

Serendipity, promotion, and literature

The contemporary book trade
and international megasellers

Ann Steiner

In working with popular fiction and book markets, I often run across the question of what makes a bestseller. In particular news journalists and cultural critics in the daily press are amazed by the sales figures for books such as *Fifty Shades of Grey* or contemporary crime fiction, and want to understand the mechanisms behind their success. The answer I give is often something vague about the complexity of the matter, or ‘it varies’, or ‘if one only knew’. In answering as if there *is* no real answer, however, I have avoided addressing the central issues: a bestseller does not appear out of thin air and it is not interchangeable with other, similar books. Instead, it has to be understood as part of a complex system in which the particular work of fiction, serendipity, and clever marketing are equally important.

There are primarily three ways to understand the forces that propel bestsellers. Firstly, a bestseller sells well simply because it is a good book. It has the certain literary qualities that can generate huge interest: well written in its genre, thrilling, exciting, something new, and possibly addressing contemporary issues. The second answer is that the book market is a structure designed to create and promote bestsellers. Publishers are driven by profit demands in ways that force them to focus on titles that will sell in large quantities. And thirdly, it is the readers’ interest in sharing their experiences with

others that compels them to read the same thing as everyone else. None of these three are full answers to the question, of course, but it is these variables and factors connected to them, that are essential to the process.

In this essay, I will argue that the equal powers of texts and market forces creates bestsellers. Important factors such as readers, social networks, interpersonal interaction, and convergence culture have to be addressed separately. The focus of this analysis is instead the intersection of book–text and industry–market, where bestsellers are created in constant negotiation. However, it is also clear that, depending on which book, author, publisher, or historical context is being analysed, the position and role of different agents in the marketplace will vary. Research into bestsellers sheds light on the nature of the book trade, marketing systems, and reading cultures, past or present. Even though it would make an interesting challenge to compare present-day bestseller culture with its early twentieth-century counterpart, in this context it is only possible to make two important but general points: that there is nothing new under the sun, but things have changed. This is no contradiction but rather a way to understand that many of the arguments, criticism, and reactions that bestsellers have evoked over time are very similar. On the other hand, technology, the market, and society have changed beyond recognition and with them the nature of bestseller culture.

The introduction of this anthology touches on what constitutes a bestseller in relation to the number of sold copies, making the point that there is a large difference between minor national bestsellers and the international megasellers. The bestselling books discussed in this essay are works of fiction selling in the highest numbers—the kinds of titles that have been named supersellers, megasellers, or hypersellers, all words with enhancing prefixes used for titles that sell far more copies than most bestsellers. In a decade, only a few books will gain such a position, but their impact on culture, literature, and reading is more profound than other titles, and the discussions in this essay are centred on these outstanding bestsellers.

Bestselling fiction

Even though people might talk in general terms about certain books as bestsellers, or about the general dominance of bestselling books, or even about the bestseller-driven market, to define the titles that should be regarded as bestsellers is not that easy. The number of copies sold of every book in the world is not information made available to the researcher, and any figure appearing in the press, marketing material, or in similar places might very well be inflated, downplayed, or simply misquoted. There are two main sources of information on books sold: bestseller lists and individual publishers.¹ The methodological problems with bestseller lists were discussed in the introduction to this anthology; trying to identify sales of international hypersellers is an even more difficult task. Wikipedia and other similar Internet sites have lists of the most sold books, but there is little evidence for how these have been collated. There are no lists that combine sales figures in different countries, which makes it hard to identify the titles that constitute international bestsellers. Most bestsellers sell well over time and in many different formats (hardback, paperback, e-book, etc.), which makes copy volume a possible way of measuring, while the value of the overall sales would provide a different result.²

Still, despite all the disadvantages of combined lists and international comparisons, an approximate list of the last decade's top book sales in Europe and North America (2004–2013) can be drawn up. The titles included are fiction only, and so exclude non-fiction, biographies, and books for younger children. The exact number of copies sold cannot be ascertained (although figures appear in many places) but general observations can be made. All the top-selling books in the period were published in series and therefore not recorded as individual titles. To make an interesting comparison I have added the bestselling single titles for 2002–2003, but since then the books that sell best have all been part of a series.³

Bestselling book series, 2004–2013:

- J. K. Rowling, *The Harry Potter series* (1997–2007, 7 books)
 Stephenie Meyer, *The Twilight series* (2005–2008, 4 books)
 E.L. James, *The Fifty Shades trilogy* (2011)
 Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games trilogy* (2008–2010)
 Stieg Larsson, *The Millennium trilogy* (2005–2007)
 Cassandra Clare, *The Mortal Instruments* (2007–2014, 6 books)
 Charlaine Harris, *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* (2001–2013,
 13 books)
 Christopher Paolini, *The Inheritance Cycle* (2002–2011, 4 books)
 Rick Riordan, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* (2005–2009, 5
 books)

Bestselling individual titles (2002–2003):⁴

- Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (2003)
 Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* (2003)
 Alice Sebold, *The Lovely Bones* (2002)

The list has been compiled by going through bestseller lists in North America and Europe for the period and then tracing the specific sales figures. Sales figures are often confused with print runs, for which exact and reliable statistics are not available. Sometimes the number of books sold as quoted on the cover of a book only relates to the North American sales, while at other times the numbers given are the worldwide printed copies. These figures are obviously not analogous. Furthermore, numbers are generally inflated as a large previous sale is regarded as a marketing argument and publishers tend to exaggerate if they can. However, there are figures to be found on authors' homepages, in the publishers' marketing material and webpages, in the daily press, and particularly in the trade press that can be used as an indication. These numbers place Rowling in a league of her own, with a figure of 450 million copies sold. Collins, James, Larsson, and Meyer have, according to the same kind of numbers, sold between 75 and 115 million books in their individual series.⁵

Further down the list are four series by Paolini, Clare, Riordan, and Harris with sales of between 20 and 35 million copies. These

numbers are if anything more unreliable than in the case of the five largest series.⁶ In order to understand the big business of internationally bestselling books, the five larger series would suffice as examples, but the others have been included in this overview for three reasons. Firstly, they strengthen the impression that of the works published in the last decade, fiction series have been the most successful. This is in part due to publishers pushing for series as it is easier to retain interest in a book when there is a sequel, but it is also due to many readers looking for long narratives that promise a continued story. Secondly, it can be noted that the four series are geared towards children and young adults, but with a strong crossover appeal, which makes the target audience very large. Thirdly, these bestsellers add to our knowledge of the importance of genre, which is something I will come back to, as all four are fantasy fiction.

