Two Early American Bestsellers

UNCLE TOM'S CABIN

HARRIET BEECHER STOWE

Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* and Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

Bestsellers are a characteristic feature of modern American publishing. The works on the weekly bestseller list published in the *New York Times Book Review* are displayed prominently and are regularly discounted in bookstores, and there is surely no author who has not, at least once, looked online to discover his or her book's Amazon.com sales rank.

Book historians agree that the term "bestseller" is probably of American origin, and they usually associate the beginning of the bestseller phenomenon with the publication of the list of the six "New Books, in the order of demand" that appeared in the inaugural issue of a New York periodical, *The Bookman*, in February 1895. The term's American origin is confirmed by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which gives the definition "one of the books having the largest sale of the year or the season" and finds the earliest citation in a report in the *Kansas Times & Star* of April 25, 1889. "Kansas City's literary tone is improving. The six best sellers here last week were *Fools of Nature* [etc.]," claimed this report, referring to a little-remembered work by Alice Brown, published in 1887. The next citation, a reference to a "best selling new book," appeared in the July 1895 issue of the *Bookman*. What the editors of the *OED* and book historians seem to have overlooked, however, is that the American *Bookman* was an imitation of a London periodical, also called the *Bookman*, which had, from its beginning in October 1891, included a list of the "best selling books" from a leading West End bookseller.

Wherever and whenever the term "bestseller" originated, the phenomenon of bestselling books antedates these lists. Even discounting the substantial sales of non-trade books—almanacs, Bibles and other religious works, text books and handbooks—a few earlier literary works also qualify as bestsellers. Their stories make up what might be termed the prehistory of "bestsellerdom."

Susanna Haswell Rowson, the author of *Charlotte Temple*, was born in Portsmouth, England, in 1762, the daughter of an officer of the Royal Navy who was assigned as collector of customs in Nantasket, just south of Boston, soon after her birth. Susanna, whose mother had died giving birth to her only child, remained in England until 1767, when her father, now remarried and established in the colonies, brought her to America to join him. These were turbulent years, however, and in 1778, after the American colonies had declared their independence, Lieutenant Haswell removed his family first to Halifax and then to England. There Susanna grew into womanhood: she first became the governess for the Duchess of Devonshire and then married William Rowson, a hardware merchant and trumpeter in the Royal Horse Guards. Soon afterward she became associated with the London theater world, and in 1786 published in London at her own expense a novel, *Victoria* —thus beginning her career as an author, a career that would last until her death in 1824.


Title page from Charlotte: A Tale of Truth, vol. I, by Susanna Rowson (Philadelphia, 1794). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

In 1791, Susanna Rowson published *Charlotte: A Tale of Truth* (better remembered today by its later title, *Charlotte Temple*), the first of three of her novels that would appear over the imprint of William Lane, proprietor of the Minerva Press and its associated network of circulating libraries. Lane's empire, which might be considered an early equivalent of a combination of the modern Barnes and Noble, Blockbuster, and Netflix, was built around the publication of light-weight popular fiction, not dissimilar from today's romance novels. In this company, Rowson's works did not stand out—indeed, they were simply three of the many sentimental Minerva novels published and quickly forgotten.


Title page from Charlotte Temple, by Susanna Rowson (New York, 1877). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

In late 1793, however, Rowson returned to America with her husband as part of a touring theater troupe that had been recruited by Thomas Wignell to perform at his Philadelphia "New Theatre," and her *Charlotte Temple* fared much better when it was published by Mathew Carey in that city the following spring. It went on to become a steady seller in America over the next century. A second edition by Carey also appeared in 1794, and further Carey editions in 1797, 1801, 1802, 1808, 1809, and 1812, as well as a possible "sixth edition," unlocated, sometime between 1802 and 1808. In 1801 new editions were also published in Hartford, New Haven, and Philadelphia (this last by Peter Stewart), and from that point forward, Carey was no longer the primary American publisher of *Charlotte Temple*. Our best record of the work's publication history lists 152 American printings or editions of the work before 1905, some of which were issued together with its sequel *Lucy Temple*—first published posthumously in 1828—usually with the omnibus title *Love and Romance*. In 1825 Silas Andrus of Hartford published the first edition printed from stereotype plates, which were subsequently used for many more printings, and at least fifteen sets of stereotyped plates were used over the next eighty years. These figures are almost surely an understatement of the true number, but in any case, they have been widely taken to qualify *Charlotte Temple* as an early American bestseller.

What accounts for the novel's remarkable success in America? Certainly its content played a role: as a tale of seduction and innocence lost, yet in the end somehow forgiven and redeemed, it struck a chord with American readers, especially during a period that saw the new nation attempt to establish itself culturally in a Eurocentric world that viewed America as innocent of artistic and moral tradition. But the question of *Charlotte Temple*'s "Americanness" is a vexed one.

