Chapter 1
Definitions

Preface

Why read, or contemplate, with any degree of seriousness, less than 'good' (and sometimes downright bad) books – the Deepings of the literary world? Do they not belong in that category, contemptuously called in German, *Wegwerfliteratur*? – 'throw-away literature'? Why pick up what literary history so resolutely discards?

Any study of bestsellers confronts the same question as does the decaf, no-fat latte drinker in Starbucks: 'Why bother?' One justification, and the easiest demonstrated, is their (that is, bestsellers') interesting peculiarity. Like other ephemera of past times, bestsellers (even Orwell's despised Deeping) offer the charm of antiquarian quaintness. Where else would one encounter a line such as: 'I say, you *are* a *sport*, pater' ['Son' addressing 'Sorrell', on having been given a tenner 'tip' in Deeping's *Sorrell and Son*]. And, so short is their lifespan, that today's bestsellers become yesterday's fiction almost as soon as one has read them.

Looking back through the lists is to uncover delightful cultural oddities. Consider, for example, the top-selling (#1) novel of 1923 in the United States, *Black Oxen*, by Gertrude Atherton. Recall too that the discriminating reader of that year had James Joyce's

Ulysses, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and D. H. Lawrence's *Aaron's Rod* to choose from.

Atherton's title is taken from W. B. Yeats ('The years like great black oxen tread the world'). The allusion signals grand literary pretension; pretension absurdly unmerited. None the less, the novel's theme was, for the time, both topical and sensational – rejuvenation. For humans, that is, not cattle.

The narrative opens in a New York theatre. A brilliant young newspaperman, Lee Clavering (a member of the city's elite 'top 400' families), is struck by a beautiful woman in the audience. Investigation reveals that she is facially identical with a young 'belle' of thirty years before, Mary Ogden. Miss Ogden married a Hungarian diplomat, Count Zattiany, and has never been heard of since. Speculation rages, but eventually the truth comes out: Ogden/Zattiany has been rejuvenated in Vienna by Dr Steinach's new X-ray technique. By bombarding a woman's ovaries at the period of menopause, the ageing process is reversible.

When news of the wonderful process hits the newspapers, 'civil war threatens'. And luckless Clavering finds himself in love with a woman old enough to be his mother. On the other side, he himself is obsessively loved by a flapper, Janet Oglethorpe, young enough to be his daughter, who drinks illegal hooch and attends 'petting parties'. The plot thickens, madly, thereafter.

It is nonsense – just as, medically, Steinach's X-ray miracle was nonsense. In 1922 Atherton herself had received the Viennese doctor's rejuvenation treatment. It seems, from publicity pictures, to have done little for her beauty. But tosh fiction and quack science as it may be, *Black Oxen* fits, hand-in-glove, with its period. And no other period.

However absurd it seems to the modern reader, Atherton's novel reflects, and dramatizes, contemporary anxiety about women's

freedoms; as definitively as did *Bridget Jones's Diary* in the 1990s. The 1920s was the era of the 'flapper' – the perpetually young girl-woman. British women in this decade had, after long struggle, the vote – but only if they were over 30, after which the heyday in the female blood was conceived to have been sufficiently cooled to make rational political decisions. The cult of Dionysian youth – the 'be young forever or die now' aspiration – is more respectably commemorated in another novel of 1923, Scott Fitzgerald's *Beautiful and Damned*. It, too, made the bestseller lists, but much less spectacularly than Atherton: Fitzgerald was running a longer literary race.

Black Oxen, the top novel in the US in 1923, is inextricably 'of' its period. It could have been published 15 years later (as was Aldous Huxley's 'elixir of life' novel, *After Many a Summer*). But out of its immediate time-and-place frame, *Black Oxen* would have no more 'worked' than a fish out of water. Nor would it, in other days, have been what it was, 'the book of the day'. The day made the book, as much as events of the day made newspaper headlines in 1923.

This hand-in-glove quality is inextricably linked with the ephemerality of bestsellerism. A #1 novel may be seen as a successful literary experiment – as short-lived as a camera flash, and as capable of freezing, vividly, its historical moment. If (to paraphrase Coleridge) one saw *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* ('Jesus tripping') wandering wild in Arabia, one would shout: 'hippy seventies!' (with the possible addition 'dude!'). If Bulldog Drummond blundered, dinner-jacketed, into one's living room, his 'man' Denny in close attendance with pint tankard, furled brolly, and pistol, one would recognize the clubland thug as a time traveller from the early 1920s.

The great literary work may be, as Jonson said of Shakespeare, 'not for an age but for all time'. The reverse is, typically, the case with the 'best' bestsellers. They are snapshots of the age.

An American kind of book

There is no advance in the merchandising of books – from the feuilleton (newspaper serial), the dime novel, through the pulp magazine, the mass-market paperback, the webstore, and, of course, the bestseller and its apparatus – that America has not pioneered and brought to perfection.

