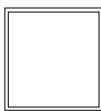


# Best-Sellers in Academic Libraries

Gregory A. Crawford and Matthew Harris

Libraries have important collection development decisions to make about best-sellers and popular culture materials. A selection of academic libraries was studied to follow the ownership of best-sellers from 1940 to 1990. The trend is to keep a higher percentage of older best-sellers in fiction than newer ones. Nonfiction appears to be more sporadic but still follows this basic trend. With the influx of popular culture studies, scholars potentially could lose valuable resources. From this study, libraries will see that a new set of collection development policies may need to be developed.

 One of the mainstays of public libraries in the United States has been their provision of best-sellers to their customers. Because these works are a reflection of the time and culture in which they were produced, they also can be an important resource for academic libraries. However, academic libraries generally do not collect such material, and if they do, they often discard it when its circulation slows or when it stops mirroring the practices of public libraries. This raises the question of whether this part of our cultural heritage is being lost. Are academic libraries keeping these materials for the use of scholars in the future?

The goal of this research was to examine ownership of best-sellers within a group of academic libraries.

## Literature Review

The ongoing debate within any library is the struggle over what should be kept and what should be thrown away. Many journals and books on collection development and weeding have tackled this issue, but

a more specific question has been posed that takes this discussion to a more frenzied level. Best-sellers are a draw for libraries, especially public libraries. But when are best-sellers no longer needed? Should libraries become the storage center for popular culture? One approach to the problem was discussed in a recent interview with retired Baltimore County public librarians Charlie Robinson and

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Jean-Barry Molz. Their ideas are based on the philosophy that libraries should “give ‘em what they want.” This philosophy provides libraries with a customer-oriented approach to collection development that allows for more best-sellers and a quicker way to get rid of them when they no longer circulate. Robinson commented: “We made sure, under the direction of the trustees, that we had enough money for books so that we bought an

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awful lot of best-sellers. And the other thing we do is throw them away when they become slow movers."<sup>1</sup> In an article entitled "If It Circulates, Keep It," Ron Hayden examined a weeding program.<sup>2</sup> This program leads to getting rid of the books that do not circulate for whatever reason, such as being too obscure, too old, or too unattractive. However, this becomes a problem when best-sellers and pop culture materials are examined. How long should a library keep a best-seller, and should the library keep everything?

The idea of collection development raises the distinct probability that best-sellers will remain in the library only until they stop circulating. Should they be trashed because of waning popularity, or should they be kept to secure their preservation for future library users? Popular culture studies have inculcated the idea that everything may eventually be important and libraries need to collect as much of everything as possible. The hottest topics seem to involve defining what "everything" includes. In "Not Just Pulp Fiction," by Eric A. Johnson and Coleen R. C. Stumbaugh, science fiction is embraced as a necessity for saving.<sup>3</sup> The Library of Congress (LOC) has an ability that no other library has—the inalienable right to collect and keep everything. It could be called the Noah's Arc of libraries. What is interesting about the Johnson–Stumbaugh article is that science fiction is being elevated to the plateau of the needed works. We need to keep Isaac Asimov and *Star Wars* because they offer us insight into our culture that would be lost if we were to get rid of every piece of science fiction.

However, not every library can be the LOC. What position should other libraries take that are faced with issues of space and realistic collection development? Do public libraries need to keep best-sellers? Do university libraries need to collect comic books? Jack A. Clarke's article, "Popular Culture in Libraries," demonstrated the possibilities of including pop culture in libraries but also pointed out the drawbacks.<sup>4</sup> He commented, "The

sheer mass and variety of these publications is so vast that it is beyond the physical capacity of even the largest library to acquire more than a fraction of the total output."<sup>5</sup> He went on to discuss how libraries pick certain areas in which to develop their collections and how problems arise because of the fragile and flammable condition of these items. Clarke continued, "The best hope for the future of this new discipline seems to lie in the fact that a meaningful dialogue has already begun on many campuses across the country."<sup>6</sup> Clarke's sentiments were echoed in William L. Schurk's piece, "Popular Culture and Libraries: A Practical Perspective." Schurk added the timeliness of the collections to the discussion: "Immediacy is another important factor. . . . Even though historical perspective must be considered, currency of fads, fashions, and foibles must be included in the spectrum of collection building profiles."<sup>7</sup> Popular culture has become the new wave in academia and with it comes the problem of access.

