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Best-Sellers: How Our Concerns Translate into Modern Fiction

Joan Esquibel (Humboldt State University)

The mythic mind is well developed in our society; it is the source of expression and inspiration. From this we create stories: films, plays, novels. Together, these form an “imaginative world...that is not just a collection of interesting stories,” but “is, more importantly, a way in which participants engage their world.” Identifying these stories provides the scholar with a more nuanced understanding of the community’s cosmology, its living myths. Myth’s relevance is maintained through its flexibility in supporting a variety of interpretations. Over time, this allows the reader “to make sense of the world... its meaning or possibilities.”¹

And those possibilities are flexible too. Mythic narratives are integrated into the community’s life, and so they change. Each myth adds to a “continuously produced and reproduced”² society, shifting along with the community. The range of any contemporary moment’s characters – their habits and conflicts – gives readers an arsenal of behavior patterns to emulate. In times when readers are uncertain of a situation or how to behave, this arsenal provides a persona or mask to act through. And which masks are most commonly adopted can tell us something about a community, and its concerns. Each functional myth provides hints of “literary tastes or social trends for a given period,”³ making each one a time capsule to the concerns, aspirations, and relationships that readers have with their communities.

Religious myth traditionally filled this role. Today, secular stories allow for social cohesion and common language for people to share within diverse spaces. And these secular stories fill a need. In their 2019 Religious Landscape Study,

the Pew Research Center found that a full 26% of Americans identify as religiously “unaffiliated.”⁴ As religious myths have in modernity started to lose their authority, the modern myths of novels and other popular narrative forms have become our “primary strata of cultural reflection,”⁵ and looking at them tells of our future habits.

Through this project I will be looking at the six books that placed the highest on the New York Times Best-Seller list between 2015-2020, to understand the teachings contemporary Americans seek and the morals they perpetuate. Best-seller lists have been criticized for undermining “the book review by not being in the best intellectual interest of the reader,”⁶ but that highly academic position itself undervalues the reality of these books’ impact on and importance to the general public.

Besides being authoritative, the *NYT* list has the advantage of being representative, in that it is focused on the United States. Going through the data, I noted the book that held the number-one slot for every week from 2015 through 2020. The book that had the greatest number of (not necessarily consecutive) number-one positions in each year, was that year’s representative. The representative books are these: 2015 *The Martian* by Andy Weir, 2016 *Me Before You* by Jojo Moyes, 2017 *The Women in Cabin 10* by Ruth Ware, 2018 *Crazy Rich Asians* by Kevin Kwan, 2019 *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* by Heather Morris, and 2020 *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng. After reading, the three topics that stood out were wealth, perseverance, and death. This project explores how these themes are portrayed and integrated within the

1 Randall Reed, “Secularism and Myth,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 26, no. 2 (2014): 203.

2 Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1967), 6.

3 Laura Miller, “The Best-Seller List as Marketing Tool and Historical Fiction,” *Book History*, vol. 3 (2000): 286.

4 “Religious Landscape Study,” Pew Research, accessed March 25, 2021, <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>.

5 William Doty, “Mythophiles’ Dyscrasia: A Comprehensive Definition of Myth,” *The Journal of the Academy of Religion* 48, no. 4 (December 1980): 532.

6 Laura Miller, “The Best-Seller List as Marketing Tool and Historical Fiction,” 288.

stories, which together act as a representative portion of our mythic canon for this time period.

Wealth is an unsurprisingly contentious theme. In all six books, the narrative perspective is of someone who lacks a resource. Two of the books are set within extreme circumstances – Mars and Auschwitz – while the other four are set in a capitalistic frame where the main character sees but does not have incomprehensible wealth. This suggests that their audiences, who have the resources to purchase these books, crave a narrative that looks at wealth within their society. Within a context of wealth, these stories present themes of gratitude for and acceptance of one’s financial standings.

The books simplify society’s economic stratification, championing the financially struggling and the poverty-stricken as if all are equally adversaries to the rich. The characters try to comprehend the wealth of their counterparts and after their interactions, the protagonists establish a point of view which dehumanizes the rich in similar ways to “a zoologist forensically examining some strange new creature and its habitat.”⁷ They develop an emotional detachment from this lifestyle, as if it were only a view “into a life no regular person would ever be able to afford,”⁸ and not a possible reality.

