
Popular fiction of the 1970s
John Sutherland
BEST SELLERS

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**Mickey Spillane, one of the world's top mystery writers, is read in fourteen languages every minute of every day. Since *I, the Jury*, published in 1947, his books have sold more than 55,000,000 copies throughout the world. People like them.**

(1970s blurb to Spillane's paperbacks. Spillane himself claims to have sold over 150,000,000 copies of his work.)

**For some literary critics writing a book that is popular and commercially successful rates very high on the list of white-collar crime.**

(Bestselling author Irwin Shaw reviewing superselling author Mario Puzo's *Fools Die*.)

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# Preface

When I tell my colleagues that I am 'working' on bestsellers I have detected behind their polite interest the unstated question, 'Why bother?' Such scepticism, and even a mild rebuke, is understandable enough. Since one third of my salary as a university teacher is designed as a stipend for research, I (and my colleagues) can estimate that some £10,000 of UGC cash has gone into this exercise in reading less than good books. Most academic teachers of English become adept over the years at parrying the familiar accusation, 'You lucky sods, you get *paid* for reading fun books. We have to do it in our own time after a *real* day's work.' (To which the standard reply is, 'So you think reading the *Pisan Cantos* and *Finnegans Wake* is fun, do you?') It is harder to parry when the literature in question is universally disdained by one's own profession.

I don't pretend to be adept in explaining it, but I have satisfied myself as to the value of spending my time and the state's cash on 'seriously' reading the likes of Frederick Forsyth and Harold Robbins. As I have argued in a previous book, it seems evident to me that the literary or 'quality' novel is much more closely tied to the mass-consumption article (James's 'novel of commerce') than our educational syllabus customarily allows. 'Tied' does not necessarily imply bondage. The thinking behind this study is not alarmist. I do not think the serious novel to be, as one slogan of 1975 put it, 'an endangered species' – endangered, that is, by mass-produced *Trivialliteratur*. But I do think that the dominant mode of commercial production of fiction brings all sorts of formative and deforming pressures to bear on the best novels and novelists of our age. I would not go so far as to say that

unless we understand *Jaws* we shall not fully understand Naipaul, but the fact that Benchley and Naipaul are both published (in Britain) by André Deutsch suggests, if not a congenital, at least a place-of-work relationship between bestseller and Booker Prize winner.

There is also, in my opinion, a usefully corrective aspect to the study of bestsellers. These novels deny us the luxury of clear cut, autonomous authorship and achieved 'texts'. The lamentable decline of bibliography as a subject in recent years has confirmed among its students an attitude to literature which is both mystical and lazy. Even undergraduates now seem to assume that books are produced magically, effortlessly wished into existence by their artistically independent authors. One of the useful aspects of bestsellers is that we cannot see them as isolated texts with single minds behind them. We have to see them as books: things which are made and are successful in so far as they sell, not just things which are composed and are successful in so far as they are critically evaluated. Nor are bestsellers entirely made by their 'authors'; a whole string of agents, editors and salesmen could – if copyright law and literary convention allowed – claim 'credits' in an essentially corporate venture.

Wherever possible I have used blurbs and publishers' synopses – not just out of idleness (though they are very convenient) but because such material bears an impress from the producers of the commodity and is thus often doubly demonstrative.

## Annotation

A Checklist of the fiction works mentioned in the text will be found appended, with author and date of first publication. Since different forms and places of publication are involved I have not attempted to give the various British and American publishers. An exception is made where I have quoted. In such cases the edition used is indicated parenthetically after the Checklist entry. For non-fiction I have used the Harvard system of notation. Full details will be found in the Bibliography of non-fiction works appended.

## Contents

# Introduction

What, Henry James asked in 1899, would the novel of the twentieth century be like? That there would be a future for the form he was certain: 'till the world is an unpeopled void,' he prophesied, 'there will be an image in the mirror.' But the quality of that image, the 'art' which he had laboured to raise, James saw as threatened by fiction's spectacular success as a market commodity. There had been 'monstrous multiplications':

> The published statistics are extraordinary, and of a sort to engender many kinds of uneasiness. The sort of taste that used to be called 'good' has nothing to do with the matter: we are so demonstrably in presence of millions for whom taste is but an obscure, confused, immediate instinct. In the flare of railway bookstalls, in the shop-fronts of most booksellers, especially the provincial, in the advertisements of the weekly newspapers, and in fifty places besides, this testimony to the general preference triumphs (James, 1962, pp. 48-9).

