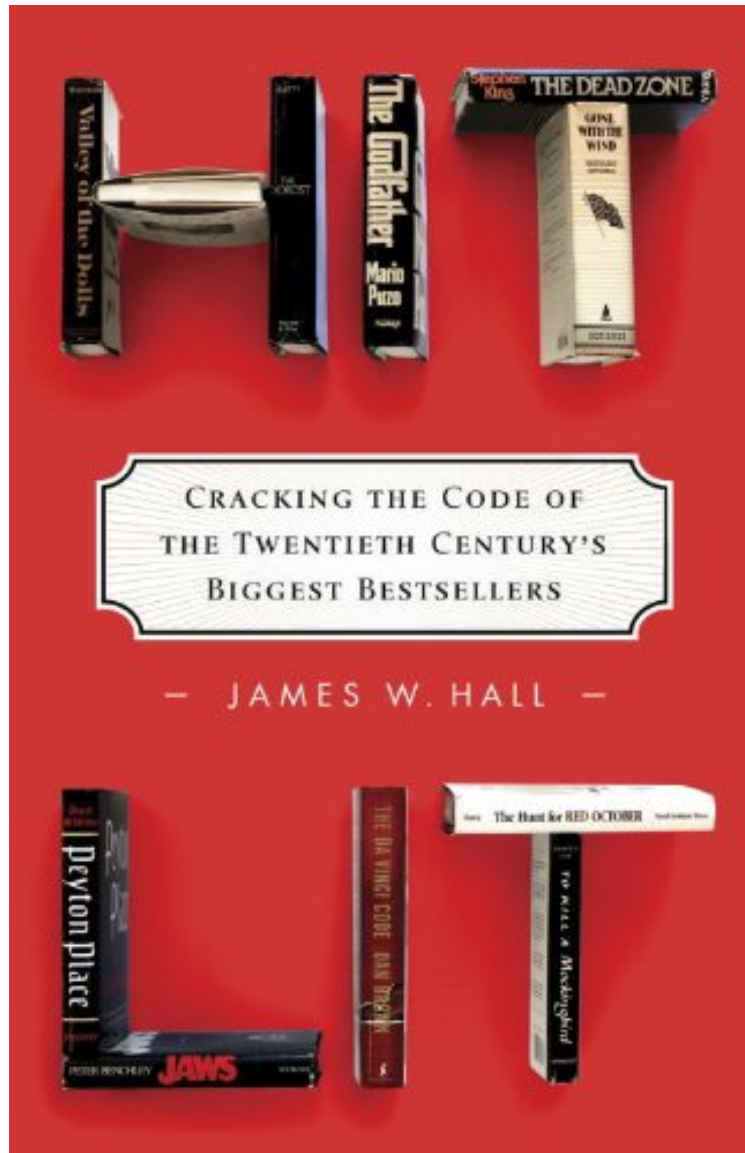


# Hit Lit: Cracking the Code of the Twentieth Century's Biggest Bestsellers

James W. Hall

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**James W. Hall : Hit Lit: Cracking the Code of the Twentieth Century's Biggest Bestsellers** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Hit Lit: Cracking the Code of the Twentieth Century's Biggest Bestsellers:

15 of 15 people found the following review helpful. An Interesting Look at What Makes Books Sell By MutiveTo start with, I thought it was pretty good over all. James Hall (the author) studied 12 bestselling books that were published in

the last century and tried to find common aspects that all books had that made them mega sellers. (And he was looking at megasellers, not purely bestsellers, as well as break out books - books written by previously not very well known authors, so that only the book - not the name on its cover - explained why it became a huge seller.) Some of the aspects I thought weren't very relevant, IMHO. (For instance, he mentions religion as being critical to the book - which I find kind of interesting as religion only played a very minimal role in, say, *Gone with the Wind*. And sex also was key, according to him, despite that I don't really remember it being all that important in, say, *The Hunt for Red October*. Plus, these two elements are so prevalent in novels that it would be hard to find one that didn't even have a hint of sex or religion, you know?) But I do think that he made a lot of really solid ones including:

