

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND THE TASTEMAKERS: CANONICITY, CULTURAL
DISTINCTION AND THE 'HARRY POTTER EFFECT' IN BESTSELLER LISTS

By

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To Nicole, who helped this project evolve from a coffee house rant to a final draft

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This essay seeks to establish the moments of overlap and influence between children's literature and the bestseller lists in regards to taste, canonicity and cultural value. In the United States, the editors of popular bestseller lists, specifically the *New York Times Book Review* list, operate under the rules of cultural hierarchy and categorization in order to act as tastemakers, elevating specific types of books to mainstream categorization and bestseller status. The rise of the bestseller list over the past century has indicated a tension in the U.S. between "highbrow" or critically acclaimed books and "lowbrow" or popular books. In the second half of the 20th century, the bestseller list begins to narrow the definition of the mainstream through its own exclusionary behaviors. As the *Times* struggles to establish itself as the most elite of the middlebrow tastemakers despite dealing in the lowbrow business of appealing to mass culture, it relies on exclusionary tactics, genre tags, categorization and structural adjustments to ensure its list maintains its "authenticity," economic value, and cultural status as a prize.

Simultaneously, the history of children's literature in the U.S. is rife with tension between the desire to provide books for a widespread audience and the aspiration to

achieve a respectable highbrow cultural status. Throughout the past century, children's literature enthusiasts have flirted with mainstream culture while attempting to maintain an elitist reputation for high quality and literary merit. As a result, children's literature has come to be regarded by some as a low brow, childish and simple form of literature, or as a specific genre of literature located outside of the mainstream literary culture by others.

When viewed through a historical lens, the collision between a mainstream gatekeeper, like the *New York Times* bestseller list, and a "genre," like children's literature, seeking out mainstream recognition, seems inevitable. In July 2000, the *New York Times Book Review* made headlines as editors announced a radical restructuring of its well-known bestseller list in response to the imminent publication of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. In response to complaints from publishers and authors with bestseller potential, the *Times* decided to sequester the first four Harry Potter books to a new children's literature bestseller list in order to make room for "true" bestsellers. At the peak of its popularity, Harry Potter redefined publishing and children's book marketing, but it did not appear on the highly regarded *Times* fiction list.

The "Harry Potter effect" is clearly not the first example of this form of cultural policing, but it serves as a valuable case study through which to view the various mechanisms of the bestseller list itself. Using the "Harry Potter effect" of 2000 as a case study, this paper will examine the ways in which these exclusionary tactics reinforce cultural hierarchies, tastes and the literary values of the mainstream.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

In July 2000, the *New York Times Book Review* made headlines as editors announced a radical restructuring of its well-known bestseller list. In the first major change to the list since 1984, the editors introduced a children's book bestseller list to appear in the *Book Review* section along with "three hardcover lists for fiction, nonfiction, and 'advice, how-to and miscellaneous' and separate lists for paperbacks in those categories" (Smith). It was instantly clear that the reason for restructuring the list was the imminent publication of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, book 4 in J. K. Rowling's wildly popular young adult series. At the time, the first three books of the series were occupying three spots on the "Adult" Fiction bestseller list. Authors who would usually find a newly released title in the top ten instead found themselves at 16 or 17, thereby squeezed off of the weekly printed list by the so-called "Harry Potter effect."¹ "They [Harry Potter books] should not be taking up space in place of bona-fide adult titles," said New York literary agent Aaron Priest (Rose 12), defending the rights of Steven King and Danielle Steel against the Boy Who Lived.

On July 8, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* debuted at number one on virtually every bestseller list in the U.S. and Britain, including lists in *USA Today*, *Amazon.com* and the *Wall Street Journal*. However, in the July 23, 2000 *New York Times Book Review*, the number one bestselling fiction novel in the country was listed as *The House on Hope Street* by Danielle Steel.² Harry Potter took up slots 1-4 on the children's list, topping classic and not so classic titles for children from age 3 to 12. Other titles included *Backstreet Boys: The Official Book*, by Andre Csillag with the Backstreet Boys; *Oh, The Places You'll Go!* written and illustrated by Dr. Seuss; and *The Legend of Luke*,

by Brian Jacques.³ As reported by the *Wall Street Journal*, *The House on Hope Street* had a sales index of 54 for that week while the *Goblet of Fire* had a sales index of 2883 (Mayles). Running alongside coverage of the *Goblet of Fire*'s midnight release parties at bookstores around the country, the most trusted bestseller list in the nation defended its decision to sequester Harry Potter in order to make room for “true” bestsellers. Some children’s literature advocates were pleased with the revision, believing the new list would provide more exposure to new books in their field. “But to some, the move seemed an embarrassing face-saving exercise and a final refusal to concede that children’s books might in fact occupy a significant place in the cultural mainstream” (Marcus 313).

The backlash against Rowling’s banishment came from many camps: librarians, teachers, children’s literature scholars, novelists, Scholastic and even competing publishers. “Best-seller lists are supposed to represent what America is reading . . . nothing has ever been as popular with families, adults, children, in the history of publishing,” argued Barbara Marcus, president of Scholastic (qtd in Corliss 2). Craig Virden, president of Random House Children’s Books (a direct competitor of Scholastic) argued, “If a children’s book is moving in the numbers that the *New York Times* editors deem appropriate for their bestseller list, then it should be there. I think that 3.8 million is an adult number” (qtd in Corliss 2). Even as pre-orders for *The Goblet of Fire* stacked up, some industry experts warned that children are a fickle audience and might be dissuaded by the reported length of 734-pages, a page count that some argued prevented it from rightly fitting into the children’s literature genre. To the delight of parents and teachers, children devoured the lengthy novels at record speeds (Marcus

314). Harry Potter mania had captured the imagination of Americans and had been featured in virtually every book column and popular publication in the nation, even appearing on the cover of *Time*.⁴ At the peak of its popularity, Harry Potter redefined publishing and children's book marketing, but it did not appear on the highly regarded *Times* fiction list.

On October 17, 2004, *The New York Times* further divided the Children's List into Hardcover, Paperback, Picture, Chapter and Series Books.⁵ Popular series titles, a major feature in children's publishing, such as *Harry Potter*, *Lemony Snicket's Series of Unfortunate Events* and *The Princess Diaries*, could now only occupy one slot on the children's bestseller lists at a time, regardless of the number of titles currently selling. Thus, when the final installment of the series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, was published on July 7, 2007, selling a record 8.3 million copies in the first 24 hours in the U.S., the full title did not appear on the *New York Times* lists, not even in the Children's section (Rich, "Sales"). The number one slot on the July 22, 2007 Children's Series list was "Harry Potter." The entry also noted the series had spent an astounding 145 weeks, or nearly 3 full years on all of the various lists, but it made no special mention of the final book's record-setting sales numbers.⁶ For a weekly feature purported to record books based on their popularity, this incongruity seems striking and confusing. Harry Potter is clearly not the first example of this form of cultural policing, but it serves as a valuable case study through which to view the various mechanisms of the bestseller list itself.

When it comes to the business of charting the popularity of books, the *New York Times* confers value and prestige on certain titles through the value and prestige of its

own *Book Review* and bestseller list. Acting as tastemakers, the editors of the bestseller list operate under the rules of cultural hierarchy and categorization necessary to elevate a specific type of book to bestseller status.⁷ Highbrow cultural gatekeepers have long attempted to keep bestsellers separate and distinct from “literature.” As S.T. Joshi claims in his book *Junk Fiction*, this form of highbrow elitism, “while seeming to seek excellence, declares *a priori* that certain realms cannot possibly produce excellence” and thus maintains a distinct policing against popular texts (8). As the Harry Potter situation clearly demonstrates, the editors of the bestseller list practice a similar form of policing, relying on a series of contradictory rules and implicit cultural mechanisms to maintain the status of their list. The “Harry Potter effect” represents the latest, and arguably the largest crisis for this long-standing cultural yardstick, not only because it forced changes in the list itself, but also because it lay bare the prejudices and preferences of the editors normally hidden behind the mechanism. Harry’s exile made explicit the policing of the *Times Book Review* editors, thereby alerting the public that the list was not merely an empirical, emotionless measure of book sales but an editorial product based on specific cultural judgments.

