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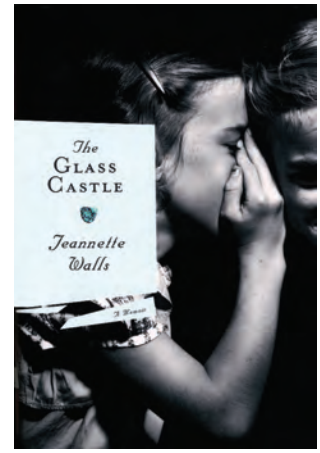
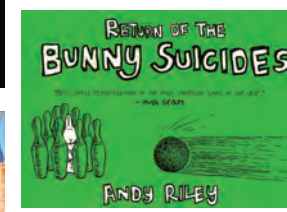
BEST *Sellers*



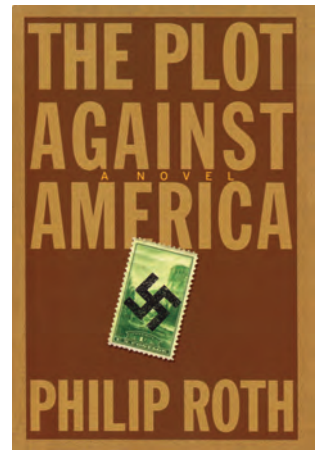


By Meakin Armstrong

Every year publishers fill bookstore shelves with countless novels, thrillers, cookbooks, political tomes, "literary fiction," young-adult titles—an endless variety of books. But at any given moment, only fifteen of them "make the list" and reach best-seller status. How do publishers find the next blockbuster book, like author Dan Brown's "The Da Vinci Code," a top seller for well over two years? "Publishing companies are engines of enthusiasm," says Chip Gibson, Random House Children's Books president and publisher. "We're always looking for the little sparks around a project; those physical manifestations of that overused but perfect word, 'buzz.' "

What's the writer's track record? Is the editor excited about a certain title? Does everyone want to look at the proposed design for the book jacket? Sometimes, even employee theft can portend success. After all, it's a hopeful sign when advance copies of a book become scarce because publishing house staffers can't wait for the title to reach the stores.

When it comes to determining a best-seller, perhaps novelist and screenwriter William Goldman's well-known dictum about Hollywood and its chase for the next blockbuster film sums it up best: *Nobody knows anything.* Or, as Doubleday Broadway president and publisher Stephen Rubin, whose stable of writers includes John Grisham, Ian McEwan, and other bankable names, explains, "Because publishing is such an intuitive business, I never say that a book will be a best-seller. I say that it has the *potential* of becoming one."



MAKING THE LIST

Perhaps these vagaries are why the best-seller list matters so much: it's the final arbiter, the endpoint, after the voodoo has been spun through marketing. And with so many new books seemingly fork-lifted onto bookshelves everyday, readers apparently appreciate the succinctness of a shortlist. "Say that you're Mr. Commuter on the train and you're involved in real estate," Rubin says. "You read in *The Wall Street Journal* that such-and-such book on real estate is a best-seller. You may well pick it up. So being on the list definitely helps."

The idea of a book reaching No. 1 status didn't exist until 1895, when a chart first appeared in *The Bookman,* a now-defunct magazine. *Publishers Weekly* introduced the oldest continuously published list in 1912. The *New York Times Book Review* didn't produce one until 1942. There are now more than forty such rankings, in publications from the Washington *Post* to *USA Today.*

While lists may vary in methodology, presentation, or focus, generally book editors draw upon a sample of actual sales data from various booksellers, then extrapolate those findings into total sales. Perhaps because it's the most read of them all, the New York *Times* is also the most disputed. Its list doesn't reveal actual sales figures—one book is simply ranked as having sold better than the other. If, therefore, a title sold only *slightly* better than another at its sample stores—even by merely one book—the better-selling title is ranked a level higher. Sales figures are also relative. Books sell better in the fall, and not nearly as well in the summer. Therefore, when a book jacket screams that it's a "New York *Times* No. 1 Best-Seller!" its meaning can vary widely in terms of actual numbers sold.

Making the list likely encourages sales even further, so publishers work their utmost to cut through the competitive morass to make their books best-sellers. For "The Da Vinci Code"—whose success everyone is currently trying to replicate—Doubleday went to great lengths. Ten-thousand advance copies were sent to reviewers, bookstores, and "big mouths" (publishing industry opinion makers) to make sure the book was noticed. One California branch of Barnes & Noble required that each employee read the book and recommend it to their customers.