Another common denominator among the international mega-sellers is the well-known transmediation of successful narratives. All these series have been adapted as films, although at present they are at different stages of production. In the case of James, work is underway to produce the first film, in the case of Clare and Paolini only a first film has been made. Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* premiered in 2012, with the sequel in 2013, and a third film planned for 2014. The first film in Riordan's *Percy Jackson & The Olympians* (2010) was a box office flop, a second film had to wait until 2013 for its release, and a continuation is uncertain.⁷ Rowling, Meyer, and Larsson have been completed as film versions and Harris has been made into a celebrated HBO television series (*True Blood*) but with a rather different story from the books. All in all, there is a strong link between bestseller publishing and the film and entertainment industry. Cross-media synergies have become increasingly important for all book publishing, but particularly in the young adult segment of the market.⁸ There are three kinds of publishing synergies: the transferal of the content to other media formats (film, game, apps); tie-in products (for example, a book about a film based on a book, or a book about the characters of the story); and merchandise (posters, jewellery, clothes, action dolls, and so on).⁹ All these products enhance and strength-

en the brand and are particularly important in conglomerate publishing.

Textual qualities and similarities in bestselling fiction

To structurally analyse what constitutes a bestselling novel in an international publishing context, four aspects—genre and themes, style and form, emotional impact, and contextual relevance—are outlined and analysed. The question of language and country of origin is also highly relevant, but it speaks to a complex question of linguistic, social, and political dominance and power structures that cannot be fully analysed in the present context.¹⁰

The top bestsellers in the list are all genre fiction: fantasy, crime, romance, and science fiction.¹¹ According to Ken Gelder, ‘Popular fiction is, essentially, genre fiction.’¹² To his mind there is little room in the world of popular fiction for naivety in relation to genre. A solid knowledge of crime, romance, fantasy, vampire, and so on is essential for writer, publisher, and bookseller alike. However, bestsellers and genre fiction are not the same thing. Most genre fiction will never become a bestseller. On the other hand, all of the bestsellers listed above belong to one genre or more, and genre typologies are often used for book jackets, blurbs, and marketing material.

Criticism of bestselling literature tends to argue that it is generic in character and description, but such statements take little account of the sheer variety in popular fiction. Gelder, despite a critical interest in popular fiction, maintains there is a difference between ‘popular’ and ‘literary’ fiction based on the latter being ‘less obviously shaped or serviced’ by genre.¹³ Thus, a work of popular fiction is more closely related to genre than to literary fiction. This is a value-laden division that frequently crops up in accounts of genre.¹⁴ For Gelder, a reader of popular fiction is always on the lookout for similar works instead of wanting to re-read individual works to gain a deeper understanding of them.¹⁵ This might be true of a very generic kind of popular fiction, but it is hardly true of bestsellers. Instead, most of them are distinguished by their ability to keep readers re-reading the text and deeply involved in fan activities.

Genre is, however, an important aspect, as most of the listed

bestsellers use genre as a tool for experiment, contrast, inclusion, or blending. The significance of genre in successful hypersellers has been noted by Kerstin Bergman. She argues that genre hybridization is a 'fundamental ... feature that contributes to such a novel's success by causing it to attract a larger and more diverse audience'.¹⁶ Her examples, Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* and Stieg Larsson's Millennium trilogy, are convincing, and I would agree that genre awareness and playfulness are important aspects of many bestselling titles. Nevertheless, it is not characteristic in every case, and while hybridization might be a common trait, the defining aspect of best-selling fiction is rather the importance placed on genre.

Literary studies use 'genre' as a term defined by textual elements. According to Alistair Fowler in *Kinds of Literature* (1982), genres are families held together in complex and dynamic structures of family likeness.¹⁷ A second practice is one often used in book market contexts, where publishers, booksellers, and librarians use genre to categorize books, but is also used by readers as an instrument for expectations.¹⁸ A third possible definition has emerged, however, where genre is neither textual nor contextual, but agency. Claire Squires, using Tzvetan Todorov's definition of genre as an institution, has argued that genre is no longer solely a practical way to categorize books in a library or bookshop, for it has become 'an agency in the publishing field'.¹⁹ Writers, publishers, booksellers, and readers act and react towards the dominant genres, and within the trade all genres are independent rather than being created. Todorov's ideological function of genre is perhaps not as useful here as Squires' development of the notion might be. Genre is not a way to classify and define texts, but rather has to be understood as such a powerful component in the contemporary literary marketplace that it becomes an independent force. Studying the 'sociology of genre' includes publishing, literature, and a wide social context.²⁰

Closely linked to genres are themes and content. In the textual definition of genre, certain themes or textual elements are necessary, or unthinkable for that matter. The basic themes visible in the list of the hyperselling novels are clearly linked to genres, the themes being relationships (love, sex, friendship), suspense (crime, thriller, mystery), fantasy (fairy tale, archetypal heroes, mythical figures,

and the re-use of Greek mythology), and current issues (social criticism, issues such as gender, sexuality and race). In a more in-depth analysis of the particular novels, the interplay of the themes could be mapped in detail. Here it suffices to note that the same narrow list of themes are found in most bestselling novels. This is hardly a surprise given that most popular fiction is based on the same archetypal storytelling that many times can be traced back as far as central European folk tales.

