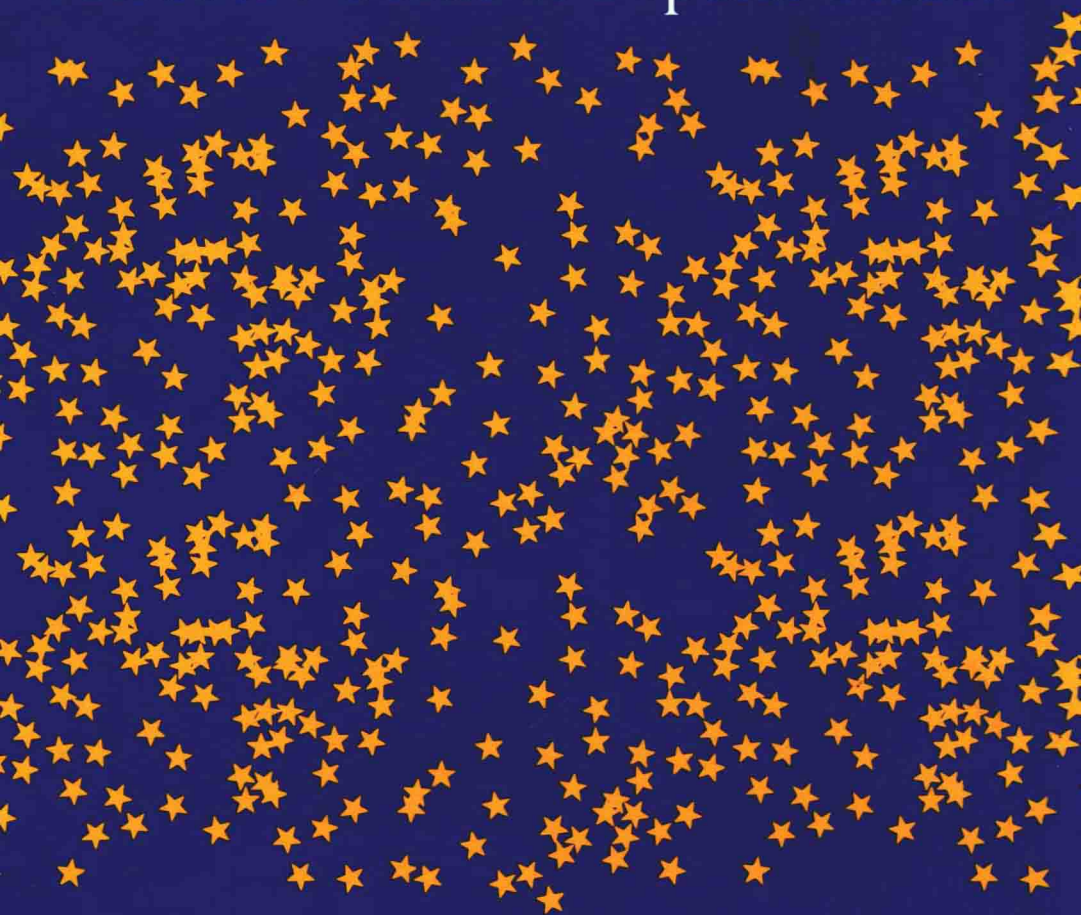


# AMERICAN BEST SELLERS

A Reader's Guide to Popular Fiction



ARLEN HINCKLEY AND BARBARA HINCKLEY

A M E R I C A N  
**Best Sellers**

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆  
☆ ☆ ☆  
A READER'S GUIDE  
TO POPULAR FICTION  
☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

*Karen Hinckley and Barbara Hinckley*



~~INDIANA~~  
UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

*loomington & Indianapolis*

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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Hinckley, Karen  
American best sellers.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. American fiction—20th century—Stories, plots, etc.
2. American fiction—20th century—Bibliography.
3. Best sellers—United States—Stories, plots, etc.
4. Best sellers—United States—Bibliography.
5. Popular literature—United States—Stories, plots, etc.
6. Popular literature—United States—Bibliography.
7. Books and reading—United States—History—20th century. I. Hinckley, Barbara.

