

Sarah Churchwell and Thomas Ruys Smith, eds.
*Must Read: Rediscovering American Bestsellers—From
Charlotte Temple to The Da Vinci Code.*

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... this inquiry is concerned with the connection between popular books read for pleasure by adult Americans and the times in which those books were read....; but flexible as the criterion may be, it would be stretched beyond the breaking point should it include dictionaries, school texts, cookbooks, government reports, or manuals on specialized subjects.¹

- ¹ Taken from James Hart's *The Popular Book*, this quote might describe at once the rationale behind *Must Read* and its competitive advantage for those interested in the history of popular reading in the United States: it successfully navigates "beyond [Hart's] breaking point" to encompass a number of genres, from romances to *savoir faire* manuals, over a period of four centuries, but it does so wisely noting that "the semantic and definitional vagaries surrounding the term 'bestseller,'" let alone what constitutes one, can never be resolved in summary or comprehensive terms.² This being a common post-modern caveat, especially in the enormous and complex field of Cultural Studies, it still helps this collection avoid the rather futile retrospective extraction of "bestseller recipes" (seen, for example, in James Hall's 2012 *Hit Lit: Cracking the Code of the Twentieth Century's Biggest Bestsellers*;³ or taken up only with a knowing pinch of salt, as in the 2007 *Why We Read What We Read* by Lisa Adams and John Heath⁴).

- 2 *Must Read* expands the usual time limits of the bestseller inquiry exponentially. Since the publication of the two basic texts in the field, with Hart's aforementioned 1950 *The Popular Book* following practically at the heels of Frank Luther Mott's 1947 seminal *Golden Multitudes*, there had been a hiatus of scholarly silence on the matter—perhaps because the stigma of popular fiction being shallow persisted—until roughly the end of the 20th century. Research on the specific subject of blockbusters within the field of popular reading, such as Alice Payne Hackett and James Henry Burke's 1977 *80 Years of Best Sellers, 1895-1975*;⁵ John Sutherland's 1981 *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction in the 1970s*;⁶ and his later *Bestsellers: A Very Short Introduction*⁷ focused on a specific short time-frame and dealt exclusively with literature. Clive Bloom's incisive *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction since 1900*⁸ expands into other kinds of writing, but concerns exclusively the contemporary U.K. market (as does much of Sutherland). The closest analogue to *Must Read* would probably be Michael Korda's 2001 *Making the List*,⁹ with its sharp cultural analysis of fiction and nonfiction alike, categorized by decade. It should be noted here though that, while Mott somewhat set the methodology for subsequent investigations (painstakingly accumulating bestseller lists created so by “vox pop”¹⁰ and then extrapolating trends from them), Churchwell and Ruys Smith opt instead to follow the more modest yet methodologically safer model set by New Historicism and go for a focused reading of the specific bestselling books of each era, to see which ingredient(s) in them it was that resonated so successfully with their reading public. What's more, they opt to focus on “the critically ‘neglected’ bestseller” (MR 6) to avoid revisiting texts already favored by scholarship (and, one presumes, to give the devil of popularity his due for accuracy's sake). They thus synthesize a picture of American (bestseller) reading that functions well on both a micro- and a macro-cosmic level.
- 3 Following the editors' “Introduction,” which highlights the above particularities of the book, there follows a chapter by Sarah Garland of great interest for the scholar in the field, “Missing numbers: The partial history of the bestseller.” Garland's painstaking research shows how the primary source of data for scholarly research in the field of popular literature, i.e. booksellers' compiled lists, are a partial source at best, since they only take into account original printings and not pirated editions (that abounded in the early years of American publishing), or miss the serialized versions of a hit item in newspapers, or rotate their list items periodically for marketing purposes, or cannot account for census and literacy figures at the time. Garland's compelling argument bolsters the editors' claim about the dubiousness of sweeping statements in popular culture/fiction studies, and provides a filter through which to gauge the subsequent essays.
- 4 Gideon Mailer's “The history of *Charlotte Temple* as an American bestseller” follows chronological suit in examining the reasons for, and form of, the success of Susanna Rowson's 1791 romantic *Tale of Truth* as “America's first bestseller.” Mailer wisely avoids a retroactive focus primarily on the allure of the novel's sensationalist element and instead weaves together a complex argument based on the pervasive puritanism of the American public at the time, with its ensuing mistrust of the “lies” and luxuries of fiction; attitudes towards truth as a marker of merit and a marketing gimmick; the mixture of explicit conservatism and implicit radicalism in the novel's theological implications; and, most importantly, “Rowson's debt to evangelical revivalism” which, for the author, “accounted for *Charlotte Temple*'s immediate and continued popularity during the first half of the nineteenth century” (MR 72). However, the latter—and focal, for Mailer—point seems a bit

less than compelling, for although the excerpts he chooses to support his theory *could* be read so, they also do not *have to* be read so.