It is certainly true that the second volume of *Charlotte Temple* (which includes the denouement) takes place in America; that Rowson herself was born in America and spent the greatest part of her life here (though her identification on the title page of the first American edition as "of the New Theatre, Philadelphia" seems rather to point to the work's racy nature, written by an actress, than to the author's American residence); and that the novel achieved its great success in America. But, *Charlotte Temple* was in many ways an English novel, first published in London by a British citizen as part of the popular Minerva Library. This is certainly how the American book trade viewed the work, for if it had been an original American work in 1794, Carey could have protected his interest in the work by copyrighting it, a privilege that at the time was restricted to works written by Americans. There can be little doubt that *Charlotte Temple*'s great success in America depended on the fact that, as a work in the public domain, it was freely available for reprinting by any and all American printers and publishers who cared to offer an edition—and many did throughout the nineteenth century.

Title page from Charlotte Temple: A Tale of Truth, by Susanna Rowson (New York, 1899). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Uncle Tom's Cabin is widely recognized as the great American bestseller of the nineteenth century—the "greatest book of its kind" as its original publisher styled it. Written by Harriet Beecher Stowe, the daughter of the leading American evangelical of the time and wife of one of our first biblical scholars, the novel was her impassioned response to the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which implicated all Americans, both northern and southern, in support of the moral outrage of chattel slavery. Stowe, who had been supplementing her family income by publishing stories and sketches since the 1830s, was regularly contributing material to the moderate antislavery *National Era* in March 1851, when she wrote to its editor, Gamaliel Bailey, announcing that she was at work on a story that addressed the evils of slavery. Initially she expected that it would extend to only three or four installments, but eventually the text of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* expanded to make up many more, which were published weekly from June 6, 1851, to April 1, 1852. The work attracted a considerable following as a serial, but not until its publication in book form would it truly become a bestseller.

As early as summer 1851, discussions were underway for the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in book form, but Boston's Phillips, Sampson, and Company, the firm originally approached, declined to take it on, fearing that its antislavery content would alienate the southern market. In September, Bailey announced in the *National Era* that he had learned from a private source that Stowe had completed arrangements with another Boston firm, John P. Jewett and Company. In fact, the contract with Jewett was not signed until March 13, 1852, a week before the book finally appeared and twelve days before the text was completed

in the *National Era*. The first edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published March 20, 1852, in two volumes priced $1.00, $1.50, or $2.00, depending on the binding.

From the start, the book was a hit. The first printing of five thousand copies was exhausted in a few days, and by April 1, a second run of five thousand had been produced. In mid-April, Jewett announced that ten thousand copies had been sold and that "three paper mills are constantly at work, manufacturing the paper, and three power presses are working twenty-four hours per day, in printing it, and more than one hundred book-binders are incessantly plying their trade to bind them, and still it has been impossible, as yet, to supply the demand." By mid-May fifty thousand copies had been sold, seventy-five thousand copies by mid-September, and in mid-October one hundred and twenty-five thousand were claimed. For the 1852 holiday season, Jewett produced two further editions: three thousand copies of an expensive one-volume gift edition with over one hundred vignette illustrations, costing $2.50 to $5.00 depending on the binding, and an inexpensive "edition for the millions," selling for only thirty-seven and a half cents, of which fifty thousand had been produced by year's end.

All this made Stowe wealthy—Jewett paid her over twenty thousand dollars in royalties by the end of 1852—and world renowned. The first London edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* appeared in late April or early May, and the work was reported to have sold over one million copies in various British editions before year's end. It was soon also reprinted, in both English and translation, on the European continent and around the world. But the *Uncle Tom* phenomenon extended beyond the novel to offshoots—children's versions, sheet music, figurines, games, muslin handkerchiefs, among others—not to mention a multitude of responses, known as "Anti-Uncle Tom" novels, which attempted to counter the work's antislavery sentiments. In the United States, dramatizations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became a staple of American melodrama well into the twentieth century.

A bestseller? Certainly. Less widely recognized is that the market for the original text of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* soon dried up in the United States. Jewett produced something like three hundred and ten thousand copies of the work during its first year of publication, but subsequent demand remained small for many years. Forced to suspend payment of his debts during the panic of 1857, Jewett produced another small printing in late 1859, shortly before he finally left the publishing business entirely in August 1860. The rights to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were then acquired by another Boston publisher, Ticknor and Fields, which first published a small printing of only two hundred seventy copies in November 1862. During the 1860s, that firm and its successors produced just under eight thousand copies. But sales were increasing: during the 1870s, nearly twenty thousand copies were produced, and during the five-year period from 1886 to 1890 just under one hundred and ten thousand copies. By the time that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* entered the public domain in 1893, the work had, like *Charlotte Temple*, become a steady seller. Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, the firm that

had inherited the rights to the work from Ticknor and Fields, made a determined attempt to maintain its control of the market for the work by issuing a variety of editions, from cheap to expensive, but by the turn of the century, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was being published by a veritable array of American publishers of inexpensive books: Altemus, Burt, Caldwell, Coates, Crowell, Dominion, Donohue, Fenno, Hill, Hurst, Lupton, McKay, Mershon, Neeley, Page, People, Rand, Routledge, Warne, and Ziegler.


