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The “Harry Potter Effect”

In July 2000, the editors of the New York Times Book Review made headlines when they announced a radical restructuring of its bestseller list. In the first major change since 1984, they introduced a children’s book bestseller list, to appear along with “three hardcover lists for fiction, nonfiction, and ‘advice, how-to and miscellaneous’ and separate lists for paperbacks in those categories” (Smith). The reason for restructuring the list was the imminent publication of Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, book four in J. K. Rowling’s wildly popular young adult series (Bolonik). At the time, the first three books of the series were occupying three spots on the “Adult” Fiction bestseller list (Staff). Authors who would usually find a newly released title in the top ten instead found themselves at #16 or #17, squeezed out of the weekly printed list by the “Harry Potter effect.” “They [Harry Potter books] should not be taking up space in place of bona-fide adult titles,” said New York literary agent Aaron Priest, defending the rights of Steven King and Danielle Steel against the Boy Who Lived (Rose 12).

On 8 July, Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire debuted at #1 on virtually every bestseller list in the US and Britain, including those of USA Today, Amazon.com, and the Wall Street Journal. However, the 23 July New York Times Book Review listed Danielle Steel’s The House on Hope Street as the #1 bestselling fiction novel in the country. Harry Potter titles occupied slots 1–4 on the new children’s list, topping classic and not so classic titles for children ages three to twelve. Other entries included Backstreet Boys: The Official Book, by Andre Csillag with the Backstreet Boys; Oh, the Places You’ll Go!, written and illustrated by Dr. Seuss; and The Legend of Luke, by Brian Jacques. As reported by the Wall Street Journal, The House on Hope Street had a sales index of 54 for that week (meaning that it sold 54 percent of the median bestseller from the half-year prior), while Goblet of Fire had a sales index of 2883 (Maryles). Articles in which the nation’s most trusted bestseller list defended its decision to sequester Harry Potter ran alongside coverage of record-breaking Goblet of Fire midnight release parties. The revision pleased some children’s literature
advocates, who believed that the new list would provide more exposure to new books in their field. Leonard Marcus summarized the opposing expert opinion in the closing chapter of *Minders of Make-Believe*: “the move seemed an embarrassing face-saving exercise and a final refusal to concede that children’s books might in fact occupy a significant place in the cultural mainstream” (313).2

The backlash against Rowling’s banishment came from many camps: librarians, teachers, children’s literature scholars, novelists, her American publisher Scholastic, and even competing publishers. “Best-seller lists are supposed to represent what America is reading . . . nothing has ever been as popular with families, adults, children, in the history of publishing,” argued Barbara Marcus, president of Scholastic (qtd. in Corliss 2). Craig Virden, president of Random House Children’s Books (a direct competitor of Scholastic), declared, “I think that 3.8 million is an adult number” (qtd. in Corliss 2). Even as preorders for *Goblet of Fire* stacked up, industry experts warned that children are an unpredictable audience and might be dissuaded by its reported length of 734 pages. To the delight of parents and teachers, however, children devoured the lengthy novel at record speeds (Marcus, *Minders* 314). *Harry Potter* mania captured the imagination of Americans and was covered by virtually every book column and popular publication in the nation, including the cover of *Time*. At the peak of its popularity, the series redefined publishing and children’s book marketing, but its last four books never appeared on the highly regarded *Times* fiction list.3

On 17 October 2004, the *New York Times* further divided the Children’s List into Hardcover, Paperback, Picture, Chapter, and Series Books categories. Though a major feature in children’s publishing, popular series titles such as *Harry Potter*, *Lemony Snicket’s A Series of Unfortunate Events*, and *The Princess Diaries* could now only occupy one slot on the children’s bestseller lists at a time, regardless of the number of titles currently selling (“Children’s Books”). When the final installment of Rowling’s series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, was published on 7 July 2007, selling a record 8.3 million copies in the first twenty-four hours in the US, the full title did not appear on the *New York Times* lists, not even in the Children’s section (M. Rich). The #1 slot on the 22 July 2007 Children’s Series list was occupied by “Harry Potter”; the entry also noted that the series had spent an astounding 145 weeks, or nearly three full years, on all of the various lists, but it made no special mention of the final book’s record-setting sales numbers. For a weekly feature purported to record books based on their popularity, this incongruity
seems striking. While not the first example of such cultural policing, the “Harry Potter effect” made visible the role of the bestseller list as a mechanism for book promotion and management.4

In this article, I explore the moments of overlap between children’s literature and the bestseller lists preceding and culminating in the “Harry Potter effect.” The New York Times Book Review and its bestseller list in particular confer instant prestige on literary titles that “make the list.” Acting as tastemakers, the architects of the list operate under the rules of cultural hierarchy which elevate a specific type of book to bestseller status while making a distinction between the popular titles and highbrow literature. The “Harry Potter effect” exposes a long-standing system of reactive policing by the editors of the Times bestseller list, who seek to promote the bestseller as a form of what I claim is a highbrow-tending middlebrow literature. Over the past half century, the Times’s fickle relationship with children’s literature has disrupted and complicated that endeavor. By examining the convergence points between children’s literature and the bestseller list, we can come to a better understanding of the historical dissonance between popularity, critical acclaim, and the forces at work behind the Harry Potter phenomenon. The “Harry Potter effect” represented the latest, and arguably the largest, crisis for this long-standing cultural yardstick; it forced changes in the list itself and lay bare the prejudices and preferences of the editors normally hidden behind the list’s apparatus. Harry’s exile made explicit the series of contradictory rules, implicit cultural mechanisms, and genre management used to maintain the “purity” of the bestseller list. The list is not an empirical, emotionless measure of book sales, but an editorial product based on specific cultural judgments.5

When viewed through a broad historical lens, the collision between a mainstream gatekeeper like the New York Times bestseller list and an ostensible “genre” like children’s literature, seeking out mainstream recognition, seems inevitable. The history of children’s literature is rife with tension between the desire to provide books for a widespread audience and the aspiration to achieve a respectable cultural status. Children’s literature’s proponents have made multiple efforts to bring it into the mainstream media and culture over the past century; as a result, specialized children’s literature bestseller lists have appeared briefly in prominent publications. In fact, the Times introduced and discontinued its first juvenile bestseller list in 1935. However, the more isolationist and elitist attitudes of children’s literature tastemakers in the 1940s and ’50s, employed in an attempt to protect its middlebrow
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status, generally caused it to disappear from those same media outlets for decades.

Similarly, the rise of the bestseller list over the past century mirrors a tension in the US between “highbrow” or critically acclaimed books and “lowbrow” or popular books. The 1940s and ‘50s indicated a shift in mainstream book culture and bestseller list philosophy, away from critical prestige and toward bestseller status. In the second half of the twentieth century, the bestseller list, specifically through the actions of the *New York Times*, began to narrow the definition of “mainstream” though its own exclusionary behaviors. The *Times* established itself as the most elite of the middlebrow tastemakers by relying on exclusionary tactics, genre tags, categorization, and structural adjustments to ensure its list’s “authenticity,” economic value, and cultural status as a prized tastemaker. Out of a desire to achieve bestseller status, authors and publishers learned how to manipulate the system, finding ways to secure the cultural capital and economic reward that come from appearing on the list.

Beginning in the 1970s, children’s literature sought to reestablish its place in the cultural mainstream; its supporters believed that steady increases in book quality, titles published, profit margins, and visibility made it much harder to marginalize. The *Times*’s pattern of exclusion and preferential treatment places children’s literature and other types of publications into genre-tagged categories, claiming that they are outside of both the mainstream and the ever narrowing selection of “acceptable” bestsellers. However, the contradictions and instabilities of this exclusionary system became impossible to ignore as the Harry Potter books, a children’s series, took a central place on the mainstream cultural stage.