II. Title.

PS374.B45H56 1989 813'.54'09 88-45754

ISBN 0-253-32728-8

2 3 4 5 93 92 91 90

A M E R I C A N  
B E S T   S E L L E R S

## *Authors' Note*

The idea for this book occurred to both authors suddenly and simultaneously. It swiftly grew into a two-year project, eclipsing all other work and all other reading. The manuscript endured through various types of mutilation by dogs and cats in Wisconsin, and went on to survive being mailed into and out of New York City. Now that the idea has become a book, the authors wish to thank Elizabeth Reinartz for her fine teaching years ago, the staff of the Sequoya Branch of the Madison Public Library, and the availability of the Strand Bookstore. Thanks also to everyone at Indiana who gave their usual superlative job of production.

AMERICAN  
BEST SELLERS

# C O N T E N T S

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AUTHORS' NOTE	vii
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Introduction	1
1 The Main Listing of Books	14
2 The Authors	124
3 The Categories	138
4 Characters—The Good, the Bad, and the Ordinary	166
5 Themes—American Dreams and Nightmares	190
6 The Trends Today	209

APPENDIX	222
A <i>Awards and Distinctions</i>	222
B <i>List of Pseudonyms</i>	227
C <i>Books That Became Movies</i>	229
D <i>Books by Year of Publication</i>	232

A NOTE ON SOURCES	245
BIBLIOGRAPHY	247
INDEX	252

# Introduction

EVERYONE READS best sellers, but no one knows very much about them. No comprehensive guide lists the books all together, gives details about the authors, or shows the trends across time. Whereas moviegoers have many such guides available, book readers do not. They might have missed, for example, a book by their favorite mystery writer or one of last week's arrivals from Stephen King. They might like to see which books have won Pulitzer Prizes or which repeat the same plot five times in a row. People buy them, scorn them, wait for the next one, and give advice on how to write them, without really knowing what the best sellers are like.

This book offers a comprehensive look at best-selling hardcover fiction of the past 20 years. It allows people to read more about the authors and the books, and to identify major topics and trends. It is based on the *World Almanac's* annual listing of books highest in U.S. sales—approximately 20 to 30 books a year. It is these top sellers we will be concerned with here: altogether, 468 books and 216 authors in the 20-year period. Since the list is based on U.S. sales and publication efforts, we call them American best sellers, whatever the nationalities of the authors. Books by Agatha Christie are American best sellers, and so is the translation of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*.

It is curious that no such basic account has been readily available before



this.<sup>1</sup> Reviewers of popular fiction typically select the books they want to talk about, ignoring others or remaining unaware of them. The bookstores themselves are of little help. A book missed once is lost to view and soon joins the limbo of last year's best sellers. Neutral accounts, too, are hard to come by. Critics treat best sellers as automatically suspect, while publishers are financially motivated to praise them. No one covers the middle ground. In some cases, in fact, it is difficult to discover what a book is about. Ignored by reviewers, the book can be known only by its cover and promotion campaign.

The cover of *Such Good Friends* announces that "Julie embarks on a sexual odyssey of vengeance unparalleled in modern marriage, recent fiction, and wildest fantasy!" In the actual novel, however, there is no sexual odyssey at all, let alone an unparalleled one. Julie's adventures are limited to sleeping with her husband's friend in one unsuccessful evening. What she really does is maintain a vigil outside her unfaithful husband's hospital room and look back at her life and marriage. People waiting for that odyssey will be disappointed, to say the least, while those who might like to know how the character copes with the double disaster that has struck will never get past the cover.

But more basically, people miss what the books are like because of the stereotyping of best sellers. Critic Edmund Wilson praises best-selling author Edwin O'Connor and admits, "... a literary intellectual objects to nothing so much as a best-selling book that also possesses real merit."<sup>2</sup> Best sellers, as a category, are set apart from books that possess merit. The same kind of categorization is found in a *Writer's Digest* piece entitled "How to Write Blockbuster Novels." Best sellers, according to the author, should have plots that can be summarized in one sentence, action that maintains a state of perpetual high drama, and characters who are unambivalent. We hate them or we adore them. Forget being a stylist, the author urges, and forget details of background and atmosphere. Two of the models suggested, not surprisingly, are Harold Robbins and Jacqueline Susann.<sup>3</sup> Yet many of the best sellers do rely on details of background and atmosphere: Thomas Tryon's *The Other* and *Harvest Home*, for example, or any of the novels by John Fowles. Many of the books show very complex characters. We do not hate or adore the protagonists in *The Embezzler* or *The Rector of Justin*. The two critics are poles apart as reviewers of fiction, but the stereotyping is the same.