America was peculiarly suited for the development of a popular fiction industry and its most dynamic manifestation: the bestseller. As a democracy, America came into being at the same time as the rise of the novel. With their revolutionary proclamations, the new state's founders enshrined rights to freedom of expression and the pursuit of happiness. Bestsellers aim to supply those commodities.

There was, unlike in Europe, no tradition of state control over literature or its makers. Commercial control, via privilege or monopoly, is similarly alien to American laissez-faire literary culture. Apart from a brief period in 1915, America has not imposed any system of retail price maintenance, such as Britain's Net Book Agreement: a trade pact (deemed illegal under American anti-trust law), introduced in the 1890s and abolished in the 1990s, devised to discourage 'underselling', or competitive pricing. 'Let 'er rip' has always been the American commercial motto.

America has enjoyed (and typically invented) the world's most advanced printing, transport, and communication technologies. Most importantly, in its formative 19th-century phase, until April 1891, the American book trade was wholly unfettered by any adherence to protocols of international copyright. It was in the happy position of being able to plunder mature European – principally British – literary cultures at will and without sanction.

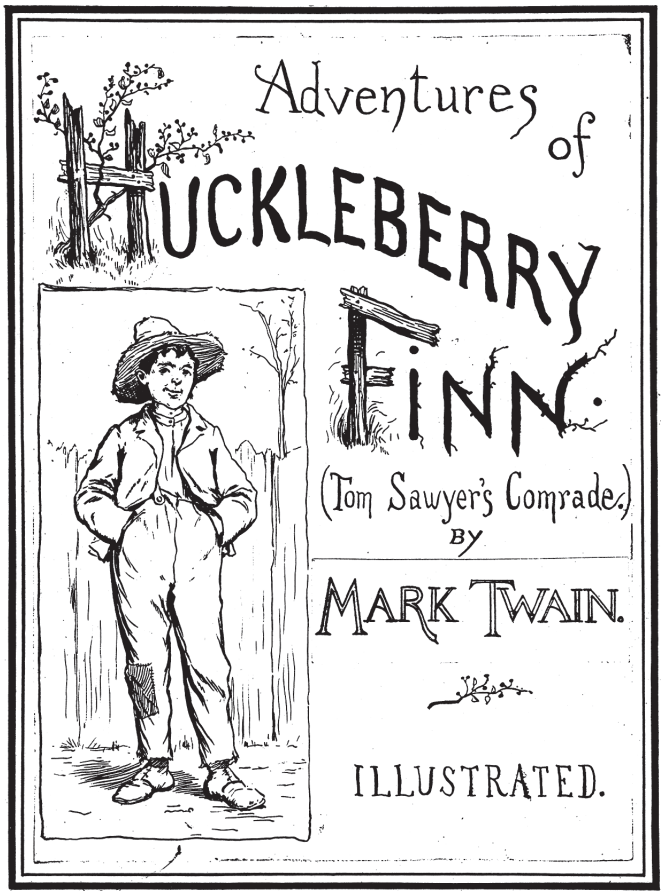
For the first hundred years of its existence, the flag of the American book trade was the Jolly Roger. And most systematically plundered was British literary property. The effect is easily demonstrated. F. L. Mott's 'Overall Best Sellers in the United States', his monograph on the subject, uses for its survey the calculus of 'a total sale equal to one per cent of the population of the continental United States for the decade in which it was published'. Mott lists, by this finicky reckoning, 124 bestselling 'American' novels, in the period 1776 to 1900. Of those, 74 are actually British in origin; 15 mainland European (mainly French); and a mere 55 native products.

Huckleberry Finn: a case study

'All modern American literature', pontificated Ernest Hemingway, 'comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*.' And, one may add, beneath its vernacular idiomatic surface – as American as Pike County – great chunks of Twain's perennially popular novel come from pirated foreign sources. The narrative is worm-holed with un-American popular fiction.

When, for example, Tom sets up the preposterous scheme to spring Jim from the shed in which Aunt Sally has imprisoned the luckless slave, the young rogue cites – what else? – *The Count of Monte Cristo*. As he explains, to a sceptical (and notably less literate) Huck:

> It don't make no difference how foolish it is, it's the *right* way – and it's the regular way … look at one of them prisoners in the bottom dungeon of the Castle Deef, in the harbour of Marseilles, that dug himself out that way; how long was *he* at it, you reckon?'
>
> 'I don't know.'
>
> 'Well, guess.'
>
> 'I don't know. A month and a half.'



1. ***Huckleberry Finn*****, the original edition of 1884, illustrated by E. W. Kemble**

'*Thirty-seven year* – and he come out in China. *That's* the kind. I wish the bottom of *this* fortress was solid rock.'

