



jcannonbooks

Because everybody
needs an editor . . .

and a newsletter

Author news

Patricia Broderick's *Dead on My Feet* is a finalist for the [Silver Falchion Award](#), a national book prize bestowed annually in Nashville. Pat, who allows me to edit her manuscripts before she sends them to her publisher, is up against thirteen competitors in the Best Cozy division. The winner will be announced in August, but why wait? We already know the winner. Just give Pat the prize so she will have fewer interruptions as she finishes the next book in her Nellie Bly series.

Glad I read that

Two from [The Intrusions](#) by Stav Sherez:

There was always too little time and every day the debt increased as more hours were subtracted from your life. He straightened the stack of incoming files and squared the keyboard and mouse. He put the pens away and tidied the cable cords. He was becoming less tolerant of clutter as he got older, or perhaps just less tolerant.

And:

He drank hospital coffee and read two chapters of *The Great Gatsby*. The appalling sense of squander and decay struck him hard. Despite having exactly the same text, it was an entirely different book from the one he'd first read when he was fifteen.

Make the best of it



The Agatha Christie shelf at the San Diego Public Library, Rancho Peñasquitos branch.

Carl Larsen, a travel writer, recovering newspaper editor, and reader of this newsletter, mused a few weeks back about Agatha Christie and whether she is the bestselling novelist of all time. Agathachristie.com, which appears to be her corporate heir, says so in no uncertain terms.

Could that be right? Maybe the protectors of her name are counting the combined sales of all sixty-six novels and fifteen short story collections? Does anyone agree? After spending time looking for believable answers from a respected source, I have no idea. She might have sold the most mysteries of all time. Or perhaps the most cozy mysteries ever. Or maybe not. Carl sought a satisfactory answer for his piece in the latest edition of *Wine Dine + Travel Magazine* about the doyenne's summer and holiday estate, the Greenway house and gardens. He settled on describing her as one of the world's bestselling authors. Can't argue with that logic. And even though rankings for the all-time bestselling novelist eluded me, the hunt gave me a chance to write the word *doyenne*.

And what about the bestselling novel of all time? Consideration would stretch beyond mysteries and encompass thrillers, suspense, romance, horror, historical fiction, Jack Reacher books, fantasy, literary fiction (sounds redundant, but it's a recognized genre mainly applied to lofty, impenetrable

novels that make references to stuff you never heard of), children's, sci-fi, western, and contemporary. In my eagerness to find out what novel is so anointed I once again ran smack into *The Answer for Everything: It depends*.

Time frame, for example. Amazon is reported to have produced a list of the fifty all-time bestselling books, but only those sold since 1994 when Amazon was born and had not yet been distracted by next-day delivery, phallic rocket ships, and world domination. I can't find the list on Amazon and have only discovered it by looking at places such as Dow Jones's [MarketWatch](#), but the whole idea of it leaves me wondering how twenty-eight years came to mean all time. Here's another timely aside: How accurate were sales figures in 1759 when *Tristram Shandy* was published? And how much lower were literacy rates in other decades and centuries? Maybe sales per capita should be analyzed? And what counts as a novel? Hardback, paperback, e-book, graphic novel, audiobook, comic book?

Some all-time bestselling book lists are enough to make you question whether people who buy and read books have even a shred of sense, but who hasn't downloaded a book that some Good Reads doofus recommended or bought a paperback at an airport newsstand and thought: I could have written this crap. And lists of superlatives are everywhere these days: the most this, the best that, the greatest whatever thing that makes a social media splash. Some of these lists present a terrifying snapshot of America. For example, NPD Group, the global marketing company, published a list in April 2022 of the top fifty U.S. restaurant chains based on sales estimates for the year ending in December 2021. Here are its top eight, the only ones I could find in a cursory search because I would have had to pay money to see the rest: McDonald's, Starbucks, Chick-fil-A, Taco Bell, Wendy's, Sonic, Pizza Hut, and Dairy Queen. Honey, would you pass me the defibrillator?

Writers and others, some employed by respectable publications, seem to determine inclusion in all-time bestseller lists based on gut feelings and whims. Just the other day, I read a review of the "Where the Crawdads Sing" movie in which the *Los Angeles Times* critic described the book upon which the movie is based as among all-time bestsellers. No source, no provenance, just the squishy use of "among." I enjoyed the book (although a lawyer friend derided some of the courtroom scenes as preposterous) and it has been a fixture on bestseller lists for years, but all time? Some things are indisputable and can be declared without attribution: the ebb and flow of tides, the speed of light, and Generalissimo Francisco Franco is still dead. But not all-time bestseller lists.