The books make apparent a (perhaps surprising) dichotomy between the suffocating and stagnant nature of money and the open and fluid possibilities of poverty. In its apparent perfection, the rich household seems to have sacrificed its warmth, and is described as “a doll’s house, where everything is...slightly off-kilter.”⁹ The young who grow up in these environments are envious of the freedom of poverty, and note that “the kindest people... the most caring, the most sincere”¹⁰ are people in poverty. It is only the poor who can authentically “love their family... [and] feel a deeper sense of pride in who they are as individuals.”¹¹ The books clearly align the readers with those who are not wealthy, and the qualities attributed to the characters serve to uplift readers, who now know that we are perceived in such a positive manner. The wealthy experience murder, infidelity, and harassment, which all point towards a sacrifice of humanity for money. The poor, on the other hand, experience freedom, love, and authenticity, which we are told are the true components of our humanity.

Still, being poor is hard. The amount of resilience in these stories is quite normal – there is a lot of it. The constant, universal, and uniting factor of life is that there are uncontrollable variables that we must learn to interact with. Methods of coping are found within myth, and each story of success provides a further development of these methods. What we learn from these six books are the methods of coping that resonated with readers during this period. The methods that are most prevalent in the texts are these: perseverance through self-confidence and acceptance, overcoming through immersion in work, and that timeless coping mechanism, distraction.

In more than half of the texts, the protagonist’s loss of control inspires them to invest in the components of their life they still have control over. Their stories do what religion traditionally has, insisting “that we... aren’t helpless, and haven’t given up.”¹² The past year, 2020, though, has made it especially clear that resilience sometimes looks more like coping, and coping sometimes looks like escapism. An escape does not need to become mindless, but it does alleviate the pressure to make personal decisions and it allows for a deeper examination of issues. So, when readers enter the world of *Little Fires Everywhere*, they escape to the controlled environment of a suburb, but from there, they encounter a complex storyline revolving around wealth, motherhood, death, and race. The distraction of novels does not disregard current issues, and current issues require a certain type of story. None of the books treated in this research project, read alone or separately, could aid us in understanding our pandemic realities, and from that we can see how these books reflect their time. As we move forward, the novels that will be popularized will relate to a feeling of living during and after a pandemic.

Though its presence may increase in post-pandemic narratives, death is a consistent topic. The Best-Sellers do not coach us through our own death. What they do, though, is teach us how to be bystanders to the dying, and one of the more consistent warnings that they present is humbling: demonstrations of toxic and non-constructive positivity do not help the dying. What the stories teach us is that to be an effective onlooker is to listen. For most of the characters facing death, what they most desperately want is to be “reconnected

7 Jojo Moyes, *Me Before You* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 58.

8 Ruth Ware, *The Women in Cabin 10* (New York: Scout Press, 2016), 47.

9 Ibid. 56.

10 Celeste Ng, *Little Fires Everywhere* (New York: Penguin Books, 2017), 322.

11 Kevin Kwan, *Crazy Rich Asians* (New York: Anchor Books, 2013), 481.

12 Jared Diamond, *The World Until Yesterday* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 347.

with mankind before [they] die,”¹³ to have one chance to see a loved one “in this room, just for a moment.”¹⁴ They do not seek their loved ones for advice, but just to have someone. The books bring readers into an active, if imaginary, evaluation of the role they play in the deaths of their own loved ones.

The topics discussed – wealth, resilience, and death – are themes we always have engaged with on a mythic level. As an entertaining and accessible mode, best-sellers offer the platform to shape society using the groundworks of religion’s mythic systems that our minds have already been trained to internalize, and in its internalization is transformation. This ability, lead towards unity in our society through a shared attitude inspired of these popular novels – the very same novels often dismissed by scholars. As a mechanism that allows for “coherent cultures,”¹⁵ a shared myth is recognizable and sacred to a people over time, which can stem from best-sellers. Myth teaches us to live well by recognizing our aspirations, fears, and goals. And so, as members of a community it is important to engage with these mythic narratives, and as scholars it is important to give credit to the influence of the best-sellers.

