

Edited by
Sarah Churchwell
and Thomas Ruys Smith

TARZAN OF THE APES

THE SHEIK

Godfather

The Da Vinci Code

Peyton Place

THE KITE RUNNER

MUST READ

REDISCOVERING AMERICAN BESTSELLERS

From *Charlotte Temple* to *The Da Vinci Code*

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Rediscovering
American
Bestsellers**

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1

Introduction

Sarah Churchwell and Thomas Ruys Smith

Must read

Over the last three or four decades, academic and critical interest in popular culture has exploded, but this explosion has produced (as explosions will) scattershot, unpredictable, and disconnected flare-ups of concentration and flashes of enthusiasm. In terms of American popular literature, a few clusters of intellectual inquiry can be identified: first, surveys of the history of the bestseller, which broadly chart the kinds of books that have interested the American public over the centuries, without necessarily engaging closely with the texts in question. There has also been a constellation of influential books focused more narrowly on the popular writing (usually novels) of a particular historical era, with less breadth of chronological coverage but more depth of textual analysis. More recent are what we might call theoretical inquiries into the production and meanings of popular writing (again usually reduced to fiction), and its relation to cultural value, especially in the contemporary

moment. There has also been an upsurge of interest in the category of “middlebrow fiction,” which may or may not be bestselling. And finally, there have been essay collections focusing on individual “blockbuster” bestsellers, reading milestone publications more or less in isolation from other blockbusters.

Within all of this activity, however, there has never been a comprehensive critical monograph that offers close readings of individual bestsellers in the United States across its four centuries of existence, and no comprehensive survey of bestselling texts has been published in more than half a century. This collection seeks partially to redress that omission, by considering—and reconsidering—a variety of influential and under-examined popular works in American cultural history within a comparative and developmental context. *Must Read: Rediscovering the American Bestseller* examines a range of American bestsellers across the centuries, reading these books as both individual texts and in relationship with one another.

This seems a vital moment for such a consideration of the evolution of popular taste(s). As Jim Collins has recently argued in *Bring on the Books for Everybody: How Literary Culture Became Popular Culture*, we are living in a moment marked by a particularly “robust popular literary culture,” driven by, among other forces, “the ubiquity and velocity of delivery systems in the form of superstores and online book sales” and “the increasing synergy among publishing, film, television and Internet industries.” The contemporary literary scene is, therefore, Collins concludes, “a complicated mix of technology and taste, of culture and commerce.”¹ And yet, as the essays in this collection amply demonstrate, such a formula might be applied to any period over the last 200 years. To understand what popular literature means, we still need to gain a more rounded understanding of what it has meant.

To begin, we need to ask what constitutes an “American bestseller” in the first place. We have chosen the term “bestseller” because it continues to be used by the publishing industry and the broad reading public, and is in fact more heuristically neutral than some of the more common scholarly rubrics, such as “popular” or “mass” “literature.” Each of these words could be said to beg the questions it is supposedly answering: which books count as “literature” and which don’t? What is the difference between the “popular” and the “mass”? All of these terms come accompanied

by decades of complex scholarly argument about popular culture in an industrial-capitalist age. They also carry with them entrenched cultural biases, as scholars such as Lawrence W. Levine have influentially argued:

We have found it difficult to study popular culture seriously, not primarily because of the restraints of our respective disciplines—which are indeed far more open to the uses of popular culture than we have allowed ourselves to believe—but because of the inhibitions inculcated in us by the society we inhabit. From an early age, we have been taught that whatever else this stuff is, it isn't art and it isn't serious and it doesn't lend itself to critical analysis.²

Levine's assertions are no less true today than they were nearly 20 years ago, and we take them to offer a useful description of the continued denigration not only of popular culture per se, but also still, within certain academic communities, of scholarly engagement with popular literature, a resistance deeply embedded in discourses of cultural value. For self-appointed guardians of "high culture," this resistance circles around the ominous charge of "dumbing down": the "easier" the text, the less academically respectable some scholars continue to deem it, as the modernist exaltation of the difficult proves a particularly tenacious and dogged academic value. Alternatively, those viewing themselves as hostile to "high culture" may still resist various forms of "low culture" as being politically suspect and artistically inauthentic, and contest the meanings of "mass culture" or "the popular." These ideological positions are as persistent as they are familiar, and they continue to shape and define a great deal of academic engagement with popular literature, as do other assumptions about literary value (including the perennial question, "But is it any good?").

Levine also points the way to a solution, however: borrowing from him we might suggest a distinction between works that are widely accessible and works that are widely accessed. By definition, such popular culture is mass culture, as it is mass-produced and mass-disseminated. But, as Levine points out, not all mass culture is popular, although it is the case in an industrial society that most popular culture (in the sense of being well-liked and widely

accessed, rather than in the sense of being grassroots folk culture) is also mass culture. Thus, the term “bestseller,” despite its many problems, removes us from this value-laden, inconsistent, arbitrary, and confusing terminology, with its vexations about whether the texts we are discussing “belong” to the masses, the people, the folk, the author, the academy, or hegemonic industrial-capitalism. The bestseller becomes a comparatively neutral (although still intransigently problematic) indicator of a text that is, historically speaking, *prima facie* “popular,” in every sense of the word, in an industrial age of mass production.

But this is not to ignore the semantic and definitional vagaries surrounding the term “bestseller.” Some of the impediments to establishing what does and does not constitute a bestseller are dealt with by Sarah Garland in our first chapter, “Missing Numbers: The Partial History of the Bestseller”; however, it should still be useful to offer some clarification here. In the main, this volume addresses texts whose sales to a high enough portion of the reading public place them self-evidently in the category of a bestseller, texts whose massive popularity made them contemporary cultural, and sometimes historical, phenomena. (The term “American” in truth proves no less problematic than “bestseller,” but it will be used more forgivingly. We use “American” conventionally to refer to the readers and authors of the United States; it remains for other volumes to consider the popular literature and markets of the Hispanophone Americas and Canada.)

The essays in this collection thus enter into an ongoing debate about the value of popular literature—or, at least, the types of popular literature that have often been met with scholarly suspicion, if not outright dismissal. As Pierre Bourdieu put it, “Intellectuals and artists always look suspiciously—though not without a certain fascination—at dazzlingly successful works and authors, sometimes to the extent of seeing worldly failure as a guarantee of salvation in the hereafter.”³ New Critical antagonism toward popular fiction still seems to hold sway, and its roots run deep, back to books like Q.D. Leavis’ still-influential 1932 analysis of bestsellers, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, which likened a taste for popular fiction to a “drug habit” that blocks “genuine feeling and responsible thinking by creating cheap mechanical responses and by throwing their weight on the side of social, national, and herd prejudices.”⁴

A postwar bestseller boom helped to question this kind of cultural snobbery toward the tastes of the “herd,” and precipitated the appearance of two groundbreaking studies of the American bestseller: Frank Luther Mott’s *Golden Multitudes* (1947) and James D. Hart’s *The Popular Book: A History of America’s Literary Taste* (1950). As Mott argued, explicitly attacking the assumptions made by critics like Leavis: “Only the cynic and the heedless can disregard popular literature. Here the sociologist finds material for his inquiries into the mores, the social historian sees the signposts of the development of a people, and students of government observe popular movements at work.”⁵ Sociologists and historians aside, the work of pioneering critics like Mott and Hart failed to inspire systematic critical attention to bestselling texts. After the first generation of significant critical trailblazing into noncanonical American literature by such important scholars as Jane Tompkins, Lawrence Levine, Cathy N. Davidson, and Michael Davitt Bell, the history of American popular fiction continued to be addressed in a largely ad hoc way in individual journal articles and book chapters or as individual case studies in the battleground of the long (and increasingly Pyrrhic) “culture wars.”