But it is the Wizard of the North, rather than Dumas, whose romance underlies Twain's realism. When he raises his gang, at the outset of the story, Tom does so with the burning cross of *The Lady of the Lake* (a narrative which, incidentally, also furnished the Ku Klux Klan with much of their ritual and symbolism). 'Walter Scott' is the name of the meaningfully wrecked steam boat which sets up the collision between the hero's romanticism and the real world, where real hurt happens.

Twain believed that Scott – the most pirated novelist of the century – had poisoned the American soul, and was responsible for the Civil War. It is curious speculation, even for Twain, that subscription to international copyright might have preserved the country from the bloodiest war in its history.

The American sales hot-house

Freed of the necessity to originate its own bestselling fiction, the American book trade's energies tilted towards selling the product – and selling to a public which was, across society, more literate and book-hungry than Britain's. It was a hot-house in which new sales techniques could, and did, emerge.

The British book trade, with a smaller economic base, a more organic (London) literary world, and a smaller (island-sized) reading public, tilted more towards origination. And, given hefty start-up costs for the commodity, the British book trade cartelized to maintain a sky-high sales price for fiction. A new novel cost more in the 19th century than at any period before or since. A three-volume first edition of, for example, Mrs Humphry Ward's *Robert Elsmere*, under the Smith Elder imprint, would have cost the consumer in 1883 a guinea and a half (not far short of £100 in modern currency). Assuming, of course, that

any consumer were rich or mad enough to disburse that much (there was, the Victorian joke went, *one* person who *once* bought a three-decker – but no one, dammit, could remember the fellow's name).

The legions of English readers who devoured Mrs Ward's story and suffered, along with the hero, the agonies of religious doubt, borrowed their volumes (a volume at a time, typically) from a circulating library. By thus 'renting' the novel for a short period, the vast purchase cost was minimized. The publishers and middlemen got their profit (3,500 three-volume sets of *Robert Elsmere* were sold in six months), and, with demand stoked sky-high by the library buzz, the booksellers could wait for the cheap (but, at 6s, hardly dirt-cheap) reprints in a year or so (60,000 cheap copies were sold). Everyone was happy. No apple carts were upset. Reading matter flowed out, serenely, to the reading public; a golden stream of cash flowed serenely back, diverging profitably into library, bookseller, and publisher's pockets (at the end of the food-chain, authors themselves might get something).

Meanwhile, in New York, a few weeks after the book went on sale in Hatchard's in Piccadilly, *Robert Elsmere* could have been bought for a quarter (25c) in any number of Broadway outlets. It is estimated 100,000 copies were sold within the year in America, and getting on for a million in three years, all at fractions of British prices. America's was a buying, not a borrowing, book culture. And more hectic with it. The unfettered laws of supply and demand drove the price down until, at the financial nadir, the pious English lady's ultra-pious fictional tract was being given away, free, with bars of soap; on the principle, presumably, that cleanliness was next to godliness. From the hundreds of thousands of copies of her novel sold in the US, Mrs Ward got not a plugged nickel.

The licence to plunder the seasonal British crop ended when America, finally and reluctantly, signed up to international

copyright law in 1891. Mrs Humphry Ward was among the first to benefit, with a huge American advance (£7,000) for her 1894 novel *David Grieve*. But old habits and practices died hard. American books remained markedly cheaper than in Britain for the consumer. Ward's 1894 bestseller sold, new, for 31/6d in the UK, and for $1 (an eighth of the price) in the US. The differential, a hangover from the era before the 1891 Chace Act, persists to this day. A hardback American bestseller is still marginally easier on the pocket than its UK equivalent.

There are other hangovers from the period in which the American book trade so prodigiously reaped where it had not sown. Particularly in British crops. Nowhere is the 'relationship' more 'special' than in popular fiction. This can be readily demonstrated by comparing the British preponderance with other groups who have, historically, made up a large part of the American population. Despite, for example, huge immigration from Germany, and its cultural impact on American life in the early 20th century, only one novel from that country has ever made it to the coveted #1 spot in that country: namely Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929). After World War II, Remarque's similarly anti-war (and, as was felt in Germany, anti-German) novel *Arch of Triumph* made the top ten in 1946. A handful of other novels translated from German have figured in the lists: Lion Feuchtwanger's *Jew Suess* (1926); Vicki Baum's *Grand Hotel* (1931); Hans Fallada's *Little Man What Now?* (1934), *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* (1936), and his 'Lourdes Story', *The Song of Bernadette* (1941). Patrick Süskind's *Perfume* (1986) was the last German novel to figure at all prominently in the American top ten.

'Isak Dinesen' (Karen Blixen) was in the top ten in 1935 with *Seven Gothic Tales*. Her fellow Scandinavian, the Finn Mika Waltari, established a more substantial place in the lists 20 years later with *The Egyptian* (1950, and again in 1955, with

the movie adaptation of the novel), *The Adventurer* (1951), and *The Wanderer* (1953). Annemarie Selinko, a German refugee long resident in Denmark, may be thought also to qualify in this national group. Her historical novel, *Desirée*, was a bestseller (tied in to the movie about Napoleon, starring – grotesquely – Marlon Brando) in 1954.

