



# Hit Lit: Cracking the Code of the Twentieth Century's Biggest Bestsellers

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**Hit Lit: Cracking the Code of the Twentieth Century's Biggest Bestsellers** James W. Hall  
**DISCOVER THE SECRETS OF WHAT MAKES A MEGA-BESTSELLER IN THIS ENTERTAINING, REVELATORY GUIDE**

What do Michael Corleone, Jack Ryan, and Scout Finch have in common? Creative writing professor and thriller writer James W. Hall knows. Now, in this entertaining, revelatory book, he reveals how bestsellers work, using twelve twentieth-century blockbusters as case studies—including *The Godfather*, *Gone with the Wind*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *Jaws*. From tempting glimpses inside secret societies, such as submariners in *The Hunt for Red October*, and Opus Dei in *The Da Vinci Code*, to vivid representations of the American Dream and its opposite—the American Nightmare—in novels like *The Firm* and *The Dead Zone*, Hall identifies the common features of mega-bestsellers. Including fascinating and little-known facts about some of the most beloved books of the last century, *Hit Lit* is a must-read for fiction lovers and aspiring writers alike, and makes us think anew about why we love the books we love.

## Hit Lit: Cracking the Code of the Twentieth Century's Biggest Bestsellers Details

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# From Reader Review Hit Lit: Cracking the Code of the Twentieth Century's Biggest Bestsellers for online ebook

## Birgit says

Have you ever wondered why certain books make it onto bestseller lists, or even more so, why some books will rank high in sales for decades? In Hit Lit James W. Hall takes a closer look at twelve such novels from the last century, presenting the common features which propelled them into the realms of bestsellers. Looking at the selection of American bestsellers of the 20th century, from "Gone with the Wind" to "The Da Vinci Code" the selected books seem to be a rather wild mix and I was curious to find out what they could possibly have in common and how these similarities make them some of the most read novels of our time. From the rather obvious such as being unputdownable fast paced tales with contentious topics and colossal characters doing great things, to the not quite as conspicuous such as the importance of geography, religion and sexual encounters this was a both surprising and insightful read. Engrossing, informative, and accessible, which shouldn't be taken for granted when it comes to authors dissecting literature, this is a truly fascinating view on the bestseller-making parts bestsellers have in common - though ultimately a great book will always be more than its individual parts. Admittedly I would have loved a broader approach to the topic and not just the focus on American bestsellers, then again maybe such a book is already on the author's to-do list. I certainly wouldn't mind! In short: Revelatory journey into the world of bestsellers!

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## Sonia Lal says

Hit Lit explains or attempts to explain what American bestselling books have in common. It talks about 12 books:

1. To Kill a Mocking Bird by Harper Lee. 1960. 134 editions, over 140,000,000 copies sold.
2. Peyton Place by Grace Metalious. 1956. 10, 670, 302 copies sold.
3. Valley of the Dolls by Jacqueline Susann. 1966. About 30, 000, 000 copies sold worldwide.
4. Gone with the Wind by Margaret Mitchell. 1936. Close to 30, 000, 000 copies sold in the 1990's.
5. Jaws by Peter Benchley. 1974. By 1975, more than 9, 275, 000 copies sold.
6. The Bridges of Madison County by Robert James Waller. 1992. About 50, 000, 000 copies sold worldwide.
7. The Hunt for Red October by Tom Clancy. 1984. 5 to 6 million sold.
8. The Godfather by Mario Puzo. 1969. By 1975, over 12, 000, 000 copies sold.
9. The Firm by John Grisham. 1991. Spent 47 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list.
10. The Exorcist by William Peter Blatty. 1971. Four years after publication, 22, 702, 097 copies sold.
11. The Da Vinci Code by Dan Brown. 2003. 81, 000, 000 copies sold.
12. The Dead Zone by Stephen King. 1979. King's first novel to break into year-end top ten.

I have not read any of these books. I cannot say if what he says about them is true. Really, I ought to read a few just to see if I agree with him. I even teased this book yesterday.

He says all of these books have 12 things in common.

