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# Where did all these books come from? The Publishing Industry and American Intellectual Life

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Colby College

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**Where Did All These Books Come From?  
The Publishing Industry and American  
Intellectual Life**

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## Introduction

The American book publishing industry shapes the character of American intellectual life. While the newspaper and television industries have been accused of and investigated for bias and lowering America's intellectual standards, book publishing has gone largely unexamined by scholars. The existing studies of the publishing industry have focused on finance, procedure and history. "There are few 'theories' of publishing – efforts to understand the 'whys' as well as the 'hows.' Few scholarly scientists have devoted significant scholarly attention to publishing" (Altbach and Hoshino, xiii).

There are many possible reasons for this lacuna. First, there is a perception that books have always been around, that they are an "old" technology and therefore they don't appear to have had as much of an impact on our society as television and other media (which were developed quickly and suddenly) seem to have had (Altbach and Hoshino, xiv). Also, despite books' present and past popularity, television, radio, and now the internet reach more people more easily, and are therefore more topical points of study and observation.

In studying the effects of mass media on everyday American life, television and the internet may be the most logical points of study. Regarding public intellectual life however, books play a much more important role. Public intellectual life has always been associated with independent thinkers publishing their work for the masses. For this reason, this I focus on trade publishing. Trade publishing produces fiction and non-fiction works for the general reading public, as opposed to technical manuals, textbooks, and other fiction and nonfiction books targeted to small and specific audiences. Although, quantitatively speaking, "the largest part of book publishing business is

embodied in that great complex of companies and activities producing educational, business, scientific, technical, and reference books and materials,” (Tebbel 1987, 439) the trade industry publishes most of the books that most people read. It is the most public segment of the industry, and the most likely place to find public intellectualism.

Trade publishing is not only the most public segment of the industry, but it is also the most susceptible to corruption and lowered intellectual standards. Unlike specialty publishing, which caters to a specific, known segment of society, trade publishers must compete with countless other publications, as well as with other forms of media, for the patronage of the general public. As John Tebbel (author of a widely referenced history of the publishing industry) puts it, “The textbook, scientific, or technical book is subjected to much more rigorous scrutiny by buyers and users, and in an intensively competitive market inferior products are quickly lost” (Tebbel 1987, xiv). Since the standards for trade publishing are not nearly as specific – trade books simply need to catch the attention of a significant number of readers, they don’t have to measure up to a given level of quality – the quality of trade books is much more variable. And yet, a successful trade publication can have a much greater impact on society than the most rigorously researched and edited textbook or scholarly study.

Over the past few decades many social theorists have commented on and lamented the decline of public intellectuals and intellectual life in America (Hofstadter 1963; Posner 2001; Jacoby 1987). Complaints about the rise of academia and the separation of intellectualism and so-called “everyday life” abound. These analyses focus on the specialization of intellectuals, on the increasing unintelligibility of intelligent writers, and place the blame on growing institutions of higher education and career

academics. This study is an examination of that same divide between everyday life – specifically everyday reading and the everyday reader – and intellectualism. But here the focus is not on how academic presses commandeered all the intellectuals, but on how and why the trade publishing industry began to reject the intellectuals.

This study uses multiple qualitative and quantitative methods in its search for an understanding of this phenomenon. A historical analysis of the trade publishing industry from 1900 until the present provides a foundation for understanding the inner workings of the publishing industry and also helps to show that the divide between popular reading and intellectual reading is neither inherent nor permanent, but that it has been created as a result of real tangible changes in the industry. Interviews with editors and booksellers supplement historical accounts with descriptions of the present situation in the industry. These interviews also provide first hand accounts of changes and problems in the industry both today and in the past. Finally, a quantitative analysis of *New York Times* #1 bestsellers and how they have changed since the list's inception in 1942 shows that the changes described anecdotally by so many former and current publishers and editors have had a real effect on the books that people read.

Theorists like Hofstadter, Posner and Jacoby lament the loss of public intellectualism, meaning intellectual thought and discussion aimed at the general public, what I will call American intellectual life. Their attacks on academia and specialized areas of study are well-founded and meaningful, but are only a part of the puzzle. In order to truly understand how and why the divide between the American public and intellectualism was created we have to take a look at popular literature, its production and

distribution, and how actual institutional changes have affected the literary output of this country.

## **The History of the Publishing Industry 1900-1950**

In order to understand the impact trade publishing has on society, the history of the industry must be understood not only in terms of historical dates and figures, but in terms of the broader changes in purpose and attitude within the industry. Nearly every historical study of the publishing industry tells a standard story. The period between 1920 and 1940 was a Golden Age of publishing, when publishing was at a financial, intellectual and cultural peak (Tebbel 1987, 201). Drastic changes following the Golden Age were typified by a series of mergers and acquisitions throughout the sixties, seventies and eighties. Dividing the twentieth century into two broad historical periods – from the beginning of the century through the end of the Golden Age in 1940, and from the end of the Golden Age through the eighties and early nineties – will not only facilitate my examination of the changing industry, but will also set the stage for my analysis of what those changes mean to American intellectual life.

### **The Golden Age of Publishing**

Initially, the American publishing industry was composed of illegal printers. Through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most American printers made their money by producing cheap and illegal reprints of well-known British authors. Even original American works by the likes of Thomas Paine were subject to illegal re-printings, giving American publishing a poor international reputation. This changed at the turn of the century when new copyright laws forced publishers to become serious members of the international publishing community (Lofquist 1995, 343). With federal copyright regulations in place, American publishers began in earnest the search for original American works fit for mass reproduction.



The end of World War I provided the publishing industry with exactly the kind of readership it needed. Population growth and increased literacy expanded the potential readership of trade books, while advances in book printing technology which lowered production costs (Benton 2000, 12-13). The populism of the 1920s provided even some of the lowest classes (though not the poorest of the poor) with enough disposable income to make books an affordable luxury (Benton 2000, 13). Newspapers and magazines were also becoming cheaper to produce and were reaching mass market distribution around this same time period. Although newspapers and magazines competed with books for readers' disposable incomes, they also helped create a new reading public. Public libraries were also becoming more and more common, encouraging general readership and self-education (Tebbel 1987, 272).

As a result of these post World War One economic and demographic changes, the book industry flourished through the 1920s. In 1920 the National Association of Book Publishers was founded, the same year that the American Library Association “announced plans to increase the usefulness of books” (Tebbel 1987, 271-272). During the 1920s, “book sales expanded briskly by some 10 percent each year, and a flock of new and energetic young publishers entered the field” (Benton 2000, 14).

Trade publishing during the 1920s consisted mostly of original works sold through retail bookstores (Benton 2000, 7). Reprints had become less common since copyright laws became more rigid and new and old houses alike were eager to create individual identities and earn reputations for quality original works. Interestingly, by 1928 a rising interest in non-fiction trade books had developed, “a trend which, in the next decade, would reverse for good the long dominance of fiction” (Tebbel 1987, 274).

This seems surprising, given that trade publishing was, and is, aimed at the general public whose primary interest in reading is often assumed to be entertainment. The popularity of non-fiction within the trade industry is further evidence of the potential influence the industry holds over public intellectualism since it shows that the public reads trade books for self-education as well as for entertainment.

The popularity of books in the 1920s carried the industry through the 1930s and the Great Depression with surprising financial success.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the thirties, a terrible period for most American businesses, was the strength of the publishing industry. Not only were there few failures, but...nearly all the old houses weathered the economic climate and an astonishing number of new houses appeared, even in the worst years (Tebbel 1987, 269).

Publishing during the Golden Age is portrayed as an un-businesslike business (a topic discussed later in this study). Yet during the Depression the industry's most successful houses kept their doors open by cutting costs, salaries, profit expectations (something a businesslike business would be reluctant to do), canceling expense accounts, lowering prices, cutting the number of publications, implementing innovative sales techniques, and simply by publishing good books that people wanted to buy (Tebbel 1987, 284). The publishing industry not only survived but grew and flourished during the Great Depression. "While other businesses talked of doom and failure, the literary world was engaged in a heated controversy over humanism, with correlated arguments about experience versus dogma, romanticism as opposed to classicism, and determinism versus dualism" (Tebbel 1987, 276). The publishing industry thrived in the Great Depression, and with it, American intellectual life.

World War Two further expanded opportunities for the publishing industry. During the war publishers were called upon to provide reading material for soldiers overseas. This resulted in the Armed Services Editions – poorly made, inexpensive, practically disposable books designed for easy travel (Tebbel 1987, 336-347). The Armed Services Editions, which were published by several of the major houses, not only provided the publishing industry with profit and publicity, but also foreshadowed the advent of paperback publishing in America (Escarpit 1966, 27). Another fact about World War Two demonstrates how the industry viewed itself and its role in society. “It was a continuing sore point in the business that the War Manpower Commission had refused to list books among the essential industries. Plainly, books were considered *less* essential than other businesses, except for technical and scientific books” (Tebbel 1987, 348). Today it would be hard to imagine even publishers arguing that the publishing industry is an essential wartime business.

According to many accounts, Golden Age publishers were indeed the valuable assets to society that they perceived themselves to be. Discussions of publishers of the Golden Age are filled with glowing reports of their dedication to literature and education. While these accounts are clearly exaggerated with nostalgic longing for the good old days, the 1920s certainly witnessed the production of excellent original American work. “One after another came books that were either important in themselves, popular sellers, or both” (Tebbel 1987, 265). It is important to note that popular sellers *and* important works were produced, and only sometimes did they overlap. Historical accounts are not the only ones that place 1920s publishers on a pedestal. The professed goals of the houses themselves are filled with nobility and culture. W.W. Norton, established in 1923

as the People's Institute Publishing Company, was "designed primarily as a house devoted to books well written and well designed that would convey intellectual knowledge to the average reader without the usual academic trappings" (Tebbel 1987, 268).

Even intense political and social pressure didn't stop some publishers from printing what they thought was important work.

Houghton Mifflin, publishers of a somewhat abbreviated translation of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*...was getting protests and threats as early as September 1933...Although opinion was divided, it appeared to be the consensus in the trade that Hitler's book was an important historical document that ought to be made available in spite of its contents (Tebbel 1987, 282).

The industry stood behind Houghton Mifflin when it made the unpopular and potentially financially damaging decision in the name of history.

Historical accounts are full of flattering depictions of publishers taking financial and social risks in order to publish what they thought *should* be published, but many historians acknowledge the inevitable fact that even the noblest publishing houses had to make money. Even during the height of the Golden Age "commercial presses were increasingly unwilling to increase publication of scholarship that they found unprofitable. Likewise, certain university presses discovered they could successfully publish trade books as well as monographs" (Meyer 1995, 357). Commercial and university presses alike were steering away from scholarly monographs that rarely covered production costs. No matter how many valuable works were published in the Golden Age, there were certainly countless others that deserved to be published, but were overlooked for financial reasons. It is generally agreed, however, that the Golden Age was a time when

books were published for their literary and intellectual value much more so than they have been at any time since.

The glorification of the Golden Age of publishing includes a glorification of the work environment of these noble publishing houses. It is tempting to imagine a group of enlightened men and women surrounding themselves with great literature and great ideas, exploring their own creativity and bringing the fruits of that creativity to the public. However, this is a highly exaggerated view of the daily work of publishers, even during the Golden Age. Trade editors have always had to spend time on less exciting manuscripts such as self-helps, how-to's, cookbooks, and other non-literary works (West 1988, 60). These editors were also involved in great literature, but very often it was the ordinary, hum-drum titles that earned enough money to allow publishers to take risks on intellectual, literary manuscripts. Furthermore, the glamorous positions in the publishing houses belonged to the few publishers and editors who were above the tedious grunt-work of the industry. The dark side of the Golden Age “was exploitation, more often than not of women, but also of men, who were paid low salaries and worked long hours in the less glamorous positions...in a business in which, admittedly, hardly anyone expected to, or did, get rich” (Montagnes 1995, 96). It can be argued that these men and women chose this thankless work because of the valuable output of the houses they worked for, but it must be noted that the publishing industry, even in its heyday, was always an industry of long hours, low pay, and for those lower in the pecking order, few social rewards.

## **The Structure of the Publishing House**

In order to get published, a manuscript must be accepted by a publishing house. In order to be successful, that manuscript, and its author, must be given adequate support from the publishing house. Therefore, the structure of the house, the roles and hierarchies of power within it, play a large role in how and why some books are successful and others are not.

Through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the roles of publisher, editor, and printer often blended together. Initially, “the post of editor was created to relieve the publisher of duties that had become overly demanding” (West 1988, 47). The editor was responsible for editing the manuscript and working with the author to remove any errors and polish over any passages unsuitable for print. As with many industries, the system of organization in book publishing became more complex and hierarchical over time. The industry itself became more and more glamorous as “the status of publishers began to rise considerably around the turn of the century...Publishers, at the top of the hierarchy, gained dignity and status by removing themselves from the inkstains of the printshop, the blue pencil of the editor, and the cashbox of the bookseller” (West 1988, 17). Differentiation of roles within houses made the position of publisher more elite, but also gave editors much more power. “By the 1920s the editor had become the next most powerful person in the typical American trade house, subordinate only to the publisher. From the author’s point of view, the editor was even more important than the publisher” since the editor was in charge of all manuscript changes and, though the publisher had the final word in acquisitions, editors were primarily responsible for finding manuscripts and choosing the best among them for publication (West 1988, 55). Differentiation of responsibilities is a

significant issue in an industry where the decisions of one small group of men and women can almost exclusively determine the nature of the works produced.

In addition to increased differentiation between the roles of publisher, editor, marketer, and other functions in a publishing house, the Golden Age increased specialization by subject. During the 1930s, houses began dividing into departments, run by specialized editors, for different genres of trade, textbook, and scholarly publication. John Tebbel attributes this trend – which turned out to be a very successful change for many publishers – to Hoyns, who became president of Harper's in 1929 (Tebbel 1987, 205). Specialization within houses made it possible to publish works targeted to more specific audiences, and gave authors the chance to work with editors who were experts in their particular field. Of course, specialization has its problems as well, specifically its tendency to neglect the general reader and encourage scholars to write for other scholars only. Public intellectualism is naturally hindered by such specialization; but the trade industry, which specializes to a far lesser degree, continued to focus on the general reader as its target audience.

Methods of acquisition in trade publishing have changed considerably over the years. Traditionally, “the new publisher began with books or authors already available to him.” However, another method of acquisition, the house-generated book, rose to popularity after Simon and Schuster began to base their publishing operation on such acquisitions (Tebbel 1987, 235). The house-generated book begins when a publisher identifies a subject area which, for various reasons, he believes will result in a successful book. Perhaps current events make the subject suddenly relevant, or perhaps recent books on the subject have been successful. A truly discerning publisher may find an area

of study that is yet unexplored but has great sales potential. The publisher then approaches an author, likely one he has worked with before or whose previous works have looked promising, and asks him to write the book. The publisher's guidelines are sometimes very general, and other times very specific. In either case, the house-generated book idea became extremely common in the twentieth century, and created more competition for new writers submitting original works, and is also an originating power behind a growing focus on publishing marketable books.

### **Background of Publishers and Editors**

The demographic and educational background of the publishers and editors running the major houses sheds some light on their practices and attitudes. Accounts of publishers during the Golden Age and before portray them as well-educated young men from wealthy backgrounds. “The founders of Farrar + Rinehart [in 1920] were typical of the new generation – smart, ambitious, well –educated, worldly, possessed of energy, courage, and with access to money” (Tebbel 1987, 254). The fact that Bennett Cerf, who founded Random House in 1921 was “an intellectual who wore a Phi Beta Kappa key, a hard worker, and a scholar when he needed to be” (Tebbel 1987, 377) is undoubtedly a positive for the publishing industry. Education and hard work are natural prerequisites for a career in the judging and handling of important written works. The fact that these men also had money in the bank could also be a positive factor for the free flow of ideas. Not depending on huge profits in order to survive, the founders of Farrar and Rinehart could afford to take risks, and to publish well-written important works that would cost them money, at least in the short term. A publisher not overly-concerned with money will certainly be able to make more intellectually admirable decisions and less financially



necessary ones. However, the fact that a wealthy background was a prerequisite to a career in publishing excluded a huge proportion of the population, even of the educated population, and kept the lower classes from having an influence over what was being published. A concentration of wealth in the publishing industry was also likely to affect how the industry defined “important” or “quality” works. A wealthy publisher may be freed from financially driven decisions, but he is still linked to his social background and his attitudes and decisions will be inevitably affected by that background. Even as late as 1951 the standard background of a publisher was one of wealth. Barney Rosset, founder of Grove Press, “was a well-to-do young man with an interest in literature – an ideal take-off point for a career in publishing” (Tebbel 1987, 417).

Publishers were well-educated and well-to-do, but not formally trained. “Through the 1960s, most publishers learned from colleagues in an informal apprenticeship of in-service, in-house training taught more often by example than precept” (Montagnes 1995, 96). There was no specific educational background that publishers and editors shared, rather “publishing was seen as a ‘gentleman’s profession’ for which nothing but a broad liberal education was required. Knowledge of publishing could be learned on the job and, so the argument went, books were so singular a product that systematic understanding of the process of publishing would not be useful” (Altbach and Hoshino 1995, xv). The system of informal apprenticeship training “was based on certain beliefs; that publishing has elements of both art and science; that it is as well a craft built on attention to endless detail; that it is different from virtually any other twentieth-century industry by virtue of its small scale, multiplicity of products, and inherent creativity” (Montagnes 1995, 96). Publishing was a unique, artistic enterprise requiring entirely

different skills and an entirely different point of view from other businesses. Publishers and editors were a different kind of businessman.

### **Attitudes of Publishers and Editors**

One of the biggest purported changes in the publishing industry is in the way publishers and editors approach their work. It is believed that editors of the Golden Age valued good literature above all other concerns, including profit, power, and their own personal or political beliefs. While there is some truth to these statements, it is unrealistic to imagine all publishers and editors of the era constantly maintained this lofty standard of selflessness and good judgment, as some accounts of the industry would have us believe. John Tebbel gives painstakingly detailed accounts of many editors and publishers of the Golden Age. He writes that Alfred A. Knopf, who founded the Knopf publishing house in 1915 “intended to publish what he considered to be the best literature whether it sold or not” (Tebbel 1987, 373). Even later, in the 1950s, Tebbel writes that Bennet Cerf of Random House published *Witness*, a book by Whittaker Chambers, even though Cerf hated Chambers and his political leanings, because the book was too well-written to ignore (Tebbel 1987, 377-378). Jason Epstein, who worked closely with Bennett Cerf and Donald Klopfer, partners at Random House, writes in his memoirs that “when Bennett and Donald owned Random House, the last thing they expected to do, as Bennett wrote in his memoirs, was make money, and in this respect they were typical of their brilliant publishing generation” (Epstein 2001, 87). The general consensus regarding publishers and editors of the first half of the twentieth century is that “most of them loved books even more than they loved making money, and the acquisition of power was not one of their primary interests” (Tebbel 1987, 202). To claim that these

men were averse to acquiring money or power is ridiculous, but their dedication to literary and social principles was a central part of their decision making processes.

Another characteristic of publishers and editors in the first half of the twentieth century is their determination to maintain their own personal identity and to create and maintain an individual identity for their house. Alfred A. Knopf “continued to publish only the books he liked, both new and old, with no particular regard for any taste but his own” (Tebbel 1987, 233) regardless of how successful or unsuccessful those books were (fortunately for him, many of them were very successful). Horace Liveright, founder of the Modern Library series and one of the most notorious (and financially wasteful) publishers of the 1920s, “was one of the chief conductors” of the literary renaissance of the twenties, “often acting on what seemed to be no more than hunches or sheer instinct” (Tebbel 1987, 243). In later years, publishers equally determined to maintain their independence and autonomy had to struggle against the conglomerating forces of the market and occasionally against public opinion. In 1959, Grove Press’ Barney Rosset went to court to challenge the ban on *Lady Chatterly’s Lover* and *The Tropic of Cancer*, both of which Grove Press had reprinted, and was successful in both cases. “Only a publisher with Rosset’s firm convictions, and the money to back them up, would have deliberately risked those cases and carried them through appeals” (Tebbel 1987, 418). By 1959, Rosset was seen as a rarity, a publisher willing to take financial losses for the sake of literature and free speech. In earlier years, his dedication would have been described as typical of the profession.

While publishers of the period are generally described as un-businesslike gentlemen whose focus was on literature rather than finance, there were some publishers

and editors in the Golden Age who took a businesslike approach to the industry, and were successful in doing so. Leon Shimkin, who began working for Simon & Schuster in 1924, “introduced a new concept to publishing – the businessman as publisher” (Tebbel 1987, 236). Shimkin’s background was in business, not the liberal arts, and he treated publishing like any other business, but still had a hand in the creative process. “Shimkin saw himself quite frankly as a businessman in publishing, applying business methods to an occupation notoriously resistant to them, but he also believed that the opposite side of the coin – the publisher in business – would fairly describe his role in the creation of books” (Tebbel 1987, 397). There were business-oriented publishers during the Golden Age, but they were the ones who stood out in a group of liberally educated, un-businesslike publishers and editors who made decisions based on quality, personal opinion, and instinct rather than on profit and marketability.

Editors have power not only over individual manuscripts, but over authors and their careers as well. In this respect editors of the Golden Age are described as men of literature who were willing to stick with an author through his failures if they saw value and potential in his work. Editors and publishers did not expect businesslike efficiency from authors; rather, they treated authors as artists and were patient with the more talented among them. James W. McIntyre, managing partner of Little, Brown from 1908-1913 was loved by authors “for his persistence in publishing their work and advancing them money even when sales did not seem to justify it, if he believed in them” (Tebbel 1987, 405). B.W. Heusch, who joined forces with Viking Press in 1925, was “first of all a reader and then an editor” who “not only discovered writers but, like his colleague, Pat Covici, knew how to work with them to bring out their best” (Tebbel 1987,

254). Rather than being turned off by an unsuccessful first book or an imperfect manuscript, these editors were willing to work alongside the author to develop a title worthy of publication. This was a generation of publishers...

...who believed that they were dealing primarily in that most precious of commodities, ideas, the essence of all civilizations and all cultures. These words may sound quaintly old-fashioned to a present generation of corporate publishing executives who have replaced 'great books' and 'publishing vision' with 'money' and 'power' as their guiding lights (Tebbel 1987, 201).

The overlap and conflict between the golden generation and the new generation focused on money and power was most evident in the 1950s where new marketing experts interfered with veteran editors and their projects. Random House editor Saxe Commins was outraged when sales tried to take precedence over art.

A book came in that looked as though it would be a commercial disaster after the author's previous large success. The sales department was consulted and Commins was told that something must be done... Commins was indignant. 'They would do a thing like that to a man? Talk about him to the sales department? He is a writer and this is his book' (Tebbel 1987, 258).

Commins, who became chief editor in 1933, was as protective of his writer's status as artist as he was of his own autonomy.

Editors and publishers of the first half of the twentieth century viewed their craft as an art and were anxious to maintain independence and legitimacy and to separate themselves from the minutiae of finance and bottom lines. But there is a darker side to these noble sentiments. Their sense of individuality and dedication to high-quality literature naturally led editors and publishers to a feeling of superiority, an elitist attitude that included contempt for popular opinion and common works (Dessauer 1995, 4-5).

This aristocratic attitude can be traced back as far as the 1870s, when the liberal setting of

New York (which has always been the center of American publishing) “gave way to a kind of genteelism, which persisted until the literary revolution of the 1970s” (Epstein 2001, 99). The wealthy background of many Golden Age publishers and editors surely affected how they viewed incoming manuscripts. Additionally, the industry itself was affected by this elitist attitude in that publishers and editors never unionized, nor did those working in the lower levels of publishing houses, even when unionization was spreading nation-wide during the 1930s.

The comparative failure of unionization could be attributed not only to the individualistic character of publishers, among whom even the new arrival still regarded the business as a gentleman’s profession, but to the individualism of the employees themselves...They held to this conception of themselves, in spite of the fact that publishing continued to be, as it remains today, the least well paid occupation in the entire field of communications. There was something romantic in this attitude and a kind of elitism that separated the workers with ideas from the workers with tools (Tebbel 1987, 283-284).

Trade publishing certainly suffered from delusions of grandeur, but there were some cases in which elitism gave way to a desire to bring books to as many people as possible. Nelson Doubleday, who joined his father’s firm in 1922, was described as a man who “would rather have had ten million people read a book at fifty cents than one million at five dollars. He was a genius at devising ways to put books into the hands of the unbookish” (Tebbel 1987, 356). This was a common sentiment among publishers, one that would become more common as the trade paperback industry began to take shape. It is undeniable, however, that the publishing industry during the Golden Age was aware of its own nobility and had an air of elitism that likely caused some editors to ignore what was popular but good.

### **Frontlist, Midlist, and Backlist Books**

The difference between popular and good is sometimes very great, and sometimes non-existent. Generally, books that are good but not popular are recognized as such by an editor before they are published. Publishers who choose to publish these books in spite of their lack of sales potential will usually print a small number of copies, and likely won't put much advertising and publicity money into promoting the book. New books that are published but not highly promoted are generally called midlist books, referring to their placement in the publisher's catalog (Hill and Power 2005, 152). New books that are expected to do well and are heavily promoted are frontlist books, and a publisher's backlist generally consists of reprints of classic and recently publishing books that are familiar to most buyers and have slow but steady sales over the years. Frequently, it is not best sellers or blockbusters that represent the best literature of a given era. Midlist and backlist books are often more significant, and, in the long run, have a greater impact on society than frontlist books that are forgotten a few years after the hype dies down. During the first half of the twentieth century, it was relatively easy for a midlist or backlist book to get published, since publishers and even booksellers were more willing to be patient while a book sold slowly over time. Furthermore, publishers were willing to accept losses on an author's first book if they thought his second would be more successful.

In the early 1900s there was a boom in both book production and in advertising and publicity. The result was that readers were overwhelmed with hyped up titles that all promised to be the best book of the century. Eventually, readers were fed up with the hype. "In fact, it seemed that people were beginning to turn away from 'boomed' books,

with the result that an increasing number of volumes could be called ‘moderately successful.’ The public was learning to discriminate, too, after the glut of novels that had been fed them for nearly two decades” (Tebbel 1987, 176). A discriminating readership encouraged midlist books by spreading their patronage over many titles rather than focusing on a few highly promoted bestsellers. By the 1920s, though bestsellers were of course desirable, publishers were also focusing on acquiring midlist books that might turn in to profitable bestsellers in the long run. Prior to 1950, most publishers were eager to develop a backlist that not only gave them a steady source of profit, but also represented the quality and character of the house, acting as a measure of its reputation (West 1988, 23).

Of course, publishers had financial reasons for building midlists and backlists as well. Occasionally, a book that is expected to make only moderate sales actually jumps up to bestseller status, if it is given enough time on the shelves. Sales for *The Cain Mutiny* were slow for three months in 1951 before word of mouth boosted its sales and made it a bestseller (Tebbel 1987, 357). The fact that bookstores kept books on the shelves much longer during the Golden Age (before paperbacks and television increased competition for the public’s attention) than they do currently made it much easier for publishers to take risks on books that might not sell successfully in the first weeks (Hackett 1975, 114). Ultimately, a publisher will make more money in the long run if he focuses on midlist and backlist works, as opposed to constantly pursuing potential bestsellers, which have higher production costs and tend to fail miserably when they don’t succeed.



However, waiting for midlist and backlist books to bring in the money isn't always feasible. It was easier during the Golden Age, when the break-even point, the number of copies a book has to sell in order to cover the cost of production, was much lower than it is now. Due to increasing costs in printing, advertising, and distribution, the break-even point for a trade book was 1,250-1,500 in 1915, 3,000 in 1950, and in 1988 it was 4,500-5,000 for small presses and approaching 10,000 for larger houses (West 1988, 28). Given these numbers, it is not surprising that the Golden Age of publishing is looked on fondly by authors of midlist books, which are very often good, but not very popular.

There was a time during the first half of the century that the midlist book did not fare so well. During World War Two production costs skyrocketed and publishers were greatly restricted in the number of publications they could print. It became much more profitable "to run large printings of best sellers at the expense of other books, and as a result, never had so few titles gone to so many readers" as in 1945 (Tebbel 1987, 350).

### **Bestsellers**

The term bestseller refers not simply to books that sell many copies, but to books that are put on a bestsellers list. The first bestseller list began in 1895, but the *New York Times* bestseller list, which has become the most publicly influential, began in 1942. Since then, the same kinds of books – adventure, romance, history, politics, culture, celebrities, and self improvement – have remained at the top of the lists (Hill and Power 2005, 16). The fact that the landscape of the list has not changed significantly suggests that either the industry has not changed significantly, or that public taste remains the same regardless of changes in the industry. Starting in 1900, the method for compiling

bestseller lists was the one developed by Arthur Bartlett Maurice, editor of *The Bookman*. This method takes the top selling books from each city, and the first book on a city's list gets ten points, the second 8 points, the third 7 points, and so on (Tebbel 1987, 180-181). The number of cities used grew over time, naturally affecting the make-up of the list. The list itself was not an institution right away. In fact, some publishers, like Little, Brown, "refused to give sales figures to the compilers of bestseller lists, who had to get them from agents or authors" (Tebbel 1987, 407). Over time, however, bestsellers lists – specifically the *New York Times* – became incredibly influential both in terms of shaping public opinion and in guiding the decisions of publishers and editors.

Early in the twentieth century, historical novels topped the bestseller lists (Hackett 1975, 109). At that point, nonfiction sales were not high enough to be included in any kind of bestseller list, but that fact changed as the 1920s approached (Hackett 1975, 111). "Since 1919 when *PW* [*Publishers Weekly*] started a separate non-fiction list, the leaders have been how-to, self-help, the Bible, cookbooks, dictionaries, entertainment, and memoirs of public figures, as well as current events" (Hackett 1975, 119). In fact, other than the Bible, Dr. Spock's *Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* is the top selling fiction or non-fiction book from 1900-1975 (Hackett 1975, 120). Over time, "the old fashioned love story disappeared from the lists and from the books most in demand in public libraries," but that didn't change the fact that "there was nothing either mature or sophisticated about many of the best-selling books" (Tebbel 1987, 302). In fact, "lightweight fiction continued to dominate fiction lists until 1921" when "the renaissance in American literature was reflected to some extent by bookstore bestsellers in 1921 when Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* sold 295,000 copies. This new realism was to replace

the old romantic novel of previous years” (Hackett 1975, 111). The 1920s saw a change in the type of fiction to dominate the lists, but it by no means saw a dramatic increase in the level of intellectualism in the bestselling books in the nation.

Being on the bestsellers lists became more and more important as years went on. During the Golden Age, “there was a national craze for bestsellers...At the beginning of the fall season in 1922, one editor observed that there were already a hundred candidates for the list” (Tebbel 1987, 302). The mere fact that bestseller lists existed encouraged publishers to find and publish these bestsellers – especially at a time when booksellers arranged their displays by publisher, not by title or genre. However, publishers were still concerned with their backlists, which were a more stable source of income and helped shape the identity of the house.

In spite of the fact that bestsellers look remarkably similar from year to year, they very closely reflect the concerns and attitudes of the public. “Social problems became the theme of many bestsellers” in the 1940s (Hackett 1975, 115). It is generally agreed that “best sellers reflected aspects of American life and thought” (Tebbel 1987, 306). What is missing from this hypothesis is that while readers certainly decide what they buy and read, they do not directly decide what gets published; and while publishers choose books with the reader in mind, they also choose books based on their own tastes, beliefs, and assumptions about what the public wants. Certainly best sellers reflect public opinion, but they cannot be used as a direct gauge of the public’s interests and concerns.

