



What does “bestseller” really mean?

Answering that question should be intuitive: that which sells the most. However, in the world of books, among the big bestseller lists, none is simply comprised of books that sell the most. With some of the most legitimate bestseller lists, the process is editorial in nature. With something like Amazon’s best sellers, it’s absolutely meaningless much of the time.

Pamela Williams, Library Director, passed along a publication, **5 Minute Librarian**, with a featured article about bestseller lists. It points out that the big bestseller lists like the New York Times, Wall Street Journal or USA Today are more driven by the personal opinion of the editors than the actual sales numbers of the book.

This is an interesting divide, because the bestseller list is one thing, but the NYT also has a highly respected “books” section where a variety of books are reviewed in depth. I personally put some stock in their reviews, but why? Because I consider that the writers have a depth of knowledge about literature, and it comes through in their reviews.

But not everyone cares how “literary” a book is. They just want to like it. Let’s take a case of what people liked clashing directly with what the Times was unwilling to put on its bestseller list and how it all wound up in court.

William Blatty’s **The Exorcist**, published in 1971, was the book everyone was talking about. In actual sales, this book was the hottest in the country. Yet, the NYT insisted on ignoring it. After months, the Times relented and put *The Exorcist* on its list but pretty far down on the list, still not reflecting its actual sales status. Writer Tucker Max refers to this as “curated elitism,” a fair term.

Blatty and his publisher sued the NYT for having a bestseller list that ignored the best seller. This was the part that surprised me. Blatty lost because the Times put forth the absolute truth as its defense. The truth is that the Times uses of the word “bestseller” as a sort of word of art (as lawyers love to say) and not a reflection of actual fact. What goes on its bestseller list is an editorial decision rather than a sales report. Apparently, that’s perfectly legal, and something to keep in mind. If you like the books the Times put on its bestseller lists, then the list means something to you. And they do have a relatively small number of like thinking book sellers who report sales to them to narrow the choices. But pure and simple literary snobbery made the editorial staff of the Times hold its nose and take a pass when it came to *The Exorcist* – and no doubt many books that lots of people like.

But what about Amazon? Don't you sometimes look at fellow reader reviews on Amazon rather than the more elite professional reviews? I've found it doesn't mean much if there's only twenty or so customer reviews but that I can learn a lot about strengths and weaknesses of a book if there are 300 reviews and I have some patience.

What I cannot tell, though, is what it means when a book earns the designation of Amazon Bestseller. Brent Underwood gave this the test without bothering to write a book. He took a picture of his bare foot, quickly turned it into what appeared to be a book cover, called it **Putting My Foot Down**, filled out the required form to put it on sale on Amazon, had his mother buy a copy and he bought two copies, and he went from no book to still no book but with the designation of Amazon Best Seller – in five minutes start to finish. Following up this experiment, he apparently wrote a 60-page book about the whole thing which is, you guessed it, sold on Amazon. I still don't know for sure if that's a real book. It has some reviews, but I cannot tell if he just had some of his friends write them.

That's the scoop about bestsellers, or at least some fun facts at your disposal. Stop in and our librarians will be happy to tell you what people around town are saying about the latest books.

See you at the Library!

Upcoming Events: April 17 at 6:30 p.m. is the **Spring Gardening Workshop**. Follow us on our website, FB and Twitter for all the upcoming spring events at the Library.