Best-Sellers in Academic Libraries

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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 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
awful lot of best-sellers. And the other thing we do is throw them away when they become slow movers.”¹ In an article entitled “If It Circulates, Keep It,” Ron Hayden examined a weeding program.² 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.³ 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.⁴ 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.”⁵ 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.”⁶ 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.”⁷ 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.⁸ 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 mega-chain 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." 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."

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. 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).
| 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         |
| Title                        | Year | Ownership |
|-----------------------------|------|-----------|
| 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        |
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

| Title                                                      | Year | Ownership |
|------------------------------------------------------------|------|-----------|
| 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        |
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 their collections.
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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.

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. Loriene 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.
9. Robert G. Sewell, “Trash or Treasure? Pop Fiction in Academic and Research Libraries,” College & Research Libraries 45 (Nov. 1984): 450–61.
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).