1. An Offer You Can't Refuse: page-turner

2. Hot Buttons: something people can't help but argue about.
3. The Big Picture: sweeping backdrop
4. The Golden Country: a lost Eden, the true homeland the MC has lost.
5. Facts: He says people want to learn about other stuff from novels. I don't agree.
6. Secret Societies: secrets about the ocean, about the bedroom, conspiracies and groups no one else knows about.
7. Bumpkins vs Slickers and vice versa: people move back and forth from the country to the city, from the city to the country
8. God: the characters have doubts about god and religion.
9. American Dream/Nightmare: rags to riches, and conversely, riches to rags.
10. Mavericks: rebels, loners, misfits, trailblazers, free spirits, nonconformists, bohemians. characters who are slightly out of step with their world.
11. Fractured Families: characters are missing some part their family. parents, siblings, children.
12. Juicy Parts: sex.

An Offer You Can't Refuse is basically good stuff that keeps you turning the page. It's speed, tension, danger and characters you are in love with. It's something dangerous going on with the character and you can't look away because you want to know what happens next. It's everything that makes you turn the page. This, I have no problem with. He also talks about how these books are movie-friendly. They are high-concept. Basically, that's when you sum up the drama of the book quickly. It helps the marketing, he says, and word of mouth, too.

I suppose it makes sense, but I am not sure I like the idea that for a book needs to high-concept in order to succeed.

I don't agree with the facts thing. He says people want to learn from novels. Learn about other people, other ways of living, things like that. Like how live in a small town, how you live in a large city, gossip. I don't agree. I mean, there have been plenty of bestsellers that you can't learn anything from. He says you learn stuff about gods and feminism, Mary Magdalene and the Hebrew alphabet from The Da Vinci Code. And he says the number of books that have shown saying Da Vinci Code is wrong is just proof of that, but I don't know. The Hunt for Red October is apparently filled with stuff about submarines and government protocols for this, that and the other.

A writer's research should be good, but it's hard to believe facts are a factor in bestsellers. They add details and they are important. But people don't read novels to learn. Do they? I mean, I don't. Someone tell me I am not alone.

Also, I do recommend this book. It's pretty interesting. Also, I got it as an ARC.

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## **Whitney says**

A study of twelve of the best selling novels over the twentieth century, Hit Lit had potential, that quickly dropped off. The main issue I had with this book was the large amount of repetition. Not only are the general plot lines described in detail in their own section in the back of the book, but they get rehashed, in even greater detail in each individual chapter.

There were several interesting points raised in this book about common subject matter to be found amongst these 12 best sellers. The introductory sections for each chapter were informative, and contained pertinent and concise examples. These early sections I enjoyed, but became quickly annoyed with the repetitive style of the rest of the chapter. This book could easily have been 100 pages shorter.

All in all, the sections are worth a look at, and it might be beneficial to skim through the beginning of each chapter to get a feel for what are some qualities that can make up a long living best seller. However, this is neither something I plan on reading again, nor am I keeping it on my shelf.

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### **Elizabeth Quinn says**

I looked forward to this book -- what novelist wouldn't want to learn the secrets of building a bestseller from a lit prof who doubles as a successful commercial novelist? But I found the book disappointing on a number of levels. The first disappointment was that I found very little new in this book -- no lightbulb over the head insights that prompted me to say, "Ah, hah! That's how it's done." Many good books have covered the same ground. The second disappointment was the selection of bestsellers reviewed -- the only 21st century novel included was published in 2003 and the rest -- with the exception of a 1991 title -- were published from the 1930s to the 1980s. All of those books were bonafide bestsellers in their day but taken as a whole bear very little resemblance to the current bestseller list. The third disappointment was Hall's failure to grapple with genre in any way. While bestsellers tend to transcend genre, most commercial novels fall into one of the standard genres -- romance, thriller, mystery, fantasy, horror, etc. -- and to ignore how they fit into the needs of their category leaves out a large part of the story of their success. Finally, the organization of the book is irritating -- twelve chapters based on the twelve key elements that all twelve bestsellers demonstrate, with each chapter broken into many smaller, subheaded parts. Hall adds in a short, summing up chapter -- a recap -- that is the most useful page in the book. But if this book is written for fiction writers, the structure makes it difficult to extract the significance for practical purposes. And if this book is written for readers, they're treated to a choppy structure which leaves one feeling that they've been exposed to lots of potentially interesting information but not the important thread that would tie all those insights together.