Indeed, what critical attention individual American bestsellers have received over the last few decades has almost exclusively focused on a handful of the greatest blockbusters, books whose historical impact was sufficient to overcome qualms about their literary significance or aesthetic quality: *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and *Gone with the Wind*, have all accrued significant scholarship, including monographs and edited collections devoted to understanding their place in American literary history. This volume seeks, by contrast, to return more critically neglected but historically popular texts to the frame. Such decisions are necessarily relative: *Charlotte Temple* and *Peyton Place*, for example, have by no means been critically ignored, but neither do they have volumes of scholarship devoted to them in the manner of *The Last of the Mohicans* or *Gone with the Wind*, nor is their significance uncontested. By the same token, we have also excluded from consideration those “classic” books whose perennial global popularity demonstrably correlates with their elevated position in the orthodox literary canon, such as *Huckleberry Finn* or *The Great Gatsby*.

Our effort, therefore, has been to maintain historical coverage of representative texts, but not to fall back on simply focusing

yet again on the same three or four texts that so often seem to stand in synecdochally for a more or less monolithic view of “the American bestseller” or “popular fiction” as a fixed and legible category. In short, our purpose is to consider only those texts that have attracted millions of readers—and yet have still, in the main, eluded significant academic attention, the critically “neglected” bestseller. It remains important to note that all of this is certainly not to diminish the important critical precedents for the type of engagements on display in these essays. Indeed, an *ars poetica* for this volume might be found in Jane Tompkins’ 1986 assertion that “it is morally and politically objectionable, and intellectually obtuse, to have contempt for literary works that appeal to millions of people simply *because* they are popular.”⁶ That popularity is our starting point.

A brief history of reading bestsellers in America

A survey of America’s reading habits over the last 400 years reveals, against a backdrop of flux and churn in the production and consumption of books, a remarkable sense of continuity in the ways in which bestselling texts have functioned in American life. At almost all points, bestsellers have served as a perennial battleground in the theater of war that is popular culture, driving discussions about literary value and the landscape of the literary marketplace, and animating moral panics throughout the ages. Moreover, they have served as a site of profound tension, both between authors whose works sell and those who do not, and between consumers and arbiters of taste—what historian Jill Lepore has described as the “democracy of readers . . . against an aristocracy of critics.”⁷ Exactly what the term “bestseller” signifies might have changed—the term wasn’t even coined until 1889, by the *Kansas Times & Star*, while reliable accounts of sales remain fugitive well into the twentieth century—but the values attached to and imposed on the idea of popular reading habits have remained strikingly similar.⁸

From the start, Americans have been, relatively speaking, a nation of readers. E. Jennifer Monaghan’s recent summary of the body of research into literacy rates in the colonies reveals that “for the

literacy of white men, the colonial period is a dazzling success story. Despite a slump after the founding generation, by the time of the American Revolution, the literacy of white men in New England had reached nearly universal levels, with that of the other colonies close behind. The signature literacy of white women, in contrast, lagged behind that of men throughout the entire colonial period even while it, too, gradually improved.⁹ Of course, the driving force behind such literacy rates was the centrality of the Bible—that definitive bestseller—in colonial life. They were a product, in Harvey Graff’s words, of “the Puritan stress on the importance of individual access to the Book and the Word . . . Literacy was a universal prerequisite to spiritual preparation.”¹⁰

Yet, even in the colonies, a rich body of popular literature—much of it secular—circulated widely alongside more spiritually edifying fare. What were all of those early American readers reading? Victor Neuberg has traced the contours of what constituted popular reading in colonial America: “almanacs, broadsides, newspapers, medical handbooks, letter writers, and practical manuals of all kinds . . . schoolbooks, devotional works, and chapbooks.”¹¹ Though such ephemeral texts have largely disappeared, both physically and from discussions of American popular literature, the volume of trade associated with them could be quite remarkable. In the 1660s, for example, “as many as four hundred thousand almanacs were sold in a year”—to a national population of approximately 100,000, in an era before universal literacy.¹² And in point of fact, such texts might truly be considered the first home-grown American bestsellers throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As Leon Jackson has highlighted, for example, Noah Webster’s *American Spelling Book*, “the best-selling textbook of early national and antebellum America,” sold “in excess of ten million copies” between 1783 and 1829, providing Webster with a steady income while he worked on his dictionary.¹³ Such nonfiction bestsellers have retained a significant prominence in the American literary marketplace.

Chapbooks, arguably the most literary texts circulating in colonial America, and the most obvious precursor of the majority of the bestsellers that are featured in this volume, were a different story. The fact that chapbooks were “a major element of popular literature” in colonial America, as they were in Britain, might alter our sense of the young New World as a place entirely

dominated by Puritan antiliterary prejudice, and destitute of literary amusement.¹⁴ As Neuberg describes, chapbooks, cheaply produced and distributed, offered readers a vibrant cornucopia of delights: “songs, riddles, jokes, anecdotes of pirates and highwaymen . . . tales of giants, monsters, and fairies, many of them residue of an oral peasant culture rooted in a long-distant past . . . abridged versions of the romances of knights and maidens . . . versions of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders*.”¹⁵ Though the fugitive nature of these texts makes it difficult to reconstruct the impact of individual titles in the literary marketplace, Neuberg highlights the fact that, at his death in 1664, publisher Charles Tias “left ninety thousand chapbooks in stock,” and notes that a chapbook like *The Famous History of Whittington and His Cat* went through “no fewer than nineteen editions . . . published in America between 1770 and 1818.”¹⁶

However, as the titles and subject matter of these chapbooks suggest, by far the majority of them were imported to the colonies from England, at least until the Revolution. Here, we can see the first glimpses of what Cathy N. Davidson has summarized as “the omnipresence of European fiction” in the American literary marketplace, and its apparently negative implications for the development of a national literature—and, indeed, native bestsellers.¹⁷ But—as it is throughout American cultural history—that transatlantic relationship was an ambiguous one. On the one hand, it was certainly true, as Neuberg writes, that the “fairly restricted market in the colonies for literary products” meant that the “considerable risk” of publishing made it “much easier, and more profitable to the trade in both countries, to import books from England.”¹⁸ As such, this was a story that became increasingly important for British booksellers. According to James Raven’s calculations, by 1770, “more books were exported annually from England to the American colonies than to Europe and the rest of the world combined.”¹⁹ The “Americanness” of American bestsellers is by no means fixed or transparent.

