



Bestsellers: A Very Short Introduction

John Sutherland

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Lady Chatterley's Lover. The Blue Lagoon. Portnoy's Complaint. The Da Vinci Code. For the last century, the tastes and preferences of the common reader have been reflected in the American and British bestseller lists, and this Very Short Introduction takes an engaging look through the lists to reveal what we have been reading--and why. John Sutherland shows that bestseller lists monitor one of the strongest pulses in modern literature and are therefore worthy of serious study. Exploring the relationship between bestsellers and the fashions, ideologies, and cultural concerns of the day, the book includes short case-studies and lively summaries of bestsellers through the years: from In His Steps--now almost totally forgotten, but the biggest all-time bestseller between 1895 and 1945--to Gone with the Wind, The Andromeda Strain, and The Da Vinci Code. Discussing both classic and contemporary novels, alongside some surprising titles and long-forgotten names. Sutherland lifts the lid on the bestseller industry, revealing what makes a book into a bestseller and what separates bestsellers from canonical fiction.

Bestsellers: A Very Short Introduction Details

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Ian says

Basically a Wikipedia page that got cut for being too lengthy. There's some really interesting stuff at the start about the historical differences between US and UK publishing, like how the UK despised the idea of a popular book list ("ugh, the masses are so DISGUSTING, Martha"), and how the US started by out-right ripping off British authors. Once you get past that, it's a pretty uninteresting slog with little to note. I'm sure it might be of use to some college student writing a paper, but to everyone else, just skim the first chapter and skip the rest.

Abbey says

Not at all what I expected, this terse and dull little book had no lists, no wonderful pile of book titles for me to peruse and, likely, add to my TBRs - the main reason I picked it up. Yes, there were tons of books mentioned in the text but while it attempted to be "chatty" the presentation, to me, only succeeded in being boring! The author writes well, but extremely pedantically, and this wasn't my cuppa. A handy little book to read while you're waiting in a long line, perhaps, but I've got lots of other, far more interesting, books to read, thank you very much.

NancyHelen says

This was an interesting, albeit very brief overview of the phenomenon of the bestseller. I think it started well, but the two sections on the US and UK market lost their way a little for me. I would have been more interested to learn about what made them bestsellers - something tantalisingly touched on in the beginning - rather than the lists of bestsellers which the sections became. Also, the final section about the digital revolution was skimmed over with almost no detail. Nevertheless, it was an interesting enough read.

Ahmad Sharabiani says

Bestsellers: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions #170), John Sutherland

Lady Chatterley's Lover. The Blue Lagoon. Portnoy's Complaint. The Da Vinci Code. For the last century, the tastes and preferences of the common reader have been reflected in the American and British bestseller lists, and this Very Short Introduction takes an engaging look through the lists to reveal what we have been reading--and why. John Sutherland shows that bestseller lists monitor one of the strongest pulses in modern literature and are therefore worthy of serious study.

Tony says

What *is* a best-seller? In many ways it's a misnomer. The Pilgrim's Progress has sold many more copies than The Da Vinci Code, but the critical difference is that the latter sold *faster* during a brief period. Identifying books as noteworthy primarily for selling quickly started out as largely an American phenomenon. Publishers in the US were proponents of stack-em-high-and-sell-em-cheap, with lurid covers and advertising to the public, long before the British joined in — for most of the 20th Century, book prices in the UK were fixed according to the Net Book Agreement, and most people got their books from libraries (to whom the majority of advertising was directed, through the trade press). The primary UK mass-market publisher, Penguin, believed it vulgar to even put pictures on the covers.

Eventually, however, the two markets largely homogenised, and barring a few interesting and informative differences, the top-selling charts from each country are remarkably similar these days — and, in both cases, largely dominated by big stars who can churn out a several-million-selling book every year or two. (Interestingly, the sales required to be the top seller each year have been consistently rising: the volume required to top the chart ten years ago would barely get you in the top 5 today.) Most are ephemeral: barely read at all a few years later (other than by fans catching up on their new favourite author's prior work), and — unless they get turned into a movie — entirely forgotten within a few decades.

