

jcannonbooks

Because everybody
needs an editor . . .

and a newsletter



Lists and A-Listers



Lists are everywhere.

- ☒ As they should be.
- ☒ They bring us order.
- ☒ They codify peculiar interests.
- ☒ Shopping list.
- ☒ To-do list.
- ☒ Christmas list.
- ☐ Franz Liszt.

Where would we be without them? But recently I have found lists that do more than remind us to buy lettuce. One is an indication that the collapse of society is imminent, and the other is a seemingly amusing diversion that secretly places us on the cool-to-square literary spectrum.

The lists are in the *New York Times*. The first is the weekly list of best sellers;

the second is the *New York Times Book Review*'s recent selection of [the 100 best books of this adolescent century](#) and a companion survey of readers. You may think I waste too many electrons telling you what's in the *New York Times*. But as a national media heavyweight in a time when many newspapers are trying to figure out how to keep the lights on, assuming they still have lights, the *Times* is one of the few newspapers with enough staff members to make these lists.

On a leisurely Sunday morning with coffee and iPad a few months ago, I noticed a disturbing fact about the nonfiction best seller list in the *NYT* (the newspaper styles it as two words, best and seller, not bestseller nor best-seller, which I suppose it can do if it wants). I saw it again in the following weeks, and in the newspaper world where I spent my career, if something happens three times or more, it must be a trend. A ghastly percentage of the top nonfiction best sellers (combined print and e-book) were either written by celebrities or about celebrities. If readers buy enough celebrity tripe to place several such books on a list that only has room for fifteen, then surely we have entered the end times.

Has it always been thus with celebrity books? I checked. Ten years ago, far fewer celebrity books were on the list. I tried to go back twenty years, but that was a time before the wide use of e-books. The iPad didn't exist yet. People had pagers in 2004, not smartphones. The *NYT* archive from that year was difficult to navigate. So I settled on a comparison to just 2014. Statisticians will object. Cherry picking, they will shout. Wake up or we're doomed, I answer.

As you read these words, you should know the driving force behind them is not jealousy. Okay, maybe a little, but it is mostly bewilderment. How did this become what we read? And I haven't even touched on celebrities who think they can write novels. I also do not plan to assign blame, but I'm sure you can think of likely suspects. Instead, I returned to Cintra Wilson for enlightenment. Her assault on celebrity, published twenty-four years ago, is as fun to read now as it was then. *A Massive Swelling: Celebrity Re-examined as a Grotesque, Crippling Disease and Other Cultural Revelations* is a flamethrower of a book. Here is one of its tamer sentences:

"We treat our celebrities, regardless of artistic merit, like an untouchable royal family, which causes most of us to act like dribbling serfs despite the value of our individual lives."

Who was the arbiter of what was a celebrity book in my examination of best seller lists? Me. I applied my own idiosyncratic rules because this is my newsletter. Books celebrities wrote about something in which they have standing and could be considered authoritative, I considered regular nonfiction.

A celebrity writing a book that exists only because of his/her/their celebrity standing is celebrity nonfiction. That means a comedian writing about comedy techniques is regular nonfiction. A comedian writing about politics is celebrity nonfiction. An actor writing about her role in a well-known movie is regular nonfiction, even though such a rule allows mawkish memoirs to take up slots. An actor writing about her mother is celebrity nonfiction. A professional baseball pitcher writing about the mechanics of throwing a slider is regular nonfiction. A pro baseball player writing about medical advances should be ignored. The same rules applied when celebrities were the subject of such books rather than the author. There must be rules.

Here are the results. In 2014, the fifty-two bestseller lists (fifteen slots each) averaged .6 celebrity nonfiction books per week. In 2024, as of August 24, the combined hardcover and e-book list averaged 3.65 books per week of celebrity nonfiction. The inescapable conclusion: We're getting dumber.

Now we turn to lists based on content instead of sales. The 100-best-books listing of the twenty-first century that the *Book Review* staff picked with the help of authors, poets, critics, and "other book lovers" diverges considerably from the top 100 list that the *Book Review* solicited from readers. While the separate lists agree on thirty-nine fiction and nonfiction books for placement in the top 100, specific rankings vary greatly. *Demon Copperhead* by Barbara Kingsolver is first on the reader list and sixty-first on the *Book Review* expert list. *My Brilliant Friend* by Elena Ferrante is first on the *Book Review* list and eighth on the reader list. Only one book is ranked in the same place on both lists: *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro in ninth. The reader list skewed popular—not airport kiosk trash, but more accessible than some *Book Review* listees.

As you might expect, I have a theory about these differences. The 503 *Book Review* judges include more than fifty successful authors. All the voting was done anonymously, but many authors agreed later to have their choices made public. I suspect some of them saw that coming and made at least one choice based on how it might appear. *Look, I write popular fiction, but deep down I'm a fan of nonlinear, inscrutable, genre-confused stuff that critics like.* FLIMP, you could call it. Fear of Looking like an Idiot to My Peers.