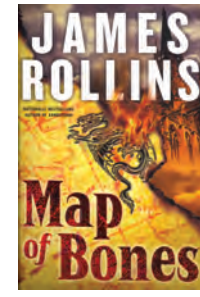
Doubleday is duplicating its effort with its newest contender, "The Traveler," a thriller by one John Twelve Hawks, an elusive author whose identity is unknown—even by his editor. Twelve Hawks, who according to his bio, "lives off the grid" and whose phone conversations with his editor are filtered through a voice modification system, is a first-time novelist. In the début edition of a planned trilogy, the setting is a consumer society dubbed "The Vast Machine." Its citizens are distracted by fashion trends and entertainment, and are largely unaware that they're being observed and manipulated. A group called "The Travelers," however, battles the all-controlling machine.

In addition to distributing thousands of advance review copies, Doubleday has produced "Traveler"-themed, Internet-based games, and faux Web sites that appear to be created by the book's characters. Doubleday has also produced three thousand DVD publicity kits for "The Traveler," wherein Twelve Hawks, in lieu of a publicity tour, reads from his book, his voice modified and rendered unrecognizable.

Should the mysterious neophyte end up topping the charts, he will be an exception. Début novelists occasionally make it onto the list—six did last year according to *Publishers Weekly*—but more than ninety per cent of its 2004 year-end list included fiction writers who had been there before. With nonfiction, success often depends upon the "platform"—the writer's name-recognition value (Jon Stewart or Jane Fonda) to ring up registers. Commercial viability is often determined by the topic itself ("The South Beach Diet"). While having a celebrity author a book for children "gives you a head start with the media," says Gibson of Random House Children's Books, "kids only care about the book. I think they're harder to hype to than adults."

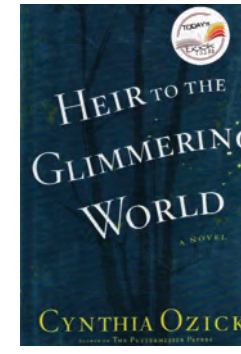
BREAKING THE CODE

From New York *Times'* best-seller John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath" to Ian McEwan's "Saturday," novels that have been



considered good—or even great—have sold well. As Michael Korda writes in "Making the List," a history of the subject, "Those who think of the best-seller list as representing the lowest common denominator have never studied [it] and fail to understand that Americans want to be challenged *and* entertained."

Maybe these lists are reflections of whom we really are at a particular moment in history (or at least what we're interested in reading). In the post-9/11 era, "The Da Vinci Code" may reflect a desire to find the hidden answers to today's confusion, or society's founding principles. (Brown's novel asserts that there is a brotherhood which has, for thousands of years, guarded secrets revealed only through codes). In June, publisher Little, Brown will introduce "The Historian" by début novelist Elizabeth Kostova. The book will also examine a hidden, coded history, but this time with the Dracula myth. In a sense, the "Harry Potter" phenomenon is a part of this growing trend: a secret society of caretakers is among us. Preorders of the sixth book in



the series, "Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince," have already made it No. 1 on the Amazon.com list, even though it won't be released until July 16th.

NOBODY KNOWS ANYTHING

Word-of-mouth is a major factor in influencing sales, but it also can't be controlled. Publishers therefore pin their hopes on ad campaigns. In the larger chain stores, they also purchase optimum floor space for book displays. Fiction, however, doesn't lend itself as easily to a quick, topical conversation on programs such as "The Daily Show," so it's often a tougher sell.

When a bookstore employee sells a title "by hand," (a recommendation based on the seller's well-honed knowledge of customer preferences), it's an important contribution to selling fiction and lesser-known titles. Book reviewers can also have clout. Pat Holt, former San Francisco *Chronicle* book editor and critic, and current editor of holtuncensored.com, says, "The best thing about being a reviewer is the good you can do for first-time novelists and other unknown writers who can't sell their books via talk shows or bookstore signings." On the other hand, when Holt excoriated a book by a repeat best-selling writer, "His loyal readers said, 'Oh joy! A new novel!' And they ran to the store to get their copy, the rats."

As the market continues to churn, publishers will keep pushing to make sure their titles make the list. And, despite herculean efforts, hoped-for blockbusters will disappoint, while book lovers who made Rebecca Wells' "Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood" a sleeper hit will find another. Goldman's observation bears repeating: Nobody knows anything. But this year there are three sure bets: the next "Harry Potter" is a certain best-seller; the eventual mass-market paperback of "The Da Vinci Code" will fly off the shelves; and hundreds more novels, thrillers, mysteries, cookbooks, and self-help titles crammed into bulging book racks will battle for the reader's attention. ■