




BESTSELLERS

英美畅销小说简史

John Sutherland 著 苏耕欣 译



通识教育
双语文库

A VERY SHORT
INTRODUCTION



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In reality there is no kind of evidence or argument by which one can show that Shakespeare, or any other writer, is 'good'. Nor is there any way of definitely proving that – for instance – Warwick Deeping is 'bad'. Ultimately there is no test of literary merit except survival, which is itself an index to majority opinion.

George Orwell, 'Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool'

事实上，我们找不到证据或理由足以表明莎士比亚或其他任何作家是“优秀”作家；也无法确证沃里克·迪平之流乃“劣等”作家。检验文学价值的最终标准是作品之流传状况而非他物，而流传本身就是多数人意见的某种标志。

——乔治·奥威尔，《李尔王、托尔斯泰和弄臣》

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Chapter 1

Definitions

Preface

1

Why read, or contemplate, with any degree of seriousness, less than ‘good’ (and sometimes downright bad) books – the Deepings of the literary world? Do they not belong in that category, contemptuously called in German, *Wegwerfliteratur*? – ‘throw-away literature’? Why pick up what literary history so resolutely discards?

Any study of bestsellers confronts the same question as does the decaf, no-fat latte drinker in Starbucks: ‘Why bother?’ One justification, and the easiest demonstrated, is their (that is, bestsellers’) interesting peculiarity. Like other ephemera of past times, bestsellers (even Orwell’s despised Deeping) offer the charm of antiquarian quaintness. Where else would one encounter a line such as: ‘I say, you *are* a *sport*, pater’ [‘Son’ addressing ‘Sorrell’, on having been given a tenner ‘tip’ in Deeping’s *Sorrell and Son*]. And, so short is their lifespan, that today’s bestsellers become yesterday’s fiction almost as soon as one has read them.

Looking back through the lists is to uncover delightful cultural oddities. Consider, for example, the top-selling (#1) novel of 1923 in the United States, *Black Oxen*, by Gertrude Atherton. Recall too that the discriminating reader of that year had James Joyce’s

Ulysses, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and D. H. Lawrence's *Aaron's Rod* to choose from.

Atherton's title is taken from W. B. Yeats ("The years like great black oxen tread the world"). The allusion signals grand literary pretension; pretension absurdly unmerited. None the less, the novel's theme was, for the time, both topical and sensational – rejuvenation. For humans, that is, not cattle.

The narrative opens in a New York theatre. A brilliant young newspaperman, Lee Clavering (a member of the city's elite 'top 400' families), is struck by a beautiful woman in the audience. Investigation reveals that she is facially identical with a young 'belle' of thirty years before, Mary Ogden. Miss Ogden married a Hungarian diplomat, Count Zattiany, and has never been heard of since. Speculation rages, but eventually the truth comes out: Ogden/Zattiany has been rejuvenated in Vienna by Dr Steinach's new X-ray technique. By bombarding a woman's ovaries at the period of menopause, the ageing process is reversible.

When news of the wonderful process hits the newspapers, 'civil war threatens'. And luckless Clavering finds himself in love with a woman old enough to be his mother. On the other side, he himself is obsessively loved by a flapper, Janet Oglethorpe, young enough to be his daughter, who drinks illegal hooch and attends 'petting parties'. The plot thickens, madly, thereafter.

It is nonsense – just as, medically, Steinach's X-ray miracle was nonsense. In 1922 Atherton herself had received the Viennese doctor's rejuvenation treatment. It seems, from publicity pictures, to have done little for her beauty. But tosh fiction and quack science as it may be, *Black Oxen* fits, hand-in-glove, with its period. And no other period.

However absurd it seems to the modern reader, Atherton's novel reflects, and dramatizes, contemporary anxiety about women's

freedoms; as definitively as did *Bridget Jones's Diary* in the 1990s. The 1920s was the era of the 'flapper' – the perpetually young girl-woman. British women in this decade had, after long struggle, the vote – but only if they were over 30, after which the heyday in the female blood was conceived to have been sufficiently cooled to make rational political decisions. The cult of Dionysian youth – the 'be young forever or die now' aspiration – is more respectably commemorated in another novel of 1923, Scott Fitzgerald's *Beautiful and Damned*. It, too, made the bestseller lists, but much less spectacularly than Atherton: Fitzgerald was running a longer literary race.

Black Oxen, the top novel in the US in 1923, is inextricably 'of' its period. It could have been published 15 years later (as was Aldous Huxley's 'elixir of life' novel, *After Many a Summer*). But out of its immediate time-and-place frame, *Black Oxen* would have no more 'worked' than a fish out of water. Nor would it, in other days, have been what it was, 'the book of the day'. The day made the book, as much as events of the day made newspaper headlines in 1923.

This hand-in-glove quality is inextricably linked with the ephemerality of bestsellerism. A #1 novel may be seen as a successful literary experiment – as short-lived as a camera flash, and as capable of freezing, vividly, its historical moment. If (to paraphrase Coleridge) one saw *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* ('Jesus tripping') wandering wild in Arabia, one would shout: 'hippy seventies!' (with the possible addition 'dude!'). If Bulldog Drummond blundered, dinner-jacketed, into one's living room, his 'man' Denny in close attendance with pint tankard, furled broly, and pistol, one would recognize the clubland thug as a time traveller from the early 1920s.

The great literary work may be, as Jonson said of Shakespeare, 'not for an age but for all time'. The reverse is, typically, the case with the 'best' bestsellers. They are snapshots of the age.

An American kind of book

There is no advance in the merchandising of books – from the feuilleton (newspaper serial), the dime novel, through the pulp magazine, the mass-market paperback, the webstore, and, of course, the bestseller and its apparatus – that America has not pioneered and brought to perfection.