This essay seeks to establish the moments of overlap and influence between children’s literature and the bestseller lists preceding and culminating in the “Harry Potter effect.” When viewed through a historical lens, the collision between a mainstream gatekeeper, like the *New York Times* bestseller list, and a “genre,” like children’s literature, seeking out mainstream recognition, seems inevitable. The history of children’s literature is rife with tension between the desire to provide books for a widespread audience and the aspiration to achieve a respectable, even highbrow

cultural status. Similarly, the rise of the bestseller list over the past century has indicated a tension in the U.S. between “highbrow” or critically acclaimed books and “lowbrow” or popular books. Within the history of the bestseller list, the 1940s and 50s indicates a shift in mainstream book culture, away from critical prestige and towards bestseller status. Determined to establish children’s literature as a middlebrow enterprise, children’s literature enthusiasts flirt with entering the mainstream culture and as a result, specialized children’s literature bestseller lists appear and disappear from the most prominent publications. The more isolationist and elitist attitudes of these enthusiasts in the 40s and 50s was an attempt to protect a middlebrow status, but their retreat from the mainstream led to an exclusion from that same middlebrow culture.

In the second half of the 20th century, the bestseller list, specifically through the actions of the most reputable of lists in *The New York Times*, began to narrow the definition of mainstream through its own exclusionary behaviors. The *Times* struggled to establish itself as the most elite of the middlebrow tastemakers despite dealing in the lowbrow business of popular books and mass culture. The *Times* relied on exclusionary tactics, genre tags, categorization and structural adjustments to ensure its list maintains its “authenticity,” economic value, and cultural status as a prized tastemaker. Out of a desire to achieve bestseller status, authors and publishers learned how to manipulate the system, finding ways to secure the cultural capital and economic reward that comes from appearing on the list. Beginning in the 1970s, children’s literature has sought to reestablish its place in the cultural mainstream and its supporters believed that steady increases in book quality, titles published, profit margins and visibility make it much harder to marginalize. At the same time the number of “genres” which are excluded or

exiled from the *Times* has increased and the bestseller list represents an ever-narrowing selection of “acceptable” bestsellers. The *Times*’ pattern of exclusion and preferential treatment places “genres” like children’s literature into genre-tagged categories and claims that they are outside of the mainstream, and therefore outside of the purview of the list itself. However, with the appearance of the Harry Potter phenomenon, the contradictions and instabilities of this exclusionary system become impossible to ignore.

CHAPTER 2 CONVERGING HISTORIES: CHILDREN'S LITERATURE MEETS BEST SELLER LISTS

While children's literature and the bestseller list seem destined to collide in the 21st century, their histories prior to the 20th century begin in very different places. The bestseller list came into existence at the dawn of the 20th century in the United States, but its existence was predicated by two earlier laws passed by the U.S. Congress. The first was the 1790 Copyright Act, which gave American writers rights to their texts for fourteen years after their original publication. This ensured a safe market in which authors could publish original works and receive adequate pay. The second law was the International Copyright Act of 1891, which prohibited the reprinting of foreign, specifically British, titles without paying royalties to the original author, thus protecting the copyright of foreign authors in the United States market. Prior to passage of this act, it was easy to tell which British titles were the most popular, by measuring the speed in which the texts were stolen and reproduced by U.S. publishers. It had been common practice prior to this international law for publishers to reproduce popular titles from England under their own imprint, thus saving money on author royalties and offering books guaranteed to sell well. It was in the shadow of the international copyright law that Harry Thurston Peck created the first bestseller list in 1895, in an attempt to report on the titles that were selling best across the country. By recording and reporting the titles, authors and publishers of the best selling books, Peck implicitly recognized the proprietary nature of the texts and tied sales to the legitimate owners of the texts. It was not until much later that the list became an indicator not only of sales and ownership, but also of cultural standing for authors, publishers and list makers.

In *Distinction: A Social Judgment of Taste*, a groundbreaking study of cultural hierarchies, Pierre Bourdieu determined that such hierarchies are formed and enforced by the members of an individual society within certain systems of class and education. “Legitimate culture” is imbued with power and capital, both economic and cultural, by the dominant class. By acquiring this type of culture, through art, manners, and education, one may enter and gain approval of that dominant class. Even though the lower classes are systematically denied access to legitimate culture by the upper classes, they recognize legitimate culture as such and judge others based on their access, acquisition and position relative to that culture, placing those with more cultural capital in a class above them. “In fact, one can never entirely escape from the hierarchy of legitimacies. Because the very meaning and value of a cultural object varies according to the system of objects in which it is placed,” a person acquiring a cultural object outside of their class might be perceived as “slumming” or “putting on airs” (88). Thus, the highest form of culture, reserved for the elite, is considered to be “highbrow” while cultural objects considered “vulgar,” common, or easily accessed by the masses are considered “lowbrow.”⁸

In 20th century America, the rise of democratic ideals about public culture within the middle class created a need for an additional category of cultural standing: the “middlebrow,” is often equated with the U.S. mainstream or popular culture. In Europe, economic class was more fixed and more indicative of cultural standing, while in the U.S., a democratic and populist nation, popularity is often equated superiority; after all, even government officials are elected by majority rule. “The only type of excellence that the average person can endure is celebrity, which is the excellence of numbers, and

hence acceptable to democracy. When democracy is conjoined with capitalism, numbers rule inexorably” (Joshi 13). In the U.S., “the primary categories of culture have been the products of ideologies which were always subject to modifications and transformations, the perimeters of our cultural divisions have been permeable and shifting rather than fixed and immutable,” (Levine 8). However, the elites in the U.S., eager to be respected culturally on the world stage, insist on a difference between what is popular and what is high quality and therefore highbrow (2).

Within these various “brow” communities, certain identifying characteristics were established in order to define what belonged to whom. In his book, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, John Guillory describes how various communities construct a list of objects of value within specific categories, known as canons. These canons “which can only be properly valued within the respective community of the object’s production” create a hierarchy of genres within a specific category, like literature or film (Guillory 277). In theory, those who find such distinctions important create a canon of exceptional or exemplary texts, against which all other entries into the field will be measured. For the “majority” culture, the bestseller list emerges as one of those canon makers, attempting to balance the lowbrow value of popularity against the standards of literary culture (142; 167).

According to Alice Payne Hackett, author of *70 Years of Best Sellers: 1895-1965*: “The term ‘best seller’ was coined and came into common use because it filled a need. A term was needed to describe what were not necessarily the best books but the books that people liked best” (ix). This distinction means that the bestseller list never intended to become the measure of the best books, but only to record the books that sold well.

Hackett and Frank Luther Mott, author of *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States*, trace the first regularly published bestseller list to the February 1895 issue of *The Bookman*, a monthly literary magazine edited by Harry Thurston Peck (Hackett 2; Mott 6). The headline above this first list reads simply “Sales of Books During the Month” and claims to list “New books, in order of demand, as sold between January 1 and February 1, 1895.” The list is then divided into 20 regions, including Uptown New York, Downtown New York, Albany, Boston, Chicago and Portland, OR, and the top 6 or 7 titles from those areas. “By 1902, the term ‘best seller’ was well established, mainly through the publicity derived from *The Bookman*’s lists, as a term specifically applied to books” (Hackett 2).