Converging Histories: Children’s Literature Meets the Bestseller List

While children’s literature and the bestseller list seem destined to collide in the twenty-first century, their histories begin in very different places. It was in the shadow of the International Copyright Act of 1891 that Harry Thurston Peck created the first bestseller list in 1895, in an attempt to report on the titles that were selling the most across the country. By recording and reporting the titles, authors, and publishers of these best-selling books, Peck implicitly recognized the proprietary nature of the texts and tied sales to their legitimate owners. It was not until much later that the list became an indicator not only of sales and
ownership, but also of cultural standing for authors, publishers, and list makers.\(^6\)

Bestseller lists confer cultural value based on what Pierre Bourdieu calls “legitimate culture,” which is imbued with power and capital, both economic and cultural, by the members of an individual society. Bourdieu asserts that cultural hierarchies are formed and enforced within certain systems of class and education in a society: “In fact, one can never entirely escape from the hierarchy of legitimacies. Because the very meaning and value of a cultural object varies according to the system of objects in which it is placed,” a person acquiring a cultural object outside of his or her class might be perceived as either “slumming” or “putting on airs” (88). The highest form of culture, reserved for the elite, is considered to be “highbrow,” while cultural objects considered “vulgar,” common, or easily accessed by the masses are considered “lowbrow.”\(^7\)

In twentieth-century America, the rise of democratic ideals about public culture within the middle class created a need for an additional category of cultural standing: the middlebrow, which is often equated with the US mainstream or popular culture. In *Junk Fiction*, S. T. Joshi claims that in Europe, economic class is more fixed and more indicative of cultural standing, while in the US, a democratic and populist nation, popularity is often equated with superiority; even government officials are elected by majority rule. He claims that Americans prefer celebrity, or excellence in numbers, to true cultural excellence because “when democracy is conjoined with capitalism, numbers rule inexorably” (13). As Joan Shelley Rubin notes in *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, “In general, the history of middlebrow culture provides a powerful illustration of the shift from producer to consumer values in America” (33). Following World War I, economic wealth was no longer a reliable indicator of such genteel qualities as education, character, culture, or luxury items (9). However, even in a number-driven consumer society, the US elites were eager to be respected culturally on the world stage; they insisted on a difference between what is popular and what is high quality, and therefore highbrow (Levine 2).

This very American tension highlights the importance of category and canon, even within measures of popularity, when it comes to limiting access of cultural objects to various “brow” communities. John Guillory claims that these canons, “which can only be properly valued within the respective community of the object’s production,” create a hierarchy of genres within a specific category, like literature or film
Those who value such distinctions create a canon of exceptional or exemplary texts against which all other entries into the field will be measured. For the “majority” culture, the bestseller list emerged as one of those canon makers, attempting to balance the lowbrow value of popularity against the standards of literary culture (Guillory 142, 167). Measurable popularity in culturally relevant publications created a body of highly visible texts that mass culture could canonize, regardless of the list’s originally intended purpose.

The bestseller list was not initially envisioned to become the measure of quality or cultural value, but to record the books that sold well. Peck’s first bestseller list appeared in the February 1895 issue of *The Bookman* under the headline “Sales of Books During the Month” (Hackett 2; Mott 6). By way of introduction, Peck writes that this list includes “New books, in order of demand, as sold between January 1 and February 1, 1895.” The list is then divided into twenty regions. Unlike Peck’s first list, contemporary publications now seek to record the highest-selling titles nationwide, carefully polling, weighting, and calculating the placement of titles on their lists in an attempt to represent the appropriate vision of a national book-buying public. In theory, no set of guidelines can predetermine what types of books will become bestsellers.

Over time, the term “bestseller” took on different meanings depending on the context. According to Alice Hackett, “By 1902, the term ‘bestseller’ was well established, mainly through the publicity derived from *The Bookman*’s lists, as a term specifically applied to books” (2). Peck simply sought to record the titles of books that were in demand as a service to publishers and booksellers. Hackett further asserts, “The term ‘bestseller’ was coined and came into common use because it filled a need. A term was needed to describe what were not necessarily the best books but the books that people liked best” (ix). Yearly lists tend to feature books with a longer period of popularity and appeal, rather than books that appear as flash sensations. It is this phenomenon that Robert Escarpit explains by drawing a distinction between “fast sellers,” which sell rapidly upon release, then fall off the radar entirely; “steady sellers,” which slowly gain a steady and enduring popularity; and the “bestseller,” which combines the previous two categories by selling many copies quickly and then maintaining steady sales (qtd. in Miller 2). For example, it is possible for a book to be named the #1 selling book of a specific year, and never appear at #1 on a weekly or monthly list in that year. Lists that classify the best-selling books “of all time” will have few titles in common with any weekly list, and the cultural value of the two lists may be very different.
Therefore, the term “bestseller” means different things when applied to different texts across decades, and the actual categories of books that can achieve bestseller status vary widely. Changes in the US population, as well as changes in publishing, methods of reporting, and an ever increasing array of places in which one can purchase books, alter the makeup of weekly lists. As these changes occur, the bestseller list adjusts, too. I will demonstrate that some of these adjustments prove to be routine, like increasing the number of stores surveyed or altering the number of books that appear on a given list. Others are caused by great changes in the bookselling industry which put pressure on the list to conform to new cultural standards. However, it remains true that there is cultural value and economic incentive to being the premier bestseller list. The value is high enough that the *New York Times*, over the course of fifty years, has actively cultivated that status by editorializing its bestseller list to best reflect the elitist-tending middlebrow values its readers expect.

Despite this contemporary cultural value, popular publications such as the *New York Times* inconsistently featured early “Books in Demand” lists, sometimes directly reprinting them from *The Bookman*. The lists were “chattier” than the current grids and charts, openly acknowledging the difficulties in compiling them and the disparities between cities or months (Korda xviii). For example, the *New York Times* “Books in Demand” list from 28 September 1901 reads:

> It is not possible to say that any particular book has been the bestseller in Boston this month. The reports from the dealers are unusually varying. “Blennerhassett” is given first place by two dealers, second place by two, and third place by a third; others do not place it at all. If the list were to be made up like the summary of a trotting race “Blennerhassett” would undoubtedly occupy the first line . . . The department stores continue to name “The Crisis” first.

As this excerpt illustrates, different classes of people purchased different kinds of books from different kinds of stores. Regional lists sometimes varied greatly in content, while single titles sometimes swept the nation on a tide of popularity. In addition, data collection methods, locations, duration of sales periods, and reporting styles of different lists were often scattershot and inconsistent. Furthermore, standardized formats did not yet exist, so comparisons between these lists are virtually impossible.
Commenting on books and their popularity became a mark of a culturally relevant publication at the turn of the twentieth century. The New York Times added a book review section on 10 October 1896 in addition to irregular reports on the books in demand. Catching on to the trend, Publishers Weekly began publishing its own fiction bestseller list as a monthly feature in 1912 and has published a list of the ten best-selling books of the year ever since (Korda xxvii). In 1919, PW expanded the list to include nonfiction books in an attempt to increase its relevancy. The editors displayed a measure of anxiety about how to describe the nonfiction category, regularly changing the name from “nonfiction” to “general” or “general literature” (Justice 5). Despite this early genre-related anxiety, multiple children’s books found their way unhindered onto PW’s monthly and yearly lists in the decade leading up to World War I, even as children’s literature as a field began to get its own bearings.10