Another aspect relevant to any understanding of the international bestseller is style and form. Not that it can be argued that there is unity, yet nevertheless it is possible to say that certain traits are common and these have to do with pace and suspense, cliffhangers, and serial narratives. In one sense, all of the hyperselling titles have suspense as a main component, not necessarily in the sense of a mystery or a thriller, but in anticipation of revelation and continuation.

In order for a novel to appeal to a wide and varied audience, it not only needs to have a theme, genre, or a famous author to attract readers; it is also necessary for the text to keep the reader reading. A boring book is unlikely to be recommended to others. The most essential component in retaining a reader is suspense. Page-turner fiction is based on the reader wanting to know what happened and how events will unfold. Suspense has been defined as a combination of fear, hope, and uncertainty.²¹ Crime fiction and thrillers have obviously always worked with suspense, but it is an essential part of most genre fiction. For example, in romance the suspense is based on the main female character being able to find love with the right man, and the unfolding of the love story is a constant back and forth in the relationship, thereby creating dramatic suspense.

A second common feature of bestselling fiction is a general trend towards serialization. As the art theorist Henry John Pratt has observed, 'Serialization dominates contemporary narrative media.'²² It is most easily observed, of course, in the development of American television drama, where the status of the high-profile television series has increased dramatically and nowadays attracts talented scriptwriters to series such as *Mad Men*, *The Walking Dead*, and *Game of Thrones*. By creating loyal audiences and, in many cases, a large fan community, these series have been very successful, and there are many similarities

between the ways they create narrative and what is found in best-selling novels. A long narrative, stretching over several novels, has the advantage of drawing the reader into the fictional universe, and if the author has succeeded in creating interest in the first book it is so much easier to attract further reading. Many times, publishers also use a book to promote its sequel. In the paratexts this can be done through advertisements or by publishing a first chapter from the next novel in the series at the end of the book. Another way to use book series is to use audience feedback and reader engagement in developing the story.

Other researchers have also observed this trend. Back in 1997, the film scholar Christine Gledhill remarked on how the serial narrative was splitting into three different forms: the *series*, the *serial*, and the *continuous serial*. The *series* is a story in which each episode or book is self-contained with a concluding end (the mystery solved, the couple happily married). Even though there might be subnarratives, the protagonists only change in a slow process. This is what happens in Harry Potter's case in the sense that he returns each summer to Privet Drive, in Collins's first novel, *The Hunger Games*, where Katniss returns safely home, and to some extent the Millennium trilogy where the mystery is solved (at least partially). The series has a very long tradition in publishing, particularly in crime fiction, with novels such as Agatha Christie's Miss Marple books and Dorothy Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey mysteries. The second kind of fiction, the *serial*, is a narrative with a plot that unfolds over a run of episodes or instalments. On television *The Forsyte Saga* (1967) or the more recent *Downton Abbey* (2010–) are examples of this kind of storytelling, and among the bestselling fiction are both Meyer's Twilight trilogy and E. L. James's Fifty Shades trilogy serials.

However, Gledhill observes a third kind of narrative structure, the *continuous serial*, which is a kind of narrative that is becoming more prominent in literature too. It is a story that does not end with the episode or book but continues on without relieving the suspense, yet unlike the serial it is not even certain that the story will ever end: "The continuous serial, on the other hand, promises a "never-ending story".²³ In this kind of narrative there are simultaneous plots and sub-plots that can shift in dominance over the course of the text.

Traditionally, popular fiction has been based on a clear beginning–middle–end structure. But possibly inspired by the television soap opera, much present-day fiction follows a pattern without endings and with a complex narrative structure. An example of this, albeit not one of the bestsellers considered here, is George R. R. Martin’s books in the series, or rather the continuous serial, *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996–, the sixth book is forthcoming), which has been made into a celebrated television series, *Game of Thrones* (2011–). Interestingly, the books in the lower range of international megasellers can all be argued to be continuous serials: Paolini (the Inheritance Cycle), Clare (The Mortal Instruments), Riordan (Percy Jackson and the Olympians), and Harris (The Southern Vampire Mysteries). Not only do these books contain complex plots, but also they are written in a way that supplies the reader with an endless story.

For practical reasons, all three types of narrative structure are generically referred to as series in this essay; however, the over-arching concept of serial narrative is an important feature in bestselling fiction, fuelled by the reader’s urge to read on in the next book. The gap in the story between the novels—what Pratt calls ‘cliffhanger continuity’—drives the reader to the next book in order to satisfy his or her curiosity.²⁴ The technique is not new. It was very common in the nineteenth century to publish in instalments in the daily press, with Charles Dickens and George Eliot being notable examples, to the extent that the publishing industry in the second half of the nineteenth century was constructed around the sale of novels in instalments, and most fiction printed in book form had already been published in a magazine or daily paper.²⁵

Today, a resurgence in the serialization of fiction is evident. According to Jim Collins, e-books and e-readers will strengthen the serial narrative as the sensation of reading one book in the singular evaporates with e-reading.²⁶ E-reading shatters the narrative of the physical codex as it is much closer to reading a long text on a computer screen. The question Collins asks is whether television serials and audio files are not ‘just the newest delivery system for format narratives’?²⁷ Evidence for this development is Amazon’s launch in 2012 of Kindle Serials as way to sell original literary works ‘published in episodes’, just like a television series.²⁸

Moving on from the questions of genre and form, two key factors in bestselling fiction, one comes to a very different issue: the emotional impact of bestsellers and the significance of emotions in literary success. Despite the fact that emotional responses differ from reader to reader, there is little doubt that the feelings experienced during reading add to a heightened sensation. The psychological responses to a text depend first and foremost on the reader—ranging from his or her emotional state, previous experiences, expectations on the text, and so forth—yet emotions require stimuli, and in reading it is the content and nature of the text that prompt the reaction in the reader. Different kinds of texts will trigger sadness, disgust, happiness, and so on.