The term “bestseller” itself can take on different meanings depending on the context. When listing the books in demand, Peck simply sought to record the titles, authors and publishers of recently published books as they were purchased in various regions of the country. Newspaper lists now seek to record the highest selling titles nationwide, carefully polling, weighting and calculating the placement of titles on the list in an attempt to represent the national book buying public.⁹ Book authors like Hackett and Korda have written books tracing the yearly bestseller lists of specific publications in order to get a sense of the evolution of book buying, publishing and marketing over decades. However, these lists can be deceptive. It is possible for a book to be named the number one selling book of the year, but never appear at number one on a weekly or monthly list. Examples of this phenomenon include: *The Miracle of the Bells* by Russell Janey in 1947 and *Kids Say the Darndest Things* by Art Linkletter in 1958 (Bear 110). Yearly lists tend to feature books with a longer period of popularity and appeal,

rather than books that appear as flash sensations. It is this type of phenomenon that Robert Escarpit attempts to explain by drawing the distinction between the “fast sellers” which sell rapidly upon release, then fall off the radar entirely; the “steady seller” which slowly gains a steady and enduring popularity; and the “best seller” which combines the previous two categories by selling many copies quickly and then maintaining steady sales (qtd in Miller 2). Lists that attempt to classify the best selling books “of all time” will have few titles in common with any weekly list and the value of both lists may be very different.

Therefore, the term “bestseller” means different things when applied to different texts and/or across decades, and the actual categories of book that can achieve bestseller status varies widely. Changes in the U.S. population, as well as changes in publishing, methods of reporting, and an ever increasing array of places in which one can purchase books alters the make up of the books on a weekly list. As these national and industry changes occur, the bestseller list adjusts too. As we will see, some of these adjustments have proven to be routine, like increasing the number of stores surveyed or altering the number of books that appear on a given list. Other changes to the list are caused by great changes in the bookselling world that put pressure on the list to conform to new standards. In theory, no canon or set of guidelines can determine what types of books will become a bestseller. However, there is cultural value, as well as economic incentive, to being the premier bestseller list. The value is high enough that the *New York Times*, over the course of 50 years, actively cultivated that status by editorializing its bestseller list to ensure that it best reflects the elitist-tending middlebrow values its readers have come to expect.

Historically, the general public was first made aware of the concept of best selling books through popular publications, such as the *New York Times*, which occasionally but inconsistently featured “Books in Demand” lists. Reports were made monthly, and sometimes were directly reprinted from *The Bookman*. The lists were “chattier” than the current grids and charts we recognize today, openly acknowledging the difficulties of compiling the lists and the disparities between cities or months (Korda xviii). *The New York Times* “Books in Demand” list from September 28, 1901 reads:

It is not possible to say that any particular book has been the best seller in Boston this month. The reports from the dealers are unusually varying. "Blennerhassett" is given first place by two dealers, second place by two, and third place by a third; others do not place it at all. If the list were to be made up like the summary of a trotting race "Blennerhassett" would undoubtedly occupy the first line . . . The department stores continue to name "The Crisis" first.

Regional lists sometimes varied greatly in content, while single titles sometimes swept the nation on a tide of popularity. Lists were years away from a standardized format and comparisons between lists are virtually impossible, as their data collection methods, locations, duration of sales periods, and reporting styles were often scattershot and inconsistent.

The business of commenting on books became a cultural marker, the sign of a culturally relevant publication. *The New York Times* debuted in 1851 and added a book review section in October 10, 1896. *Publishers Weekly* began publishing its own Fiction bestseller list as a monthly feature in 1912 and have published a list of the ten best selling books of the year ever since (Korda xxvii). In 1919, *Publishers Weekly* expanded its coverage to include nonfiction books. The editors displayed a measure of anxiety about how to describe the nonfiction category, regularly changing the name from “nonfiction” to “general” or “general literature” (Justice 5). In the decade leading up

to the first world war, multiple children's books found their way onto the *Publishers Weekly* monthly and yearly lists. Those titles included *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (1904), *Molly Make Believe* (1911), *Pollyanna* (1914), and *Pollyanna Grows Up* (1915).

The origins of children's literature is even less definitive than the bestseller list. Children's literature experts often credit the first example of a book designed explicitly for children to John Newbery, a British publisher, who offered "A Pretty Little Pocket-Book" to his customers in 1744 (Marcus 7). The book is the first known example of a "toy" book and is often mentioned as the progenitor of children's literature as we know it. Perhaps owing to its birth as a novelty item, the taint of "usefulness" has never been fully exorcized from children's literature: Bourdieu excluded children's books from his surveys because he assumed "that children's books are utilitarian rather than literary texts" (Kidd 167). In addition, its association with children allow many people to assume that children's literature fits into the categories that Bourdieu uses to describe popular or lowbrow texts: easy, simple, and childish. Children's books were originally designed to be either "toys," or instructional books, such as primers or religious texts to be used in the moral and religious education of youth. Many children's literature experts assert that these assumptions and historical uses mean "[t]he study of children's texts is technically *more* complex than the study of adult books, partly because the audience is different, . . . and partly because of the *range* of texts and the *range* of purposes" (Hunt, "Delight" 25). However, to the general public, these historical uses have often been used to classify children's texts as childish, immature and less valuable than other forms of literature. Unfortunately for children's literature enthusiasts, "with a few exceptions –

children's books are equated with 'popular' texts in the adult system, and are therefore, by definition, inferior" (Hunt 19).

While the term "bestseller" caught on quickly in America, the term "children's literature" was slower in achieving widespread recognition. Children's literature scholars often recognize the period between 1850 and 1910 as the "Golden Age of Children's Literature" even though it occurred before the field was fully established.¹⁰ This period resulted in the publication of classic titles such as *Alice in Wonderland* (1855/56), *Little Women* (1868), *Five Little Peppers and How they Grew* (1880), *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1886), and *The Wizard of Oz* (1900). The 1850s also marked the start of the free library movement in the U.S.: the Hartford Library Association began to provide free library service to the city and the first publicly funded library opened in Boston (Marcus 31; Lepore 1). These libraries allowed children's literature to flourish and develop, where librarians began to insist on special children's sections staffed by well-informed children's librarians. These librarians were entrusted with selecting the very best that children's publishing had to offer in order to provide access to high quality literature to as many children as possible, "surrounding young people with books that fed their sense of wonder and imagination without also exposing them to the world's cares" (Marcus ix). As women like the indomitable Anne Carroll Moore, first librarian in the New York City Public Library children's room, asserted their control and tastes over children's literature in general, they were forced to confront the definition and meaning of the term children's literature. To do this, they sought to establish a series of guidelines for determining which texts would be deemed the best (Lepore 3-4). Moore

and her colleagues established themselves as the taste making authorities when it came to deciding which books were appropriate for children.

Moore also pioneered the children's literature canon by compiling a list of "twenty-five hundred standard titles in children's literature" to be included in the new children's libraries around the country (Lepore 2). Classic texts from the Golden Age, such as *Alice in Wonderland*, were placed at the center of the emerging children's literature canon, since these books were already recognized for their artistic and groundbreaking qualities in the field of general fiction. As Seth Lerer, a Stanford professor of literature noted, "Sometimes, books labeled as juvenile are, instead, antique" (qtd in Lepore 3). He claims that while many texts for kids are either about the Middle Ages or incorporate conventions of that genre, many are also transplants from another time period. "Lurking in the stacks of every 'children's library' are dozens of literary imposters: satires, from ages past, hiding their fangs and shiny new books, dressed up in some very old clothes" (Lepore 4). In an attempt to increase the standing of children's literature in the eyes of the public at large, many of these classic texts were inducted into the canon, leading to confusion in the eyes of many about what was then, or what is now, correctly called children's literature. By insisting that books with literary and artistic value, regardless of length, subject matter or potential adult appeal, could qualify as children's literature, these founding sisters of the genre left the door open for arguments that even Harry Potter did not belong solely to a children's audience.

At the same time, American publishers did not see value in children's literature, so in the early part of the 19th century, they often hired women, considered to be naturally interested in children, to head their small and experimental juvenile departments.¹¹ The

American public at the turn of the century recognized neither the cultural value nor the educational value of children's books, especially children's fiction. "Advocates for children's literature responded to this devaluation by insisting upon levels of distinction, in effect creating a middlebrow tradition of children's literature, and perhaps positioning 'children's literature' as a middlebrow formation more generally" (Kidd 170). Moore and her contemporaries attempted to establish a series of high expectations and demands for children's literature in an attempt to form a canon of children's literature that would place the entire enterprise on a higher rung on the cultural ladder, well within the middlebrow.