This book will attempt to correct the information gap that exists for American best-selling novels. A review of the top 468 best sellers from 1965 through 1985, it should provide a clearer sense of what the books are like—in their range and diversity and their elements in common. It should also give the kind of basic information that people can use to see at a glance what the best sellers have been—and draw up their own lists and conclusions.

What are the best sellers and what are they like? Who writes them, and what do they deal with? Can we generalize about their themes and char-

acters, or are the differences more striking than the similarities? These questions are of interest not only to potential readers but to students of popular culture. With the changes in society from the 1960s to the 1980s, how have the best sellers changed? Who, for example, are the heroes and heroines, what battles do they fight, and what dreams do they pursue? This book will answer these questions by identifying major topics and trends. Some beginning answers, however, can be offered by way of introduction to show the diversity of the books and set the context for the following chapters.

### *What Is a Best Seller?*

The one thing these books have in common is a very high sales figure over a short period of time, usually not exceeding one year. A book is commonly called a best seller if its hardcover sales reach 100,000 copies and paperback sales 1,000,000. The top sellers do considerably better. However, these range from serious literature to highly intelligent escape reading, on through the ranks of formula fiction to drivel. One magazine nominated three best sellers as the worst book of the year for 1968: Drury's *Preserve and Protect*, Drew Pearson's *The Senator*, and Gore Vidal's *Myra Breckinridge*. An even more spirited competition for worst book might be waged by some of the best sellers of the 1980s, where, for example, characters we do not care about work their way through enough boardrooms and bedrooms until the pages contracted for have been completed. At the other extreme, six Pulitzer Prize winners are also best sellers: Saul Bellow's *Humboldt's Gift*; *The Stories of John Cheever*; Bernard Malamud's *The Fixer*; *The Confessions of Nat Turner* by William Styron; Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song*; and John Updike's *Rabbit Is Rich*.

Many of the formulas for best sellers can be questioned by looking through the books on the list. Sex, for example, is often seen as a requirement for a best-selling novel, with the book highest in individual sales, Jacqueline Susann's *Valley of the Dolls*, used to support this assertion. But to make a convincing argument against this point, look at the three authors ranked highest in the number of best sellers written. Victoria Holt's heroines find suspense and romance, Stephen King's characters face terror and the supernatural, and Robert Ludlum's heroes are caught in gigantic international conspiracies, all with sex used very infrequently in the stories. Holt has 10 books and King and Ludlum 9 each in the 20-year period.

The characters are as diverse as the themes and categories. They range from Russian spies to small-town rabbis, from Gothic heroines to Green Berets. Sometimes the same stock character, with only the name and circumstances changed, will appear in several stories. But we also find such original detectives as Miss Marple, the Russian Arkady Renko, and Sergeant Valnikov with his drinking problem and 19-year-long nightmare. Bellow created the unique Moses Herzog, who writes unmailed letters to people

(Nietzsche, Eisenhower, his deceased relatives, former mistresses) as he fights through a personal crisis, restores his house in the country, and thinks of murdering his wife's lover.

There is a striking diversity among the authors, too. Best sellers are written by former vice-presidents, Nobel Prize winners, missionaries, and scientists; elderly ladies, farm girls, and feminists; lawyers, teachers, and cops. It is interesting that 63, or 30% of the authors are women—a higher proportion than is found in most other high-paying professions. People know of the repeating authors, who publish a best seller every year or two. But more than half of the authors appear with their first best seller, and for a few it is the only book they have written.