Nevertheless, some noteworthy American texts did achieve national and international prominence in the Colonial Era. The significance of a text like Mary Rowlandson’s *Captivity & Restoration* (1682) lies not just in its status as a bestseller among American readers, but in its popular success back in the Old World. As Richard Slotkin has described, Rowlandson’s text “found

immediate favour in both America and Europe” and “went through numerous American and English editions during the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.”²⁰ Indeed, so influential and far-reaching was the popularity of this American bestseller that Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse are willing to contend “that Rowlandson’s style of narration . . . provided the basis for the English novel” when it began to take shape early in the eighteenth century.²¹

Of course, it was precisely this literary development that would bring about profound changes in the reading habits of Americans—and, indeed, the conception of the bestseller more widely. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the majority of “best sellers” across America’s history has been novels; it is clear that there is an intimate relationship between the literary dominance of the novel and the very concept of the bestseller. Both were the products of cultural, social, and industrial changes that transformed the West over the course of the last three centuries, including rising literacy rates, drives toward universal education, processes of industrial mass production and dissemination, the rise of the middle class, and the gradual inclusion of previously subaltern citizens, including women and African Americans, into the ranks of readers and authors.

In his dissection of the rise of the novel in Britain, William Warner notes that “by the 1720s, novels comprised one of the most high-profile, fashionable, and dynamic segments of the market.”²² By the middle of the eighteenth century, the British conversation about novels had largely shifted from an assessment of the medium shaped by “the old Puritan condemnation of stories of lies” to a debate about “what kind of novel should be read, and what kind should be written.”²³ And in 1785, Clara Reeve could look back to 1750 and marvel at the way that novels “did but now begin to increase upon us . . . ten years more multiplied them tenfold.” Though finding many novels worthy of praise, Reeve also had reasons to lament that proliferation of popular literature, voicing a suspicion of such texts that would persist (and, indeed, still persists): “Every work of merit produced a swarm of imitators, till they became a public evil, and the institution of the Circulating libraries, conveyed them in the cheapest manner to every bodies hand . . . young people are allowed to subscribe to them, and to read indiscriminately all they contain; and thus both food and poison are conveyed to the young mind together.”²⁴

While the transformation of reading habits took slightly longer to foment in America, when they did, driven by similar social forces like the circulating library, the effects were equally profound. The extraordinary literary revolution that took place in America alongside the other revolutions of the late eighteenth century was vividly highlighted by Royall Tyler in the Preface to *The Algerine Captive*, published in 1797 (and itself, if not quite a bestseller, then at least popular enough to be serialized and reprinted in Britain):

One of the first observations the author of the following sheets made upon his return to his native country, after an absence of seven years, was the extreme avidity with which books of mere amusement were purchased and perused by all ranks of his countrymen . . . In our inland towns of consequence, social libraries had been instituted, composed of books designed to amuse rather than to instruct; and country booksellers, fostering the new-born taste of the people, had filled the whole land with modern travels, and novels almost as incredible.²⁵

Support for Tyler's observations can be found in James Raven's conclusion that the 1790s were marked by a "great increase in American editions of British novels" and a significant reduction in the lag between British and American editions.²⁶ This was, in part, a result of the post-Revolution refashioning of copyright law that did away with international restrictions on intellectual property and opened the field for American publishers to reprint British texts at will. Though this state of affairs is often seen as one of the key impediments to the growth of American literature, it also ensured the proliferation of American readers. As William St Clair has concluded, "In America, all recent British writing came quickly and it came cheap . . . Americans of the romantic period had easier access to the literature being written in Great Britain than most of their contemporaries across the ocean."²⁷ Alongside such developments in copyright and the profession of authorship, the significance of a single bestseller should not be underestimated. Susanna Rowson's profoundly transatlantic *Charlotte Temple*—published in Britain in 1791, reprinted in Philadelphia by Mathew Carey in 1794, written by a woman born in England who moved to America at 15—was such a signal success in the literary marketplace that, as Davidson

describes, it was quite simply “a novel that, more than any other, signalled a new era in the history of the book in America.”²⁸

While Royall Tyler, undoubtedly speaking for many, broadly welcomed these changes in American literary culture—what he saw as an exchange of “sober stories and practical pieties” for “the haunted houses and hobgoblins of Mrs. Ratcliffe”—his optimism did not come without certain telling, and common, caveats. He lamented the fact that “while so many books are vended, they are not of our own manufacture.” Second, echoing Reeve while adding a nationalist twist to her concerns, he worried that the American reader is “insensibly taught to admire the levity, and often the vices, of the parent country. While the fancy is enchanted, the heart is corrupted.”²⁹ By no coincidence, such misgivings about the novel were particularly directed at women, and especially at young women. Over the course of the next century, an entire critical literature of sermons, conduct books, and jeremiads appeared on both sides of the Atlantic, warning against the “seductive” dangers of the novel for susceptible “young ladies,” including the novel’s promotion of “morbid appetites,” “sickly sensibility,” “erroneous views of life,” “evil passions,” time-wasting, and the loss of piety and self-control. By 1841, American Harvey Newcomb was instructing young women in his guides to “good Christian character”: “If you wish to become weak-headed, nervous, and good for nothing, read novels.”³⁰ As America entered a new era of bestsellers, these fears and misgivings would linger.

A useful guide to what constituted an American bestseller in the Early Republic—that crucible period for the development and popularization of American literature—can be gleaned from Earl Bradsher’s 1912 biography of publisher Mathew Carey. As Tyler’s 1797 survey of the literary scene suggested, Bradsher confirms “that Mrs. Radcliffe and her school were very popular in America”—especially *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). But according to Bradsher, it was certain bestsellers, now forgotten, that were of particular note: Jane Porter’s *The Scottish Chiefs* (1810), for example, was subject to an “immense and enduring vogue.” As for what Bradsher “should be inclined to regard as the most popular British novel in America before Scott,” that accolade he awarded to Regina Maria Roche’s *The Children of the Abbey* (1796).³¹

Then, there was Walter Scott himself. Looking back on the genesis of Scott’s extraordinary popularity in 1833, a year after his

death, the *North American Review* reminisced about the epochal significance of the publication of his first novel in 1814: “When *Waverley* appeared, men beheld it with as much perplexity, as the out-break of a revolution; the more prudent held their peace, and waited to see what might come of it; the critics were in sad straits, having nothing wherewithal to measure it . . . but the public, without asking their opinion, gave decisive judgment in its favor”—until “the tide of favor” had “swelled . . . to a torrent.”³² The desire for Scott’s books among American readers—like their counterparts in the Old World—was undeniably profound. In St Clair’s judgment, “In histories of American reading, or in any attempt to assess how far cultural formation and mentalities were influenced by reading, he must be regarded as one of the most influential authors.”³³ In 1818, an American correspondent confirmed to Maria Edgeworth, herself a sometime bestseller in the United States, that Scott’s novels “have excited as much enthusiasm in America as in Europe,” noting particularly, “Boats are now actually on the lookout for ‘Rob Roy,’ all here are so impatient to get the first sight of it.”³⁴ Moreover, the fierce rivalry that developed between publishers to bring the first pirated edition of the new Scott to the American market had a clear effect on the nation’s book buyers. As Frank Luther Mott concluded, “competition had an exciting effect on the public, and it made immediate best sellers possible.” It was a business model that would last “until well past the midcentury mark,” and the same kind of popular excitement would soon surround the arrival of new works by authors like Dickens and Bulwer.³⁵ As Bradsher put it, “From *Waverley* in 1814, to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, 1870, the year that did not produce at least one highly popular British novel was a barren period.”³⁶