The great novelist's overture to the new century finishes on an uplifting note. But the essay as a whole is haunted by James's 'uneasiness' at the perceived 'triumph' of the 'general preference' of the 'millions'. Trampling through the neat parterres of the House of Fiction is Demos, emancipated by the Common Schools Act of 1870 and sodden with an excess of those low novels that George Eliot memorably called 'spiritual gin'. The Hogarthian allusion is not quite right, however, for it was the newness and, in an obscure way, the new technology which alarmed the nineteenth-century clerisy. Matthew Arnold, for example, picked on the same associations of 'flaring' gaslight and steam engines in his

description of 'the tawdry novels which flare in the bookshelves of our railway stations, and which seem designed, as so much else that is produced for the use of our middle class seems designed, for people with a low standard of life' (Williams, 1961, p. 169).

It was a couple of years before James wrote 'The future of the novel', but it was in his other home, America, that the term 'bestseller' originated. And clearly enough it is the now familiar glossy bestseller and bestsellerdom that he foresaw. It is noteworthy, however, that although it alarmed him as a portent, James – who almost single-handedly made his kind of fiction *discutable* – does not discuss the 'English novel of commerce'. To do so is 'impossible, I think ... without bringing into the field many illustrations drawn from individuals – without pointing the moral with names both conspicuous and obscure. Such a freedom would carry us, here, quite too far, and would moreover only encumber the path' (James, 1962, p. 54). The task is declined by James, not only 'here' but elsewhere. The taste of the millions in novels – their fiction factory, to adapt the Jamesian metaphor – is glimpsed only fleetingly in stall displays, through shop windows and in advertisements.

The majority of critics of the twentieth century follow James's practice. Anthony Burgess, for example, writing a study comprehensively entitled *The Novel Now* ('now' being 1945-71) confidently discards much of what is, ostensibly, his subject matter:

> Very occasionally the best book and the bestseller coincide, but generally the books that make the most money are those which lack both style and subtlety and present a grossly over-simplified picture of life. Such books are poor art, and life is too short to bother with any art that is not the best of its kind (Burgess, 1971, p. 20).

Embodied in this bluff dismissal notice served on a large slice of Anglo-American fiction are a familiar set of interlocking prejudices, all confirming Burgess's critical triage. First, there is the *prédilection d'artiste* for the 'aristocratic', the stronger since Burgess, like Lawrence who elaborated the theory, is a major novelist ('style and subtlety' opposed to 'poor art' – the class attributes transpose clearly enough). This hauteur is

buttressed by an appeal to the select canon of 'real' and 'classic' art which transcends the flux of time; of the many maxims he could have chosen, Burgess chooses to cue us with Hippocrates' *ars longa, vita brevis* ('life is too short to bother . . .'). Finally, underpinning the whole is Arnold's notion of the 'culture' of the highly educated minority, 'the best that has been thought and said' (Burgess's gloss: 'the best of its kind'). The bestness which is not respected is that of selling.

Burgess's is one book, and within its self-imposed restriction a good one. But around us, every week, we see the same prejudice at work. An alien, with nothing but the back ends of our weeklies or the Friday and Sunday supplements to go on, would hardly infer that the fiction industry depends preponderantly on a handful of current bestsellers and a mass of genre productions, largely brought out in paperback (a form generally ignored by reviewers, though for twenty years the majority of novels have been bought as reprints in soft covers). This flattering misapprehension of a reading public abuzz with interest in the week's 'quality' hardback novels is quickly dispelled by a visit to any of W.H. Smith's eighty or so station bookshops. In their 'flare' (brighter even than that which appalled James and Arnold) one is bombarded by 'W.H. SMITH'S TOP TEN PAPERBACKS' (predominantly fiction), a 'bestsellers' section (paperback novels) and rank upon rank of sf (science fiction), gothic, thriller and romance volumes – all paperback. What one does not find are the £5 apiece novels earnestly evaluated in this week's *New Statesman*, *Spectator* or *TLS*.

One can cite other examples of the bestseller's invisibility at the level where literature is seriously discussed. In 1976 a comprehensive guide to British and American *Contemporary Novelists* was prepared by St James Press, London, and St Martin's Press, New York. It is a massive volume, more like a building block than a book. Some 1,650 pages long, it represents the efforts of two Editors, twenty-nine Advisers (all distinguished academics or otherwise literary dignitaries) and 194 Contributors. Between them this critical regiment have produced entries on nearly 700 novelists, arranged alphabetically from Ahmad Abbas to Sol Yurick. The comprehensiveness

of the work is astonishing; everyone will find authors whom he has never heard of, but whose contribution to contemporary fiction is clearly substantial. And equally astonishing is the cyclopaedia's omission of novelists one cannot but have heard of, but whom the Advisers regard as beneath notice. Even a reference work of this extensiveness can find no room for Harold Robbins (with an estimated 200 m. sales), Alistair MacLean (with an estimated 150 m. sales), Frederick Forsyth (with an estimated 50 m. sales), Mickey Spillane (with an estimated 150 m. sales), Barbara Cartland (with an estimated 100 m. sales), Jacqueline Susann (whose bestselling novel has sold over 6 m. in the US) or Peter Benchley (whose bestselling novel has sold over 10 m. in the US).