Some are full-time and some are part-time writers. Asimov writes 4,000 words a day, while Graham Greene tries for 400, although he says they will need rewriting. Irving Stone works daily on his books from 9:00 to 6:00 with only a short break for lunch. Louis Auchincloss, however, writes his best sellers while pursuing a full-time career as a Wall Street lawyer, and Father Andrew Greeley divides his time between writing, teaching sociology, and the church. Colleen McCullough wrote *The Thorn Birds* from evening to dawn after a day's work at the Yale neurological laboratory. It was therapy, she said, in the wake of an unhappy love affair. Joseph Wambaugh stayed on the force of the Los Angeles Police Department after becoming a best-selling novelist. He claims he resigned finally after a suspect he was arresting asked for an audition for "Police Story".<sup>4</sup>

Some authors engage in extensive research. Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *August 1914*, for example, is the product of a major study of military history and strategy. It has been praised for the detail of its battle plans and knowledge of military science. Even so, the author points out in the Foreword that the book is only the beginning of a larger study which will take 20 more years to complete. Erica Jong's *Fanny*, which gives a contemporary feminist view of the adventures of an 18th-century character, grew out of her graduate work in literature. Jong turns the original Woman of Pleasure of John Cleland's *Fanny Hill* into a courageous heroine while capturing the language and spirit of an 18th-century novel. Ruth Beebe Hill's *Hanta Yo* is based on a lifelong study of American Indians, during which time she lived with the tribes and learned their dialects. Michener also supplies fascinating detail in each of his books. Just read the list of credits in any one of them.

At the other extreme, Leon Uris admits that a "crash course in history" is all that it takes to write his historical novels. He sees them as transported westerns with no real research needed. Martin Cruz Smith drew compliments for his authentic portrayal of Russian daily life in *Gorky Park*. Smith, however, who speaks no Russian, visited the country for only five days in 1973. He did read widely about Soviet law enforcement and talked to Russian emigres in New York.

In many cases the author's imagination serves as a successful substitute for research. Elmore Leonard, best-selling author of *Glitz*, who wanted

inside information on the work of a hotel thief, asked the assistance of a chief of security in a large metropolitan hotel. When the security man declined to help—no doubt envisioning the instructions on how to burglarize a hotel suddenly made available to millions of readers—Leonard decided to “make it up.” He has also made up the dialogue of underworld characters, arguments between ball players, and the procedure for handling cash in a large department store. However he does it, people seem to agree that most of the details are right.<sup>5</sup>

The authors’ attitudes toward their work are different as well. There is a great distance indeed from a John Updike or Eudora Welty, who treat the art of the novel seriously and self-consciously, to some of their neighbors on the best-selling lists. In contrast to the serious literary novelists, consider Lawrence Sanders’s puzzled reaction to a highly favorable *New York Times* review. Said Sanders, “I don’t take myself seriously, so why should anyone else? I’m writing entertainment—I hope intelligent entertainment, but that’s all.” And when Greeley was attacked for the sensationalism in his books, he said simply, “I am telling the kind of story I want to tell the way I want to tell it, to people who like such stories, and that seems to me quite enough.”<sup>6</sup>

In other cases, authors combine the goal of entertainment with a message they feel strongly about. Ludlum clearly entertains, with nine best sellers in 12 years through 1984. Yet his books convey a sense of moral outrage at what international power elites—consisting of governments, industrialists, and financiers—are capable of doing. In *The Rhinemann Exchange* Germans and Americans arrange a trade to keep World War II going. In *The Matarese Circle* an international group plans simultaneous takeovers of the major world governments, and in *The Holcroft Covenant* another international group plots to establish a Fourth Reich. As Ludlum admits in an end note reprinted in several of the novels, “I write primarily as an entertainer. But . . . you write from a point of view of something that disturbs or outrages you. And that’s what I do. I admit to being outraged—mostly by the abuse of power by the fanatics.”

Even more clearly, Allen Drury has a message to tell in his books on American politics. Drury is strongly opposed to a foreign policy he sees as appeasing Communism and sharply critical of the press. The villains in his stories are primarily journalists and liberal presidential candidates. As he explains to the reader in *Preserve and Protect*, he is “continuing the argument between those who favor the responsible use of strength to oppose the Communist drive for world dominion, and those who believe that in a reluctance to be firm, in permissiveness, and in the steady erosion of the law lies the surest path to a secure and stable world society.” For Drury, entertainment does not require a careful balance of points of view.