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### **Rita Ciresi says**

This is a wise and witty look at why certain books rise to the top of the bestseller list. I really enjoyed Hall's analysis and found myself going back to revisit the opening of *Gone With the Wind* and *Peyton Place*. And yes, I admit: this book made me finally try to read a novel by John Grisham. I actually got halfway through *The Firm*!

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### **Cathy DuPont says**

Loved it, just loved it. Although this book is not for everyone, it was right down my alley.

When I find a writer I enjoy, even before the end of the book, I'm looking up who he/she is, where they're from, their education and background, other books they've written and anything else I can find out about them.

Knowing this is a personal defect of mine due to my background in newspaper/radio and communications, I enjoy reading about the writer and all the sidebars and backstories I can locate. So this book into that territory as a backstory of sorts on bestsellers.

I can say, too, that I simply love Dr. James W. Hall's writing. It's clear, concise, entertaining and from time to time humorous. I've read everything he's written, including his poetry and I'm much lacking in that area. However, it was written by Hall, so I read it.

Hit Lit is the culmination of classes he's taught on bestsellers at Florida International University in Miami. He's given credit to his students for a lot of the work and effort they've made in coming up with the list and the 'common threads' that weave through the list of the 12 bestsellers named. Hall is anything but an egotist, he gives credit where credit's due to his students, his friend and fellow author Les Standiford and a number of others notes in the book.

It was so interesting to me to see those commonalities in the 12 books, although some were, in my mind, somewhat of a stretch. The one book that seems to be highlighted more than the others was *Gone With the Wind*, which I read just last summer so it was fresh on my mind.

He clearly described why he chose the 12 books he called 'best sellers on steroids.' Because of their publication date, readers today probably never heard of some of them nor read them. And a couple even surprised me as bestsellers. Who would have thought *Jaws* would be on the list and have something in common with *Gone With the Wind*? Or Stephen King's, *The Dead Zone*? Or *The Exorcist*?

While reading, I was thinking about this review and underlined many passages and quotes that I was going to use. But in the end, glancing through the book, the review would have been made up of nothing but quotes.

One of his past students, Christine Kling, a published writer (just finished her first book) was quoted about Hall's bestseller class: "I kept quiet about the books I really loved---the guilty-pleasure books by Stephen King, John D. MacDonald, Hammond Innes, and the like. They were books to be gobbled up, not savored. I recognized that the books I loved transported me to other worlds in ways that good literature often did not. In the "good reads," the proscenium of the physical book disappeared and the "I" ceased to exist. Losing myself in the story like that was pure incomprehensible magic." Much like I feel when I'm reading some of my favorite writers.

I've got many of these bestsellers on my shelf now, waiting for the moment when I want to read some great literature...and one or two I need to re-read.

This book will make me a far better reader and has indeed taken away that feeling of guilt that I have when I pick up a book of mystery, my favorite genre, which never cracked the bestseller list. Well worth a read from the norm for me.

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I was so looking forward to reading this book and enjoyed reading the forward so much, that I purposely jumped the gun and wrote about it before I was even 1/8 through the book. Leaving this as a reminder to me of how much I was looking forward to reading *Hit Lit* by Dr. James W. Hall, one of my favorite authors.

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Yahoo! Just got it in the mail and read the first part of the foreward. It's going to be great...and had to share a couple of comments from Dr. Hall's forward:

"While books are savored alone, they grant you membership into the most fascinating club I know: fellow readers. Fellow voyagers into the vast uncharted water of imaginative literature."

And "robust characters who magically migrated from the page and took up residence inside me, who became as real and gut-wrenching as any humans I'd ever met."

I'm going to enjoy, really enjoy this one! Always enjoyed Jim Hall's writing, too. He's really special. Read preface but started today, May 25.

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## **Ray Bearfield says**

James W. Hall wrote poetry and taught literature before he ever wrote best-selling Florida-based crime fiction. Reading *Hit Lit* suggests that signing up for his class in popular fiction would be as big a hoot as finding out what Thorn, his recurring protagonist, is up to.