### **Advertising**

Not only do publishers and editors decide what books the reading public has to choose from, they also decide which books will be advertised and how, decisions which

strongly influence the decisions the reading public makes. People cannot buy a book if they don't know it exists. Publishers have always struggled with advertising – more evidence of the un-businesslike nature of the publishing industry. In the early 1900s there was a surge of advertising in the industry, resulting in the 'booming' period, 1902-1904. Publishers spent a lot of money on advertising, but much of it was unsuccessful. They over-praised mediocre work so that all praise seemed insincere. They overused commentators so that their comments became meaningless, and overall publishers early in the century made poor advertising decisions (Tebbel 1987, 174-178). This resulted in the previously mentioned public aversion to 'boomed' books, which created an era of moderately successful midlist books, as opposed to an age of blockbusters.

During the Golden Age, the marketing strategy that worked best for the industry was the promise of the American Dream, of a cheap and easy education through reading. At the beginning of the century, books were seen, and advertised, as the gateway to success, a get smart quick technique that attracted the middle class in droves, but failed to fully reach the working class (Benton 2000, 16-17). "Books were hailed as affordable, plentiful, colorful dabs of civilization to be lavished throughout the gracious modern American home, and many heeded attentively" (Benton 2000, 20). For the middle class, books were a status symbol, a sign that one was educated and concerned with the world of letters, and also a sign that one had enough money and leisure time to spend on unnecessary but cultivating activities. The lower classes were also targeted, especially by the first paperback publishers, and encouraged to educate themselves for a low price. E. Haldeman Julius, one of the pioneers of paperback publishing, "quickly produced a

masterpiece of mail-order advertising that began, ‘WOULD YOU SPEND \$2.98 FOR A COLLEGE EDUCATION?’ and the stampede began” (Tebbel 1987, 286).

In spite of the veneration many modern accounts of earlier twentieth century publishing have for the nobility and character of publishers of yore, gimmick advertising was not unknown even to the most prestigious houses. In the 1920s, not only were publishers exploiting the lower classes’ desire to feel, be, and be perceived as educated people, they were employing the same publicity stunts that any business would have used. Knopf used sandwich men to advertise books as early as 1921. Putnam held a crossword puzzle contest in 1925 to increase sales for his puzzle books and dictionaries, and Covici-Friede even used skywriting in 1928 (Tebbel 1987, 315-318). Advertising did not contain much substance, and “the general public...relied increasingly on book jackets to inform them about what might be between the covers. Consequently, flap copy was becoming more effective as a point-of-sale technique” (Tebbel 1987, 311). One fact that makes advertising in the Golden Age look a little more reputable is that “books rather than authors continued to dominate display advertising” in the 1920s (Tebbel 1987, 309). Books relied at least somewhat on their own content, not exclusively on the previous successes of the author, for recognition. This made the advantage that previously successful authors held over new authors somewhat less severe. But even in what was supposedly the most intellectual and enlightened era of publishing, flashy advertising was used, and it often worked.

There have been attempts throughout the industry’s history to create joint advertising campaigns, based on the idea that promoting general readership and book buying would be beneficial to publishers in general. Publishers and booksellers tried to

organize their publicity efforts in 1920 with the Co-operative Book Advertising Campaign and again in 1921 with the Publishers Adclub. Both attempts failed (Tebbel 1987, 308).

Earnest Elmo Calkins, a noted advertising expert, argued in 1922 that publishers' advertising should be directed towards general reading rather than specific books, and proposed that the houses should raise a million dollars a year for the next several years to carry out this kind of campaign...Few people in publishing agreed with him (Tebbel 1987, 309).

Whether because the competition between them was too great, or because their inefficiencies made organization too difficult and costly, an organized advertising campaign never came to fruition during the Golden Age of publishing.

During the Golden Age and before, publishers were assisted in their publicity attempts by the newspaper and magazine industries. The creation of a mass media of newspapers and magazines was a large factor in the advent of the Golden Age as the literate mass media increased the size of the reading public. Furthermore, during the Golden Age newspapers treated publishing industry news as real news, making the inner workings of the industry transparent to the public while simultaneously providing valuable publicity. Even as early as the post-Civil War era newspapers paid a lot of attention to what was getting published by whom and for how much (Tebbel 1987, 174).

During the Golden Age, when houses merged, when editors quit or were fired, when editors and publishers argued, it was reported in the major newspapers (Tebbel 1987, 201-227). John Tebbel even goes so far as to argue that "in book trade publishing, the most important development of the twenties was unquestionably the move in other media, especially newspapers, to treat books as news. This could be seen not only in great off-the-book-page publicity, but, more importantly, in the rise of literary

supplements as major reviewing media” (Tebbel 1987, 310). Tebbel acknowledges the fact that, except for the major literary cities like New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Boston, newspaper reviews were often lacking quality and insight, but maintains that newspaper coverage in the twenties gave the trade industry valuable publicity while acknowledging and making public its important role in society. Magazines were also becoming more and more interdependent with the trade industry during the 1920s (Tebbel 1987, 271). Rather than running book reviews or industry news, magazines often printed the first chapter of a book as a teaser just before publication, or printed an entire book in serial, which helped publishers stimulate word of mouth publicity. The fact that the publishing industry was in its heyday just as mass media was beginning to take shape is no coincidence; each industry fueled the other, even as they competed for the attention of the reading public.

### **Booksellers**

Publishers marketed and advertised their books to readers, but publishers rarely sold their books directly to those readers. The bookstores that acted as intermediaries between publishers and readers during the Golden Age were very different from the bookstores we are familiar with today. “Bookstores, in fact, were really the first drugstores as we know them now” (Tebbel 1975, 7). Having to compete with book clubs, libraries, and mail-order sales, bookstores generally carried items besides books in order to keep profits high. This put even the most literary of bookstore owners in a difficult situation. “Most bookstores kept only two or three hundred dollars worth of stock at a time, and put their capital into sidelines. They competed with one another, underselling to get rid of books, which the general merchandisers offered at nearly cost price to attract

customers for other goods” (Tebbel 1987, 16). During World War II in particular, there was an increase in “the availability and excellence of new lines of popularly priced books. Chain stores had suddenly discovered the value of books as merchandise” (Tebbel 1987, 349). In order to compete with other booksellers, prices were slashed, which in turn lowered the price at which booksellers were willing to purchase books from publishers. Publishers, however, had no sideline business, so it was in their best interest to keep prices high and uniform from bookstore to bookstore.

### **Pricing**

During the first half of the twentieth century, publishers struggled with the laws of the free market economy, including competition and uncontrolled pricing. Publishers in some European countries, including England, were able to prevent booksellers from underselling their products by passing legislation, in England’s case, the Net Book Agreement, which allowed publishers to place a minimum price on their books, allowing them to control profits while minimizing competition. American book publishers tried to follow the British example and pass their own Net Book Agreement in 1901. After a long legal battle, the Supreme Court ruled against the Net Book Agreement in 1913, and publishers were forced to allow booksellers and the free market to set the retail price for their products (West 1988, 32-33). This change, however, did not affect the way in which publishers priced their own books. In fact, “even under fair trade laws individual publishers did as they had always done: priced books on their estimates of what a title might sell” (Tebbel 1987, 280). Publishers calculated the cost of printing the book, the advance to the author, the costs of advertising and publicity and other overhead costs, estimated how many copies the book would sell, and decided on a price that would keep



the break-even point below the point of expected sales. Though there is a kind of science to this equation, ultimately publishers must rely on their own estimates of how many copies a book will sell. During the 1940s, production costs increased steadily, and “realistic relief could only come from what the publishers had so long sought to avoid – an increase in retail price. Inevitably, it came” (Tebbel 1987, 339). When the Net Book Agreement failed, publishers were forced permanently into the free market system, a situation which many publishers had hoped to avoid.

### **The Reading Public**

Forced to compete like any other business, the publishing industry became increasingly dependent on the reading public, their tastes and opinions. Before and during the Golden Age, the size of reading public, both in sheer numbers and relative to total population increased dramatically. World War Two in particular was a catalyst for this growth. During the war, publishers learned “that Americans were not quite as literate as everyone had supposed, but at the same time the conflict had brought books to a great many people who had been deprived of them before” (Tebbel 1987, 307). Not all Americans were readers, but those who had the potential to become readers were encouraged by wartime publications, which, as noted previously, were affordable and accessible thanks to paperback publishing and the increased popularity of books in chain stores (Tebbel 1987, 349). According to *Time* magazine, World War Two was a time “when book buying and reading had reached outside the small world of intellectuals to the mass audience – ‘the whole vast literate population of the United States’” (Tebbel 1987, 348).

While a growing reading public was unquestionably good for the publishing industry in the financial sense, there was some resistance to the phenomenon based on intellectual grounds. When more and more people started reading, the elite, both inside and outside of the publishing industry, feared that the integrity of the book was in danger. In the early twentieth century, “too many books” flooded the public. Too many books on the market means that the few that are truly great literature and have the potential to significantly impact society are drowned by masses of mediocre or even bad books. In 1912, a speaker at the American Booksellers Association convention, “a Doubleday executive, came up with a ringing new slogan – one that has been ringing ever since: ‘Fewer Books and Better’” (Grannis 1975, 72). The sentiment was that “fewer, better books – circulating among the more refined readers whose educated tastes better enabled them to evaluate and appreciate them – were preferable to a larger but less discerning market.”

It is evident that the argument against too many books was just as much an argument against the new working class readership that “made a mockery, it was felt, of authentic book ownership: they wanted the effects of culture without the substance” (Benton 2000, 25). Publishers, editors, and writers were concerned for the dignity and integrity of the book, which they felt was on the decline in the 1920s (Benton 2000, 10). They felt “their professional values slighted in the frivolous popularity of books” (Lehmann-Haupt 1951, 20). Naturally these sentiments were strongest amongst publishers of re-printed classics in special, limited edition paper and bindings, but throughout the industry there was a fear that books would become base commodities,

which would not only drive down prices, but also diminish the social status of publishing professionals.

The fear of too many books in too many hands “coincided with the outpouring of ‘cheap’ books and the late nineteenth century flood of paperbacks...In the twenties the complaint was partly a protest against changing times, as indeed it had been before, and partly a response to the growth of the industry, which was constantly making it more competitive, and, for some publishers, less profitable” (Tebbel 1987, 273). The industry was becoming more and more a part of the American free market, and in resisting the popularization of books, industry leaders were resisting that transition. Of course, it was publishers’ own drive to maximize profits that led to the popularization, and perceived debasement, of the book. Even the publishing industry itself “had seemed to forsake higher things by pumping out thousands of copies of one Zane Grey [a popular 1920s author] novel after another, packaged in garish covers and emblazoned with vulgar buy me blurbs” (Benton 2000, 26). Whether or not these novels and their presentation were truly “garish” or “vulgar,” the publishing industry, much to its own chagrin, was more and more a mass market industry, and there were many who feared that books would soon be just another commodity, to be manufactured, sold, and bought with the same intellectual consideration as shoes or soap.

### **Paperback and Mass Market Publishing**

Behind this fear of the pollution of the book world, there was, undoubtedly, a fear of an educated working class. Elites in the book industry were elites like any others who wanted to keep their industry and their social class exclusive. Their fears were not wholly without basis. In 1921 E. Haldeman-Julius founded Little Blue Books (Tebbel

1987). These books were priced to own, even for the working class, and were made cheaply with paper and staples, designed for travel and the life of the working class. The titles published under Little Blue Books included reprints of classic works of literature, philosophy, history, and much more, including extremely controversial works on religion, sexuality, and politics. Thanks to Little Blue Books, sold through mail-order catalogs, “millions of Americans living in small towns and rural areas far from adequate libraries were able to sample the world’s masterpieces for the first time, while they learned about socialism, psychoanalysis, and sex” (Tebbel 1987, 287). In fact, Haldeman-Julius was himself a socialist, and literature and socialism were inextricably linked in his mind. “In the ‘democracy of books,’ as he called it, he would bring this literature to the masses at a price they could afford” (Tebbel 1987, 285). Long established publishing houses were not happy about Little Blue Books. Their affordability made all other books look extravagant and expensive, forcing other publishers to bring their prices down. Also, Little Blue Books was contributing to the degradation of the written word, making literature accessible to everyone and thereby diminishing its power as a social tool and status symbol. However, “few in the publishing world understood the Haldeman-Julius was more than a publisher whose cut-rate selling infuriated them. He was, before anything else, a propagandist, and he carried out his intention to provide a marketing mechanism for liberals and dissenters of his time, with nearly all of whom he agreed” (Tebbel 1987, 287). Elite readers, jealous of their social status, were right to fear the education of the working class. One man, at least, had revolutionary motives at heart.

The Little Blue Books were designed for the lowest classes. The Modern Library, however, founded by Boni & Liveright in 1917, was designed for a slightly higher class

of readers. Printed in paperback, they were cheap editions of classic works, but were of a higher quality than mass market publications like Little Blue Books. Unlike mass market books, they were marketed towards students and other intellectual readers who were unable to afford a collection of expensive hardbound classics. Under Boni & Liveright, the Modern Library was very successful and very profitable, but Liveright managed his business so poorly that he was forced to sell the Modern Library to Bennet Cerf, who used it as a starting point for Random House in 1925 (Tebbel 1987, 256). The success of the Modern Library started a new trend in publishing, trade paperbacks, quality paperbacks sold in retail book outlets, as opposed to the more cheaply and hastily designed mass market books sold in drug and grocery stores.

In 1939, mass market paperbacks got another boost when Robert Fair de Graff founded Pocket Books, inspired by England's Penguin series. Designed to fit in a pocket and bound cheaply in paper and glue, Pocket Books consisted primarily of reprints of popular, light literature, particularly mysteries, and popular non-fiction. Pocket Books began modestly, printing about 10,000 copies per title, but as soon as they were made available to the public, demand for them increased exponentially (Tebbel 1987, 295). A year or two after initial publication, Pocket Books began to use independent wholesale distributors to supply their books to retail outlets throughout North America (Bonn 1995, 263). The use of independent distributors was new to the industry, and started a trend that would begin to break down some of the traditional regional barriers in the publishing industry. Throughout the Golden Age, books were becoming more and more available to more and more people. The nature of the book changed, as did methods of distribution and marketing. As the reading public grew, the publishing industry grew with it and, in

many ways, grew away from its cultural and elite background and into a more egalitarian, democratic, and yet profit-driven industry.

Until new mass marketing techniques and new methods of distribution became common in the industry, publishing was a regional business with centers in major cities, mostly in the northeast. Until E. Haldeman-Julius and other mass marketers entered the scene, there was very little effort to reach rural areas or cities beyond the centers of New York, Boston, Chicago and Philadelphia. Even in intellectual terms, publishing was a regional activity. “Even before the Civil War publishers had issued two sets of schoolbooks, one for the North and one for the South” (Tebbel 1987, 319) The Civil War cemented the North-South intellectual divide by leaving the South economically strapped. “By the time the South recovered economically, northeastern publishers had become so firmly established, so solidly a part of the post-Civil War northern plutocracy, that there seems never have been a serious effort to challenge them” (West 1988, 39). Throughout the Golden Age, publishers in the major literary cities were by far the dominant force in the industry, and there were no signs of those centers shifting or of publishers attempting to widen their sphere of influence.

### **Censorship**

One issue that has always, and will always come up in regards to the written word is censorship. The Golden Age was certainly no exception. During the 1920s, and, to a lesser extent, the 1930s, there was a huge amount of censorship placed on the industry from religious groups, patriots, unions, private businesses, and even writers and professors, who were determined to re-write books to suit their own needs (Tebbel 1987, 318-330). This applied most specifically to school books, but trade books were affected

as well, particularly fiction works that were perceived as immoral or overly sexual. During the Golden Age, censorship came from outside groups attempting to control what kinds of books the public read. Publishers found themselves in difficult political situations as well. During World War Two, publishers were “in an ideological dilemma they had never been in before: were the Soviets to be considered friend or foe?” (Tebbel 1987, 342). Once again, this question was most pressing for publishers of school textbooks, but trade publishers also had to be mindful of what they printed regarding such sensitive issues. The fact that publishers considered this choice and were troubled by it shows that not only did they have a significant amount of influence on society, but also that they were aware of that influence and its consequences.

### **Publishing: Art or Business?**

Just as censorship of books came from outside the industry during the first half of the twentieth century, the factors that pushed publishing towards a business-oriented, profit-maximizing industry were externally forced upon a naturally unprofitable business, or so the argument goes. Even as early as the 1800s, “publishers were forever producing elaborate descriptions of how much it cost to produce a book and how unprofitable it was, until there was good reason to wonder how they remained in business. Authors were not impressed with the publishers’ cries of poverty...” (Tebbel 1987, 173). Of course publishers made money, otherwise they would not have been able to publish books. The fact that publishing survived the Great Depression practically unscathed is reason enough to take claims of poverty with a grain of salt. But it is true that publishing was never a big-profit industry. The publishing industry wasn’t affected by the broken economy of the 30s nearly as much as other industries, but it also wasn’t aided by the

booming economy of the 20s to the same degree as other industries (Benton 2000, 15). Publishing was less dependent on market fluctuations than most American industries, and its low margin of profit may have been the reason why. Publishing certainly earned itself a reputation for being unprofitable during the Golden Age and even for a few years after.

As late as the nineteen-fifties, trade-book publishing...was believed to offer its practitioners a rather select and gentlemanly way of life. It may not have been considered a particularly profitable business, but it was a business in which publishers and editors could feel sustained not only by their love of books but by their sense of personal independence (Whiteside 1981, 1).

As Jason Epstein, founder of Anchor Books in 1953, puts it, “For owners and editors willing to work for the joy of the task, book publishing in my time has been immensely rewarding. For investors looking for conventional returns, it has been disappointing” (Epstein 2001, 4). It may well be that what is disappointing to investors is necessary to maintain the integrity of the book.

The publishing business was so un-businesslike that a report, commissioned by National Association of Book Publishers and written by Oliver H. Cheney in 1932 was generated to discover the inefficiencies in the industry and suggest new modes of operation that would allow publishing houses to be run as efficiently and profitably as any other business. His suggestions included the elimination of many practices that were long-standing traditions in the industry. Cheney’s report consisted of...

...the observations of a banker and businessman, attempting to find a way of making the publishing industry conform to the norms and standards of other business. As such it made good sense to like-minded people who read about the report in the newspapers. To those in the industry, however, much of what the report had to say seemed unrelated to the realities they knew (Tebbel 1987, 287).



Industry insiders' reaction to the report was one of indifference since its suggestions were wholly irrelevant to their work as they saw it. John Macrae of Dutton said "there is a spiritual influence in the book field which is unique because books are personal, and it is ridiculous to judge our profession with the same standards as one may justifiably judge a purely commercial endeavor" (Tebbel 1987, 281). Booksellers felt the same way. As Richard F. Fuller of the Old Corner Bookstore in Boston pointed out, "if this [Cheney's report] is a true picture in all it details either one of two things must be true: A. The book industry is doomed, or B. An industry which is as bad as ours and has survived all these years must be worth saving" (Tebbel 1987, 281). An industry that functions so well with so many inefficiencies may not need fixing after all. And indeed, Cheney's report changed very little, and "considering the highly individualistic character of publishing as it was then, it is hardly surprising that so little was ever done about the report's recommendations. When the excitement died down, most of the publishers went back to conducting business in the old familiar way" (Tebbel 1987, 281).

Critics of the modern publishing industry refer back to the days when publishing wasn't trying to be something it's not – a business. They argue that publishing and business are an unnatural pairing, and that a business based on profit and expansion can only prevent the free flow of ideas, the facilitation of which is seen as a publisher's obligation to society. "Trade publishing is by nature a cottage industry, decentralized, improvisational, personal; best performed by small groups of like-minded people, devoted to their craft, jealous of their autonomy, sensitive to the needs of writers and to the diverse interests of readers" (Epstein 2001, 1). The Golden Age is seen as the pinnacle of this kind of publishing, when it was "a much smaller, and more intimate

activity than it is today, and the titles published by any publishing houses tended to reflect to a greater extent the interests and priorities of the proprietor than abstract market forces” (Horowitz and Curtis 1995, 305). When the shift from artistic instinct to market forces began is not exactly agreed upon. Some say that even in the early 1900s “many new publishing houses were beginning to do business in the manner of other American firms, seeking high profit and exploiting a growing technology and an expanding market” while “older publishers continued to think of their calling – their ‘profession’ – in terms taken from an earlier time” (West 1988, 42). However, most who write on the subject believe that it is only during the second half of the twentieth century that “publishing has deviated from its true nature by assuming, under duress from unfavorable market conditions and the misconceptions of remote managers, the posture of a conventional business” (Epstein 2001, 4).

Up until 1950, the publishing industry is described with heavy-handed nostalgia (some of which is assuredly exaggeration) as the pinnacle of intellectual freedom. Naturally, the true nature of the industry from 1900 to 1950 is somewhere in between the sentimental construction that old time editors and publishers describe in their memoirs and the elite, exclusive, inefficient exercise in narcissism that is suggested by the dominance of rich, white men who worshipped their own independence.

While publishing may never have been quite the ‘profession for gentlemen’ it was widely believed to be, it *was* a unique kind of business. Its chief ingredient was a love of the printed page, of the book. People in publishing liked the feel of the book in the hand, and they were almost all inveterate readers... Their joy of finding a manuscript that was deemed worthy of publication was shared by everyone involved. When readers felt the same way, those who had made it possible were delighted. If it failed in the marketplace, there was some sorrow, but seldom regret for having published it. Authors and editors often formed close relationships and many stayed united for years. Publishing, in short, was like a small

town where everyone knew everyone else and felt a kinship that was not to be found in ordinary commercial enterprises (Tebbel 1987, 462-463).

After 1950, the terms used to describe the publishing industry have lost some of their lofty, noble intellectualism. Publishing started to become a conventional business.

## **The History of the Publishing Industry 1950-Present**

As early as the 1950s the publishing industry underwent drastic changes. These changes were so drastic that “it can be argued that no other American business has changed so completely so quickly” (Tebbel 1987, 469). The period between 1960 and 1989 is commonly referred to as the Age of Acquisitions in the publishing industry. During that time “there were a reported 573 mergers and acquisitions in the US book publishing industry” (Greco 1995, 229). As a result of these mergers and acquisitions the publishing industry got smaller and larger at the same time. Fewer and fewer companies controlled the major houses, but those companies had far more capital than independent houses had ever had, and so the scale of publishing increased dramatically.

As early as 1940, publishing houses like Doubleday were shifting from rural self-sustaining houses to “money-machines” and the beginnings of the publishing giants they are today (Whiteside 1981, 225-226). Many houses, like Macmillan which broke away from its British parent company in 1952, went public but “neglected to provide themselves with enough shares to resist a takeover attempt, an unimaginable precaution at the time in any case” (Tebbel 1987, 364). By 1959 “Wall Street had discovered book publishing, and the tumultuous era of mergers, takeovers, and public stock offerings had begun. Already there were those who could see that publishing was about to undergo a profound and irreversible change in its traditional character” (Tebbel 1987, 363). It is difficult to pinpoint the beginning of the Age of Acquisitions, but it is generally agreed that “it was in 1960 that it received its first big impetus: the absorption of Alfred A. Knopf into Random House, which set the tone for what happened later” (Whiteside 1981, 3).

**Table 1<sup>1</sup>**

Year	Number of Mergers and Acquisitions	Percentage of Total Number in decade	Percent of Total Number From 1960-1989
1960	14	7.65	2.44
1961	11	6.01	1.92
1962	7	3.83	1.22
1963	12	6.56	2.09
1964	8	4.37	1.40
1965	14	7.65	2.44
1966	23	12.57	4.01
1967	23	12.57	4.01
1968	38	20.77	6.63
1969	33	18.03	5.76
<b>1960-1960</b>	<b>183</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>31.94</b>
1970	29	16.38	5.06
1971	15	8.47	2.62
1972	8	4.52	1.40
1973	12	6.78	2.09
1974	22	12.43	3.84
1975	16	9.04	2.79
1976	16	9.04	2.79
1977	22	12.43	3.84
1978	22	12.43	3.84
1979	15	8.47	2.62
<b>1970-1979</b>	<b>177</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>30.89</b>
1980	12	5.63	2.09
1981	16	7.51	2.79
1982	9	4.23	1.57
1983	10	4.69	1.75
1984	29	13.62	5.06
1985	30	14.08	5.24
1986	40	18.78	6.98
1987	26	12.21	4.54
1988	26	12.21	4.54
1989	15	7.04	2.62
<b>1980-1989</b>	<b>213</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>37.17</b>
<b>1960-1989</b>	<b>573</b>	<b>-----</b>	<b>100.00</b>

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<sup>1</sup> Greco 1995, 231-232

By the end of the 1960s, two of the three major television networks had a hand in the publishing industry (Greco 1995, 231). The 1970s and 1980s were periods of huge change with an unprecedented number of mergers, acquisitions, and consolidations, finally tapering off in 1987 when the October stock market crash caused the US House Ways and Means Committee to eliminate tax breaks that encouraged mergers (Greco 1995, 230).

The industry and the economy in general benefited from the Age of Acquisitions in many ways. The increased scale of production and distribution that resulted from increased capital in the industry created countless new jobs. Rural areas which were previously ignored by most of the industry received an influx of books and bookstores. The US publishing industry turned into a global industry, creating international marketing opportunities that boosted the US economy. And, quite simply, publishers and editors had more starting capital with which to find and sell new titles. Of course, there were drawbacks as well, including the difficulties of working through the bureaucracy of a conglomerate in order to get something done in a publishing house. Also, many foreign companies were among those acquiring independent publishers, so the industry was more and more under the influence of foreign interests, and was more and more dependent on foreign capital, which increased US debt and sent profits overseas. Finally, there was an inevitable loss of editorial independence whenever an independent house was acquired by a parent company (Greco 1995, 235).

When independent publishing houses became parts of large corporations, there were always assurances that nothing would change. The previous owners were told that they would maintain autonomy and that the corporate parent company would not interfere

in the day-to-day workings of the publishing division. “A time would come when no one in publishing believed such promises, so common and so meaningless in business life, but book people were still learning the language of the boardroom” (Whiteside 1981, 365). In reality, when houses were bought out or went public, investigations into their business practices revealed inefficiencies and deficiencies that went unnoticed in the gentlemanly, un-businesslike world of private publishing companies (Whiteside 1981, 13). Naturally business-savvy CEOs wanted to fix those deficiencies, but since they knew so little about publishing, the changes they made were not always for the best.

As the companies running the publishing industry got bigger and bigger, the industry itself began to operate on a larger scale. “In keeping with the scale of these corporate consolidations, many other aspects of the book-publishing business appear to have grown dramatically. Things just seem to keep getting bigger and bigger” (Whiteside 1981, 3). Publishing conglomerates with large amounts of capital behind them were able to make larger and larger bids on popular works, drastically increasing the size of advances paid to the most successful authors. “It wasn’t always true, say 50 years ago, but now becoming a popular author leads to wealth” (Hill and Power 2005, 211). In the sixties and seventies, competition between houses became focused on the size of the advances paid for original works, rather than on the quality and integrity of a publisher’s list (Tebbel 1987, 424). Publishing was generally becoming larger and more finance-oriented than ever before.

With greater size and outside investment, publishing became – or seemed to become – more like other businesses; an information industry. There was more emphasis on profit and less on nurturing unknown authors. The ‘blockbuster syndrome’ was diagnosed; formula publishing expanded, as did the chain bookstores fed by formula publishing; advances on royalties soared; editors moved from house to house, carrying authors with them

much like account executives in advertising agencies. At the new scale of publishing, management became more important than craft standards and at least the equal of creative judgment (Hill and Power 2005, 211).

Even independent publishers who did not become part of corporate conglomerates grew to corporation-sized giants themselves (Whiteside 1981, 10). As larger publishers wielded their financial power, “those independent publishers who resisted the temptation to be acquired began to encounter difficulties in maintaining or improving their position in the market, since that market was increasingly influenced by the larger amounts that houses backed by conglomerates could bid for books by popular authors” (Whiteside 1981, 15). Small houses were gradually being shut out from the bestseller industry, and, as will be discussed later in this study, bestsellers were becoming more and more necessary to a house’s survival.

Once a few corporations with large amounts of capital entered the industry, it became more difficult for small independents to compete, leading to even more mergers and acquisitions. “The wave of mergers, consolidations and acquisitions by foreign corporations has left the publishing industry with just a handful of major houses that can grab a seat at the table and bid on the mega deals that now dominate the business” (Vanderbilt 1999, 179). The stakes were rising in trade publishing, and simultaneously there were fewer and fewer houses able to meet the new financial standards. Family owned independent houses were adversely affected by the federal estate tax, which made it difficult for houses to survive the death of their owner without merging or going public (Whiteside 1981, 185-186). Concentration of power in an industry as intellectually influential as publishing has serious potential dangers, but there are many who don’t fear a media monopoly in trade publishing, simply because “there was a dramatic increase in



both the total number of book publishing firms and title output between 1960 and 1989” (Tebbel 1987, 405). How many of these more numerous publishing firms are able to compete with the giant conglomerates is another question, especially in light of the huge market shares enjoyed by the top 15 publishers as early as 1989. Table 2 shows that the top 15 publisher in 1989 took in 72.4% of the U.S. book market share with the top 10 publishers along taking in more than half of the market share. The dramatic increase in the number of book publishers aside, by the end of the Age of Acquisitions, a handful of publishers controlled the majority of the book market.

**Table 2<sup>2</sup>**

Rank	Publisher	Market Share of Total U.S. Book Market (%)
1	Simon and Schuster	8.83
2	Time-Warner	7.69
3	HarperCollins	7.58
4	Reader's Digest	6.32
5	Random House	5.69
6	Harcourt Brace Jovanovich	5.53
7	Bantam Doubleday Dell	5.19
8	Encyclopedia Britannica	4.18
9	Maxwell Macmillan	3.55
10	McGraw-Hill	3.35
11	Times-Mirror Book Group	3.35
12	Thomson Corporation	3.32
13	Penguin USA	3.19
14	Houghton Mifflin	2.71
15	Macmillan/McGraw-Hill	1.92
	Total	72.4

The publishing industry had remained relatively independent throughout the first half of the twentieth century. There were several historical and economic factors that contributed to the advent of the Age of Acquisitions. First of all, following World War

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<sup>2</sup> Greco 1995, 235

II, the American public was more educated and more affluent than ever before. The GI Bill produced “a classless generation of serious readers...the GI Bill had democratized higher education and liberated it from its aristocratic traditions” (Epstein 2001, 125). After the war, “America underwent a cultural revolution...Increased educational attainment, coupled with a growing affluence gave many more Americans than in previous periods the appetite as well as the means to pursue cultural interests” (Dessauer 1995, 3). There were, quite simply, more people who wanted to and were able to buy and read books.

Following World War II, the Cold War and the endless competition between the United States and the Soviet Union encouraged the American government to increase spending on education, flooding the educational and library book markets with money. “Between 1957 and 1970, nearly \$1 billion was invested in public, school, and college library programs alone” (Dessauer 1995, 23). With the government funneling so much money into the book industry, “the publishing community responded by vastly expanding its title output” (Lofquist 1995, 342). Increased readership combined with a market supported by government spending had turned the publishing industry from a gentlemen’s business where no one expected to make serious profits to a booming industry with improving sales potential. “Between 1968 and 1989, this industry posted an impressive array of business statistics that validated the financial rationale for these high-priced mergers and acquisitions...There was money to be made in book publishing, and the industry’s highly valued cultural ‘ambiance’ clearly augmented the deal” (Greco 1995, 230). Foreign investors felt that US publishing companies were selling at depressed prices, due to a cycle of recessions between 1960 and 1989, and the

depreciation of the US dollar (Greco 1995, 233). All in all, corporations believed, and with good reason, that entering the publishing industry was a sound financial choice.

It has been suggested that the general attitude of entrepreneurs in the United States became more cutthroat, thereby catalyzing the takeover of the one anti-business publishing industry. Tebbel argues that earlier in the century men like J.P Morgan were more willing to let the publishing industry stand alone.

Morgan found that the principles and practices of Wall Street did not apply to publishing and got out as soon as possible, but those who came after him in our time have been far more ruthless and efficient. If publishing did not fit the conventional business pattern, they would, by God, *make* it fit, and if that meant firing old employees from the top down who had given their lives to the business, it would be done without any sentimentality. If it also meant thinking of books in terms of sales rather than merit, they were ready to construct such a list (Tebbel 1987, 463).