In *Uses of Literature* (2008), Rita Felski argues for a notion of reading that involves strong engagement with literary texts. In her study she explores four ‘modes of textual engagement’: recognition, enchantment, knowledge and shock.²⁹ These modes, she says, are not literary qualities, nor are they simply psychological effects. Instead, they ‘denote multi-leveled interactions between texts and readers that are irreducible to their separate parts.’³⁰ Felski’s analysis of emotional responses to reading addresses the question of experience that is pertinent to any kind of reading. However, there is a general belief that emotional reading is less worthwhile than intellectual and analytical reading. Such clear distinctions between reading practices are scarcely valid, of course, as few people could claim to turn off all emotions. Felski has also shown that emotional involvement is not a reaction isolated to popular literature, but can surface in the reading of any text. Emotions are always a part of the reading process and should not be set against other reading modes.

As the reader’s response to a text is individual, it is not possible to claim universal emotional impact. However, what is clear is that all the bestselling novels in the list above rely on one or several of Felski’s modes. A brief summary shows, for example, that of the various series Stephenie Meyers’s *Twilight* is based on recognition and enchantment; Stieg Larsson’s *Millennium* on shock and knowledge; Rowling’s *Harry Potter* on shock, enchantment, and recognition; James’ *Fifty Shades* on recognition and enchantment; Collins’s *Hunger Games* on knowledge and shock. This crude way

of naming reactions to novels hardly constitutes an analysis of the emotional responses to fiction, but even so highlights how essential emotions are.

A fourth aspect to bestselling fiction is relevance. A book many people enjoy reading has to be relevant in one way or another. What is regarded as relevant differs between genres and readers (a political biography and a high-fantasy novel are not relevant in the same way), and in terms of bestsellers, relevance has to do with addressing contemporary issues or representing a popular theme. According to John Sutherland, the bestseller is a title that encapsulates a moment in time and cannot be transferred to another time: "They are snapshots of the age."³¹ Many bestsellers simply do not make sense or appeal to later readers, but are amply revealing about a particular time and place, whether it is the matter of female sexuality in Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1973) or the post-apocalyptic stories discussed in Määttä's essay in this volume.³² It also means that by following bestsellers over a period of time, we will be able to understand not only literary preferences, but also prevailing social, cultural, and political concerns. As scholars of popular fiction have shown, the novels that are most firmly bound to their time will soon be outdated.³³ Often novels tap into fears, dreams, or pressing issues of the day: women's liberation, sexuality, and boundaries of the body, violence, war and global catastrophes, age and youth, race and fear of otherness.³⁴

The novels do not necessarily present answers, but they at least approach them tangentially. For example, *Fifty Shades of Grey* is a romance with explicit erotic scenes, what is generally termed *erotic romance*. The media and scholarly attention paid to James's Fifty Shades trilogy has mainly been focused on the sexuality in the novels. While this is a minor part of the story, in the eyes of both the media and academia it, rather than the characteristic love story, has been seen as the main feature. There is not space here to go into the detail of whether Fifty Shades is repressive or liberating, which has been the main topic of discussion in most contexts. Quite clearly the novels deals with subject matter important to today's society—women's sexuality. An overview of romance novels over the last two centuries shows many similar examples of female characters nego-

tiating the position between virgin and whore, particularly visible in examples of erotic romance such as John Cleland's *Fanny Hill* (1748), Kathleen Winsor's *Forever Amber* (1944), Sergeanne Golon's *Angelique* (1960), and Shirley Conran's *Lace* (1982). *Fifty Shades* is the most recent in a long line of similar stories addressing women's sexuality. Carol Thurston in her study *The Romance Revolution* (1987) has shown the transformation of the erotic romance over time and particularly the development of the genre in the 1970s and 1980s with a strong heroine who is both good and sexual.³⁵

James' *Fifty Shades* trilogy, as well as the other bestselling novels that have brought female sexuality to the fore, illustrates how popular fiction often raises relevant issues. Analysis of the other novels in the bestseller list shows similar results. It is obvious that the major themes of the Harry Potter series are morality, good and evil, rebellion, loyalty, anti-fascist ideals, and democracy, while Meyer's *Twilight* series taps into fears of other races and of difference, but also deals with sexuality, religion, and death.

Markets, promotion, and the structure of publishing

In the 1979 edition of *Glaister's Glossary of the Book*, a bestseller is defined as a book of general interest that sells many copies over a short period of time, created by the publisher through 'skilful advance publicity' and by connecting the title to (cheap) paperback issues and film rights.³⁶ If it were that easy to create a bestseller in 2014 many publishers would rejoice, but, as the history of bestselling fiction tells us, this is not the case. Despite promising content, film rights being duly sold, and a large promotion campaign, titles still fail, in the sense that they do not sell as well as expected. The business-to-business systems for the sale of publishing and translation rights are perhaps even more important than sales to individual readers. A large variety of publishing rights are constantly available on the market, and everyone wants to make sure that they secure the right titles without spending too much money. At the Frankfurt Book Fair rights are sold and buzz is created, but many titles will not match the expected sales. For example, the English international rights for the *Amberville* novel series by Tim Davy were

sold to HarperCollins for \$350,000. Conceivably it was this offer that created the ensuing hype that led to sales of translation rights to 35 countries. In the end, the book sold poorly in every country and very few of the international publishers choose to publish all four instalments.³⁷

At other times, publishers are simply serendipitous in their choices. Although the publishers of Stieg Larsson and J. K. Rowling believed in their novels, they had no way of knowing of the successful outcome. Nevertheless, the work done by agents, publishers, booksellers, and other similar persons or companies is very important for the success of a book.