*Hit Lit* sums up the analysis, rumination and brainstorming that informed that class, and he graciously credits the students whose interest and curiosity kept his passion alive. Subtitled "Cracking the Code of the Twentieth Century's Biggest Bestsellers," he packs a ton of information into 230 pages that breeze by much too quickly.

People who teach writing are no more able to resist deconstructing what they read than biologists are able to resist dissecting their newest discoveries. The process can be for enlightenment or enrichment. Robin Cook famously brags that his decision to subordinate the practice of medicine to the pursuit of popular fiction was calculated, and that he prepared for his new calling by reading an armload of best-sellers, then setting out to replicate the "formula" his study revealed. If that example represents the most successful known effort to hit the big time, Hall's *Hit Lit*, which does the same thing in a far less mercenary fashion, stands as the most entertaining.

Betsy Willeford, who was married to a tremendous crime fiction writer herself (Charles Willeford, author of *Miami Blues*, *52 Pickup* and other classics) told me that Hall's first attempt at a popular novel -- 1987's *Under Cover of Daylight* -- came after years of struggling in the academic trenches and crafting poetry that nobody read while watching others climb the charts. He was curious to see if he could compete in that arena. Seventeen novels later, he's made his point.

And now he offers *Hit Lit*, a thoroughly enjoyable romp through the best-selling books of our time, lovingly disassembled to show their similarities and structure. Those who hope to crack the best-seller lists themselves will find the couple of hours it takes to read it time well spent.

But it's not a "how-to" book in the conventional sense. Those looking for a recipe for best-sellerdom would probably gain more from reading Donald Maas's *Writing the Breakout Novel* or Dwight V. Swain's *Techniques of the Selling Writer*. The great joy *Hit Lit* offers is a chance to skim the waves of the most popular books of our time, rekindling the thirst to sample them again or even try them for the first time.

What are those books? How were they determined? What properties do they share? What makes them worth the time? The answers are in Hit Lit. It's the perfect book to open the summer. It's the perfect book to open the mind to worlds worth revisiting.

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### **Karan Bajaj says**

I love this book, and recommend it to all writers. Here's the thing - he doesn't give you a "plug and play" formula that will cheapen your writing. He does however highlight a list of elements that were probably going to be present in your story anyhow, but makes you think of turning up the volume on some of them. For example, he says that readers love to learn about a secret society or hidden world. So if that was going to be part of your story anyway, you may ramp it up after reading this and realizing how crucial that element is in several blockbuster bestsellers.

I find that the best books on writing teach as much about human nature and what drives and motivates us as people, as they do about storytelling. This is one of those books. It's insightful for avid readers as well - if you want to deconstruct why you get drawn into certain stories and what makes a book so page-turning. This book along with Save the Cat are ones that I recommend quite often.

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### **Diane Barnes says**

This was an enjoyable book about what goes into books that become mega-bestsellers. Although I felt the author stretched a few points to make his case, this book was full of odd and interesting facts that any literary addict will enjoy.

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### **Susan Oleksiw says**

This is a fun, incisive and thoughtful guide to what makes a best seller. The author examines 12 best sellers, drawing out the common features in them, and discussing why they have such appeal to readers. It's very insightful and worth reading no matter how many books you may have read or written.

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### **Lincoln says**

I finished HIT LIT in one afternoon. He gives thorough analysis of twelve bestseller novels; reflecting dedicated ponderance of how each book interconnects with prose and plot.

I took some issue with the way he dismissed Oprah's picks with two books on his list as "suitable" replacement -- because he just kicked bestselling novels by anyone of color right out of the room. I mean, does Toni Morrison not have an impressive book sales figure, or two? Whatever...



ANYhoo, besides reminding us that sex will always sell in literature, the author did offer valuable insight about elements shared by each and all of the disparate bestsellers. I have written several novels and I did learn some new things from HIT LIT. It's a fast read; and good to have on a serious writer's shelf.

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## **Fred Forbes says**

James Hall is one of my favorite authors and this non-fiction book is quite a change from his Thorn series of thrillers. Although it is somewhat repetitive in places, it was a nice recap of the 12 books selected, many of which I read years ago. His collection of essays, *Hot Damn*, is one of my favorites so I knew the non-fiction arena would not be too much of a challenge for him. I appreciated the insights into his own writing. Since the titles discussed and their commonalities have been described in other reviews, I'm tossing this one in only to flag an interesting read.