Like the bestseller list, children's literature began making successful forays into mainstream culture via periodicals in the 1920s. 1918 marked the first year that Moore began publishing a regular column in *The Bookman*. She refused to talk about popular children's literature or what children were reading, but instead focused on what children *should* be reading to improve their minds and manners. The 1920s marked an explosion in children's literature publishing: in 1919, 433 new titles for children were published, whereas in 1929, 931 new titles were published (Marcus 104). In 1921, the first Newbery Medal for excellence in children's writing was awarded to Hendrik van Loon for *The Story of Mankind*, in an attempt to crown a select number of children's books as literary and new classics (Kidd 173). The rise in children's literature sales led to increasing press coverage. In October of 1924, *The Horn Book* made the move from a children's bookstore newsletter to a magazine. In January of 1930, the *New York Times Book Review* jumped on the bandwagon and inaugurated a fortnightly page, which reviewed books for young readers. The *Herald-Tribune* began publishing a

similar weekly column shortly after, forcing the *Times* to make their feature weekly in order to compete. The same year, the *New Yorker* began publishing an annual feature on the state of literature for young people (Marcus 111).

In response to the growing visibility of children's literature in literary circles, *Publishers Weekly* debuted the first ever juvenile fiction bestseller list on February 15, 1930. The bestseller page that day contained 3 lists – fiction, nonfiction, and juvenile – with ten titles each. However, the first interaction between children's books and the bestseller list was to be short-lived. In a redesign in May 1932, the juvenile list was printed separately from the other two lists. It is unclear why the list was discontinued, but it disappeared in the June 1932 issue and did not appear again for nearly 60 years (Justice 5). The *New York Times Book Review* also published a list of the five top selling juvenile titles in December of 1935, but it was immediately withdrawn the following month (Justice 10).

Based on the “historic reluctance of book reviewers and the book review media to get embroiled in the sordid question of what is selling as opposed to the question of what is worth reading,” it is possible to theorize why bestseller lists were most uncomfortable evaluating children's literature based on their popularity (Korda xxi). It may have been due to the extremely vocal, and increasingly media savvy, children's librarians who felt the evolution of children's literature was best left to them. It might have been due to the elitist tendencies of the bestseller list editors who then, as now, felt children's literature did not have a place in a measure of mainstream literary consumption. Most likely, in the first half of the century, the bestseller list was still

reaching to legitimize its own version of the popular; its editors could not afford to spend cultural capital to assist children's literature with its own legitimacy struggle.

As America fell into the Depression, children's literature turned slowly from a highly visible enterprise seeking admittance into the mainstream, towards a more insulated field (Marcus 109). The Newbery Prize, which attempted to "legitimize children's literature . . . contributed to the ongoing separation of children's and "serious"/adult literature . . . effectively removed children's literature from broader public ownership despite (or rather through) those claims about fashioning a public" (Kidd 173). As children's literature retreated into its own "secret garden," bestseller lists took root in the nation's consciousness and established a strong presence in cultural tastemaking over the next few decades. After a period of insulated development, children's literature would again seek a place in the cultural mainstream in the 1970s, where it would find resistance from cultural institutions like the bestseller list.

War of the Tastemakers: A Battle between Popularity and Critical Acclaim

As the Depression raged, children's publications began to struggle, as extraneous or experimental budgets were the first to be cut from publishing houses and librarians purchased fewer books (Marcus 110). Moore's column in the *New York Herald Tribune* was discontinued and she retreated to the genre-specific *Horn Book* in 1930 (Marcus 127). *The Bookman* folded and ceased publishing in 1933, leaving others to pick up the bestseller list tradition it had started. To add to children's literature's worries, new competition for the attention of children began to emerge in force. The Disney animated film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* premiered December 22, 1937 and despite harsh criticism from children's librarians, it was an immediate success. Comic books were also invented in the mid-1930s and rapidly climbed in popularity, much to the

dismay of children's literature critics, who found them to be crude and inappropriate when it came to the advancement of children's minds (Marcus 136-137). In response, the first Caldecott medal was awarded June 14, 1938, as a celebration of a high quality children's illustrated work staged against the backdrop of animated films, comic books and photograph-filled magazine's pages (138). From this moment on, each successive generation would hear cries from librarians, educators, and parents that children were distracted from the serious business of reading by the newest technology. Over the past half-century, television, music, video games, computers and the Internet have all been blamed for the "death of the book."

Following the Depression, the 1940s marked a distinct shift in the way Americans evaluated the legitimacy and literariness of books. With less money to spend on books, fewer books in print due to wartime paper rationing, and more choices in entertainment than ever before, Americans became more concerned with reading the "right" books. However, instead of relying on critical acclaim from experts, they began to look to their neighbors. On August 9, 1942, the *New York Times* debuted the bestseller list as we currently know it: a weekly feature appearing in the center of the Sunday *Book Review*. It contained a fiction and nonfiction list to start. The number of titles listed on the book review was fluid over the next 3 years, fluctuating between 5 and 20 titles, with the average at 15. Some have speculated that the number of titles changed depending on how much space needed to be filled in the pages of the *Review* that week (Justice 8). *Publishers Weekly* turned its monthly list into a weekly list for the first time that same week: August 8, 1942 marked the first weekly list in the magazine's history (Justice 6). Despite the coinciding "birthdays" of these lists, over the next half century, the *Times*

would come to dominate the realm of middlebrow taste making, taking the position previously held by critics from the literary elite.

The appeal to popularity as a selling point is a uniquely American phenomenon.¹²

As Ruth Miller notes in her book *Myths and Mores in American Best Sellers: 1865-1965*:

Alexis de Tocqueville, aware of the American's need for conformity in a uniquely competitive world, would have been delighted to read today's book advertisements. The major appeal to the potential customer is not that the book is interesting, relevant, exciting, well-written or has any of the other qualities that might make one wish to read a particular book, but rather that it is a best seller. If one buys it one joins the great majority, and need not seek the strength to defend one's individual taste, even to oneself. (Elson 12)

This desire to be a part of the well-read crowd creates a demand for a reliable source to recommend the most popular titles.¹³ This desire became more pronounced in the 1950s, as individuals sought a place in the "American dream" version of middlebrow life. Thus, the 1950s began to visibly reinforce the concept that bestsellers create bestsellers. A book at the top of the bestseller list one week is likely to see an uptake in sales the following week, as lists in popular publications like the *New York Times* function not only as reported figures, but as advertisements. Conveniently located at the center of the *Times Book Review* is a list of books that your friends, neighbors, co-workers and in-laws have already read and will expect you to be familiar with as well. The list even featured large boxes and distinctive design features that made it easy to locate in the book section, in the midst of all the highbrow critical reviews. However, while the bestseller list claims to provide you with a picture of what the nation is reading, it fails to emphasize the fact that the list is a filtered image, narrowed through the lens of a specific type of middlebrow categorization.

As the influence of bestsellers lists grew, the influence of children's literature advocates like Moore seemed to be waning. Popularity began to take precedence over expert recommendations or reviewers' opinions when deciding what book to buy, even in children's literature. In October 1945, E.B. White published *Stuart Little* against the vehement protest of Moore, and her successor at the New York Public Library, Frances Clarke Sayers, declined to stock the book on the shelves (Lepore 7). Despite their attempts to ensure no one read the book, the public purchased it in great numbers. E.B. White's second book, *Charlotte's Web*, was similarly criticized by Moore, and was also extremely successful; it spent a combined total of 489 weeks on the *Times/Publishers Weekly* bestseller lists (Justice 326). Children's librarians worried that if parents no longer saw them as the most trusted source for finding appropriate and high quality children's literature, who would ensure the right books found their way into the hands of children? In a choice between protecting the high standards and middlebrow expectations of the genre, or allowing children's literature to fully enter the mainstream, the leaders chose to protect their status. By choosing to value and protect the best of children's literature through canonization and a cultural hierarchy, the librarians determined to save children's literature implied that the texts with which the public was most familiar were of lowbrow status. It would not take long for the public perception of these popular texts to be transferred to all of children's literature.