Whether or not the level of determination among entrepreneurs changed drastically over the course of the century, the amount of mergers and acquisitions in the industry concentrated power and, perhaps more importantly, increased the financial and quantitative scale of competitive trade publishing.

### **Quality in Literature**

Concentration of power in any industry is discomfoting to those concerned with fair competition and the free flow of ideas. In the publishing industry, where books that can potentially shape public opinion and begin and end public debates are either published or silence, that concern is greater still. But those who wish to criticize the quality of books published under the corporate mentality must first establish what determines a quality trade book. In non-fiction, a standard of accuracy, clarity, and relevance is relatively easy to establish. In fiction, however, there is more disagreement. In fact, few who write about the publishing industry even attempt to define quality in

fiction. There is often a distinction made between literary and commercial fiction, but the extent of that distinction seems to be that literary fiction is only sometimes entertaining while commercial fiction is designed with entertainment as its primary purpose. Many people, including authors and editors, defend commercial fiction on just these grounds. Sabrina Jeffries, author of several romance novels, believes that “literary writers have forgotten that literature used to be about telling an entertaining story” (Hill and Power 2005, 61). Lawrence Shapiro, Vice President and Editorial Director of the Book of the Month Club, the History Book Club, and American Compass, points out that “the primary incentive for most people buying a book is to seek entertainment. It’s not that they’re resistant to literary quality, but that’s not the first they’re looking for. In some cases, readers just want escape entertainment, and they don’t want to be challenged. By definition, literary fiction is challenging” (Benton 2000, 58). There is a general sentiment among commercial authors and publishers that “you hear that books should be ‘challenging, troubling, take us out of our comfort zone.’ What about reading being enjoyable?” (Hill and Power 2005, 60). Other authors confess to the more practical side of trade fiction. Nicholas Sparks, a *New York Times* best-selling author, confessed that “writing is an art, but publishing is a business...If you want to sell millions of copies you should consider writing a commercial novel. And that is not to say that commercial writing isn’t high quality. It simply means that the plot isn’t secondary to writing style” (Hill and Power 2005, 235-236). Of course, quality should refer both to entertainment and to writing style, and perhaps to something larger as well, a relevancy and significance, not necessarily regarding something profound and world-changing, but at least something that will be remembered. There is “a distinction between books that are

great entertainment and books that are great entertainment *and* great literature: One is of the moment and one lasts longer, sometimes forever” (Vanderbilt 1999, 134). The trouble with that distinction is that if we are going to criticize the quality of the modern publishing industry, we must judge today’s literature today.

In order to judge what kinds of effects corporate ownership has over the quality of books produced in trade publishing, the changes in the industry that have resulted from the increase in scale and concentration must be looked at in terms of their affect on the way books are written, selected, and edited. For example, before publishing became such a high-volume, profit-focused industry, the length of time from acquisition to publication was much longer. After the Age of Acquisitions, whenever publishers faced hard financial times, they “began speeding up the publication process for hardcover books, trimming the standard one year from receipt of manuscript to publication date to three to four months, to sooner achieve a return on their capital” (Vanderbilt 1999, 198). Lawrence Shapiro echoed that sentiment, saying that publishers are “crashing more books, rushing them to market” (Hill and Power 2005, 101). “Rushing” a book through the editorial process can hardly be a positive factor in regards to its intellectual value. More importantly, the speeding up of the process also applies to the actual writing of trade books. “Bestselling authors do not have the luxury of sitting at a word processor, starting out the window, going to lunch, and coming back and staring some more. They have publishing contracts in place that require meeting rigorous deadlines and maintaining a relentless pace of production” (Hill and Power 2005, 184). It may not be necessary for authors to stare out the window in order to write quality literature, but a “relentless pace of production” does not sound conducive to the creative process.

### **Structure of the Publishing House**

As the financial stakes in publishing increased, the internal structure and hierarchies of publishing houses changed accordingly. First and foremost, literary agents became a powerful force in the author-publisher relationship. “Forty years ago agents were mere peripheral necessities, like dentists, consulted as needed, not the dominant figures in the lives of authors that many of them have since become” (Epstein 2001, 6). Agents did not come into existence during the Age of Acquisitions, but in previous times they were on the fringes of author-publisher negotiations, partly because there was little need for them, and partly because publishers strongly resented and feared their power to extract higher advances and better terms for authors. As publishing grew in scale, larger and larger advances were being paid and authors, many of whom were being treated as celebrities for the first time thanks to increased distribution and advertising for the biggest sellers, felt the need for representation in order to avoid being exploited by publishers (Tebbel 1987, 171-172).

As much as publishers did, and do, resent agents, they have become so prominent in the field that “nearly all the major publishing houses will not accept unsolicited submissions. So for a new author, acquiring a literary agent is mandatory” (Hill and Power 2005, 65). Agents necessarily add a businesslike tone to literary proceedings, especially the types of agents who deal exclusively in blockbuster books, are lawyers and deal directly with Hollywood; these are the agents that are becoming more and more numerous and powerful (Whiteside 1981, 56). Because of the intervening power of agents, authors are no longer loyal to one house, moving instead to whichever publisher can pay the highest advance (Epstein 2001, 18-20). Not only does this put smaller houses

at a disadvantage, even regarding an author whose first book was published by a small independent house, but the resulting competition drives advances for the most famous authors so high that publishers often make little or no profit from their books, making it more difficult for those publishers to take risks on unknown authors or avant-garde writing. Additionally, publishers and editors are discouraged from nurturing young, promising writers, because most of them will wind up with another agency for their next book. Agents became more and more intrusive over the years, not only in the financial process of signing a book deal, but in the creative process as well (West 1988, 18-19). This adds a degree of alienation to the process, separating the author from his work. “By taking on the trappings of professionalism, publishers and agents have isolated the author from the process by which writing is made into literary merchandise” (West 1988, 19). Although authors technically have control over what happens to their manuscript during the publication process (Hill and Power 2005, 69), the power of agents working directly with publishers has increased the feeling of separation between an author and his work once he hands it over to the house.

Within publishing houses, the various roles of publishers and editors became more departmentalized and hierarchical in the second half of the twentieth century (West 1988, 18). Essentially, the division between publisher and editor is that the editor is focused on the creation of the work while the publisher is focused on the public reaction to the work (Escarpit 1966, 121). In theory, this allows the editor to focus on the quality of the work, leaving issues like marketing, publicity, sales, and release schedules to the publisher. In practice, however, the editor is not quite so freed from business issues. “Industry critics have said that one of the problems with the publishing industry is that

books are not as meticulously edited as they were in the past. The number of editorial staff is limited due to cost pressures and the need to keep churning out new titles to fit the publishing calendar” (Hill and Power 2005, 69). Editors who discuss literary issues with authors, who help them develop their characters and resolve plot holes, were among the “inefficiencies” that were greatly eliminated during the Age of Acquisitions. The most valuable editors in a corporate publishing house are those with “ability to seek out and buy publication and subsidiary rights to potential best-sellers; that is, editors have tended to be regarded as acquirers of literary properties rather than as editors per se” (Whiteside 1981, 92).

In the high-volume, high-pressure world of corporate publishing, acquisition becomes about signing the next book by a big-name author, or finding a new author whose work is remarkable similar to that of a best-selling author. “Anything new – anything unique, which admittedly is going to include some pretty dreadful stuff as well as some works of genius – is likely to stymie an editor, who can’t compare it to something already published” (Vanderbilt 1999, 55). When publishing was a low profit-expectation business, publishers were free to take on titles that might not necessarily sell but that they thought were worthy of publication. The Age of Acquisitions changed that by raising the amount of money put into the publishing industry in the form of advances and advertising, and thereby demanding more consistent returns on that capital.

One of the results of this demand is programmed publication, which targets a specific audience with a specific type of book. Financially speaking programmed publication is a very smart decision, for it has a more or less guaranteed readership of a predictable size. However, programmed publication takes away some of the reader’s



power to choose and to thereby influence future publications. Non-programmed publication leads to a kind of “natural selection” of what people want to read (Escarpit 1966, 122). Large corporations interested in turning a profit are more likely to encourage their publishers and editors to engage in programmed publication, which guarantees a degree of success in a specific market, rather than encouraging them to take risks on potentially more meritorious works that may or may not be successful in any market. By discouraging new and innovative writing, “all efforts at really effective programming end up by fixing literature in a rut when they are applied to the filter of publishing. When applied to the writer, they lead purely and simply to sterility” (Escarpit 1966, 151). Employing the house-generated novel system popularized by Simon & Schuster during the Golden Age, later publishers like Doubleday “believed that the publisher should ‘invent books which the public really wants, or thinks it wants’ and then engage writers to create those books for public sale” (West 1988, 44). What the public wants to read is determined before the public has the chance to choose. A public that is not exposed to a new kind of book cannot choose it.

Since publishers face such extreme competition for the next best-selling book, editors are given less time to deliberate over a manuscript before making a decision.

Random House Vice President and Editor Robert D. Loomis explains.

Everything I get now is via multiple submission [meaning the manuscript is sent to several publishers at once]. I am given a deadline, two weeks usually, which means I have to read the proposal that week. If I like it, I have to get someone else to look at it because we’re going to have to make a bid on it. Then we get into the bidding and only one house out of five or six can win (West 1988, 35).

Editors are under constant pressure to sign the next big book, and naturally that pressure leads to rushed editorial decisions regarding both acquisitions and changes to accepted manuscripts.

Corporate owners do not, of course, directly insist that editor spend less time editing manuscripts, or that they ignore new and interesting works with no precedent for sales. “Megacorporations...do not exert direct control of day-to-day decisions; they control indirectly, through the financial standards imposed and the accountabilities sought” (Horowitz and Curtis 1995, 310). Simply by changing profit expectations, corporate owners changed the way editors and publishers approach their work. It has been said that “the difference between the quality of pressure felt by an account executive sewing up a new account and a trade-book editor signing up a potential best-seller is steadily diminishing” (Whiteside 1981, 98).

No longer working for themselves, editors are constantly aware of the bottom line and the consequences of acquiring and publishing an unsuccessful book. Jason Epstein claims that after Random House went public, although the day-to-day activity of the house changed only slightly, the conditions under which that work was done changed significantly when the publishers were suddenly responsible for other people’s money (Epstein 2001, 12). The simple fact of no longer risking one’s own capital reduced publishers’ autonomy and therefore discouraged them from taking financial risks that were previously an integral part of the business (Whiteside 1981, 12).

### **Attitude of Publishers and Editors**

During the Golden Age, publishers and editors viewed their work as intellectual work, they viewed authors as artists, and they were willing to focus on the long-term

social and financial benefits of publishing valuable works, at least occasionally, rather than obsessing over the instant gratification of a best-seller. According to Gene Taft, Vice President and Director of Publicity for Public Affairs Books, “the industry used to be run by bookish people who liked to read. But there are not enough book people who are good business people. Now, with the large conglomerates having taken over so many houses, a different kind of executive is involved in the industry” (Hill and Power 2005, 54). These new executives were not always planted by corporate owners, but were sometimes hired by independent houses, and in these cases “change came in through the back door, not by the rude method of acquisition but through the advent of new managers who were much more business oriented” (Tebbel 1987, 367). Eventually, the business-oriented managers in such houses took control from those who were more concerned with creativity, and the nature of the house changed (Tebbel 1987, 371). Even those who entered the industry without a business approach were soon changed by the new culture of publishing.

Gradually your brain begins to think much more commercially than it used to. It’s really fun when it works, of course. Believe me, there are few things greater than handling a best-seller, but it doesn’t always happen. Whether it does or doesn’t, your brain and your psychological focus are still so much on money that you just don’t look at books the way you used to (West 1988, 76).

Of course, not every editor working under corporate management turns into a profit-hungry businessman willing to publishing any piece of writing that looks profitable, regardless of quality. “Even within the most seemingly monolithic companies, there are individual editors whose professional skill and energy and devotion to literature are such that they have been able to establish, in effect, their own imprints within those companies” (Whiteside 1981, 97). And there are those, like Raymond C. Hegel,

President of Crowell-Collier's, who see "no conflict of interest between a publisher's responsibility to stockholders and his responsibility to readers" (Tebbel 1987, 365).

Perhaps editors and publishers could successfully serve the interests of their corporate owners and the interests of the reading public at the same time; but when those interests inevitably come into conflict, choices have to be made.

### **Background of Publishers and Editors**

Traditionally, training for a career in publishing consisted of a liberal education and apprentice-style in-house occupational experience. And while a liberal education was still seen as basic requirement for a career in publishing, even after the Age of Acquisitions (Montagnes 1995, 105), business training was becoming more and more important in the industry. Essentially, publishing houses were being taken over by businessmen, "and this 'new breed,' much decried by the traditionalists, often sees training in business management as more useful than the traditional apprenticeship in publishing itself" (Altbach and Hoshino 1995, xv). Writing in 1987, John Tebbel was a fierce critic of the new system of training.

The recent crop of new editors is hardly reassuring, since many of them are victims of an educational system which did not provide them with the essential command of the English language needed to edit a manuscript. For some time now it has not been uncommon to find editors who know how to order wine and food in a good restaurant at expense account luncheons but who seldom read a manuscript thoroughly, if at all. Their function is to provide ideas for books and keep profitable authors happy (Tebbel 1987, 463-464).

Hopefully, Tebbel was exaggerating. But in light of the fact that editors were more and more focused on acquisitions and less on development and actual editorial functions, it is not surprising that the editors who were most adept at wooing the next big author and winning and dining his agent are the ones who became most powerful and most numerous.

Naturally, “the skills required for this job always include the acquiring editor’s ability to persuade and an ability to control details; other abilities depend on the field” (Luey 1995, 91). As important as it is to be able to close a deal and spot the next cultural fad, an industry of editors trained primarily in the commercial aspects of publishing are certainly going to let more intellectually significant works, which may or may not sell millions of copies, fall by the wayside in order to compete for the next big blockbuster.

Opportunities are sure to be missed when editors are all trained to look for the same type of book. “In addition to being economically aware, publishers must be familiar with the world of arts and letters, science and social science, and must hire an editorial staff competent to work in these different areas” or the quality of the publishers’ output, both in regards to literary quality and economic value, is sure to suffer (Altbach 1995, 274).

### **The Blockbuster Complex**

As the scale of publishing increased during the age of acquisitions and beyond, author advances grew larger and larger, thanks in part to the rising popularity of agents, and publishers and editors were under more and more pressure to find the next big blockbuster. In terms of sales, there are three kinds of books according to Escarpit. Fast-sellers sell a lot of copies right away, but then sales quickly drop off to practically nothing. Steady-sellers don’t ever reach a big sales peak, but their sales never drop very low either. Bestsellers start out with tons of sales, like fast-sellers, but don’t plummet the same way fast-sellers do (Escarpit 1966, 116). By this definition, a book that is on the *New York Time*’s bestseller list for one day may qualify as a fast-seller. For various reasons, fast-sellers and best-sellers have come to dominate the mindset of publishers and editors in the US.

The age of acquisitions left the publishing industry with a few very large publishing houses, many very small, independent, often non-profit publishing houses, and few mid-sized publishing houses. This change made it easier to provide the most popular titles to larger audiences, but more difficult to serve smaller audiences. Specialized and “midlist” books and authors fell by the wayside (Dessauer 1995, 2). The simple fact that the large corporate houses have more capital to spend on huge advances to already popular authors increases the amount of money spent on popular books and encourages publishers to look for books that will guarantee a return on that investment. The only books that can provide that guarantee are books by extremely well-known authors or books that follow the same formula as previously popular books. However, since no book can absolutely guarantee success, publishers tend to overproduce, since “if five books out of a hundred sell in large figures, ninety-five others can safely earn little or no money without bankrupting a publisher” (Tebbel 1987, 456). Furthermore, “since it is impossible to predict which projects will be bestsellers, it is necessary to invest in a great many projects in order to guarantee that a few will turn out to be highly successful. Similar strategies have been pursued in such disparate fields as venture capital investing and crap table betting” (Follett 1995, 83).

In addition to the increased size of publishing houses, and hence of author advances and other expenses, several factors have contributed to the industry’s increased dependence on books with extremely high volume sales – what many call the “blockbuster syndrome.” Chain retail bookstores, which will be discussed at length below, depend on high-volume high-turnover merchandise. There was once a “fundamental principle that the function of the frontlist is to enhance the backlist...that

today's retail chains with their dependence on ephemera" have all but eliminated (Epstein 2001, 60). Another contributing factor is the rising power of paperback houses.

Hardcover publishers compete more and more intensely for money from paperback houses, who have been spending more and more money on subsidiary rights as the scale of the industry has inflated, and who will often buy the rights to a second, paperback printing of a book before the hardcover printing has even been published, "and that means that the publishers concentrate more and more on seeking out and promoting potential best-sellers" (Whiteside 1981, 21-22).

Other factors contributing to the blockbuster syndrome include "the influence of television talk shows that regularly feature authors as guests, the control by entertainment conglomerates of hardcover and paperback publishing companies as well as motion-picture companies and the like, and the increasingly active involvement of Hollywood in the business of book publishing itself" (Whiteside 1981, 22). Publishers will actually base acquisition decisions on the interest expressed by paperback, television, and film outlets in subsidiary rights to the story. In combination with rising costs in printing, advertising, and publicity, these factors have increased the "break-even point" for a trade book from an estimated 3,000 copies in 1950 to as many as 10,000 in 1988 (West 1988, 28). As Michael Cader, publisher of Cader Books, puts it, "like almost all products of popular culture, the big hits get bigger, as most everything else gets smaller. And the ability of the biggest producers to extract top dollar from their corporate partners also tends to increase" (132;16;210).

The result is that "the entire economy of trade-book publishing seems to have become focused on the pursuit of 'the big book' – the so-called blockbuster" (Whiteside

1981, 19). Whereas backlists used to be a publisher's most stable source of income, they now account for less and less of a publisher's yearly profit (Epstein 2001, 111).

Ultimately, this means that moderate-sellers, midlist books, have a small chance of getting published, and even less of chance of receiving the advertising support they need to succeed. In modern retail chains, shelf-life is short, and "with display life estimated at less than two weeks, returns can run as high as 60 percent for many titles" (Bonn 1995, 265). It is not surprising, therefore, that "with few exceptions, books either sell well from the outset or will never sell" (Vanderbilt 1999, 126). Of course, even during the Golden Age of publishing it was never easy for a new or unusual author to get a book published, but the blockbuster complex has "reduced 100-to-1 odds to 1,000-to-1." According to literary agent Richard Curtis, "the industry now puts its money behind front runners, books that are commercial winners before the author has written a word" (Hill and Power 2005, 232).

The practice of concentration on sure-fire hits clearly makes it less likely that publishers will print works by new authors or authors whose books have failed in the past. But what does that mean for the quality of the work being produced? First of all, in a creative industry homogeneity is necessarily stifling, and each book which follows a standard best-seller formula is bound to be slightly less imaginative than the last. Furthermore, some literary scholars believe that serious authors require publishers who are able to absorb a loss on their first few books, which will start to sell on the backlist over time. These authors will eventually achieve financial success as their later books gather more of a following (West 1988, 146). The simple fact that so many of our most beloved classic authors were unpopular during their own lifetimes is evidence that slow



sellers are often the best books. In the blockbuster-oriented industry of the second half of the twentieth century, even those first books which do get published are almost never given adequate advertising support (Dessauer 1995, 2).

“The trouble is that the nonbooks [cookbooks, self-help books, or redundant formula-based fiction] swallow up so much of the publisher’s available promotion and advertising budget, so much of the time of the publisher’s professionals, so much shelf space, that better books suffer” (Vanderbilt 1999, 195). According to some who worked within the industry during the age of acquisitions and after, “apprehension is widespread – among authors, among many agents, and even among some heads of conglomerate-owned publishing houses – that in the blockbuster era the artistic worth of many individual authors is being slighted or ignored” (Whiteside 1981, 102-103). Because moderately profitable books are no longer considered worthwhile, “various works of at least some literary merit that previously would have been published and then kept in print for a reasonable period are now less likely to be published at all, and, when they are published are much less likely to be kept in print” (Whiteside 1981, 104).

But it is more than just acquisitions that were affected by the rising concentration on blockbuster books. Among those who look back on the Golden Age as a time when editors really cared about their authors and their work, “some commentators claim that such careful editing has ceased under pressure to focus on profit-making blockbusters” (Luey 1995, 95). Editors are hired for their ability to track down the next blockbuster and to woo its author – and the author’s agent – into a contract. Skills in the actual criticism and editing of either fiction or non-fiction manuscripts are less and less important. One critic believes that “ownership by people who do not understand the business fully” can

have its own negative impact on the quality of books a house produces. According to this same critic, factors such as over production, competition over big names and subsidiary rights, the influence of media fame, and “the tendency to buy already developed talent rather than to bring up young talent” have adversely affected publishing in the same way they have affected the music, movie, and sports industries (West 1988, 149). All in all, the blockbuster effect has truly damaging potential for the literary quality of books published in the era of the best-selling books.

Literary quality is not the only aspect of book publishing that may be damaged by the blockbuster effect. In many ways, pursuing best-sellers at the expense of steady-sellers or mid-list books can be financially unwise. For one thing, it puts an increased amount of pressure on the publishing house to constantly acquire new books for the frontlist. As Neil Nyren, editor at G.P. Putnam and Sons, puts it, when the industry is only interested in best-sellers, “in order to be successful you have to keep feeding the frontlist, and so you’re always looking for new books. It’s tough” (Hill and Power 2005, 17). Aside from the added pressure on editors and publishers, there are untapped markets that are completely ignored in the world of blockbuster publishing. “Given the enormous range and diversity of interests in a pluralistic society, it becomes obvious that in aggregate, the book industry depends as much on small as it does on large markets for survival and success” (Dessauer 1995, 6). By forgetting these small markets, the publishing industry is running a huge risk. When readership declines in tough economic periods, it is “the books of mass appeal, the real mega-sellers, that first feel the pinch, as marginal readers drop by the wayside” (Vanderbilt 1999, 84). Publishers who focus

entirely on best-sellers may find their sales taking more of a tumble when the stock market dips.

Best-selling books make money in the short-term, and this, combined with the fact that they raise the profile of the publishing house amongst authors and agents, is what makes best-sellers so appealing to publishers and editors. Short-term profits, however, do not translate to a successful business. Author H.L. Mencken believed that publishers pursuing bestsellers alone are hurting themselves financially, because “sales, in themselves, mean little: the important thing is profits. I believe that selling good books, in the long run, is more profitable than selling bad ones – that the high apparent yield from trash is set off by large losses, and that the business, in the last analysis, is a losing one” (Mencken 1930, 170). Even disregarding the cultural drawback to publishing “trash” or “non-books,” the financial drawbacks for doing so are very real.

Publishing houses may be able to get a quick financial fix from the ghost written novel of the supermodel of the month or the earnest autobiography of today’s sports hero, but for their bottom line, how much better to have published the next *The Great Gatsby*, which will sell hundreds of thousands of copies year after year for the next sixty years? That publishing houses believe they cannot afford the time and the risk involved in finding and nurturing the author of the next *The Great Gatsby* is the central conundrum of the new world of publishing (Vanderbilt 1999, 194).

By yielding to the demands of the market, publishers succumbing to the blockbuster effect hurt not only the readers they serve, but their own long-term financial well-being as well. An independently owned company would perhaps be less likely to spend such large sums of money on works that will bring in profits for only a short period of time. But corporate-owned publishers have both the capital to back these ventures, and a mindset that encourages such get-rich-quick techniques.

## **Booksellers**

In early publishing, booksellers and publishers were often one and the same. Even today many publishers have house-owned bookstores. In a 1959 Supreme Court trial regarding an illicit book, the court ruled that “a bookseller could not be convicted for selling an obscene book...unless...the seller knew the book was obscene” (Tebbel 1987, 458). Aside from the impact this ruling had on the censoring of books, it legally separated the actions of booksellers from the actions of publishers. More and more over the years, publishers and booksellers began to act as entirely different entities, often with conflicting, or at least colliding, interests.

The United States migration to the suburbs drastically changed the approach booksellers took to their craft. In the cities, small independent bookshops remained intact, while suburban malls encouraged mass merchandising chain stores. The publishing industry was, therefore splitting “into two quite different and incompatible businesses – a dominant one producing mass merchandise for the malls and another committed to the traditional search for backlist candidates” (Epstein 2001, 105). Between 1957 and 1982, the number of booksellers in the US nearly tripled, going from 8,300 to 21,500 (Dessauer 1995, 3). In the 1960s, just as publishing houses were merging and consolidating, “entrepreneurs entered the retail scene, setting up chain operations to introduce economies of scale, into what many considered a profit-minimizing business” (Lofquist 1995, 353). What once was a relatively unprofitable business was, like publishing, being forced into profitability. Founders of chain bookstores hoped to increase profits by increasing volume, and many of them did, and do, “carry more profitable sidelines such as greeting cards, stationary, gifts, and toys,” all

of which have a higher profit margin than books (Dessauer 1995, 10). In spite of increased volume and growth in other directions, bookselling remains a relatively low-profit business when compared with other consumer industries. This fact has not discouraged corporate involvement in the industry, however, but rather has increased the pressure to raise volume even further in order to make the business worthwhile (Rath 1995, 18). The Age of Acquisitions in publishing was also the age of chain and mall stores in bookselling.

The increased number and scope of chain bookstores has had many effects on the book industry as a whole. One of the most significant is the decrease in shelf-life for the average book. One of the biggest overhead costs a chain bookstore has is rent. The larger the space, the higher the rent, and so inventory, even in the largest stores, is limited. And thanks to “the iron rule by which inventory and rent are inverse reciprocals,” chain stores demand “high volume and high turnover” (Epstein 2001, 105). Unlike small independent stores, chain bookstores are expected to have the latest titles at all times and would lose their customer base if they didn’t. As a result, there is no room in chain bookstores “for slow titles from a publisher’s backlist” (West 1988, 145). Bookstores do, of course, stock backlisted classics like Dickens and Shakespeare and F. Scott Fitzgerald, but newer books with slow sales don’t stay on the shelves at big chain stores for very long. “Not so long ago, a new book might remain in a store for a year, eighteen months, two years, before being sent back to the publisher. Not so today...Promotion and word of mouth have to work pretty darn fast to get a book selling” (Vanderbilt 1999, 109). Decreased shelf-life doesn’t have a huge effect on best-sellers or fast-sellers, but it can be devastating to steady-sellers or mid-list books. Even if publishers are choosing to print

books of value that will not be instant best-sellers, their shelf-life at chain bookstores (where most people today buy books) is so short that they have little chance of long-term success (Epstein 2001, 13-14).

Bookstores do not, and cannot, stock a copy of every book published. Inevitably they must make judgments about which books to stock and which books to ignore. The way in which they make these decisions can greatly influence not only what people read, but what publishers publish as well. “When selecting forthcoming publications, retailers tend to rely heavily on publishers’ predictions of success” as expressed by the publisher’s sales representative, “which experience shows are very often in error” (Dessauer 1995, 9). Booksellers can afford to take such risks because unsold books can be sent back to the publisher for a full refund, a practice that has been in place since the 1920s (Vanderbilt 1999, 188). Wholesalers are also able to return books to publishers for a refund, however, “most books left unsold by wholesalers are destroyed rather than returned to publishers and in some recent years the number of books pulped has actually exceeded the number sold” (Dessauer 1995, 13). Many industry critics believe that the practice of returning books for a full refund should be discontinued, since it places an undue portion of the risk on the publisher and leaves the bookseller with little or no incentive to try to advance the sales of particular books.

Booksellers do pay a price for unsold books of course, including lost inventory space for other books that might have sold better, as well as manpower and other overhead costs. Since it is impossible to know for sure which books will succeed and which will not before they hit the market, booksellers, like publishers, look at factors such as the success of the author’s previous books, the success of previous books of the

same genre or on a similar subject, and general public interest in the issues or topics included in the book. The two major book chains in the US today, Borders and Barnes & Noble, have interesting buying practices.

Borders centralizes its book buying, although each store has the ability to request individual titles. Each Borders buyer focuses on one subject and is expected to become an expert in that subject. The performance data by title and author are available to the buyers to make book selections as scientific and data driven as possible (Hill and Power 2005, 98).

By centralizing its book buying, Borders is homogenizing the books it carries from store to store. This is one of the purposes of a chain in any industry, to have the same products and services available in a variety of locations. Scientific and data driven purchases are perhaps likely to make more sales, but can tend to have little to do with the content or quality of the work as separate from its market value. Barnes & Noble claims that “the selection at each [store] is tailored to the interests of the local community it serves” but most likely the majority of buying decisions are made at the central corporate level. Barnes & Noble also prides itself on its publishing program which “focuses on relatively low-profile, risk averse titles” like Dickens and Shakespeare (Hill and Power 2005, 99). Since the Age of Acquisitions booksellers, like publishers, have become more and more concerned with finding a surefire seller than a great piece of literature.

The new corporate mentality amongst booksellers did not appear overnight. Starting around the middle of the twentieth century, American booksellers began thinking like corporations, and this change can be tracked through the changes in the approach and attitude of the American Booksellers Association (ABA). Around 1946, the ABA began encouraging new book outlets, and proposed a “packaged bookstore” complete with “plans, estimates, fixtures, and basic stock” for new retailers in addition to purchasable

“display assemblies.” All this was done in an attempt to more adequately supply the nation with books. Over the next few years, conventions included “very well-attended workshop meetings on better store operation – staff training, stock control, selective buying, and – a new point of emphasis at the 1949 meeting in Washington – the choice and handling of sidelines” (Grannis 1975, 85). It was only natural that the ABA sought out ways to bring books to newly developing suburbs and rural areas, and the approach they took was decidedly corporate and chain-oriented.

As the Age of Acquisitions proceeded, so did booksellers’ emphasis on professionalism and efficiency, ideals that, during the Golden Age, were secondary to a love of books and a dedication to quality literature.

In 1959, President [of the ABA] Charles B. Anderson...strongly called the membership’s notice to the widening opportunities for booksellers because of growth in population, education, and shopping center development, then in its infancy. New opportunities underlined, he said, the need for greater professionalism in store management (Grannis 1975, 92).

Throughout the 1960s, “management and merchandising continued to be major themes of national and regional meetings” of the ABA. At the 1962 ABA convention, a Model Bookstore staffed by expert personnel and stocked with publishers’ current titles was available for questions from new booksellers (Grannis 1975, 95). These models and packaged bookstores were designed, like supermarkets, “to make the customer walk past as many products as possible, and this design works well for television brand-name recognition tactics” (Whiteside 1981, 42-43). For the first time, booksellers were encouraged to act like any other sellers, maximizing profits through display, layout, and brand-name recognition.



Along with brand-name recognition came an emphasis on Hollywood-style fame and glamour. In the 1970s, ABA conventions included professionals and show business insiders looking for the news photographers.

The individual book-and-author publicity at the conventions... overshadowed, at least in press reports, the serious work done in book business discussions and in the buyers' shows. Furthermore, it has been easy for the press to spotlight the show business personalities and forget the distinguished and interesting public figures and serious writers (Grannis 1975, 99).

Basically, ABA conventions were beginning to look more like Hollywood galas than literary events, and the Stephen King's and John Grisham's of the era were getting more press than the most distinguished scholars and most lauded writers and critics.

Training and supervision of personnel was taking a more professional, corporate tone as well. "In the 1960s, systematic programs for the education of booksellers, working towards professionalism, began to spring up, starting with the Booksellers Seminar" (Grannis 1975, 105). Booksellers who used to be trained through experience in both selling and reading were now given more formal and business-management oriented training. One statement by the ABA declared that in order to attract the best and the brightest to bookselling, the business "must be not only spiritually but economically attractive to educated people" (Grannis 1975, 108). This meant raising the bar for entry into the industry, and therefore making it a more exclusive, professional industry. There were warnings, however, from within the ABA, that "in their rush for efficiency, booksellers must always keep the intellectual, entertainment, and cultural needs of their communities in the fore, or else they will become dull copies of one another" (Smith 1975, 140). Going from one chain store to another and taking note of the differences

between them would be a good way to determine whether this warning was heeded or not.