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## **Jenny Maloney says**

There are a couple things you need before you jump into this book:

1. A love of reading or writing. If you're not interested in either of those things, you will not find fascinating what I found fascinating.
2. You need to have read at least half of the books Hall discusses (*Gone With the Wind*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Godfather*, *The Exorcist*, *Peyton Place*, *Valley of the Dolls*, *The Dead Zone*, *Bridges of Madison County*, *Jaws*, *The Da Vinci Code*, *The Hunt for Red October*, and *The Firm*) **AND/OR** be willing to have a few of those endings totally spoiled for you. Otherwise what he's talking about won't make sense and it'll irritate you that gave away so much.

After you have those two things, there's nothing that's not interesting in his presentation of the Twelve Features that all of these titles possess.

There are a couple things that seem "duh" about a couple of the Features: of *course* a mega-bestseller would have characters that you can latch onto - but what I appreciated about Hall's discussion was that he attempted to define why these characters were latch-onto-able. It's a really clear, concise argument that he makes.

Another aspect I liked was the focus placed on the American mega-bestseller. All of the books explored in *Hit Lit* have something intrinsically American about them and were wildly successful in the USA. So there's some sociological probing going on at the same time - the way Americans view race, religion, and S-E-X are front and center because there's no denying that all three of these issues are present in the mega-bestsellers here. Really fascinating.

Because of Hall's summaries and analyses, I have a greater respect for the authors' authenticity and the level of skill that writing a mega-bestseller takes. He presents the popularity of sentimentality, overt tugs at heartstrings, and the gratuitous calls-to-action for which bestsellers are critically minimized as a gauge for what's really important to the reading public. Hall gives the bestseller a respect that's not seen often in academic or critical circles - and I think he does a good job of expressing the impact of these books. (Plus, Hall seems to know what he's talking about in general - two of his former students: Barbara Parker and

Dennis Lehane.)

Hall sums up that knowing what makes these novels tick isn't enough to create one of your own. You can know the recipe all day long, but that doesn't make you Gordon Ramsay now does it? Write with passion, write what you're interested in, and remember that if there are no tears for the writer, there are no tears for the reader. (per Robert Frost)

I've read exactly half of the books on this list, and with the exception of *Jaws*, I loved all of those. This book has inspired me to read the others on the list, so that can't be a bad thing, right?

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## Charlotte says

In his new book, *Hit List*, Author James W. Hall takes a look at twelve novels published in the 20th century and shares his thoughts on why they were wildly successful. The books he chose are listed as follows:

Gone With the Wind

Peyton Place

Bridges of Madison County

The Firm

The Davinci Code

The Exorcist

Jaws

Dead Zone

Valley of the Dolls

To Kill A Mockingbird

The Godfather

The Hunt for Red October.

I admit to having read five of these novels and have seen several other of the movies. (lol - does that count?)

But all of these novels have been bestsellers, some are still bestsellers even after all of these years. Some were "one hit wonders" and others were the beginning of successful careers for the author. But none of that matters because anyone who considers themselves avid readers have heard of these novels.

<http://charlotteswebbofbooks.blogspot...>

Hall takes all twelve of these novels and looks at the common themes in them and why he thinks they became bestsellers. One common theme that sticks in my mind is that the main characters in each of these novels did not have a traditional nuclear family, or if they did it was incredibly dysfunctional, laden with infidelity and/or abuse. Even Scout had lost her mother at a tender age.

I admit that I knew very little about *Peyton Place* and purchased it to read, but I have yet to have read it at the time I am writing this post. I also bought *Jaws* and *Gone With the Wind* (I can't find my copy) based on this book. I think that *Hit Lit* is one of those books that will only find an audience with real Word Nerds and those interested in replicating the success in their own books.

What do you think? Have you ready any of the twelve books listed and do you think you will read this book?

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**Leanne Ritchie says**

James Hall's review of best-selling American fiction managed to reinvigorate my desire to read bestsellers and understand their common elements. His enthusiasm is catchy and his advice to writers is sound. My only criticism is that he dips his toe in rather shallow, tepid waters when it comes to relating the common themes of modern day bestsellers to the folk tales and myths that proceeded them.

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