Who has these collections, and why? Two works have presented different sides to the discussion. The first is a paper entitled "The Public Library as a Popular Materials Center," by Loriene Roy, and the second is an article entitled "Trash or Treasure? Pop Fiction in Academic and Research Libraries," by Robert G. Sewell.<sup>8</sup> Roy tackled the public library's responsibilities. Her paper chronicled the rise of the pop culture movement and the history of its inclusion in public libraries. Her conclusion centered on the public library's struggle to be like an academic library and yet have the appeal of a megachain bookstore. Either way, popular culture materials only enter the public library in an attempt to compete with the chain stores or as a way to secretly sway more readers to experience the more academic side of the public library. In this situation, the library keeps what it needs to keep going.

Sewell, on the other hand, looked at the academic library's responsibility with regard to collecting popular culture. He

saw a different role for the already-established academic and research libraries; his problem lay in defining where they stop collecting. Sewell provided excellent background on what individual libraries are keeping in terms of pop culture. He established that these libraries should be collecting popular culture materials but left out exactly what should be kept. It seems that personal taste is the deciding factor for every library. If a faculty member is a die-hard comic book purveyor, the library should have an extensive collection for him to rummage through. Sewell presented three main aspects to collecting popular culture material that would be deciding factors in this issue for years to come. First, funding is limited for popular culture collection. Sewell commented, "Most academic libraries rely heavily, if not exclusively, on donations for popular culture resources."<sup>10</sup> The issue becomes: Is the best-seller a necessity, or should the library take its chances on the book being donated? Another aspect is the problem of cataloging. Basically, this argument comes down to time, personal taste, and accessibility. The final aspect is preservation of the items. Here again, pop culture does not always come hardbound. Sewell concluded his article by saying, "Academic and research libraries have diverse responsibilities and demands made upon them. Crucial decisions are being and will be made concerning what to collect and preserve of our cultural heritage."<sup>11</sup>

The consensus remains up in the air. Some argue that best-sellers should be kept only as long as they circulate; others argue that they should be kept forever to preserve our cultural heritage. Some even take the culturally elitist view that best-sellers should be kept only if they become classics. And so the arguments continue; some best-sellers are kept, and others find their way out of the collection and are lost to future researchers.

### Method

First, a list of best-sellers needed to be identified. To do this, the researchers used

the *Publishers Weekly* listing of best-sellers for selected years as reported in *80 Years of Best-Sellers*, by Alice Payne Hackett and James Henry Burke, and *The Bowker Annual of Library & Book Trade Information*.<sup>12,13</sup> The top ten fiction and non-fiction titles for every fifth year, beginning in 1940 and ending in 1990, were included in the study. This sample yielded a total of 220 titles.

To determine ownership of these best-sellers by academic libraries, the union catalog of libraries that were members of the Associated College Libraries of Central Pennsylvania (ACLCP) was searched for each individual title. The ACLCP union catalog represents the holdings of twenty academic and research libraries. Of these, thirteen are private colleges or universities and seven are public institutions, including the State Library of Pennsylvania. At the time of the study, the smallest collection numbered approximately 86,000 volumes (Alvernia College) and the largest numbered 987,000 (State Library of Pennsylvania). The average number of volumes held by these libraries was approximately 250,000.

Upon searching the union catalog, the total number of libraries owning a copy of each work was recorded. Searching was restricted by publication date to one year prior to a work appearing on the best-seller list to one year afterward. This, of course, eliminated other printings of individual titles, but the goal was to determine ownership of original editions as they appeared at the time they were included on the best-seller list. Thus, a 1985 edition of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* would not have been counted, but an edition published between 1939 and 1941 would have.

### Results

Among the 110 works of fiction listed as best-sellers between 1940 and 1990, all but one was owned by at least one ACLCP library. The average number of libraries owning each work was 8.6. The most frequently owned titles included *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (20), *Up the Down Staircase* (18), *Herzog* (18), and *Humboldt's Gift* (17).