There are good reasons for this quite typical neglect. Academic and higher-journalism approaches habitually establish a critic/subject to literary/object relationship, which the bestseller slips out of. The bestseller is never static or sufficiently complete in itself for criticism either to get to work on it, or to make the work worthwhile. (Thinking along these lines Colin Watson observes, in his entertaining *Snobbery With Violence*, that looking for literary qualities in Edgar Wallace is as futile as applying canons of sculpture to a pile of gravel.) We have no critical vocabulary for applauding the ingenious, polymorphic tie-ins of an otherwise poor novel (its media adaptability), or for congratulating a novelist who writes indifferently – or even appallingly – but promotes his or her book with genius (Jacqueline Susann is a prime example). Above all, criticism has great difficulty in coming to terms with the ephemeral product; there is no good criticism of the bestseller for the same reason that there is no good criticism of television; the thing is never around long enough to be engaged with. Denied his customary durable object, the reviewer/critic falls back on a kind of Podsnappery ('Not literature!') and saves his time for more worthwhile activities. Bestsellers are left to the mock-critical assessments of the advertising man.

Traditionally, then, 'bestseller' is not a term which has figured much in literary-critical discussion, other than as a pejorative for an outlying area of books which literary criticism prefers not to discuss. Yet, for some purposes, the utility of

bestsellers lies in the very fact that they often have no literary merit to distract us. We are not therefore detained by any respect for their sanctity as 'texts'. Nor are we automatically led to think of them as finished products in their own right; instead we can view them as integrated and dependent parts of a frankly commercial machinery, itself the product of a particular society at a particular period of history. Seen in this way, the bestselling novel may be reckoned as subordinate to other parts of the manufacturing and consuming system – such as the publicity which helps sell it, the author's 'image' or the public's 'needs'. One is rarely tempted to detach the bestseller from the specific conditions of its typically brief bestselling existence. And what is useful about such culturally embedded works is what they tell us about the book trade, the market place, the reading public and society generally at the time they have done well. As a German critic neatly puts it: 'the bestseller indicates a successful sociological experiment' (Peters, 1976, p. 139). There is a hand-in-glove relationship between the bestseller, its time and its productive apparatus. Withdrawn from this relationship they perplex us: why, one wonders, should close on two million otherwise sensible Americans in 1972 have wanted to buy *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*? Answers can only be found by looking at the historical and book trade circumstances in which Bach's book 'made it'. In this way the bestseller forces us to think, as Raymond Williams, for example, would have us always think, of 'Literature in Society' rather than 'Literature and Society' (Williams, 1977, p. 24). There are other reasons for reading bestsellers – not least that they are often fun to read. But it is the inextricability of bestsellers from their host culture and productive machinery that directs the attempt to read them critically in the following pages.

## On the use of the term

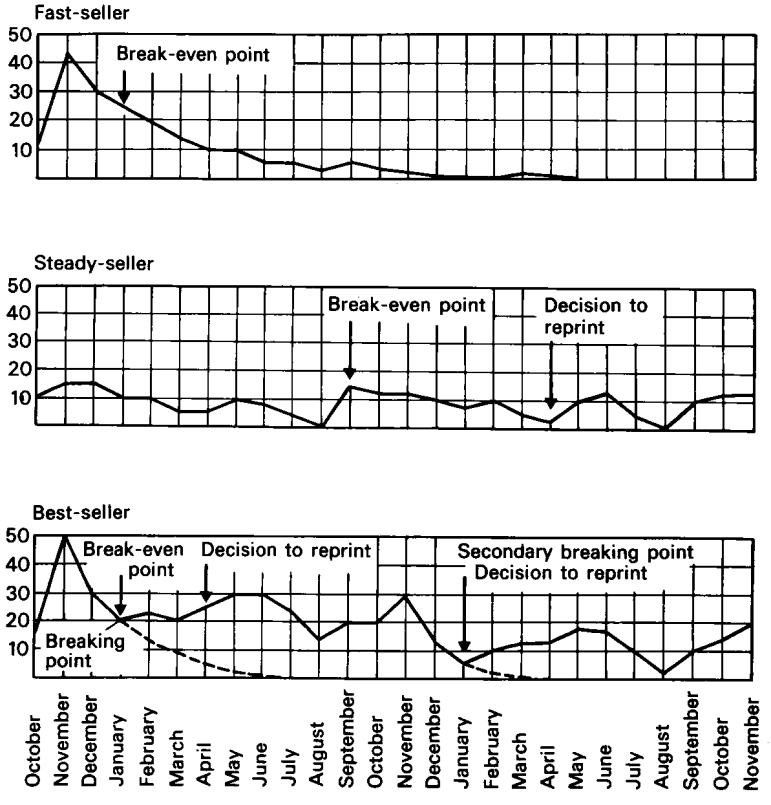
The word 'bestseller' and its derivatives (bestsellerism, bestsellerdom) are not governed by any agreed definitions. In the book trade the many usages are casual, and often

