those of chains, while he paid less attention to the more important issue of how the report sheets get compiled in the first place. This is not too surprising considering that Blatty's books sold much better in the chains than in independent bookstores. Blatty's motivation for taking on the *New York Times* list thus appeared to be far more about his own financial gain than about protecting the public's interest in an accurate record of best-sellers, which is probably one reason why few people in the book industry demonstrated visible support for Blatty's campaign. After all, Blatty was hardly destitute even if *Legion* did not become a blockbuster. But it is also the case that many people in the book world have a lot invested in the list as it now exists.

A few of the more recent challenges to the *New York Times* list demonstrate book professionals' cognizance of how the list affects them. Some members of the book industry have actually come to perceive that they are being harmed more than helped by the list. For quite some time, a number of independent booksellers have argued that their reports to the *New York Times* list were in effect gifts to chain bookstores. That is, once a book that sold well in independent stores became certified as a best-seller, the chains began to promote and discount the title, and independents saw subsequent sales of the book go to their chain competitors. But this issue became more critical in 1997, when the *New York Times* entered into an agreement with Barnes & Noble's Internet bookselling arm. The *Times's* World Wide Web site then provided a link between every book reviewed and a Barnesandnoble.com order form. Independents were furious about this connection between the *Times* and Barnes & Noble, viewing it as an indication that the foremost review organ in the country cared little about whether independent booksellers survive. In protest over the deal, approximately one hundred stores decided to stop reporting to the *Times* best-seller list. The *Times* tried to appease independents by creating a new feature on its website that compares best-sellers at independents and chains. But this did not win over many independents.⁵⁰

Instead, there have been several moves to create separate independent lists. For instance, WordsWorth Books of Cambridge, Massachusetts, started a national list showing best-sellers from independent booksellers. And two Washington, D.C., book professionals produced an independent best-seller list for the Washington area. Some trade associations also decided to create alternatives to the *New York Times* list. Both the Northern California Independent Booksellers Association and the Mountains & Plains Booksellers Association began to widely distribute best-seller lists reflecting sales among their independent bookstore members.⁵¹ In addition to these regional efforts, the American Bookseller Association launched a weekly

national list that reflected the sales of 170 independents.⁵² There have also been initiatives by a couple of commercial organizations, most notably BookScan, an offshoot of the music industry's SoundScan, to institute a system for the collection of sales data from all types of book outlets via point-of-sale cash registers. However, that has yet to gain the cooperation of many parties in the book industry.

This is not to say that all independents have abandoned the *New York Times* list. Hundreds still participate, in part because being a *Times*-reporting store enhances a bookseller's ability to attract prominent authors for store events. But as a letter sent to the *Times* by the Southeast Booksellers Association warned, the move by independents to leave the list could make it less relevant to the industry.⁵³ This may be a possibility. However, the relevance of the list to the industry stems from its ability to attract readers to books. And the independents face an uphill battle in diminishing the list's credibility among the reading public.

While some members of the book industry would like to see the best-seller list deflated, others are fighting for the right to benefit from its marketing clout. In a somewhat odd confrontation, the *New York Times* threatened legal action against online booksellers Amazon.com and Borders.com for posting its best-seller list on their sites. Industry observers were taken aback by this as reprints of the list had long been a fixture in bricks-and-mortar bookstores. The dispute between Amazon and the *New York Times* was soon settled, with the *Times* agreeing to let Amazon use the lists provided that Amazon show best-sellers alphabetically rather than by rank, and as long as Amazon did not disclose a week's list before it was published in the Sunday Book Review section. In return, Amazon agreed to continue submitting its sales figures to the compilers of the *Times* list.⁵⁴

Both this dispute and its resolution provide an interesting demonstration of how best-seller lists reflect and shape power relations in the book industry. Although the *New York Times* relies on major booksellers like Amazon to provide the paper with sales figures in order to retain its reputation as the foremost best-seller list, Amazon's need for access to the list is apparently greater. Just as the *Times* did not give in to independents' demands to cancel its agreement with Barnesandnoble.com, this dispute appears to have been settled on the *Times*'s terms.