On the other hand, there are writers whose message is only the story itself and whose primary goal is to tell it. Three years before his death, John O’Hara observed in *And Other Stories* that the worst thing about growing old was the diminished strength for his work. He added, “Much as I

like owning a Rolls Royce . . . I could do without it. What I could not do without is a typewriter, a supply of yellow second sheets, and the time to put them to good use." Michener, too, regrets that he may not have time to do a book on the Caribbean or all the other land masses and eons of geologic deposits whose stories should be told. And when Graham Greene was asked what he would like to accomplish as a writer, he answered simply, "Just write a good book."<sup>7</sup>

If it seems startling to invoke Updike and Sanders, or Drury and Greene, in the same paragraph, the point should be clear. They all have written best sellers. So Vidal reviews "The Ten Top Best Sellers" of 1973, beginning with the eye-catching line "Shit has its own integrity." Assigned the review one year later, he would be criticizing himself. Number one in 1973 was *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*. (Vidal calls it "a greeting card bound like a book.") Number one the following year was *Burr*.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, some books are more likely to appear on the best-seller lists than others. There are dominant themes and character types; some categories are more popular than others. While the books are diverse, they can be grouped by genre, topic, and the appeal they make to readers.

When the books are divided according to genre and topic, the most popular category is clear. This group consists of the historical novels, books with settings before World War I. A second large category comprises the dynasty novels: sagas of families over several generations. The plots are typically simple, telling of a rise from rags to riches, or the futility of riches, or a power struggle within a family. The characters are often only briefly sketched, since three or more generations of marriages and deaths, triumphs and failures, secret deals and murderous secrets must be recounted before the novel's conclusion. Nevertheless, they offer the reader a kind of instant history, too. The families are shown against the sweep of events from the coming of the industrial age, through depression and war, to the modern era.

In addition, there are more than 20 books apiece in such familiar categories as spy novels, mysteries, and tales of horror and the supernatural, but few science-fiction stories and westerns. The rarity of science-fiction books is interesting, given the popularity of science-fiction films. In fact, two of the best-selling books—*E.T.* and *Return of the Jedi*—were written in book form only after they succeeded at theaters. Arranging the best sellers by topic, we find a large number of books about American politics and international intrigue, as well as the stories set during or immediately after World War II. Presidents are defeated, blinded, kidnapped, and assassinated. Senators sell out. Journalists fight coverups or contribute to them. There is corruption in Washington, fighting in the Middle East, conspiracy by international cartels, terrorism, and the threat of nuclear war. Readers are not only getting some instant history; they are getting a crash course in current events, too. Whether the courses are accurate is an entirely different matter.

Then there are books on sex and Hollywood glamour, as everyone might expect. But, contrary to expectations, we find in chapter 2 that these categories are no more popular than many others, and less popular than some.

At the other extreme, very few satires, comedies, or collections of short stories appear on the lists, and few books about American wars other than World War II. Only two children's books are best sellers—*The Butter Battle Book* and *Nutcracker*—again in marked contrast to the movie and video industry. (The book *E.T.* has language and details of characterization that might require a PG-13 movie rating.) Still, almost half of the best sellers do not fit clear genre categories, so a good deal of diversity remains.

Cutting across the categories, however, we find other similarities. If books are grouped according to their appeal to readers, a large majority of the best sellers offer one or more of the following rewards. They offer factual information, the kind of escape reading that comes from predictability, or the satisfaction of experiencing in fictional form some common dreams and nightmares of American life.

### **Fiction as Fact: Learning Can Be Fun**

Many of the novels claim to be useful as well as entertaining. Whether they feature inside accounts or years of research, they offer factual information in the easily palatable form of the fictional story. Novels by insiders take us within an industry or occupation or group to show “how it really is.” Officer Wambaugh tells us how policemen think; Potok gives details of a rabbi's daily life; presidential aides Safire and Salinger show what goes on in the White House. One way, it is clear, to write a best-selling novel is to have another career to tell people about.

