

bestselling authors approach the craft of writing and the marketing of their books differently than those who are perpetually on the outside looking in? Let's find out. We'll probably encounter a number of surprises along the way.

"Success comes to a writer, as a rule, so gradually that it is always something of a shock to him to look back and realize the heights to which he has climbed."

P. G. WODEHOUSE, *Louder and Funnier*

MAKING THE LIST

How They Work

AGAINST THE ODDS

A BRIEF HISTORY OF HOW THE BESTSELLER LIST BEGAN

HOW THE LISTS WORK

Bestsellers bring prestige, power, and—let's not forget—profits to their publishing houses. A house with a history of bestsellers has demonstrated that they are tuned in to what readers want to buy and have marketing savvy, industry connections, and a shrewd business sense. Authors know that these publishers have the financial capability to pay large advances, print runs in the hundreds of thousands, and the clout to get their titles in the chain stores.

HEIDE LANGE, *Literary Agent*

Sanford J. Greenburger Associates, Inc.

Are some publishers better at generating bestsellers?

I think what levels the playing field in this area—whether it's a big house whose imprints regularly appear on the lists or a small house that only occasionally appears—is when all members of a publisher's team work together to the best of their ability. It's not enough to have a fabulous book that is only prized by the acquiring editor. That editor, together with the active support of the agent, has to convince the rest of the house to play their roles as creatively and aggressively as possible.

When one or two departments drop the ball, especially if one of these is the publicity department, this could seriously affect the performance of a book. However, when everyone is committed to it and conveys that to important people outside the house—the “big mouths” in the industry, including other successful authors, key people in the bookselling community, and the media—then a strong book has the best chance of rising to the top. Of course, an experienced publishing house will better know how to read the early signs and be prepared to take all the appropriate steps in order to further build momentum. This may take the form of store placement, expanding an author’s tour, and taking out ads—in other words, proceeding aggressively. The agent should be ensuring that all of this occurs.

AGAINST THE ODDS

The statistics regarding success in the publishing industry are daunting, and it’s best that most aspiring writers pay them no mind. Otherwise, a lot of what we now hail as great literature would never have been attempted. Bowkers estimates that 175,000 new titles are now published annually. It is believed that less than 1 in 100 books that are submitted for publication actually end up in print; some experts place it at 1 in a 1,000 books.

It has been estimated that only 10 percent of books published ever end up selling enough copies to earn back the advance paid to the author. In other words, the author will never have the happy experience of finding a royalty check from a publisher in their mailbox. How many become bestsellers? Fewer than .3 percent. *Writers Digest* has said that 24 million people in the United States describe themselves as creative writers. Less than 5 percent of these writers have ever been published.

A notion is promulgated in a lot of those “How to Become a Fabulously Successful Author” books that, with enough grit, perseverance, and, of course, using the marketing techniques outlined in the book, anyone can become a bestselling author. Well, especially in fiction, the statistics reveal you can’t. Most of the seats at that table already have reservation cards.

Let’s look at the *Publishers Weekly* fiction bestseller list for a ten-week period. With 15 slots on the list, over ten weeks there are 150 positions available. Seemingly,

The truth is, over that time only 40 different books appeared on the list. Just 10 books occupied 48 percent of the available positions (72). Eighteen books took up nearly 70 percent of the positions.

The banner headline we have all seen in the bookstore, “21 Weeks on the Bestseller List!!!,” translates into the list being dominated primarily by the same few most popular authors. To the author trying to get on the list, the other writer’s 21-week streak of success just means 21 fewer spaces available for their own, perhaps equally wonderful book.

Another way of looking at these results is that, if 40 books made the list over a 10-week period, an average of 4 new books per week appeared on the list, or 208 for the entire year (in fiction). Truly, not many authors ever get to enjoy “the thrill” described in Chapter 1.

Considering the numbers of novels published each year—upwards of 17,000—a new author really only has a tiny chance to secure a spot, even position 15, on the list. But it does happen: eight first novels made the bestseller list in 2003, and eleven made it in 2002.