Despite a long and rich history that precedes the birth of the bestseller list, children’s literature is still seeking its own place in the legitimate culture of the middlebrow. Early children’s books were often designed to be either “toys” or instructional books such as primers or religious texts. As such, children’s books are often thought of as objects to be used, rather than read; Bourdieu excluded children’s books from his surveys because he assumed “that children’s books are utilitarian rather than literary texts” (Kidd 167). In addition to being equated with “useful” rather than artful texts, children’s literature is often equated with popular literature. According to Felicity Hughes, when authors began striving to write the “serious novel,” or the “art novel,” they did so by excluding women and children from the potential audience (543). Thus, she argues, literature considered suitable for women and children was placed in direct contrast with highbrow, “serious” novels and so became equated with popular, lowbrow novels (544). According to Hughes, Henry James believed that “being exclusive is a necessary condition for novels being serious. Popular novels cannot be good, they must be vulgar” (547). Joshi claims that this form of elitism, “while seeming to seek excellence, declares a priori that certain realms cannot possibly produce excellence,” and thus maintains a distinct policing against popular texts (8). Beverly Lyon Clark echoes these arguments by claiming that many nonexperts incorrectly assume that “kiddie lit” fits into the categories used by Bourdieu to describe popular or lowbrow texts: easy, simple, and childish. Thus as early as 1900 critics and readers alike viewed children’s literature as popular, simple, easily
accessible, and therefore inferior, while artistic novels were viewed as exclusive, difficult, and unsuitable for women and children (Hunt 19; Hughes 547). In a cultural hierarchy, such perceptions placed children’s literature in the low end of the spectrum.11

Even as these cultural categories emerged, the free library movement began in the US in 1850 and was a key development in the children’s literature field (Marcus, Minders 31; Lepore 1). Public librarians began to insist on special children’s sections staffed by well-informed children’s librarians, often women (Eddy 34). These women were entrusted with selecting the very best that children’s publishing had to offer in order to provide the city’s children with access to high-quality literature. As women like Anne Carroll Moore, the first director of the New York City Public Library’s Central Children’s Room (1911), asserted their control and tastes over children’s libraries, they sought to establish a series of guidelines for determining which texts would be deemed the best (Lepore 3–4). Moore pioneered the children’s literature canon by compiling a list of “twenty-five hundred standard titles in children’s literature” to be stocked in the new children’s libraries around the country (2). As the taste-making authorities, Moore and her colleagues sought to eliminate the “mediocrity in children’s book publishing” and encourage publication of new texts that would delight and educate without moralizing or sentimentalizing childhood (Eddy 42).

At the same time, American publishers started small and experimental juvenile departments. These publishing houses often hired women because they were considered to be naturally interested in children and thus experts in easily accessible children’s literature, despite a lack of credentialing in the field. At this time, the American middle class recognized neither the cultural nor the educational value of children’s fiction, for the reasons mentioned above. Kenneth Kidd argues that “ Advocates for children’s literature responded to this devaluation by insisting upon levels of distinction, in effect creating a middlebrow tradition of children’s literature, and perhaps positioning ‘children’s literature’ as a middlebrow formation more generally” (170). According to Anne Lundin, Moore’s instincts were “entrepreneurial in expanding her enterprise, building branches, promoting books nationwide and internationally, and making children’s books visible and valid to middlebrow culture” (26). As a part of this middlebrow movement, in 1921 the American Library Association (ALA) awarded its first annual Newbery Medal for excellence in children’s writing, thus designating a distinguished and select number of children’s books as literary and new classics (Kidd 173).12
In addition to Newbery winners, Moore placed classic texts from the golden age of children’s literature, such as *Alice in Wonderland*, *Little Women*, and *The Wizard of Oz*, at the center of this emerging children’s literature canon. Many scholars within and outside of the children’s literature field recognized these texts for their artistic and groundbreaking qualities in the field of general, or adult, fiction. As Seth Lerer notes, “Sometimes, books labeled as juvenile are, instead, antique” (qtd. in Lepore 3). He claims that while many texts for kids are either about the Middle Ages or incorporate conventions of that genre, many are also transplants from another time period, “literary imposters: satires, from ages past, hiding their fangs; and shiny new books, dressed up in some very old clothes” (4). In an attempt to increase the standing of children’s literature in the eyes of the public at large, many of these “literary imposters” were inducted into the children’s canon, leading to confusion about what kinds of books could correctly be called children’s literature. By insisting that books with literary and artistic value, regardless of length, subject matter, or potential adult appeal, could qualify as children’s literature, these founding sisters of the genre left the door open for arguments that even *Harry Potter* did not belong solely to a children’s audience.

Like the bestseller list, in the 1920s children’s literature appealed to mainstream culture via periodicals. In 1918, Moore began publishing a regular column in *The Bookman*, focused on what children should be reading to improve their minds and manners. A rise in children’s literature sales, up from 433 new titles in 1919 to 931 in 1929, led to increasing press coverage (Marcus, *Minders* 104). In 1924, *The Horn Book* made the move from a children’s bookstore newsletter to a national trade magazine. And for the first time, in January 1930, the *New York Times Book Review* inaugurated a fortnightly page that reviewed books for young readers. In response, the *New York Herald-Tribune* began publishing a similar column weekly, forcing the *Times* to do the same. That same year, the *New Yorker* also began publishing an annual feature on the state of literature for young people (Marcus, *Minders* 111). In response to the growing visibility of children’s literature in literary circles, *Publishers Weekly* debuted the first juvenile fiction bestseller list on 15 February 1930. It joined lists of fiction and nonfiction books, each with ten titles. However, the first interaction between children’s books and the bestseller list was short lived. In a redesign in May 1932, the juvenile list was printed separately from the other two lists and, for unclear reasons, was discontinued in the June 1932 issue. It did not appear again for nearly sixty years (Justice 5). The *New York Times*
Book Review also published a list of the five top-selling juvenile titles in December 1935, but it was withdrawn the following month (10).

In what Korda describes as a “historic reluctance of book reviewers and the book review media to get embroiled in the sordid question of what is selling as opposed to the question of what is worth reading,” it is important to explore the reasons why the bestseller list editors were most uncomfortable evaluating children’s literature based on popularity (xxi). List makers faced an extremely vocal and increasingly media-savvy group of children’s librarians, who felt that the development of children’s literature was best left to them. The elitist tendencies of the bestseller list editors also may have led them to feel that children’s literature did not have a place in a measure of mainstream literary consumption. However, I believe this reluctance was in largest part due to the fact that in the first half of the century, the bestseller list was still reaching to legitimize its own version of “the popular”; its editors could not afford to expend cultural capital in assisting children’s literature with its own legitimacy struggle.

As America fell into the Depression, children’s literature turned slowly from a highly visible enterprise seeking admittance into the mainstream, toward a more insulated field (Marcus, Minders 109). According to Kidd, the Newbery Medal, which attempted to “legitimize children’s literature . . . contributed to the ongoing separation of children’s and ‘serious’/adult literature . . . [and] effectively removed children’s literature from broader public ownership despite (or rather through) those claims about fashioning a public” (173). Over the next few decades, as children’s literature retreated into its own “secret garden,” bestseller lists pushed to the forefront and took root in the nation’s consciousness by establishing a strong presence as cultural tastemakers.

The Times, They Are A-Changin’:
Negotiating Popularity and Critical Acclaim at Midcentury

As the Depression deepened, children’s publications struggled; publishing houses cut extraneous or experimental budgets and librarians purchased fewer books (Marcus, Minders 110). The New York Herald-Tribune discontinued Moore’s column and she retreated to the genre-specific Horn Book in 1930 (127). To add to children’s literature’s worries, competition for the attention of its audience continued to emerge in force. The Disney animated film Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs premiered on 22 December 1937. Despite harsh criticism from children’s librarians, it
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was an immediate success and brought to the forefront concerns about children’s access to cinema. Comic books, invented in the mid-1930s, rapidly climbed in popularity even though children’s literature critics declared them to be crude and inappropriate for the advancement of children’s minds (136–37). In response to this proliferation of visual media, the ALA awarded the first Caldecott Medal on 14 June 1938, as a celebration of a high-quality children’s illustrated work (138). From this moment on, each successive generation would hear cries from librarians, educators, and parents that children were distracted by the newest technology from the serious business of reading. Over the past half century television, music, video games, computers, cell phones, and the Internet have all been blamed for the “death of the book.”