But, as a snapshot of a particular time, they're highly revealing. *Why* were millions of people reading a particular book at a particular time?

One can attempt to answer the puzzle by revisiting those years, recovering what one can of the Zeitgeist, and pondering the coincidence of factors – ideological, social, cultural, commercial – which led to the novel's hitting that particular historical mark. The bestseller, regarded in this light, is a literary experiment that works, for its time. But, typically, only for its time. Regarded carefully, it can be seen to fit the period that gave it birth as a tailored glove fits the hand. Given their diversity, bestsellers can, but often don't, repay close literary-critical attention. But for what they tell us about the host society in which, briefly, they came good, bestsellers are among the most informative literary-historical evidence available to us.

This, however, is where this specific book goes awry. It makes this lofty claim — and then fails to deliver on it, instead painstakingly (for which read 'painfully') taking us through a hundred years of US and UK best-sellers, with a couple of sentences on each, largely devoid of anything interesting, let alone insightful.

At times this reads like a 19th Century anthropological study. Sutherland is sent into a world he doesn't seem much to like, faithfully cataloging what he sees, but with no real understanding of it (other than the certainty that it's inferior to *his* world). At times you can almost sense him pleading with the series editor: "I'll gladly write about these books, but please please please don't make me *read* any of the beastly things!"

No matter how he looks at it, he can't really come up with any plausible reason *why* people would read best-sellers rather than classics, other than irrationality — down largely to either susceptibility to advertising, or misplaced loyalty to an author or genre.

"Why, when reading is so private an activity, should people want, so simultaneously, the one 'book of the day'?" he asks. There are many possible answers that a book supposedly all about the topic should really

examine, but Sutherland seems largely at a loss. He can't even seem to fathom, for example, that even though the *reading* itself might be private, people might actually want to be part of a wider conversation amongst other people who've read the same books.

For an introductory overview of the mass-market publishing industries in the UK and US over the past century or so, three stars. For insight into what the best-sellers actually tell us: one star.

Staszek says

This is mostly an enumerative, boring, unenlightening description of scores of bestselling books published in the US and the UK since the late 19th century until the 2000s. There's hardly a shred of any economic, sociological, or literary analysis here, and if you're desperate for plot summaries, you will likely find more comprehensive ones at Wikipedia (or, frankly, anywhere but here).

Some isolated remarks (like the one about 'bestsellers' vs. 'fastsellers') are interesting enough, the book is not a bad read, and Sutherland has done some information compiling which may be useful to readers interested in the history of publishing. Designed differently and delivered in a systematic manner—not as a series of unrelated anecdotal data—this could have been a decent reference book. Right now, it is nothing more than a disappointment.

Yiyizheliu says

It's very interesting to see the comparison of the publication culture and Bestsellers evolution in US and Europe, the dynamic relationship and distinction between Bestsellers and classics. This is one of most interesting very short introduction books I've read so far. Maybe because I'm not so familiar with the literature in US and UK, I found it a bit hard for me to associate with many Bestseller names introduced in the book.

Damaskcat says

I enjoy reading books about books and John Sutherland writes well about books of all kinds. He has an entertaining and approachable style and makes his subject very readable. Here he looks at the phenomenon of the bestseller. The book is not an exhaustive list of bestsellers in the UK and in the US as it is a short introduction but it does look at the highlights as well as some unexpected bestsellers on both sides of the Atlantic.

The book starts by defining a bestseller and then goes on to look at books which have made it to the top in the US and the UK. Some of the time this is the same books but at other times the books which have caught the public imagination are completely different. I found it interesting that a book has to sell more copies now in the twenty first century to make the bestseller lists than in the late nineteenth century when the concept of the bestseller first appeared in the media.

I found this entertaining and informative reading and it reminded me of some of the books I read years ago. I

was quite surprised to realise that many of the early twentieth century bestsellers are still in print even now, a hundred years later, thanks to the e-book revolution.