New per-title sales records were set in 2003: Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* sold an unprecedented 5.7 million copies, and Rick Warren’s *The Purpose-Driven Life* sold 11.3 million copies. According to *Publishers Weekly*, 30 hardcover fiction titles sold more than 400,000 copies in 2003. An additional 98 sold more than 100,000 copies. Twenty-four non-fiction hardcover titles sold more than 400,000 copies in 2003, and 100 additional titles sold at least 100,000 copies.

A big success in hardcover fiction now means one million copies, rather incredible when you consider many authors are ecstatic when their book’s sales top 20,000. It really is a quantum leap from *author to bestseller*.

Here’s a strange question: does being on the bestseller list cause a book’s sales from then on to increase? Alan Sorensen, a Stanford business professor, examined hardcover fiction sales for 2001 and 2002 and came up with some interesting conclusions in his study, “Bestseller Lists and Product Variety: The Case of Book Sales.” He found that appearing on the *New York Times* bestseller list did indeed thereafter increase a book’s first-year sales, but previously bestselling authors got the least boost from appearing on the list, while “new” or unknown authors got as much as a 57 percent jump in sales. For new authors, the list helps to advertise them to the book-buying public, Sorensen concluded. With favorite authors, such as Nora Roberts, her fans do not need to look at the bestseller list to make a decision about buying her new book.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF HOW THE BESTSELLER LIST BEGAN

The bestseller list originated in 1895 in a publication called *The Bookman*. This list contained fiction titles only. *Publishers Weekly* began a nonfiction list in 1912, then added its own fiction list a year later, and *The New York Times Book Review* list, often referred to simply as the *New York Times* bestseller list, began to appear on a weekly basis in 1942.

How to Live on 24 Hours a Day, by Arnold Bennett, sounds like a great new time-management book for the ultraharried person of the 21st century. It was also useful in 1912, when it was published. Reviewing the lists from past decades, going back to the turn of the 20th century, you make a startling discovery—not much has really changed in terms of the types of books that make it to the top: adventure, romance, history, politics, culture, celebrities, and self-improvement.

Even the public's appetite for books by show business stars is nothing new. Appearing sixth on the nonfiction list for the year 1917 was *Laugh and Live*, by early film star Douglas Fairbanks.

Studying the historical bestseller lists, you also see that authors from the past, to whom many of the literature classes we took in high school and college were dedicated, did not necessarily appear on any lists, at least while they were alive and could still spend the royalties. Those after-death royalties seem somehow unsatisfying.

The five corporations that currently dominate the bestseller lists are Random House, Inc., Penguin USA, Simon & Schuster, Time Warner, and HarperCollins in that order. It is estimated that these five companies accounted for 75 percent of the hardcover bestselling titles for 2003 and about 72 percent of the hardcover bestsellers in 2002. Paperback bestsellers emerged from these same five houses in roughly the same proportions.

NEIL NYREN, Senior Vice President, Publisher, and Editor-in-Chief

C. P. Putnam & Sons

How important are bestsellers to the overall profitability of a publishing house?

It depends upon what that publishing house does. There are lots and lots of publishers who have never published a bestseller in their life,

a steady income. They're working on backlist books which will sell year after year after year.

That's a wiser procedure for a lot of publishers to do, because a bestseller tends to be a very front list-oriented thing. You go out, you have a big burst of sales, and then the book falls off the list, until it comes out in paperback. That's the end of it. In order to be successful you have to keep feeding the front list, and so you're always looking for new books. It's tough.

There are publishers who make an extremely good living out of producing books that will sell each and every year.

Putnam is known for its bestseller success. We tend to publish about 85 to 90 books a year, and in 2003, we placed 31 titles on the *New York Times* bestseller list, which is great. That's over a third—but that also means close to two-thirds of the titles we published were not *New York Times* bestsellers. There were a few of them in there that we would have liked to have been, but didn't make it, but most of them were books we knew going in were not going to be bestsellers. They were authors we were trying to build, or books with a certain market, or books that had a different sales pattern, or books that we hoped would turn out to be good backlist sellers.