On 9 August 1942, the New York Times debuted the bestseller list as we currently know it, indicating how the post-Depression 1940s marked a distinct shift in the way Americans evaluated the legitimacy and literariness of books. With less money to spend on books, fewer titles in print due to wartime paper rationing, and ever increasing choices in entertainment, Americans became more concerned with reading the “right” books. Instead of relying on critical acclaim from experts, they began to look to their neighbors and popular sentiment. The new bestseller list was a weekly feature appearing in the center of the Sunday Book Review. It contained both fiction and nonfiction lists. Since the number of titles was fluid over the next three years, fluctuating between five and twenty, some have speculated that it changed depending on how much space had to be filled in the pages of the Review that week (Justice 8). Publishers Weekly turned its monthly list into a weekly feature that same week (6). Despite the coinciding “birthdays” of these lists, over the next half century the Times came to dominate the realm of middlebrow taste making, taking the position previously held by critics from the literary elite.13

This kind of appeal to popularity as a selling point is a uniquely American phenomenon. As Ruth Miller Elson notes:

Alexis de Tocqueville, aware of the American’s need for conformity in a uniquely competitive world, would have been delighted to read today’s book advertisements. The major appeal to the potential customer is not that the book is interesting, relevant, exciting, well-written or has any of the other qualities that might make one wish to read a particular book, but rather that it is a bestseller. If one buys it one joins the great majority, and need
This desire to join the well-read crowd created a demand for a reliable source to recommend the right titles. It became even more pronounced in the 1950s, as individuals sought a place in the “American dream” version of middlebrow life and aimed to conform to social norms. These trends in the 1950s visibly reinforced the concept that bestsellers create bestsellers; a book on the bestseller list one week is likely to see an uptick in sales the following week. Thus lists in popular publications like the *New York Times* began to function not only as compilations of reported figures, but also as advertisements and implicit recommendations. Conveniently located at the center of the *Times Book Review* was a list of books that friends, neighbors, coworkers, and in-laws had already read and would be talking about. The list employed large boxes and distinctive design features that made it easy to locate in the book section without having to wade through the highbrow critical reviews. However, while the bestseller list claimed to provide an empirical picture of the nation’s book buying, it deemphasized its own filtered nature and refined image, narrowed through a specific lens of middlebrow categorization.¹⁴

As the influence of the *Times* bestseller list grew, the influence of children’s literature librarians seemed to wane. Popularity began to take precedence over expert recommendations or reviewers’ opinions when deciding what book to buy, even in children’s literature. In October 1945, Harper’s published E. B. White’s *Stuart Little* against the vehement protests of Moore and some of her colleagues (Lepore 7). Despite her attempts to ensure no one read the book, the public purchased it in great numbers. White’s second book, *Charlotte’s Web*, was similarly criticized, yet it was also extremely successful; it spent a combined total of 489 weeks on the *Times/Publishers Weekly* bestseller lists (Justice 326). Children’s librarians worried that parents no longer saw them as the most trusted source for finding appropriate and high-quality children’s literature. Given a choice between protecting the high standards and middlebrow expectations of the genre (along with their power over authors and publishing houses), or having children’s literature fully enter the mainstream and allow popularity to recommend texts to young readers, Moore and her colleagues chose to protect its respectable, middlebrow status. When these experts chose to value and protect children’s literature through canonization and an imposed cultural hierarchy, they implied that the popular texts the public associated
with children’s literature, like *Charlotte’s Web*, were vulgar and lower in quality than “real” children’s literature. But this insular move led to a diminished public perception of these popular texts being transferred to all of children’s literature, thereby demoting all children’s texts to a lowbrow, genre-tagged status in the highbrow–lowbrow spectrum.

According to Guillory, this hierarchy of bestsellers and classic texts begins taking shape in the early 1900s:

> certain “popular” works are relegated to the lower levels of the system, other “serious” works to the higher, and this sorting out across the vertical structure of the educational system, initially very modest, is gradually more marked over the succeeding century and a half . . . the prestige of literary works as cultural capital is assessed according to the limit of their dissemination, their relative exclusivity. (133)

This logic applies not only to the ways in which the canonization of children’s literature may have harmed the overall public opinion of popular children’s texts, but also to why the *Times* excludes certain types of books from its lists. While the *Times* seeks the middle ground between popular and highbrow texts in order to appeal to the middlebrow, at the same time it sells its list as the most selective in order to confer value on the idea of “bestseller status” and the achievement of even greater status as the “#1 *New York Times* Best Seller.”

From the 1950s on, the *New York Times* list was the most widely read by the public, and so it became the most important list for book publishers and sellers (Miller 3). Many US publishers are located in New York, and they regard the *Times* as their “hometown” paper (4). For many, the *New York Times Book Review* bestseller list is the list of note. The *Times* editors police the list with this status in mind to prevent “unserious” books from crowding out the “serious” ones. Otherwise, unserious people might look to the list for guidance, while the elite, who have the money and cultural capital, would view the list as vulgar and useless for their purposes. Evidence of this logic is seen in features regularly included on the bestseller page, such as “Editors’ Choice” or “Recommended New Titles.” These features showcase the most serious and literary of newly released titles, rarely bestseller material. By recommending serious literature alongside popular titles, the *Times* editors reinforce their own taste-making authority.

It is also common practice for bestseller list editors to create rules and guidelines for data collection to ensure that certain types of books
are excluded. Sometimes, editors exclude certain titles simply to narrow the scope of the list. In the 1950s, cookbooks, textbooks, manuals, and genre books like romance novels were left out of the *Times* tallies. Mott notes that his list “omits all bibles, prayer-books, hymnals, almanacs, cookbooks, ‘doctor-books,’ textbooks, dictionaries, and manuals” (9). Hackett additionally excludes pamphlets, encyclopedias, “and certain other ‘non-books,’ such as picture and game books” (11). According to Miller, “compilers of a 1934 *Publishers’ Weekly* list displaying the best-sellers for a period of over fifty years decided to exclude major sellers such as the *Fannie Farmer Cookbook* and the *Boy Scout Manual* because they were used, not read” (6). If editors consider children’s literature to be useful rather than literary, this pattern of exclusion should allow them to ignore children’s literature texts as a matter of course.