According to Guillory, this kind of hierarchy of bestsellers and classic texts began to take shape in the early 1900s, when:

certain 'popular' works are relegated to the lower levels of the system, other 'serious' works to the higher, and this sorting out across the vertical structure of the educational system, initially very modest, is gradually more marked over the succeeding century and a half . . . the prestige of literary

works as cultural capital is assessed according to the limit of their dissemination, their relative exclusivity. (133)

This applies not only to the ways in which the canonization of children's literature may have actually harmed the overall public opinion of popular children's texts, but also why the *Times* excludes certain types of books from its lists. The *Times* sought to find the middle ground between popular and highbrow texts in order to appeal to the middlebrow, while attempting to sell itself as the most selective list, in order to confer value on the idea of "bestseller status."

From the 1950s on, the *New York Times* list was the most widely read list by the non-industry public, and so it became the most important list for book publishers and sellers (Miller 3). As many U.S. publishers are located in New York, they regard the *Times* as their "hometown" paper (4). This, coupled with the high regard for the *Book Review* within the industry and a wide readership of the list in the public, means to many that the *New York Times Book Review* bestseller list is *the* list of note. The *Times* began to police the list to prevent the unserious books from crowding out the serious ones and to ensure that the maintained its importance and value. Otherwise, unserious people might look to the list for guidance, while the elite, who have the money and cultural capital, would view the list as vulgar and useless for their purposes. Thus, the *Times* actively works to maintain this delicate balance between bestsellers and literature in order to remain a major tastemaker.

Over the years, the *Times* editors have regularly included features with names like "Editors Choice" or "Recommended New Titles" next to the bestsellers. These features showcase the most serious and literary of newly released titles. By placing serious literature alongside of the popular titles, the *Times* shores up its own authority by

averaging out the brow level of the list page. As we have seen, failing to make the *Times* list is not unusual, but being removed from that list or exiled to a “lesser” list amounts to an extremely visible rejection by one of the major tastemakers of our times.

Bestseller list editors at the *Times* and other publications create rules and guidelines used for collecting data in order to ensure that certain types of books are excluded from the list. Sometimes, titles are excluded simply to narrow down the scope of the list. Cookbooks, textbooks, manuals and genre books, like romance novels, are left out of the *Times* tallies. Mott notes that his list “omits all bibles, prayer-books, hymnals, almanacs, cookbooks, ‘doctor-books,’ textbooks, dictionaries, and manuals” (9). To this list, Hackett adds: pamphlets, encyclopedias, “and certain other ‘non-books,’ such as picture and game books” (11). According to Miller, “compilers of a 1934 *Publishers’ Weekly* list displaying the best-sellers for a period of over fifty years decided to exclude major sellers such as the *Fannie Farmer Cookbook* and the *Boy Scout Manual* because they were used, not read” (6). For those who place children’s literature among the types of books that are useful rather than literary, this pattern of exclusion would certainly allow the *Times* bestseller list editors to exclude children’s literature as a matter of course.

However, in other instances, exclusions are also made in the interest of taste. “In 1961, the *Chicago Tribune* announced that it would no longer give free publicity generated by its best-seller list to books that were ‘sewer-written by dirty-fingered authors for dirty-minded readers’” and excluded books by Harold Robbins and Henry Miller (Miller 6). An article by Franky Schaeffer in the *Saturday Evening Post* in January 1983 highlighted the fact that “[b]ooks by Christians published by Christian book

companies” almost never appear on the *Times* list, despite outselling “their contemporary secular counterparts, often by a ratio of 3 to 1” (qtd in Bear 159). He, and other religious figures have recently pointed to this fact as an example of the secular world’s anti-Christian “bigotry.”¹⁴

The preemptive exclusionary tactics of the lists are not always successful. Traditionally, when a new, invasive type of bestseller threatens the integrity of a list, its editors create separate “special” lists in order to sideline them. The first example of a re-listing to exclude books occurred in 1917-1918, when *Publishers Weekly* felt it was necessary to publish a separate “War Books” category to clear all of the WWI titles out of the general nonfiction list (Korda 29-31). On the one hand, those new forms of bestselling books are granted valuable real estate on the prestigious pages of their day, though they are often beyond needing the advertisement at that point. On the other hand, this “feature” position often has a limited duration and it may be pushed aside, downgraded to a monthly feature or removed at any point, making the genre appear disposable.

Furthermore, when moving beyond the specific moment of publication, classification of texts often becomes fuzzy. Changing tastes may mean a change in classification for books. Similarly, the boundary between children’s literature and adult literature is even harder to define, especially over a long period of time, as tastes and judgments of a title may change. In Hackett’s list of the bestselling books from 1895-1965, she notes juvenile fiction titles among the adult books. However, she includes the caveat that: “Many of the titles listed as juvenile fiction were originally published as adult books, but changing taste has now placed them in the category of juvenile or, at least,

young adult reading” (11). Malcolm Cowley is quoted as stating that the distinction between “a classic (a book admired by intelligent readers through several generations) and a best seller (a book purchased by many readers in one generation)” is not absolute. “The terms, he says, ‘are not mutually exclusive – a best seller may become a classic in time, as happened with Dickens’ novels” (Hackett 7). Therefore, if popular books are popular for long enough they may become classics, even if they are considered simple or childish in their particular historical moment.

Of interest to this particular investigation is the conflation between “classic” texts, popular texts, and texts that are claimed by children’s literature. Mott records a list of “twenty-one books of general reading which occupy a kind of best-seller heaven of their own” having sold more than two million copies each in the United States (as of the book’s publication in 1947). This list includes nine titles traditionally associated with children’s literature, such as *Alice in Wonderland*, *A Christmas Carol*, *Little Women* and *Tom Sawyer*, and one illustrated *Story of the Bible* which would be suitable for children (8). Likewise, Leonard Marcus notes:

In the United States, several of the most widely read books of the last decades of the nineteenth century (as gauged by sales) would be children’s books: from 1865 to 1869, *Hans Brinker*, *Little Women*, and *Innocents Abroad*; from 1870-1879, *Little Men*, *The Hoosier School-Master*, and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; from 1880 to 1889, *Uncle Remus*, *Heidi*, *Treasure Island*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and *Little Lord Fauntleroy*; and from 1890 to 1889, *Black Beauty*. (Marcus 43)

In part, the number of children’s literature titles that rank as “bestsellers” due to steady sales over decades helped ensure the presence of a profitable juvenile department in the majority of publishing houses in the United States. In 1949, the president of Random House admitted to a group from the Authors Guild of America that children’s literature was a successful venture for publishing houses. “Golden Books are now the

biggest part of Simon and Schuster and Walter Farley's horse books are among the biggest money makers at Random House" (Marcus 180).

The *New York Times* again attempted to introduce a "Children's Best Sellers" list on November 16, 1952. It contained 16 titles and was explained by "an analysis based on reports from leading booksellers in 30 cities, showing the year's sales rating of 16 leading children's books published during the first 10 months of 1952" (Justice 10). However, that list was only published annually in November from 1952 to 1958, just in time for the Christmas shopping season. The list appeared bi-annually from 1959 to 1973, when it disappeared from the *Times* again. These brief appearances of children's literature lists are reflective of a steadily increasing presence of books for children and parents' preoccupation with providing the right kind of books for their children. However, it is clear from the irregular appearance that the genre was still considered less important than other forms of literature at the time, and a type of literature not usually judged by popularity or mass appeal. Despite the popularity of children's literature among the baby boomers, a regular, weekly children's list was still too far outside of the middlebrow culture that the *Times* continued to cultivate.