**FIGURE 1**  
**Fiction Titles**

Title	Year	Ownership
Princess Daisy	1980	0
The Family	1940	1
A Lion Is in the Streets	1945	1
Star Money	1950	1
The Chapman Report	1960	1
The Secret Woman	1970	1
Random Winds	1980	1
Secrets	1985	1
Lucky	1985	1
Rage of Angels	1980	2
Jubal Sackett	1985	2
Memories of Midnight	1990	2
Lady Boss	1990	2
Night in Bombay	1940	3
The Robe	1945	3
The Spike	1980	3
If Tomorrow Comes	1985	3
Message from Nam	1990	3
Earth and High Heaven	1945	4
Joy Street	1950	4
Floodtide	1950	4
The Man with the Golden Gun	1965	4
The Bourne Identity	1980	4
The Key to Rebecca	1980	4
Family Album	1985	4
The Witching Hour	1990	4
Stars on the Sea	1940	5
Jubilee Trail	1950	5
The Constant Image	1960	5
The Listener	1960	5
Rich Man, Poor Man	1970	5
The Choirboys	1975	5
The Eagle Has Landed	1975	5
The Devil's Alternative	1980	5
Skeleton Crew	1985	5
The Bourne Ultimatum	1990	5
Forever Amber	1945	6
The Adventurer	1950	6
Not As a Stranger	1955	6
The Moneychangers	1975	6
The Great Train Robbery	1975	6
Firestarter	1980	6
The Fifth Horseman	1980	6
The Stand: Complete and Uncut Edition	1990	6
September	1990	6
Hotel	1965	7
Great Lion of God	1970	7

**FIGURE 1 (Continued)**  
**Fiction Titles**

<b>Title</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Ownership</b>
The Gang that Couldn't Shoot Straight	1970	7
The White Tower	1945	8
Captain from Castile	1945	8
The Cardinal	1950	8
No Time for Sergeants	1955	8
The Looking Glass War	1965	8
The Crystal Cave	1970	8
QB VII	1970	8
The Mammoth Hunters	1985	8
The Parasites	1950	9
Auntie Mame	1955	9
The Lovely Ambition	1960	9
The Green Berets	1965	9
Don't Stop the Carnival	1965	9
Looking for Mister Goodbar	1975	9
Shogun	1975	9
Contact	1985	9
The Plains of Passage	1990	9
Four Past Midnight	1990	9
The Burden of Proof	1990	9
The Black Rose	1945	10
Trustee from the Toolroom	1960	10
Curtain	1975	10
The Greek Treasure	1975	10
Texas	1985	10
Mrs. Miniver	1940	11
The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit	1955	11
Ourselves to Know	1960	11
The Ambassador	1965	11
Kitty Foyle	1940	12
The Nazarene	1940	12
The Grapes of Wrath	1940	12
So Well Remembered	1945	12
Immortal Wife	1945	12
Something of Value	1955	12
The Tontine	1955	12
Hawaii	1960	12
Bonjour Tristesse	1955	13
Ragtime	1975	13
The Covenant	1980	13
Cass Timberlane	1945	14
The Wall	1950	14
The Disenchanted	1950	14
Majorie Morningstar	1955	14
Advise and Consent	1960	15
The Leopard	1960	15
Those Who Love	1965	15

**FIGURE 1 (Continued)**  
**Fiction Titles**

Title	Year	Ownership
The French Lieutenant's Woman	1970	15
Islands in the Stream	1970	15
Travels with My Aunt	1970	15
Lake Wobegon Days	1985	15
How Green was My Valley	1940	16
Oliver Wiswell	1940	16
Across the River and Into the Trees	1950	16
Andersonville	1955	16
Ten North Frederick	1955	16
Sermons and Soda-Water	1960	16
The Source	1965	16
Love Story	1970	16
Humboldt's Gift	1975	17
Up the Down Staircase	1965	18
Herzog	1965	18
For Whom the Bell Tolls	1940	20

Another eight titles were owned by sixteen libraries, and another seven were owned by fifteen libraries. No library within the ACLCP owned a copy of *Princess Daisy*. Among the least frequently owned titles, four were held by two libraries, five by three libraries, and eight by eight libraries. Figure 1 provides the entire list of fiction titles, the year each was on the best-seller list, and the number of libraries that owned each one.

Among nonfiction works, 105 (87.5%) were owned and fifteen (12.5%) were not. The average number of libraries owning a specific title was 7.4. The most frequently owned titles were *Markings* (20), *The Family of Man* (20), *Iacocca: An Autobiography* (19), *A Thousand Days* (19), and *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (19). Another two titles were owned by eighteen libraries. The least frequently owned books included fifteen that no library owned, among them, *The Frugal Gourmet* and *Wealth without Risk*. Sixteen other titles were owned by only one library. These included *The Ascent of Man*, *Campus Zoo*, and *Elvis and Me*. Figure 2 provides the entire list of nonfiction titles, the year each was on the best-seller list, and the number of libraries that owned each one.