However, some exclusions are made explicitly in the interest of taste. Miller notes that “In 1961, the *Chicago Tribune* announced that it would no longer give free publicity generated by its best-seller list to books that were ‘sewer-written by dirty-fingered authors for dirty-minded readers,’” and excluded books by Harold Robbins and Henry Miller (6). In contrast, an article by Franky Schaeffer in the *Saturday Evening Post* in January 1983 highlighted the fact that “[b]ooks by Christians published by Christian book companies” almost never appear on the *Times* list, despite outselling “their contemporary secular counterparts, often by a ratio of 3 to 1” (qtd. in Bear 159). Schaeffer and other religious figures have recently pointed to this fact as an example of the secular world’s anti-Christian bigotry. These instances make it clear that editors are aware of the selling power of the bestseller list and the cultural capital imparted to books that appear on it.15

It is worth noting that these preemptive exclusionary tactics are not always successful. Traditionally, if a new, invasive type of bestseller threatens the integrity of a list, its editors create separate “special” lists in order to sideline such books, just as they did with the Harry Potter series. The first example of this relisting occurred in 1917–18, when *Publishers Weekly* felt it was necessary to publish a separate “War Books” category, clearing all of the WWI titles out of the general nonfiction list (Korda 29–31). In terms of cultural capital, new forms of best-selling books are granted valuable real estate on the prestigious pages of their day. However, this “featured” position often has a limited duration and it may be moved, downgraded to a monthly feature, or removed, marking the category as disposable.
Furthermore, when moving beyond the specific moment of publication, the classification of a text often becomes fuzzy. Malcolm Cowley states that the distinction between “a classic (a book admired by intelligent readers through several generations) and a bestseller (a book purchased by many readers in one generation)” is not absolute. “The terms are not mutually exclusive—a bestseller may become a classic in time, as happened with Dickens’ (sic) novels” (qtd. in Hackett 7). Therefore, if popular books are popular for long enough they may become classics, even if they are considered simple, childish, or easily accessible in their particular historical moment. Similarly, the boundary between children’s literature and that meant for adults is difficult to define, especially over a long period of time, as tastes and judgments of a title may change. Hackett notes juvenile fiction titles among the adult books in her survey of bestsellers from 1895 to 1965, but she includes the following caveat: “Many of the titles listed as juvenile fiction were originally published as adult books, but changing taste has now placed them in the category of juvenile or, at least, young adult reading” (11).

Of interest to my investigation is the conflation between “classic” texts, popular texts, and those claimed by children’s literature. In 1947, Mott recorded a list of “twenty-one books of general reading which occupy a kind of best-seller heaven of their own,” having sold more than two million copies each in the United States. This list included nine titles traditionally associated with children’s literature, including *Alice in Wonderland*, *A Christmas Carol*, *Little Women*, and *Tom Sawyer*, and one illustrated *Story of the Bible* suitable for children (8). The enduring popularity of these children’s best/steady sellers across decades helped ensure the presence of a profitable juvenile department in the majority of publishing houses in the United States. In 1949, the president of Random House admitted to a group from the Authors Guild of America that children’s literature was a successful venture for publishing houses, with profitable series like Golden Books helping children’s literature departments grow in size and prosperity (Marcus, *Minders* 180).16

As sales continued to climb in those departments, the *New York Times* introduced another “Children’s Best Sellers” list on 16 November 1952. It contained sixteen titles, and the accompanying explanatory text: “an analysis based on reports from leading booksellers in 30 cities, showing the year’s sales rating of 16 leading children’s books published during the first 10 months of 1952” (Justice 10). However, that list was only published annually in November from 1952 to 1958, just in time for the Christmas shopping season. The list appeared biannually from
1959 to 1973, when it again disappeared from the *Times*. These brief appearances of children’s literature lists reflect a steadily increasing presence of books for children in the publishing world, as well as parents’ preoccupation with providing the right kind of books for their children. However, it is clear from such irregular appearances that the genre was still considered less important than other forms of literature at the time, and a type of literature not usually judged by popularity or mass appeal. Despite the popularity of children’s literature among the baby boomers, a regular weekly children’s list was still too far outside of the middlebrow image that the *Times* continued to cultivate.

*Only the “Best”: Narrowing the Field*

Starting in the post–WWII era, the *Times* bestseller list attempted to establish itself as the most elite by favoring books high in the cultural hierarchy and cultivating an air of exclusivity. The *Book Review* commented on highbrow texts for the literary elite, but the bestseller list circulated to greater numbers of people, regardless of “brow” level. Despite its elitist tendency, developments in publishing and book buying pushed the *Times* to adjust the composition of the list and its polling methods in order to maintain access to the middlebrow or risk losing its position as the “best” list. For example, the acceptance of paperback books into the mainstream was a major shift in literary culture. Once synonymous with paperbound dime novels and comic books, paperbacks were considered both in the publishing trade and by the public to be the epitome of lowbrow literature. However, the tension between this traditional stance and growing popular appeal in the 1960s made bestseller editors anxious about how properly to include paperbacks into their catalog of bestselling titles. Like the *Harry Potter* phenomenon, the mass popularity of paperbacks worked against the category’s potential legitimacy as literature and its worth to the bestseller list.

On 5 December 1965, the *Times* added a paperback list as a monthly feature, usually released during the first weekend. It started out with five title lists for “fiction” and “general” titles. After six years, it was moved to the bottom of the page, replaced by “Recommended New Titles” at the top (Justice 9). In February 1974, brief one-line descriptions of each book on the list were added to title, author name, publisher, and price. In an attempt to mediate the “brow” level of paperbacks, in March the list changed again: the categories “Fiction” and “General”
Bestseller Lists and the “Harry Potter Effect” were replaced by “mass market” and “trade.” In an interview, George M. Nicholson, a pioneer in high-quality children’s paperback publishing, recalled how the difference between “mass-market and trade was also a social gulf. It was like being from the wrong side of the tracks” (Marcus, “Interview” 130).

The “mass market” paperback category served as a scapegoat for those who saw all paperbacks as inferior, while the elite-sounding title “trade paperbacks” gave readers a sense that these were the select, insider books. According to Justice, “Like the story papers, dime novels and pulp magazines of other publishing eras, the paperback book was born to serve a market that did not suggest immediate respectability, and even though the paperback sales continued to increase . . . the lists providing information on paperback sales were yet to be considered fully legitimate” (9). In an attempt to maintain their cultural currency, list editors still excluded books considered to be the lowest-brow of the paperback form, such as romance novels. The anxiety over paperback books thus caused a major identity crisis for established bestseller lists. The *Times* had to integrate the new form carefully into its list while weighing the cultural impact of the addition. As paperbacks became acceptable and legitimate in the mainstream culture, the *Times* had no choice but to adjust, or risk falling out of the mainstream.17

The appeal of the bestseller list also influenced the categorization of texts that sought to be accepted into the list’s view of the mainstream. By the 1970s, the bestseller list had accumulated enough cultural capital to be seen as a legitimizing force, capable of conferring bestseller status, and the rewards that come with it, on a select scope of books. In a preview of the “Harry Potter effect,” a 1970s British crossover novel further confused the division between children’s literature and general fiction in an attempt to capitalize on its potential popularity in the US. After being rejected by thirteen British publishers, Richard Adams’s *Watership Down* was finally published in November 1972 by Penguin as a juvenile fantasy book. It won both the Carnegie Medal in 1972 and the Guardian Children’s Prize for Fiction in 1973. However, when the book crossed the Atlantic, *Watership Down* was reclassified as adult fiction, even though Macmillan, its American publisher, originally intended to market it to children: “The president of Avon, a major paperback house, read the book and, recognizing its bestseller potential, paid a substantial sum for paperback rights” (Marcus, *Minders* 269; emphasis mine). This led the editors at Macmillan to reclassify and publish the book “on the general trade list where it could be given the broadest
possible exposure” (270). On 5 May 1974, _Watership Down_ appeared at #1 on the *Times* and _Publishers Weekly_ fiction bestseller lists and remained there for more than three months; it was released as a mass-market paperback and appeared on those lists in 1975. The category change precipitated by American bestseller list politics did not seem to have much impact on the audience; the book was, and is, popular with both adults and children. However, to successfully market _Watership Down_ in the US, publishers had to reclassify it as an adult text so it could qualify for bestsellerdom and the economic benefits (and paperback sales) that went with it. This reclassification allowed the bestseller list to maintain its middlebrow standards while advertising _Watership Down_’s popularity without visible conflict. In this case, the category of “bestseller” had a higher cultural and economic capital than did the category of “children’s literature”; the potential authority and prestige of a bestseller list medallion on the paperback’s cover far outweighed the authority of its foreign children’s awards or academic, highbrow praise from children’s literature scholars.