The changes in the book market over the last twenty years have been profound, which has left its mark on the top-selling titles. Robert Escarpit said in 1965 that ‘Things change swiftly, however, in the world of books. Over the last decade everything has been transformed—books, readers and literature.’³⁸ His remark is evidence of fact that the rapid changes in the book trade seen in the twenty-first century are not new. Even so, in the last two decades the production and dissemination of books have gone through major changes more thorough and radical than previous shifts. Some developments have been of little consequence for the publishing and promotion of best-sellers, but several have redrawn the map for global, conglomerate publishing and its focus on ‘big books’. Printing and publishing, e-books, the speed of writing, typesetting, logistics, dissemination and sales, and adaptations for different media are all examples of areas in the book trade that have drastically altered who can do what.³⁹ The overarching concept is speed—the speed at which things can be written, typeset, published, printed, distributed, sold, and accessed.

Each of these areas can also be examined in terms of finances. The cost of producing a book has historically been one of the most important factors in growth of the book trade. As book production became cheaper the industry was able to grow.⁴⁰ Due to the falling cost of printing and distribution, book production has increased exponentially over the last hundred years. Cheap publishing in the twenty-first century and soaring numbers of books have led to a disintegration of the trade. Published books in every form, from e-book and print-on-demand to large-scale publishing by estab-

lished houses, has created a polarized market that is tricky to grasp. Apart from the very few successful titles that will be reprinted, most books have a short lifespan. Chris Anderson has argued that the present market offers a 'long tail', but while this is true in terms of sales, from a publishing perspective most books have six months to succeed and many books cannot be accessed at all after two years.⁴¹ This might change as e-book production expands, yet the existence of ever more titles has still made it harder for individual books to be visible. Paradoxically, when increasingly more books are being produced, the difficulty of attracting attention to single titles has led to an increasing focus on a small segment of books—the ones the publishers will invest in the most.

Technology has made it easier and cheaper to publish, but it has become harder to muster attention, distribution, and sales. Inexpensive and simple printing can be regarded as a democratization, but has at the same time led to a polarized market where major books and bestsellers seem to have all the media attention and visibility. The bestseller industry is constantly driven towards international markets, spurred on both by large media conglomerates with publishing interests and by national publishing houses looking for the next success abroad and trying to capitalize on national bestsellers through international sales. International mergers and acquisitions have been commonplace in the book publishing world since the 1960s. Eva Hemmungs Wirtén has termed the transition a 'conglomeratization'—the evolution of publishing from small-scale independence to a market dominated by large-scale, transnational media conglomerates⁴²—while many countries have seen what Claire Squires calls 'a near oligopolistic control', with a small number of giant corporations dominating both national and international publishing.⁴³ The overall structural change has also affected publishing (largely titles and range), sales of subsidiary rights, and marketing towards a focus on bestselling, or at least potentially bestselling, titles.

The six largest publishers in the world—Pearson, Reed Elsevier, Thomson Reuters, Wolters Kluwer, Bertelsmann, Lagardère/Hachette Livre—all have divisions that cover every area of the book trade, along with different media companies (television and film, games, magazines and so on). This concentration is echoed in the

vertical as well as the horizontal integration of the business, in a well-established corporate model in which a company owns publishing houses, imprints, or similar in every area of the market (children's books, education, spirituality, general non-fiction, travel, and so on) which means they will have horizontal control over every aspect of publishing. Furthermore, the company controls every area of production, distribution, and sales (book stores, book clubs, Internet sales), which gives it vertical coherence.⁴⁴ Literature in this context becomes 'content'; content that can be translated, repackaged, and sold to different markets and market segments depending on demand. Large-scale industry is set up to create a variety of media formats, media attention, and a wide range of spin-offs and merchandise, all to best effect. In this way, the book and remediated versions of the story enhance one another and fuel the hype created by the publishing house. Global conglomerates do not operate alone, but rather in an intricate network of publishers in other countries, rights agents, media companies, and merchandise manufacturers.

There is a growing number of titles published each year in almost every country in the world.⁴⁵ This is rarely because individual publishing houses are increasing their number of titles, however. Instead, the rising numbers are due to there simply being more publishers—subsidiaries, small publishers, micropublishers, self-publishing, and print-on-demand. One view of this development is that the ever growing number of minor publishing enterprises threatens serious publishing, while the opposite view holds that it is bestseller publishing that floods the market with too many copies of the same titles. The overall problem is that there are too many books, both on national and international levels. The massive output of books has created a more competitive market for fiction, with increasing pressure on individual titles.

The book market always requires something new. Or, at least it has to provide the sensation of novelty. Even reprints of classics by Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, or Ernest Hemingway require fresh typesetting and a new jacket and blurb. Reprints are safe, but do little to develop the trade, and every publisher is constantly searching for the next new thing. In a hit-oriented market, bestsellers have become increasingly important for major publishers. The largest publishers need a steady stream of bestsellers and a single success

like Harry Potter or Fifty Shades can dramatically alter the finances and prospects of a large publishing conglomerate. At the same time, successful titles seem more unpredictable than ever.

Big business publishing thus requires constant growth. The difficulty of expanding within the publishing industry is referred to as 'the growth conundrum' by John B. Thompson in *Merchants of Culture* (2010)—how does a publishing house grow in what is essentially the static market of trade publishing?⁴⁶ Thompson identifies three strategies used by the large companies: taking market shares from competitors by having a higher hit rate; selling books in new ways; and acquiring other publishing houses. All three are geared towards a more competitive and concentrated market and are significant for bestseller-oriented publishing, especially the first strategy. So, how do to improve a hit rate? Again there are three possibilities, all with their disadvantages. One can buy works by an established and successful author (an expensive habit), publish books in a genre or type that appears to be up and coming (yet publishing me-too books in genres such vampire, erotic romance, and the like does not assure success), or one can buy titles that have proved to be popular in other markets (but there are no guarantees that a French, or even a British, success will find a readership in another country). Yet despite the obvious drawbacks, conglomerate publishing is increasingly focused on finding bestsellers.