A bestseller is an important part of what we do as a house and a lot of what the big houses do, but it's only a piece of what the business is about.

In nonfiction, the bestseller list is a strange neighborhood. You never know who's going to move in. Fiction writers seem to endure, appearing on the list repeatedly, even for decades, but nonfiction authors move in and out, as making those lists relies more on having a "hot topic" rather than the brand name or popularity of the author.

Gloom-and-doom books about how to cope with the end of the world appear right on cue whenever the economy worsens, but self-improvement books sit side by side with them on the bestseller list. It is through readers are thinking, "While we're waiting for the end of the world, we can at least get in better shape." Publishers tend to be behind the curve about what's happening with the economy or world affairs. By the time they get around to releasing the gloom-and-doom books, the economy has already turned, and people have gone back to being optimistic.

Consider some of the titles of bestsellers from the late '70s and early '80s.

- *Crisis Investing: Opportunities and Profits in the Coming Great Depression*
- *The Coming Currency Collapse and What to Do about It*
- *How to Prosper during the Coming Bad Years*

The authors of these books certainly prospered despite the fatal flaws in their prognostications. The 1980s are now fondly remembered as a decade of tremendous economic growth and prosperity.

Another durable trend on the bestseller list is that down the decades, though good times and bad, Americans have always sought help for their golf game.

HOW THE LISTS WORK

The recognized national bestseller lists include *The New York Times Publishers Weekly*, *USA Today*, and *Book Sense*. Additionally, there are regional bestseller lists such as the *San Francisco Chronicle* and *LA Times*, chain store lists such as Barnes and Noble, and bestseller lists by genre. Then, of course, there is the bestseller list at Amazon.com.

TOBY USNIK, Director of Public Relations
The New York Times Company

How is the New York Times bestseller list compiled?

The New York Times compiles its rankings by polling many hundreds of independent booksellers nationwide (representative of about 2,000 general interest bookselling locations around the country), selected because they are willing and able to report actual unit sales on hundreds of titles week-in and week-out on a confidential basis. In addition, our panel includes about 40 wholesalers who supply books to nonbookstores (airports, hotel and hospital gift shops, grocery stores, consumer co-ops, Target, Wal-Mart, and the like). And then, of course, we poll the regional and national chains.

We also interview scores of significant online e-tailers. We are interested only in general interest outlets, where customers have equal opportunities to select from a broad range of titles, and, stated in another way, we do not poll specialty shops, as this would bias our results.

Thus, thousands of actual selling locations are interviewed by phone each week by our staff.

After the locations report their sales, what happens to the data?

All the unit sales are keypunched and run against a statistical model that tells us the weekly sales, ranks the titles for nine lists (six adult lists and three children's lists), and produces in-depth analysis (i.e., separate lists for the chains and independents, as well as regional rankings and other customized analyses). A master file carries a background description of each store, so that if any sales look peculiar, the system flags them for another interview to find out if there was any mistake or some special circumstance that we need to tell readers about. (Many business or religious books, for example, benefit from huge bulk sales, so we tell readers that with a dagger symbol after the description of the book in the published listings.) A typical large store could easily spend about seven to eight hours a week preparing our reports on a voluntary, unpaid basis, as we ask for sales on hundreds of titles in many categories in order to rank with breadth and depth. A few years ago, we began ranking as deep as 35 positions for our Web site, where we publish the expanded bestseller lists. So that is a lot of numbers each store produces for this weekly miracle.

Can you translate the rankings on the bestseller list into sales for each title?

The number of sales for any title is confidential. You can imagine why: Were we to reveal the sales magnitudes, there would be no end to the number of manipulations the lists would be subjected to by overzealous publishers, agents, and the authors themselves, scrambling to buy up their own books in order to attain a false ranking. So the only way we can really maintain the integrity of the lists is to never reveal the sales thresholds needed to step on.

So the sales necessary to qualify for a position on the list can vary?