The reader survey, which remains anonymous, freed participants from how-will-I-look concerns. I don't say either list is better. I'm just interested in the differences. As a community service, and with full attribution to the *New York Times*, I have reprinted both lists below because not everyone has an *NYT* subscription (I support paywalls because journalists have to eat, but I'm betting they won't mind if I do this).

I ask you to send me a note about a book or two from this century you would have put on the *Book Review* top 100. Or let me know if you think a listed book is overrated or underrated. I will keep this anonymous, so you need not fear. And tell me how many books on the *NYT* list and reader list you've read. Turns out I've only read ten on the newspaper list and twenty-two on the reader list. A few others I started and didn't finish because at this point in my life I permit myself to stop reading something if I don't like it.

Two observations. Why is there nothing by [Mick Herron](#) on either list? And only one book by a celebrity turned up: *Just Kids* by [Patti Smith](#) was ranked sixty-six on the readers list. She might not even be a celebrity anymore given that decades have passed since Gilda Radner impersonated her on *Saturday Night Live*, which was once a sign of pop culture ascendancy.

A flicker of hope.

New York Times Book Review:

1. *My Brilliant Friend*, Elena Ferrante
2. *The Warmth of Other Suns*, Isabel Wilkerson
3. *Wolf Hall*, Hilary Mantel
4. *The Known World*, Edward P. Jones
5. *The Corrections*, Jonathan Franzen
6. *2666*, Roberto Bolaño

7. *The Underground Railroad*, Colson Whitehead
8. *Austerlitz*, W.G. Sebald
9. *Never Let Me Go*, Kazuo Ishiguro
10. *Gilead*, Marilynne Robinson
11. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Junot Díaz
12. *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion
13. *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy
14. *Outline*, Rachel Cusk
15. *Pachinko*, Min Jin Lee
16. *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier &*

- Clay,
Michael
Chabon
17. *The
Sellout*,
Paul
Beatty
18. *Lincoln
in
the
Bardo*,
George
Saunders
19. *Say
Nothing*,
Patrick
Radden
Keefe
20. *Erasure*,
Percival
Everett
21. *Evicted*,
Matthew
Desmond
22. *Behind
the
Beautiful
Forevers*,
Katherine
Boo
23. *Hateship,
Friendship,
Courtship,
Loveship,
Marriage*,
Alice
Munro
24. *The
Overstory*,
Richard
Powers
25. *Random
Family*,
Adrian
Nicole
LeBlanc
26. *Atonement*,
Ian
McEwan
27. *Americanah*,

- Chimamanda
Ngozi
Adichie
28. *Cloud
Atlas,*
David
Mitchell
29. *The
Last
Samurai,*
Helen
DeWitt
30. *Sing,
Unburied,
Sing,*
Jesmyn
Ward
31. *White
Teeth,*
Zadie
Smith
32. *The
Line
of
Beauty,*
Alan
Hollinghurst
33. *Salvage
the
Bones,*
Jesmyn
Ward
34. *Citizen,*
Claudia
Rankine
35. *Fun
Home,*
Alison
Bechdel
36. *Between
the
World
and
Me,*
Ta-
Nehisi
Coates
37. *The
Years,*
Annie

- Ernaux
38. *The
Savage
Detectives*,
Roberto
Bolaño
39. *A
Visit
From
the
Goon
Squad*,
Jennifer
Egan
40. *H
Is
for
Hawk*,
Helen
Macdonald
41. *Small
Things
Like
These*,
Claire
Keegan
42. *A
Brief
History
of
Seven
Killings*,
Marlon
James
43. *Postwar*,
Tony
Judt
44. *The
Fifth
Season*,
N.K.
Jemisin
45. *The
Argonauts*,
Maggie
Nelson
46. *The
Goldfinch*,
Donna
Tartt

47. *A
Mercy,*
Toni
Morrison
48. *Persepolis,*
Marjane
Satrapi
49. *The
Vegetarian,*
Han
Kang
50. *Trust,*
Hernan
Diaz
51. *Life
After
Life,*
Kate
Atkinson
52. *Train
Dreams,*
Denis
Johnson
53. *Runaway,*
Alice
Munro
54. *Tenth
of
December,*
George
Saunders
55. *The
Looming
Tower,*
Lawrence
Wright
56. *The
Flamethrowers,*
Rachel
Kushner
57. *Nickel
and
Dimed,*
Barbara
Ehrenreich
58. *Stay
True,*
Hua
Hsu
59. *Middlesex,*