Title page from the first edition of Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among The Lowly, by Harriet Beecher Stowe (Boston; Cleveland, Ohio, 1852). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

The initial success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was no doubt due, in part, to its topicality: the Fugitive Slave Act meant that no American could ignore the implications of slavery any longer. Stowe's depiction of that "peculiar institution" stressed not only its cruelty but also the ways in which it compromised the values of Christianity and domesticity that were so much a part of the dominant culture of Victorian middle-class America. The promotional activities of its publisher J. P. Jewett also played a role. Jewett was recognized by his contemporaries as an innovative book promoter at a time when a truly national market for books was first established in the United States. His successes included not only *Uncle Tom's Cabin* but also the second great bestselling domestic novel of the decade— *The Lamplighter*(1855) by Susanna Cummins. In promoting *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Jewett spent thousands of dollars for advertising before the work was published, and upon its publication he traveled to Washington to push the book to all leading senators, both northern and southern, a tactic that surely served to draw attention to it. Front matter added to the new 1878 edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* made sure to stress that this was a work that championed the downtrodden, now generalized over ten years after the emancipation of the African American slaves, but also the work's status as an American classic that had been recognized worldwide. It was promoted as a book that deserved to be read.


Title page from the holiday gift edition of Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among The Lowly, by Harriet Beecher Stowe (Boston; Cleveland, Ohio, 1853). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

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What conclusions can be drawn from this examination of the publishing history of these two early American bestsellers? Both achieved substantial sales, but the sales patterns differed. The success of any bestseller depends on market conditions as much as upon content and promotion. Some topics—"Lincoln's Doctor's Dog," as George Stevens quipped in the title of his short book on bestsellers published in 1939—resonate more than others. Just as important is the political economy of the book trade, the legal, economic, and manufacturing "technologies" that make substantial sales possible in the first place.

Copyright certainly played a role in the success of the two novels that I am considering here. *Charlotte Temple* was slow to find its audience, which was largely in America rather than Britain, where it was first published. The record also does not show that Rowson's work achieved remarkable sales in any one year; rather, it was what is often termed a "steady seller" over many years. It is impossible to imagine the continued success of *Charlotte Temple*had it not been in the public domain in the United States, leaving any publisher free to reprint it. In contrast, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* achieved a remarkable sale immediately upon publication in book form, something that struck contemporaries as extraordinary. But its sale ceased almost completely after a year, for production came to a halt, and only after several decades did Stowe's work begin to find an audience that brought it steady sales like Rowson's. Perhaps the very fact that the work was controlled under copyright encouraged J. P. Jewett to make such promotional efforts when the book was first published to ensure its exceptional success. Nevertheless, it is also worth noting that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* achieved remarkable sales in Britain, where it was not protected by copyright, and in the United States, especially after 1893, when it had entered the public domain.

Title page from the cheap "edition for the millions" of Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among The Lowly, by Harriet Beecher Stowe (Boston; Cleveland, Ohio, 1852).

Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

The prehistory of American bestsellers takes us beyond questions about the content and literary value of bestselling texts and invites us instead to explore just what makes such a phenomenon possible. Markets are complex things, and the market for books more so than most. If copyright can be viewed as restricting the free flow of books and the information that they contain, as is often claimed, then perhaps we need to explore just how copyright also fosters that flow by controlling the markets that enable it. Surely it is no coincidence that bestseller lists emerged in the United States only after the nation passed an international copyright law in 1891. In what ways has copyright influenced the market for books, bestsellers and others? And how does the political economy of publishing influence how we choose the books that we continue to read and treasure? This examination of the publishing history of two early American novels offers a first answer to these questions.


xAdvertising flyer for multiple editions of Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among The Lowly, by Harriet Beecher Stowe (Boston and New York, ca. 1880). Courtesy of the author.

Further Reading:

The early history of American bestsellers is recorded in Frank Luther Mott's *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States* (New York, 1947), James D. Hart's *The Popular Book: A History of America's Literary Taste* (New York, 1950), and the series of compilations by Alice Payne Hackett beginning with *Fifty Years of Best Sellers, 1895-1945* (New York, 1945). The best source for information on the life and works of Rowson is R. W. G. Vail, "Susanna Haswell Rowson, The Author of *Charlotte Temple*: A Bibliographical Study," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, n.s. 42 (1932): 47-160. A helpful guide to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and its many spin-offs is Stephen Railton's Website, Uncle Tom's Cabin & American Culture: A Multi-Media Archive. The phrase "political economy" is borrowed from William St Clair's influential 2005 lecture, "The Political Economy of Reading," in which he argues to the contrary that copyright and its restriction of intellectual property have severely limited the availability of books in editions at a price that allows them to reach substantial audiences.

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Michael Winship, Iris Howard Regents Professor of English II at the University

of Texas at Austin, is the author of *American Literary Publishing in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (1995) and a member of the editorial board of and contributor to multiple volumes of *A History of the Book in America* series, now published by the University of North Carolina Press. An earlier version of this essay was presented as a keynote address at “Birth of the Bestseller: The 19th-Century Book in Britain, France, and Beyond,” organized by the Bibliographical Society of America in New York in March 2007.