On the other hand, shortly after the Amazon-*Times* dispute was resolved, both Barnes & Noble and Borders announced that they would create and publicize weekly lists of best-sellers based on sales from their own stores. Most significant, the chains would then offer discounts on their own best-sellers rather than the best-sellers on the *New York Times* list.⁵⁵ Since there were generally very few differences between the *Times* and chain best-sellers, this move would appear to mean little for the fate of individual titles.

However, because Barnes & Noble and Borders are the country's two largest booksellers, publishers admitted that they might have to reevaluate the place of the *Times* lists in their marketing plans and in formulas for payments to authors.⁵⁶

This development suggests that only when book professionals' interests are no longer tied to the *Times* list might it lose its authority. It is possible that the *Times* list could be undermined. But this is only because there are other lists that can be effectively used for marketing purposes. Thus, the potential crack in the might of the *New York Times* list does little to alter either the power of best-seller lists in general or to ensure that a more accurate list will appear.

The politics of the best-seller list is an issue that should concern both scholars of the book trade and those who look to the best-seller lists to provide useful information on people's reading habits. I do not mean to suggest here that existing best-seller lists bear absolutely no relation to actual sales of books. A title that appears on the *Times* list (or one of the other major lists) probably is selling in high numbers. But rankings may not always be deserved, and there may be other high-selling titles that do not make it onto the lists. Therefore, scholars who want to use such lists as records of popular tastes need to scrutinize more closely the context in which they are produced. They should understand that the authority of the list is more cultural than scientific, and that the purpose of the list is as much about economics as it is about entertaining or informing the public. While the best-seller list does not necessarily give us a transparent account of Americans' reading patterns, it can tell us a lot about the social production of best-sellers.

Notes

1. The most widely consulted are probably Alice Payne Hackett's volumes: Alice Payne Hackett, *Fifty Years of Best-sellers, 1895–1945* (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1945); idem, *60 Years of Best-sellers, 1895–1955* (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1956); idem, *70 Years of Best-sellers: 1895–1965* (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1967); idem and James Henry Burke, *80 Years of Best-sellers: 1895–1975* (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1977). See also John Bear, *The #1 New York Times Bestseller: Intriguing Facts About the 484 Books That Have Been #1 New York Times Bestsellers Since the First List in 1942* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1992); Karen Hinckley and Barbara Hinckley, *American Best-sellers: A Reader's Guide to Popular Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Keith L. Justice, *Bestseller Index: All Books, by Author, on the Lists of Publishers Weekly and the New York Times Through 1990* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1998).

2. Perhaps because they are the most widely read of any single genre of book, romance novels written for women may well be studied more than any other popular genre. See, for example, Linda K. Christian-Smith, *Becoming a Woman Through Romance* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Resa L. Dudovitz, *The Myth of Superwoman: Women's Bestsellers in France*

and the United States (London: Routledge, 1990); Kate Ellis, "Gimme Shelter: Feminism, Fantasy, and Women's Popular Fiction," in *American Media and Mass Culture: Left Perspectives*, ed. Donald Lazere (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 216–30; Margaret Ann Jensen, *Love's Sweet Return: The Harlequin Story* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1984); Madonna M. Miner, *Insatiable Appetites: Twentieth-Century American Women's Best-sellers* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1984); Tanya Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (New York: Methuen, 1984); Deborah Philips, "Mills and Boon: The Marketing of Moonshine," in *Consumption, Identity, and Style: Marketing, Meanings, and the Packaging of Pleasure*, ed. Alan Tomlinson (London: Routledge, 1990), 139–52; Jean Radford, ed., *The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986); Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); Ann Barr Snitow, "Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women Is Different," in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 245–63; Carol Thurston, *The Romance Revolution: Erotic Novels for Women and the Quest for a New Sexual Identity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Eva Hemmungs Wirtén, *Global Infatuation: Explorations in Transnational Publishing and Texts: The Case of Harlequin Enterprises and Sweden* (Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala University, 1998). However, researchers have also given much attention to science fiction, westerns, mysteries, self-help literature, and other categories that sell in high numbers.