The rise of self-help and advice books in the 1980s caused the next structural change in the *New York Times* bestseller list. These titles congested the nonfiction list, and, in similar language to that of later “Harry Potter effect” critics, publishers claimed that “serious nonfiction” was being crowded out by “humor and how-to books.” The *Times* created a new list for “Advice, How-to and Miscellaneous” in both hardcover and paperback in January 1984 (Bear 204). Booksellers found the revision to be “confusing” and unnecessary and called it “foolish clutter which is decreasing the importance of the list as a whole” (204). But this gatekeeping maneuver allowed the *Times* to expel another unacceptable category of books; over time, this special list would be moved around, the number of its titles changed based on available space, and eventually removed from the printed page to the Web site.

The “How-to” category in the *Times* sparked a proliferation of niche or specialized lists. While the *Times* created a new list to maintain its middlebrow standards, other publications began to feature specific genres of books in deference to niche audiences. In autumn 1990, _Publishers Weekly_ introduced a monthly hardcover/paperback religious bestseller list and an audio bestseller list, divided into fiction and nonfiction (Justice 7). The *Times* re-split the paperback fiction list into Trade and Mass Market lists in September 2007 and added the Graphic Books list on 9 March 2009 (“Up Front” 2007). Even with a proliferation of categories, the indecision and anxiety over children’s literature
remained. In August 1990, *Publishers Weekly* reintroduced a monthly list of children’s bestsellers, in the categories of Picture Books, Younger Readers, Middle Readers, Young Adults, and Nonfiction. In 1996, *PW* featured an article listing the “100 Best Selling Children’s Books of All Time”; it reprised this feature in 2002, updated to include *Harry Potter*. The *Times* annual list of children’s bestsellers reappeared in November 1977, this time divided into “Hardcover Best Sellers” and “Paperback Best Sellers,” with fifteen titles each. The yearly list appeared once more, in November 1978, before disappearing for over twenty years.

*Prizing Popularity: Competition and Manipulation of the Bestseller Mechanism*

In the twenty-first century, bestsellerdom resembles a cultural prize, or what James English describes as “a kind of competitive spectacle” that “produces the specifically modern form of capital we call celebrity” (51). Bestseller status, like many other prizes, comes with an economic reward: bestselling books are likely to sell even more copies. Bookstores often prominently feature displays of bestselling books with the most recent bestseller list posted nearby, on the assumption that popularity attracts; customers will choose to purchase a book based on the list’s endorsement. The economic incentive is one of the reasons that the data gathering and ranking systems of the major lists are so hotly contested; the difference between appearing at #1 and #11 on the *Times* bestseller list could alter future sales by millions of copies. Since the 1970s, contracts between publishers and authors have often included so-called elevator clauses, stipulating bonuses to be paid when an author makes the *Times* list, according to how high the book ranks and how many weeks it lingers (Miller 7). From that era to the present day, the *Times* often has been rocked by fraudulent attempts to cheat the system, pervasive/invasive genres of books, and other scandals that prefigured the “Harry Potter effect” and established a pattern of response from the list editors.

Since the *Times* and other established lists often survey independent and chain bookstores and weight their input to create a balance between them, lists based on sales in chain bookstores are often different from those in the newspapers. Outside of these mainstream lists, other publications attempt to fill the needs of a specific audience or genre niche with their own lists. According to English, “Prizes, an instrument of cultural hierarchy, would themselves come increasingly to describe a
hierarchical array, a finely indexed system of greater and lesser symbolic rewards, the negotiation of which constitutes a kind of second-order game or subsidiary cultural marketplace” (54). As each of these lists attempts to assert its own independence, claim its own audience, and establish its own legitimacy, the lists compete for placement within the highbrow–lowbrow spectrum, with the Times at the top.

In the 1980s, the economic prize often took precedence within the publishing world. Michael Korda, former editor-in-chief at Simon & Schuster, recounts a meeting in which an accountant chided the editors, saying, “Do you guys realize how much money the company would make if you only published bestsellers?” (173). The bestseller “prize” is so valuable that some people attempt to manipulate the system in order to achieve that status. Korda notes that rumors of movie companies or individuals buying copies of books in bulk to influence the list abound, but that “not too many people . . . really want to buy fifty or a hundred thousand copies of a book just to get it onto the bestseller list” (xxii). Laura J. Miller details a number of similar schemes, including the rumor about Jacqueline Susann, author of Valley of the Dolls, cozying up to booksellers known to report to the Times; and a consulting firm connected to the authors of The Discipline of Market Leaders spending $200,000 at various outlets in order to get the book on the bestseller list for fifteen weeks (6).18

William Peter Blatty, author of The Exorcist, went so far as to file a $6 million lawsuit against the New York Times when his book Legion did not make the list the first week it was released (Bear 198). In August 1983, he claimed that intentional negligence and injurious falsehood on the part of the Times Book Review editors cost him large sums of money. He pursued the suit all the way to the Supreme Court of the US. The Court ruled in favor of the Times, accepting its assertion that the list was an “editorial product” and therefore covered under the First Amendment (Miller 8). As a result of the lawsuit, the Times began including fine print beneath its weekly list, first claiming that the list was statistically adjusted, then gradually adding addenda and caveats as time went on.19

More contemporary spectacles, like the 2006 controversy surrounding talk-show host Oprah Winfrey’s initial endorsement and subsequent denunciation of James Frey’s purported memoir, A Million Little Pieces, have helped to fuel the celebrity vision of the bestsellerdom prize.20

As the Internet became a greater force in book buying in the 1990s, the Times placed a link to BarnesandNoble.com on its bestseller list Web page in 1995. In return, Barnes and Noble offered a 30 percent discount
on all Times bestsellers purchased from its Web site. Furious at the favoritism, independent booksellers organized a boycott and 100 stores refused to report their sales figures to the Times. The Times attempted to make amends by creating yet another list featuring top-selling titles based on data solely from independent sellers, while simultaneously reassuring readers that not enough independent sellers participated in the boycott to damage the integrity of its main list (Miller 9). In 1999, Amazon.com, Borders.com, and the Times filed lawsuits against one another over the use of the Times bestseller list in discounting policy, since the Times claimed intellectual property rights to the list on the Internet (Miller 9).

Following this lawsuit, new lists appeared everywhere, each with a specific marketing profile. The Amazon.com, BarnesandNoble.com, and Book Sense lists track the books sold in that specific establishment, acting as a measure of units sold and a measure of success of that bookseller’s brand. By attempting to protect the exclusivity of its bestseller list, the Times provoked these Internet giants into competition and contributed to the proliferation of list makers. A specialized list appearing on a Web site or the wall of a store, or quoted in a newspaper article, also acts as an advertisement that says: “This book sold here.” While each list claims to be individual and unique, the majority of titles overlap all the lists, making distinction between them virtually nonexistent. English claims that this is to be expected: “The fields of art thus become littered with awkwardly redundant consecrations, whose once fiercely guarded differences have ceased to be discernable” (52). However, when the Times decided to exile Harry Potter, the Internet giants had accrued enough cultural capital to lend their new bestseller lists legitimacy. To many, Amazon.com or BarnesandNoble.com were considered equal points of comparison to the Times.