Newsweek.com compiled something it called the thirty bestselling books of all time in any language and published it in September 2021. Newsweek offers no

indication of how it came to these conclusions. No sources are cited, no data provided. That robs us of an answer to life's fundamental question: Sez who?

[The Newsweek.com piece](#) included an introductory tidbit explaining that “there is no single source consistently tracking book sales over the centuries and religious books such as the Bible and Quran have been omitted, as so many are disturbed for free.” Good to know foundational religious texts will disturb you at no charge. Yes, the writer likely meant distributed or disbursed, but the article has been sitting on the website for almost a year without correction.

Here's part of the Newsweek.com list, along with supposed sales:

1. *The Hobbit*
by
J.R.R.
Tolkien
(140.6
million)
2. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*
by
J.K.
Rowling
(120
million)
3. *The Little Prince*
by
Antoine
de
Saint-
Exupéry
(100
million)
4. *Dream of the Red Chamber*
by
an
author
Newsweek

declined
to
identify,
but
it
is
Cao
Xueqin
(100
million)

5. *And
Then
There
Were
None*
by
Agatha
Christie
(100
million;
you
go,
Ags)

6. *The
Lion,
the
Witch
and
the
Wardrobe*
by
C.S.
Lewis
(85
million)

7. *She:
A
History
of
Adventure*
by
H.
Rider
Haggard
(83
million)

8. *The
Adventures
of
Pinocchio*
by

Carlo
Collodi
(80
million)

9. *The
Da
Vinci
Code*
by
Dan
Brown
(80
million;
now
that's
disturbing)

10. *Harry
Potter
&
the
Chamber
of
Secrets*
by
J.K.
Rowling
(77
million)

Everyone muscled into this bestselling novel list thing, including [the Utica Public Library in New York](#). I'm a library fan because libraries provide nearly every book I read, but come on, Utica. It offered no documentation to support its list other than this unsatisfactory explanation:

"As is the case with any cumulative list, this rank order may be subject to change and argument. It should also be noted that sales statistics might not always be 100% accurate. However, this list was compiled through research of currently available information and is presented in good faith."

The Utica library included handy dates of publication but did not attempt to determine individual ranks or sales numbers:

Don Quixote by Miguel de Cervantes, 1605
A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens, 1859
The Count of Monte Cristo by Alexandre Dumas, 1814
The Lord of the Rings by J.R.R. Tolkien, 1954
Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone by J.K. Rowling, 1997
And Then There Were None by Agatha Christie, 1939

The Hobbit by J.R.R. Tolkien, 1937

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe by C.S. Lewis, 1950

The Little Prince by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, 1943

The Da Vinci Code by Dan Brown, 2003

Many sites have assembled lists that seem to have been copped from elsewhere online and amount to little more than clickbait. You start to see crossover, and the number of copies sold can vary from list to list, but no one cites a source.

James Clear, author, entrepreneur, and newsletterist, presented the [bestselling books of all time](#), which he said are ranked by number of copies sold, not by “my personal ratings.” That’s a relief; bestsellers should be ranked on sales, in my opinion. No hint as to where the sales numbers came from.

1. *Don Quixote*
(500 million copies sold)
by Miguel de Cervantes
2. *A Tale of Two Cities*
(200 million copies sold)
by Charles Dickens
3. *The Lord of the Rings*
(150 million copies sold)
by J.R.R.

- Tolkien
4. *The Little Prince*
(142 million copies sold)
by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry
 5. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*
(107 million copies sold)
by J.K. Rowling
 6. *And Then There Were None*
(100 million copies sold)
by Agatha Christie
 7. *The Dream of the Red Chamber*
(100 million copies sold)
by Cao Xueqin

8. *The Hobbit*
(100 million copies sold)
by J.R.R. Tolkien
9. *She: A History of Adventure*
(100 million copies sold)
by H. Rider Haggard
10. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*
(85 million copies sold)
by C.S. Lewis

Barnes and Noble, on its website, asked in 2019 about [your reading habits](#).

“The following books are bestsellers, the stories that have engaged and delighted and enchanted so many people, generation after generation, that they sit atop the list of the most-read and most purchased books ever. How many of these important titles have you read?” the website inquires.

Who says they’re atop the list? And whose list is it? Does anyone attribute anything anymore?