Booksellers wield a tremendous amount of influence over the decisions that publishers make, hence booksellers and their buying and selling practices are an important part of any discussion of the American publishing industry. This influence became more and more direct during the Age of Acquisitions. In 1961 the ABA organized a “Goodwill Committee of leading booksellers to call upon individual publishers for informal talks on problems of mutual interest” (Grannis 1975, 92). The interests of this Goodwill Committee and the booksellers it represented changed significantly as chain bookstores became more and more prominent. Since chains have different needs than independent bookstores, namely higher volume and faster turnover, the more chain bookstores there are the more publishers will tend to shape their lists to suit those bookstores. Publishers often favor chain bookstores in terms of discounts, shipping costs, and other issues, so much so that “the Federal Trade Commission preferred charges against six of the leading book publishers in 1987 for allegedly discriminating in favor of chain bookstores against independents” (Rath 1995, 19). One chain bookstore buys more books than several independent bookstores put together, so naturally they have a disproportionate influence over publishers.

Chain bookstores have the power to influence not only how publishers market their books or how many copies of a book they will print, but even which books they will publish and which they will not. “There are those who fear that the chains, by far the largest buyers of books from publishers, virtually determine what will be published, since every house quite naturally wants to sell as many of its titles as possible to them” (Tebbel

1987, 463). The chains that publishers are coerced to cater to “demand high rates of turnover and therefore a constant supply of bestsellers, an impossible goal but one to which publishers have become perforce committed” (Epstein 2001, 12). The blockbuster effect is perpetuated by virtue of the fact that publishers depend on chain bookstores to buy their books. One industry insider even goes so far as to claim that “some major hardcover publishers just will not go ahead with the publication of a certain book until they have obtained what they consider an encouraging reaction from the big bookstore chains about its chances for selling well” (Whiteside 1981, 46). Though there is no formal mechanism for this kind of influence, there is little doubt that the opinions of booksellers, particularly the most popular chain bookstores, are taken into account when editors and publishers make their decisions.

Unlike publishers, booksellers’ reputations are not based on the quality of the books they provide. Booksellers are therefore more likely to seek out bestsellers over quality literature. And when such a concentrated group of booksellers has such a strong influence over publishers, it is likely that whatever chain bookstores will buy, publishers will print. When booksellers meet with a publisher’s sales representative, one of the things they are most interested in is how much advertising and publicity books will be receiving from the publisher (Hill and Power 2005, 8). Books which the publisher doesn’t bother to advertise are likely to be bought in small quantities, if they are bought at all, further decreasing their chances of reaching a large audience. Once again the advantage goes to “bestselling, or proven, authors’ work at the expense of titles from exciting new authors or those with a smaller audience – precisely the authors that independent stores have been so skilled at hand selling to their customers” (Hill and

Power 2005, 97). During the Golden Age, new authors had a hard time getting published. The power of chain bookstores is just one of many aspects of the Age of Acquisitions that has made life for new or unknown authors even more difficult.

Independent bookstores, in spite of the fact that they are for-profit enterprises just like chain stores, are much more likely to keep slow sellers on the shelves longer, and to hand sell – personally recommend books to customers – unknown books. Independent bookstores do what is termed “programming.” With a more intimate knowledge of their customer base than is possible in large chain stores, independent store owners and workers can pick and choose titles that they believe certain readers will enjoy, and hence get unknown books into the hands of people who will help them become popular through word of mouth publicity. Though bookstores are praised for programmed selling, programming is generally perceived as dangerous at the trade publishing level since it puts publishers in the position of predicting what books the general reading population will like. Publishers, who are often very removed from the reading public, will never be able to predict every twist and turn in the public’s interest, so programmed publishing could lead to homogenization and deprive the reading public of important options. Many believe it already has (Escarpit 1966, 146).

Like buyers at chain bookstores, independent booksellers take into account “a blend of the pitches from the publishers’ rep, historical sales data they have collected about an author or a topic” and knowledge of their sales base.” Unlike chain store buyers, however, independent bookstore owners also rely largely on “what their gut instinct tells them will be popular” (Hill and Power 2005, 93). Since they are accountable only to themselves, independent store owners are much more likely to make

personal judgments about the books they are offered. While this may sound like a negative thing – the owner’s personal taste deciding what books the public will be offered – it allows for much more possibility and variety than reliance on previous sales records and other economic data. Within the ABA, a community of independent bookstores is organized under the group Book Sense. The stated goal of this organization is to promote new authors or overlooked books (Hill and Power 2005, 103). Ultimately, independent bookstores give unknown works that happen to be good a longer shelf-life and a greater hope of success” (Whiteside 1981, 27). As the number of independent bookstores decreases, so does the demand for books that are of literary value, but which many not be great commercial successes (Whiteside 1981, 107).

While many people both inside and outside of the industry are lamenting the loss of independent bookstores as a result of the rising number of chain bookstores, many others claim that independent bookstores are still going strong. Certainly Book Sense has only grown in recent years, and there are still quite a few independent bookstores and presses in the United States. “Notwithstanding the strong feelings in the book business about the future of the independent bookstore, as of March 1992 there was no evidence that independent bookstores as a class were doing anything less than prospering” (Rath 1995, 19). Some doubters of the plight of the independent bookstore playfully “paraphrase America’s most famous author, Samuel Clemens,” saying “the reported death of the independent bookstore is ‘an exaggeration’”(Lofquist 1995, 353). However, even if independent bookstores are still in business and are still making money, there is no doubt that the superstores of bookselling are dominating most people’s experiences with books, if only because the superstores are easier to find.

Chain bookstores have many advantages over the old methods of bookselling. First of all, they encourage reading in environments where books were never present before.

To take bookstore chains to task...is to overlook an important contribution they have made: introducing the idea of *bookstore* to millions of people who might not ever have set foot in one...They wander past the front window and are irresistibly drawn in. Mall bookstores have made book browsing seem like great fun (Hill and Power 2005, 97).

Chain bookstores look like regular stores, and so shoppers who would never have considered themselves readers are suddenly shopping for books. Chain bookstores have, ostensibly, created more customers for books (Smith 1975, 139). Author Stuart Woods further argues that “the proliferation of chain bookstores has certainly helped writers. A great many more books are being written – and sold – than had been in the past” (Hill and Power 2005, 98). Publishers also praise chain bookstores on occasion “because they give us six to ten thousand more places to sell books than we had before” (West 1988, 76). Chain bookstores have their advantages, especially for those who believe that it is better for people to read anything than nothing at all. It cannot be denied, however, that chain bookstores encourage formulaic bestsellers, and though they may not intentionally neglect works of literary or social value, their practices tend to leave many such works behind.

### **Advertising**

The shift to high-volume publishing has changed both the way publishers advertise books and the relative importance of advertising to the success of a book. As bookstores look more and more like malls, books and authors are sold as name-brand commodities rather than literary, historical, or intellectual works. The hype of

commercial advertising makes it all but impossible for readers to distinguish between a truly great new book and the latest in a series of knock-offs of the last bestseller. The way books are advertised is important not only because it affects readers' choices, but because it affects publishers' choices as well. Books are accepted or rejected by publishing houses based on their marketability, and bookstores are more likely to carry book that has a lot of advertising money behind it. Publishers' sales representatives, newspaper and magazine reviews, and the appearance of books on television all contribute to the hype of the bestseller, and all have a profound effect on a new book's chances of getting published at all.

As publishing houses and booksellers have become larger and larger, publishers have depended more and more on sales representatives to convince booksellers of a book's worth. These sales representatives are salesmen, not authors or literary critics, and their sales pitches generally focus on a book's title, cover, publicity budget, and the author's availability for personal appearances (Vanderbilt 1999, 90). Since sales representatives can't possibly read all the books in a publisher's catalog, "every title, regardless of differences in subject matter, audience, nature, or appeal receives identical treatment" when being pitched to a bookseller (Dessauer 1995, 13). Just as in other industries, all books, some of which are of high quality and originality and some of which are derivative or poorly written, are "inflated to approximately equal pressure, equal dimensions, by the hot air of hype – they are all made to seem strangely alike" (Whiteside 1981, 192).

In face of all this hype, sales representatives have a hard time convincing booksellers that their praise of certain books is sincere, so often they will choose some

books in the catalog to condemn as overrated by the publisher (Vanderbilt 1999, 91). Rather than solving the problem of insincere hype by actually reading and judging the available books, they become even more insincere by more or less randomly elevating some books over others. Hype makes all books look equal to booksellers, but also to book-buyers as well. Since surprise bestsellers are becoming rarer, publishers and their sales representatives will “front-end the careers of ‘literary’ writers, publishing them with a big push as if they were out-and-out commercial. This is perilous, because it’s much harder to connect with literary readers using these techniques” according to Jonathan Galassi, President and Publisher of Farrar, Straus + Giroux, LLC (Hill and Power 2005, 56). In short, sales techniques practiced by modern publishers, specifically large trade publishers and especially directed towards chain booksellers, are carried out with little or no regard for the literary quality, or even literary characteristics, of the book in question.

It has been said that there’s no such thing as bad publicity, so the books and authors that receive no publicity at all are perhaps of more concern than those which are hyped without regard to content. Publishers, especially corporate publishers, are more and more of the mindset that “advertising, to be effective, must follow sales, that sales don’t follow advertising; so a book must prove itself without advertising before I can get a piece of a publisher’s advertising budget” (Vanderbilt 1999, 109). This practice could lead to higher quality output, since books are expected to prove themselves rather than reaching success through media support. This is not necessarily the case, however, since the way books “prove” themselves often has little to do with the quality or originality or literary value of the book itself.



A book with a famous or previously best-selling author, for example, has proven itself, and will therefore receive advertising support from the publisher. For various other reasons, publishers focus their advertising money on the new acquisitions most likely to become blockbusters. When publishers pay a high advance for a book, they want high returns to cover that risk so publishers often decide how much advertising money to spend on a book based on the size of the advance paid to the author or the size of the printing required to reach the break-even point (Vanderbilt 1999, 142). Furthermore, books that are less likely to be blockbusters run smaller initial printings, and therefore publishers have less of an incentive to sell those few printed copies, “Most major publishers don’t implement their advertising plans for the majority of their books – those not by a name author, not by a celebrity, and not focused on the events on today’s front page – until the reviews start coming in” (Vanderbilt 1999, 109), and even then, “the money put into advertising often depends on how quotable the reviews are” (Whiteside 1981, 37). When the demands of chain bookstores and the lure of selling subsidiary rights are dominant in the mind of the publisher, it is essentially paperback houses and salesmen, not readers or editors, who help publishers decide how much advertising effort to put into a given book (Whiteside 1981, 108).

How much advertising money publishers decide to spend on a book is important not only in terms of reaching readers, but in terms of reaching bookstores.

A salesman who has only a few minutes of the buyer’s precious time to sell a current list is not going to spend even a minute on anything remotely marginal, although that means not even mentioning books of merit on the list that may have relatively small sales (Tebbel 1987, 463).

A sale representative’s reputation is based not only on how many sales he makes, but on how many copies of those books the bookstore sells. Recommending a book with little

advertising behind it is a risky choice, one that a sales representative is unlikely to make. Publishers themselves are less likely to publish books that appear to be difficult to market or advertise. A survey of publishers revealed that some of the reasons editors decline nonfiction books are that “the author’s platform (media visibility and built-in marketing base) is too small” and reasons for declining nonfiction include “a story that is hard to pitch or...seems to have a limited audience” (Hill and Power 2005, 75-77). Ultimately, advertising is just one more way in which new books by unknown authors or avant-garde works that aren’t comparable to previous bestsellers are placed at a severe disadvantage. Even when such books are advertised, “mainstream trade publishers’ effectiveness in publicizing and advertising any but the most popular titles is often sadly wanting” (Dessauer 1995, 10) in part because they depend so heavily on television talk shows and the author’s celebrity status as advertising techniques. Ironically, publishers promote the up and coming Stephen King novel, which would likely be a bestseller with or without advertising, while neglecting the books that could truly benefit from such investment, “tried-and-true backlist titles that most booksellers stock” (Dessauer 1995, 15). Large, corporate publishers focus on mass media, commercial advertising, and so books that are so expertly promoted by independent presses fall through the cracks in the high volume world of modern publishing, further reinforcing the blockbuster mindset (Dessauer 1995, 4).

Those who would defend the modern publishing industry argue that books of real worth that are neglected by corporate advertising will make themselves known through word of mouth. Word of mouth advertising is often hailed as a supreme force that can drag even the most obscure book into the public eye. Jonathan Galassi believes that

“word of mouth is the only thing in the end that will truly make a book sell” (Hill and Power 2005, 57). However, as powerful as word of mouth is, it can only work if enough people find the book in the first place, and with bookstores getting larger, more books are getting lost in the shelves, especially as shelf-life declines. Word of mouth “is not always the product of spontaneous consumer response, however; it can be awakened and stimulated by publishers’ effective publicity and promotion” (Dessauer 1995, 6). But if the types of books that once benefited from word of mouth publicity aren’t being advertised, indeed, aren’t being published to the extent that they once were, then bookstores will be filled with copies of copies of bestsellers and readers will likely consume the books in front of them.

One type of advertising that was in use during the Golden Age and is still in use today is literary reviews. As previously mentioned, reviews have a strong impact on publishers’ decisions regarding advertising budgets and the size of printings. In fact, publishers may be more strongly influenced by reviews that readers are. In this way, reviews can make or break a book – especially a book by an unknown author. A good review early on, in a major newspaper or magazine such as *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *The Washing Post*, *Time* and others, will encourage the publisher to order a large printing and to spend more money, both of which will stimulate sales and lengthen shelf-life. A bad review early on will have the opposite effect, all but destroying the books chance of becoming even a steady seller. The problem here is that sometimes reviewers are just plain wrong (Vanderbilt 1999, 103-108). Like publishers, editors, and booksellers, reviewers often praise books that mimic recent bestsellers and are turned off by unusual books by unknown authors. Indeed, unknown authors find it nearly

impossible to even get their name printed in such publications. On the other hand, intellectual snobbery can also lead to reviews that misrepresent the work in question. As author Barbara Delinsky puts it, “a book will be billed as literary, and critics will jump on the bandwagon. But it’s often the case of the emperor’s new clothes; the book may be perfectly unreadable, yet critics will find something brilliant to say, lest they be thought unbrilliant themselves” (Hill and Power 2005, 59). A careless or misguided reviewer can do considerable damage in the life of a book.

Magazine and newspaper reviews are, however, extremely important in that they open up a discussion of a new book outside of the industry. While publishers, sales representatives and booksellers are discussing a book’s marketability, reviewers are discussing its quality. Ideally, “reviews contribute to good authorship by criticizing books and subjecting them to public scrutiny. This kind of scrutiny contributes to high levels of intellectual attainment” (Grannis 1975, 86-87). However, even assuming that most reviews are of high intellectual quality, the fact that fewer and fewer major outlets include book reviews is troubling to Jonathan Galassi, who fears that “reviews are being squeezed out of many print media as they get ‘dumbed down’” (Hill and Power 2005, 37). An important question to ask is why New York City “is the only city nation with a Sunday book review as good as *The New York Times Book Review*?” (Vanderbilt 1999, 189). Although publishers may rely on them a bit too heavily, as one of the few sources of in-depth analysis of new books, printed reviews are an important, and diminishing, source of intellectual discussion regarding trade books.

Part of the reason print reviews have been declining is the rising involvement of television in the book world. A large part of the development of the second half of the

twentieth century was Americans' increasing familiarity with and attachment to television. Naturally many people feared that television would lure people away from reading and seriously damage the trade book industry. However, a 1950 survey conducted by the ABA "showed that 'the book trade's fear of television is unjustified' and the effect of TV on book sales was 'absolutely nil'" (Grannis 1975, 272). Later, John Tebbel agreed, saying that "contrary to the doomsayers, book production has increased every year and it is the television audience that now shows a decline" (Tebbel 1975, 14). Fears that television will replace books still abound, and studies regarding the reading habits of children and adolescents may support those fears; however, it seems that people who love books have not been deterred by the ease and accessibility of television. Furthermore, chain bookstores have made books a part of the consumer culture which television supports, and television has itself been a "strong stimulus for book sales" (Grannis 1975, 87).

Television talk-shows in particular have become an integral part of many publishers' advertising campaigns. Audiences for daytime TV are large and loyal, and unlike print reviewers, television personalities are like friends to their closest followers, so their book recommendations work like word of mouth (Hill and Power 2005, 126). Television talk-shows, both daytime and late night, are therefore an ideal setting for book advertising. However, this practice places certain restrictions on books and their authors. First of all, "the books discussed on talk shows are usually non-fiction works, because talk-show hosts find it difficult to discuss works of fiction on the air" (Whiteside 1981, 35). Another problem is that "book publishing, is, sadly, somewhat the bottom rung of the media. Let's say you have an author book on a major network morning show. The

first segment to get bumped if they run behind schedule is not the interview with Jennifer Lopez, it's the book segment" (Hill and Power 2005, 128).

Talk-show tours also place unreasonable demands on authors, forcing them to be actors as well as writers.

Sending authors on talk-show tours has become such an integral part of the trade-book economy that it is difficult to conceive of any publisher's being able to discontinue the practice, even if he wanted to, without detriment to his company's competitive standing; and this conviction may attract the publishing houses to those authors who seem capable of becoming public 'personalities' (Whiteside 1981, 36-37).

This will not make a difference to great authors who are also great television personalities, but it will make publishers less likely to sign contracts with great writers who are not great television personalities. Publishers hope, or expect, that their authors will be charismatic celebrities. But there is no logical reason to expect a writer to be a good television personality (Vanderbilt 1999, 149-152). After all, no one expects a television personality to be a good writer. Television has had a serious impact on the publishing industry, and yet "publishers still believe that newspapers and magazines are the most cost-effective media for reaching the book-buying audience" (Vanderbilt 1999, 122) – more evidence in support of those who believe that the book has survived and will survive the growing popularity of television.

### **Paperbacks and Mass Market Publishing**

During the age of acquisitions, mass market publishing experienced "the same phenomenon that had occurred in the hardcover firms – the trend towards mergers" (Tebbel 1987, 426). As the publishing industry as a whole got larger and larger in the second half of the twentieth century, paperback and mass market publishing grew both in size and power through mergers and acquisitions. "The immediate effect of such mergers

was to provide the paperback publishers with enough capital to give them a marked competitive edge over the hardcover people in the drive for profits in a market that was narrowing down to the competitors for ‘better’ if not ‘best’ sellers” (Tebbel 1987, 426). Paperback and mass market houses were not only getting larger, they were expanding their repertoire of reprints and classics to include original and intellectual titles as well, drastically changing the relationship between hardcover and paperback houses and the industry as a whole.

In 1948, Victor Weybright and Kurt Enoch founded the New American Library which set out to publish “a unique blend of books with mass market appeal and those that went beyond to include serious nonfiction and the scholarly, something that no other paperback house had done to that extent.” Enoch’s goal was “to achieve a mass audience while preserving the special virtue of books” (Tebbel 1987, 429-430). This was the beginning of a new trend in paperback publishing – a drive towards quality literary reprints and original works which put paperback and mass market houses in more direct competition with trade publishers. In 1950, Fawcett magazines began “issuing in earnest original fiction in their Gold Medal softcover imprint” (Bonn 1995, 267). Trade paperback publishing, a movement which started with the Modern Library in the 1920s, was growing and expanding at an incredible rate.

In 1953, Anchor Books was founded, and many consider this the true starting point for trade paperback publishing (Bonn 1995, 267). According to Jason Epstein, one of the founders of Anchor Books, “we were trying to reach a much smaller and more specific audience, mainly academic, literary, highbrow” (Tebbel 1987, 424). As a result of Anchor Books and other new paperback imprints, in addition to renewed efforts from

old paperback imprints, “it was during this time [the 1950s] that paperbacks began to sell in very large quantities, eroding somewhat the big sales of hardbound novels” (Hackett 1975, 116). Though the paperback industry faced some challenges during the late 1940s and early 1950s regarding overproduction and clogged distribution channels (Bonn 1995, 265), the industry grew in both size and power as the Age of Acquisitions drew near. In 1957, *Publishers Weekly* started a separate bestsellers list for paperbacks, and later separated mass market from trade paperbacks (Hackett 1975, 121). In 1968, “trade paperbacks became a feature of the Model Bookshop” at ABA conventions (Grannis 1975, 96) and throughout the 1970s and 1980s paperback houses published more and more original titles (Bonn 1995, 267). As we will see, this growth in paperback publishing was a huge turning point in the direction and attitude of the industry as a whole.

As early as the end of World War II it was clear that “most people understood that a large part of the future lay in paperbacks” (Tebbel 1987, 408). In fact, according to John Tebbel, “if there is a consensus about anything among publishers, the single fact nearly everyone agrees on is the great importance of mass market publishing after the close of the Second World War” (Tebbel 1987, 421). As early as the late 1940s, “hardcover publishers were checking with their soft cover counterparts for reprint interest before committing themselves to publishing certain titles” (Bonn 1995, 266). The implications of this development are clear: paperback and mass market houses gained more power over the trade publishing industry, shifting the focus of the industry from a small intellectual audience to an entire population. Throughout the history of mass market publishing, it has been a popular, commercial enterprise.



...popular fiction dominated mass market publication lists, and mass market publishers were criticized for narrowly channeling popular taste. In the classic debate of book publishing's role in society (i.e., commercial enterprise versus cultural arbiter), these publishers responded that they were merely publishing what the public demanded. And when titles sold in bestseller quantities rarely equaled in the past, this argument carried the day (Bonn 1995, 266).

On the one hand, paperback and mass market publishing encouraged commercialism and consumerism and led to the creation of the blockbuster syndrome. On the other hand, "the paperback industry has more or less kept publishing alive by making books easier and cheaper to buy and by allowing publishers to publish books other than blockbusters, which now dominate hardcover sales" (Tebbel 1987, 465). Though paperbacks have made it easier for more books to get published, they have also encouraged a commercialized publishing industry by calling for books that appeal to everyone, which can often turn into publishing for the lowest common denominator. "Historically, book publishers have preferred to concentrate on limited markets, to charge high prices, and to enter the mass market only when forced to by economic pressures, technology, and competition. The situation in current publishing has required them to do so" (West 1988, 153). Essentially, the growing popularity and profitability of mass market publishing turned even hardcover publishing into a mass market business.

During the age of acquisitions trade paperbacks and mass market books printed more original works and targeted more academic audiences while hardcover publishers began targeting more general audiences, causing these previously separate industries to look more and more alike. One reason for this is that "the mergers and structural consolidations of the late 1970s and 1980s within the book industry drew paperback publishing – mass market and trade – into the core of general book publishing. Trade

publishing in turn took on many characteristics of mass market paperback operations” (Bonn 1995, 270). By taking on “many of the design, marketing and editorial selection practices introduced or exploited successfully by mass market...publishing over the last fifty years” (Bonn 1995, 263), trade publishing “has today become an integrated and recognized component of the mass media, competing with, complementing, and supporting other media, particularly film and television. Books are created, judged, selected, designed, positioned, marketed, repositioned, and reissued with media integration and promotion paramount” (Bonn 1995, 270). Though the success of paperback publishing has encouraged an egalitarian, inclusive approach to publishing and has made books available to more of the population than ever before, it has also created a commercialized book industry.

Its flashy packaging is supported by commercial marketing methods – publicity, promotion, and advertising – that focus on the external elements of the work more than its inherent literary worth. For better or for worse, these methods and goals, often divorced from literary standards and taste, are a direct result of the success of paperback publishing in the last fifty years (Bonn 1995, 270).

As with any new technology, paperback publishing created both opportunities and limitations for readers and publishers alike. One of those limitations is a focus on commercial, rather than literary, standards for publication.

### **Bestsellers and Awards**

During the second half of the twentieth century, many changes were made to the way bestsellers lists were compiled and therefore to the impact they had on the publishing industry. *The New York Times'* bestseller list grew in popularity and influence after its inception in 1942. Though the *Publisher's Weekly* list was, and is, extremely influential and is often used in reference collections, the *NYT* list is more focused on readers than

the *PW* list is, as evidenced by the fact that in 1960 *PW* started using publisher's 'in-print' figures or print orders instead of data from booksellers to compile their lists (Hackett 1975, 121). So while *PW* lists are perhaps more reflective of the publishing industry, the *NYT* lists are more sales focused. Of course, *The New York Times* is not the only reputable publication with a bestseller list, but over time it has become the most prestigious. Author Catherine Coulter admits that "it's a very mysterious thing to me why the publishing industry set up the *New York Times* as the torch bearer for bestsellerdom, but at some point in the past they did, and now we all have to live with it" (Hill and Power 2005, 4).

The dominance of *The New York Times* warrants a discussion of its methods and accuracy. Toby Usnik, one time Director of Publications for *NY Times Co.*, explained the process of compiling the list. The *New York Times* polls hundreds of independent booksellers – excluding specialty stores like Christian bookstores or stores centered on specific hobbies or activities – who are willing and able to provide the necessary data, about forty wholesalers, regional and national chains, and "significant" online e-tailers. Polls are done by phone, and the actual numbers of sales are kept confidential to avoid rigging the list (Hill and Power 2005, 18-19). This methodology naturally raises some questions. What kinds of stores are unwilling to provide data? What level of technology do stores need to have in order to be able to provide data? What is a "significant" online e-tailer? Do the same stores participate regularly, or is it different from week to week, or even day to day? The truth is, *The New York Times* bestseller list is compiled through a somewhat secretive process, and many industry insiders themselves are uncertain of its

methods or accuracy. Some even claim to have seen evidence that the list can be, and sometimes has been rigged (Vanderbilt 1999, 138).

In an age of blockbusters when publishers are focused so narrowly on “bestsellers,” this is not a harmless accusation. Michael Cader laments that “more and more, that list has been engineered to have less to do with the books that are actually selling the most, and its statistical accuracy has fallen in comparison to many other major lists” (Hill and Power 2005, 21). Cader refers to *The New York Times* and other newspaper and magazine lists as “fake ones...which are not representative of the business as a whole and/or involve as much art as science” and instead places his trust on the BookScan list, which tracks actual sales through computer records at bookstores. The BookScan list is not available to the public (Hill and Power 2005, 21). Cader’s accusations are vague, but specific complaints are difficult to make when the process is so secretive. One reason for a confidential compilation process is to make sure that sales records for individual stores and publishers private. But a side effect of this safety measure is that the public takes for granted the accuracy of the list, and because the public is so reliant on it publishers must be as well.

Bestseller lists show patterns and trends throughout history which have been tracked by various publishers, booksellers, and historians. For example, in the 1950s “the modern world was decidedly replacing history as the basis for bestselling novels” (Hackett 1975, 117). Whether this trend reflects a lack of interest in history, a growing consciousness and concern with modern society, or both is difficult to determine, but the bestseller lists provide important insights into trends in the attitude of the reading public as well as the changing obstacles within the industry itself. A simple examination of

people's opinions regarding what it takes to make a bestselling book is very revealing. There are those who dismiss the idea of a formulaic bestseller. "It has been said that a publisher's idea of a good book is a book very much like another book that has sold well. But writers and publishers have found that more often than not, setting out to write a best-seller is just about the worst way to write a best-selling book" (Vanderbilt 1999, 133). Some people look to sales patterns rather than writing techniques to define the source of a bestseller, arguing that "best-sellers are books which break out of the social circle for which they were originally intended" (Escarpit 1966, 118). This has likely been the source of many best-sellers, including books like *Harry Potter* which were aimed at children but wound up enchanting adults as well. Similarly, Neil Nyren explains that some bestsellers are expected to be best sellers but others come out of nowhere. "And we *love* that. It gives us hope: that good books can become best sellers purely because they're just good books" (Hill and Power 2005, 11).

Many are more cynical regarding the value of books that reach the list. Richard Curtis, a literary agent at the Curtis Agency, after listing the traits of a best-seller added "notice I haven't said that the book has to be well written. And that's the pity of the bestseller list" (Hill and Power 2005, 24). Best-selling author Stephen King has a more personal reaction to the lists. "I actually feel a little bit sick to my stomach, if I'm to be honest. I've read some really excellent novels lately that were a long run from the bestseller list and nobody in the publishing business seems to give a damn" (Vanderbilt 1999, 2). John Tebbel believes that the lists have little, if anything, to do with the content of a book, and argues that this was not always the case. "What lies between the covers hardly matters as long as it can be sold by modern marketing techniques. One has only to

compare the best-seller lists of today with those of twenty-five years ago to perceive the sharp decline in the quality of even mass market books” (Tebbel 1987, 464).

Clearly there is some disagreement both about how to reach the bestseller lists and about the general value of the books that make it. But one thing is certain: once a book has made the list, the value of the book and the talent of the author are often taken for granted. “In 1960 only two new authors made the list of ten bestsellers in fiction” (Hackett 1975, 117). As the bestseller list became more of an institution, authors who had not previously made the list had a harder time getting noticed. Once an author has made the bestseller list, however, “the public will likely gobble up whatever they write next” (Hill and Power 2005, 17). Books on the bestsellers list “begin to pull readers into their orbits, whether or not the readers really like the books or even understand them – or even read them” they will buy them, simply because they are bestsellers (Vanderbilt 1999, 143).

Literary awards have historically been quite separate from bestseller lists, sometimes intentionally so. While getting a book on the bestseller list often means fame and fortune for an author, “authors who had won literary awards or prizes earned, on average, no more than those who had not” in 1979 (West 1988, 20). Some “commercial” authors – those who write for a wide audience and do so in hopes of selling more copies – may actually wish to avoid literary prizes since they can distance an author from the public and make his work less attractive to them (Escarpit 1966, 157). Of course, this fact applies more to some audiences than others and makes certain assumptions about the value system of those authors. Keeping literary prizes and awards separate from commercial goals has led to some controversy in the book industry. In 1979, the

Association of American Publishers changed the National Book Awards to the American Book Awards. The new awards included input from buyers and sellers of books, not just authors and critics. This outraged many industry insiders, and some authors actually turned down nominations (Whiteside 1981, 94-96). The tension between book sales and literary awards reflects poorly on both academic elitists and profit-driven commercialists within the industry and highlights the difficulty of integrating intellectual works into a commercial industry without alienating readers who just want an entertaining book.

### **The Reading Public**

Studies of the publishing industry and of books and literature in general constantly refer to the reading public. Determining just exactly who or what this reading public is, however, can be a difficult task. In the world of trade publishing, the reading public is anyone who might read a book, including those who read frequently as well as those who read rarely. It is those who buy books more frequently, however, that are of most concern to trade publishers. It has been estimated that “the core 60 percent of book buyers who purchase books consistently...is responsible for 90 percent of consumer sales.” It is therefore logical that trade publishers would focus on that 60 percent while specialty publishers often target the types of audiences who buy books rarely and only when they coincide with their specific interests or hobbies. There is a bit of a paradox involved with this approach, however. While trade publishers are after the 60 percent book buyers who make frequent purchases, by focusing on familiar looking blockbusters, they are also attempting to appeal to those who rarely read, or only read the most popular and recognizable titles and authors. However, “occasional and rare buyers, who generally are drawn to the most popular titles, tend to fall by the wayside during hard

times, while core buyers, loyal to their hobbies and interests, would rather do without lunch than give up the happy hours their books provide” (Dessauer 1995, 6). By publishing books that appeal to everyone, publishers may in fact be neglecting the very readers who depend on books as more than a way to pass the time. “Put very crudely, one can try to sell a large number of items at a low price to a mass market, or one can attempt to sell fewer items at a high price to a limited market” (West 1988, 149). During the first half of the twentieth century, publishing favored the latter technique. In more recent history, however, trade publishing has become dependent on selling more books more cheaply to more people, and is therefore dependent on a reading public that, when the economy is doing poorly, may turn out to be consumers first and readers second.