Indeed, there really is no magic number for number 1 or number 15, for example. It is all relative to the sales that week for all other titles, in comparison to one another. Naturally, there are tremendous seasonal variations. For example, it takes a lot more sales to break onto the hardcover lists during the fall than it does during the summer. The fall is when people are buying gift hardcovers. It is harder to make the paperback lists in the summer, when people are buying vacation titles. And it is easier to get a low ranking on the hardcover fiction list, for example, if everyone is buying the number-one selling Stephen King or Danielle Steel: there are so many fewer sales down below that top spot. Without compromising any internal information, I can tell you that a wildly popular book, like the *Harry Potters*, for example, or a new John Grisham, could easily account for a quarter of a million sales in its first week in the stores.

The only way you can find out the sales rank of a specific title would be to contact the publisher. They may or may not choose to tell you—and, in fact, they may not know, as shipments may be the best number they have on hand, and this does not account for returns down the road. It may be helpful, for example, to contact Barnes and Noble headquarters or Borders, for example, and ask them for their own figures for their chains alone. That would give you a slice of information you seek. But they, too, are reluctant to share information publicly, for competitive reasons.

Publishers Weekly (<http://www.publishersweekly.com>) is devoted to trends and news in the publishing industry and book reviews. Each issue has several bestseller lists: fiction and nonfiction hardcover bestseller lists, trade paperback, and mass paperback bestseller lists. They also track the children's bestsellers and, on occasion, categories such as cookbooks, religion, or audio books. *PW* surveys selected bookstores, both chain stores and independents, as well as other retail sites, then uses a formula to weigh the responses and determine the bestsellers.

MITCHELL KAPLAN, Owner
Books and Books, Inc., Coral Gables, Florida

Are some publishers better at turning out bestsellers than others?

Some houses focus primarily on that, like Dutton and Putnam. There are some houses that are great at creating bestsellers where there were none, like Knopf has a terrific eye for spinning a book into a best-seller.

Nielsen BookScan, while not a bestseller list, does track book sales. Information is captured at the point of sale, the cash register, from about 4,500 retailers—that's about 60 percent to 75 percent of the relevant retail outlets in the industry. Wal-Mart and several supermarket chains do not report. The data can be ranked by quite a few categories and is used by publishers and distributors. Currently, the data is not available to the public but by subscription only.

MICHAEL CADER, Publisher,
PublishersMarketPlace.com and Cader Books

How would you say the bestseller list (whether NY Times, PW, or USA Today) has changed?

There are two kinds of bestsellers lists. The fake ones—pretty much all the lists produced by newspapers and magazines, which are not representative of the business as a whole and/or involve as much art as science—and the closest thing we have to a real one, the BookScan list (never seen by the public), which tracks actual sales. Even that only captures some sales at this point.

Overall, most lists are moving towards more of a real point-of-sale basis except, ironically, for the most followed list of all, the *New York Times* list. More and more, that list has been engineered to have less to do with the books that are actually selling the most, and its statistical accuracy has fallen in comparison to many other major lists.

Book Sense is an association of independent bookstores, those not affiliated with the major chains. They now compile their own bestseller list based on sales data from participating stores. A book receives the same point value from each store regardless of how many copies sold per store. They also publish a "recommended" list, the reviews coming from the booksellers themselves. This list includes many titles that are not bestsellers but are, in the booksellers' opinions, titles that deserve recognition. Their monthly recommendations can be seen at <http://www.booksense.com>.

MEG SMITH, Associate Director
Book Sense Marketing

How does the Book Sense bestseller list work?

The Book Sense bestseller lists are compiled from sales data reported by independent bookstores participating in the Book Sense national marketing campaign. An average of 475 stores nationwide report weekly, via either Nielsen BookScan or one of two American Booksellers Association developed methods. The sales data is weighted so that all stores, regardless of size, specialty, or number of units sold, equally influence the ranking of the books. The number-one selling book in every store receives the same point value, regardless of the actual number of units sold, and these point values are then combined to determine the final ranking. The same is true for the number-two selling book, and so forth.