Only the "Best": Narrowing the Field through Adaptations and Categorizations

The *Times* bestseller list attempted to establish itself as the most elite of all the lists by favoring books considered high on the literacy scale and cultivating an air of exclusivity. The *Book Review* itself continued to review and comment on the highbrow literary texts for the literary elite, but the bestseller list circulated to greater numbers of people, regardless of brow level. Despite this elitist tendency, developments in publishing and book buying pushed the *Times* to adjust the composition of the list and its polling methods in order to maintain access to the middlebrow or risk losing its

position as the “best” list. The acceptance of paperback books into the mainstream reading culture was a major shift in literary culture. Once synonymous with the paperbound dime novels and comic books, paperbacks were considered the epitome of lowbrow literature. However, the tension between this traditional stance and growing popular appeal with middle class readers in the 1960s created anxiety in bestseller editors about how to properly include paperbacks into their catalogue of bestselling titles.

On December 5, 1965, the *Times* added a paperback list as a once a month feature, usually released during the first week of the month. It started out with 5 title lists for “fiction” and “general” titles. After six years, it was moved to the bottom of the page, replaced by “Recommended New Titles” at the top (Justice 9). In February 1974, brief one-line descriptions of the book were added to the title, author name, publisher and price on the list. In an attempt to mediate the brow level of paperbacks, in March of the same year, the list changed again: the categories “Fiction” and “General” were replaced by “mass market” and “trade” lists. It was clear that the “mass market” paperback category would serve as a scapegoat for those who saw all paperbacks as inferior, while the elite sounding title of “trade paperbacks” gave readers a sense that these were the select, insider books to be considered superior to the popular, vulgar paperbacks read by the masses. Books that had always been associated with the paperback form, like romance novels, were still excluded from these lists.

Publishers Weekly introduced similar mass market and trade paperback lists in 1976, though the chart positions were unnumbered and contained only 5 titles to the hardcover’s 15 titles. “Like the story papers, dime novels and pulp magazines of other

publishing eras, the paperback book was born to serve a market that did not suggest immediate respectability, and even though the paperback sales continued to increase . . . the lists providing information on paperback sales were yet to be considered fully legitimate” (Justice 9). *Publishers Weekly* expanded the trade paperback list to 10 titles and the mass market to 15 by 1977, but their lists remained relatively stable for the next decade, minus some cosmetic changes (7). The anxiety over paperback books thus caused a major identity crisis for the established bestseller lists. The *Times* had to carefully integrate the new book form into their lists while weighing its cultural value. As paperbacks became acceptable and legitimate in the mainstream culture, the *Times* had no choice but to adjust, or risk falling out of the mainstream, in this case on the side of the elites.

A similar controversy over polling wholesalers in addition to book stores in the 1980s continued to force editors to acknowledge their audience in the mainstream. In 1986, *Publishers Weekly* noted that the list was now “compiled from data received from large-city, university and chain bookstores, book wholesalers and independent distributors nationwide” (Justice 7). Some felt that the middlebrow book buying public, who were just as likely to pick up a book at a box store, chain bookstore or airport gift shop as a traditional bookstore, were not being fairly represented. However, critics pointed out that non-bookstore venues were the most likely to only stock bestselling books. By polling those sales venues, the list would essentially create a feedback loop, ensuring the same bestsellers were listed week after week. In the end, both *Publishers Weekly* and the *Times* were pressured into polling the wholesalers or risk being deemed out of touch with the mainstream book buyer.

However, the appeal of the bestseller list also worked to influence the categorization of other texts which sought to be accepted into the list's view of mainstream. By the 1970s, the bestseller list had accumulated enough cultural capital to be seen as a legitimizing force, capable of conferring bestseller status, and the rewards that come with it, on a select scope of books. By trying to capitalize upon that popularity, a 1970s British crossover further confused the division between children's literature and general fiction. After being rejected by 13 publishers, *Watership Down* was finally published in England in November 1972 by Penguin as a juvenile fantasy book. It won both the Carnegie Medal in 1972 and the Guardian Children's Prize for Fiction in 1973. However, when the book crossed the Atlantic to the United States, *Watership Down* was reclassified as an adult fiction text. According to Marcus, "the president of Avon, a major paperback house, read the book and, recognizing its bestseller potential, paid a substantial sum for paperback rights" (269). This led the editors at Macmillan to reclassify it and publish it "on the general trade list where it could be given the broadest possible exposure" (270). On May 5, 1974, *Watership Down* appeared at #1 on the *Times* and *Publishers Weekly* fiction bestseller lists and remained there for more than three months; it was released as a mass-market paperback and appeared on those lists in 1975. The category change precipitated by American bestseller list politics did not seem to impact the audience: the book was, and is, popular with adults and children. "Of course, the divisions and categories established by publishing houses and academia have never determined or even closely mirrored the reading customs and practices of children and adults" (Zipes xxxii). In order to purchase and successfully market a former children's book in the U.S., it was

necessary for its publishers to reclassify it as an adult text, so that the book might fit into the preconceived notion of bestsellerdom.

The next major change in the *New York Times* bestseller list came on January 1, 1984. With the rise of self-help and advice books in the 1980s, the nonfiction list was crowded with such titles. In response to criticism that “serious nonfiction” was being crowded out by “humor and how-to books,” the *Times* created a new list for “Advice, How-to and Miscellaneous” in both hardcover and paperback. The paperback lists were now titled “General” and “Advice, How-To and Miscellaneous,” while the hardcover lists included the new category, fiction and nonfiction. Booksellers found the revision to be “confusing” and unnecessary. One bookseller called it “foolish clutter which is decreasing the importance of the list as a whole,” while others approved, saying, “it’s a smart move” (Bear 204). This is an example of the *Times* exerting a form of gate keeping against unacceptable forms of literature by expelling them from the most legitimate of the lists. Over time, this special list would be moved around, the number of titles changed based on available space and eventually, moved from the printed page to the website.

The “How-to” category in the *Times* also sparked a proliferation of niche or specialized lists. While in the case of the *Times*, the list was created in order to maintain the standard of titles in its nonfiction lists, other publications began to feature specific genres of books in deference to a niche audience. In the autumn of 1990, *Publishers Weekly* introduced a monthly religious bestseller list, both hardcover and paperback, as well as an audio bestseller list, divided into fiction and nonfiction (Justice

7). The *Times* re-split the paperback fiction list into Trade and Mass Market lists in September 2007 and added the Graphic Books list on March 9, 2009.

Even with a proliferation of categories, the indecision and anxiety over children's lists in particular remained. In August 1990, *Publishers Weekly* re-introduced a monthly list of children's bestsellers, in the categories of Picture Books, Younger Readers, Middle Readers, Young Adults and Nonfiction. In 1996, *Publishers Weekly* featured an article listing the "100 Best Selling Children's Books of All Time" and reprised the feature, updated to include Harry Potter, in 2002. The *New York Times* annual list of children's bestsellers reappeared in November of 1977, this time divided into "Hardcover Best Sellers" and "Paperback Best Sellers" with 15 titles each. The yearly list appeared once more in November 1978 before disappearing for over twenty years. Neither that list nor anything like it appeared in the *New York Times Book Review* until it debuted the children's literature list on July 23, 2000.

CHAPTER 3 CONCLUSION

Bestsellerdom in many ways behaves like a cultural prize. According to the formulations of James English in *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards and the Circulation of Value*, a cultural prize is “a kind of competitive spectacle,” that “produces the specifically modern form of capital we call celebrity” (51). Outside of the mainstream lists, others attempted to fill a specific audience or genre niche. Since the *Times* and other established lists often survey independent and chain bookstores and weight their input to create a balance between them, the chain bookstore’s lists are often different from those in the newspapers. As each of these lists attempts to assert its own independence, claim its own audience and establish its own legitimacy, the lists compete with each other for placement within the highbrow/lowbrow spectrum. “Prizes, an instrument of cultural hierarchy, would themselves come increasingly to describe a hierarchical array, a finely indexed system of greater and lesser symbolic rewards, the negotiation of which constitutes a kind of second-order game or subsidiary cultural marketplace” (English 54).