Trying to gauge the intellectualism of the reading public is a precarious undertaking. Judging people, especially an entire population, based on what they read in their leisure time is not exactly fair. Even the most brilliant minds enjoy light reading now and then. And if Americans are engaging in more light reading than previously, it could be argued that it is due to an increase of intellectualism in other areas of life such as work, education, or civic engagement. However, there is a perception in the book industry of a reading public that is less willing to read long, dense, intellectually meaningful work than it was in the past. Whether or not this perception is true, it has a serious effect on how authors write and which books publishers and agents choose to support.

Author Peter Straub believes that readers now are not “quite as willing to stick with very long novels” (Hill and Power 2005, 48). Jonathan Galassi asserts that readers today, as opposed to readers in the late 90s and earlier, have a short attention span and are



always looking for something new. He attributes this to the fact that Americans now have more leisure options thanks to technology, and to the “distracting and worrying” world situation which have helped cause this shift away from serious fiction (Hill and Power 2005, 112). That today’s world situation is more distracting and worrying than the world situation in the 30s or 40s is up for debate. The important thing about Galassi’s comment is that it shows how the American reading public is perceived by the publishing industry.

This perception of the reading public is not, of course, wholly without foundation. “The initial hurdle to selling books...is that nobody reads...Much as we would like to consider ourselves a civilized and literate people, there is a staggering mass of evidence to the contrary” (Vanderbilt 1999, 79). During the first half of the twentieth century, the hurdle was that people couldn’t read or didn’t have the money to buy books. Now that America is more educated and more prosperous than ever, the problem is that people don’t want to read. “Illiteracy gets all the press, but just as sad a problem is aliteracy, which has been defined as the ability to read without the desire to do so. This affliction, even among high school and college graduates, is rampant” (Vanderbilt 1999, 81). Unless people are taught to love books at a young age, they rarely become readers. Melcher, a Boston bookseller who experienced the change in the industry firsthand, explained that as the Age of Acquisitions began, “our visitors were those with already established reading habits. The parents who were buying children’s books were the children of parents who had bought them children’s books” (Melcher 1956, 162). American politics has become anti-books, even anti-intellectual. Presidents like John F. Kennedy were well-read and well written and were admired for it. Now being well-read

is weird, freakish, bookish, an sign of anti-social tendencies, all insults thrown at Associate Justice of the Supreme Court David Souter during his confirmation hearings (Vanderbilt 1999, 85-87).

Some people are willing to accept the attitude of the American public and adjust the publishing industry accordingly. “Better to have readers who buy only mass market books, it is said, than to have the total number of readers reduced to a mere trickle, as some fear, with books going the way of the horse-drawn carriage” (Tebbel 1987, 463). Others think that reducing the quality of books to appeal to the least intellectual reader is not necessary, but reducing the volume of books is. “Our theory is that people are baffled by libraries – when you are confronted by 20,000 books you will read nothing, but if you have at hand 15 which you feel to be the best current material on any subject important to you, you will read them all. The whole pattern of democracy seems to have become too large” (Anderson 1975, 198). While either of these adjustments are preferable to having reading disappear completely, reducing the quality or the variety of books available to the public seems to be an unnecessary sacrifice to make.

Many in the publishing industry claim to be mere servants of the public, giving them what they ask for, no more and no less. The idea is that consumers “‘vote’ for which kinds of books are being published with the dollars they spend. This is as it should be, some believe” (Hill and Power 2005, 54). However, the previously discussed assumptions that publishers make about the reading public make this approach problematic since readers can only ‘vote’ for books or types of books that have already been published. There is another set of beliefs surrounding the publishing industry’s role in relation to the reading public. “In respect of written culture, the same social conditions

create both the supply and the demand and reading is one of those goods which are sought only when they have already been found” (Escarpit 1966, 84). In other words, readers cannot demand something they have never been exposed to. Especially when the power of modern marketing techniques are taken into account, “there is a market for any good book, and maybe for any bad book, too” (Vanderbilt 1999, 30). The charge is for publishers to market the good books as fiercely as they market the bad ones. Thomas Whiteside, author of *The Blockbuster Complex*, believes that “the public will buy these books,” meaning books of high literary and intellectual quality, “if they are exposed to them, but they are being exposed to them less and less” (Whiteside 1981, 107).

Promoting a love of good books is not only something publishers should do, it is something that will help them financially. “The failure to impart the joys of books and reading to more people is that most woeful failure of our educational system (and of publishers who have thus failed to further their business interests” (Vanderbilt 1999, 72). In order to further their business interests, publishers should be working together to promote reading and literacy in general in order to increase their potential audience (Vanderbilt 1999, 187). Looking back at the days of the Golden Age, “there was once a day when reading was a popular form of entertainment, when books provided a shared experience for a diverse and fragmented population. Amazed publishers are reminded time and time again that that day has gone, that their franchise slipped away from them while they weren’t minding the store” (Vanderbilt 1999, 87). Or perhaps, as a result of the Age of Acquisitions and the subsequent corporate mentality that overtook the industry, they were minding the store – and the bottom line – too carefully and neglected to mind their customers.

## Censorship and Politics

During the first half of the twentieth century, censorship of publishing by the government or powerful conservative forces was a major concern for those dedicated to the free flow of ideas through books. Throughout the Age of Acquisitions, the courts themselves became much more lenient towards “obscene” literature – with the exception of the Red Scare and “communist” literature in the 50s. In 1968, Charles Rembar wrote in *The End of Obscenity*, “no matter what the courts and legislature had traditionally deemed ‘obscene’...the government could not suppress a book if it had merit as literature...if there was any discernable value, the First Amendment must intervene” (Tebbel 1987, 459). While this kind of thinking left works that were not of “discernable value” open to attack, the Age of Acquisitions saw increasing political and legal freedom in the book world.

The Age of Acquisitions threatened another kind of censorship – corporate censorship. But even in this area fears seemed to be unwarranted. In 1959, Clinton Williams Murchison, a Texan oil tycoon, became a significant investor in Holt. Though he was strongly anti-communist and considered some of Holt’s books pro-communist, he made no attempt to prevent Holt from publishing those titles (Tebbel 1987, 387). Though this is just one example, Murchison is indicative of the corporate owner who was less concerned with what the books were about than with whether or not they made money. Corporate and conglomerate owners don’t keep a close eye on the content of the work their divisions publish, which means they don’t censor – politically or otherwise – the titles being published. However, this also means that corporate and conglomerate owners don’t care about the quality of the work being produced, only about how much money it

brings in (Whiteside 1981, 191). While lack of interference from corporate owners is a positive for publishing divisions, the narrow focus on the bottom line is a source of pressures and demands that lead to blockbuster publishing, leaving many valuable works behind.

Yet another kind of censorship has developed since the Age of Acquisitions – commercial censorship. “The state has not dictated that we form conglomerates. We are told that economic reality does the dictation” (Henderson 1995, 323). Similarly, the state has not dictated that publishers ignore midlist books in favor of potential blockbusters, or that books should resemble previously successful books, or that controversial or overly-intellectual subject matter should be avoided. These are all precepts imposed upon the publishing industry by the “economic system,” which, in fact, has been created by players in this industry and others. As publishing companies are more frequently owned by conglomerates that also own television, newspaper, film and other media divisions, “there is a danger that divisions of a conglomerate will work with one another on book/movie/music combinations, thereby restricting the free market” and raising prices while limiting consumer’s choices (Whiteside 1981, 188-189). It has long been the case that “when commerce or politics censors literature, small presses joyously publish what needs to be published.” Small, independent presses still provide an outlet for important but less-profitable works. But in an industry where “publishers must now compete worldwide for celebrity names...huge advances are required” and “the publishing machinery, like the market, must be massive,” small presses simply do not have the capability to help these important works reach the audience they deserve (Henderson

1995, 323). The publishing industry is censoring itself, not out of moral conviction or political beliefs, but out of a desire to make the industry as profitable as possible.

### **The Role of Publishing in Society**

Publishing is a business, and while some publishing companies are non-profit, most are not, and bookstores certainly are not. This has always been the case, but during the Golden Age and before, publishing companies were often run by men of means, to whom profits were helpful but not necessary and who chose the business for its intellectual lifestyle. Since the Age of Acquisitions, however, publishers are more often businessmen to whom profit is extremely important. Generally speaking, the book world today is split into two groups, the corporate entrepreneurs and, as Whiteside calls them, the *littérateurs*. The corporate entrepreneurs advocate bestselling books and conglomerates. They view themselves as populists bringing books to the masses. The *littérateurs* fear profit-driven publishing as harmful to less-profitable but more meritorious work. At the moment it seems as though the corporate entrepreneurs have a better hold on the industry (Whiteside 1981, 93).

Since the close of World War II the publishing industry has undergone immense change. “Individualism has persisted, of course, but at the same time the industry has become homogenized to a large extent...The corporate mentality has largely replaced rugged individualism as the result of innumerable and continuing mergers and acquisitions” (Tebbel 1987, 352). Financially, “corporate management has been a success, but Henry Holt, the most stubborn of the nineteenth century’s pigheaded individualists, would not have recognized his publishing child in its far blander, latter day embodiment. A price had been paid” (Tebbel 1987, 389). While there is practically no

disagreement about the drastic change the industry underwent during the second half of the twentieth century, whether that change has made the industry better or worse is a point of serious contention.

One argument in defense of the new corporate mentality of the industry is that book publishing is, quite simply, a business, and like any business it requires financial savvy in order to be successful. Even John Tebbel, who often laments the corporate mentality, admits that “editorial brilliance alone is not enough to keep a publishing house alive” (Tebbel 1987, 413). Jason Epstein, who also waxes nostalgic for the days when Maxwell Perkins nurtured young authors through long and fruitful careers, concedes that “literature, like all religions, is a business, though not a very good business” (Epstein 2001, 59). Indeed, there is some truth in the fact that treating books as commodities make the business more efficient, more effective, and more profitable (Vanderbilt 1999, 180). Even where authors are concerned, a corporate approach to publishing has its benefits. The old model of publishing – focusing on works of literary rather than monetary value – works best in aristocratic societies where many authors have other sources of income. In a free market democracy a more profit oriented business is required to support a class of authors (West 1988, 43). From the bookseller’s point of view, “a bookstore, well stocked with the best of books, and staffed with intelligent book loving assistants, is of no avail unless it is managed on sound financial principles” (Kroch 1975, 179). In other words, publishers and booksellers who don’t focus on profits will not stay in business, and a bankrupt publisher cannot publish any books at all, intellectual or otherwise.

These defenders of corporate publishing also argue that independent and university presses have actually benefited from the Age of Acquisitions and the resulting corporate mentality, since they are able to publish moderately successful works that trade publishers pass up in favor of blockbusters (Whiteside 1981, 190). Others, such as Richard Snyder of Simon and Schuster argue that chains and conglomerates are beneficial to the public because they get people to read. He blames authors' agents, who pressure editors into making deals on unwritten books and use other aggressive tactics, for any decline in quality over the years (Whiteside 1981, 116-118). Of course, it is the corporate mentality of chains and conglomerates that has allowed agents to become such a necessary and influential part of the publishing process. Still others believe that the book business is too individual, too intellectual, to be completely undone by corporate invaders.

No matter how big or how consolidated or how commercial the industry becomes, it will remain at its core a cottage industry, for the product it is selling is homemade, woven by hand by individual craftsmen, piece by piece, book by book. The publishing industry may be brought into modern times by every technique of automation and mass merchandising, but there will never be a way to mass-produce what this industry is selling (Vanderbilt 1999, 17).

Depending on the inherently individual and intellectual nature of books, some *littérateurs* are willing to work with the corporate entrepreneurs to maintain as much integrity as possible within the current shape of the industry.

Corporate entrepreneurs are profit-focused, and so they try to run the book business like any other corporate business. However, this is not always the most profitable path to take when it comes to the publishing industry. There is an inherent disconnect between the efficient nature of corporate business and the unpredictable,



instinctual nature of publishing. As corporations took over publishing companies, they found that “there were areas of trade-book publishing in which any attempt to plan was bound to be futile” (Whiteside 1981, 90). Corporate investors expect consistent profit patterns that just don’t happen in the publishing world. “A few fortuitous bestsellers distorted a year’s profits so that the following year suffered by comparison. Publishers understood this pattern. Wall Street did not” (Epstein 2001, 88). Even within the day-to-day budgets of corporations and conglomerates conflict occurs. “Conglomerate budgets require efficiencies and create structures that are incompatible with the notorious vagaries of literary production, work whose outcome can only be intuited” (Epstein 2001, 12).

The result of these conflicts is not only harmful to the intellectual work of publishing, but is often financially harmful as well. During the Age of Acquisitions, “the continued application of nonbook principles and ideas to publishing” led to labor problems for many publishers, something that was “rarely seen in the industry” prior to that time (Tebbel 1987, 366). The “imposition of the corporate mentality” has caused bureaucratic confusion and has kept publishing wages the lowest in the communications industry, which has driven the best and brightest to other industries and led to increased recruitment of executives from other areas of business (Tebbel 1987, 462). Publishing corporations and conglomerates manage to keep profits high, but their corporate practices may very well be limiting their financial success by neglecting the inherent differences between book publishing and the production of other commodities.

Corporate publishers have been accused of being short-sighted businessmen. More severely, they are accused of contributing to the demise of literature as an intellectual art form. On the simplest level, there are complaints “that much of the fun

has gone out of publishing” (Tebbel 1987, 462). One critic of the corporate industry recounts an occasion where “an American editor remarked to me...’You know, it just isn’t fun anymore. Publishing used to be exciting. Now we have to earn back these crazy advances and it’s just like publishing with a gun to your head” (Henderson 1995, 323). While complaints about a lack of “fun” in the industry may seem frivolous, publishing under pressure, “with a gun to your head,” is unlikely to result in quality publishing, in the careful selection of the best available manuscripts when the latest book that is just like last month’s bestseller is a much better bet.

There is a strong sense of lost individualism in the industry, a sense that books are becoming just another form of media, devoid of any characteristics that differentiate them from television, film, and other mass media. In fact, “the trade-book business seems on the way to becoming nothing more than the component of the conglomerate communications-entertainment complex which happens to deal primarily with publishing books” (Whiteside 1981, 22). In the new industry, “books, movies, and television programs can be regarded as integrated components of a total commodity” (Whiteside 1981, 65). The danger here is that books are supposed to be more intellectual, are perceived as sources of intellectual stimulation, whereas most films and television programs are recognized as simple entertainment. This is evidenced by the fact that children are discouraged from watching too much TV and are encouraged to read. When books are produced with the same attention to intellectual integrity as television programs, encouraging children to read may not be such a good idea.

There is hope that technological change will lead to a reestablishment of intellectual standards in book publishing, though there is much disagreement about what

the new technology will look like and exactly what kind of an impact it will have. Until a serious change occurs in the way books are produced, however, publishers will remain, as Jason Epstein puts it, “short-term gamblers, betting, often rashly, on titles they hope will prove faddish for a season or two, often without regard to their intrinsic worth or long-term prospects.” Epstein does not, however, blame thoughtless or malevolent publishers – he is a publisher himself, after all – for the “devolution of once-proud publishing houses into units of impersonal corporations. Nor does he blame “the falsely alleged defects of suburban culture.” Epstein places the blame on “morally neutral market conditions” like the high cost of rent in mall stores and other unforeseeable, unpreventable changes in the United States economy (Epstein 2001, 26-27).

Blaming morally neutral market forces certainly makes everyone feel better. It’s hard to blame authors for writing popular books, or businessmen for trying to make a profit. It is similarly difficult to criticize the reading public for accepting copycat bestsellers instead of demanding high quality literature. Treating reading as a leisure activity instead of as a point of study is hardly a sin. Neutral market forces, however, are not forces in and of themselves. It takes people to create them and more people to allow them to change an entire industry. What is at fault for the takeover of the publishing industry by corporate ideals is a failure to hold publishers responsible for the cultural power that they wield.

Epstein himself believes that publishers have a moral and intellectual obligation to society. “I believed and still do that the democratic ideal is a permanent and inconclusive Socratic seminar in which we all learn from one another. The publisher’s job is to supply the necessary readings” (Epstein 2001, 56). Supplying the readings for a

society full of television sets and computers may seem relatively unimportant, but “despite challenges from other mass media...books remain one of the most important means of intellectual communication and continue to be the center of the intellectual system of most communities” (Altbach 1995, 271). Especially in terms of public intellectual life, where thinkers share their thoughts freely and openly, books are a much more important means of communication than fast-paced television programs or questionably sound internet sources.

Given the importance of books to intellectual life, publishers play an incredibly important role in the world of ideas. “By virtue of control over what appears in print, the publisher exercises considerable power” (Altbach 1995, 274). Publishers and editors can sometimes single-handedly open or close a new field of study or literature. “Editors may decide to develop offerings in a field new to the house...or to stop soliciting manuscripts in a field in which they have not done well...obviously, such decisions will be controversial, because they are viewed as predictions about the importance of the field, or even as death sentences” (Luey 1995, 94). When this power is abused, when decisions are made not based on predictions about the importance of a field but on purely economic reasoning, fields of study which might prove enlightening and useful to the American public can be quickly silenced and hidden from public view. Booksellers have a similar responsibility, especially since chain bookstores are now the main source of the public’s reading material. “As the middleman in this exchange [of ideas], the bookseller is not only the conduit between author and audience, but in the conduct of his business he is in a position to influence that relationship profoundly, whether for good or for ill” (Tebbel 1987, 3).

Publishers and booksellers alike hold significant power over American intellectual life. With so much power in the hands of one industry, dangerous situations which threaten the free flow of ideas are bound to occur. Working within a capitalist free market economy, monopolies must be prevented at all costs. But something else must be demanded if the quality, not just the quantity or the availability, of published works is to be maintained. Publishers, editors, authors, agents, booksellers, and the reading public, must remember that publishing is not just a business. It is a business that can significantly influence the opinions and beliefs of the American public. It can keep the American public informed and engaged, or it can combine with other forms of mass media and become just another distraction. The Age of Acquisitions made the publishing industry look and act more like a business. By acting like a business, the industry lowered many of its literary and cultural standards. Since the industry now looks like a business, the level of literary and cultural quality the public demands of it has also been lowered. The Age of Acquisitions brought about a change that was perhaps inevitable: the transformation of a unique and ideological business into an entrepreneurial enterprise like any other.

## **Bookseller and Publisher Interviews**

In order to gain some insights into the current situation of the publishing industry, I interviewed publisher and booksellers about their experiences and practices as well as their opinions and impressions of the industry in general. Since the interviews were conducted under the promise of anonymity, the interviewees will be referred to as respondents A-K. Below is a list of the respondents, their titles, and what type of company they work for (see appendix for detailed methodology).

- A: Senior Publicist at an imprint of a large corporate publisher.
- B: Vice President of a large corporate publisher
- C: Assistant manager at one branch of a large corporate chain bookstore.
- D: Director of independent college bookstore
- E: Assistant editor of relatively large non-profit independent publisher
- F: Editorial Assistant at small, non-profit independent publisher
- G: Editor at small, non-profit, independent publisher
- H: Buyer at large independent bookstore with one branch
- J: Partner at a very small independent bookstore.
- K: Lead buyer at large independent bookstore with three branches

Although the sample is not large enough to provide any qualitatively significant data, the responses are very revealing and help to connect modern industry practices to historical accounts of changes in the industry over the last hundred years – particularly when responses from employees of independent companies are compared to those of corporate publishers or booksellers.

### **Quality Books**

One of the difficulties in assessing the change in the quality of output in the publishing industry is defining quality. Therefore, one of the first questions the respondents were asked was “what is your definition of a quality book?” Some respondents, particularly independent booksellers, were hesitant to answer this question.

Respondent H said “I shouldn’t be the one to speak to about that.” Respondents I and D were both cautious about judging people’s reading habits. Respondent K said that “we don’t differentiate. Danielle Steel and Normal Mailer go in the same section” while respondent D made it clear that “it’s not a judgment call. I filter what we carry but I don’t make judgments on what people read.”

In spite of this consciously open-minded approach toward books, respondents from independent companies mentioned a few traits that a quality book must have. In order to be high quality a book must, first and foremost, be “well-written. Very well-written grammar and vocabulary wise” (respondent J). When respondent K hands a book to a customer, she wants to be able to say that it is “wonderfully written” and “beautifully phrased.” Respondent D immediately answered “Good writing – that’s the basis. Good editing.” It is interesting to note that these independent booksellers reference hand-selling in their response, and that respondent D linked editing to writing, not to marketing or manuscript selection.

Respondents from independent companies also mentioned the social significance of a work. Respondent H believes that a quality book “criticizes society...has some sort of message...makes you think about the state of how things are now whether personally or worldwide or in one particular country.” She says she finds books like this in both fiction and non-fiction and that they are “not always bestsellers.” Respondent J believes that a quality book “has to make some connection between the book and the reader...You can write a book about anything. I think if it’s well-written and finds some human quality that speaks to the reader then it could be a great book.”

There was also a sense that a quality book has to be more than a casual read. Respondent K mentioned “thought-provoking subject matter” and said that “Good literature asks more of the reader.” She differentiated between a quality book and “something you read to get through a flight to Miami when you just want to escape and be entertained” but once again said that she and her colleagues “try not to be judges of that” and that people read both kinds of books, so her store stocks both. Respondent J suggested that a quality book should be difficult to write and to read, saying ‘if you can churn out a book every few months they probably aren’t going to be anything memorable. They might be entertaining, and light reading has its place,’ but it is not high quality.

When asked how often they come across books that they think are of high quality but are unlikely to sell many copies, the independent booksellers all responded that it happens all the time. When asked if they were likely to stock such a book, respondent H answered “if it’s something I know I’ll pick up and read I’ll bring it in because I’ll ‘staff pick’ it. Though my staff picks don’t usually sell very well.” Respondent K also mentioned hand-selling as a way to make “midlist fiction that looks to have good quality but might have minimal market” worthwhile. Respondent K added, “I like to take risks with new authors.”

Opinions about quality books from corporate respondents were largely worked into discussions of acquisitions and marketing strategies. Respondent C, however, defined a quality book in terms of the reader’s reaction to it. A good book is “something I can’t put down” some that “inspires me” or is “plain interesting.” Respondent C expresses a feeling that is prevalent in modern America, saying “If I’m going to spend the



time to sit and read something it has to be worth something.” The respondent also focused on the social aspect of reading, saying that a quality book is something that you want to talk to other people about. Like the independent respondents, she is concerned with a book’s social significance, but on a more micro-sociological level.

### **Acquisitions**

Respondent F described the acquisitions process at her small, non-profit independent publisher. When a manuscript comes in from agents, many of whom the house has developed a relationship with, the editors, assistant editors, and director read them. The assistant editors write “reading reports” for every manuscript they read, while editors only pass along the ones they like. Unsolicited manuscripts are first read by volunteer readers who chosen “based on their backgrounds in literature.” If the volunteer readers like the manuscripts, they pass them up to the assistance editors and the process continues. Respondent E described a similar process in which unsolicited manuscripts are read by interns who write reading reports “which are then analyzed by assistant and associate editors who decide whether to recommend the manuscript further.” At these independent presses, unsolicited manuscripts are accepted, but they must survive one more round of readers than agent-submitted manuscripts do.

When asked what factors determine whether a book will be selected for publication, all three independent presses mentioned literary attributes first. Phrases like “distinctive voice” and “command of language” came up more than once. Respondents focused on literary devices such as imagery and tone. Respondent F was interested in “artistic and literary innovation,” on “literary value, which we think of as writing that has a singular distinctive voice and vision, and addresses contemporary concerns and topics

in a fresh and unique way.” Respondent E said that he looks for “distinctive writing, beautiful books. We’re looking for art.”

Audience and reader reaction were not a focus for the non-profit independent publishers. Respondent G said that the work has to “keep the reader engaged. There has to be more than just a crescendo ending. There has to be something at risk, something at stake.” Beyond that however, there was little besides literary quality that affected their decisions – at least according to their testimony. When asked what factors besides literary quality are taken into consideration, respondent E answered, “as a non-profit, not a whole lot” (many answers from respondents E, F, and G began with “as a non-profit”). “That’s what our non-profit status affords us,” respondent E explained. “When we find a book we really believe in we can go after it.” Similarly, respondent G answered that half of his house’s list every year consists of “important works that need to be out in the world. They won’t sell a whole lot, especially in Nascar Nation, but that doesn’t matter. They need to be out there.” On the whole, the non-profit independent publishers described their standards for literature in terms befitting the Golden Age of publishing. Those who wax nostalgic for the good old days of the industry would find hope and comfort in the words of these editors. The fact that these houses are not only independent but non-profit supports the idea that the market system and modern business practices have lowered the standards for literature in America.

The independent publishers interviewed were not focused on audience as a criterion for selection, but they did not completely disregard a book’s potential readership either. Respondent E said “we’re obviously interested in whether or not a book has an audience,” but the reasons he gave for that interest were not financial. “Plenty of people

can write really well but are totally disengaged from humanity. We want writers that have something to say about the human predicament.” He went on to say that “it’s hard to delineate between considering who a book is going to appeal to and marketing...there’s a difference and there’s not a difference.” Respondent E is trying to express his desire to publish books that people want to read as separate from a desire to publish books that will sell a lot of copies. In fact, although respondent E mentioned that big sellers can be beneficial because they “bolster the rest of the list” and each respondent mentioned at some point that they need to at least break even financially, none of the non-profit independent publishers mentioned potential sales as a criterion for manuscript selection.

Independent booksellers were very much focused on their customers when making decisions about title selection. The important distinction here is between customers and audience. Independent booksellers were concerned not only with how many people the book could potentially appeal to, but to how many of those people were patrons of their specific store. Respondent J, whose store is in a town of only 2,000 residents, feels so confident in her understanding of her customers’ tastes that when she finds a book that she likes but that has little or no publicity behind it, she says “we would probably get it if we think it’s a really good book and usually there’s some customer who would relate to it to.” Local book clubs and local authors also drive the acquisitions process. Whether through personal relationships, shared socio-economic background, or shared reading experience, respondent J and her customers are able to share books with one another that other bookstores might overlook.

Larger independent bookstores also focused on their own customers when selecting titles. “You have to seek out the right customer for a book” said respondent D. “You have to know your customer.” Respondent H says that when she looks at a book she thinks about “whether it will sell to our customers.” It seems that catering to a specific body of readers can have a positive effect on literary quality. Respondent K buys for a large store that stocks everything “from the very literary to the pretty commercial. But the more commercial books like Danielle Steel are not something we do well with. While we represent her, people tend to buy her at Wal-Mart, so we might buy one or two of her and a big supply of a more literary author.” Rather than buying the books that will appeal to the most people within the general reading public, these respondents buy the books that will appeal to the people within their specific customer base. Respondent D also mentioned a focus on local settings and authors. One drawback to catering to a specific audience is that it may homogenize the store’s contents. For example, respondent K buys for one store that has a very conservative clientele and one store with a more liberal customer base, and she buys books accordingly. Naturally the first store will be lacking more liberal authors and titles while the second is unlikely to carry books with strong conservative principles. However, each of these stores is unique in terms of each other and other stores nationwide.

All bookstores try to acquire a variety of titles and authors, but there is also a desire to shape the store’s collection, to acquire books that fill in the gaps and fit the store’s style. Respondent D says that “if there’s a book that does something I want it to do for our collection then even if it’s not going to be a big seller we can get behind it and help it see the light of day. You’re putting your reputation on the line when you stand

behind a book.” This was a sentiment expressed by independent publishers as well. Respondent E says that his house is “looking for books that fit the mission of the house and the publishing list. We wouldn’t publish a science fiction novel, for example” since the house focuses on literary fiction and non-fiction. Of course, having said that, “totally new things are so striking sometimes that we do go ahead with them.” Similarly, respondent G tries to achieve a “wide range of styles within the house...a variety of writers from different social and imaginative backgrounds.”

All of the independent publishing houses involved in this study were also non-profit, so financial considerations about how a book would sell were secondary in the acquisitions process. The independent bookstores, however, were all for-profit companies and so had some sales-based considerations involved in selecting titles. Every respondent interviewed mentioned the author’s previous success or failure, as well as the success or failure of similar books, as a factor in deciding whether or not to carry a title. Of course, this puts first-time authors or unprecedented books at a disadvantage. For new authors, respondent K considers the publishers track record for picking good debut authors, a technique not mentioned by other respondents. Respondent K considers not only the author but also the subject matter, both in terms of how it has sold in the past and how flooded the market it with similar books currently. For example, ‘there’s too much chick-lit being published, so I don’t buy every new one that comes out. Same goes for mystery books.”

Another factor that shapes independent booksellers’ decisions is the amount of buzz or publicity surrounding a book. Respondent D often checks with her wholesaler to see how many copies of a book they’ve ordered as a way to gauge their excitement about

the book. Of course, “they could all hate the book and I still might order it.” Respondent D also notes upcoming publicity events, especially when considering non-fiction titles. Non-fiction authors don’t usually have as much history as fiction authors on which to base judgments, which the respondent mentioned was one reason why new fiction authors may have a harder time than new non-fiction authors. When looking at a non-fiction book, she considers whether the author is an expert in his field and whether he has appearances on shows like “20/20” or “Good Morning America” arranged. Respondent D treated this information more as a way to gauge the publisher’s excitement over the book than as a way to boost sales in her own store. Independent bookstores and even non-profit publishers need to sell books, but respondents from these stores seemed confident in their ability to find those books that would do well with their specific customers and within their specific collection.

The process for selection at corporate publishers and bookstores is very different from independent publishers and booksellers. Respondent B mentioned that at his large corporate house manuscripts are accepted often before they are completed. He looks at a proposal “including a brief description, a table of contents, and a sample chapter or two” and he and his colleagues make decisions based on that. This is a common practice, especially when considering non-fiction manuscripts. Respondent C, the only representative of a chain bookstore, is not directly involved in acquisitions since buying takes place at the corporate level. She did, however, explain the process as she understands it. Buyers get submissions from both publishers and individual authors (either self-published or those seeking publication). They buyers then “make their best judgment on what they think is going to be a bestseller.” (Significantly, the respondent

brought bestsellers into the discussion early on.) There are different buyers for different genres – fiction, non-fiction, juvenile, etc... - who are all based at the corporate office. There are also regional buyers who mostly focus on travel books. In short, the buying process is corporate-centric and employees working at individual stores are uninvolved.

Although managers of individual stores do not have any input into buying decisions, they do have the power to “short-list” books, or order a small amount of a specific book. If the corporate office sends over six copies of a book and the store sells three in the first week, they might order three more right away. Or if a customer orders a copy of a book the store might order a few extra in case word of mouth sends more customers looking for the same title. Stores can even short-list titles that the corporate office never sent over in the first place. “Theoretically,” the store can short-list anything they want. Before the orders go out, however, the managers get together and review the orders and try to figure out why the book was selling, whether it’s a temporary burst of sales or an up-and-coming title. Perhaps the book was on a local school reading list or was just mentioned on a talk-show. Then the managers will decide whether to cancel the order, place the order, or even order more copies. Short-listing is one way that respondent C and her colleagues are able individualize their store and serve their customers locally.

Not surprisingly, corporate booksellers and publishers were more focused on a book’s potential audience and salability than independent publishers and booksellers were. Respondent B listed salability as the third factor in evaluating manuscripts, after the quality of the writing and the authority of the author (respondent B works mostly with non-fiction) and mentioned that he looks for “a subject for which there is an audience.”

Respondent A is a senior publicist, and so deals almost exclusively with publicity and marketing. She reported that she is asked to weigh in on manuscripts before they are selected for publication to decide “whether the author could be promotable” and “whether the author is media-genic.” For example, she might be more likely to recommend a book if its author were the host of a TV show or a popular columnist. If the author already has some credibility, a “launching pad” as respondent A called it, “it lends him more credit when you’re pitching a book.” Respondent A emphasized the fact that her feedback is not “definitive” in terms of choosing a book for publication, but her opinions are sought before a decision is made.