3. The two pioneering accounts of the best-seller are Frank Luther Mott, *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best-sellers in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), and James D. Hart, *The Popular Book: A History of America's Literary Taste* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1950). More recent studies include John Sutherland, *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction of the 1970s* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981); Elizabeth Long, *The American Dream and the Popular Novel* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985); and Ruth Miller Elson, *Myths and Mores in American Best-sellers 1865–1965* (New York: Garland, 1985).

4. Quoted in Dinitia Smith, "An Empire with Modest Beginnings," *New York Times*, 24 March 1998, C6.

5. Quoted in Lisa See, "L.A. Times Drops Mass Market, Trade PBs from Bestseller Lists," *Publishers Weekly*, 22 January 1988, 18. For an early version of opposition to the idea of the best-seller, but written before the term itself was in wide usage, see Henry Dwight Sedgwick, "The Mob Spirit in Literature," *Atlantic Monthly* 96 (July 1905): 9–15.

6. Ron Busch, President Pocket Books, in Jeanne O'Connor, "Could Net Pricing Save the Industry? Book Professionals Talk About Pricing," *American Bookseller*, September 1982, 62. Today, this publisher would be hard-pressed to find any book, best-seller or otherwise, along Fifth Avenue in midtown Manhattan. In the years since his complaint, almost all the bookstores along that stretch of Fifth Avenue have closed. After the landmark Doubleday Book Shop closed in June 1997, a Barnes & Noble was the sole remaining store in this neighborhood, which was once a major center of bookselling.

7. Mott, *Golden Multitudes*, 6–7.

8. Hart, *The Popular Book*, 301.

9. Robert Escarpit, *The Book Revolution* (London: George G. Harrap, 1966), 116.

10. Dudovitz, *The Myth of Superwoman*, 25.

11. Frederick Lewis Allen, "Best-Sellers: 1900–1935," *The Saturday Review of Literature*, 7 December 1935, 3–4, 20, 24, 26.

12. Claud Cockburn, "Introduction to 'Bestseller,'" in *Literary Taste, Culture, and Mass Communication*, vol. 12: Bookselling, Reviewing and Reading, ed. Peter Davison, Rolf Meyer-sonn, and Edward Shils (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1978), 101–19.