The Kindle edition of this book has an active index - always a useful feature of a non-fiction book. It contains a useful list of further reading. If you want a quick survey of the books which have caught the public imagination over the last century or so then this would be a good book to start with.

Paul Bryant says

Here's a fast little gallop through the crazy world of bestsellers – I liked it! Some fun facts for you:

Agatha Christie is probably the world biggest selling novelist ever – 72 novels in total, 2 billion sales. That is not really a fun fact. It's actually a yawn. I think most people are born knowing this already.

Barbara Cartland is a best selling author although none of her 600-PLUS NOVELS (it says here) was an individual bestseller

Gone With the Wind sold a million in 1936 (first year of publication) which was phenomenal, but the top five novels regularly sell that amount in their first year in recent years in America

Genre novelists, maybe predictably, were able to crank out the merchandise at speeds which indicate some form of chemical assistance – check it out :

Zane Grey – 200 westerns

Max Brand, “king of the pulps” – 600 novels plus 900 stories under 20 pen names in various different genres (most famous title : *Destry Rides Again*, but he also created Dr Kildare)

Louis L'Amour – 200 western novels

John Creasey – 600 mystery novels

Hank Jansen – about 220 novels with titles like *Frails Can Be So Tough* and *Broads Don't Scare Easy*

Leslie Charteris – umpteen novels (he created The Saint)

Dennis Wheatley – also umpteen

Erle Stanley Gardner – 80-plus mystery novels

Mickey Spillane – not that many novels but he did brag that he could turn out one in three days if he was pushed

Stephen King – 54 novels and going strong

There's a constant strand of what you might call *research fiction* in the bestsellers – *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, which was the life of Michaelangelo fictionalized by Irving Stone, *Hawaii*, which is the fictionalized story of Hawaii by James Michener, *Hotel*, *Airport*, *Wheels*, *The Moneychangers* - all by Arthur Hailey in which he investigates one industry per novel, then there's John Grisham and Michael Crichton. Some of 'em contract out the research.

There's an assumption that bestsellers are the fast food of fiction, to be scraped off the shoes of any readers of proper literature before entering a decent household; but sometimes great novels actually sell well, such as

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes

Main Street

The Grapes of Wrath

All the King's Men

Lolita

The Naked and the Dead

Lady Chatterley's Lover (guess why)

Couples

Portnoy's Complaint

Humboldt's Gift

Ragtime

Sophie's Choice

The Handmaid's Tale

The Satanic Verses

The Bonfire of the Vanities

Some big name authors, as you have noticed, turn themselves into franchises and brands – new James Bond novels are produced without the need for the frankly deceased Ian Fleming; likewise V C Andrews novels continued to be published as “A V C Andrews novel by Andrew Neiderman”. If only they'd have thought to do that with Charles Dickens or Shakespeare.

Unwittingly I seem to have become a John Sutherland fanboy – I have now read this one, plus his very amusing *Lives of the Novelists*, plus his also amusing *50 Literature Ideas you Really Need to Know*, plus his strange, annoying, but never boring *How to be Well Read*. Perhaps he is stalking me.

Jennifer says

Helpful, but a bit rambling in places. Also, wish that there had been a better set of primary sources.

Douglas Wilson says

Good, informative.

Gandi says

A thoroughly researched book that casts a very interesting approach to bestsellers. My main takeaway was that bestsellers reflect the society of that period.

Angela Maher says

A fairly good overview of what a bestseller is, and isn't, and the factors that influence sales. It won't tell you how to write one, nor does it go into any detail on individual books, but if you like books it has some interest.

Chris says

Well, this Very Short Introduction is nice tour though bestsellers in the US and UK. I do wonder what Sutherland would change considered the rise of certain authors and books. Still a quick fun read. At times, Sutherland can be quite snarky.

Todd Hogan says

This reads like a thesis, without much new insight.