Bestseller status, like many other prizes, comes with an economic reward. Bestselling books are likely to sell even more copies. Bookstores often prominently feature displays of bestselling books with the most recent bestseller list of choice posted nearby, on the assumption that popularity will breed future popularity. This economic incentive to be on the list is one of the reasons that the data gathering and ranking systems of the major lists are so hotly contested; the difference between appearing at #1 and #11 on the *Times* bestseller list could alter sales by millions of copies of books. Since the 1970s, contracts between publishers and authors often include elevator

clauses, stipulating bonuses to be paid when an author makes the list, according to how high it ranks and how many weeks it lingers (Miller 7).

In the age of 80s greed, the economic incentive to writing, publishing and publicizing bestsellers was at an all time high. Michael Korda, editor and chief of Simon & Schuster, recounts a meeting in which an accountant chided the editors, saying, “Do you guys realize how much money the company would make if you only published bestsellers?” (173) The bestseller “prize” is so valuable that some people attempt to manipulate the system in order to achieve that status. Korda notes that rumors of movie companies or individuals buying copies of books in bulk to influence the list abound, but that “not too many people . . . really want to buy fifty or a hundred thousand copies of a book just to get it onto the bestseller list” (xxii). In her article “The Best Seller List as Marketing Tool and Historical Fiction,” Laura J. Miller details a number of other similar schemes, including the rumor that Jacqueline Susann, author of *Valley of the Dolls*, cozied up to booksellers known to report to the *Times* and a consulting firm connected to the authors of *The Discipline of Market Leaders* spent \$200,000 at various outlets in order to get the book on the bestseller list for 15 weeks (6).¹⁵

William Peter Blatty, author of *The Exorcist*, went so far as to file a \$6 million dollar lawsuit against the *New York Times* when his book, *Legion*, did not make the list the first week it was released (Bear 198). In August 1983, he claimed intentional negligence and injurious falsehood on the part of the *Times Book Review* editors cost him large sums of money and pursued the suit all the way to the Supreme Court. The court ruled in favor of the *Times*, accepting its assertion that the list was an “editorial product” and therefore covered under the First Amendment (Miller 8). As a result of the

lawsuit, the *Times* began including fine print beneath the weekly list, first claiming that the list was statistically adjusted, but gradually adding addendums and caveats as time went on.¹⁶

As the Internet became a greater force in book buying in the 90s, the *Times*, in an attempt to remain modern, current and thus, relevant, placed a link to BarnesandNoble.com on the bestseller website in 1995. In return, Barnes and Noble offered a 30% discount on all *Times* bestsellers purchased from their website. Furious at the favoritism, independent booksellers organized a boycott and 100 stores refused to report their sales figures to *Times* reporters. The *Times* attempted to make amends by creating yet another list, one that featured top selling titles based on data solely from independent sellers while reassuring readers that not enough independent sellers participated in the boycott to damage the integrity of the list (Miller 9). In 1999, Amazon.com, Borders.com and the *Times* filed lawsuits against one another over the use of the *Times* bestseller list in discounting policy, since the *Times* claimed intellectual property rights to the list on the Internet (Miller 9).¹⁷ By attempting to protect the exclusivity of its bestseller list, the *Times* provoked these Internet giants into competition and contributed to the proliferation of list makers.

Following this lawsuit, new lists appeared everywhere, each with a specific marketing profile. The Amazon.com top seller list or the Barnes and Noble top ten bestsellers track the books sold in that specific establishment or chain, acting as a measure of units sold and a measure of success of that brand. That list appearing on a website, or the wall of a store, or quoted in a newspaper article also acts as an advertisement that says: "This book sold here."¹⁸ The BookSense list is compiled by the

consortium of independent bookstores and thus only polls those independents. While each list claims to be individual and unique, the majority of titles overlap all the lists, making the distinction between the lists nearly impossible. “The fields of art thus become littered with awkwardly redundant consecrations, whose once fiercely guarded differences have ceased to be discernable” (English 52). However, by the time the *Times* decided to exile Harry Potter, these Internet giants had accrued enough cultural capital to lend their new bestseller lists legitimacy. To many, Amazon.com and Barnes and Noble could be considered equal points of comparison or alternative options by competing news outlets and angry Rowling fans.

As the list of repute, the *Times* is in constant danger of being replaced at the top of the hierarchy by one of the competing lists, so it attempts to adapt and change with the times. However, the proliferation of categories, niche lists and listing organizations not only intensifies this form of hierarchical competition but it also works to devalue the prestige of each individual award. By creating secondary lists to ensure the integrity of its brand, the *New York Times* has diluted its own influence and reputation.¹⁹ As more and more titles, regardless of genre, can claim “#1 *New York Times* Best Seller” status, complete with a medal on the front cover, the value of that prize decreases, because as it is no longer rare and exclusive. By working to keep non-mainstream books out of its main fiction and nonfiction list through the creation of variable, rotating and web-confined niche lists, the *Times*, like the children’s literature librarians decades before, implied that the entire category of “bestseller” is easily accessible, cheap, and therefore, lowbrow.

This competition between cultural prizes also explains why people affiliated with the highbrow look at bestsellers with disdain; they place importance in different forms of cultural capital. Thus, “prizes have served not simply as credentials but also, and no less significantly, as stigmas” (English 41). While the middlebrow in America place value and importance in popularity, those affiliated with the highbrow value other qualities and see books that have achieved this specific pinnacle of popularity, like Harry Potter, to be too rich in the wrong kind of capital. A spot at the top of any bestseller list may proclaim loudly to those elites that this book is not for them, as books that are popular and books that are good are two mutually exclusive categories. Lamenting the fact that classic Golden Age texts like *Alice* are less likely to be read by children today, Harold Bloom, famed literature critic, wondered if it might be better for children to read nothing at all than to read lowbrow books like Harry Potter.

Is there any redeeming educational use to Rowling? Is there any to Stephen King? Why read, if what you read will not enrich mind or spirit or personality . . . I hope that my discontent is not merely a highbrow snobbery, or a nostalgia for a more literate fantasy to beguile (shall we say) intelligent children of all ages. Can more than 35 million book buyers, and their offspring, be wrong? Yes, they have been, and will continue to be for as long as they persevere with Potter. (Bloom)²⁰

While Bloom was unwilling to concede any merits to Rowling's novels, he did grant her “an unusual distinction: She has changed the policy of the policy-maker.”

As we have seen, the *Times* bestseller list has long survived various crises precipitated by controversial classifications, genres, cultural values and economic pressures by adopting a policy of exclusion to protect the value of its bestseller list. However, Harry Potter proved to be too big for the popularity machine. As it occupied three possible slots on the list, with another title on the way, the phenomenon was too big to ignore and too steadfast to wait out. As many have noted, “the outsized success

of the [Harry Potter] books made them a lightning rod for attacks from many quarters” including those on the grounds of cultural exclusivity and mainstream appeal (Marcus 313).

As newspapers in the U.S. see a decline in subscriptions, repute and power, the efficacy and reputation of the *Times* bestseller list will likewise make it a target for attack. With the rise of television talk shows, internet blogs and niche marketing, it may not be possible for the *Times* to maintain its prestigious placement as the tastemaker of note, no matter what policing policies it puts into place. The editors’ attempts to thwart the “Harry Potter effect” may have even further hastened its decline in authority. Other publications exploited the visibility of the lists mechanics and preferences to promote their own list as more accurate or more attuned to a specific subset of tastes, because “every prize that declares or betrays a social agenda opens the door to new prizes claiming greater purity of aesthetic” or in this case, popular judgment (English 60). The publicity surrounding the “Harry Potter effect” gave competing publications leverage against the *Times* in the struggle for cultural legitimacy. The struggle continues, as the *Times* new children’s list has been downgraded to a monthly print feature. Those enthusiasts who saw the introduction of the anti-Potter children’s list as an increase in mainstream visibility for children’s literature must now decide how the *Times* website, where the list appears weekly, fits into a vision of cultural hierarchy.