Unranked and conveniently available from barnesandnoble.com:

A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens
The Lord of the Rings by J.R.R. Tolkien
The Little Prince by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry
Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone by J.K. Rowling
And Then There Were None by Agatha Christie
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and *Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll (the two novels are thrown together as one for reasons that are—as you might expect—unexplained)
The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe by C.S. Lewis
She: A History of Adventure by H. Rider Haggard
The Da Vinci Code by Dan Brown (help me here, I'm gagging)
The Catcher in the Rye by J.D. Salinger

Penguin Random House also gets in the game, but its [Bestselling Books of All Time](#) (includes nonfiction) should have been titled Bestselling Book List of All Time That We Made Up Because We Published These Books. There can be no other reason for including most of the entries on the list.

“You’ve probably heard of these stories or walked by these covers displayed at your local bookstore!” Penguin Random House fluffs on its website, complete with gratuitous and grating exclamation point. “From beloved classics that have stood the test of time to contemporary favorites that provide commentary on the world we live in, these fiction and nonfiction reads are the bestselling books of all time for good reason.”

Becoming by Michelle Obama
Wonder by R.J. Palacio
Oh, the Places You'll Go! by Dr. Seuss
The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up by Marie Kondo
The Very Hungry Caterpillar by Eric Carle
The Fault in Our Stars by John Green
The Girl on the Train by Paula Hawkins
Fifty Shades of Grey by E.L. James

If people can make up lists of the bestselling novels and other books of all time without documentation, reporting, or much thought, I can too. So here you are, the top ten in reverse order. Unlike other list makers, I bravely admit that I have no idea what criteria I used to make this collection other than to indulge my car-crash fascination with a certain hulking drifter.

The Killing Floor by Lee Child. Jack Reacher finds thugs in small-town Georgia, then beats them up.

Tripwire by Lee Child. Jack Reacher finds thugs in Key West, Florida, then beats them up. No word on whether any had six toes.

Echo Burning by Lee Child. Jack Reacher finds thugs in Texas (is that redundant?), then beats them up.

Nothing to Lose by Lee Child. Jack Reacher heads north to find thugs in Hope and Despair, fictional towns in Colorado named by someone unfamiliar with subtlety. Or maybe they're not fictional. Anyway, Reacher beats up thugs.

61 Hours by Lee Child. Jack Reacher finds a snowstorm and thugs in South Dakota. He beats up the thugs. I can't recall if he ate pie, and checking would require me to reread the book, which is contrary to any of these bestseller lists because it would involve research. But I can assure you that Reacher likes pie.

Make Me by Lee Child. Jack Reacher stops in what is described as a place of endless prairie, but of course, we Americans long ago swapped out prairies for wheat, corn, and livestock. According to jackreacher.com, which should know, Reacher finds a town of "silent, watchful people, and descends into the heart of darkness." Maybe that's what novelists call imagery? Amber waves of American grain may not seem much like the Congo and Lee Child likely won't be confused with Joseph Conrad, but happily for us and this bestseller list, Reacher finds some thugs. He beats them up.

Past Tense by Lee Child. Jack Reacher finds thugs in New England, having beaten up all available thugs in the Southeast, Southwest, Midwest, Mid-Atlantic, Plains, and Mountain West. Conjugation plays no role, despite the title. That's a shame because the pluperfect of irregular verbs can be vexing and probably deserves a beating.

Some book.

Some other book.

And now, the bestselling work of fiction of all time:

Ulysses by James Joyce. That is a surprise, especially since no human other than James Joyce's editor has read *Ulysses*, and literature students who say they have done so are filthy liars. But as long as I'm making stuff up, I can designate whichever book I want. It's easy, and you can do the same. You don't have to do any research, and if you're really lazy, you can steal someone else's list. But do lies, stealing, and making stuff up surprise you these days? Of course not! Lies are the new truths.

Reacher said nothing.

You can read this item on my blog, [Take My Word for It](#), by clicking here.

Cozy up to this

Agatha Christie had favorites among the books she wrote, Carl Larsen informs us. She was partial to *And Then There Were None*, her 1939 mystery that appears on various bestselling books of all time lists. But what were her other favorites? You'll have to check out Carl's piece in [Wine Dine + Travel Magazine](#). And while you have the magazine open, the summer 2022 issue includes fun stories by Mike Burge and Brian Clark, who are subscribers to this newsletter. And you wouldn't want to miss the hypnotic photo essay that Alison DaRosa shot with an iPhone in Cuba. And then there is the unnerving tale from editors Ron and Mary James about cruising in the time of Covid. Ah, just read the whole magazine.

Kind regards,
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