It is an established irony that as much as Scott’s popularity helped to foster a new climate for bestsellers in America, the cheap, pirated editions of his work made it more difficult for American authors to establish their own foothold in the literary marketplace. But here, too, there are transatlantic nuances to consider. Scott had a profound effect on the generation of bestselling American novelists who emerged in his wake, and not just as influence and example, but in concrete terms. Even a brief perusal of Scott’s novels demonstrates his abiding fascination with the United States and his openness to American writers. Particularly telling is his engagement with the works of Washington Irving. Scott developed a

fondness for Irving's writing after reading his *History of New York* (1809)—what Mott describes as “a great success,” though “not perhaps an immediate best seller.”³⁷ Accordingly, in 1820, when the British publication of Irving's *Sketch Book* was threatened by the bankruptcy of Irving's publisher, he turned to Scott for help. Scott's “favourable representation” persuaded John Murray to publish the *Sketch Book*, and the fate of a bona fide, seminal American bestseller, on both sides of the Atlantic, was secured.³⁸

Scott had an equally influential, if less amiable, relationship with James Fenimore Cooper, who modeled himself on Scott when publishing *Precaution*, his first novel (a comedy of manners written in frank imitation of Jane Austen) in 1820. Cooper wrote to his publisher Andrew Goodrich that he wanted his novel to emulate “the style of the Philadelphia edition of *Ivanhoe*”—Scott's latest, just published.³⁹ As Wayne Franklin describes, Cooper also advised Goodrich that he “should avoid any suggestion that *Precaution* was an ‘original’ American work,” and tacitly foster the sense that he was “republishing a British work” in order to appeal “to the Anglophile tendencies of the native marketplace.”⁴⁰ While such promotional tactics failed to establish *Precaution* itself as a bestseller, it did establish Cooper's canny presence in the literary marketplace and pave the way for the bestselling texts that he would soon produce, including *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826).

Many British writers were no less interested in American readers than they were in American writers. Lord Byron wrote excitedly in 1813 at the prospect of being “redde on the banks of the Ohio!,” “To be popular in a rising and far country has a kind of *posthumous feel*.”⁴¹ And the vogue for American texts was hardly restricted to the literary elite. By 1825, Mary Tyler, Royall Tyler's wife, could marvel at the “rage . . . for American literature,” on both sides of the Atlantic.⁴² Clarence Gohdes has concluded that authors like Irving and Cooper “were as well known during the eighteen twenties and thirties as most of their British contemporaries,” and that, in turn, their popularity “was a mere trickle to that which was to come.”⁴³ With no little irony, it was once again the vicissitudes of international copyright law that helped to ensure American authors' bestseller status in the Old World. As St Clair highlights, after the Copyright Act of 1842, “American books and magazine were among the few sources of texts which could be printed to be sold cheaply in Britain . . . shops which sprang up near the new

railway stations, it was noticed, were filled with offshore piracies of American books”—to the point that some commentators “feared that their own national identity was being undermined.”⁴⁴ Copyright would continue to be associated with a proprietary sense of national identity for another century and more.

The extraordinary growth in the nineteenth century domestic consumption of American novels can be traced through some telling statistics. As Richard Teichgraeber outlines, “During the 1820s 128 American novels were published, almost forty more than had been published in the previous 50 years, and five times the number published during the previous decade—and yet more than double that number appeared in the 1830s; and the total more than doubles again in the 1840s, to nearly eight hundred.”⁴⁵ The book boom of the 1850s marked a new era in the history of the American bestseller—a phenomenon clearly visible to contemporary commentators. Addressing the Association of New York Publishers in 1855, George Putnam declaimed to his colleagues, “20 years ago who *imagined* editions of 100,000 or 75,000, or 30,000, or even the now common number of 10,000?”⁴⁶ In December 1857, when a financial panic appeared poised to put an end to the publishing boom, George William Curtis could look back wistfully at the moment when “every book of every publisher was in the twenty-sixth thousand, and the unparalleled demand was increasing at an unprecedented rate; when presses were working night and day; when, owing to the extraordinary demand, the issue of the first edition must be postponed from Saturday to Thursday; when not more than fifty thousand copies could be furnished in three days; when the public must have patience, and would finally be supplied.”⁴⁷

On its own, the cultural phenomenon of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852)—“for an immense number of people,” Henry James recollected, “much less a book than a state of vision, of feeling and of consciousness”—would guarantee the era a unique place in the genealogy of bestselling American texts.⁴⁸ But for all that, there are still uncertainties about the exact topography of the bestselling landscape at this crucible moment. As Ronald Zboray has noted, the “easy equation of technological innovation in printing”—steam-driven presses, stereotyping and electrotyping, the changes in distribution brought on by the transport revolution—“and the dramatic growth of the antebellum reading public” is too pat.⁴⁹

After all, throughout the antebellum years, most books, “even most paperbacks,” and certainly most American books, “remained too expensive for working-class people.”⁵⁰ The antebellum bestseller explosion was driven by urban, middle-class readers; the era of mass market book consumption had not yet arrived in full force.

Similarly in need of a corrective is the abiding sense of binary divisions in the antebellum literary marketplace—between, particularly, men and women, and high culture and low culture. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s now proverbial dismissal of the “d—d mob of scribbling women” that he perceived to have taken over “the public taste” erected an apparent division between the “trash” produced by popular female writers and the literature of neglected male writers.⁵¹ But as Lucy Freibert and Barbara White have highlighted, while female authors might have written extraordinarily popular bestsellers, in overall terms, “men outnumbered women on the best-seller list three to one.”⁵² And, as writers like Lawrence Levine and David Reynolds have argued, the idea of a distinct split between American Renaissance figures like Nathaniel Hawthorne and popular literary culture is a fallacious one. In the words of Levine, “in the nineteenth century, especially in the first half, Americans . . . shared a public culture less hierarchically organised, less fragmented into relatively rigid adjectival boxes than their descendants were to experience a century later.”⁵³ Indeed, Hawthorne’s correspondence suggests a familiarity with the work of plenty of “scribbling women”—writers like Grace Greenwood and Julia Ward Howe, not to mention a pointed admiration for a real bestseller like Fanny Fern.⁵⁴ Conversely, Michael Davitt Bell also highlights the fact that “Hawthorne . . . published much of his early work in giftbooks and ladies’ magazines.” Indeed throughout his career, Hawthorne’s readers would have been “the same people (or a subset of the same people)” who read bestselling authors like Susan Warner or Maria Cummins.⁵⁵

At least one truism about popular writing in the 1850s remains eminently clear: in that decade, the American bestseller carved out an unassailable place for itself in the literary marketplace. In 1896, the *London Illustrated News* would declare:

Perhaps the most entirely popular books in prose and poetry which have been read by the masses of the English people during the last fifty years have come to us from America – the poems

of Longfellow and “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” . . . Certain it is that Longfellow’s sales in this country have far exceeded those of any of our own poets.⁵⁶

By the end of the nineteenth century, though, the shifting literary landscape meant that the tensions revealed in Hawthorne’s outburst against popular women writers became sharpened. In the antebellum years, as Nina Baym outlines, “Reviewers of the time assumed that without the seal of popular approval a novel could not be put forward as a great work of art . . . though popularity was by no means in itself the test of artistic merit, one could never assume the opposite: that popularity implied poor art.”⁵⁷ In the late nineteenth century, the rise of realism and the simultaneous arrival of what James described in 1898 as “literature for the billion” meant that such assumptions would be increasingly overturned.⁵⁸ As the *Hour* put it in 1883, “The increase in the number of books published in the United States . . . is the most significant fact in the history of printed literature.”⁵⁹ The era was marked by what Nancy Bentley has described as a new “explosion in print and in book buying.”⁶⁰ Supported again by technological change—linotype, cheap paper—print culture finally became “not only voluminous but remarkably cheap,” and debate once again raged over its significance.⁶¹ Unlike the expansion of books and readers in the antebellum era, the fin de siècle seems to have been marked out by a fracturing of reading communities. As Bentley notes, the burgeoning audiences for popular writing constituted, on some levels, a “readership for whom elite authors were largely outsiders.”⁶²

An examination of what constituted popular reading at the end of the nineteenth century both supports and troubles the sense that this was a moment when distinctions between high and low literary culture became more meaningful. While Mark Twain and Stephen Crane produced books that sold well, the definitive popular bestseller of the era was Lew Wallace’s religious epic *Ben-Hur* (1880), which, at the time of Mott’s calculations, ranked “among the top half-dozen best sellers by American authors.”⁶³ But even that picture of popular reading can be further destabilized by emerging archives and newly available data. “What Middletown Read” is an online database built from the lending records of the Muncie, Indiana Public Library from 1891 to 1902.⁶⁴ This archive of every book borrowed by every lender in a representative Midwestern

town reveals a surprisingly unfamiliar literary landscape. Horatio Alger's books—the most popular author among the Muncie library patrons—were borrowed 9320 times across the decade. The works of other forgotten series authors like Charles Fosdick, Martha Finley, and William T. Adams dominate the list of most borrowed authors, and each run into the thousands. As for the most borrowed book, that accolade went to Louisa May Alcott's *Under the Lilacs*, first published in 1878. However, the records of individual patrons also demonstrate the ways in which such bald statistics always blur the distinct stories of individual readers. We can see, for example, that the Arthur Case who borrowed *Under the Lilacs* on May 23rd 1901 also borrowed George Eliot's *Adam Bede* and William Cullen Bryant's translation of the *Iliad*—not to mention Howell's *The Minister's Charge*. To misquote Raymond Williams, there are in fact no mass readers; there are only ways of seeing people as mass readers.

Nonetheless, now-familiar literary hierarchies became only more culturally fixed in the early years of the twentieth century. As Lisa Botshon and Meredith Goldsmith have illuminated, that story was complicated in the 1920s by the rise of a further stratification driven by the popular “middlebrow fiction that was, in fact, consumed by a majority of readers”—a field dominated by critically neglected “women writers of diverse class, ethnic and racial backgrounds” like Edna Ferber, Anita Loos, and Edith Hull.⁶⁵ To that category, one might also add a self-help book like Emily Post's *Etiquette* (1922) which has remained a persistent bestseller ever since and also helped to define the era for millions of readers. F. Scott Fitzgerald's rationale for the relative commercial failure of *The Great Gatsby* in 1925—“the book contains no important woman character and women controll [*sic*] the fiction market at present”—has become almost as emblematic of modernism's ambivalent relationship to the feminized popular as Hawthorne's antebellum complaints.⁶⁶ But perhaps less familiar is the knowledge that canonical literary figures like Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck, and indeed Fitzgerald himself, “reached huge audiences”—or tried to reach them—through mass market book-selling innovations like the Book-of-the-Month Club. As James West reveals, even Eugene O' Neill “sold some 97,315 copies” of his collection *Nine Plays* through such channels.⁶⁷

As the twentieth century progressed, popular literature found itself challenged—and also sustained—by new forms of mass

culture, especially cinema and television. Evan Brier notes that at mid-century, “mass culture exerted itself powerfully on American novels, shifting the cultural and economic space they occupied as surely as television did to movies, magazines and newspapers.”⁶⁸ At the same moment, elite attacks on mass culture, popular literature included, became more barbed. Dwight Macdonald’s *Against the American Grain: Essays on the Effects of Mass Culture* (1962), for example, could note of the “reading matter” of the Book-of-the-Month Club, for example, “the best that can be said is that it could be worse.”⁶⁹ But there is some irony, as Brier highlights, to the fact that, while cultural commentators expressed “alarm over the fate of both reading in general and high literature in particular . . . , more books than ever before were produced and sold to a growing population of educated consumers.”⁷⁰ Or as Peter Swirski has highlighted, “More than half of all the books ever published came out after the first hydrogen bomb; more than half of all wordsmiths who ever put pen to paper did so after the birth of TV . . . The number of new titles released each year in the United States more than quadrupled between 1950 and 1991.”⁷¹ Bestselling books negotiated their way through this marketplace as they had done at least since the early nineteenth century, working in new productive synergy with the other cultural forms that also threatened their extinction.

The novel that most bears out this observation remains the most famous blockbuster of the twentieth century. Before the early twenty-first century was marked by such epoch-defining books as J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter books and Dan Brown’s global bestseller *The Da Vinci Code*, it was Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*—and the symbiotic relationship between the 1936 book and the 1939 film—that set records which still stand today. The number one bestseller of 1936 and 1937, selling a million copies in the first six months of publication alone, *Gone with the Wind* would go on to sell more copies than any other novel in the history of the United States to date. Within a year it had sold almost 2 million copies and won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction; but as Ellen Firsching Brown and John Wiley Jr. have shown, it was also “developed, marketed and groomed for success.” And once again, transformations in copyright law were inextricable from the story of the book’s popularity: “Mitchell changed the course of international copyright law through her struggle to

maintain control over the *GWTW* literary rights, . . . fend[ing] off unauthorized editions of her book around the globe, [and] calling attention to the inadequacy of copyright protection for American writers.”⁷² The novel’s popularity was reinforced by the commercial and critical triumph that was David O. Selznick’s 1939 Hollywood adaptation. The film version catapulted *Gone with the Wind* back to the top of the bestseller list, where it vied at the end of the decade for preeminence against the other great parable of Depression-era America, *The Grapes of Wrath*—another book whose place at the top of the US bestseller list in 1939–40 owed much to its Hollywood adaptation that same year. *Gone with the Wind* was just as successful internationally as it was domestically; by December 1936, it had reached the top of the British bestseller list, and eventually Mitchell would declare that “everybody except the Chinese and the Albanians” were trying to purchase rights to publish the novel.⁷³ In its first 50 years, *Gone with the Wind* would go on to sell 25 million copies in 27 languages, and returned to the bestseller lists in 1986 (thanks to a special anniversary edition), and again in 1991, when its authorized sequel, *Scarlett*, finally appeared—and itself shot to the top of the bestseller list. Film and TV adaptations, VHS and then DVD collectors’ editions, marketing and publicity campaigns, the machinery of media and reception, reprints, reissues, sequels both “authorized” and “unauthorized,” copyright, translation, and international rights: all of these processes and machineries are cranking behind the scenes to elevate “blockbusters” like *Gone with the Wind* (or, indeed, the Harry Potter books) above the status of mere “bestseller” and into the ranks of cultural phenomena.

