

What Makes a Best Seller?

(Extracts from the talk recently broadcast by Michael Joseph, the London publisher who is visiting New Zealand)

NOWADAYS any novel which sells 50,000 copies or more can be regarded as being in the best-selling category. Now what is it that determines the sale of a novel? Why should one book sell two thousand copies and another two hundred thousand? What makes a book tick?

Let me try to eliminate some of the things which *don't* make a book sell. With all respect to the power of the Press, I am sure that reviews and advertisements don't sell books. They can only help to keep them selling. Books which have been widely and enthusiastically reviewed, and supported by big advertising campaigns, can, and often do, fail completely to attract the reading public. On the other hand, a book can become a best-seller without benefit of reviews and advertising.

Nor is the author's reputation so important a factor as many people believe. There will always be an initial demand, possibly a big demand, for a new book by a popular author: but if the public don't like it, it won't go on selling. It is noticeable, of course, that many authors who reach best-selling heights remain there for some time. The public is very loyal to its favourite authors. But eventually it is the books that count.

Good and Bad Titles

Perhaps the subject—or the theme of a book—has a lot to do with it. Maybe. But on the whole I think not. Best sellers can have almost any subject, theme or background under the sun. Think of historical novels like *Gone With the Wind*; religious novels like *The Robe*; the humorous stories of P. G. Wodehouse; serious novels like *The Heart of the Matter*, by Graham Greene; romantic novels like *Daphne du Maurier's Rebecca*. There is no end to their variety.

Has the title anything to do with it? Or the get-up of the book—its wrapper, for example? Here we can definitely say "No," although I think it true to say that a bad title can handicap a book; and a good title can certainly help. I have good reason to remember a novel by an unknown author on a very unpromising subject—a Welsh mining village. It was called *The Land of My Fathers*. A good title, but not good enough. I persuaded the author to change it. We needed, I said, something nostalgic, something almost Biblical. And so the book, fortunately I think, was re-christened *How Green Was My Valley*.

I have often heard people say that films turn books into best sellers, but I don't think that is true. Very few books are filmed until and unless they are already successes in their own right; and although a good film will often send people to the bookshops and libraries to read in the printed page what they have enjoyed on the screen, I believe that motion pictures can only increase the sales of an already successful book.

Well, let's agree that it isn't films, or advertising or reviews. It isn't the author's reputation, and it isn't the subject. And it isn't the appearance of the

book in the bookseller's window, or the title — although all these things may help to make the book a success. The secret, I think, is word-of-mouth recommendation. When someone talks to me enthusiastically about a book I nearly always get it and read it. The spoken word is much more powerful than the printed one. And I expect you react in the same way to your friends' recommendations. But, you will say, that is begging the question: and so it is. We still don't know what makes people excited enough about a book to go around urging others to read it.

Timing

This is where I begin guessing. I admit I have pondered over this best seller mystery for many years: and, rightly or wrongly, I think that the *timing* of a book is all important. The best seller of twenty or even ten years ago might be a failure today. Today's best seller might have had no success ten years ago. I believe that to be a best seller a book must strike the right note at the right time: that it must either satisfy some particular hunger in the reading public, or reflect a prevailing mood.

Let's go further. I believe that the writer of a best seller must be absolutely sincere: that he must believe passionately in the characters he creates, and the things they do. If they are not living, flesh and blood creatures to him, they will certainly not live for other people.

Now, to make a story real to other people, to carry the reader away to another world, so that he can identify himself with the characters and share their hopes and fears, their emotions and their experiences, is the supreme art of the novelist.

Good Writing

The ability to tell a good story is not enough. Good writing is not enough: indeed, I can think of some best sellers which have been poorly written and badly constructed. This dismays me, for I respect good writing and can never read a badly written book with enjoyment. But the fact that some books do become best sellers in spite of weaknesses in writing and construction does, I think, underline the point I am trying to make. The novel that appeals to half-a-million readers—for there are at least five readers for every copy that is sold by the publisher—the novel that half-a-million or more readers enjoy is one that touches something deep inside them. It must rise above the level of competent story-telling, good writing, and skilful character drawing. It must make people laugh or cry, or both. It need not have a conventional "happy ending" but it must be satisfying. The author must have enough skill to induce in the reader what has been called "the willing suspension of disbelief" and, as I have said, it must have a contemporary value. It is true that some best sellers survive to become classics, but the majority are ephemeral; they blaze like rockets in the sky and tomorrow they are forgotten.



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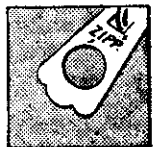
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