- 5 Rachel Ihara in the next chapter appears to make a stronger case with “‘Like beads strung together’: E. D. E. N. Southworth and the aesthetics of popular serial fiction.” An expert on serial fiction, Ihara delineates here with systematic clarity how Southworth’s mastery of “the episodic structure” allowed for a weaving of readers’ concerns into the plot of her many 19th-century serial novels, thus making the fiction *du jour* as much a newspaper item as the journalists’ stories and fad ads by which it was framed on the page. Southworth also created a pleasant sense of continuity and familiarity through intertextual character reappearances, diffusion of plot focus into multiple storylines, and the use of stock character types and situational motifs. Thus Ihara argues that subsequent scholarly readings of early serialized fiction in their single-volume form cannot do full justice to the aesthetics of those works.
- 6 “*Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* and the visual culture of temperance” by William Gleason takes on another offbeat perspective in reading Timothy Shay Arthur’s 1854 titillating teetotaler tale in conjunction with popular “temperance images” that had become a key component of public expression by the 1840s (MR 102). Gleason’s discussion of both the popular array of emblematic temperance images and the import of the book’s powerful visuality is well founded on historical facts and astute; however, the main argument that draws parallels between the two realms, like for example one of the book’s frontispieces and the popular image of “the Tree of Intemperance” (MR 114-15), suggests a critical alertness to visual connections that may or may not have been there for the average reader of such sensationalist narratives. This might be the reason why Gleason finally restricts himself merely to highlighting “the ways in which Arthur’s images—in words and in pictures—helped *Ten Nights* insinuate itself so deeply into nineteenth and early twentieth-century popular culture” (MR 126), without insisting that this “help” was in any way definitive.
- 7 Hsuan L. Hsu’s analysis, in “‘The Man Without a Country’: Treason, expansionism, and the history of a ‘bestselling’ short story,” of Edward Everett Hale’s short story is important in two ways: first, in showing how the long-term effects of bestsellerdom are as culturally important in terms of scholarly conclusions as the explosive immediate form of success we’ve come to associate with blockbusters. Half the article, in fact, is about the sequel named after the story’s protagonist, the novel *Philip Nolan’s Friends*, which “represents a key moment in Hale’s rethinking of the phenomenon of extrastate violence that links Nolan’s indefinite detention in the 1863 story with the longer development of US imperialism through the nineteenth century” (MR 142). Although that might suggest the difficulty of speaking about bestsellers in other than novelistic terms, it also points to a feature of bestsellerdom within the capitalist market, that is, the diffusion of the bestselling item as a “brand” in a variety of related (tenuously or not) products and media. Second, Hsu’s article offers an interesting deconstruction of the historic context (and subsequent reception) of the short story’s apparently patriotic theme, showing an underlying concern with expansionist and exceptionalist imperial violence. Juxtaposing a close reading of the text’s points of semantic tension to dramatically shifting attitudes about America’s international role, the essay shows “that ‘The Man Without a Country’ is as concerned with empire building as with nationalism, as much a tale of the state’s own investments in extraterritorial and extralegal force as it is a parable of treason and

redemption” (MR 138)— a conclusion that rings a very sharp bell after Bosnia, Iraq and Afghanistan.