- Jeffrey
Eugenides
60. *Heavy*,
Kiese
Laymon
61. *Demon
Copperhead*,
Barbara
Kingsolver
62. *10:04*,
Ben
Lerner
63. *Veronica*,
Mary
Gaitskill
64. *The
Great
Believers*,
Rebecca
Makkai
65. *The
Plot
Against
America*,
Philip
Roth
66. *We
the
Animals*,
Justin
Torres
67. *Far
From
the
Tree*,
Andrew
Solomon
68. *The
Friend*,
Sigrid
Nunez
69. *The
New
Jim
Crow*,
Michelle
Alexander
70. *All
Aunt
Hagar's*

Children,
Edward
P.
Jones

71. *The
Copenhagen
Trilogy,*
Tove
Ditlevsen
72. *Secondhand
Time,*
Svetlana
Alexievich
73. *The
Passage
of
Power,*
Robert
Caro
74. *Olive
Kitteridge,*
Elizabeth
Strout
75. *Exit
West,*
Mohsin
Hamid
76. *Tomorrow,
and
Tomorrow,
and
Tomorrow,*
Gabrielle
Zevin
77. *An
American
Marriage,*
Tayari
Jones
78. *Septology,*
Jon
Fosse
79. *A
Manual
for
Cleaning
Women,*
Lucia
Berlin
80. *The*

*Story
of
the
Lost
Child,*
Elena
Ferrante

81. *Pulphead,*
John
Jeremiah
Sullivan
82. *Hurricane
Season,*
Fernanda
Melchor
83. *When
We
Cease
to
Understand
the
World,*
Benjamín
Labatut
84. *The
Emperor
of
All
Maladies,*
Siddhartha
Mukherjee
85. *Pastoralia,*
George
Saunders
86. *Frederick
Douglass,*
David
W.
Blight
87. *Detransition,
Baby,*
Torrey
Peters
88. *The
Collected
Stories
of
Lydia
Davis,*
Lydia

- Davis
89. *The
Return,*
Hisham
Matar
90. *The
Sympathizer,*
Viet
Thanh
Nguyen
91. *The
Human
Stain,*
Philip
Roth
92. *The
Days
of
Abandonment,*
Elena
Ferrante
93. *Station
Eleven,*
Emily
St.
John
Mandel
94. *On
Beauty,*
Zadie
Smith
95. *Bring
Up
the
Bodies,*
Hilary
Mantel
96. *Wayward
Lives,
Beautiful
Experiments,*
Saidiya
Hartman
97. *Men
We
Reaped,*
Jesmyn
Ward
98. *Bel
Canto,*

- Ann
Patchett
99. *How
to
Be
Both,*
Ali
Smith
100. *Tree
of
Smoke,*
Denis
Johnson

The reader top 100, with ranking in the ***New York Times Book Review*** in bold:

1. *Demon
Copperhead,*
Barbara
Kingsolver,
61
2. *All
the
Light
We
Cannot
See,*
Anthony
Doerr
3. *A
Gentleman
in
Moscow,*
Amor
Towles
4. *The
Goldfinch,*
Donna
Tartt,
46
5. *Pachinko,*
Min
Jin
Lee,
15
6. *Educated,*
Tara
Westover
7. *Tomorrow,
and*

*Tomorrow,
and
Tomorrow,*
Gabrielle
Zevin,
76

8. *My
Brilliant
Friend,*
Elena
Ferrante,
1

9. *Never
Let
Me
Go,*
Kazuo
Ishiguro,
9

10. *Station
Eleven,*
Emily
St.
John
Mandel,
93

11. *A
Little
Life,*
Hanya
Yanagihara

12. *The
Overstory,*
Richard
Powers,
24

13. *The
Underground
Railroad,*
Colson
Whitehead,
7

14. *Wolf
Hall,*
Hilary
Mantel,
3

15. *The
Road,*
Cormac

- McCarthy,
13
16. *Lincoln*
in
the
Bardo,
George
Saunders,
18
17. *Atonement*,
Ian
McEwan,
26
18. *Middlesex*,
Jeffrey
Eugenides,
59
19. *Americanah*,
Chimamanda
Ngozi
Adichie,
27
20. *The*
Amazing
Adventures
of
Kavalier
&
Clay,
Michael
Chabon,
16
21. *Homegoing*,
Yaa
Gyasi
22. *Hamnet*,
Maggie
O'Farrell
23. *The*
Warmth
of
Other
Suns,
Isabel
Wilkerson,
2
24. *Bel*
Canto,
Ann
Patchett,

98

25. *Gilead*,
Marilynne
Robinson,
10
26. *The
Corrections*,
Jonathan
Franzen,
5
27. *Normal
People*,
Sally
Rooney
28. *Cutting
for
Stone*,
Abraham
Verghese
29. *Say
Nothing*,
Patrick
Radden
Keefe,
19
30. *A
Visit
From
the
Goon
Squad*,
Jennifer
Egan,
39
31. *Circe*,
Madeline
Miller
32. *Cloud
Cuckoo
Land*,
Anthony
Doerr
33. *The
Book
Thief*,
Markus
Zusak
34. *Cloud
Atlas*,
David