Russian fiction first made an entry in the American lists (less for the author's origins, than its setting in war-torn China) in 1942 with Nina Fedorova's *The Family*. Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* shared the top position, week in week out, with his (Americanized) compatriot Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* in 1958. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, as the 'thaw' in the Cold War took hold, made the lists in 1972, with *August 1914*.

French-originated bestsellers are notably absent, represented solely by the two *rive gauche* novels Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse* (1956) and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Mandarins* (1958). Both were boosted by the mid-1950s cult of French *nouveau vague* film. The sole Italian representative to have made any dent on the lists is di Lampedusa's study of an aristocratic Sicilian dynasty, *The Leopard* (1960) – generally regarded as one of that country's very greatest literary achievements. Australia has Coleen McCullough's bodice-ripping *The Thorn Birds*, #1 title in 1977.

Despite Spanish now being a second language in border states, only three Hispanic-originated novels have ever made it to the top ten. Ibanez's *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* was the #1 title in 1919 (a year still in post-trauma from the truly apocalyptic World War I). The philosopher George Santayana's *The Last Puritan: A Memoir in the Form of a Novel* made the top ten in 1935, and is regarded as the finest *Bildungsroman* (portrait novel) ever to do so. Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* was intermittently, in the weekly lists, #1 in 1993.

This handful of titles excepted, anything other than British titles are absent from the upper reaches of the American bestseller lists. The following is a breakdown, by place of national origin, of the 1,000 novels representing the decades' top ten titles, 1900 to 1999.

Decade	US	British	Other
1900–09	86	14	0
1910–19	76	23	1
1920–29	71	28	1
1930–39	68	28	4
1940–49	85	11	4
1950–59	82	11	7
1960–69	83	16	1
1970–79	71	27	2
1980–89	84	16	0
1990–99	94	6	0
Totals	800	180	20

The fluctuations suggest, unsurprisingly, a greater penetration by the British product in the first half of the century (104 of the total 180). There is a notably sharp chauvinistic swing towards American fiction in the 1990s.

Anni Mirabili

Throughout the 20th century, although there was an overall drift towards the home product in the US, there were regular resurgences, or extraordinary clumps, of Britishness in the American lists. The so-called *Annus Mirabilis*, 1924–5, for example, saw the publication of P. C. Wren's *Beau Geste*, P. G. Wodehouse's *Jeeves*, and Edith M. Hull's *The Sons of the Sheik* – all of which clustered at the top of the 1924 charts. The following year saw *Soundings*, by A. Hamilton Gibbs (the #1 novel in America that year), Margaret Kennedy's *The Constant Nymph* (#2), Michael Arlen's *The Green Hat* (#5), Rafael Sabatini's *The Carolinian* (#9), and A. S. M. Hutchinson, *One Increasing Purpose* (#10). *Sorrell and Son*, published in England in 1925 and in America a year later (where it made #1), set Warwick Deeping on what was to be a ten-year-long domination of the American charts. So powerful was Britain's performance that there were jeremiads about it in the American press bemoaning the decline in national literary prowess.

This colonial shadow lies heavily across the greatest 'American' book of 1925, *The Great Gatsby*, in which the hero does a 'Yank at Oxford' stunt to win over Daisy, the woman he loves. Dreaming spires and Jay Gatsby are 'great'; Kansas and James Gatz (his 'true', farm boy, identity as we learn late in the narrative) ain't great. Now recorded as the most studied novel in American high schools, *The Great Gatsby* did not make the 1925 list. As was noted earlier, Fitzgerald was running a longer literary race.

One can perceive other years throughout the century when the British content bulged significantly. The 1925/6 *annus mirabilis* is attributable to the warm connections forged by wartime alliance 1917–18. The Americans came over here: British fiction went over there. Something similar is detected in 1940 – a year in which America was 'neutral', but nonetheless, in her heart, side

by side with her transatlantic cousin. The bestselling novel of that first year of the European war, rather bizarrely, was Richard Llewellyn's story of life, hardship, and indomitability in a Welsh coal-mining village, *How Green was my Valley* (filmed, even more bizarrely, with a Hollywood cast, in 1942; it turned out that even Llewellyn – despite his name – was about as Welsh as Jimmy 'the Schnoz' Durante; but this did not prevent the film sweeping the Oscars that year).

The third title on the 1940 American bestseller list was *Mrs Miniver*, by Jan Struther. It had begun as a series of newspaper articles in the US, in 1939, commemorating British pluck and 'we can take it' coolness under fire. It was the special relationship bestsellerized. According to Winston Churchill, Struther had done more for the anti-Fascist cause than a flotilla of battleships. The old warhorse none the less wanted his liberty ships from his friend Franklin Roosevelt.