Authors lacking an interesting background are free to research one, or to make up the details, as long as the effect of authenticity is achieved. Thus, we find pages of maps, bibliographies, and long lists of credits to convince readers that they are getting new and substantial information along with their story. Arthur Hailey shows the inside workings of numerous industries, including an airport, a power company, a bank, and a hospital. The only information most people have about power companies is how much they charge a month—or their policy on disconnect notices. *Overload*, then, can offer a behind-the-scenes look at the complex workings of a power company and the continuing problems it faces. Michael Crichton scatters charts, computer messages, and technical appendixes throughout his novels. While the material has little to do with the story or its supposed scientific subject matter, it can help foster the impression that serious information is being provided.

We can now see why historical novels and books about current events are so popular. Along with accounts of industries and occupations, special groups and scientific experiments, they offer more than a story. Readers can justify the time spent on entertainment by being informed. “We Ameri-

cans," one critic points out, "are reluctant to take our fiction straight without a chaser of education."<sup>9</sup>

The popularity of these books is seen in the promotions suggesting that the fiction may actually be fact. The novels are cast as predictions of next year's headlines or thinly disguised accounts of real persons and events. The cover promotion for *The Day of the Jackal* asks, "Can This Be Fiction?" with the implication that it is not. *The Last Days of America* is called "as real as today's headlines," and *The Spike* is said to be "so convincing that it's hard to tell where fact leaves off and fiction begins." The books themselves may offer routine information that is available to the most occasional newspaper reader, or plots that are bizarre and incredible. Maybe there are 171 Russian KGB agents in the White House alone, as *The Spike* tells us. Or maybe there are not. Fiction writers are free to imagine whatever they want.

The novels, in fact, vary tremendously in the amount of information and misinformation they convey. Member of Parliament Jeffrey Archer wrote *First among Equals*, a story of three men who compete to be the British prime minister. Most of the book, however, relies on basic information that one need not be a British politician to know. The same can be said for the vice-presidency in Agnew's *The Canfield Decision*. On the other hand, in *Full Disclosure*, William Safire writes about routines and strategies of the Nixon White House that could be known only by insiders. In *The Triumph*, Galbraith offers a rare look inside the State Department bureaucracy. His 1968 fictional account of the Martinez regime sounds like the Philipines of the Marcoses nearly 20 years later. But even in the 1960s, American political conventions were far from the free-for-alls that Knebel and Drury would have their readers believe. In Knebel's *Dark Horse*, deadlocked convention members finally turn to Eddie Quinn, a New Jersey turnpike commissioner, to be their presidential nominee. The last dark horse actually nominated at a convention was Wendell Willkie in 1940, hardly a turnpike commissioner, and before that one would have to go back to 1924, when the rules of the convention were very different. Nor are vice-presidents and cabinet members just waiting for the chance to snatch power from a disabled or missing president. Their real problem would be to get in to *see* the presidents, never mind to overthrow them.

In each of these cases readers are offered information along with the story, but, as the book covers say, it is hard to know where fact stops and the fiction begins.

### **Formula Fiction: No More Surprises**

Some best sellers offer predictability rather than information. Readers have had enough surprises and challenges for one day, and enough information, too. They want to relax with a good book and not be disappointed. They know the author already, the hero, and perhaps even the outline of the plot. Many of the best-selling detective and spy stories offer this kind of



escape reading. People know Lew Archer or Hercule Poirot and do not need to think about a new character. In a John MacDonald mystery, they know Travis McGee, his friends, and his very personal code of honor. Travis sails his boat in the Florida Keys, uncovers a series of murders, and gives his own comments about what is wrong with the world. Readers of a William Buckley spy novel already know CIA agent Blackford Oakes. They know what to expect from the author's wit and can look forward to another imaginary conversation between presidents, foreign-policy advisers, and other famous people. The predictability is deliberate in these cases and a large part of the books' appeal.

The number of these books among the top best sellers attests to their popularity. Buckley and Christie have five each, and MacDonald has five in the Travis McGee series alone. Robert Ludlum accounts for nine of the spy stories, each pitting a fairly ordinary American against a gigantic international conspiracy. Even the titles are predictable and, like all good formulas, easily interchangeable (*The Holcroft Covenant*; *The Aquitaine Progression*; *The Parsifal Mosaic*, and on through the rest of the three-word titles). Lawrence Sanders has written six of the best-selling mysteries, and still has some of the Ten Commandments and the seven deadly sins to go.