13. Wendy Simonds, *Women and Self-Help Culture: Reading Between the Lines* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 241.
14. Hackett, *70 Years of Best-sellers*, 2; Mott, *Golden Multitudes*, 204–6.
15. *New York Times*, 12 October 1931, 19.
16. *New York Times*, 23 November 1931, 17.
17. *New York Times Book Review*, 9 August 1942, 8.
18. *New York Times Book Review*, 9 September 1945, 8.
19. Laurie Winer, "Book Publishing: They've Got a Little List . . .," *Wall Street Journal*, 26 July 1984, 24.
20. Mary M. Edwards, "A Bestseller List to Make Book On," *American Bookseller*, September 1977, 15.
21. That number has grown considerably in recent years. In 1990, the report sheet showed thirty-six titles. In 1999, the number had reportedly shot up to 350 titles. "The Making of a Best-Seller," *Book Marketing Update*, November–December 1990, 1; Charles Kaiser, "Making the Best-Seller List," *Brill's Content*, March 1999, 114.
22. "The Making of a Best-Seller," *Book Marketing Update*.
23. Edwin Diamond, *Behind the Times: Inside the New "New York Times"* (New York: Villard, 1994), 362–64.
24. Conversation with *Publishers Weekly* staff member, July 1998.
25. "N.Y. Times to Change Bestseller Lists," *Publishers Weekly*, 23 December 1983, 23–24.
26. *Wall Street Journal*, 23 February 1994, B5.
27. Bernard E. Rath, "Unchain the Journal's List of Bestsellers," *Wall Street Journal*, 22 March 1994, A15.
28. Maureen O'Brien, "'USA Today' Launches Top-50 Bestseller List," *Publishers Weekly*, 1 November 1993, 16.
29. <http://www.topbestsellers.com>, September 1999.
30. Kenneth C. Davis, *Two-Bit Culture: The Paperbacking of America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 292–94.
31. Hackett and Burke, *80 Years of Best-sellers*, ix.
32. See, "L.A. Times Drops Mass Market, Trade PBs from Bestseller Lists"; Jane Heller, "Paperback Bestseller Lists," *Publishers Weekly*, 26 February 1988, 96.
33. *Los Angeles Times*, 5 November 1995.
34. Daisy Maryles, "The Big Get Bigger," *Publishers Weekly*, 20 March 1995, S3–S8; Daisy Maryles, "Making the Charts," *Publishers Weekly*, July 1997, 32–36.
35. "A Bestseller at Last," *Bookselling This Week*, 24 August 1998, 2.
36. Maryles, *Making the Charts*.
37. Winer, *Book Publishing: They've Got a Little List*. . . .
38. Paul Farhi, "Gannett Funds Used to Buy Neuharth Book," *Washington Post*, 6 September 1990, A1, A18–19.
39. David Stout, "Plot on Best-Seller Lists Is Said to Be Charged," *New York Times*, 27 July 1995, B4; William Glaberson, "Article Says 2 Authors Tried to Exploit Times List," *New York Times*, 28 July 1995, B2; Willy Stern, "Did Dirty Tricks Create a Best-Seller?" *Business Week*, 7 August 1995, 22–25; Willy Stern, "The Unmasking of a Best-seller: Chapter 2," *Business Week*, 14 August 1995, 41; Calvin Reid, "A-W Rejects Claim Authors Tricked 'Times' List," *Publishers Weekly*, 28 August 1995, 30; "Business Week Reformulates Best-Seller List," *Bookselling This Week*, 4 September 1995, 1; 3.
40. See, for example, Judith Appelbaum, *How to Get Happily Published*, 4th ed. (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992); William Peter Blatty, "Fewer Blacks, and Fewer Still Black Men," *Saturday Review*, January–February 1985, 29–33; 90; "The Fiction of Bestseller Lists,"

Book Marketing Update, March–April 1992, 1; Elisabeth Sifton, “Book Editor Sounds a *Cri de Coeur*: Let’s Dump the *Times* Best-Seller List,” *New York Observer*, 22 February 1993, 1, 24.

41. <http://www.barnesandnoble.com>, September 1999.

42. Actually, at its founding, B. Dalton did not intend to focus on best-sellers, but it soon fell into this strategy.

43. For more on the strategies of the chain bookstores, see Laura J. Miller, “Shopping for Community: The Transformation of the Bookstore into a Vital Community Institution,” *Media, Culture & Society* 21 (May 1999): 385–407; idem, “Cultural Authority and the Use of New Technology in the Book Trade,” *Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 28 (Winter 1999): 297–313.

44. Maxwell J. Lillienstein, “Concentration and Other Threats to the Book Industry: Part III,” *American Bookseller*, December 1980, 32; Winer, *Book Publishing: They’ve Got a Little List . . .*; Sifton, “Book Editor Sounds a *Cri de Coeur*.”

45. “Schuster Assails ‘Best-seller’ Lists,” *New York Times*, 19 July 1932, 15.

46. O. H. Cheney, *Economic Survey of the Book Industry, 1930–1931*, 1st ed. (New York: National Association of Book Publishers, 1931), 127–28.

47. William Miller, *The Book Industry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), 55.

48. Jean Marie Angelo, “Publishers Are from Mars/Booksellers Are from Venus: Reading the Industry’s Signals,” *American Bookseller*, April 1997, 66.