Other good, if not wonderful, years pop up regularly. In 1937, A. J. Cronin's *The Citadel* came in at #3, Virginia Woolf's *The Years* at #6 (surely the result of enthusiastic reviewing in high places), and Somerset Maugham's *Theatre* at #7.

In 1977 the top title was Tolkien's posthumous codicil to his 'Rings' epic, *The Silmarillion*, with John Le Carré's novel about dishonourable spooks, *The Honourable Schoolboy*, at #4, and John Fowles's semi-autobiographical *Daniel Martin* at #10. Given the runaway success of Tolkien (a million-seller in hardback), over half the bestsellers sold of the top ten had British authorship blazoned on their American title pages.

Bestsellerism and anti-bestsellerism

Despite these impressive conjunctions of material, one major institutional factor in the 20th century served to differentiate,

radically, British and American bookselling practices. Britain in the 1890s had introduced the 'Net Book Agreement' (NBA) – a measure that kept the country's book trade in line for a hundred years. Effectively, the NBA compact forbade, on pain of collective trade boycott, the selling of books at less, or more, than the sale price posted on the wares by the publisher. No reduction, or surcharge, in price for these 'net' (that is, net-price) books – which invariably included new novels – could be offered by any retailer, however many copies were bought or wherever the copies were bought. The NBA also, effectively, suppressed the growth of the book clubs which in America (with the Book of the Month Club and the Literary Guild) disseminated millions of hardback fiction titles annually, at fractional cost, to the reading population. Book clubs took off in the UK only decades later, in the 1960s.

In Britain, for most of the 20th century, a single copy purchased in the corner shop in John O'Groats, or Land's End, would cost the same as each of a hundred copies bought from Hatchard's in Piccadilly. The effect was to create a low-pressure, 'civilized', or 'carriage trade' ethos. This was further enhanced by British resistance to any 'sale or return' facility for the retailer. In America, a major bookstore could order 1,000 copies of some novel and – if the thing died on the shelf – return 999 for full refund. In Britain, once ordered, the books were yours. It made for cautious ordering by bookshop managers.

America, after a brief flirtation with retail price maintenance during World War I (which US courts promptly banned as 'cartelization'), never bought into the Net Book idea. It was disdained as radically un-American: socialistic, almost. Discounting on purchase price – either in shops or book clubs – served as gasoline to the bestseller list's flames. And it was only after the abolition of the NBA in the UK in 1995 that the two national systems converged – to the degree that they are now, in their largest formations, supra-national.

1 OCTOBER 1995 · THE SUNDAY TIMES

Novel opportunity: Penguin's Glover says there will never be a better time to buy books than between now and Christmas

Final chapter for book price fixing

Readers are the winners as the end of the Net Book Agreement puts bestsellers in the supermarkets and forces publishers and retailers to cut prices and margins. Report by Sarah Fairbairn

IT IS SAID that when the mainframe computer at the Foreign Office came close to crashing some years ago, the cause of the overload was found to be nearly 2,000 unfinished novels written by aspiring authors in their lunch hours.

True or not, the dismantling of the Net Book Agreement (NBA) and its fixed book prices spells the end of dreams for would-be authors as publishers and retailers respond to a more competitive environment.

Large-scale discounting starts this weekend, with the newly announced Booker prize shortlist heading promotions. As the battle lines are drawn, with the action centred on bestsellers, the industry faces turmoil.

Trevor Glover, Penguin UK's managing director, says: "There will never be a better time than between now and Christmas to buy books."

For the big retailers such as WH Smith, its Waterstone's subsidiary, and Thorn EMI's Dillons, the dissolving of the 95-year-old pact that propped up book prices is likely to spark a price war.

WH Smith, with about 25% of the book market, kicks off this weekend with discounts of up to 50% on 60 titles, divided between HarperCollins, part of News Corporation, the ultimate owner of The Sunday Times, and Random House, two of Britain's top publishers.

Books, accounting for about 25% of WH Smith's sales, are its most important product and, for a time, are likely to be used as a loss leader to attract fresh customers.

Smith executives hope the increased footfall in the stores stemming from the price war, could push overall like-for-like sales up by as much as 5% in the next few months.

Peter Bamford, managing director of WHS retail says: "We can now use books to sell other products -and help us revitalise our brand."

Dillons is planning its biggest price promotion, slashing the cost of 200 books, split between bestsellers, coffee-table books and specialist titles.

Stephen Dunn, the marketing director, reckons bestseller sales can increase fourfold when prices are cut by a third.

But Dillons, which is Britain's top academic bookseller, is not cutting academic-book prices, as its busiest selling period gets under way ahead of the new university year.

Dunn says: "We are trying not to react in the short term." He says the discount itself, not its size, attracts customers, adding that there is a floor under book prices below which no extra customers can be persuaded to buy.