Corporate respondents did not focus entirely on issues of profit and salability when discussing acquisitions. Respondent B, working in non-fiction, was very concerned with an author’s credibility. He looks for “an author who has some authority to write about the subject that he or she has chosen.” And respondent C, although she is removed from the buying process, says that she doesn’t “think it’s always the monetary thing. I think they [the corporate buyers] consider themselves noble. They’re not uppity,” but they take more than mere profit into account when making their acquisitions and marketing decisions. However true this may be, in this sample there is no doubt that terms concerning profit, salability, and marketing potential were heard more often from corporate and conglomerate companies than from independents.

### **Backlist Midlist and Frontlist**

In historical accounts and modern criticisms of the publishing industry, one of the most frequent complaints against corporate publishers and chain bookstores is that they inflate the sales of frontlist titles while ignoring midlist books and letting backlists



dwindle. Interestingly, the independent booksellers interviewed seemed to think of midlist and frontlist titles as one and the same, which in a sense they are. Frontlist and midlist titles are both new titles from a publisher; the only difference is that frontlist titles get more publisher promotion. As respondent H put it, “midlist is still frontlist but not the books that are destined to be bestsellers. They’re the books you want to give a try to or books that are likely to become strong backlist titles...They are the bread and butte in many ways.” Respondent D doesn’t use paper catalogs, and for that reason “frontlist and midlist are the same thing to me. I look at them all.” As far as backlist titles go, all independent booksellers said that they shape their own backlists within the store, occasionally dropping titles when the sales stop, but keeping others that sell slowly over time. Respondent D reported occasionally looking through a publisher’s online backlist “to make sure we haven’t missed a good one.”

Although these independent booksellers report treating midlists and frontlists equally, the fact that publishers give some books more promotion than others undoubtedly skews acquisitions towards frontlist books. How long books stay on the shelves, however, is a better indicator of how midlist books fare at independent bookstores. Midlist books will, if for no other reason than lack of publicity, need longer shelf-time in order to reach an audience through word of mouth. Respondent D said that the average shelf-life of a book in her store is about 6 months for new hardcover, “longer than at bigger stores because it takes longer for the same number of customers to see the book.” When asked how she decides to pull a book from the shelves, respondent D said that when a book has been on the shelf for a while she checks sales figures to see if it’s time to send the book back. She also checks with national sales figures through her

wholesaler; if a book is doing well nationally but not in her store she might hang on to it and try to increase its sales. “It’s more fun that returning it.” Also, a book might get some extra time on the shelf depending on administrative factors like when the next shipment of books is going out to that publisher. All in all, shelf-life is determined on a case-by-case basis.

Respondent H says that hardcover non-fiction tends to get between 4 and 6 months on the shelf, hardcover fiction gets about 4 months, and paperbacks stay on the shelves for about 6 months. However, there are exceptions depending on subject matter. For example, history books tend to get a little more time on the shelves before they’re pulled. Respondent K gave a very broad response at first, saying that books can stay on the shelves “anywhere from 30 days to 100 years. We try to give anything at least 30 days, and there are books that have been here since 1977.” Eventually, respondent K revealed that a book can stay on the shelf for about 6 months before it becomes a candidate for removal. Genre once again came up as a qualifier. “In the poetry section you’re not gonna get rid of something that hasn’t sold in a month or two, you leave it in. In romance or mystery you get rid of it because those sections are driven by what’s coming next.” The most significant part of respondent K’s policy is “if something’s selling regularly, even once a month, you want to keep it in stock.” Without such a policy, it would be easy to mistake a slow-but-steady selling midlist or backlist title for a dead book.

The non-profit independent publishers interviewed believe strongly in a backlist as a source of profit. Respondent F referred a strong backlist as a “good strategy for financial stability.” Respondent E said that “everything really relies on the backlist,

especially for smaller publishers without a lot of money.” This is true not only because backlist books themselves create steady income, but because having strong titles throughout history “gives us more weight in the field” and lends them more credibility in the eyes of booksellers and readers. Respondent E also mentioned acquiring paperback rights “to books that never came out in paperback because of a lack of sales potential” as a cheap and easy way to build both fiction and non-fiction backlists since royalties are low and there are no editing costs. Although he did not mention buying rights from conglomerate publishers in particular, paperback rights are certainly one way in which smaller presses can benefit both from the work of large presses and from their unwillingness to publish low-selling backlist titles.

But backlist books are more than profitable for independent publishers; they are also important in terms of quality and in terms of meeting readers’ needs. Respondent F frequently mentioned backlist books as a way to publish quality books and make money at the same time, saying that “we hope the books that we publish will be significant literature for (at least) decades to come.” Respondent F went on to say that “although most of our books don’t have as wide an audience as our few bestselling titles, they eventually will become bestselling backlist titles and possibly find themselves in the literary canon of the future.” Respondent G saw backlists as a way to shape and balance the house’s collection. He looks for “a good balance of social backgrounds” and “a variety of aesthetics and tastes. When people browse the shelves there needs to be something there for them.” Respondent H said that backlist books are a good way to connect to authors, to “maintain relationships and build careers.” Of course, a previous

author does not get a free ride. His future books will only be published as long as they are “worthwhile.” Author loyalty is important, but it does not override literary quality.

Corporate respondents recognized both the financial and literary value of a backlist. Though respondent A has little involvement with her company’s backlist – as a publicist she says “if something’s old I can’t really use it” – she believes that the backlist generates a good portion of profit for the house.” Respondent B, who has been in the industry for fifty years, confirmed the importance of a backlist to a large house. “Personally I think it’s very important. The backlist pays the bills...It’s risky business publishing new books without a strong backlist.” Respondent B went on to suggest that backlist books are of a higher quality than those that come and go from the bestsellers list. “Books with quality are the ones that will continue.” According to many critics of the modern publishing industry, respondent B’s attitude towards backlists is a rarity among corporate publishers. Of course, it is impossible to make generalizations based on one response, but perhaps the fact that the respondent has been in the industry for fifty years, has lived through many of the changes lamented by critics, explains his old-fashioned devotion to backlist books.

Corporate bookstores are by necessity less amenable to midlist and backlist titles than independent bookstores are. Respondent C said that “a book has a life so to speak, usually about 3 months...6 months for non-fiction,” confirming the widespread belief that fiction writers have a harder time than non-fiction writers. Turnover is a priority for chain bookstores, so much so that respondent C reports that each branch of her chain store has a person whose job it is to make sure that new books get out on the floor as soon as they arrive. And for every new book on the shelf, an old one has to get taken off.

With only three months on the shelves, a work of fiction, especially one without a pre-existing audience, has to generate interest quickly and immediately in order to have a chance.

### **Bestsellers**

Although respondent D reports to the *New York Times*, the list she really uses is Book Sense. The Book Sense list is created by the American Booksellers Association and is based on and targeted towards independent bookstores. “The Book Sense bestseller list is perhaps more literary than other lists. We used to use the *New York Times* but after watching the two lists, the Book Sense list seemed to more accurately mirror our sales pattern. The difference between the lists is not huge...but where the differences are, we fit better with Book Sense.” Respondent K also prefers the Book Sense list, saying “the *New York Times* list is more commercial. Those books aren’t necessarily bestsellers for us. We focus on Book Sense, and we’ll stock what people want to buy.” Any list that tracks sales is commercial, but the Book Sense list allows great freedom of reporting and so is likely to include more surprises, books that may have been perceived as too literary to draw an audience.

Respondent D shared the details of how she reports sales figures both to the Book Sense bestsellers list and to the *New York Times* bestsellers list. For Book Sense, “we tell them each week the sales figures of any book that sold more than two copies.” For the *New York Times* the process is a bit different. The *Times* sends a list of books separated into genre (hardcover fiction, paperback non-fiction, etc...) with about 30 titles in each section and booksellers are asked to provide sales figures for each of the books on the list. The same list is used two weeks in a row. “They say ‘we encourage you to write in

other books,' but who's gonna do that?" How the *Times* decides which books to put on the list is a mystery. The *New York Times* list is not very different from the Book Sense list, so this method of collection does not completely corrupt the results, but it certainly shows a bias towards books that are expected to do well, and could easily prevent a surprisingly popular book from getting the kind of national attention it needs to be truly successful. Respondent D had a very skeptical attitude towards the *NYT* list. "I report to the *New York Times*," she explained, "because of how publishers treat stores who report to the list. Shipments arriving on time, more attention from representatives, that kind of thing. They [publishers] ask if you report, so it's in my best interest to report,"

None of the three independent, non-profit publishers report information to bestsellers list and neither do respondents H and J. Respondent K's response was "if you contribute to the *New York Times* list, theoretically, we would sign a confidentiality agreement to not say whether we report or not. We do report to the Book Sense list which is not confidential, and the Bookscan list, which is not available to the public." The level of secrecy surrounding the *New York Times* list is both surprising and dangerous. No matter how successful the list's compilers are at predicting bestsellers, they are bound to miss a few books, some of which could prove to be very significant. And anyone who has conducted surveys or questionnaires knows that encouraging people to write in additional information rarely yields results. Also, since booksellers sign confidentiality agreements – respondent K kept her response implicit even though she was guaranteed anonymity – there is no way to tell whether different types of bookstores in different regions of the country are adequately represented. All of this wouldn't matter

quite so much if the *New York Times* bestseller list didn't have the cultural power that it does.

All of the independent booksellers reported the stocking of bestsellers as a worthwhile activity in terms of profit. According to respondent D, this is because "once somebody has made the decision to buy one thing, they're more likely to buy a second." Respondent D sells Book Sense bestsellers at a 25% discount and says "I don't know about those stores that sell bestsellers at 40% off, but what I do with my bestsellers works."

When asked whether stocking bestsellers was beneficial in terms of quality, respondent D focused on the customer use-value of books. Lists, particularly the Book Sense list, help "match people with books...Lists are important, they help people find books of interest to them." But bestsellers lists should not be the beginning and end of bookselling. "They're also a cop-out, an easy answer. If you're using it as a primary reference tool, you're not doing what you have to be doing. That's not the art of it." Respondent K was somewhat ambivalent in her response, saying "well, what's better? Some of what is a predictable bestseller, which we like to have, it is...not award-winning quality writing, but it meets the needs of the reading public. Competition for best-selling spots sometimes increases quality and sometimes decreases quality." Once again customer use-value is factored into a definition of quality.

Respondent H was a good deal less diplomatic in her response.

You have to have bestsellers because that's what the public wants. But focusing on bestsellers brings down the quality and the variety of what you have on your shelves. At an independent store you want to have variety, but it's becoming harder and harder because what's selling is the bestsellers and people don't tend to browse as much as they used to.

Respondent H was one of the few respondents to explicitly criticize popular books, not only as lower quality literature, but also as homogenized and generic titles designed to serve only the most fundamental reading needs.

When asked whether she was likely to stock bestsellers and potential bestsellers, respondent H answered “if I know for sure it’s gonna hit the bestseller’s list...I do put emphasis on that, I do order a lot, especially if the author has a good history...But I don’t put that much into it because they [those celebrating a new book as the next big thing] are not always right. You can’t always trust your gut.” Respondent K answered that she does heavily stock books that she believes will be bestsellers, but that she focuses more on finding surprise bestsellers “that they don’t have at Wal-Mart.” Respondent D says that “we are very likely to get a book once it’s on the list if we didn’t have it already” but went on to say “if it’s a big book for *me*, I buy more. Our #1 might be #13 overall.” Respondent J receives the *New York Times*, *Publishers Weekly*, and Book Sense lists, displays the *New York Times* list in the store and highlights the books that she has in stock, which makes up about a quarter of the list. Clearly respondent J is not letting the list dictate her acquisitions to a great extent. In general, the independent booksellers pay attention to lists – specifically the Book Sense list – and stock bestselling titles, but put their own predictions and the needs of their specific customers ahead of national numbers and publishers’ promises.

Since the independent publishers interviewed were all non-profit, they were generally unconcerned with publishing the next bestseller. Rather than pursuing books with a pre-existing audience, respondent F is “more interested in a writer who seems likely to have a rising profile, since their audience is likely to increase.” He goes on to



say that “we won’t publish something we don’t think is of artistic and intellectual value just because we think it will sell well.” Not only does the pursuit of bestsellers threaten literary standards, it uses up limited resources. “We don’t do headhunting. We don’t have time for that” explained respondent G. Small presses simply don’t have the money or the manpower to fight for the next big book. Of course, ideally these non-profit presses would like to sell some copies as well. “We need to make some money from the sales of our books” admitted respondent G. Respondent F summed up the position of the non-profit presses toward bestsellers when he said “it is our goal and hope that we’ll eventually publish a book that is both in line with our literary ideals and garners a huge audience.” Non-profit, independent presses have nothing against bestsellers, but are unwilling to compromise their standards in order to acquire one.

When it comes to predicting the next big seller, marketing and promotion came up more often than writing, plot, or any literary devices. When asked if there was a formula for a bestselling book respondent H answered “no. Tough question, but no. It has to do with publicity and marketing.” Respondent E got to the heart of the issue when asked about a formula for a best-selling book. “There’s a formula for promoting a bestseller, but when it comes to the book, I don’t think so....The book itself is something we’re looking at and deciding on...then it’s a process of building buzz and you follow the potential that you make.” In other words, how the book is marketed and promoted can have just as much to do with the creation of a bestseller as the author or even as the book itself.

Respondent K had a rather unique answer to the question of whether or not there is a formula for a bestselling book. She responded in terms of formulaic writing –

something very few respondents did, even when prompted to do so. “There’s certainly a formula for a James Patterson kind of bestselling book, which is a fast-moving, plot-driven story and a known author so that people will feel safe spending their money on it.” Another formula is one for “the bestselling book that is timely. Barack Obama’s memoir was huge, and that had a very specific purpose in the market.” In the end, respondent K agreed that “one key is getting the right publicity,” citing a book called *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* which was “very unusual but got good publicity...There’s some formula and some serendipity.” It seems that there are some books which will just always be bestsellers, like fast-moving plot-driven stories and memoirs of popular public figures. For more unusual work however, it comes down to marketing. Respondent K thinks that surprise bestsellers are becoming rarer since “information is so quickly shared” and booksellers know immediately what the publisher has planned for promotion, which books they’re pushing, and when something new and unusual is coming out. “There’s so much out there that you can fairly readily predict” which books are going to be bestsellers. But it seems likely that these “predictions” are little more than decisions about which books to promote and which books to stick in a corner.

Corporate respondents discussed bestsellers lists in somewhat different terms. Respondent C reported that her company has its own bestsellers list, and though she doesn’t know how it is compiled or whether her corporate office provides sales figures for the *New York Times* or any other lists, she noted that her company’s list “is pretty much identical to the *New York Times* list.” Respondent B says that his company does not share information with any lists. Respondent A, however, described an interesting relationship between her publicity department and compilers of bestsellers lists.

Respondent A reports communicating with a “point person” at the *New York Times* regarding spikes in sales and sending them copies of upcoming publications. It is impossible to determine exactly what kind of influence these communications have over the list, but it is possible that such communications with publishers help the compilers of the *New York Times* list to create the list that they send out to booksellers.

When asked about her company’s approach to stocking bestselling books, respondent C answered “we’re all over it basically” meaning that if there’s a bestselling book out there, her store wants to have it. However, that doesn’t always work out. The respondent referred to a recent error in which only 35 copies of a new book by J.R.R. Tolkien’s son were ordered. “In my mind, you say ‘Tolkien burps on Thursdays’ and you sell a thousand copies. Why you only get 35 I don’t know.” She believed that the error was not the buyers’ fault, but more likely due to the publisher ordering too small of a print run. She was confident that the corporate buyers would recognize the salability of a book connected with Tolkien. Her store sold out quickly and she had to wait quite a while for a new shipment. Whether the error was at the publisher or the booksellers level, it is easy to see how lack of publisher or bookseller confidence in a new title can undermine whatever word-of-mouth momentum a book may develop based on its own merits.

Respondent B described his company’s policy towards bestsellers as a constant. “We’re always looking for bestsellers. Some books that we acquire, we expect them to be bestsellers, and that’s reflected in the amount we pay for them.” Respondent B has basically described the blockbuster syndrome. Houses are forced to pay more and more for manuscripts from popular authors because corporate houses drive the competitive

rates higher and higher. Once such an expensive manuscript is acquired the publisher needs to earn a big return in order to justify the advance and so puts a lot of advertising money behind it, often at the expense of other books.

In terms of predicting bestsellers, respondent B referred to the author's reputation for bestsellers, subjects that are currently in the public eye, and "novels that seem to be very commercial." Respondent A also emphasized the track record of the author and type of book as a good indicator, saying that "two-thirds of the books I have worked on have hit the *New York Times* bestsellers list; a lot of them were house authors had had good track records." When asked how bestseller potential is detected, respondent C expressed great confidence in her ability and the ability of her colleagues to predict bestsellers. "From working in the business long enough, you can even just tell by the cover." As a more concrete method of detection she mentioned that she uses 3, meaning if a book sells 3 or more copies the first day it comes out, "there's something special about it." Respondent C also referred to books that are promoted and emphasized by publishers and corporate buyers. "If corporate sends over a ton of copies, it's going to be a bestseller." This response can be interpreted in a couple of different way. One the one hand, it means that the corporate buyers are astute observers of literature and the book market, that they know what's going to be a bestseller and so they buy a lot of copies. However, it also implies that books which are purchased in bulk by the chains are promoted more aggressively by both publishers and booksellers, thereby creating a bestseller.

Respondent C believes not only in her company's ability to predict bestsellers, but also in her store's ability to create bestsellers. "If you make a statement with the book

sometimes you can increase the salability. ‘Pile it high and watch it fly.’” When corporate thinks a book is likely to be a bestseller they wind up creating even more of an audience for it by “putting it in people’s faces.” But what happens if the corporate buyers decide that a book is unlikely to be a bestseller? They will buy only a few copies and will do little in terms of display or advertising. Corporate decisions can take a book with a large potential audience and make it even larger, but they can also take a book with a small potential audience and make it even smaller. Respondent A described a similar process by which a bestseller is created.

The cases where it happens most naturally are where all the departments work together...when a publisher deems that this book may be the next bestseller based on track records and history, marketing needs to get on board, editorial needs to make sure the author delivers the best manuscript he can, sales needs to be on board, everybody needs to know that this is a top priority. When a publishing team has their ducks in a row, it’s easier to produce” a bestseller.

Although editorial and authorial quality is mentioned in this description, the creation of a bestseller is largely taken out of the hands of the author and responsibility is placed on the publishing mechanism to make the most out of a good manuscript.

In regards to bestsellers and their relationship to quality corporate respondents described a kind of give and take. Respondent B implicitly separated bestsellers from quality books in his responses. “One has to pursue bestsellers just to provide enough dollar income to the company. But it shouldn’t mean that you don’t pursue books that aren’t going to be bestsellers.” Bestsellers make money, but other books provide variety and quality to the house list. When faced with the same issue, respondent C expressed a great deal of confidence in the decisions made by corporate buyers. She believes that they are not merely concerned with selling books, but also with good books, concepts that

she believes are not at odds with one another. She confesses that “people here might say, ‘that’s junk but we’ll sell millions.’” but points out that “that is tempered by getting important books that we feel are good and we recommend.” Here she shifted her focus onto local sales, employees at individual stores hand-selling books that they find worthwhile. However, the example she gave of this kind of individual sales decision was Jodie Piccoult, a *New York Times* bestselling author who is heavily promoted by publishers and booksellers alike. Although hand-selling Jodi Piccoult may not do much to decrease the level of homogeneity at a corporate bookstore, the fact remains that individual employees of chain bookstore have the power to make adjustments and enhancements to corporate decisions and so are able to both maximize sales and share books that they find meaningful.

### **Marketing**

As mentioned previously, none of the non-profit independent publishers mentioned marketing when asked about their acquisitions process. However, respondents E and G later revealed that the marketing department is consulted before a manuscript is selected. Respondent E said that the marketing department decides “whether they’ll be able to sell it, and we take that under advisement.” He pointed out, however, that the marketing department has a literary side as well. “The marketing people have good artistic sense and we value their opinions.” He also justified the practice by acknowledging the basic necessity of selling books. “It’s part of crafting the list. You want a few books that can sell a lot of copies.”

The size of a book’s print-run can have serious and lasting effects on its sales potential. Even respondents from independent stores reported that the more copies of a

book they have in stock the more aggressively the book will be marketed and sold. Respondent C's account of the Tolkien incident suggests that buyers are often at the mercy of the publisher in terms of how many copies of a book are available. When asked how the size of a print run is determined, respondent G mentioned the same literary factors that go into selecting a manuscript for publication, and additionally the author's eagerness to promote his own book. Respondent E's company takes a more empirical approach. The company's distributor communicates with booksellers, and six-to-eight months before a book is printed (but after it has been selected for publication) pre-orders start coming in and the number of books printed is based on those figures along with other factors such as the author's track record and budgetary constraints. Respondent G refers to books with large sales potential as "lead titles," and says that they might get a little bit more advertising than the rest of the list, but not more than a couple of extra ads in a literary journal. Even at small non-profit houses, however, print-run decisions can seriously change the way the book is perceived and sold.

Since these independent presses work through distributors, their interactions with booksellers in terms of marketing are limited. "We get quotes from booksellers, not official blurbs on the books, but we'll put them in publicity materials to reviewers or other booksellers. We put as many copies of good books in their hands as possible for them to hand-sell." For these independent publishers, booksellers are the target of the advertisements. "Our publicity is focused on booksellers, not with them" (respondent E).

The two large independent booksellers interviewed had a more direct connection with publishers in terms of marketing, particularly respondent K. In her store, as in chain bookstores, publishers co-op space both within the store itself and on store fliers and

newsletters to feature certain books. However, respondent K was careful to note that “we have a clear delineation between what’s being advertised and what we’re recommending. In other words, we try to keep our advertising and editorial spaces separate. We don’t necessarily want the publisher to own our newsletter and our shelves.” This independent store takes active measures to remain independent in an industry where publishers have the power to buy store space. Respondent K also makes deals with publishers regarding author signings and events. “They’ll say to us ‘if you take author Q who’s a tough sell, we’ll send you Al Gore who will draw hundreds of thousands of people.’” In this way, publishers can use their big-name authors to help bolster sales for the unknowns on their list.

Author signings are a commonly used technique for book publicity. However, even for an independent bookstore large enough to host 500 events a year, an unattended author signing is unacceptable, and as respondent K reported, stores are reluctant to host signings for unknown or unpopular authors. Respondent D reports that author signings “can be problematic when people don’t show up. I’ll do them, but I can’t guarantee a crowd. I’m going to need one hundred names to send announcements to. The author needs to show an audience base. If you can’t get one hundred names, then I can’t help you.” Clearly author signings might be a more viable option for established authors than for new or unknown writers. Independent publishers seem to understand this, and don’t demand that authors be active in their own publicity. Respondent G said that authors are asked to spread the word about their own contacts and be responsible for whatever signings or readings they choose to arrange. They are also expected to send the publisher mailing labels for all their contacts in the business so that promotional postcards can be



sent out as one of the first marketing moves. Authors are encouraged to do everything they can to support their own sales, but they are not required to put on a show.

Respondent E said that authors are involved in their own publicity “as much as they want to be. Authors who know how to self-promote tend to sell more books, but it’s up to each author...We encourage it, but we can’t require it.” Once again, the benefit of boosting sales is something that is desired, but not a driving force of the house’s decisions.

Displays are a large part of bookstore advertising. Respondents E, F, and G all mentioned displays at local independent and chain bookstores, but none of the independent houses interviewed co-op display space nationally. At independent bookstores, decisions about displays are made almost entirely by the store’s employees. When books are ordered sometimes display cases and posters are ordered along with them, but “publishers don’t really drive the displays” (respondent D). Similarly, respondent K reports selling space to publishers, but maintains control and separation between advertising space and store-recommended titles. Respondent H also reports total autonomy over where books are placed in the store and which get more eye-catching displays. Of course as previously discussed, the larger the quantity of a given title in the store, the more likely it is to be displayed prominently.

Surprisingly, placement within a genre was described as an important factor in sales for each of the independent booksellers. Respondent K reported that she uses publishers’ classifications as a starting point and that she asks the publishers’ representatives “a hundred times a day, ‘where would you put this?’ Each one is a debate and you want to put it where you think people who want to read it are going to browse. It can be a hard question. Publishers sometimes have no idea.” Respondent D said that

“the publisher gives us hints” but that she then has to decide how that matches up to her stores. “Publishers will sometimes create a section that we don’t have.” The placement of the book can have such a strong impact on sales that when national sales are really high but the book is doing poorly in the store, respondent D may simply move the book to another section instead of giving up on it. “It’s different from a library, there’s not one correct answer to where a book goes. You put it where you can find customers.”

Helping books find their customers was central in the response of all of the independent booksellers on this issue.

Another option for publicity is print ads. Respondents E and G said that their houses preferred ads in journals and magazines over newspapers, suggesting a more literature-focused audience. Respondent J reported that she occasionally uses local print ads, but mostly relies on writing groups, conversation groups, and book clubs to spread the word about new books. Respondent H does not place any advertisements, but there are a few print and radio local media personalities who will come into the store and pick out books on their own to review. Review copies – or galleys – were by far the preferred method of publicity for independent publishers. Since these non-profit presses frequently publish unknown authors, author signings would be difficult to arrange and even more difficult to turn into successes. Likewise, print ads work best for authors that are already known to the public or at least to booksellers. The only way to encourage word-of-mouth publicity is to get people to read the book.

Corporate respondents had more bureaucratic descriptions of their marketing and advertising decisions. According to respondent B, decisions about how much advertising should go into a given title are based on “many people having read at least

some of the manuscript several months before publication” and coming to a consensus on how many copies the book is likely to sell. The decision is made by “a lot of different people who have a grasp on what the audience could be.” His company also uses market research on occasion, particularly for elaborate or expensive projects whose audience appeal is uncertain. Books with a large potential audience are given more publicity while books with a small potential audience are given less. While this creates an even bigger audience for the big books, it makes it more difficult for a book without a strong base to become popular. Both respondents A and C revealed that they are not involved in decisions about advertising budgets or print runs, but both confirmed the fact that the more copies of a book the company thinks will sell, the more promotion they put behind it.

In terms of publisher and bookseller cooperation on marketing efforts, respondent A said “I keep them in the loop as far as local events are concerned. Maybe in a different time they helped out more, but they’re so understaffed now.” Respondent B agreed that booksellers’ involvement is limited, but made a distinction between independent and chain bookstores. Chain stores “advertise author appearances and books when we pay them to. They are involved with our cooperation” whereas independent booksellers are not involved at all. Respondent C confirmed this fact, saying that advertising is largely publisher driven. The store itself does not put out any advertising at all, except for print ads for big name author signings, which the respondent believes are arranged by the publisher.

When asked about authors’ involvement in their own advertising, respondent B answered “some authors are very very active” and went on to describe the benefits

authors can reap from taking such an active role. Respondent A was even more strongly in favor of author involvement. “Authors underestimate how much they can do for their book. Some authors feel like, ‘I wrote the damn thing now it’s up to you guys to do the work,’ but the work doesn’t stop there.” Ideally, authors should “work on plans that would compliment what the in-house publicist is doing.” Respondent B previously suggested that an author’s willingness to work on his own publicity might help the manuscript’s chances of acceptance, or at least increase the size of the print-run.

Respondent A included how “media-genic” the author is in the factors she considers when recommending a book for publication. To both of these corporate respondents, an author’s personality, his willingness to become a public figure, is a factor in editorial and marketing decisions. The fact that respondent B is less concerned with such issues is likely the result of the fact that he works mostly with non-fiction while respondent A focuses on commercial thrillers, making just one more reason why new fiction authors may have a harder time getting published and sold than new non-fiction authors. This may also account for the fact that respondent A relies heavily on print advertising while respondent B uses it only for books with very large potential and focuses most of his advertising on review copies. Readers of commercial fiction might be more easily impressed by print ads while readers of non-fiction might be more concerned with reviews and recommendations.

Respondent C described author tours and bookstores events as a big part of publicity for many books. Signings and events for big name authors like Stephen King or Jimmy Carter are arranged by the corporate office and generally occur at stores located in urban centers like New York. Individual stores do arrange their own author signings with

local authors or even more nationally known authors who for one reason or another seek out a particular store. Sometimes authors approach the store on their own, and sometimes the store's events coordinator seeks them out. Author signings don't cost anything, so if an author comes in "we'll look at the book and deem that it's worth it...sometimes we'll just give [an unknown author] a table to sit and sign their books. It's like a neighborhood service." If the author wants the store to publicize and organize an event, he will have to show that he will be able to draw some kind of crowd. The respondent was not sure whether corporate permission is required for each author signing, but certainly for nationally popular authors, elaborate events, or special cases corporate would be notified ahead of time. As with most other aspects of the chain store, the individual employees of the branch have some freedom, but ultimately their decisions are under the scrutiny of the corporate office.

Chain bookstores are often criticized for having neglected the art of hand-selling. Respondent C said that she and the rest of the branch's management team frequently read galleys that publishers or authors send to the store. Every morning the managers of the store meet to discuss new books and galleys coming in, or even older books that they have read and feel strongly about. The respondent also said that casual conversations in the break room often lead to a consensus about a good book that will wind up being displayed and promoted. This is another way in which individual stores can create business around a book that might not get much attention from the corporate office. Of course, galleys cost money to produce, and a book that is heavily promoted by the publisher is more likely to catch a bookseller's eye. Also, the branch receives a report every month that features various books. It contains information about the book, the

author, and gives tips for hand-selling it to customers. “They give us some direction that way,” said respondent C. “They give us all the information they possibly can.” Even a practice as individual and personal as hand-selling involves at least some degree of corporate guidance.

There is a similar degree of corporate control over store layout and displays. Publishers will sometimes co-op, or buy a section of the store in which to display their books and give the bookseller a volume discount on the books. These arrangements are made at the corporate level. Each store in the chain receives a monthly planner, “which tells us when, how many, and what titles to put where in the store at all times.” This applies to the book section and the music section of the store. “They tell us exactly what to do.” There are a couple of display tables where she can put out “certain trade paperbacks that sell well here, so we do have some degree of freedom.” However, most of the display areas are spoken for by corporate. Unlike at the independent bookstores, the location of each book has “already been determined to the nth degree, section and subsection.” If a manager of a local branch feels that corporate has made a mistake – has placed a book in the philosophy section when it should be under religion, for example – they can send an e-mail to a nameless corporate address (e.g. genre@corporate.com) and explain the situation. Sometimes corporate will approve a change of classification, and sometimes it won’t. This differs greatly from the freedom allowed to independent bookstore owners, who can move a book from section to section in order to find the right customer for it.

The difference between corporate and independent marketing strategies is largely an issue of scale. Certainly independent publishers would co-op space in national chain

stores if they had the resources to do so, and independent booksellers would gladly host big-name authors on a regular basis if they could. But the fact that they don't is not merely their bad luck; it changes the way they do business. Because they rely more heavily on word-of-mouth publicity and positive reviews and recommendations, they are more focused on the book itself, on publishing and selling something that people will want to tell their friends about. The blockbuster effect doesn't just drive marketing prices up, it changes the standards of what publishers and booksellers are looking for in a book. Where aesthetic and commercial marketing techniques are central strategies, aesthetically and commercially pleasing authors and books will take precedence.

