

What makes a book a bestseller? It's tricky

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It is a truth generally acknowledged that authors and publishers want their books to become bestsellers. Bestseller lists, especially those published in prestigious media outlets, such as the [New York Times](#), or publishing industry magazines are important marketing tools for publishers, and useful selection tools for booksellers, librarians and

readers.

An appearance on a New York Times bestseller list is a major coup for a book and its author. Even if, as economist [Alan Sorensen](#) contends, "appearing on the list leads to a modest increase in sales for the average book," the benefit is "more dramatic for bestsellers by debut authors," who are more likely to secure contracts for new books and become recognizable brands.

Hence bestsellers—and bestseller lists—have [two functions](#): economic on the one hand, and ideological or social on the other. Their role is to make money for authors, publishers and retailers. But they also mirror prevailing cultural and societal norms. They can influence public discourse and foster a shared reading experience.

Yet the "bestseller" remains a contentious and uncertain concept. The New York Times lists, for example, are based on [sales figures reported by thousands of stores](#) of all sizes and demographics from the United States and key online vendors of ebooks. Bestsellers are grouped in multiple categories, with some categories of books excluded.

But how the lists are compiled is not entirely clear. The methodology [has been defended](#) as "a secret both to protect our product and to make sure people can't try to rig the system." Yet there is some evidence that gaming the system [does sometimes occur](#).

Best of the worst?

On one level, the definition of a "bestseller" is simple: it is a book that appears on a list because it has sold the greatest number of copies in a given, usually short, time. How many copies a book needs to sell to become a blockbuster depends on the time of the year and the size of market. The stakes are the highest in the weeks leading up to Christmas,

when book sales spike.

A book can claim "bestselling" status after one week on a list. Similarly, an author can be called a "[New York Times bestselling author](#)" for life if they have written a book that appeared on the list for just one week.

But books can sell well over different [time frames](#). There are "fast sellers"—that is, those with large short-term sales. There are "bestsellers" with large long-term sales. And there are "steady sellers," which have moderate sales over a longer period of time.

Only the fast sellers and bestsellers are visible in weekly and monthly bestseller lists; the steady sellers are not. The latter can only be identified by looking at longer-term sales trends. Books by Jane Austen, for example, have been selling steadily since the 1920s.

Over the years, critics have been at pains to point out that commercial success is rarely a sign of literary quality. In 1971, British novelist [Anthony Burgess](#) wrote: "Very occasionally the best book and the bestseller coincide, but generally the books that make the most money are those which lack both style and subtlety and present a grossly oversimplified picture of life."

For [others](#), "bestseller has been a term of disparagement, signifying the mindlessness and conformity of a mass society."

So what books do Australians actually buy?

According to [Nielsen BookScan](#), by May 2024 the Barefoot Investor was the top lifetime bestseller in Australia, followed by Fifty Shades of Grey, The Da Vinci Code, Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, and Fifty Shades Darker.

A brief history of the bestseller list

Bestseller lists first appeared in the UK in the [Bookman](#), a monthly magazine published in London between 1891 and 1934. The idea for the journal and the list was copied by the Bookman in New York, which started publishing bestseller lists in 1895.

In 1912, the American trade magazine [Publishers Weekly](#) started running its own lists. The New York Times list, which is widely considered to be the most prestigious in the United States, has been published weekly since 1931.

In Britain, the most widely publicized bestseller lists began in the Sunday Times in the 1970s. The lists were produced by the [Bookwatch system](#), which measured over-the-counter sales reported by chain stores and some independents. [The Bookseller](#), a UK trade publication, also started publishing a bestseller list in the mid-1970s.

In the 1990s, the Whitaker BookTrack was developed in the UK as a tool for publishers to provide more accurate information to inform their business decisions. In 2002, following a number of mergers and acquisitions, BookTrack from the UK, BookScan from the U.S., and Booktrack-ACNielsen from Australia were combined into [Nielsen BookScan](#) under a single ownership, allowing for tracking of sales data in those countries, and later expanded to others.

[Nielsen BookScan](#) gathers point-of-sale data from book retailers. In Australia, it covers 1,300 outlets nationwide, an estimated 90% of retail sales. The company also tracks the sales of physical audiobooks. In 2021, [Nielsen PubTrack Digital](#) was launched, with participating publishers in Australia and New Zealand, to track ebook trends going back to the start of 2012.

All of this information is compiled, updated, and processed by Nielsen, and sold to subscribing publishers and the media, including the Australian publishing industry newsletter [Books+Publishing](#).