1. To become a mega-bestseller (vs. just a decent seller), you need to appeal to people who don't read books on a regular basis. (Or at least don't buy books.) Even if every single person in the US who normally buys books bought a copy of your book, you wouldn't sell as well as any of these books did. So you need to appeal to a group beyond the regular book buying contingent. This means that your book can't have super fancy, hard to understand language, or elements that would mostly appeal to a serial reader. (For instance, a super unique plot is going to appeal more to someone who's read thousands of books than it would to someone who only reads once in a while. The same is true for vivid imagery, lovely writing, etc. None of these might hurt, but it's not going to make for a mega-seller either.)
2. The characters in these novels are rarely self-reflective. They act. They don't sit around and think and feel and discuss their place in the universe. They go out and do stuff.
3. Most of these novels are movie friendly (and were eventually made into movies). This may not be necessary for a mega seller (as most sold well prior to having movies based on them), but...if you want a bestseller, it may make sense to ask, "Is this the kind of thing that would make for a good movie?" If the answer is no, then you may not have a mega-seller.
4. It hits hot buttons. Virtually every novel covered hit some kind of hot button that was a big deal in the day. (And generally still important now. *Valley of the Dolls* is really the one exception to the "still relevant now" rule.) Essentially, a novel that doesn't cover any bigger themes isn't all that interesting to most readers. (Even if it covers them crudely, like *The Da Vinci Code*.)
5. There are almost always intricately described worlds which the viewer may not be familiar with. Whether this is a town, a secret society, or the ante belleum south, readers seem to like learning something new. (Or at least feeling like the author knows what they're talking about.) That world building and research matters!

Looking at books that are too new to be covered (*Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, *The Hunger Games*) I think that most of these actually meet these criteria fairly well. So there may be something to these rules, such as they are. Not that I think that writers should write to them. (As there are a lot of books that ping all these boxes and yet still don't become best sellers. And there are a lot of good books that don't sell all that well and are still desirable.) But I think that it's definitely worth a read for someone who is either trying to write popular literature or just wants to know what makes people read.

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Excellent for any Author who Wants to Write a Best Seller

By Hemlock

James W. Hall is an enjoyable writing professor and this particular work, a study by Hall and his students, deeply examines what makes a hit in the world of modern literature. While the ten books studied tend to cover a wide range of tastes and time periods, from the drama of Southern strife during the Civil War in *Gone With the Wind* to the modern techno-thriller in *The Hunt for Red October*, as Hall dissects each of the books the vast differences really become similarities shared by all ten, and by extension, any modern mega-seller. Authors as diverse as Jacqueline Susann in *Valley of the Dolls* and Stephen King in *The Dead Zone* share story and literate features with John Grisham, Peter Benchley and Harper Lee, covering social controversy, character flaws and the adversity of life choices to the delight of millions of paying readers. The only problem with this book is that you will find yourself searching out and reading, or rereading, the books presented here. It's a valuable exercise for any current or future author also looking to add the best-seller cartography to their resume.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Some valid points, but poor choice of bestsellers to analyze

By Brioche

I bought this book with high hopes that it would reveal the secrets of the bestsellers. While the author makes valid points, I am disappointed in the bestsellers he selected for analysis. Is there anything new to know about Scarlett O'Hara in "*Gone With the Wind*" or Scout in "*To Kill a Mockingbird*?" Both books are known quantities, acknowledged classics, and have been analyzed ad nauseum. While this book makes some valid points about both, there are no revelations, and to be honest this book doesn't add much new about either. But including the old chestnuts "*Peyton Place*" and "*Valley of the Dolls*" is downright odd, considering how many more recent bestsellers would have been more relevant choices. Including those two but skipping "*Silence of the Lambs*," a masterpiece of structure and characterization, also made into a movie, makes no sense to me. Few, if any serious writers, look to "*Valley*" or "*Peyton Place*" for insights on how to write a bestseller. To be fair some of the novels analyzed are much more relevant, like "*The Godfather*," "*The Firm*," and "*Da Vinci Code*." There is in-depth analysis, but the bottom line is, there are no major insights. I found the *The Bestseller Code* much more helpful and revelatory. Interestingly, the two novel mentioned in both books are "*The Firm*," and "*Da Vinci Code*."

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.