### **Publisher/Bookseller Interactions**

When asked what kinds of publishers and booksellers they do the most business with – corporate or independent – almost every respondent expressed a preference for independent businesses, but said that most of their work is done with corporations. Respondent K explained that her company does “80% of our business with 10% of our publishers” and listed Random House, Penguin, Harper, Simon & Schuster and St. Martin's as major suppliers. “We still pay a lot of attention to the University Presses,” she explains, “and we do everything we can to support smaller independent publishers” because “that's what gives us the breadth of more interesting subjects.” Respondent D said that she deals mostly with large publishers, but said that having independent press books is what “makes a bookstore interesting.” Similarly, respondent H listed Random House, Warner, Penguin, and HarperCollins as “by far” the biggest suppliers for the store. Interactions with independent publishers are done mostly through large distributors that represent multiple independent presses. Respondent H acknowledged the fact that

“small presses without distributors have a hard time.” She does work with some University Presses, “but not as much as we used to.” Respondent C was unsure of her company’s relationship with publishers, but believes that they do a lot of business with the larger houses like Random House. She said, however, that a “good share” of their books comes from independent publishers or print-on-demand publishers. She noted that orders are often placed with distributors or other intermediaries rather than with the publishers themselves.

As a publicist, respondent A noted that at least 50% of the bookstores she deals with are independents, a surprisingly high number coming from a corporate publisher. “If I have 17 events set up, 5 or 6 of them are chains, and the rest are independent.” It is important to note, however, that this response is coming from a publicist, and the house probably does most of its sales through chain stores. Also, respondent A suggested that chains occasionally receive preferential treatment when it comes to scheduling events because of the large number of books they buy. “You have to keep the accounts happy. If I’m planning an event in a certain city and I know the local independent will do a great job but the large chain store just bought 10,000 copies of the book, we have to keep them happy.” Respondent B echoed the sentiment of the independent booksellers, saying “of course we do a lot of business with the big chains, of course we do a lot with online retailers, but we try very hard to maintain good relations with independent and smaller booksellers.” It seems that all of the respondents prefer to work with independent companies, but are unable to do so because of business constraints. It is interesting to note that almost all of the respondents mentioned University Presses rather than non-University independents.



All of the independent publishers interviewed deal with booksellers through distributors (who take up a big portion of the house's budget). Both respondents E and G said that they do a lot of work with chain stores, perhaps even the majority of their sales. Since chain stores have "three-quarters of the market share, a good chunk of our business goes to them" (respondent G). Yet both respondents, particularly respondent E, expressed a preference for independent booksellers and the way they do business. "Independent booksellers are a life blood. They get independent business models better than the chain stores do...Ultimately the group of people that keep the book tree alive is the independent booksellers." Respondent E went on to explain that "there are good booksellers at chain bookstores, but the business practices of chains make life difficult."

Chain booksellers will get excited about a book and order 10,000 copies. We're compelled to print that many because you don't want to refuse the sale. Then another book comes in that's a bigger deal, so our book sits on the shelf for four or five months and then the chain returns 6-7,000 copies because their business interests changed. We can't deal in that kind of volume with them. Of course, sometimes they turn our books into bestsellers.

Respondent K mentioned the same issues, saying that "the chains have this attitude, and there are concerns about the number of books that are being bought and returned unsold. They have huge stores and buy huge quantities and then sometimes things don't work out and they return large quantities." Respondent G was more positive about chain bookstores, but did say that "their ordering patterns were messed up at first, but they're getting better at it." It seems that chain bookstores take advantage of publishers' return policies in a way that makes it difficult for small publishers to keep up.

It has already been established that publishers' expectations for a book and the amount of publicity they put behind it can greatly influence booksellers' attitudes towards

it. But booksellers can also have a strong influence over the decisions that publishers make. Both respondents H and I reported communicating with authors regarding unpublished manuscripts and recommending them to publishers. However, they both noted that it is rare that they will suggest an author to a publisher and that they are never approached by publishers regarding books that have not been accepted for publication. Respondent K even said that she tries to avoid involvement with unpublished manuscripts because “it’s just...it’s not what we do. It would be overwhelming if authors thought that we were a conduit to publishers.” For simplicity’s sake if nothing else, both respondents prefer to deal with manuscripts only after they have been accepted for publication.

Respondent K made reference to “pre-sale” meetings that publishers have with chain bookstore buyers, saying “if Barnes & Noble doesn’t like it, they won’t publish it.” Respondent C did not refer to any such meetings, but did say that authors sometimes come to the store with unpublished manuscripts. The respondent refers them to a corporate office. There is a system in place (she was unsure as to whether it was a whole department or just a small network) for discovering new authors and directing them to publishers. The fact that the corporate office actually recommends authors to publishers is significant, although it is unclear how frequently this occurs. If a large chain recommends an author to a publisher, the publisher can be certain that the chain will want to buy the author’s book, possibly in large quantities. This must greatly increase the author’s chance of being published.

When asked about bookstore influence on publishing decisions, respondent A said “I imagine chains have more brand equity [than independent booksellers]. It’s kind of a default go-to place. I’m sure they do have influence over the books that get published,

though I couldn't really say." After this ambiguous answer, respondent A made reference to a kind of pre-sale meeting between the publisher and chain bookstore buyers. "I have heard that chain buyers sometimes say things like 'you need to change the cover or we won't buy as many copies.' So that does happen." Respondent B also revealed a great deal of interaction and influence from booksellers, but was very positive and expressed a great degree of trust in their decisions. He believes that the growth of chain bookstores has increased the visibility of some books that might otherwise have been overlooked. "Chains will decide to display a book face-out for 1-3 months and that will have a significant effect on how the book sells. They're savvy people, they make good decisions. They will come to us and say 'your new book has a lot of potential and we'd like to display it face out for x months, are you willing to pay us x dollars?' and we usually say great!" Here the respondent reveals that although publishers pay booksellers to display certain books, it is often the case that booksellers themselves choose which books to display. This is both comforting in that booksellers can select titles for promotion that publishers may have disregarded or overlooked, and unsettling in the amount of power that a few buyers at a chain store can have over publishers' lists.

### **Divisions and Parent Companies**

Corporate and conglomerate publishers and booksellers have many advantages over independent publishers and booksellers, not the least of which is the scale of inventory and capital they have to work with. But another major difference that can be of great advantage to conglomerate companies is assistance between parent companies and sister companies. Respondent B described a "very helpful" relationship between the various sales and editorial offices of his company, both within an imprint and between

imprints. He described an exchange with an editor from another office who had received a manuscript that wasn't right for his imprint but sent it along to him because he thought it might work at a different imprint. Not only does this make it easier for editors at the various imprints to find worthwhile manuscripts, but it helps authors find the imprint that suits them best. However, such practices raise questions of monopolization. Imagine one publisher covering all genres and styles, constantly referring authors back and forth within itself. On the one hand, authors could be passed around from imprint to imprint until they find just the right division for the book. On the other hand, independent publishers would become even more marginalized, limiting the variety and, arguably, the literary value of books being published.

The same issue applies to corporate booksellers. Respondent C referred to nearby branches of the chain as sister stores. "We try to help each other if we can. If a customer is looking for a book and we don't have it we can get it from a nearby store, and vice versa. If there's some hot book we might call them up to see how it's doing in their store." Cooperation between stores provides convenient services for customers, helping them to get their hands on a wider variety of books quickly and easily. Of course, cooperation between chain stores necessarily leaves independent bookstores out of the loop, giving large chains a further advantage in the area.

Sister companies within a conglomerate don't always get along. Respondent A said that since the imprints in her company cover somewhat different genres, there isn't much competition. But occasionally publicity efforts will collide and another imprint will try to "tailgate on our publicity." But she added that there's always competition between books, even within the same imprint. "If the *Times* reviews one of my books,

that means there's less room for another." There are limited resources out there, both in terms of sales and in terms of publicity. So even within houses there are competing interests.

Even when inter-company competition is taken into account, conglomerates have a great advantage over independents without sister or parent companies to share information, books, authors, and resources with. One way that independent publishers can counter that advantage is to form a kind of alliance with other independents. All of the independent houses interviewed use large distributors to get their books into bookstores, and respondent G referred to 70 other non-profit independent publishers who use the same full-service distributor as "sister publishers". Although the companies are competitive in some ways, they are all non-profit so they do not often find themselves fighting for the same few authors. Often if a manuscript comes to respondent G that is not a good fit for the house, he will recommend it to a sister publisher that might be a better fit. In this way, the independent publishers are gaining some of the same advantages that conglomerate publishers have. In addition to recommending authors to one another, the houses will communicate regarding issues such as returns and sales patterns in order to understand how their individual experiences reflect larger trends. By communicating with one another without interfering with each other's editorial decisions, these independent "sister publishers" are learning and gaining from each other while maintaining their autonomy.

Independent booksellers have a similar resource in the American Booksellers Association. The ABA – which each independent bookstore interviewed is a member of – provides insurance services, financial news and information, advertising and

promotional opportunities, distribution services, annual conventions, and an online “idea exchange.” The ABA also compiles the Book Sense bestsellers list, which respondents D, H, and I all referenced as a valuable tool. Independent publishers and booksellers can work together to share information in order to compete with the efficiencies and networking advantages enjoyed by corporations.

### **Changes in the Industry**

One of the questions that most interested the respondents was “what kinds of changes have you witnessed during your time in the book industry?” The responses were varied both in content and in tone, but the all of the respondents described real-life experiences of trends that have been described sweepingly and sentimentally in historical accounts of the industry

One of the most frequently mentioned changes was the consolidation of both publishers and booksellers. Respondent K said that “even though there are fewer people reading, there’s still more being published” because of the growing size of publishing houses and the creation of print-on-demand technology. “The consolidation in publishing has been huge. It used to be that the ten imprints at HarperCollins were seven different publishers. Same goes for Random House.” This consolidation, combined with the rise of the superstores, raises concerns about “the shrinking of independents and our market share and what we can offer as far as diversity. Everything’s so homogenized and boring in our country.” This scattered, somewhat contradictory response is lined with hope. W.W. Norton is mentioned as a house that has “maintained their separate identity” in the face of increasing consolidations.

Respondent E argued that consolidation is encroaching into the world of independent publishers as well. Distributors are beginning to consolidate more and more, putting many independent houses under one distributor. A recent merger between two distributors resulted in a change from 100-140 publishers under one distributor to 350-400. This change is very recent, so its effects are uncertain, but there is “a lot of uncertainty about how this will affect small publishers.” Although the benefits of using a distributor are evident, when the offerings of 400 independent houses are presented as a group by one distributor, the term “independent” may need to be qualified.

Since chain bookstores are already such a huge force in the industry, increased consolidation was often discussed in terms of consolidation of power rather than consolidation of the stores themselves. Respondent J believes that “chain bookstores must be changing the books being published, because they have so much clout in purchasing and advertising.” As more and more independent bookstores go out of business, the respondent says that she realizes that she could not do what she does without a second income. Respondent A has only been in the book business for three and a half years, but has noticed a decline in the number of independent booksellers as more and more of them close every year. She also noted that “people talk about how the market is static, how there’s not really any growth.”

The lack of growth in the industry is sometimes discussed as the result of chain bookstores, sometimes as the result of a shrinking readership, and sometimes both. Respondent H, who believes that “there are a lot less people reading” than there were 14 years ago believes that chain bookstores have something to do with that. “Their whole goal is to get the bestsellers out. That’s what they try to get the public reading,” with the

result that bestsellers are the only things people read. Respondent G raised the age-old cry to too many books, which he sees as a result of chain stores. Readership, in the meantime, is not growing in his opinion, so initial print runs are smaller than they used to be, and as has been discussed earlier, a small print run can stop a book dead in its tracks.

Discussions of a shrinking readership and an increased focus on bestsellers fully support arguments for the growth of the blockbuster syndrome. Respondent G observed that while advances for fiction have gone up, advances for work in other areas like poetry and philosophy have gone down, keeping those industries small and out of the public eye. Respondent B also referred to the blockbuster complex, saying that “the amount of money we have to spend to buy books has gone way up. We never used to give anybody a million dollars. A big advance would have been one hundred thousand dollars.”

Advances are going up for the most commercial fiction, which means that commercial fiction is heavily promoted. However, only one respondent complained openly about the quality of books being published today, and she quickly qualified her complaints. “I’ve read things from a hundred years ago bemoaning the low quality of books. We look at the same things over and over again.” Perhaps this cycle of intellectual dissatisfaction with books means that intellectual standards have always been and will always be too high for the market to meet.

The question of change in the industry essentially comes down to a question of progress. As the book industry progresses towards a more businesslike way of doing business, there are those who see it as negative, those who see it as positive, and those who see it as simply natural. Respondent B who has been in the industry for 50 years, noted that “no one worked in marketing when I started. There was advertising and sales,



but now there's a whole level of people who do nothing but marketing and that didn't exist before. No one even talked about marketing. That's one radical difference." His observations support historical accounts of a shift in the industry from an art to a business, from literature based to audience based. Though he did not make an explicit judgment about the effect this change has had on the quality of the house's output, he seemed to question the necessity of such a large marketing mechanism.

Respondent C was the only respondent who expressed a strongly positive attitude toward these changes. She believes that chain bookstores don't necessarily change the kinds of books that get published, or if they do, the change is for the better. "We get obscure things and University Presses...It's not just sales. They [the buyers] do try to get things that are...literate...There's a wider variety of things available...We try to put out as much as we can in all different areas. Just throw out the net and see what happens." Respondent C was also quick to praise the atmosphere of chain bookstores, which she believes encourages not only readership, but intellectual discussion as well. "Bookstores, I think, are becoming more and more like coffee shops, where people come to talk about things. There's a social aspect to our store in particular because we have comfy chairs and an open atmosphere." This atmosphere of openness increases both quality and profitability, since readers are in a comfortable place where they can discuss books and cultural affairs, whether through store-organized book groups or simply while browsing the store, and as a result the store sells more books.

Respondent C did recognize the negative aspects of consolidation in the industry, but placed them in a larger social context. "It puts smaller bookstores out of business, but that's not the chain bookstores' fault. It's like anything else in the world." Respondent C

has worked in the book industry for seven years, and before that worked in the clothing industry. She believes that the book industry is going through the same changes as the clothing industry and other industries have already gone through. When she came into the book industry she noticed that it was “way behind as far as a lot of retailing things go; grouping things together in a certain way, boutiqueing if you want to call it that. The way they arranged the stores was not as customer-friendly. They were like, ‘we’re noble, we’re not going to try to make money,’ but now they’ve figured out that they have to make money.” The respondent’s personal experience in the industry reflects trends noted by historians and commentators on the industry over the past half-century. The book industry is catching up to other American industries in terms of efficiency and profitability. The respondent implies that this progression is ongoing, that as internet bookselling becomes more popular, the corporate office continues to try to find ways to cut overhead and make the stores themselves more efficient. As she put it, “they’re squeezing everything out of the bookstore.” In spite of this, she does not see these changes as negative, as a loss of cultural freedom, but rather as a natural progression of the industry, a progression which does not have to threaten quality.

Respondent C raised many legitimate defenses of chain bookstores and the consolidation of the book industry in general. A more efficient business can get more books out to the public more effectively. There is no doubt that chain stores make it easier for people to find books. However, the fact that respondent C’s store is so focused on bestselling books and authors means that they are supplying more and more copies of fewer and fewer books to the reading public. The change in the publishing and bookselling industry from art to business is all too obvious. The only question is whether

the consolidation of the book industry is as acceptable as the consolidation of the music, clothing, film, newspaper, and television industries or whether books are too important to be left to the market system.

### **American Intellectual Life**

When asked how their work affects or is related to American intellectual life, respondents had varied answers depending on what kind of company they work for and how they perceived their own influence. For example, respondent J focused on the effect she has on the intellectual life of her small town. In a village of only 2,000 people, having a bookstore at all is considered a luxury. “The community is very happy to have us here.” Respondent H did not have an answer to the question, and respondent K focused on her colleagues and the work they have done to make sure that controversial books are not dismissed. The owner of the store is a fierce “defender of the first amendment to read, write, sell, and possess constitutionally protected material. We’ve had a lot of criticism from the right and the left” concerning books about gun control because “we’re willing to host controversial authors.” The store has even gone to court over books about recreational drugs. Respondent K and her colleagues believe that “you can’t assume that people have a certain intent” just because they pick up a book. “We’re all about freedom of speech and reading and we think people should be able to read whatever they want in a comfortable atmosphere.” Respondent D also focused on her individual store, particularly hand-selling and making sure customers find the right book for them.

The non-profit, independent booksellers who were interviewed emphasized their non-profit status when asked about their contributions to American intellectual life. Each

of them was extremely proud of their non-profit status and the freedom it allowed them. They were also very mindful of their influence on American intellectual life and were eager to discuss it. “We choose which writers we support” said respondent F, “and this shapes what people are able to read. I love working for a non-profit literary press despite the lower pay because our ultimate goal is to support writers whose work we believe truly contributes usefully and freshly to the culture and to literature.” Respondent G is proud of his work because he publishes “works that may never have been printed otherwise. It is our mission to advance public interest and appreciation for literature.” All three respondents referenced their non-profit status as a factor in allowing them to publish meaningful intellectual work. “Not being focused on sales allows us to do important intellectual work.”

Respondent E gave a brief defense of for-profit publishers, but also expressed his concern regarding consolidations. “I don’t believe that just because a publisher is enormous or corporate that they won’t publish intellectual books, but competition amongst publishers is a good thing and the more people out there trying to find people doing interesting things with language the more you’re going to find those authors and those books.” In other words, for-profit publishers are not necessarily un-intellectual. Even the large corporate houses can and do put out valuable intellectual work. Respondent E also touted the power of books in general, saying “books are the place for intellectuals to converge...Without vibrant book publishing our ability to communicate ideas is out the window.” These independent, non-profit publishers feel a sense of obligation to the reading public, and clearly believe that the way they do business can have a profound effect on the exchange of ideas in American society.

The corporate respondents also expressed a desire to improve and contribute to American intellectual life. Respondent A hopes that she “puts out books that people want to read and that contribute to the literary community.” However, both respondents A and B expressed a sense of inevitability regarding what people will choose to read. Respondent B believes that “good books will always find an audience; we just need to make them available and make sure people know about them.” While the non-profit independent editors saw themselves as gatekeepers of intellectual life, to use a term from West (1988), the corporate editors described themselves as mere conduits, providing the books that people want to read.

## **Bestsellers and Awards**

### **An Analysis of Statistical Trends in *New York Times* #1 Bestsellers**

The *New York Times* bestsellers list is the most influential bestsellers list in terms of consumer behavior and therefore has a huge impact on the kinds of books that get published. Other lists, such as the ABA's Book Sense list, are also very influential, but the *New York Times* list is a much better indicator of industry trends because of its age and popularity. A statistical analysis of how the list has changed in terms of the number of titles that make the #1 spot each year, the kinds of publishers that top the list, and the connection between the bestsellers list and award-winning authors will not only provide a critical look at the list itself, but will also help to highlight major shifts in industry trends over the last 60 years.

#### **Number of Number Ones**

Throughout the history of publishing, critics of the industry have periodically complained that there are too many books being offered to the reading public. They have argued that the average reader is overwhelmed by an abundance of choices and becomes unable to sift through the multitude of titles. This is especially true when each new book that comes out is promoted and publicized as the next big book. If every book is the next big book, how are readers supposed to discern which ones are really of value?

The *New York Times* has been compiling lists of bestselling fiction and non-fiction since 1942. A new list comes out each week, but there is not always a new book at the top of the list. A book may stay in the #1 spot for several weeks, several months, even a year. Therefore, a list of the #1 *New York Times* bestsellers since 1942 has far less than 52 books per year.

**Figure 1**

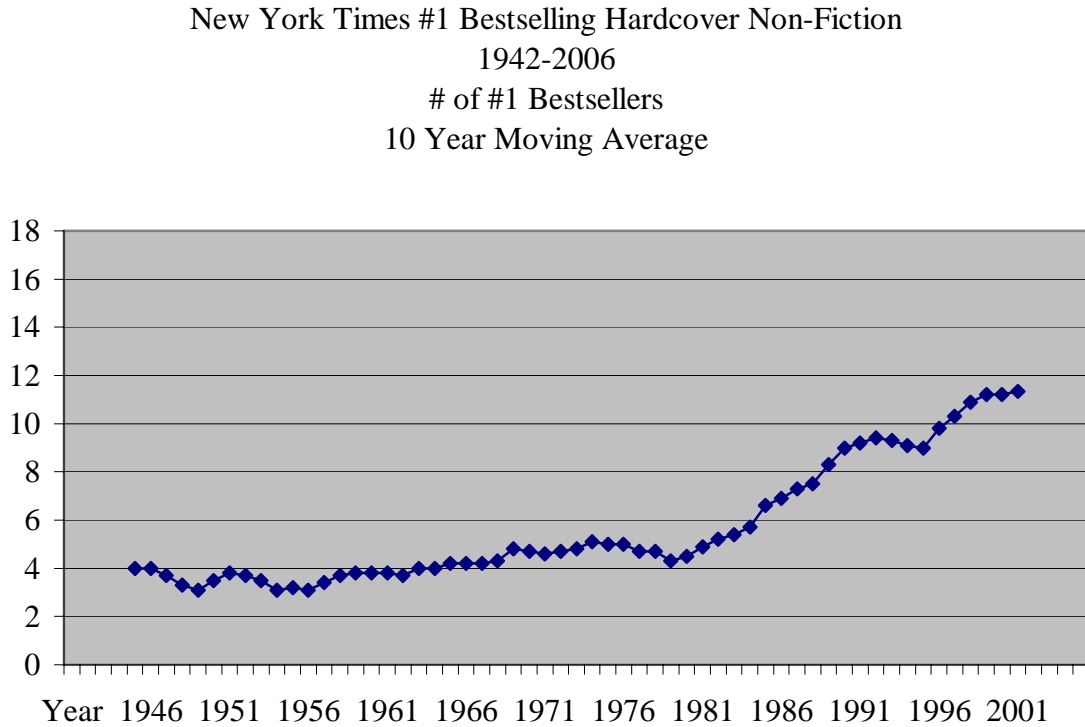
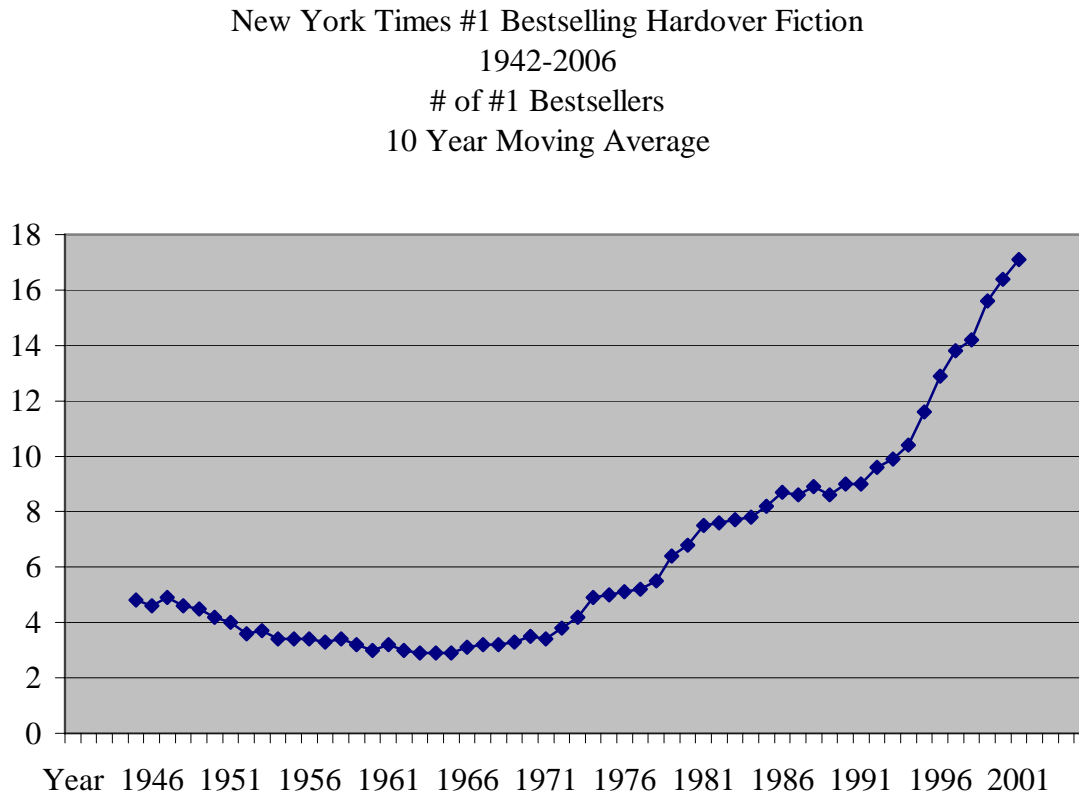


Figure 1 shows the number of #1 *New York Times* hardcover non-fiction bestsellers for each year since 1942 as a 5 year moving average (see appendix for detailed methodology). Between 1942 and 1980 the average number of books per year stayed around 4 books, never going higher than 5. In 1980 the average number of #1 bestsellers per year started a steady climb and except for a few years in the 1990s, it has been increasing ever since.

Figure 2 shows the same data for the *New York Times* #1 bestsellers in hardcover fiction. The data for earlier years are not as steady as on the non-fiction list. In fact, the fiction list shows a slow but steady decline in the average number of #1 bestsellers per year until 1965. Since then the number has been increasing, especially through the 1990s

where a steeper line shows more dramatic increases in the number of #1 bestsellers per year.

**Figure 2**



This data tells us that there are more big-selling books now than ever before, but that these books don't remain big-sellers for very long. Essentially this data is confirming the existence of a blockbuster syndrome. More and more books are selling in large numbers, but these books are not lasting. The publishing industry is getting better at hype and worse at longevity. This data also reflects the high turnover rates at booksellers, particularly chain booksellers, where books are given only a few months on the shelves before being sent back to the publisher. The implications that this data holds for midlist books is also significant. If the most popular books only stay in the public eye



for a short time (when compared to popular books of earlier years) then midlist books have even less time to generate an audience.

The fact that the increases began in the 1980s for the non-fiction list and the late 1960s and early 1970s for the fiction list makes it likely that the shifting pattern is connected with the Age of Acquisitions. As publishers became larger and larger, they were able to pay higher advances for books, particularly popular fiction. Once these large advances were paid, a large and quick profit was expected to be the result. And so the blockbuster was born. The fact that there are more #1 bestsellers now than ever before, and the fact that the increase started with the Age of Acquisitions, tells us that the charges levied against corporate publishers and booksellers for focusing on bestsellers – fast-sellers, actually – and ignoring midlist books, are not only backed by hard evidence, but have real effects on the industry as a whole and the way in which people buy books.

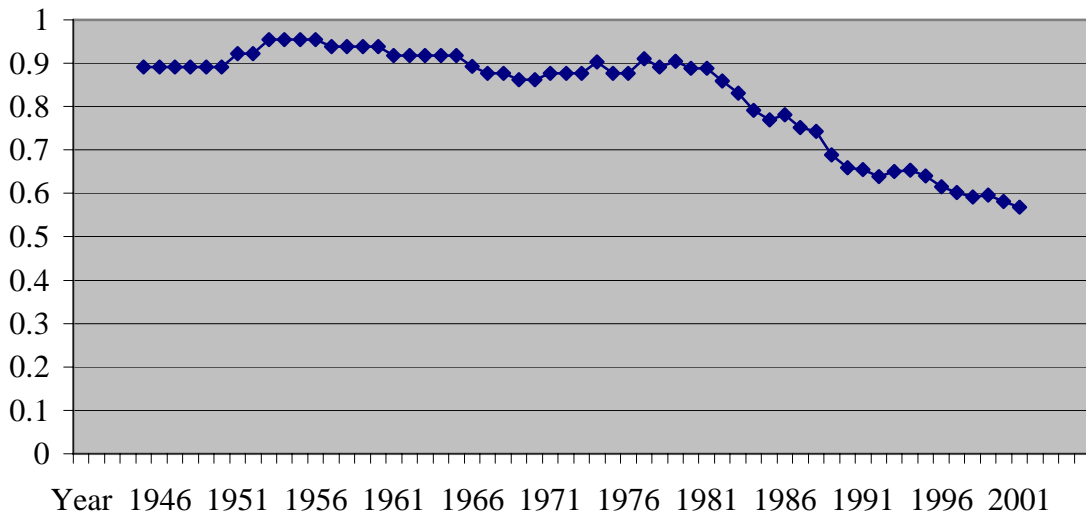
### **Book to Publisher Ratio**

The number of books that reach the #1 spot each year is higher now than it ever has been. One could argue that this is a positive thing, that a wider variety of books are reaching wider audiences, and that competition between publishers for the top spot on the list has made it a harder position to hold. This argument only makes sense, however, if different publishers are actually vying for that top spot. On the contrary, the data shows that fewer and fewer publishers are putting more and more books at the top of the list.

The non-fiction list shows a fairly steady variation in publisher to book ratio until the late seventies when the ratio began a steady decline (figure 3). The fiction list (figure 4) shows a similar trend, though as with the number of #1 bestsellers per year, the fiction list showed more variation before the 1970s than the non-fiction list.

**Figure 3**

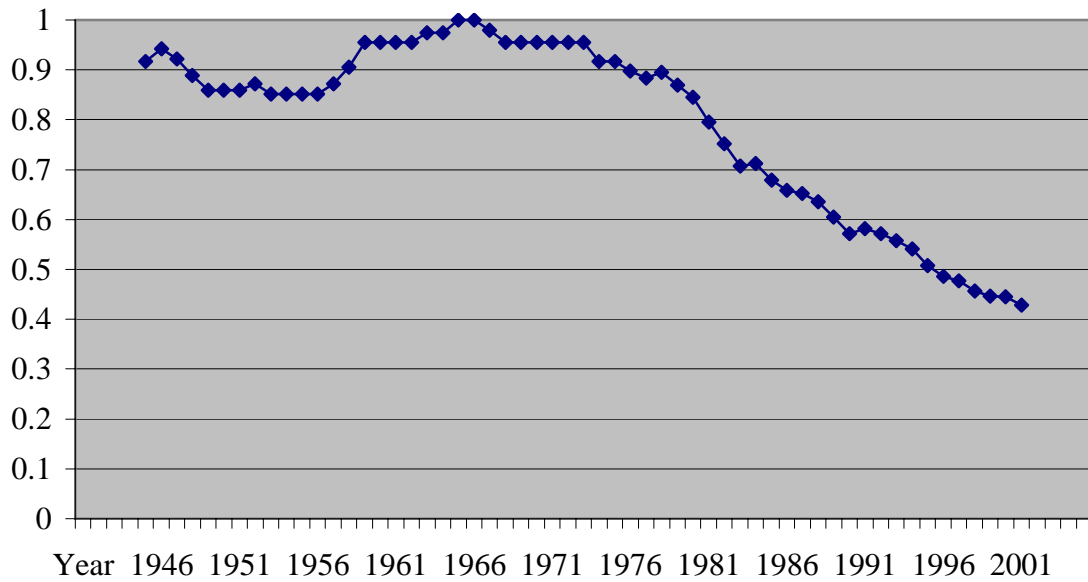
New York Times #1 Bestselling Hardcover Non-Fiction  
1942-2006  
Publisher to Book Ratio  
10 Year Moving Average



The most recent publisher to book ratio for the fiction list is considerably lower than the ratio on the non-fiction list. This reflects accounts given by publishers, editors, and booksellers which suggest that fiction is frequently judged by the past successes of the author and publisher. Non-fiction is judged by these standards as well, but issues of subject matter and the authority of the author play a much larger role. The lower publisher to book ratio for the fiction lists shows that changes in the industry have had a slightly strong effect on fiction books and authors than on non-fiction.