This is a significant change to how lists used to be produced. Until 2002, the bestseller lists published in newspapers such as the Australian and Sydney Morning Herald were impressionistic and whimsical, based on reports from a select number of independent bookshops in major cities. Even more limited and somewhat eccentric were the lists published by the Australian Book Review, which relied on information from a different shop in a different state each month.

In addition to bestseller lists published in the media, bookshop chains, such as [Readings](#), and online booksellers, such as [Booktopia](#) (which has recently gone into receivership), create their own bestseller lists across various categories, based on their own sales data.

In Australia, the computerization of book sales necessitated by the introduction of the GST in 2000, has improved the accuracy of sales data. Nielsen BookScan has expanded the basis of the data beyond specialist booksellers to include department stores and other non-traditional book retail outlets.

Following its introduction into Australia, Nielsen BookScan has been blamed for contributing to the [decline of Australian literary fiction](#), its poor sales now clearly visible in bestseller lists dominated by genre fiction.

The making of a bestseller

The factors that make a book a bestseller, especially in the case of first-time authors, can be unpredictable. Yet as early as 1981 literary critic [John Sutherland](#) was writing about what he called the "bestseller

machine."

This is a process by which bestseller status becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Huge advances attract publicity and a commensurate investment in promotional activity, which propels a book into the bestsellers list to ensure the advances are earned. Appearance on a bestseller list in turn guarantees further sales, as the title becomes more likely to be sold, often at a discount, in non-specialist retailers.

Bestsellers are also more likely to attract additional rights sales and adaptations into other media, such as films, [graphic novels](#) or video games, which increases the popularity of the book and its author even more.

A novel idea that taps into the zeitgeist enough to become a bestseller is followed by an inevitable string of lookalike books, explicitly promoted by references to successful authors, or even with their endorsements on the cover.

The success of the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling, for example, stimulated spectacular growth of Young Adult fiction. Stephanie Meyer's bestselling Twilight series led to the creation of a new genre called New Adult. Over time these trends evolve or go out of fashion to be replaced by a new sensation.

The effect of the cultural focus on bestsellers is twofold. One consequence is that bestsellers sell more copies than ever, creating dominant author brands that take most of the spoils. Not surprisingly, the big five publishers produce the majority of bestsellers. Their share of the market is proportional to their capacity to spend large, be it on advances or marketing and publicity.

At the other end of the scale, the majority of self-published authors

rarely sell significant quantities of books. If they do, it is a sure way to being published traditionally. This was the case of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. The book started as a *Twilight* fanfiction. It became popular as a self-published book, but did not become a bestseller until 2012, when it was released by Vintage Books, an imprint of Penguin Random House.

By 2021, the *Fifty Shades* trilogy had sold [165 million copies](#) worldwide.

Bestsellers unread

Even if a book sells well, that doesn't mean it is actually read.

Stephen Hawking's [A Brief History of Time](#) spent 147 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list and 237 weeks on the Times of London bestseller list. But as the [Washington Post](#) observed, the question of how many people "read the book from cover to cover" became a "running joke, which even Hawking found humorous."

The digitization of book sales has allowed for a more accurate picture of what people are buying, if not actually reading. Amazon, the world's largest online bookseller, has a number of algorithm-driven ranking systems. In addition to [Amazon Best Sellers](#), updated every hour, it publishes [Amazon Charts](#), updated once a week, which features two categories: "most sold" and "most read."

The "most sold" category regularly includes self-published titles, in contrast to the bestsellers list published in traditional media, such as the New York Times. The "most read" category is based on an average number of Kindle readers and Audible listeners each week. It provides a clear indication of the actual readership of these titles, which is not always the case with bestseller lists.

Readers matter

As [Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo](#) write: "Readers play a crucial role in maintaining the success and reputation of bestselling fiction."

But bestseller status is not crucial to readers. In fact, for some, the term can be a turn-off due to its association with publisher's hype and a system that privileges a "mainstream" consumer. Instead, many readers rely on offline and online recommendations.

Since 2021, BookTok, a bookish community on TikTok, has played an increasingly significant role in generating book sales, especially in genres such as romance, fantasy and young adult. It has contributed to the success of authors such as [Colleen Hoover](#), [Sarah J. Maas](#) and [Freida McFadden](#).

Using a hashtag #BookTok young readers share videos about books they read. Interestingly, the recommended [books](#) are often a few years old, in contrast to traditional bestseller lists, which focus on new titles. As [Elizabeth A. Harris](#) wrote in a 2022 New York Times article: "In essence, BookTok supercharges something that's always been essential to selling a book: word of mouth."

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