An additional analysis was performed to determine average ownership, by year, for both fiction and nonfiction. As figure 3 shows, average ownership fluctuates, but the overall trend is to own a higher percentage of older fiction best-sellers and relatively fewer more current ones. The ownership of nonfiction is spottier, although the general trend is to own older nonfiction titles, as well.

### Implications

Are libraries discarding or not even collecting a part of our cultural heritage, namely, the best-selling fiction and nonfiction literature? The results of this small study seem to indicate that this may indeed be the case. Although only one fiction title was not owned within the ACLCP, it is interesting—and shocking—to note that fifteen nonfiction titles were not owned.

Although this research examined the collections of only a convenient sample of libraries, these libraries do represent a variety of types of institutions, from liberal arts colleges to comprehensive universities. The collections of the larger research universities may indeed include these items, providing scholars of the future with access to them.

**FIGURE 2**  
**Nonfiction Titles**

<b>Title</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Ownership</b>
Bet It's a Boy	1940	0
Dear Sir	1945	0
The Baby	1950	0
Look Younger, Live Longer	1950	0
A Man Called Peter	1955	0
Better Homes and Gardens Diet Book	1955	0
Year of Decisions	1955	0
Folk Medicine	1960	0
Better Homes and Gardens First Aid for Your Family	1960	0
Better Homes and Gardens Decorating Ideas	1960	0
Shelley Also Knows Shirley	1980	0
The Frugal Gourmet	1985	0
Dr. Berger's Immune Power Diet	1985	0
Better Homes and Gardens New Cook Book	1990	0
Wealth without Risk: How to Develop a Personal Fortune w/o Going Out...	1990	0
Betty Crocker's Picture Cook Book	1950	1
How I Raised Myself from Failure to Success in Selling	1950	1
Your Dream Home	1950	1
Campus Zoo	1950	1
The General Foods Kitchens Cookbook	1960	1
Better Homes and Gardens Dessert Book	1960	1
Between You, Me, and the Gatepost	1960	1
How to Be a Jewish Mother	1965	1
Happiness Is a Dry Martini	1965	1
Better Homes and Gardens Fondue and Tabletop Cooking	1970	1
The Ascent of Man	1975	1
Nothing Down	1980	1
Elvis and Me	1985	1
The Be-Happy Attitudes	1985	1
Dancing in the Light	1985	1
I Never Played the Game	1985	1
I Kid You Not	1960	2
My Shadow Ran Fast	1965	2
The Sensuous Woman	1970	2
Caught in the Quiet	1970	2
The Sky's the Limit	1980	2
Craig Claiborne's Gourmet Diet	1980	2
Financial Self-Defense: How to Win the Fight for Financial Freedom	1990	2
Bo Knows Bo	1990	2
Ball Four	1970	3
Total Fitness in 30 Minutes a Week	1975	3
The Save-Your-Life Diet	1975	3

**FIGURE 2 (Continued)**  
**Nonfiction Titles**

Title	Year	Ownership
Homecoming: Reclaiming and Championing		
Your Inner Child	1990	3
The Power of Positive Thinking	1955	4
The Secret of Happiness	1955	4
Everything You Wanted to Know About Sex but		
Were Afraid to Ask	1970	4
Angels: God's Secret Agents	1975	4
Winning Through Intimidation	1975	4
The Frugal Gourmet on Our Immigrant Heritage:		
Recipes You Should...	1990	4
Land Below the Wind	1940	5
American White Paper	1940	5
How to Live 365 Days a Year	1955	5
May This House Be Safe from Tigers	1960	5
World Aflame	1965	5
In Someone's Shadow	1970	6
Crisis Investing: Opportunities and Profits in		
the Coming Great Depression	1980	6
Country Squire in the White House	1940	7
General Marshall's Report	1945	7
Thy Neighbor's Wife	1980	7
A Smattering of Ignorance	1940	8
Anything Can Happen	1945	8
Bring on the Empty Horses	1975	8
Fit for Life	1985	8
As I Remember Him	1940	9
Belles on Their Toes	1950	9
TM: Discovering Energy and Overcoming Stress	1975	9
Sylvia Porter's Money Book	1975	9
The Bermuda Triangle	1975	9
Yeager: An Autobiography	1985	9
A Life on the Road	1990	9
An American Life: An Autobiography	1990	9
A Gift of Prophecy	1965	10
Pleasant Valley	1945	11
Body Language	1970	11
I Married Adventure	1940	12
Black Boy	1945	12
The Mature Mind	1950	12
The New English Bible	1970	12
The Civil War	1990	12
How to Read a Book	1940	13
Try and Stop Me	1945	13
The Egg and I	1945	13
Mr. Jones, Meet the Master	1950	13
The Conscience of a Conservative	1960	13
Days of Our Years	1940	14