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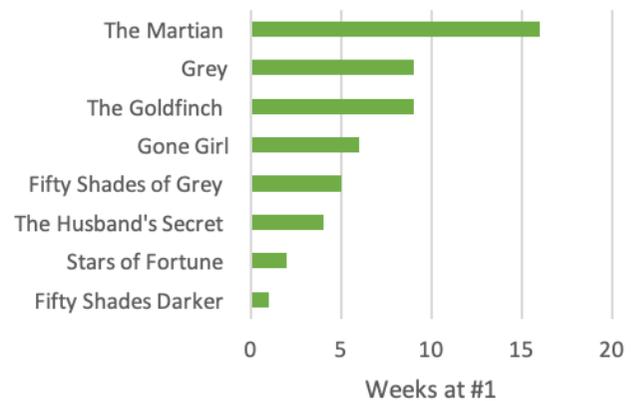
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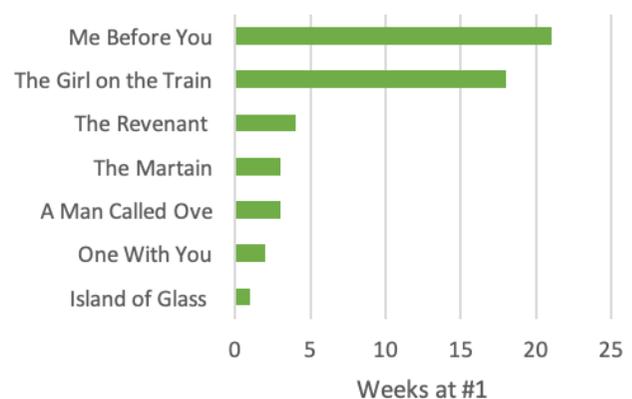
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Research Graphs

2015's Top Selling Books



2016's Top Selling Books



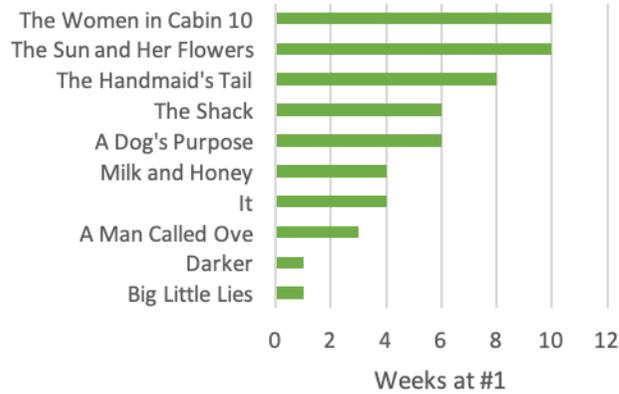
13 Andy Weir, *The Martian* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2014) 100.

14 Ruth Ware, *The Women in Cabin 10*, 268.

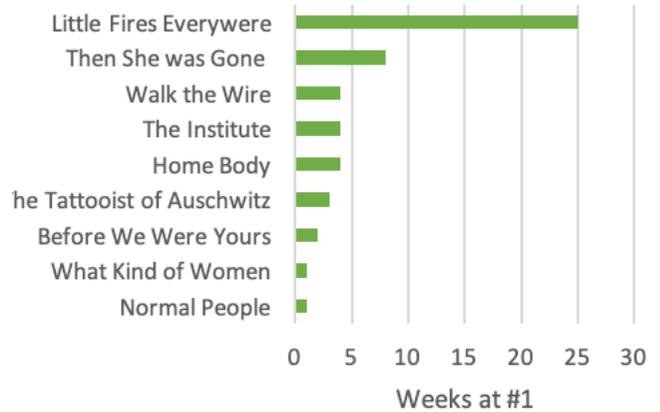
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Research Graphs (Continued)

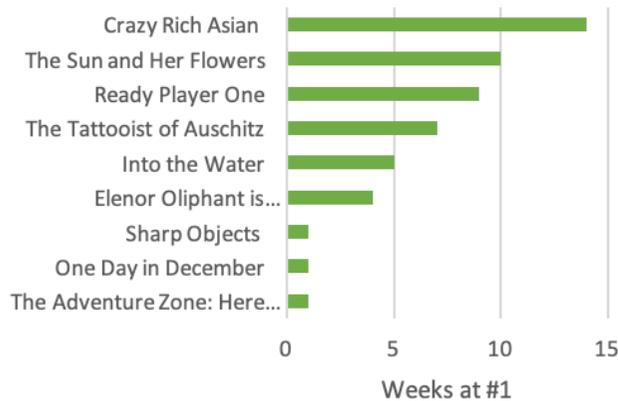
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