It is not only the mysteries and spy stories, however, that offer this kind of predictability. Arthur Hailey's books supply formula as well as fact. In each of his six best sellers he assembles a collection of characters and shows us their backgrounds, ambitions, and fears. The heroes and villains are instantly recognizable. Community groups—working for civil rights, the environment, or the prevention of cruelty to animals—agitate briefly and are unsuccessful. To this basic brew Hailey adds all the details of the various work establishments and enough crisis to keep the action at highest pitch. The industries are changed, from hotel to airport to hospital, while the rest of the book remains the same. Another example of formula fiction is provided by Robin Cook. Cook's novels are a cross between a Gothic horror story and *General Hospital*. In three best sellers (*Coma*, *Brain*, and *Godplayer*), something is very wrong at a large metropolitan hospital. A female physician must discover what it is and risk her career and romance in the process. The novels end with the doctor-heroine herself a patient, vulnerable and in need of rescue. The same plot, in fact, appears three times with only the names of the characters changed.

### **Fantasy Fiction: Imagine That . . .**

Another kind of escape allows readers to face their dreams and nightmares in fictional form. Many of the books portray fantasy lives of the rich and famous. Details of character and plot are kept to a minimum so that reality cannot break through to spoil the fantasy. The men are rich, powerful, and sexually successful (Robbins), while the women are young, beautiful film stars (Susann) or the young, beautiful wives of film stars (Collins). Other



books, too, allow readers to escape from paying their bills to a world where wealth can be taken for granted. Louis Auchincloss, with five best sellers, describes a world of money and position in New York society. Paul Erdman's heroes travel the globe making financial deals that change the course of nations. In other books fame and political power are the subjects of fantasy. According to the top sellers, Washington, D.C., and Hollywood are the glamour capitals of the world. So family money lets characters run for the presidency (*All in the Family*; *The Prodigal Daughter*; *Captains and the Kings*), while stories about policemen and authors, murder and incest are given Hollywood settings. Altogether, more than 50 of the top best sellers deal primarily with money, fame in film or politics, or other kinds of glamour.

Even more of the books project the rags-to-riches fantasy of the American Dream (see chapter 5). People pursue life, liberty, and property in a land where all things are possible. The dream appears in different forms, whether it is the classic rags-to-riches story or merely the background of a minor character. It is pursued by individuals and across several generations of a family. In *Kane and Abel*, Abel Rosnovski, a Polish orphan born to poverty, immigrates to the United States, goes to night school while he works as a waiter, and rises to become a hotel tycoon. He will come to rival William Kane, who was born to wealth and privilege, went to Harvard while Abel was going to night school, and made his first million before he graduated from college. Most of the family sagas show the dream at work across several generations. In the novels of Howard Fast, for example, the hard-working immigrants give birth to the upwardly mobile second generation, who in turn produce the tycoons and dynasties of the present day. Throughout the sagas the immigrants come from different lands and face different circumstances, but the Horatio Alger story is the same.

The best-selling nightmares are more diverse; still, some themes appear with unusual frequency. Four in particular are interesting to watch for. The American Dream can go wrong or turn into a nightmare. Characters suddenly find that "something happened": they have been led into a dead end or trap of their own making. In other books, scientists are out of control, scattering deadly germs or conducting brain transplants in large hospitals. In still others, giant conspiracies exist, linking governments, banks, and other power centers, against which the individual is helpless. The glories of technology and politics, like the American Dream itself, have their darker side. Supernatural horrors also exist, although they appear with less frequency. They are found lurking in quiet Maine villages, waiting for young couples in Manhattan apartments, or possessing little girls in bedrooms in Georgetown. In each of these cases readers can face their own fears in the guise of a fictional story.

Best sellers are not unique in offering escape, information, and vicarious experience. All fiction can provide these, along with other effects. The best sellers, however, are very *specific* in the kind of information and escape they offer and in the recurring dreams and nightmares that appear. While the