**FIGURE 2 (Continued)**  
**Nonfiction Titles**

Title	Year	Ownership
The Thurber Carnival	1945	14
Kon-Tiki	1950	14
Gift from the Sea	1955	14
Cosmos	1980	14
New England: Indian Summer	1940	15
Why Johnny Can't Read	1955	15
Inside Africa	1955	15
Brave Men	1945	16
Up Front	1945	16
Breach of Faith: The Fall of Richard Nixon	1975	16
Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient	1980	16
Megatrends 2000: The New Direction for the 1990's	1990	16
Kennedy	1965	17
The Making of the President	1965	17
Up the Organization	1970	17
American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language	1970	17
Free to Choose: A Personal Statement	1980	17
The Third Wave	1980	17
Games People Play	1965	18
A Passion for Excellence: The Leadership Difference	1985	18
The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich	1960	19
A Thousand Days	1965	19
Iacocca: An Autobiography	1985	19
The Family of Man	1955	20
Markings	1965	20

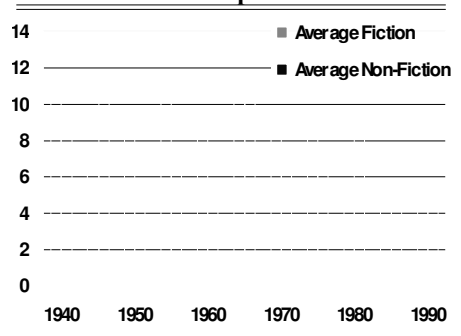
Because of the difficulty of obtaining good data, this research did not attempt to determine whether the libraries in the study had ever owned titles and then withdrawn them. If a library had owned these titles and had chosen to withdraw them, the question of collection management policies needs to be raised. However, that is a question for a future study.

**Conclusions**

As this small study indicates, many important works of fiction and nonfiction may be in danger of becoming lost to future scholars. This research only examined works on the best-seller lists in the years after 1940. A more frightening scenario may appear for even older works because the *Publishers Weekly* best-sellers lists began in 1895.

As this debate grows, libraries are being asked to define their roles within the community. Based on this study, academic libraries are faced with many difficulties in selecting what to include in

**FIGURE 3**  
**Ownership Trends**



their collections and what to weed out. Best-sellers tend to find their way out of the libraries when they become outdated, but they find their way back in when they are deemed worthy of being included in the canon. With the rise of popular culture studies at many universities, these rules of inclusion are being questioned. The next step is to decide the capabilities of an academic library and who should be influencing the decision-making process.

Libraries can be storehouses of information, but when does a storehouse become a junkyard? Further research and evaluation of this situation may provide more insight into the actual collection development process and allow libraries a better view of the importance of best-sellers and popular culture materials. Furthermore, new technology may permit a larger community of libraries to share such materials, allowing for greater access and a larger storage capability.

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### Notes

1. Nancy Pearl, "Gave 'em What They Wanted," *Library Journal* 121 (Sept. 1996): 136–38.
2. Ron Hayden, "If It Circulates, Keep It," *Library Journal* 112 (June 1987): 80–82.
3. Eric A. Johnson and Coleen R. C. Stumbaugh, "Not Just Pulp Fiction: Science Fiction Integral to U.S. Culture and LC Collections," *Library of Congress Informational Bulletin* 55 (Sept. 1996): 338–45.
4. Jack A. Clark, "Popular Culture in Libraries," *College & Research Libraries* 34 (May 1973): 215–18.
5. *Ibid.*, 216.
6. *Ibid.*, 218.
7. William L. Schurk, "Popular Culture and Libraries: A Practical Perspective," *Drexel Library Quarterly* 16 (July 1980): 43–52.
8. Lorie Roy, *The Public Library as a Popular Materials Center*. Paper presented at the Joint Meetings of the Popular Culture Associations and American Culture Association, San Antonio, Texas, Mar. 26–29, 1997.
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10. *Ibid.*, 459.
11. *Ibid.*, 460.
12. Alice Payne Hackett and James Henry Burke, *80 Years of Best Sellers: 1985–1975* (New York: Bowker, 1977).
13. *The Bowker Annual of Library & Book Trade Information* (New York: Bowker, 1981, 1986, 1991).