**Figure 4**

New York Times #1 Bestselling Hardcover Fiction  
1942-2006  
Publisher To Book Ratio  
10 Year Moving Average



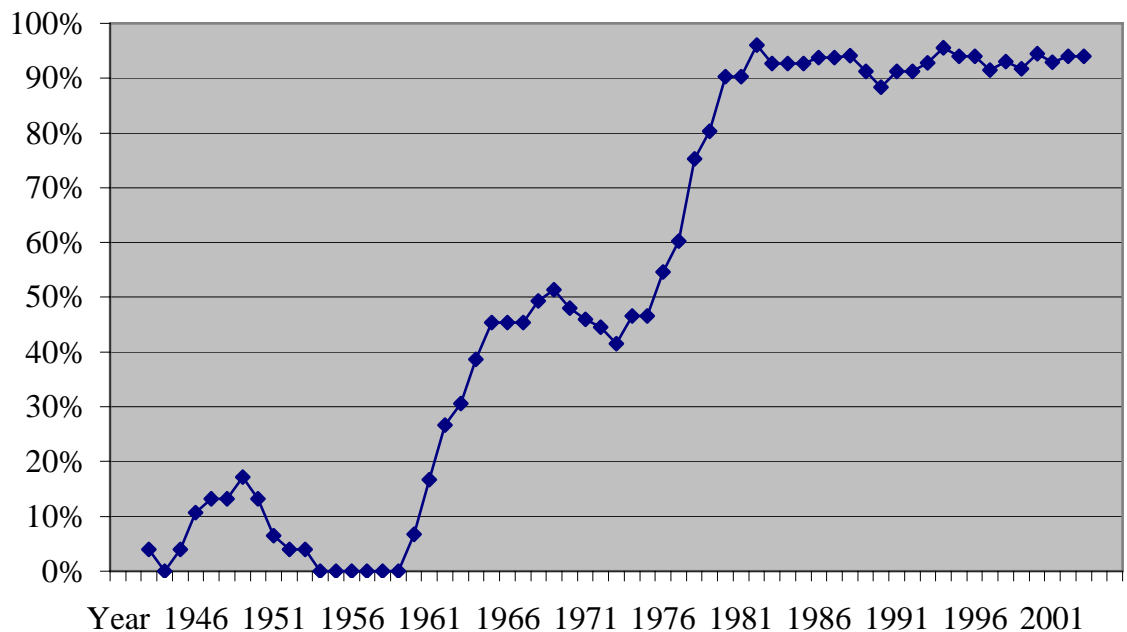
The consolidation of the publishing industry does not simply mean that there are fewer different publishers in the industry. It means that readers are reading books from fewer different publishers, which necessarily homogenizes the books that the average reader confronts. In 2006 eight different publishers produced all twenty of the year's bestselling hardcover fiction. It would be an exaggeration to say that those eight publishers have taken control of the book industry, but the trend toward monopolization by a few publishers is evident.

### % Non-Independent Publishers

Arguments against the corporatization of the industry are based on the idea that corporate and conglomerate publishers have gained control of the book business and are pushing more literary independent presses aside. Naturally, conglomerate and corporate publishers tend to have more resources than independent publishers, but their effect on American intellectual life is only significant if they actually change what people read. Figure 5 shows the percentage of books that reached #1 on the hardcover non-fiction bestsellers list each year that were published by a non-independent publisher.

**Figure 5**

New York Times #1 Bestsellers Hardcover Non-Fiction  
1942-2006  
% Non-Independent Publishers  
5 Year Moving Average



The trend is clear, and not surprising. Independent houses dominated the #1 spot until the early sixties when the number of non-independent houses on the list began to climb. Once again this trend coincides with the Age of Acquisitions as another sharp increase appears during the 70s and 80s.

**Figure 6**

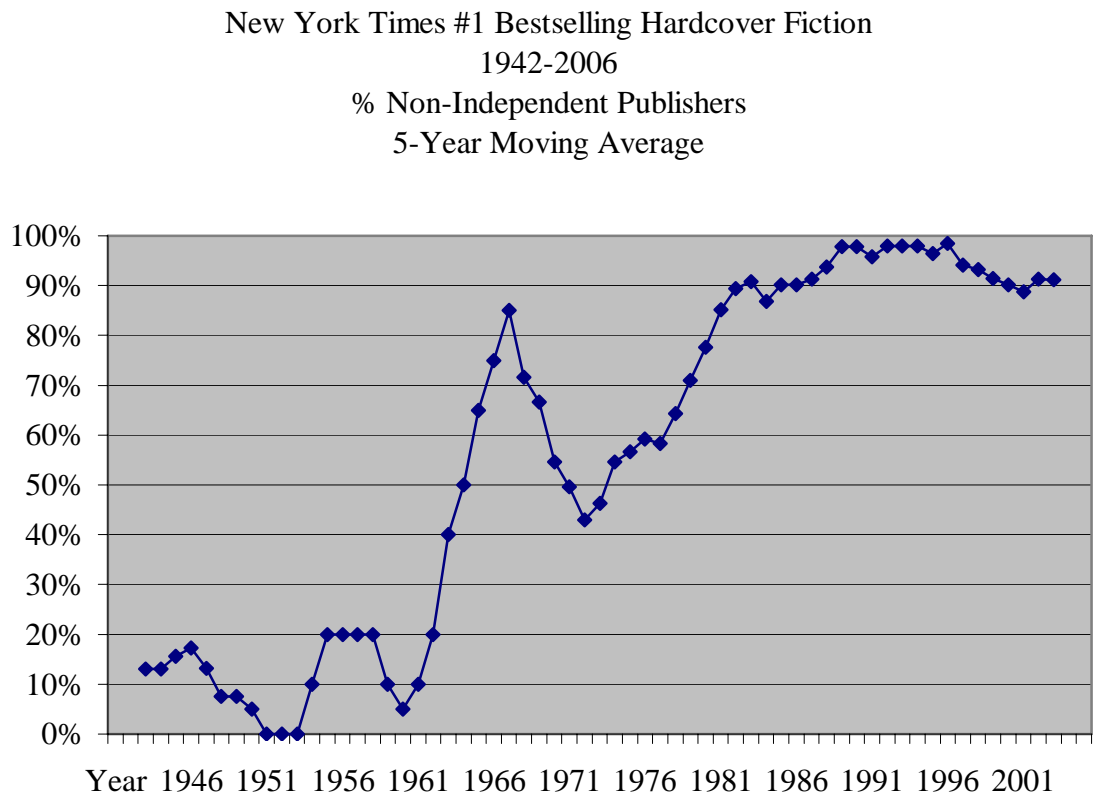


Figure 6 shows a similar, but even more drastic, trend in the hardcover fiction list. Between 1960 and 1967 the percentage of #1 books published by non-independent publishers climbed from 5% to 85%.<sup>3</sup> The percentage then decreased just as sharply until 1972 where it reached 43%. Between 1972 and 1989 (the end of the Age of

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that figures 5 and 6 represent a 10-year moving average. The sharp increases therefore reflect drastic increases in non-independent publishers, evident even when tempered with the lower percentages of previous years.

Acquisitions) the percentage increased again and reached an all-time high of 98% in 1996.

The fact that the figures for hardcover fiction are more dramatically dynamic than the figures for hardcover non-fiction is neither coincidence nor a methodological issue. Works of fiction are judged on a more subjective level by publishers, readers, and the compilers of the *New York Times* list. While tastes and interest in non-fiction are certainly affected by the changing times, there are certain standards of research and expertise that temper the fluctuations on the non-fiction list. Standards for fiction are slightly more fluid and arbitrary, so the shape of popular fiction is much more connected to market fluctuations.

The change in the percentage of #1 bestsellers that are published by non-independent publishers reflects not only the growing numbers of non-independent publishers but also their growing power in the industry. Corporate and conglomerate publishers weren't invented in the 60s, 70s, and 80s, but their numbers greatly increased and they began to pursue bestsellers in earnest. Their presence at the #1 spot shows the power they have over what the average reader is exposed to.

### **Award Winning Authors**

Non-independent publishers have had a growing influence over American readers and American intellectual life since the 1960s. But what affect has that influence had over the quality of books that Americans are reading? Quality is a subjective and elusive term, and although it is possible to compare the quality of one book to another, it is impossible to do on such a large scale. Award-winning authors are one way to measure intellectual quality quantitatively. An examination of how award-winners and #1

bestsellers have overlapped since the list’s inception should provide a sense of to what degree intellectual and literary excellence have overlapped.<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 7**

New York Times #1 Bestselling Hardcover Non-Fiction  
1942-2006  
Percentage of Books by Authors with Major Awards  
10 Year Moving Average

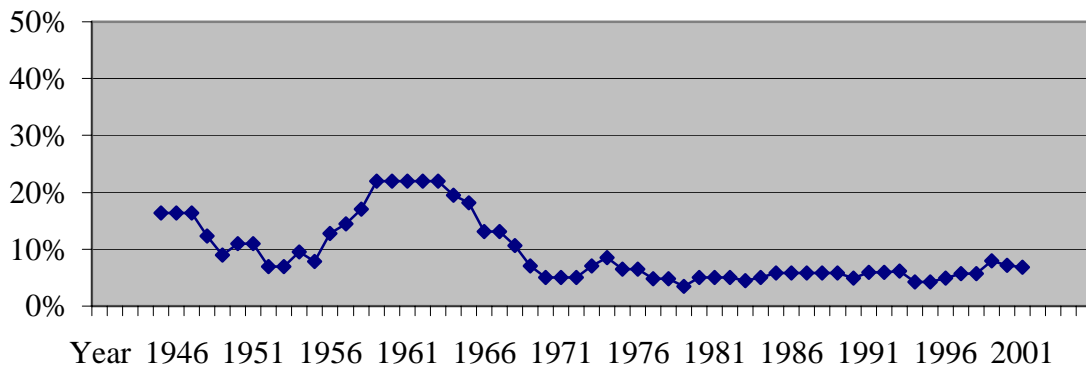


Figure 7 shows the percentage of #1 hardcover nonfiction bestselling books that were written by award winning authors.<sup>5</sup> The first significant result of this comparison between bestsellers and award-winning authors is that there is not much of an overlap. This is partly because there are so many more bestsellers than there are awards. However, it also indicates that popular fiction and award-winning authors have never been quite in sync. In the 1950s and 1960s the average percentage of books by award-winning authors on the list increased, reaching an all time high of 22% from 1959-1963. After 1963 the percentage started a decline that lasted into the mid-seventies. Since then

<sup>4</sup> The Pulitzer Prize, the Nobel Prize, and the National Book Award were defined as “major awards” for this study because of their wide scope, their intellectual integrity, and their long history. Each has been in existence for almost as long as the *New York Times* bestsellers list.

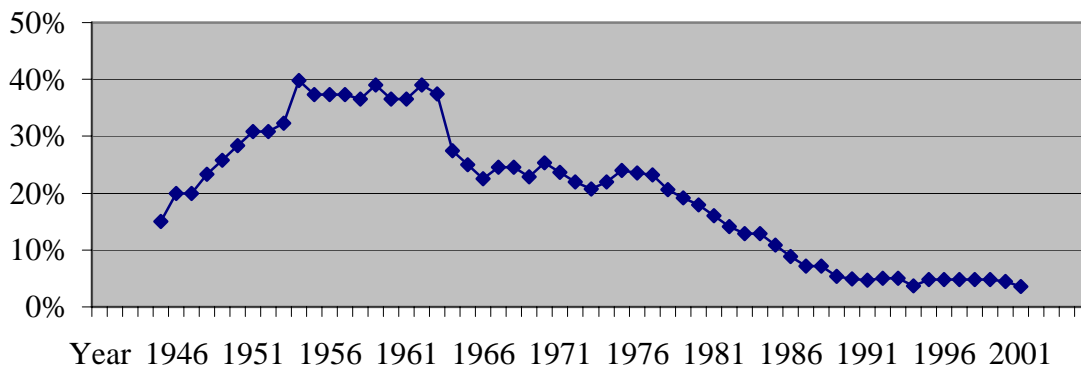
<sup>5</sup> Authors that appear more than once on the list were counted for each appearance; multiple awards for the same author were counted together.

the average percentage of #1 bestselling hardcover non-fiction that were written by award-winning authors has stayed between 3% and 8%.

Figure 8 shows the same data for hardcover fiction, and once again the fiction list shows the same trend as the non-fiction list, but the differences are even more exaggerated.

**Figure 8**

New York Times #1 Bestselling Hardcover Fiction  
1942-2006  
Percentage of Books by Authors with Major Awards  
10 Year Moving Average



The 1950s and early 1960s show a dramatic increase, reaching as high as 40%. Once again 1963 marks the beginning of a significant downward trend which started to level off in the late 1960s, but continued to decline from the 70s onward. Although the all time high for fiction is nearly twice that of non-fiction, the 10 year verage percentage of #1 bestselling fiction books that were written by bestselling authors in 2002 was only 3.61%, and for non-fiction it was 6.83%.

It is important to note that while this data shows a significant trend, the number of #1 bestsellers for both fiction and non-fiction has been steadily increasing since 1942 (see



figures 1 and 2), so even though the percentage of #1 books by award winning authors has gone down, the number of awards has stayed relatively constant. But while the number of awards has not decreased significantly, the data does show that more books on the bestsellers list does not mean more quality books on the bestsellers list.

### **Conclusion**

The *New York Times* bestseller list is what it says it is – a bestseller list. It is not a measure of quality, of intellectual or literary value, or even of staying power. I do not suggest that none of the books on the list have any intellectual or literary value, but simply that being on the list says almost nothing about the quality or value of the work. What it does say is that the book had financial support and publicity, that it was well marketed, and that a few powerful people believed it had potential.

What is most significant about this analysis is that it shows that the *New York Times* bestseller list was not always so separate from (not opposed to) literary quality as it is now. There have always been award winners on the list, but as the number of books on the list went up, the number of awards did not. Also, the variety of publishers – and therefore books – on the list has decreased. No matter how varied and open-minded a publishing house is, having fewer producers necessarily leads to less variety. This is true of all industries. The same can be said for the decline of independent publishers on the list. Corporate and conglomerate publishers are more focused on profit than the remaining independent houses (many of which are actually non-profit) and thus dominate the list. These trends also follow historical events in the industry – specifically the Age of Acquisitions – lending credence to the argument that the consolidation of the industry has significantly changed the kinds of books being published.

None of these trends or patterns would be significant if the *New York Times* list had little influence over readers, booksellers, or publishers. But since the Age of Acquisitions and the rise of the blockbuster complex, the list has become more and more important. That fact can be proven by simply walking into a bookstore – especially a chain bookstore – browsing the shelves, and counting how many times the words “New York Times Bestseller” appear.

## Conclusion

The process of collecting the data for this study was almost as revealing as the data itself. Dozens of publishers were unwilling to answer my questions, even after being guaranteed anonymity. Booksellers were more willing to respond, but my calls and e-mails went unanswered at the large corporate bookstores. The *New York Times* was particularly unresponsive, even when all I requested was an archive of their bestsellers list. The secrecy surrounding the compilation of the *New York Times* list was both surprising and troubling. Similarly, the Book Scan list, which tracks actual sales of all books at participating bookstores directly from their registers, is not available to the public. That such a publicly influential business is conducted out of public view is both suspicious and potentially dangerous. Without a transparent process, readers cannot know whether or not they are being presented with the best possible selection of literary works, and they cannot demand a more unbiased process.

The changes that have occurred in the publishing industry in the last century are real and have truly changed the way people read and approach books. The rise of corporate publishers and booksellers in the Age of Acquisitions and beyond has led to an increased disparity between books that sell and books that don't. Corporate houses are more interested in blockbusters and bestsellers than ever before. And though small independent or non-profit houses publish quality books that are overlooked by the corporate houses, independents and non-profits simply don't have the resources to support such books with the marketing and publicity necessary to bring them into public view. According to information from the respondents interviewed in this study, historical accounts of the industry, and simple observation, the secret to a bestselling book is

marketing. A beautifully written book with a meaningful and engaging story to tell will never be read if it is not publicized. And a work of mediocre writing with an unoriginal but entertaining plot can quickly top the *New York Times* bestsellers list with the right marketing campaign behind it.

In spite of the overly-sentimental tone of accounts of the Golden Age, I believe that publishers were at one time more aware of the artistic value and cultural importance of their work than they are today. Publishing today operates like any other business. We would never expect a clothing manufacturer to produce clothes that they didn't think would sell, nor do we expect to see independent clothing stores with any great frequency. The same goes for food manufacturers, computer and software engineers, and other commodities producers. And yet each of these industries was once considered an art in addition to being a business, and to a lesser extent some are still perceived as such today. Even very artistic industries such as film and music have become commodified to the point where consumers expect the industries to focus on marketing and sales rather than quality. The publishing industry is undergoing this same change from art to business, but at a later time. The question is whether we are willing to allow such an intellectually influential business to be judged solely on standards of profits and sales figures.

The assumption that every good book will find a readership is quite simply wrong. This functionalist assertion appears with startling frequency – in one form or another – in interviews, essays, articles, and discussions about books and publishing. Everything in American culture suggests a completely different reality. The American public will watch, eat, buy, and read the most advertised and accessible products. In a culture where faster is better and brand recognition is learned almost in infancy, claiming

that the American public can search through the hundreds of thousands of books available in stores and online to find the best possible books in terms of quality is a utopian dream. The capitalist argument is that consumers vote with their money, and so the top selling books are the books that the readers have decided are the best books (Hill and Power 2005, 52). This kind of voting works only as well as political voting. Citizens vote for president, but they choose between the six or seven candidates that larger social institutions have, for one reason or another, placed in the public eye. If readers are voting for the best books, they are voting from amongst the few books that publishers and booksellers have already selected as big sellers.

It can be argued that publishers are just giving readers what they want, and there is an element of truth in that statement. Obviously readers enjoy Stephen King and Danielle Steel; publishers cannot force unwanted books on the public. But they can prevent potentially popular books from ever reaching an audience. Corporate publishers and corporate booksellers, and to a lesser degree independent publishers and booksellers, underestimate the public. I believe that the American reading public would read, enjoy, and benefit from a wider selection of quality books, meaning books that are intellectually stimulating, socially relevant, or at the very least, well-written. But publishers and booksellers assume, based on past sales records of poorly marketed intellectual works, that the American public wants nothing to do with such books. The corporatization of the industry is largely to blame for this phenomena, not only because large corporate companies are more likely to cater to the lowest common denominator of the public but also because they force small and independent companies to imitate corporate practices to stay in business. Corporate houses are not in and of themselves dangerous, but since they

have come to dominate the industry, both in terms of the number of corporate houses and in terms of the proportion of popular books published by corporate houses, they dictate the standards of business and quality for the entire book reading public.

Books are on television. Books are on the internet, both on retail sites and in blogs and reviews. Although the presence of books in mass media outlets like newspapers and magazines is decreasing, bestselling books, particularly ones concerning current events, pop culture, or just the latest book by one of America's top authors, are media-wide phenomena. Books are one of many mediums that shape American culture and identity, and they can be a powerful tool towards the improvement of American intellectual life, if they are not taken for granted. Television was once a great opportunity to create a new and exciting educational and cultural space. Sadly, the television shows that most people watch and that are most heavily advertised and promoted are the least culturally or educationally valuable. The book industry is headed down the same road. Publishers need to realize that they have not only an opportunity, but a responsibility. Experience has shown that the American public will not always seek out better but less readily available products when the ones in front of them will suffice. But if publishers make intellectually valuable work as available and visible as the latest cookie-cutter mystery or chick-lit novel, then Americans might prefer the former, at least some of the time.

In the early 1900s Americans got sick of hyped books; they started to ignore over-the-top advertising and chose books based on the content rather than the billboard, and as a result, not everyone read the same thing. There were more moderately successful books than ever before (Tebbel 1987, 176). Considering the extreme levels of advertising and

promotion that surround the few books that publishers and booksellers label “bestsellers” before they even sell one copy, it would not be surprising if modern American readers reacted the same way. Of course, modern American readers are much more familiar and comfortable with advertising and hype than readers were in the early 1900s. Hopefully that familiarity has not completely numbed our sense of personal judgment, for readers are the most likely source of a solution to the blockbuster complex. Since publishers and booksellers are now more than ever focused on profit instead of art, appeals to their bottom line are much more likely to induce change than appeals to their sense of intellectual responsibility.

## **Appendix A: Methodology**

### **Section 1: Interviews**

#### *Respondent Selection*

Unfortunately, a random sample of publishers, editors, and booksellers was not possible. Even under guarantees of anonymity many industry insiders were reluctant or unwilling to share the information requested. Even after being told that respondents were free to decline to answer any of the questions they found inappropriate many publishers and booksellers were unwilling to speak with me. Often, assistants or secretaries felt uncomfortable asking their employers to review my questions. Given the general and seemingly benign nature of the questions it seems both strange and revealing that so many in the industry were unwilling to speak with me. However, the fact that I was doing academic research and not writing for a newspaper or magazine was comforting for many respondents.

In an attempt to hear from a wide range of respondents, many phone calls and e-mails were sent to various independent, corporate, and non-profit publishers and booksellers. As the results show, independent and non-profit companies were the most responsive. Corporate offices generally asked me to send my information and questions via e-mail to the human resources department. Only one such e-mail out of dozens resulted in an interview.

Clearly random sampling was not an option, so I used personal contacts and online directories and searches to make contact with respondents. Frequently the respondents asked to view my questions before speaking with me. Most of the interviews were conducted over the phone, one was conducted in person, and one respondent



answered the questions via e-mail. The respondents discussed in this study include all the individuals who responded to my questions with the exception of those whose experiences were not relevant to this study.

*Bookseller Interview Questions:*

What is your position within your company?

1. Describe the decision-making process involved in selecting titles.
  - a. What do you look for in trade fiction?
  - b. What do you look for in trade non-fiction?
  - c. Is there a formula for a best-selling book?
  - d. What is your definition of quality in books?
  - e. What factors besides the inherent quality of the work go into the decision-making process?
  - f. Do you often come across quality works that are unlikely to be big-sellers? How likely are you to stock such books?
2. How do you approach publishers' offerings in terms of frontlist, midlist, and backlist titles?
  - a. How likely are you to select a title from a publisher's midlist?
  - b. How likely are you to select a title from a publisher's backlist?
  - c. What is the average shelf-life of a book in your store?
  - d. How do you determine when to stop carrying a book?
3. Tell me about your approach to bestselling books.
  - a. How much emphasis do you and your company place on stocking potential bestsellers?
  - b. How do you determine whether or not a book is likely to become a bestseller?
  - c. Do you feel that pursuing bestsellers is beneficial in terms of profit?
  - d. Do you feel that pursuing bestsellers is beneficial in terms of quality?
4. What kind of interactions do you and your company have with publishers and their representatives?
  - a. What kinds of publishers do you do the most business with (corporate, independent...)?
  - b. Do you communicate with publishers regarding books that have not yet been accepted for publication?
  - c. Do you feel that the growing presence of chain bookstores has changed the publishing industry as a whole? How?
5. Describe the relationships between your company and its various divisions.
  - a. What kind of input does your parent company provide on a regular basis?
  - b. How do your parent company and/or sister companies influence your purchasing and marketing decisions?
  - c. How much guidance does your parent company provide regarding how books are displayed?

- d. How much guidance does your parent company provide regarding which titles to feature or hand-sell to customers?
6. What kinds of marketing decisions are involved in bookselling?
  - a. Do you use market research to determine what readers are interested in? Why or why not? How?
  - b. How do you decide how much advertising should go into a given title?
  - c. What kinds of marketing techniques do you use most often? Why?
  - d. How much advertising effort comes from the publisher or the author?
  - e. How do you arrange author signings and other publicity events?
  - f. How do you decide which authors to bring to your store?
7. How do you determine what genre a trade book falls into (mystery, thriller, politics, etc...)?
8. How much of your company's profits come from trade books? How much from other divisions?
9. Do you provide information for the *New York Times* bestsellers list or other bestsellers lists? What kind of information
10. What kinds of changes have you witnessed in your time in the book industry?
11. What else about your company or your work do you feel is important in terms of American intellectual life?

#### *Publisher Interview Questions*

What is your position within your company?

1. Describe the decision-making process involved in selecting a manuscript for publication.
  - a. What do you look for in trade fiction?
  - b. What do you look for in trade non-fiction?
  - c. What is your definition of quality in books?
  - d. Is there a formula for a best-selling book?
  - e. What factors besides the inherent quality of the work go into the decision-making process?
  - f. Do you ever come across quality works that are unlikely to be big-sellers? How likely are you to publish such works?
2. Describe your approach to your company's backlist.
  - a. Do you feel that building a strong backlist is beneficial in terms of profit?
  - b. Do you feel that building a strong backlist is beneficial in terms of quality?
  - c. How much emphasis do you and your company place on selecting strong backlist titles?
  - d. How do you determine whether or not a book is a good candidate for the backlist?
3. Describe your approach to bestselling books.
  - a. How much emphasis do you and your company place on acquiring bestsellers?
  - b. How do you determine whether or not a book is likely to be a bestseller?
  - c. Do you feel that pursuing bestsellers is beneficial in terms of profit?

- d. Do you feel that pursuing bestsellers is beneficial in terms of quality?
4. What kinds of interactions do you and your company have with booksellers?
  - a. What kinds of booksellers do you do the most business with (chain, independent, academic, electronic...)?
  - b. Do you communicate with booksellers about a title before deciding to publish it?
  - c. What, if any, influence does bookseller interest have over your editorial decisions?
  - d. Do you feel that the growing presence of chain bookstores has changed the publishing industry as a whole? How?
5. Describe the relationship between your company and its various divisions or imprints.
  - a. What kind of input does your parent company provide on a daily basis?
  - b. How do your parent company and/or sister companies influence your editorial decisions?
  - c. How independent or interdependent are the divisions or imprints within your company?
6. What kinds of marketing decisions are involved in publishing a book?
  - a. Do you use market research to determine what readers are interested in? Why or why not? How?
  - b. How do you decide how much advertising should go into a given title?
  - c. What factors help to determine how many copies of a book will be printed?
  - d. To what extent are authors involved in their own advertising campaigns?
  - e. To what extent are booksellers involved in advertising campaigns?
  - f. What advertising techniques do you use most often? Why?
7. How do you determine what genre a trade book falls into (mystery, thriller, politics, philosophy, etc...)?
8. How much of your company's profits come from trade publishing? How much from other divisions?
9. Do you provide information for the *New York Times* bestsellers list or other bestsellers lists? What kind of information do you provide?
10. What kinds of changes have you witnessed in your time in the publishing industry?
11. What else about your company or your work do you feel is important in terms of American intellectual life?

## Section 2: Bestseller Methodology

### *Acquiring Bestsellers Lists*

Initially I hoped to analyze yearly *New York Times* bestsellers, (i.e. the bestsellers of 2006) and track changes over the years. Surprisingly, the *New York Times* either does not compile such a list or does not keep archives of it. After several calls to the *New York*

*Times* and after leaving several messages with Orville Buddo, a staff editor of the *New York Times* bestseller list, I decided to use the much more readily available list of all the books that have every been #1 on the *New York Times* bestseller list. For this I used both a published book with details and facts on each book that has been #1 on the list from 1942 (when the list started) until 1990 (Bear, 1992) and a website that lists both every weekly list since 1942 and all the books that have every been #1 on the list (Hawes Publications). Neither source is authorized by the *New York Times*, but random samples from both sources were checked against actual issues of the *New York Times* for accuracy. Specific weekly lists for both the *New York Times* and Book Sense were found on the lists' websites ([www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) and [www.bookweb.com](http://www.bookweb.com)). Since it was sadly impossible to read all the books on these lists, descriptions of books were acquired either from the list itself, from Bear (1992), or from publishers' or authors' websites.

#### *Determining Publisher Ownership*

Determining whether booksellers were independent or corporate was surprisingly complicated given the general availability of such information. Publishers' websites often provided a history of the company and its various parent companies. However, outside sources had to be consulted in some cases, especially concerning publishers that were once independent but have since been through multiple acquisitions processes. In cases where unaffiliated or unofficial websites were the only available sources, multiple sources were found in order to confirm the information. Timeline histories of major parent companies such as Bertelsman or News Corporation were also very useful in determining when certain publishers were acquired.

#### *Awards*

Lists of award-winners were acquired from the official websites of the Nobel Prize, the Pulitzer Prize, and the National Book Awards. Authors who won multiple awards were counted as one award winning author, but they were counted each time they appeared on the list. The three prizes were chosen for their longevity (each has been around almost as long as the *New York Times* bestsellers list) and for their reputation for intellectual integrity.

### *Statistical Methodology*

Most of the statistical data regarding *New York Times* is displayed as a 5 or 10 year moving average. For a 5 year moving average, this means that data displayed for 1980 is actually an average of all the data between 1978 and 1982. Moving averages were used not to skew or shift the patterns, but to smooth out outliers and to make long-term trends and patterns more evident. This was especially necessary for the awards data. With only a few award winners per year the changes in the data from year to year were quite dramatic but, when smoothed out with a moving average, patterns began to emerge.

## **Appendix B: Interview Respondents**

### **Respondent A:**

Respondent A is a senior publicist at an imprint of a large corporate publisher. The publisher is itself owned by a large media conglomerate that owns companies in radio, television, music, magazines, and other communications services. The publisher has dozens of imprints, some of which were once independents and some of which branched off of the corporate house. The house is most well known for its adult trade books, but it owns mass market, religious, and educational imprints as well. Respondent A has been in the industry for 3 ½ years.

### **Respondent B:**

Respondent B is a Vice President and Executive Editor at a large conglomerate publisher. The publisher is owned by a large media conglomerate which owns several companies in television, film, magazines, and newspapers. The publisher itself has at least 5 divisions – most of them educational – and dozens of trade and educational imprints. The company grosses over \$1 billion per year. Respondent B has been in the industry for 50 years.

### **Respondent C:**

Respondent C is an assistant manager at a branch of a large corporate chain bookstore. The corporation owns a few small publishing imprints as well as technology retail stores and a used bookstore service. The store itself sells videos and DVDs, music, toys and games, gifts, stationary, home and office supplies, and computer software and accessories as well as textbooks, reference books, and trade books. The store also includes a coffee shop with food and beverages, both to eat in and to take out. The

corporation sells 445 million books in a year. According to the company's website, bestsellers make up only a small portion of the company's sales, and small publishers are well represented in the stores. Respondent C has been in the industry for 7 years.

**Respondent D:**

Respondent D is the director of an independent bookstore that serves both a college and a public community. The store is independent in that it is a part of the private college. College textbook sales are designed to break even while all other sales go into the college's general budget. In addition to textbooks and trade books, the store sells drinks and snacks, office and school supplies, college apparel and merchandise, gifts and stationary. The respondent said that about 12% of profits come from trade books.

Respondent D has been in the industry for 21 years.

**Respondent E:**

Respondent E is an assistant editor at an independent, non-profit publisher. Founded in 1979, the company publishes between 15 and 20 books per year in fiction, literary non-fiction (not written for an academic or scientific audience), poetry, and children's books. The company's mission statement declares a dedication to literature as art and to keeping books in print for years to come. Respondent E has been in the industry for 3 ½ years.

**Respondent F:**

Respondent F is an editorial assistant at a non-profit independent publisher. Founded in 1974 the company publishes novels, memoirs, short stories, poetry, cultural and literary criticism, collections of essays, gay and lesbian literature, but no "genre trade

books” meaning mystery, romance, etc... The company publishes a many as 23 books per year. The respondent has been in the industry for one year.

**Respondent G:**

Respondent G is an editor at a small non-profit independent publisher that publishes primarily poetry, including American poets, new poets, translated poets, and also some literary fiction. The company’s mission statement is to foster readership and readership appreciation. Since 1976 the company has published more than 170 books. Respondent G has been in the industry for 15 years.

**Respondent H:**

Respondent H is a buyer at a large independent bookstore. The store has only one location, but sells used books in addition to retail trade books. The store has about 25,000 books in 5,000 square feet of floor space. The store includes a cafe and regularly hosts author signings and other events. Respondent H has been in the industry for 14 years.

**Respondent J:**

Respondent J is a partner in the ownership of a small independent bookstore. Located in a village of only 2,000 people, the store is very small and sells very few non-book items. Respondent J has been in the industry for 8 years, and was a librarian for 20 years before that.

**Respondent K:**

Respondent I is the lead buyer at a large independent bookstore with 3 locations. The stores include coffee shops and some gift items, but books make up 90% of the



stores' profits. The stores hold regular events and put out calendars of featured books and authors. Respondent I has been in the industry for 30 years.

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