49. Curt Suplee, “By the List Possessed,” *Washington Post*, 31 August 1983, B1, B12; “Blatty Sues New York Times Over Bestseller List,” *BP Report on the Business of Book Publishing*, 5 September 1983, 1, 8; Lisa See, “Blatty Sues N.Y. Times Over Bestseller List,” *Publishers Weekly*, 9 September 1983, 18; “N.Y. Times Says Blatty Sued for Publicity,” *Publishers Weekly*, 11 November 1983, 11; “Blatty Moves to Force Depositions by N.Y. Times Editors in Suit Over Bestseller List,” *BP Report on the Business of Book Publishing*, 14 November 1983, 1; “Judge Dismisses Blatty Suit over N.Y. Times Bestseller List,” *BP Report on the Business of Book Publishing*, 2 April 1984, 1, 5; Blatty, *Fewer Blacks, and Fewer Still Black Men*; “California Court to Hear Blatty Suit Against Times’ Best-sellers List,” *BP Report on the Business of Book Publishing*, 12 May 1986, 1; 6–7; “California High Court Dismisses Blatty Suit Against the Times,” *BP Report on the Business of Book Publishing*, 5 January 1987, 1, 7; Howard Fields, “High Court Refuses Blatty Suit Against ‘N.Y. Times,’” *Publishers Weekly*, 18 March 1988, 10.

50. “Independents Rethink Reporting Their Bestsellers,” *Bookselling This Week*, 4 August 1997, 1–2; Katayoon Zandvakili, “West Coast Booksellers Irate at ‘NYT’ Link with B&N,” *Publishers Weekly*, 11 August 1997, 238; Karen Angel, “‘NYT’ to Post Online Indies List,” *Publishers Weekly*, 22 December 1997, 21–22; “NYT Debuts Independents List,” *Bookselling This Week*, 23 February 1998, 1, 3.

51. Elizabeth Bernstein, “Wordsworth Forms New Bestseller List for Independents,” *Publishers Weekly*, 27 October 1997, 27; Karen Angel, “Indies Spurn ‘NYTBR,’ Create Bestsellers Lists,” *Publishers Weekly*, 22 December 1997, 22; “NCIBA Publishes First Weekly Bestseller List,” *PW Daily for Booksellers*, 14 January 1998; “Look Out NY Times: MPBA Launches List,” *PW Daily for Booksellers*, 5 March 1999. The Mountains & Plains Booksellers Association subsequently discontinued its list. Steven M. Zeitchik, “Indie List Is Dead, Long Live the Indie List,” *PW Daily for Booksellers from Publishers Weekly*, 18 January 2000.

52. Carl Lennertz, “Making It Count: A Book Sense Bestseller List,” *Bookselling This Week*, 20 September 1999, 5–6; idem, “Book Sense Bestseller List Debuts in BTW,” *Bookselling This Week*, 6 December 1999, 1.

53. Bob Summer, “SEBA Protests ‘Times’, BarnesandNoble.com Pact,” *Publishers Weekly*, 20 October 1997, 16.

54. Doreen Carvajal, "Amazon Asks Court to Clear Use of Times Best-Seller Lists," *New York Times*, 5 June 1999, C3; Steven M. Zeitchik, "Amazon Tangles with 'Times'; Will Open New DC," *Publishers Weekly*, 14 June 1999, 12; Doreen Carvajal, "Times Co. and Amazon Settle a Legal Dispute," *New York Times*, 10 July 1999, C7.

55. This applied only to the chains' bricks-and-mortar stores; Barnesandnoble.com and Borders Online continued to discount *Times* best-sellers.

56. Doreen Carvajal, "Barnes & Noble to Phase Out Use of the Times List of Books," *New York Times*, 13 November 1999, C7; Steven M. Zeitchik, "Barnes & Noble to Create Own Bestseller List," *Publishers Weekly*, 20 September 1999, 10; Jim Milliot and John Mutter, "Sales Jump, but Online Efforts Result in Loss," *Publishers Weekly*, 29 November 1999, 22.