Furthermore, in order to gain further economies of scale, the large American and British publishers have merged their sales forces, making sale representatives responsible for a very large number of new books each year. A large publishing corporation will carry as many as 5,000 new titles a year (trade only) and it is not possible to promote these equally. Priority lists are made that differentiate between how titles are to be sold, by which channels, and with what kinds of marketing campaign. The priority lists are generally made up of three types of books. The first are titles by brand-name authors such as Dan Brown, J. K. Rowling, and Suzanne Collins, which are sold purely on the author's name, his or her previous sales through different channels, and the book cover. Second, there are books that the publisher identifies as a potential bestsellers; and third, there are the books that the sales representatives identify as interesting at a

later stage of the process.⁴⁷ Marketing departments will hence treat certain books as bestsellers—where the author is already a brand name and where the publisher recognizes a strong potential.

Yet there are still a great many unexpected successes. As Escarpit writes, ‘best-sellers are books which break out of the social circle for which they were originally intended’.⁴⁸ Every publisher knows that a bestseller cannot be created; it just appears, and the best a publisher can hope to do is to identify it at an early stage. What has been termed the ‘ineliminable serendipity of trade publishing’ is a fact that can be dealt with in two ways.⁴⁹ Either one can publish fewer titles and market them harder in the hopes of having made the right choices, with an evident risk that the real hits will fail to happen. Or one can publish a broader selection of titles, market them equally, and try to spot which books will take off. In this case one is more likely to be the one who publishes ‘the black swan’. The concept of the ‘black swan’, as defined by Nassim Nicholas Taleb, is the appearance of the unexpected that will change previous knowledge. He attributes it to three characteristics: it is an outlier (it is ‘outside the realm of regular expectations’); it has an extreme impact; yet, despite its out of the blue appearance, people will find rational explanations afterwards.⁵⁰ The ‘combination of low predictability and large impact’ makes the black swan enigmatic and important in equal measure.⁵¹ Because a publisher cannot measure the uncertain, there is no business model that can predict the next big thing. At least four of the bestselling authors in the list were surprise hits: E. L. James, Stieg Larsson, Christopher Paolini, and J. K. Rowling. The publishers who opted for the first alternative of only publishing bestsellers missed out on them completely. Ironically, many of the large American and British companies have minimized their lists with the argument that they should only focus on bestselling books. This has become something of a paradox, a bestselling book is unpredictable and not easy to identify in advance.

The rationale of this business model has led to a preoccupation with what are called ‘big books’.⁵² These are not the same as bestsellers. A bestseller is a title that succeeds in selling many copies, while a ‘big book’ is promoted in such ways and to such extent that it is clear that there are great hopes of it becoming a bestseller. A ‘big book’

will be treated in a special way in-house, among sale representatives, and in sale channels (for example, it will be sold through supermarkets or book clubs to a greater extent than other titles would be). As Thompson puts it, ‘The difference between a big book and a bestseller is the difference between aspiration and reality.’⁵³ In these cases, the individual title is dependent on the publisher’s brand and reputation with the trade to make it into important sales and marketing channels. Claire Squires and Padmini Ray Murray have argued that it has become increasingly important to develop a publishing brand if books are to realize their sales potential. The publishers’ focus on the brand is not only to attract customers in terms of book buyers but mainly in ‘their business to business relationships’.⁵⁴ To have a strong publishing brand makes it possible to negotiate deals with booksellers, distributors, and book clubs, and to attract media attention in the shape of feature articles and television and radio appearances. A publisher’s brand can also attract other authors and agents, and in the case of conglomerate publishing it is a way to demonstrate that the company is able to develop ‘content’ in other media formats and create hype—and bestsellers.

You cannot conjure a bestseller out of thin air, but, equally, a well-written, easily read novel cannot reach a wide audience unless it is helped on its way by a large (or at least a semi-large) publisher and extensive marketing. Among the top-selling titles there are several examples of novels that were initially published on a smaller national scale and later picked up in the international loop of bestsellers. Rowling, James, Larsson’s books are all examples of this, and it has been argued that they are evidence of a book market where, for example, self-publishing and minor languages have equal opportunities.⁵⁵ Yet, at some point the major international publishers picked up all these authors, and it was not until then they reached sales of the dimensions discussed in this essay.

Concluding remarks and a note on reading bestsellers

The international culture of bestsellers is under constant negotiation by authors, agents, publishers, media producers, booksellers, online e-distributors, critics, bloggers, and readers. Much of the

literary bestselling phenomenon can be explained by the rationale of the twenty-first-century cultural industry, but it also has to be understood from a consumer perspective and traced through individual experiences and cultural practices. This essay argues that it is a combination of texts and market structures that creates bestsellers. However, it could also be argued that readers are an equally important factor, and previous research into reading cultures in the twenty-first century has looked at different areas of fan culture, readers' online activities, and the importance of a social infrastructure of reading.⁵⁶ It is obvious that a bestseller requires many readers, and an international megaseller in the same league as Rowling's *Harry Potter* many more than that. A broad target audience in terms of gender and age is preferable, although not necessary. It is notable that of the nine top-selling book series, only two were published for adults (Larsson and James), while all the others had children, adolescents, and young adults as their primary target groups. It appears that an audience of readers ranging the ages 13–25, although a wide range, will provide a solid base that can be expanded, for it is also obvious that each of these titles has sold equally well or even better to adults. Defining books according to gender is not only precarious, but also has little merit when it comes to discussing textual gender. However, gender is a definite element in publishing in terms of market segmentation and genre publishing as well as target audience. Three of the nine series discussed here are romance novels, with a primary female readership: Meyer, James, and Harris's. Paolini, on the other hand, is a high-fantasy novel with a primarily male audience. The other five have a wide gender appeal, and the only conclusion that can be safely drawn is that gender is not a defining trait when it comes to who buys and reads bestsellers.