While gross margins must come under pressure for retailers and publishers, the idea is that higher volumes will more than compensate.

Both will need to co-operate to extract maximum profits from initial print runs and, while retailers insist they will not put publishing houses under pressure to reduce prices unreasonably, power is likely to shift to the large retailers able to buy in bulk, knowing that they can now use price as a weapon to shift stock.

So publishers' margins will remain slim, with retailers scooping, on average, half the price of a hardback.

About 20% of the retail price is the manufacturing cost, 10% may go to the author, leaving slim pickings for the publisher, which will also have to pay for marketing and distribution.

An increase of about 60% in the price of paper over the past two years is adding to publishers' woes. With these pressures, publishers will have to become more focused in what they publish. The number of new titles is already declining after almost doubling to 89,000 between 1980 and 1994.

Random House has cut its list by about 600 to 1,200 since 1992 and Gail Rebuck, the chief executive, says there are further cuts to be made. She says the company has seen sales rise "significantly" in that period, reflecting a more focused approach to its titles.

Publishers and retailers agree the NBA's fall does not mean the demise of specialist new titles. About 10% of people buy 40% of books and this hardcore will not take price into consideration when buying.

Indeed, Sydney Davies, of the Booksellers' Association, believes many books, including academic titles, could rise in price. "Bestsellers may be cheaper but prices of other books may go up in compensation," he says.

The Booksellers' Association has 3,300 members, ranging from giants to small shops. It wrote to members last week, offering pricing and negotiation courses to help small shops respond to the upheaval.

"The end of the Net Book Agreement could mean the end of the gentlemen booksellers," says Davies, pointing out that many rely on the cashflow generated by bestsellers and that this could be severely dented by price competition.

At Penguin, Glover says: "Small booksellers have reason to be concerned. They must concentrate on loyal customers to win through."

Independents will also face competition from supermarkets, led by Asda, a pioneer discounter. WH Smith's Bamford dismisses the threat posed by supermarkets, saying they carry about 10% of the 30,000 titles found in an average WH Smith store. But with supermarkets entering the fray and other retailers such as Kingfisher's Woolworths chain aiming to snatch as much as 10% of the market by the end of 1996, the British book industry is entering a turbulent time.

Intensified competition ahead of Christmas will cloud the long-term effects of the NBA's fall. But, in the final chapter, it is almost certain that readers will be the winners, as the sector becomes more focused and commercial.

Glover says: "It is not a brilliant day for publishing. We will have to wait and see what this brave new world brings."

His caution is echoed by Rebuck. "It gave us no pleasure to withdraw from the NBA," she says. "But now we have responded to the change, we hope to sell more books to more people in more places."

Bamford says: "If you were a bookseller in the 1930s and had seen the coming of TV, video and computer games, you would have packed up then and there. Books are extremely resilient and nothing will change that."

2. Newspapers reported an industry in turmoil as the Net Book Agreement was dismantled in 1995

Are HarperCollins, or imprints like Heinemann and Secker & Warburg, sheltering under the Random House umbrella, British, American, neither, or both? Send your answer to London, New York, Sydney, or Toronto. Or Berlin – since the parent Random House is now German-owned. (John Murray, Walter Scott's and Jane Austen's publisher, is now French-owned: something that would baffle both of them, fiercely patriotic as they were during the Napoleonic Wars.) The author Ken Follett, who was born and educated in Britain, sells very many more copies of his books in the US than in the UK, and his bestsellers, such as *Code to Zero* (#1, 2000), have American settings and characters. Where does he belong? Perhaps the answer will be found in his papers, deposited at Saginaw College in Michigan.

For a hundred years, from the 1890s until the 1990s, British book culture (along with its European counterparts) was inherently inimical to the idea of the bestseller and disdained, entirely, any official 'lists'. This American barbarism, as it was thought, distorted customers' buying habits. Discriminating readers 'browsed', like ruminant beasts chewing the cud in an English meadow; they did not 'stampede' like maddened cattle across the Great Plains.

The high sales pressure associated with American styles of bestsellerism cramped, it was felt, the range of bookshops' stock. Beneath mountainous piles of whatever 'the book of the moment', worthy books struggled to be seen. Books did not 'compete' with each other – they were 'different', as a successful 1960 British legal defence of retail price maintenance insisted (successfully; the Net Book Agreement was judged 'legal'). No one ever said, as of books, 'where baked beans are burned, men are burned'. Why, then, sell books like baked beans? Or so the British book trade felt.

As a result of this cultural resistance, the first reliable lists did not arrive in the UK until the mid-1970s, when the *Bookseller* began

assembling them for the trade, and *The Sunday Times* began making them available to the reading public. Over following years they became an established feature of the British book world, which has in other ways accommodated to American high-pressure salesmanship – more so after the abolition of the NBA in 1995, and the evolution of the traditional high street bookstore into something virtually indistinguishable from the American hyperstore. In the US, it is Barnes and Noble, Borders, and Amazon.com; in the UK, Waterstone's, Borders, and Amazon.co.uk. And one increasingly sees the same novels at the top of the two countries' bestseller lists.