- 8 James Russell’s “Exhilaration and enlightenment in the biblical bestseller: Lew Wallace’s *Ben-Hur, A Tale of the Christ*” is one of the most enjoyable chapters of the book: glibly written and with a sharp eye for the right nuances in his close reading of the 1880 bestseller in conjunction with Wallace’s own fall from Grace as a Confederate General. Russell argues that the appeal of *Ben-Hur* (and its filmic adaptations) rested in its mix of “sensation and spirituality,” thrill and conversion narrative, lavish physical descriptions and hazy epiphanic encounters with Jesus, which enthralled “a sizable demographic of committed Christians who had previously avoided the ‘frivolous’ pleasures of novel reading” (MR 158). However, I cannot help but think—and in this case I take these thoughts to be the mark of an engaging piece of scholarship—that, given Russell’s suggestion that Wallace saw himself in the wronged protagonist (in terms of his odd conversion to Christianity and his grievances against General Grant—a proxy for Messala—over the botched battle of Shiloh), perhaps the immense appeal of the tale is not so much the message about being meek as Christians and giving up the chance for violent action, but, instead, the capacity of the hero to engage in precisely that kind of violent action and gain the advantageous position of the winner, the stronger man who can then choose to be merciful. This mentality best summed as “speak softly and carry a big stick,” captures perfectly America’s image of itself, especially in terms of its international relations, and would explain why readers/viewers consider the chariot race scene as the climax of the novel, not Ben-Hur’s conversion at the foot of the Cross.
- 9 “‘Absolutely punk’: Queer economies of desire in *Tarzan of the Apes*” by J. Michelle Coghlan follows with an insightful deconstruction of the sexual and relational economies of Edgar Rice Burroughs’s 1912 runaway hit, which started from the humble pulps to become a brand name for an “American merchandizing extravaganza” (MR 176) in a variety of media. While reading *Tarzan* as one of the “queeroes” (MR 195) of pop Americana was originally suggested by other critics—the article cites Kenneth Kidd, Dana Seitler, and the blog “Quixotic Quests of Q the Conqueror”—Coghlan’s investigation is original in considering the effect upon readers of the cross-currents of problematic and unfulfilled homosexual, cannibalistic, or bestial desire (declarative of other boundaries of class, race and ethnicity). It thus brings together the exotic jungle with the anxieties of the burgeoning American suburbia, an even more sinister jungle as often coded in the Americana imaginary.
- 10 The next chapter, Sarah Garland’s “Ornamentalism: Desire, disavowal, and displacement in E. M. Hull’s *The Sheik*” devotes its largest part in an *Orientalism*- and gender- informed reading of the 1919 novel best remembered as a Valentino movie, which however will bring little to the theory-savvy scholar. More useful are the historical notes about and around the text, which implicate orientalist and “ornamentalist” discourses with the romance trope and its glossing over of cultural anxieties, and most useful—and interesting—is the final discussion of female fantasy as a mode of expressing forbidden female desires, which deconstructs the novel’s stereotypical tropes and receptions.
- 11 The shift from Victorian attitudes to Modernity is concluded with a foray into nonfiction in “Small change? Emily Post’s *Etiquette* (1922-2012).” Grace Lees-Maffei’s well-written overview of nearly a century of *Etiquette* editions shows how “its historical value is best revealed when the various editions of *Etiquette* are read retrospectively and comparatively,” gauging cultural shifts from the textual ones, and raising questions on

how to read the selective similarities between serialized fiction (discussed by Ihara in Chapter 4) and this kind of nonfiction that bases its longevity on its being “a work under continual revision” (MR 225). Noting how Emily Post’s writing techniques, for example her use of made-up characters with symbolic names to illustrate situations, or self-directed intertextual irony, peppered her guide with literary appeal, Lees-Maffei is raising very modern questions about the nature of authorship (the current *Etiquette* is a family-written text) and textual authenticity as forms of authority.

- 12 Chapter 11, “Blockbuster feminism: *Peyton Place* and the uses of scandal,” chronicles the uproar over Grace Metalious’s groundbreaking 1956 novel and how the differential interpretations of its content—lowbrow abomination for the establishment critics, but liberating and refreshing revelation of life’s dark truths for the public—built its bestseller status. Ardis Cameron devotes no small part of the essay on Metalious’s own “cult of personality” and the role it played in stirring a sensation and then keeping it broiling. Cameron’s style, combining lively moments from Metalious’s rise to notoriety/fame with a balanced exposition of the novel and its historico-cultural context, makes one want to (re-)read *Peyton Place* not only as a cultural marker, but as a text that marks the start of a series of contemporary attitudes about (negative) celebrity, authorship, censorship, interactive reading and individuality—the very thing one sees today culminating in (online) self-publishing, reality shows and exaggerated fan cultures (complete with fan fiction). Still, one would have liked to see a more careful proofreading of this piece, as here I discovered the majority of the book’s grammatical slip-ups.
- 13 Evan Brier’s “Crimes and bestsellers: Mario Puzo’s path to *The Godfather*” reads “crime” in two senses: not only as the sensationalist topic of Puzo’s novel that led to the history-making film trilogy by Francis Ford Coppola, but as the perception of the publishing industry as a kind of corrupting Mafia taking advantage of honest literary talent. Disheartened by his lack of success for what he thought was a far better work of his, *The Fortunate Pilgrim* (1965), and with the plan for his next ambitious book dismissed by his publisher, Puzo set out to write the kind of novel erudite people would supposedly hate, a piece of lowbrow crime fiction, under the assumption that this was what the *hoi polloi* would buy. Although, as Brier eloquently argues by weaving historical and cultural facts together, Puzo’s basic assumptions about his public and publishers’ behavior were wrong; and although he could not factor in the unpredictability of the market, or the slim odds of literary success, the result of this grudge—as in the case of *Ben-Hur* above—was a bestseller embedding in its plot much of Puzo’s own embittered worldview: “Had Puzo recognized the cultural worlds as it was in 1965,...he might have written the literary novel he had planned. In that case, it is likely that neither that novel nor *The Fortunate Pilgrim* would be well remembered today. We have benefited from his misreading” (MR 292).
- 14 People who enjoy verbal irony and wit are sure to enjoy the chapter by Sarah Churchwell, titled “Master of sentiment: The romances of Nicholas Sparks”: the careful juxtaposition of narrative bits with cultural information and Sparks’s own less-than-flattering pronouncements (like when he compares himself to the Greek tragedians, Shakespeare, Jane Austen and...Hemingway—MR 310-11)) occasionally had me laughing out loud. Churchwell uses Sparks as an author emblematic of a “recent resurgence of Victorian models of sentimental domestic fiction in mainstream popular romance” (MR 297), harboring “a covert but explicitly Christian agenda into ostensibly secular fiction via the rhetoric of ‘choice’” (MR 298). The close reading to which Churchwell subjects Sparks’s evangelical fiction reveals this agenda in all its sinister dimensions, especially its