While Korda describes the list as a “corrective reality” exposing us to the truth of our book buying and reading habits, many now realize that it is a truth filtered through the lens of the editors’ preferences, prejudices and preemptive exclusions, a mechanism that is never purely empirical but editorial in nature (x). Just as “the Harry

Potter effect” undermined the bestseller narrative, it also undermined the account of the death of the book, especially for children: in June 2003, first day sales of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* were estimated at \$100 million, while the blockbuster film *The Hulk* grossed only \$62 million over the entire weekend (Rich “Hulk”). As scholarship and studies seek to explain how Rowling captured the imagination of an entire generation, it is clear that the influence of the Harry Potter phenomenon continues to resonate over a decade after it began. While Americans will continue to look to popular authorities to tell us what to read, what to watch, and where to find the comfort of a community of taste, the tale of an orphan wizard was enough to briefly expose the truth of who is influencing whom within the bestseller system.

¹ The phrase “the Harry Potter effect” is often used to explain everything from the books’ effect on the *Times* list (Rose), Scholastic stock prices (Hayden), and children’s reading habits (Cannon). The term has no clear origin point, though I first came across it in Rose’s *Wall Street Journal* article from Sept. 1999. Authors and publishers shut out of the *Times* list also claim to have been “Pottered” (Brahim).

² The most current list printed in the *New York Times Book Review* reports sales on a 2- week delay. Starting in 1995, the *Book Review* also posted the bestseller list on-line. According to the 5 Feb 2010 bestseller list on the web: “The best-seller lists and the “Inside the List” column appear on the Web a week before they do in print.”

³ On 11 Sept 2000, the *Times* divided the list into picture books, paperbacks and chapter books. The three lists were rotated weekly in the printed version of the *Book Review*, and all three appeared every week on the *Times* website.

⁴ The *Time* cover on September 20, 1999 includes an illustration of Harry Potter’s face and the caption: “The Magic of Harry Potter: Hero of three best sellers, he’s not just for kids. Here’s why the books have captured our imagination” (Grandpre).

⁵ From *New York Times* 17 Oct 2004: “Note From the Editor: A new category has been added to the children’s best-seller list: In addition to picture, chapter and paperback books, series of three or more titles originating in hardcover will now be listed separately.” The *Times* follows the publisher designations when assigning categories for each title, which prompted some critics to advise Scholastic that when releasing *Harry Potter V*: “simply designate it as adult fiction. The boy will be 15 by then; he could be the Holden Caulfield of wizards” (Corliss).

⁶ *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* reportedly sold 8.6 million copies in the United States within 24 hours of its release, or 96 copies a second (Rich, “Sales”). The *Telegraph* reports that the same title sold an additional 3 million copies in England during the same time period. *Forbes* reported worldwide totals for the first day of sales are estimated at 15 million and puts total sales of all Harry Potter titles at 375 million copies worldwide (Celebrity).

⁷ Bourdieu asserts that institutions, such as newspapers and book critics, assist taste choices. These institutions are chosen and reinforced within a specific group and work to reinforce and reproduce taste

within their class. However, the “tastemakers” must not stray too far from the established taste preferences of that group, or risk losing their authority (232, 240).

⁸ This term, originating from the late 19th century is derived from the idea that people with high foreheads were more intelligent. The separation of highbrow culture and lowbrow culture was popularized by figures such as Matthew Arnold and T.S. Eliot, who found value in elevating certain forms of literature above others. The term middlebrow gradually evolved as a taste level between the two.

⁹ The *New York Times* does not disclose the exact formula used to weight sales from independent stores, chains, the Internet or other booksellers “because the *Times* considers its formula proprietary information” (Miller 4).

¹⁰ Dates for the Golden Age vary depending on the scholar. Among others, Carpenter dates the Golden Age to 1860-1930, while Hunt places the first Golden Age from 1863-1913 and the second Golden Age from 1945-1978. Most texts associated with the Golden Age originated in Great Britain.

¹¹ For a more detailed account of these women and their work in children’s publishing, see Marcus, *Minders of Make Believe*: “Sisters in Crisis and Conflict: the 1930s,” 110-141.

¹² 21 April 1974 marks the debut of the first regular British bestseller list, appearing in the *Sunday Times Review*. Editors marked it as their foray into the very “American” trade of tracking popularity over quality of a book (Sutherland).

¹³ The relationship between Oprah and the *Times* bestseller list is far too complex to cover in this paper. However, she proved to be the biggest competition for the *Times* at the top of the taste making hierarchy at the end of the 20th century, though her success was still measured in relation to the *Times* list. According to English: “The 1999 National Book Awards . . . presented the National Book Foundation’s 50th-Anniversary Gold Medal to one of the giants of daytime television, Oprah Winfrey. Winfrey was honored for the staggering success of the TV Book Club format her producers had conceived a few years earlier, a device which by the end of 1999 had resulted in Oprah’s monthly “picks” making the bestseller lists twenty-eight times in a row and Oprah herself being called the most powerful literary tastemaker in the nation’s history” 34). See also Minzesheimer.

¹⁴ In 1953, the *Holy Bible*, released in a *Revised Standard Version* actually appeared on the *Times* and *Publishers Weekly* lists for over a year. The *New English Bible* would also appear in 1961, though it would only spend a week at #1 in the *Times*, edged out, ironically, by *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (Bear 81).

¹⁵ In an attempt to prevent this type of “cheat,” the *Times* notes books purchased in bulk with a dagger. See Footnote below.

¹⁶ *Times* fine print, quoted from the on-line list for 5 Feb. 2010:

Rankings reflect sales, for the week ending January 30, at many thousands of venues where a wide range of general interest books are sold nationwide. These include hundreds of independent book retailers (statistically weighted to represent all such outlets); national, regional and local chains; online and multimedia entertainment retailers; university, gift, supermarket, discount department stores and newsstands. An asterisk () indicates that a book’s sales are barely distinguishable from those of the book above. A dagger (†) indicates that some bookstores report receiving bulk orders. Among those categories not actively tracked are: perennial sellers; required classroom reading; text, reference and test preparation guides; journals and workbooks; calorie counters; shopping guides; comics and crossword puzzles. Click here for an explanation of the difference between trade and mass-market paperbacks. Publishers have provided the age designations for their best-selling children’s titles.*

¹⁷ The parties eventually settled and Amazon agreed to post the titles listed in the *Times* in alphabetical order, instead of by their rank for the week. For more information about the Amazon/Borders/*New York Times* lawsuits over the use of the *Times* bestseller, see Miller.

¹⁸ The major Internet booksellers Amazon.com and BarnesandNoble.com are intricately connected with the *New York Times* list. The web version of the *Times* bestseller list features links to both web booksellers, where the books listed are discounted. As major booksellers in the United States, both companies report book sales to the *Times*. However, Barnes & Noble and its competitor Borders publicize and discount their own best sellers rather in their brick-and-mortar stores instead of the *Times* list. (Miller 10).

¹⁹ As of Feb 2010, *The New York Times* maintains 13 lists and publishes them weekly on their website. Not all lists are published in the print version of the *Times Book Review* on Sunday. The lists include:

Hardcover Fiction, Nonfiction, Advice, and Business; Paperback Trade Fiction, Popular Fiction, Advice and Nonfiction; Children's Picture, Chapter, Series and Paperback; and Graphic Books.

²⁰ Shortly after publishing his article on Rowling, Bloom published his own book for children: *Stories and Poems for Extremely Intelligent Children of All Ages* (2001). The book features "forty-one stories and tales . . . and eighty-three poems" from classic authors like Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Kipling, Keats, Hans Christian Anderson and Louis Carroll. In his introduction, Bloom states: "I do not accept the category of 'Children's Literature,' which had some use and distinction a century ago, but now all too often is a mask for the dumbing-down that is destroying our literary culture" (15-16).

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