Mitchell,
28

35. *The
Covenant
of
Water,*
Abraham
Verghese
36. *The
Year
of
Magical
Thinking,*
Joan
Didion,
12
37. *The
Nickel
Boys,*
Colson
Whitehead
38. *The
Great
Believers,*
Rebecca
Makkai,
64
39. *Olive
Kitteridge,*
Elizabeth
Strout,
74
40. *The
Kite
Runner,*
Khaled
Hosseini
41. *Life
After
Life,*
Kate
Atkinson,
51
42. *The
Brief
Wondrous
Life
of
Oscar
Wao,*

Junot
Díaz,
11

43. *Between
the
World
and
Me,*
Ta-
Nehisi
Coates,
36

44. *The
Heaven
&
Earth
Grocery
Store,*
James
McBride

45. *There
There,*
Tommy
Orange

46. *The
Song
of
Achilles,*
Madeline
Miller

47. *Lessons
in
Chemistry,*
Bonnie
Garmus

48. *On
Earth
We're
Briefly
Gorgeous,*
Ocean
Vuong

49. *Gone
Girl,*
Gillian
Flynn

50. *James,*
Percival
Everett

51. *Caste,*

- Isabel
Wilkerson
52. *The
Nightingale*,
Kristin
Hannah
53. *Trust*,
Hernan
Diaz,
50
54. *11/22/63*,
Stephen
King
55. *Braiding
Sweetgrass*,
Robin
Wall
Kimmerer
56. *The
Hunger
Games*,
Suzanne
Collins
57. *Small
Things
Like
These*,
Claire
Keegan,
41
58. *White
Teeth*,
Zadie
Smith,
31
59. *Where
the
Crawdads
Sing*,
Delia
Owens
60. *The
Dutch
House*,
Ann
Patchett
61. *North
Woods*,
Daniel
Mason

62. *The Sympathizer*,
Viet Thanh
Nguyen,
90
63. *The Fifth Season*,
N.K.
Jemisin,
44
64. *2666*,
Roberto
Bolaño,
6
65. *Evicted*,
Matthew
Desmond,
21
66. *Just Kids*,
Patti
Smith
67. *Piranesi*,
Susanna
Clarke
68. *The Devil in the White City*,
Erik
Larson
69. *Killers of the Flower Moon*,
David
Grann
70. *Know My Name*,
Chanel
Miller
71. *Sing, Unburied, Sing*,

Jesmyn
Ward,
30

- 72. *Crying
in
H
Mart,*
Michelle
Zauner
- 73. *Harry
Potter
and
the
Deathly
Hallows,*
J.K.
Rowling
- 74. *Klara
and
the
Sun,*
Kazuo
Ishiguro
- 75. *The
Lincoln
Highway,*
Amor
Towles
- 76. *Just
Mercy,*
Bryan
Stevenson
- 77. *Sapiens,*
Yuval
Noah
Harari
- 78. *Kafka
on
the
Shore,*
Haruki
Murakami
- 79. *1Q84,*
Haruki
Murakami
- 80. *Deacon
King
Kong,*
James
McBride

81. *The
Immortal
Life
of
Henrietta
Lacks,*
Rebecca
Skloot
82. *Tom
Lake,*
Ann
Patchett
83. *Let
the
Great
World
Spin,*
Colum
McCann
84. *Tenth
of
December,*
George
Saunders,
54
85. *When
Breath
Becomes
Air,*
Paul
Kalanithi
86. *Life
of
Pi,*
Yann
Martel
87. *Girl,
Woman,
Other,*
Bernardine
Evaristo
88. *The
Plot
Against
America,*
Philip
Roth,
65
89. *The
Glass*

- Castle,
Jeannette
Walls*
90. *In
the
Dream
House,
Carmen
Maria
Machado*
91. *Project
Hail
Mary,
Andy
Weir*
92. *Drive
Your
Plow
Over
the
Bones
of
the
Dead,
Olga
Tokarczuk*
93. *Remarkably
Bright
Creatures,
Shelby
Van
Pelt*
94. *The
Bee
Sting,
Paul
Murray*
95. *A
Thousand
Splendid
Suns,
Khaled
Hosseini*
96. *The
Vanishing
Half,
Brit
Bennett*
97. *My
Year*

- of
Rest
and
Relaxation,*
Ottesa
Moshfegh
98. *Shuggie
Bain,*
Douglas
Stuart
99. *Empire
of
Pain,*
Patrick
Radden
Keefe
100. *A
Man
Called
Ove,*
Fredrik
Backman

Kind regards
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August 2024



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