As the list of repute, that of the Times is in constant danger of being replaced at the top of the hierarchy by one of the competing lists, so it attempts to adapt and remain current with contemporary standards. However, the proliferation of categories, niche lists, and listing organizations not only intensifies this form of hierarchical competition but also works to devalue the prestige of each individual award. By creating secondary lists to ensure the integrity of its brand, the New York Times has diluted its own influence and reputation. As more and more titles, regardless of genre, can claim “#1 New York Times Best Seller” status, complete with a medallion on the front cover, the value of that prize decreases because it is no longer rare and exclusive. By working to
keep nonmainstream books out of its main fiction and nonfiction list through the creation of variable, rotating, and Web-confined niche lists, the *Times*, like the children’s literature librarians decades before, implies that the entire category of “bestseller” is easily accessible, cheap, and therefore lowbrow.23

This competition between cultural prizes also explains why people affiliated with the highbrow look at bestsellers with disdain; they place importance on different forms of cultural capital. Thus, “prizes have served not simply as credentials but also, and no less significantly, as stigmas” (English 41). While the middlebrow in America place value and importance on popularity, those affiliated with the highbrow value other qualities and see books that have achieved this specific pinnacle of popularity, like *Harry Potter*, to be too rich in the wrong kind of capital. A spot at the top of any bestseller list may proclaim loudly to those elites that this book is not for them, as books that are popular and books that are good are often two mutually exclusive categories. Lamenting the fact that classic golden age texts like *Alice* are less likely to be read by children today, Harold Bloom wondered if it might be better for children to read nothing at all than to read lowbrow books like *Harry Potter*:

Is there any redeeming educational use to Rowling? Is there any to Stephen King? Why read, if what you read will not enrich mind or spirit or personality . . . I hope that my discontent is not merely a highbrow snobbery, or a nostalgia for a more literate fantasy to beguile (shall we say) intelligent children of all ages. Can more than 35 million book buyers, and their offspring, be wrong? Yes, they have been, and will continue to be for as long as they persevere with Potter. (“35 Million”)

While Bloom was unwilling to concede any merits to Rowling’s novels, he did grant her “an unusual distinction: She has changed the policy of the policy-maker” (“35 Million”). It is possible that by altering the tastemaker, Rowling achieved the even greater prize of celebrity. As we have seen, the *Times* has long survived various crises precipitated by controversial classifications, genres, cultural values, and economic pressures by adopting a policy of exclusion to protect the value of its bestseller list. However, when *Harry Potter* occupied three possible slots on the list, with another title on the way, the phenomenon became too big to ignore and too steadfast to wait out. As many have noted, “the outsized success of the [Harry Potter] books made them a lightning
rod for attacks from many quarters,” including those on the grounds of cultural exclusivity and mainstream appeal (Marcus, Minds 313). What made the “Harry Potter effect” distinctive was that a single series was able to overwhelm the bestseller list and bring to light the ways in which cultural gatekeepers like the Times had kept children’s literature at arm’s length for over a century.

As newspapers in the US see a decline in subscriptions, repute, and power, the efficacy and reputation of the Times bestseller list will likewise make it a target for attack. With the rise of television talk shows, Internet blogs, and niche marketing, it may not be possible for the Times to maintain its prestigious placement as the tastemaker of note, no matter what policing policies it puts into place. The editors’ attempts to thwart the “Harry Potter effect” may have even further hastened its decline in authority. Other publications exploited the visibility of the list’s mechanics and preferences to promote their own lists as more accurate or more attuned to a specific subset of tastes, because “every prize that declares or betrays a social agenda opens the door to new prizes claiming greater purity of aesthetic”—or, in this case, popular judgment (English 60). The publicity surrounding the “Harry Potter effect” gave competing publications leverage against the Times in the struggle for cultural legitimacy, even as it gave children’s literature scholars and enthusiasts a new opportunity to debate their own legitimate place in mainstream culture. The struggle continues, as the presence of the children’s literature lists in the Times fluctuates. In 2010, the children’s list was downgraded to a monthly print feature, although it still appeared weekly on the Times Web site. Then, in 2011, the children’s literature lists were returned to the weekly printed list as the Times reformatted the list to include e-books (“Up Front” 2011). Those enthusiasts who saw the introduction of the anti-Potter children’s list as an increase in mainstream visibility for children’s literature must now continually advocate for the children’s literature lists to remain present in the print version, or decide how a presence on the Times Web site fits into the vision of a cultural hierarchy.

While Korda describes the list as a “corrective reality” exposing us to the truth of our book-buying and reading habits, many now realize that it is a truth filtered through the lens of editors’ preferences, prejudices, and preemptive exclusions, a mechanism that is never purely empirical but editorial in nature (x). Just as “the Harry Potter effect” undermined the bestseller narrative, it also undermined the account of the “death of the book,” especially for children; in June 2003, first-day sales of
Rebekah Fitzsimmons

Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix were estimated at $100 million, while the blockbuster film The Hulk grossed only $62 million over the entire weekend (F. Rich). As scholarship seeks to explain how Rowling captured the imagination of an entire generation, it is clear that the influence of the Harry Potter phenomenon continues to resonate over a decade after it began. While Americans will continue to look to popular authorities to tell us what to read, what to watch, and where to find the comfort of a community of taste, the tale of an orphan wizard was enough to briefly expose the truth of who is influencing whom within the bestseller system.

Notes

Many thanks to Kenneth Kidd and Anastasia Ulanowicz for their assistance and encouragement.

1The phrase “Harry Potter effect” has been used to explain everything from the books’ effect on the Times list (Rose), to Scholastic stock prices (Hayden, et al.), to children’s reading habits (Cannon). The term has no clear origin, though I first came across it in Rose’s Wall Street Journal article from September 1999. Authors and publishers shut out of the Times list also claimed to have been “Pottered” (Brahim and Cullinan).

2For more information on the differences between the reporting and sampling data of these different lists, see Truitt. The most current list printed in the New York Times Book Review reports sales from two weeks earlier. Since 1995, the Book Review also posts the bestseller list online; according to the 5 February 2010 version, “The best-seller lists and the ‘Inside the List’ column appear on the Web a week before they do in print” (Britton, Garner). On 11 September 2000, the Times divided the children’s list into picturebooks, paperbacks, and chapter books. The three lists were rotated weekly in the printed version of the Book Review, and all three appeared every week on the Times Web site. The rotation of lists stopped with additional reformatting of the list, as noted in this article.

3Many critics of the Times declared that the length and serious content of Goblet of Fire disqualified the text from the category of children’s literature. The Time magazine cover for 20 September 1999 includes an illustration of Harry Potter’s face and the caption, “The Magic of Harry Potter: Hero of three bestsellers, he’s not just for kids. Here’s why the books have captured our imagination” (Grandpre).

4From the New York Times, 17 Oct. 2004: “Note From the Editor: A new category has been added to the children’s best-seller list: In addition to picture, chapter and paperback books, series of three or more titles originating in hardcover will now be listed separately.” The Times follows the publisher designations when assigning categories for each title, which prompted some critics to advise Scholastic that when releasing Harry Potter V: “simply designate it as adult fiction. The boy will be 15 by then; he could be the Holden Caulfield of wizards” (Corliss). Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows reportedly sold 8.3 million copies in the United States within twenty-four hours of its release, or ninety-six copies a second (M. Rich). The Telegraph reports that the same title sold an additional 3 million copies in England during the same time period (Phelvin). Forbes reported worldwide totals for the first day of sales estimated at 15 million and puts total sales of all Harry Potter titles at 375 million copies worldwide (“Celebrity”).

5Bourdieu asserts that institutions such as newspapers and book critics assist taste choices. These institutions are chosen and reinforced within a specific group and work to reinforce and reproduce taste within their class. However, the tastemakers must not
stray too far from the established taste preferences of that group, or they risk losing their authority (232, 240).

Two laws passed by Congress pre-dated the bestseller list’s existence in the US. The 1790 Copyright Act gave American writers rights to their texts for fourteen years after their original publication. This ensured a safe market in which authors could publish original works and receive adequate pay. The International Copyright Act of 1891 prohibited the reprinting of foreign, specifically British, titles without paying royalties to the original author, thus protecting the copyright of foreign authors in the United States market. Prior to this act, US publishers routinely stole and reproduced British titles without paying royalties to their authors; publishing houses saved money and offered proven titles, or books guaranteed to sell well, to bookstores around the country. Without these two laws, publishers would rarely want to advertise exactly how well titles were selling, or their authors might demand a greater share of the profits.