One of the main attractions of a bestseller is that it comes with an 'approved by many' stamp. For the reader, if so many others have already read the book, it cannot be all bad. Secondly, as everyone seems to be reading it, there is a strong incentive to do the same. People act in groups and want their habits, behaviour, and interests to fit in.⁵⁷ If publishers create hype, then readers, and soon-to-be readers, create buzz. Word-of-mouth marketing is regarded as the strongest and most persuasive kind of marketing within the book

trade.⁵⁸ A recommendation from a friend is what makes us most likely to read something. ‘The social infrastructure of reading’, to borrow Elizabeth Long’s phrase, is the interaction between readers and the choices we make in reading a certain book.⁵⁹ Navigating the flood of books has for many become an increasing problem. The bestseller lists appear not only in the *New York Times* and similar daily papers, but also in every Internet bookstore, high-street bookshop, and railway and airport newsagents. These lists have become the tool of choice for many people, overwhelmed by the sheer number and range of the books to choose from. The usefulness of bestseller lists as a selection tool has been noted by Margaret Mackey in an article on picking books and the obstacles to reading. She argues that choosing the right book has become a growing problem for many, but that if other readers have already chosen a book it gives the title real worth, making it a viable choice. Mackey also suggests that high among the potent attractions of bestsellers are the remediated versions, the re-workings, and the spin-offs.⁶⁰ They promise a universe where the reader can stay as long as he or she wants. Various fan forums, film versions, and games also offer entry to the fictional universe. The novel might be the first and original version, thereafter translated into other media, but for the individual reader the experience of a fictional world might be organized in a different way. Perhaps it begins with seeing the film, or hearing the soundtrack on Spotify, or discussing a related subject on Facebook. The entry and exit points in the textual and narrative universes are not the same as they were twenty years ago. In a convergence culture, information, images, textual production, and more flow from the publishing industry and from the fans, out into a wide loop of stardom. Bestsellers by nature are reliant on readers, and it can be argued that the influence of the audience has been strengthened and thus has redrawn the map of the bestseller literary industry.

For there to be a bestseller, one needs a particular work of fiction, serendipity, and clever marketing. When elaborated on, this simple recipe says much about the rationale of twenty-first-century bestseller culture. Some aspects – novelty, pace, suspense, genre, and seriality – of a novel can make it more desirable, but none of these are the sole reason for success. An international bestseller will also

need to have a large international publishing house behind it to oversee rights, media production, and media attention. It could be argued that the development of the book market in the twenty-first century is increasingly geared towards bestsellers. In the intersection of book–text and industry–market, bestsellers are created in constant negotiation, but, while some works are more serendipitous than others, they are all part of a larger structure.

Notes

- 1 A third option could have been Nielsen BookScan, but for the methodological problems discussed in detail by Määttä in this anthology.
- 2 See Rasmus Grøn, ‘The Bestseller List and its (Dis)contents. The Construction of “the Bestseller”’, *Academic Quarter*, 7 (2013), 19–33; see also the differentiation between bestsellers, fast-sellers and steady sellers in the introduction to this volume.
- 3 Miha Kovač and Rüdiger Wischenbart, *Diversity Report 2010. Literary Translation in Current European Book Markets* (Vienna: Rüdiger Wischenbart Content and Consulting, 2010), 40 offers an analysis of bestseller lists in several European countries in 2008–2010, suggesting that apart from Brown and Hosseini other authors have been very successful, particularly Carlos Ruiz Zafón and Muriel Barbery. The problem with the study is that it only covers some European countries and no YA fiction, and it is unclear which titles are included.
- 4 The figures that can be found mention Brown as 80 million copies, Hosseini close to 40 million, and Sebald 10 million.
- 5 Larsson and Collins 75 million each, James 90 million, and Meyer 115 million.
- 6 The figures for these four series are unreliable as it is unclear which of the titles are included; they are taken from the daily press rather than trade magazines, and some of them only appear on websites such as Wikipedia.
- 7 Internet Movie Database, www.imdb.com.
- 8 Claire Squires, *Marketing Literature. The Making of Contemporary Writing in Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 24.
- 9 As discussed in greater detail in the introduction to this anthology.
- 10 Addressed in Ann Steiner, ‘World Literature and the Book Market’, in *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, ed. Theo D’haen, David Damrosch and Djelal Kadir, (London: Routledge, 2012), 316–324; and in greater detail in Malin Nauwerck, *A World of Myths—Canongate’s Myths Series as a Transnational Publishing Project* (unpub. diss., Uppsala University, 2013).
- 11 In Meyer’s case, genre has been much discussed, the problem being that there is no ‘other world’. The question is whether or not dark fantasy and its subgenre supernatural romance count as fantasy or not. The case for Meyer’s and Harris’s novels being fantasy is made by, for example, Roz Kaveney, ‘Dark Fantasy and Paranormal Romance’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, ed. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (Cambridge: CUP, 2012), 214–23.
- 12 Ken Gelder, *Popular Fiction. The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field* (London: Routledge 2004), 1.