America was peculiarly suited for the development of a popular fiction industry and its most dynamic manifestation: the bestseller. As a democracy, America came into being at the same time as the rise of the novel. With their revolutionary proclamations, the new state's founders enshrined rights to freedom of expression and the pursuit of happiness. Bestsellers aim to supply those commodities.

There was, unlike in Europe, no tradition of state control over literature or its makers. Commercial control, via privilege or monopoly, is similarly alien to American laissez-faire literary culture. Apart from a brief period in 1915, America has not imposed any system of retail price maintenance, such as Britain's Net Book Agreement: a trade pact (deemed illegal under American anti-trust law), introduced in the 1890s and abolished in the 1990s, devised to discourage 'underselling', or competitive pricing. 'Let 'er rip' has always been the American commercial motto.

America has enjoyed (and typically invented) the world's most advanced printing, transport, and communication technologies. Most importantly, in its formative 19th-century phase, until April 1891, the American book trade was wholly unfettered by any adherence to protocols of international copyright. It was in the happy position of being able to plunder mature European – principally British – literary cultures at will and without sanction.

For the first hundred years of its existence, the flag of the American book trade was the Jolly Roger. And most systematically plundered was British literary property. The effect is easily demonstrated. F. L. Mott's 'Overall Best Sellers in the United States', his monograph on the subject, uses for its survey the calculus of 'a total sale equal to one per cent of the population of the continental United States for the decade in which it was published'. Mott lists, by this finicky reckoning, 124 bestselling 'American' novels, in the period 1776 to 1900. Of those, 74 are actually British in origin; 15 mainland European (mainly French); and a mere 55 native products.

Huckleberry Finn: a case study

'All modern American literature', pontificated Ernest Hemingway, 'comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*.' And, one may add, beneath its vernacular idiomatic surface – as American as Pike County – great chunks of Twain's perennially popular novel come from pirated foreign sources. The narrative is worm-holed with un-American popular fiction.

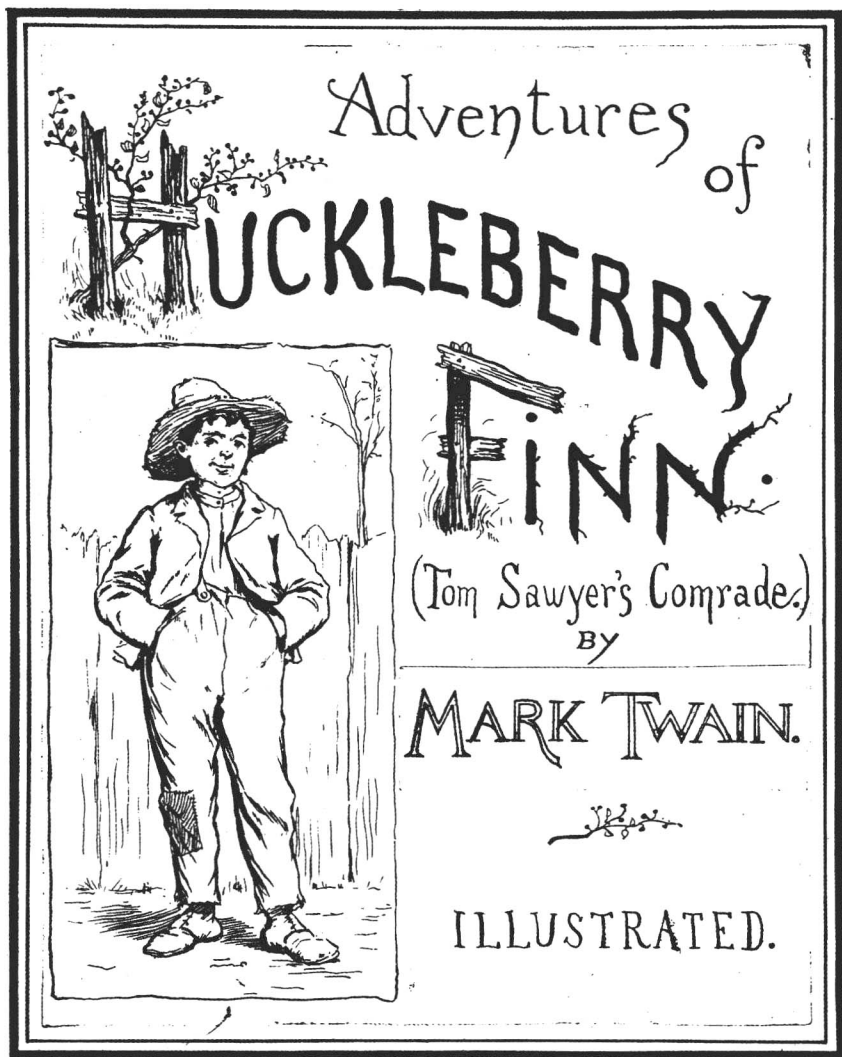
When, for example, Tom sets up the preposterous scheme to spring Jim from the shed in which Aunt Sally has imprisoned the luckless slave, the young rogue cites – what else? – *The Count of Monte Cristo*. As he explains, to a sceptical (and notably less literate) Huck:

It don't make no difference how foolish it is, it's the *right* way – and it's the regular way ... look at one of them prisoners in the bottom dungeon of the Castle Deef, in the harbour of Marseilles, that dug himself out that way; how long was *he* at it, you reckon?'

'I don't know.'

'Well, guess.'

'I don't know. A month and a half.'



1. *Huckleberry Finn*, the original edition of 1884, illustrated by E. W. Kemble