As James West explained back in 1988, even before the revolutions of e-publishing were on the horizon, throughout the history of book-making and book-selling “the pressure of technology, exerted through new and better mass-production methods, has periodically forced manufacturers to address larger markets . . . and each time an old guard has mounted a vigorous campaign to defeat, or at least weaken, the pressure of the mass market.”⁷⁴ Over the last century and a half, those books that have become bestsellers have been propelled there by a publishing industry whose practices have, in many ways, altered little since the nineteenth century. In the last decades of the twentieth century, the book superstore, an institution represented most iconically by the now bankrupt Borders chain, rose to prominence against a chorus of complaints,

not least from independent booksellers. In Laura Miller's words, in terms of dismissal not dissimilar to those leveled at the bestsellers on their shelves, "detractors . . . scoffed that the superstores were better at promoting coffee drinking than an interest in ideas and the intellect."⁷⁵

As the experience of Borders attests, those institutions are themselves in the process of falling beneath the market pressures brought on by the unstoppable rise of internet booksellers (Amazon.com most notably), the dominance of the Kindle and its cognate devices, and the extraordinary availability of out-of-copyright works through distributors like, but not limited to, Google Books. But even in this apparently democratized age of accessibility where, in Jim Collins' terms, book reading has (again?) become "an exuberantly social activity, whether it be in the form of actual books clubs, television book clubs, Internet chat rooms," and the divisions between hierarchies of culture have apparently been deconstructed beyond repair, some of the old anxieties about the meaning of bestselling texts stubbornly abide.⁷⁶ Jonathan Franzen's famous discomfort with being included in Oprah Winfrey's book club, or Pulitzer Prize winner Jennifer Egan's dismissal of contemporary bestsellers like Sophie Kinsella's *The Princess Diaries* (2000) as "derivative, banal stuff," suggest that old debates about the degradation of literary popularity are very much alive and kicking, even as their controversy highlights shifting cultural norms.⁷⁷ Whatever form the bestseller takes in the future, however it is produced, marketed, distributed, and consumed, and whatever anxieties continue to coalesce around it and its readers, there seems little doubt that there will always be some books that we all simply must read.

Rediscovering the bestseller

From this long history of popular reading, then, we have sought to identify a range of texts that might have a claim to warrant continued, or renewed, critical attention. Some of our chapters feature definitive bestselling texts; others seek to trouble our understanding of what a bestseller looks like; but, ranging over times and contexts, all are joined in the attempt to turn again to some of the books that have been the most read, but not the most studied.

As the above suggests, it would clearly be quixotic, not to mention futile, to attempt to be exhaustive in this volume's coverage. A truly comprehensive account of American bestsellers through the ages, as we have tried to show, would need to take into account an extraordinary array of texts, starting with the Bible and working through broadsides, chapbooks, sermons, religious and political treatises, philosophy, Shakespeare, British novelists including Richardson, Defoe, Scott, and Dickens, yellow-backs, dime novels, pulp fiction, genre fiction, cookbooks, advice manuals, children's books, and the so-called mass market paperbacks whose sales are anecdotally colossal in aggregate but statistically elusive (for reasons addressed by Sarah Garland in our first essay; an example might be L. Ron Hubbard's *Dianetics*). The texts under consideration in this volume, therefore, have all been selected as representative books that suggest larger stories about the complex and contested meanings of the bestseller. Taken as a whole, they present a different picture of the development of American literature from that found in the orthodox canon.

Though Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1794) begins the collection, it is dominated by bestsellers that were written, published, distributed, and read in an industrial age, from an antebellum sensation like Timothy Shay Arthur's *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* (1854), through an early twentieth-century smash like E. M. Hull's *The Sheik* (1919), up to popular twenty-first-century blockbusters like Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003), and the romances of Nicholas Sparks. That said, to limit the scope of this volume entirely to novels would be reductive and misrepresentative. As such, in a few significant and emblematic instances, chapters are dedicated to texts that challenge definitions of what constitutes a bestseller. These texts also aid in demarcating some of the boundaries of the task at hand—influential instruction manuals like Emily Post's *Etiquette* (1922), for example, or Edward Everett Hale's perennially popular short story, "The Man Without A Country," (1863) test prevailing assumptions about the market dominance of long narrative fiction in Anglo-American culture.

The approaches taken by the contributors to this volume vary considerably, though most are based around historicized readings of these neglected texts within their cultural contexts, and in relation to the wider critical issues surrounding bestsellers. Framed against the background of the marketplace, authors and readers engage in

the complex conversations surrounding bestselling books. These conversations return persistently to questions of the mechanisms of authorship (celebrity, branding, publicity, reputation); of publishing (editing, marketing, advertising, distributing); of reading (habits of reading, dissemination, adaptation, longevity); and of cultural value (the politics of high and low, canonicity, pleasure, escapism).

Each chapter explores a different aspect of the bestseller puzzle, but mosaic patterns also emerge from these small building blocks of national identity and an emergent American modernity. Consistent themes appear, including the evolution of normative identities; religion; sentimentality; violence; erotics; nation-building; cosmopolitanism; consumer capitalism; landscapes; dreams and fantasies; and nightmares and prohibitions, to name just some of the shared preoccupations of these immensely popular books. In short, these texts and their audiences contain multitudes.

The history of American bestsellers cannot properly begin without a careful consideration, however definitionally incomplete, of the problematics of “bestseller” as a heuristic term. Sarah Garland’s “Missing Numbers: The Partial History of the Bestseller” traces some of the problems in attempting to use the term “bestseller” as an objective, quantifiable way of calibrating the popularity or commercial success of individual books. Garland begins with the relativity, partiality, and contingency of the term “bestseller” itself, before considering some of the difficulties in measuring, evaluating, and identifying bestsellers (and all this before one even begins the task of interrogating or establishing the “literary” or aesthetic value of a text). Reminding us that “it’s not just fiction which takes on the task of telling us how to live,” Garland argues that “the history of American ‘bestsellers’ as told by the bestsellers lists is not so much a history of stock-taking and accounting as a history of discourse—of comment, interpretation and opinion . . . the lists themselves represent multiple tastes, multiple purchases, overlapping and diverging American patterns of consumption.” Bestseller lists always come to us “already read,” as Garland points out: “they represent books that have been consumed and statistics that come to us interpreted.”