- 13 Gelder 2004, 40.
- 14 As shown by Squires 2007, 70–1.
- 15 Gelder 2004, 41.
- 16 Kerstin Bergman, 'Genre-Hybridization—a Key to Hyper-Bestsellers?', *Academic Quarter*, 7 (2013), 106–118, quote at 107.
- 17 Alistair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature. An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).
- 18 Ann Steiner, 'Den litterära genren som marknadskoncept: Klassiker och fantasy hos bokhandlare, läsare och litteraturvetare', in *Det sköna med skönlitteraturen*, ed. Lars Rydquist (Stockholm: Svenska Akademien, 2013), 28–39.
- 19 Squires 2007, 72.
- 20 Squires 2007, 74.
- 21 Jonathan Frome and Aaron Smuts, 'Helpless Spectators: Generating Suspense in Videogames and Film', *Text Technology*, 1 (2004), 15.
- 22 Henry John Pratt, 'Why Serials Are Killer', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 71/3 (2013), 266–270, quote at 266.
- 23 Christine Gledhill with Vicky Ball, 'Genre and Gender: The Case of Soap Opera', in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans and Sean Nixon (2nd edn, London: SAGE, 2013), 337–386, quote at 364.
- 24 Pratt 2013, 267.
- 25 Graham Law, *Serializing Fiction in the Victorian Press* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000); James Wald, 'Periodicals and Periodicity', in *A Companion to the History of the Book*, ed. Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 426.
- 26 Jim Collins, 'Fifty Shades of Seriality and E-Readers Games', *Academic Quarter*, 7 (2013), 366–79.
- 27 Collins 2013, 375.
- 28 Amazon, www.amazon.com/b?ie=UTF8&node=5044445011.
- 29 Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 14.
- 30 Felski 2008, 14.
- 31 John Sutherland, *Bestsellers. A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), 3.
- 32 Jong's popularity as a novel of the sexual revolution has been analysed by Meryl Altman in 'Beyond Trashiness: The Sexual Language of the 1970s Feminist Fiction', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 4/2 (2003), 7–19. *Fear of Flying* has been said to have sold 20 million copies (Neely Tucker, 'Fear of Flying author Erica Jong zips along 40 years after dropping her literary bombshell', *Washington Post*, 8 October 2013).
- 33 An interesting example is Annette R. Federico, *Idol of Suburbia. Marie Corelli and Late-Victorian Literary Culture* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 2000).
- 34 John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance. Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976) makes similar observations in a study of formulaic literature; however, he only deals with literature that follows certain patterns and the popularity of formulas. The popularity of individual works can be related both to the overall formula and to the specific topic in its time.
- 35 Carol Thurston, *The Romance Revolution. Erotic Novels for Women and the Quest for a New Sexual Identity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 8.

- 36 Geoffrey Ashall Glaister, *Encyclopedia of the Book* (2nd edn, London: British Library, 1996), 39, a reprint of Glaister's *Glossary of the Book* (1979).
- 37 Kalle Laxgård, 'Det går upp som en sol', *Svensk bokhandel*, 62/20 (2013), 11–28. Tim Davy is a pseudonym for a Swedish author.
- 38 Robert Escarpit, *The Book Revolution* (London: Harrap, 1966), 9.
- 39 See Laura J. Miller, 'Whither the Professional Book Publisher in an Era of Distribution on Demand', *The International Encyclopedia of Media Studies*, ed. Vicki Mayer, ii (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013) for an analysis of the consequences.
- 40 For example, the invention of wood-based pulp in the production of paper in the eighteenth century was a key factor in the rise of literacy. Similar shifts can be seen over the last two centuries as technology has made paper, printing, and binding less expensive—cheaper publishing has always been a force to be reckoned with.
- 41 Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail. Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More* (New York: Hyperion, 2006).
- 42 Eva Hemmungs Wirtén, 'The Global Market 1970–2000: Producers', in *A Companion to the History of the Book*, ed. Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 395–405.
- 43 Squires 2007, 22.
- 44 Martin K. Perry, 'Vertical Integration: Determinants and Effects', in *Handbook of Industrial Organization*, ed. Richard Schmalensee and Robert Willig, i (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1989), 183–255; David Croteau and William Hoynes, 'The Media Industry: Structure, Strategy and Debates', in *Media Studies. Key Issues and Debates*, ed. Eoin Devereux (London: SAGE, 2007), 32–54. Recent developments in Sweden and Germany are analysed in Anna-Maria Rimm, 'Conditions and Survival: Views on the Concentration of Ownership and Vertical Integration in German and Swedish Publishing', *Publishing Research Quarterly*, 30/1 (2014), 77–92.
- 45 Steiner 2012.
- 46 John B. Thompson, *Merchants of Culture. The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 109.
- 47 J. B. Thompson 2010, 188–9.
- 48 Escarpit 1966, 118.
- 49 J. B. Thompson 2010, 191.
- 50 Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan. The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (2nd edn, New York: Random House, 2010), xxii is not limited to market changes, and argues that the idea conceptualises everything in history that can have a fundamental impact (wars as well as fashion, plagues, and art schools).
- 51 Taleb 2010, xxii.
- 52 J. B. Thompson 2010, 192.
- 53 J. B. Thompson 2010, 193.
- 54 Claire Squires and Padmini Ray Murray, 'The Digital Publishing Communications Circuit', *Book 2.0*, 3/1 (2013), 3–23, quote at 10.
- 55 Kovač and Wischenbart 2010, 32.
- 56 For example, Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture. Where Old and new Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo, *Reading Beyond the Book. The Social Practices of Contemporary Literary Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2013); *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2014).

- 57 Marc Keuschnigg, 'Konformität durch Herdenverhalten: Theorie und Empirie zur Entstehung von Bestsellern', *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 64 (2012), 1–36, looks at the effect of social herding on reading and book sales in Germany in 2001–2006. While hardly surprising, the results show the importance of bestseller lists and media attention.
- 58 Giles Clark and Angus Phillips, *Inside Book Publishing* (4th edn, London: Routledge, 2008), 181–3; Allan J. Kimmel and Philip J. Kitchen, 'WOM and social media. Presaging future directions for research and practice', *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 20/1–2 (2014), 5–20, argue that the power of word-of-mouth marketing is overrated, but is still very much in use in book promotion.
- 59 Elizabeth Long, *Book Clubs. Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- 60 Margaret Mackey, 'Finding the Next Book to Read in a Universe of Bestsellers, Blockbusters, and Spin-Offs', *Academic Quarter*, 7 (2013), 216–36.