Information is compiled on a weekly basis. Stores submit their data by 3:00 AM Eastern time each Tuesday morning. We then generate seven national bestseller lists: hardcover fiction, hardcover nonfiction, trade paperback fiction, trade paperback nonfiction, mass market, children's fiction, and children's illustrated. These lists are distributed to stores, publishers, and media outlets via e-mail by noon on Tuesday, and then officially published on our trade Web site, BookWeb.org.

How does your list differ from the New York Times list and the Publishers Weekly bestseller lists?

The Book Sense lists are immediate, accurate, and a pure reflection of the independent sector.

Book Sense lists are the "freshest" lists of the three. They are based on sales data from over 475 independent bookstores, and are compiled weekly.

Both *PW* and *NYT* publish their lists one or two weeks after the sales period the list represents.

The Book Sense lists are based solely on units sold in the independent stores. We do not include double sales of the same book; i.e., once at the wholesaler and once at the bookstore. They are a reliable indicator of real sales in independent stores.

The Book Sense lists naturally reflect the tastes and buying habits of the customer of the independent bookstore as well as the passion of the independent bookseller. The bestseller list is influenced by another Book Sense list, the Book Sense Picks (formerly the Book Sense 76), a monthly compendium of titles recommended and enthusiastically hand sold by the booksellers. Book Sense Picks can become a sort of grass roots marketing buzz for a title. Many Picks debut on the Book Sense bestseller list and migrate to other lists weeks later. Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (Doubleday) and Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* (Little Brown) are two recent examples. Other Picks may appear primarily, but consistently, on the Book Sense bestseller list. *Book List*, by Nancy Pearl (Sasquatch), is one example of that phenomenon.

Incidentally, Book Sense also prepares lists for the various regional independent bookseller associations based on sales data reported by their members. We also prepare specialty lists (e.g., business, cooking, sports) and provide customized lists for several print outlets.

How can a publisher influence the Book Sense list?

Publishers influence any list only through their marketing and sales efforts.

Publishers speak to booksellers all the time about their books, through galleys, (prepublication review copies), our monthly White Box mailings [new titles sent to the stores by the publishers], personal and phone rep conversations, the convention, and forums, etc. Some publishers will focus certain of their titles for marketing efforts aimed at the bookseller nominating a book for the Book Sense Picks list. Booksellers take to certain titles because of what their sales reps tell them, or whether they like the subject matter or think their customers will, or because other booksellers are jazzed about it. If the booksellers are interested, they will communicate their passion and recommendations to their customers, and bestsellers may result.

RICHARD CURTIS, Literary Agent
The Curtis Agency

To what extent can a publishing house cause a bestseller to happen?

Amusingly, the only time publishers make silk purses out of sows' ears is when they're not trying and a sleeper book surprises everyone. Otherwise, a book has to have a lot of bestselling qualities in order to qualify for bestseller candidacy, such as a great author track record, heavy expenditure on advertising and marketing, a lot of media attention, timeliness, a high concept, and a handsome package. Notice I haven't said the book has to be well written. And that's the pity of the bestseller list.

WHAT CAUSES A BOOK TO BECOME SUCCESSFUL?

THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTORS

PREVIOUS SUCCESS IS THE KEY INDICATOR OF FUTURE SUCCESS LISTENING TO THE MARKETPLACE

THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTORS

As part of the research for this book, the authors surveyed over 100 editors and agents in mid-2004. Participants in our "Editors and Agents Survey" included editors at major publishing houses, university presses, and small presses, as well as agents from both small and large literary agencies. The survey was conducted by e-mail and fax. Among the questions was: "What are the most-important factors in a book's success? Please select the five factors (and only five) that you think are most important and rank them from one (most important) to five (least important)."

PREVIOUS SUCCESS IS THE KEY INDICATOR OF FUTURE SUCCESS

Looking at the average scores in Figure 3.1, "Factors in a Book's Success," agents and editors are in agreement that the fan base, whether the author's previous book was a bestseller, and the quality of writing are the keys to success. Agents attribute more of the success to the book getting good word-of-mouth promotion than editors do. Editors think