If the meaning of American bestsellers is contested, so is the proper starting point of any historical enquiry or genealogy. In order to ascertain when America begins reading bestsellers, we need to ascertain when America begins. Because of the elasticity

of the meanings of “America” across its history—pre-Colombian settlements and populations; the European colonies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; the original thirteen colonies of the revolutionary United States; the ever-expanding boundaries of the United States through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century; late twentieth and early twenty-first century broadening of the concept of Americas beyond the territory, history, or peoples of the United States, to a more inclusively conceived Atlantic culture—what makes the first American bestseller American is as difficult to establish as what makes it a bestseller.

If the story of American bestsellers might be said, in one sense, properly to begin with the story of America, then *Charlotte Temple* becomes a persuasive place to open that story. Susanna Rowson’s 1794 *Charlotte: A Tale of Truth* was not just a bestselling book about America that thrilled audiences on both sides of the Atlantic in the early years of the American republic; it was also a story that recognizably dramatized the family romance of the American Revolution itself, as Cathy N. Davidson has influentially argued.⁷⁸ A novel defined by rebellion and loyalism, and by anxieties about origins, begins our genealogy: *Charlotte Temple* is one of the first bestsellers to contest and establish the meanings of America itself in relation to the Mother Country it has just abandoned. Gideon Mailer’s “The History of *Charlotte Temple* as an American Bestseller” returns “Rowson’s debt to evangelical revivalism” to our understanding of *Charlotte Temple*, arguing that “its ultimately forgiving message” helped ensure its popularity: “its appeal to private and familial social codes assumed a universal aesthetic sensibility, whose moral aspect could also transcend social divisions.”

Sixty years later, one of the most popular writers in America was another woman who wrote tales of sensation and sensibility, a woman whose career spanned four decades across the middle of the nineteenth century, including the famous “book boom” of the antebellum years. Rachel Ihara points out that what scholarly attention Mrs E. D. E. N. Southworth has received has focused almost exclusively on one novel, *The Hidden Hand*, and suggests instead that Southworth was “defined less by her ability to produce a major best-selling novel than by her capacity to maintain a large and loyal audience” across nearly half a century, by means of a strategic deployment of the mechanisms of periodical publication. Ihara argues that Mrs Southworth’s success was partly dependent

upon an emergent authorial identity that we would now call a “brand.” Although Southworth has been dismissed as a careless or lazy writer, Ihara suggests that the demands of serial fiction took precedence over concerns for unity of characterization or originality of plot: “tolerance for fragmentation, multiplicity, and contradiction . . . were at the heart of Southworth’s aesthetic.” Hsuan L. Hsu similarly suggests that form is central to understanding Edward Everett Hale’s 1863 “The Man Without A Country,” as that form adapted and evolved over Hale’s career. Resisting the easy and common temptation of reading Hale’s cautionary tale as “a transparent patriotic parable,” Hsu argues instead that the evolving story “reframed its nationalist object lesson to suit the increasingly expansionist outlook of American readers,” a frame that properly must take in emergent nationalist sentiment during the antebellum years, as well as postbellum “U.S. nation building, imperialism, and the denationalization of racialized subjects throughout the nineteenth century.”

Timothy Shay Arthur’s *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* was another profoundly popular cautionary tale; it was also one of the most familiar texts of nineteenth-century American popular culture. William Gleason reconsiders *Ten Nights* within the context of its original illustrations and their references to the iconography and visual economy of the temperance movement. The recognition that the representational strategies of *Ten Nights* make it “as significant a visual artefact as it is a literary one” also enables a reevaluation of the novel’s narrator and his “photographic” ways of seeing. Arguably a text situated on the cusp between the conduct and guidance manuals of the long nineteenth century and the “self-help” and “advice” books of the long twentieth century, *Ten Nights* draws on the shifting tactics of a temperance movement as it transitions from “sensational approaches” to “legalistic” ones, and may have helped open the door to the psychological methods of twentieth-century advice manuals.

As the nineteenth century draws to a close, James Russell returns our attention to the most popular novel in American history until *Gone with the Wind* in 1936, a novel that reportedly outsold in aggregate even *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Lew Wallace’s *Ben-Hur*. Russell reads *Ben-Hur* as a conversion narrative that used emergent marketing methods to encourage its audience to believe the novel itself could be a vehicle for readers’ conversion to a good Christian life.

Russell situates *Ben-Hur* within a genealogy of mainstream fictions that have “sought to close the gap between the beliefs of American Christians and the pleasures of popular entertainment.” Russell thus reminds us of the importance of conversion narratives—and not just a broader notion of redemption—to a specifically American notion of popular culture. Conversion narratives constitute not just an ideology but also an aesthetic, America’s preeminent, perdurable model for individual transfiguration, community formation, and nation-building, and they continue to permeate all aspects of its popular culture.

If commonsense holds that bestsellers are in the business of wish-fulfillment, J. Michelle Coghlan considers the “curious” pressure of renunciation in Edgar Rice Burrough’s *Tarzan of the Apes*, and “not simply because so many books that have gone on to become American bestsellers refuse us the ending we most wanted.” It has become axiomatic that *Tarzan* is the compensatory, racialized fantasy of a white man as “lord of the jungle,” but this reading fails to take sufficient account, Coghlan suggests, of *Tarzan*’s “vectors of desire.” Instead of privileging Tarzan’s desires, Coghlan argues for reading the novel’s interracial anxieties within the context of “queer exchanges of desire” and situates this sexual economy within the historical context of contemporary anxiety about “white slavery” as the racialized female sex trade. Sarah Garland’s “Ornamentalism: Desire, Disavowal and Displacement in E.M. Hull’s *The Sheik*” also considers Americans’ attraction to exoticism and the way another favorite American form was adapted by the changing discourses and meanings of empire. Reading the supertext of Hull’s novel as both captivity narrative and formula romance, Garland argues that both “the luxurious orientalist *mise en scene* and the captivity plot” of *The Sheik* provide loci “where patriarchally legitimized forms are rearranged, subverted, re-enforced or sidelined by women.” Suggesting that the novel’s tactical orientalism works both as an ornament and as a screen for displacement, Garland finds that these strategies enable Hull “to provide a happy ending that fits with both the erotics of property under patriarchy and the class logic of imperialism.”