abused by the advertising industry's version of poetic licence and suggestive indefiniteness. 'Bestseller' can refer to books, a style of books or an author of books (Sidney Sheldon, for example, is proclaimed as 'Mr Bestseller'). One regularly encounters such illogicalities as still unpublished (and therefore entirely unsold) novels being described as 'surefire bestsellers'. And indeed, so many works in the course of a year are put forward as *best*sellers as to make the superlative meaningless. (Once achieved, of course, the true bestseller would mean the end of bestsellerdom.)

Commentators on bestsellers have adopted various definitions of convenience. Simplest is Alice P. Hackett's taxonomic approach, in her various books on the American bestseller. For these surveys Hackett merely summarizes the works which have figured in the New York lists and makes up an annual 'ten bestsellers of the year' (fiction and non-fiction) aggregate. For Hackett, bestsellers are books which have had the honour of appearing in American bestseller lists. Slightly more analytic is F.L. Mott, in his 1947 study *Golden Multitudes*. Mott employs a quantitative threshold to identify the books which are his subject. His test for bestselling status is that a book shall sell a quantity equal to 1 per cent of the population of the US for the decade in which it was published. The advantage of Mott's calculus is that he can include in his discussion long-term steady-sellers which move too slowly to figure on weekly, monthly and annual lists, or which are too unglamorous to be included, since the essence of bestsellerism, as with pop music, is that there should be hectic change and turnover. The disadvantage of Mott's approach is that for him the bestseller is not a distinct genus but an ordinary book which succeeds to an extraordinary degree. Whereas for the book trade, of course, the bestseller stands in the same relation to other books as does a star to a supporting player. It is importantly *different* from the run of merchandise.

Robert Escarpit, in his works on the sociology of literature, confronts this question of how the successful book is different in kind, not just degree. For him the bestseller is typified by a distinctive selling curve; and the graphs which he sets up record not just a volume (which is what Mott does) but pace of sale (which Mott doesn't). Using this bi-axial measurement

Escarpit discriminates between three forms of sales success: fastseller, steadyseller and bestseller (see table).




*Source*: Escarpit, 1966, p.117.

For Escarpit the bestseller is one of a very small number of books (some 2-3 per cent, as he reckons) which combine characteristics of the other two kinds of successful book: 'a best-seller is in fact a fast-seller which, at a certain point, develops into a steady-seller' (Escarpit, 1966, p. 118).

Escarpit's definition is precise and satisfyingly technical. Its disadvantage is, it seems to me, that it does not always do justice to the bestseller as 'an American kind of book'. Nor does Escarpit's method allow him to deal easily with the bestselling *author* (for example, Barbara Cartland, who has

sold over 100 m. copies of her romances, yet rarely if ever has any single title on a list at any particular time) or *genre*, that is to say the bestselling line of books ('romance', 'gothics' etc.).

Escarpit's work, as befits a literary sociologist, is admirably neutral and untainted by personal preference. In its neutrality it stands in flat contrast to a group of what might be called the morally indignant critics of bestsellers, of whom the best known are probably O.H. Cheney (*Economic Survey of the Book Industry*, 1932), Q.D. Leavis (*Fiction and the Reading Public*, 1932), and, most recently, Per Gedin (*Literature in the Market Place*, 1977). For these commentators the bestseller is, primarily, the product of a debased cultural ethos – bestsellerdom. Their studies, all of them highly eloquent, are suffused with pessimism, or at best a depressed sense that whatever hope there is lies in the resistant power of 'an armed and conscious minority'. The bestseller is conceived by this kind of critic to signal literature's surrender to the machinery of advanced capitalism. As a cultural system bestsellerdom is marked by an internal drive towards total commercial rationalization. So driven, it is portentous and symptomatic of general malaise (it is to make these larger points that Richard Hoggart, for instance, introduces a survey of popular literature in his *The Uses of Literacy*, 1957). In the discussions of these influential critics 'bestseller' is invariably a pejorative.

My own use of the term is, I hope, neutral and non-pejorative. As will be evident from the following chapters, I would contend that bestsellers are usefully approached by an examination of the apparatus which produces them (bestseller lists, the publishing industry, publicity), an apparatus which is called here, for convenience, 'bestsellerism'. In the following pages I do not make Escarpit's fine distinction between 'fastsellers' and 'bestsellers'. Nor, of course, do the American and British book trades. For me (and them) the contemporary fiction bestseller is, more often than not, a fastselling book which never achieves the respectable middle-age of steady demand. And the main form in which this fastseller/bestseller retails is now the paperback. (Arguably in the UK, where titles get on what bestseller lists there are