parochial models of femininity. The essay becomes particularly relevant in view of the recent emergence of more such pruriently reactionary hits, such as the *Twilight* and *50 Shades of Grey* series.

- 15 Georgiana Banita's reading of Khaled Hosseini's 2003 hit in "The Kite Runner's transnational allegory: Anatomy of an Afghan-American bestseller" introduces an international tangent in the volume, consistent with considerations of America's cultural hegemony in the globalized market. Through a juxtaposition of key passages with facets of the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan, Banita reveals how Hosseini caters fully to his American readers, justifying U.S. political exceptionalism and cultural imperialism through "a heavy-handed parable" (MR 320) of an Afghani U.S. citizen returning to his homeland in order to atone for an old wrong by saving a saintly friend from the violence of a sociopath Nazi Taliban rapist (!). At the same time, Banita reveals a third dimension in the novel conflating the process of reading and writing with political exchanges favoring ultimately western logocentrism and a false "universalism," a trait exacerbated in the film version of the novel.
- 16 Equally austere is the critique of Dan Brown's 2003 mega-hit, *The Da Vinci Code*. In "The fiction of history: *The Da Vinci Code* and the virtual public sphere," Stephen J. Mexal delineates how the book, "a strange new hybrid: not historical fiction, but fictional history" (MR 343), seductively blurs the lines between past truth and the Aristotelian "impossible plausibility" to feed the American public's penchant for conspiracy theories in a virtual world where, according to the Baudrillardians, because anything can be simulated to perfection, anything could be true. According to Mexal, Brown offers a revelatory, "coherent master historical narrative" to pacify a public discomfited by fragmented, transient realities and postmodern uncertainties (MR 347). At the same time, the individual plucky researcher triumphing against powerful conspiratorial consortia approximates the anti-establishment lone hacker favored by the virtual public: "By participating in this virtual public sphere, and debating the nature and coherency of narratives fictional and historical, the reader ultimately imagines him- or herself as an agent of a new postnational history" (MR 355). That, ultimately, is a good way to sum up the conclusions of this collection, for they reveal the precarious and wholly arbitrary nature of bestsellerdom, born out of a momentary conjecture of public trends, publishing bets, and authorial intent.

NOTES

1. James D. Hart, *The Popular Book: A History of America's Literary Taste* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1950), 283.
2. Sarah Churchwell and Thomas Ruys Smith, "Introduction," in *Must Read: Rediscovering American Bestsellers* (London and New York: Continuum, 2012), 4. Subsequent quotes from the book will be cited parenthetically by "MR" and page number only.
3. James Hall, *Hit Lit: Cracking the Code of the Twentieth Century's Biggest Bestsellers* (New York: Random House, 2012).

4. Lisa Adams and John Heath, *Why We Read What We Read: A Delightfully Opinionated Journey Through Bestselling Books* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2007).
 5. Alice Payne Hackett and James Henry Burke, *80 Years of Best Sellers, 1895-1975* (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1977).
 6. John Sutherland, *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction in the 1970s* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).
 7. John Sutherland, *Bestsellers: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).
 8. Clive Bloom, *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction since 1900* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002).
 9. Michael Korda, *Making the List: A Cultural History of the American Bestseller, 1900-99* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2001).
 10. Frank Luther Mott, *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 1.
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