The perils and pleasures of ornamentalism and materialism emerge as an increasing preoccupation of American popular culture as the twentieth century gathers pace. Although the pressure of ostensibly nonfiction forms—conversion narrative, temperance

literature, captivity narrative, national histories—is felt throughout this collection, Grace Lees-Maffei’s consideration of Emily Post’s *Etiquette*, first published in 1922, is our only chapter devoted solely to the question of popular nonfiction in general and advice literature in particular. Lees-Maffei considers how the evolution of *Etiquette* across the near-century of its existence offers “a useful tool in calibrating the changing nature of the American dream.” If popular novels have often adopted or adapted nonfiction forms, Lees-Maffei suggests the ways in which this “pre-eminent example of American advice literature” borrows novelistic techniques and can itself be read as a peculiar type of serial fiction. Reading *Etiquette* in this way reveals an America that views itself as “theoretically classless—or at least largely homogenized into a self-identified and broadly defined middle class,” but in fact “is practically well-versed in reading subtle delineations of class codes from mien, gesture, expression and behavior, as well as dress, accessories and possessions.” Ardis Cameron’s reading of *Peyton Place* might suggest that Grace Metalious’s bestselling novel could be seen as offering advice directly opposed to Emily Post’s protean, evolving social guidance: Metalious’s transgressive subjects were so popular because they defied the taboos that Emily Post carefully calibrates and reinforces. Cameron reads both the figure of Metalious, America’s “unnerving ‘authoress,’” and her “sexsational bestseller,” through a reception history of the letters and memories of Metalious’s readers in the conformist, neo-Victorian 1950s. For Cameron, Metalious “authorized” the nation to speak the unspoken: “incest, oral sex, divorce, adultery, homosexuality, social inequality and the bitter unfairness of female desire” were licensed by the “excitable speech” of *Peyton Place*. In his consideration of Mario Puzo’s *The Godfather*, Evan Brier continues this turn toward audiences and the marketplace, situating Puzo’s blockbuster within “the inescapable unpredictability of the marketplace for fiction,” an unpredictability only accelerated by the rapid growth of the postwar American publishing industry. For Brier, *The Godfather* is the result of Puzo’s “fortunate misreading of the book trade and of his place in it.” Instead of transcending the binary distinction between the “literary” and the “popular,” Brier argues, *The Godfather* was animated by this foundational distinction and is a product of it.

Sarah Churchwell argues that Nicholas Sparks’s bestselling twenty-first-century romances are similarly driven by anxieties

about the “literary” and the “popular,” anxieties that rapidly become gendered. Offering fantasies of mastery to counter a sense of historical loss by reviving the nineteenth-century novel of sentiment, Sparks’s novels emblemize “the recent resurgence of Victorian models of sentimental domestic fiction in mainstream popular romance.” This form, Churchwell maintains, “has enabled evangelical writers to smuggle a covert but explicitly Christian agenda into ostensibly secular fiction via the rhetoric of ‘choice.’” Instead of the paranoid model of *The Da Vinci Code*, Sparks’s romances offer metanoia, or spiritual conversion, a form that melds easily with the sentimental novel’s “exaltation of feminine morbidity, and sublimation of erotic desire into religious ecstasy.” If Sarah Garland reads *The Sheik* as a novel that begins as captivity narrative and turns into formula romance, Churchwell argues that the romances of Nicholas Sparks seek cultural value *qua* mastery by transforming themselves into conversion narratives. Georgiana Banita’s reading of Khaled Hosseini’s 2003 *The Kite Runner* brings American history, geopolitical paranoia, and the novel of sentiment together in one global blockbuster. Banita argues that what she terms “the Hosseini aesthetic—an eminently recognizable blend of epic storytelling, sentimentality, and morality tale,” is itself symptomatic of an emergent transnational discourse after 9/11, “especially through narratives that recount the ‘untold stories’ of the regions in which the US is taking a distinct strategic interest.” Asking “whether the novel indeed reflects a post-American outlook or merely disguises its deeply American convictions beneath a cosmopolitan façade of travelling identities and fates,” Banita argues that this novel is both a “deeply American fable disguised as a transnational text” and a novel that deploys “the transnational paradigm to shed light on Afghanistan’s national project and humanitarian crises.”

Stephen J. Mexal similarly reads Dan Brown’s blockbuster 2003 *The Da Vinci Code* as a response to global anxieties, in this case “a deep and persistent ambivalence about the relationship between fictional narrative and historical subjectivity.” The “bestselling bestseller” ever, *The Da Vinci Code*, Mexal argues, “reveals a deep longing, in a global, transnational public, for a coherent master historical narrative.” This global public is drawn by “the allure of a single and authoritative narrative of human history,” and comes together to “mourn the loss of the authority of the historical master narrative.”

If history cannot provide us with a master narrative or foundational authority, it is not the case that continuities and genealogies cannot be identified; our partial history of American bestsellers does not purport (or aspire) to offer mastery, but we hope it may serve. As these chapters demonstrate, bestsellers enunciate national fictive truths; they prescribe and challenge normative identities and values; they offer the consolations of wishful thinking and the inducements of guilty pleasures; they are instruction manuals for self-improvement and conduct books for the improvement of others. They present us with an imaginary national diegesis that resists or even prohibits exegesis, as we are told how to read popular books—and how not to read them. By contrast, *Must Read: Rediscovering the American Bestseller* holds it to be self-evident that these “must-reads” must be read as critically as they are, or once were, read widely.

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Notes

- 1 Jim Collins, *Bring on the Books for Everybody: How Literary Culture Became Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 7.
- 2 Lawrence Levine, “The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and Its Audiences,” *American Historical Review*, 97:5 (December 1992), 1369–99, 1372.
- 3 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (London: Polity Press, 1993), 116.
- 4 Queenie Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1939), 7, 73–4.
- 5 Frank Luther Mott, *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 5.
- 6 Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press: 1985), xiv.
- 7 Jill Lepore, “Dickens in Eden,” *The New Yorker*, August 29, 2011, 52–61, 54.
- 8 Received wisdom holds that the *Bookman* first coined the term, in 1895, but according to the OED, it was the American Midwest

that deserves the credit—or blame—for transforming high sales into a categorical distinction.

- 9 E. Jennifer Monaghan, *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 3.
- 10 Harvey J. Graff, *The Legacies of Literacy: Continuities and Contradictions in Western Culture and Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 164.
- 11 Victor Neuberg, “Chapbooks in America: Reconstructing the Popular Reading of Early America,” in Cathy N. Davidson ed., *Reading in America: Literature & Social History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 81–113, 83.
- 12 Neuberg, “Chapbooks,” 81.
- 13 Leon Jackson, *The Business of Letters: Authorial Economies in Antebellum America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 19.
- 14 Neuberg, “Chapbooks,” 81.
- 15 Neuberg, “Chapbooks,” 81.
- 16 Neuberg, “Chapbooks,” 95.
- 17 Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 11.
- 18 Neuberg, “Chapbooks,” 82.
- 19 James Raven, “The Importation of Books in the Eighteenth Century,” *A History of the Book in America: Volume 1: The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 183–98, 183.
- 20 Richard Slotkin and James K. Folsom eds, *So Dreadful a Judgment: Puritan Responses to King Philip’s War, 1676–77* (Wesleyan University Press, 1978), 301.
- 21 Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, *The Imaginary Puritan: Literature, Intellectual Labor, and the Origins of Personal Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), n266.
- 22 William B. Warner, *Licensing Entertainment: The Elevation of Novel Reading in Britain, 1684–1750* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 6–7.
- 23 Warner, *Entertainment*, 8.
- 24 Clara Reeve, *The Progress of Romance* (Colchester: W. Keymer, 1785), 2 vols, 2:7, 77.
- 25 Royall Tyler, *The Algerine Captive; or, The Life and Adventures of Doctor Updike Underhill* (Hartford: Peter B. Gleason and Co., 1816), v.