Terminology

Any kind of book can be a bestseller. Even, in my wildest dreams, this Very Short Introduction. But ever since bestseller lists first appeared, the term has primarily attached itself to works of fiction – those jam tarts for the mind, as William Thackeray called them. In what follows, reference is exclusively to the bestselling novel, literary sweetmeats.

The actual term 'bestseller' is first recorded as coming into use in 1902, some seven years after the first 'lists' were introduced. The term was, from the first, a misnomer. 'Best' is a superlative. If one is being precise, as in the film *Highlander*, 'there can only be one'. Whether the Bible, Shakespeare, or the *Highway Code* is a moot point.

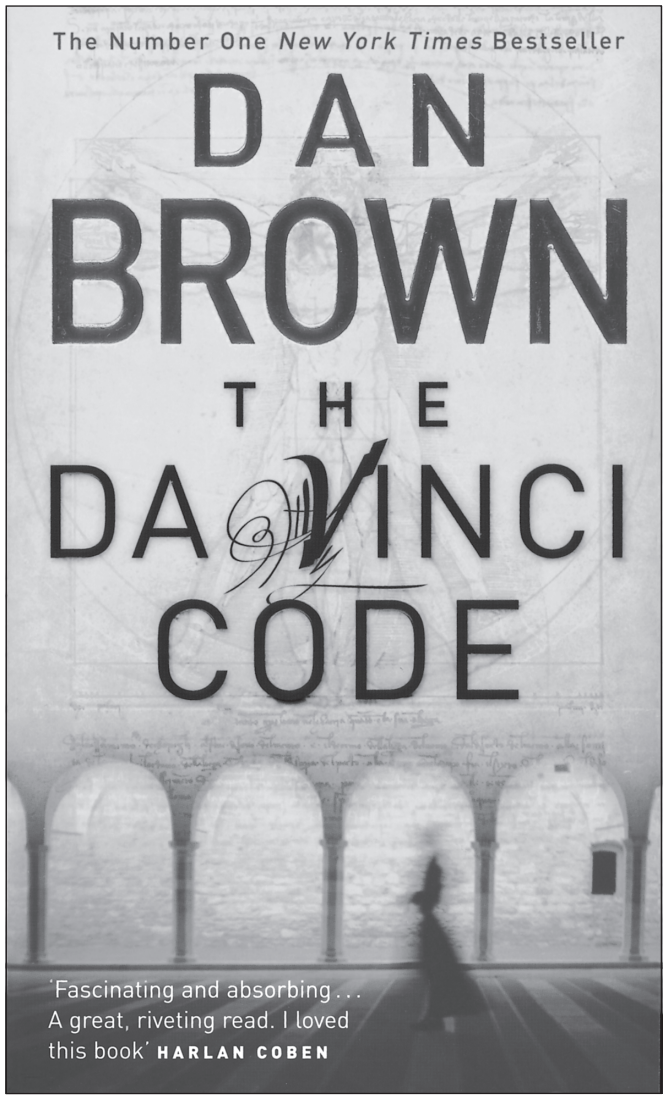
But, as the lists make clear, week by week, there is always more than one bestseller, so called (up to a couple of hundred in the latest trade lists), and – one may be confident – next year's bestsellers will probably be bigger and better bestsellers. The next decade's certainly will be.

When we use the term 'bestseller', we buy into book trade (white) lies. It is commonly, nowadays, called 'hype' or 'spin': mendacity