Bourdieu also says that by acquiring legitimate culture through art, manners, and education, one may enter and gain approval of that dominant class. Even though the lower classes are systematically denied access to legitimate culture by the upper classes, they recognize it as such and judge others based on their access, acquisition, and position relative to that culture, placing those with more cultural capital in a class above them (88). “Highbrow” is a term originating in the late nineteenth century, derived from the idea that people with high foreheads are more intelligent. The separation of highbrow and lowbrow culture was popularized by figures such as Matthew Arnold and T. S. Eliot, who found value in elevating certain forms of literature above others. The term “middlebrow” gradually evolved to mean generally a mainstream taste level between the two. For a more detailed account of this evolution, see Rubin.

The New York Times does not disclose the exact formula used to weight sales from independent stores, chains, the Internet, or other booksellers “because the Times considers its formula proprietary information” (Miller 4).

Examples of a yearly #1 that never appeared at #1 on a weekly bestseller list include The Miracle of the Bells, by Russell Janey, in 1947; and Kids Say the Darndest Things, by Art Linkletter, in 1958 (Bear 110).

Titles included Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm (1904), Molly Make Believe (1911), Pollyanna (1914), and Pollyanna Grows Up (1915).

Clark describes “changing attitudes towards children’s literature in the last century and a half . . . [which] allowed kidlit to emerge as a derogatory term and changes that allow us, now, to revalue, to ironize, it” (2). I use the term here with the intent to employ all of those connotations. See Del Negro for a more detailed evaluation of Harry Potter as “popular fiction.”

For a more detailed account of these women and their work in children’s publishing, see Marcus, “Sisters in Crisis and Conflict: the 1930s,” in Minders of Make-Believe (110–41); and Eddy, “Protecting Books” and “Making Books,” in Bookwomen (16–29, 65–86).

The Bookman went bankrupt and ceased publishing in 1933, leaving others to pick up the bestseller list tradition it had started (Marcus, Minders 136).

21 April 1974 marks the debut of the first regular British bestseller list, appearing in the Sunday Times Review. Editors marked it as their foray into the very “American” trade of tracking a book’s popularity rather than its quality (Sutherland).

In 1953, the Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version actually appeared on the Times and Publishers Weekly lists for over a year. The New English Bible would also appear in 1961, though it would only spend a week at #1 in the Times—edged out, ironically, by The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich (Bear 81).

In the United States, several of the most widely read books of the last decades of the nineteenth century (as gauged by sales) would be children’s books: from 1865 to 1869, Hans Brinker, Little Women, and Innocents Abroad; from 1870 to 1879, Little Men, The Hoosier School-Master, and The Adventures of Tom Sawyer; from 1880 to 1889, Uncle Remus,
Heidi, Treasure Island, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, and Little Lord Fauntleroy; and from 1890 to 1899, Black Beauty” (Marcus, Minders 43).

In 1986, Publishers Weekly noted that its list was now “compiled from data received from large-city, university and chain bookstores, book wholesalers and independent distributors nationwide” (Justice 7). Some felt that the middlebrow book-buying public was just as likely to pick up a book at a big-box store, chain bookstore, or airport gift shop as at a traditional bookstore, while critics pointed out that a non-bookstore venue was most likely to stock only bestselling books. By polling those sales venues, the list would essentially create a feedback loop, ensuring that the same bestsellers were listed week after week. In the end, both Publishers Weekly and the Times were pressured into polling wholesalers, or risk being deemed out of touch with the “average” book buyer.

In an attempt to prevent this type of “cheat,” the Times notes books purchased in bulk with a dagger. See note 19 below.

17 Publishers Weekly, quoted from the online Bestseller list page for 11 March 2012:

About the Best Sellers

Rankings reflect sales reported by vendors offering a wide range of general interest titles. The sales venues for print books include independent book retailers; national, regional and local chains; online and multimedia entertainment retailers; supermarkets, university, gift and discount department stores; and newsstands. E-book rankings reflect sales from leading online vendors of e-books in a variety of popular e-reader formats.

E-book sales are tracked for fiction and general nonfiction titles. E-book sales for advice & how-to books, children’s books and graphic books will be tracked at a future date. Titles are included regardless of whether they are published in both print and electronic formats or just one format. E-books available exclusively from a single vendor will be tracked at a future date.

The universe of print book dealers is well established, and sales of print titles are statistically weighted to represent all outlets nationwide. The universe of e-book publishers and vendors is rapidly emerging, and until the industry is settled sales of e-books will not be weighted.

Among the categories not actively tracked at this time are: perennial sellers, required classroom reading, textbooks, reference and test preparation guides, journals, workbooks, calorie counters, shopping guides, comics, crossword puzzles and self-published books.

The appearance of a ranked title reflects the fact that sales data from reporting vendors has been provided to The Times and has satisfied commonly accepted industry standards of universal identification (such as ISBN13 and EISBN13 codes). Publishers and vendors of all ranked titles confirmed in timely fashion to The New York Times Best Seller Lists requirement to allow for independent corroboration of sales for that week.

Publisher credits for e-books are listed under the corporate publishing name instead of by publisher’s division.

Sales of both print books and e-books are reported confidentially to The New York Times. The Best Seller Lists are prepared by the News Surveys and Election Analysis Department of The New York Times. Royalty Share, a firm that provides accounting services to publishers, is assisting The Times in its corroboration of e-book sales.

An asterisk (*) indicates that a book’s sales are barely distinguishable from those of the book above it. A dagger (†) indicates that some retailers report receiving bulk orders.
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Click here for an explanation of the difference between trade and mass-market paperbacks.

The relationship between Oprah Winfrey and the Times bestseller list exceeds the scope of this article. However, she proved to be the biggest competition for the Times at the top of the taste-making hierarchy at the end of the twentieth century, though her success was still measured in relation to the Times list. According to English, “The 1999 National Book Awards… presented the National Book Foundation’s 50th-Anniversary Gold Medal to one of the giants of daytime television, Oprah Winfrey. Winfrey was honored for the staggering success of the TV Book Club format her producers had conceived a few years earlier, a device which by the end of 1999 had resulted in Oprah’s monthly ‘picks’ making the bestseller lists twenty-eight times in a row and Oprah herself being called the most powerful literary tastemaker in the nation’s history” (34). See also Minzesheimer.

The parties eventually settled, and Amazon agreed to post the titles listed in the Times in alphabetical order, instead of by their rank for the week. For more information about the Amazon/Borders/New York Times lawsuits, see Miller.

The Book Sense list is compiled by the consortium of independent bookstores by the same name, and thus only polls those independents. The major Internet booksellers Amazon.com and BarnesandNoble.com are intricately connected with the New York Times list. The Web version of the Times bestseller list features links to both Web booksellers, where the books listed are discounted. As major booksellers in the United States, both companies report book sales to the Times. However, Barnes & Noble and its competitor Borders [before it went out of business in 2011] publicize and discount their own best-sellers in their brick-and-mortar stores instead of the Times list (Miller 10).


Shortly after publishing his article on Rowling, Bloom published his own book for children: Stories and Poems for Extremely Intelligent Children of All Ages (2001). The book features “forty-one stories and tales…and eighty-three poems” from such classic authors as Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Kipling, Keats, Hans Christian Andersen, and Lewis Carroll. In his introduction, Bloom states, “I do not accept the category of ‘Children’s Literature,’ which had some use and distinction a century ago, but now all too often is a mask for the dumbing-down that is destroying our literary culture” (15–16).

Works Cited