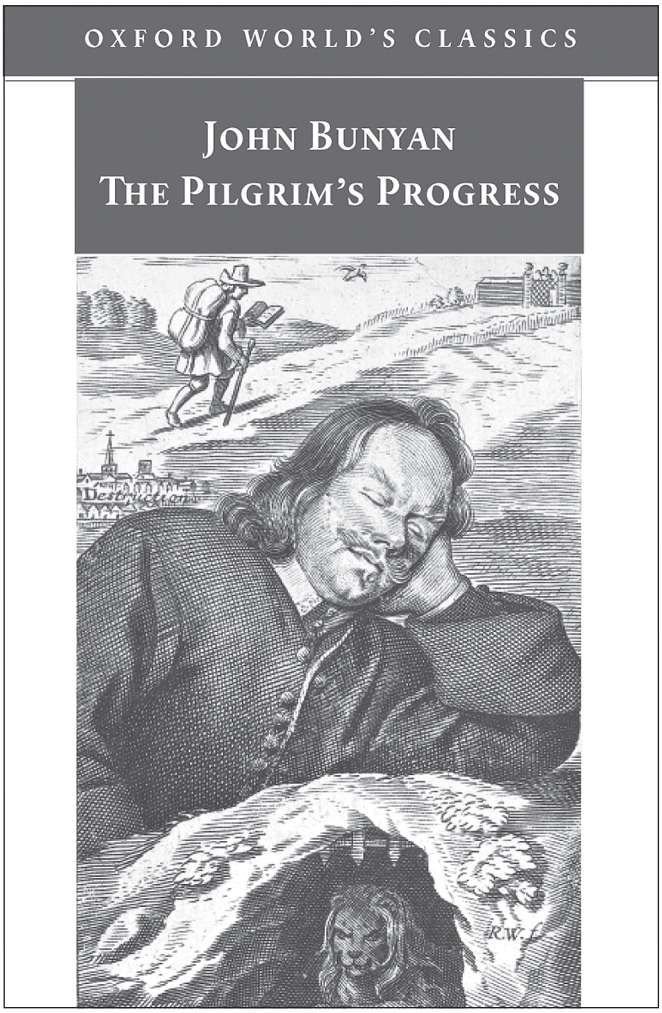
in a good cause – that cause being the sale of more and more books to more and more people. The correct term would be 'better sellers', or 'new books that are currently doing well until something newer comes along'. When the bestseller first appeared, at the tail end of the 'gilded age' when publishing still prided itself on being a profession for gentlemen, the preferred term for what we now call bestsellers was 'books in demand'. Until the 1920s, with works such as A. S. M. Hutchinson's phenomenally popular *If Winter Comes*, the British book trade referred to 'big sellers'. Semantically preferable as such terms might be, these were too tame for the aggressive commercial mood of the 20th century.

'Fast-seller', it is often suggested, would be another preferable label. It is the pace of sale, not the ultimate total of sales, that defines a bestseller. *The Pilgrim's Progress*, less than page-turning as it may be as a religious thriller, has outsold *The Da Vinci Code* many times over. But it has done so during half a millennium of devout readership. A century hence, Mother Church will surely survive. Leonardo's picture will still draw its crowds in the Louvre. And – one may confidently predict – Bunyan's allegory of the Christian life will still be read, if only for its timelessly chaste prose. But Dan Brown's anti-Catholic fantasia? Probably not – other than by literary archaeologists – and certainly not for its prose. Over the period 2003 to 2006, *The Da Vinci Code* 'outsold' *The Pilgrim's Progress* only in the sense that it sold (briefly) faster. Which of the two, then, merits the description 'bestseller'?

Over every bestseller list there should be a *carpe diem* inscription: books of the day and for the day only. Read them while ye may, then toss them away.



***3. The Da Vinci Code*: 'bestseller'**



4. ***The Pilgrim's Progress*****: bestseller?**

The literary bestseller

One must enter a cautionary qualification. Bestsellers, as a category, are wholly unpredictable as to content and literary quality. No one, even those whose instincts are sharpened by a working life in the book trade, can say, for certain, which way the market will jump. Fewer publishers would go bust if they could. Most novels will fail even to cover their production costs, of that one can be sure. But any novel, and any kind of novel, can triumph; even, from time to time, literary novels. This uncertainty, and its occasionally surprising consequences, can be put in the form of a quiz:

Q. What do Mickey Spillane and George Orwell have in common?

A. They both sold 6m copies of an individual novel, written in the same year.

Q. Where would one find *August 1914* and *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* side by side?

A. On the 1973 bestseller list, as the top two titles.

Q. What do the following have in common: *Doctor Zhivago*, *Anatomy of a Murder*, *Lolita*, *Around the World with Auntie Mame*?

A. Over the year 1958 they were, at various times, all the bestselling novel of the week and the top four (in the order above) in the final, annual, round-up.

One could put together a very respectable educational curriculum from the bestseller lists. Or, alternatively, a scathing indictment of utterly degraded British and American popular taste, as Q. D. Leavis did, in 1932, with *Fiction and the Reading Public*. Any work of fiction, as the charts indicate, can qualify: whether high literature (such as E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*, #1 American bestseller in 1976), brutal pulp (Spillane's *I, The Jury*,

#1 paperback in 1946), or cynically conceived schlock (Erich Segal's *Love Story*, in 1970).

The top spot may be occupied by a title posterity will come to regard as a 'classic', such as Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, alongside a work of near pornography, such as Harold Robbins's *The Carpetbaggers* (the novel which, in February 2007, Myra Hindley credited as the inspiration for her and Ian Brady's infamous child murders). Chalk and cheese, both titles are listed as 1961 bestsellers. That, and the fact that they are generically 'fiction', is the only point of contact they have.

As a rule of thumb what defines the bestseller is bestselling. Nothing else. There may be rhythmic recurrences, over long periods, as fashions wax and wane, but to look for significant patterns, trends, or symmetries is, if not pointless, baffling, as will be discussed in Chapter 3.