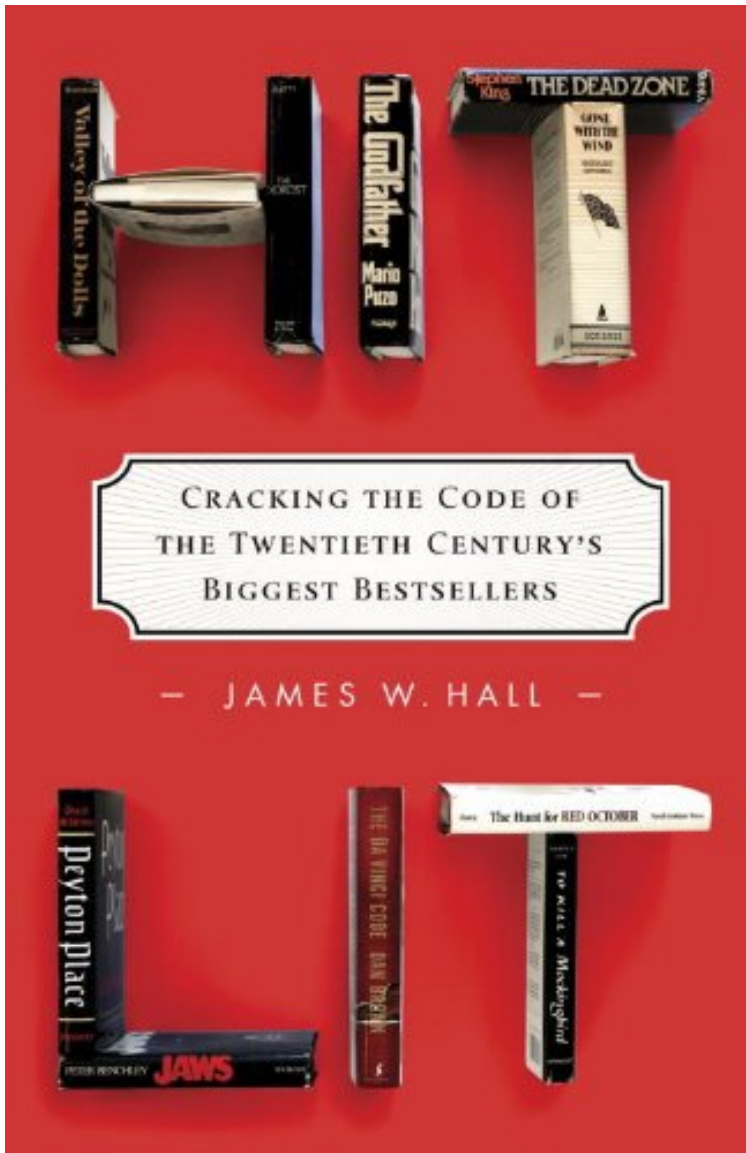


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# Hit Lit: Cracking the Code of the Twentieth Century's Biggest Bestsellers



Par James W. Hall  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurDISCOVER 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 studiesincluding 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.

**EXTRA CHAPTER 1 FEATURE #1 An Offer You Can't Refuse** The most difficult thing in the world is to make things simple enough, and enticing enough, to cause readers to turn the page. -HELEN GURLEY BROWN, FORMER EDITOR OF *COSMOPOLITAN*

Some tricks of the trade that make our bestsellers unputdownable. When Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* intercepts an impatient guest who's rushing to a wedding, and grabs hold with his skinny hand and glittering eye, and proceeds to mesmerize the man with his haunting sea story, Coleridge has given us a nifty metaphor for the foremost mission of a bestseller writer. These books grip you and refuse to let you loose until they've finished their tale. For the popular audience, first and foremost a novel must be entertaining. It's a fact so painfully obvious, I shudder to say it. For a novel to rise to the sales level of these twelve blockbusters, it must be a page-turner. A book you can't put down, that you want to read in a gulp. One that keeps you up all night. Gripping. Edge of your seat. Mesmerizing. Fast-paced. Spellbinding. A roller-coaster thrill ride. Unputdownable.

Novelist and historian Les Standiford, a university colleague of mine, is fond of telling roomfuls of aspiring novelists, "The only place people read books they are not interested in is college." The focus of this chapter is twofold. First I'll share what my students and I came to call the "mechanics of speed." Various ways in which writers initially engage readers, then keep them securely hooked while moving fast through a few hundred pages. Then we'll look beyond narrative devices at the other key ingredients that helped these twelve novels seize the attention of so many readers.

**MOVIE-FRIENDLY** Hollywood filmmakers can teach us a thing or two about speed, for moviemakers have turned storytelling into a science, using certain formulaic devices that consistently accelerate the forward movement of the narrative. It's true that all twelve of the novels on our reading list were made into major motion pictures, and without a doubt some of their sales success as books was spurred by their filmic version. However, the common belief that a movie of a novel is the main factor in driving a book's commercial success is not supported by the facts. For instance, *Jaws* sold around a million copies before the film even came out. In the cases of *Valley of the Dolls* and *The Da Vinci Code*, which are two of the biggest bestsellers of all time, so many copies had already been sold by the time the movie hit the theaters that it was unlikely any movie ticket buyers had not already bought the novel. Indeed, they seemed to be drawn to the film because they knew and loved the book. That said, the effect of a successful film on the novel's long-term sales can be substantial. *Gone with the Wind* is the top-grossing domestic movie of all time, adjusted for ticket price inflation. Without a doubt, the film's ongoing popularity keeps the sales of the novels perking along. However, it's important to note that Margaret Mitchell's novel sold two million copies within a year of its publication, long before David O. Selznick got his hands on it. In this case, as in many others, the movie obviously helped the book's long-term sales, but the film was only one of many factors contributing to the book's overall success. The permutations are endless: Bestsellers that flop at the box office (*The Lovely Bones*). Novels that have marginal sales but become spectacular hits as films (*Forrest Gump*). Novels that were moderate bestsellers but become movie legends. (Larry McMurtry has done it often.) But such considerations are ultimately beside the point; at least, they're beside my point—which is that popular novelists have undeniably absorbed many lessons from the craft of filmmakers, and either intentionally or unintentionally, they have made their stories more "movie-friendly." These are the books that Hollywood folks want to make into movies. And moviemakers, in turn, have sharpened their storytelling craft by employing techniques of successful novelists. This cross-pollination of the two storytelling art forms is natural and mutually beneficial. Steven Spielberg puts it this way: "I like ideas, especially movie ideas, that you can hold in your hand. If a person can tell me the idea in twenty-five words or less, it's going to make a pretty good movie." Being able to compress a novel's complex plot into a single sentence is both a useful exercise for a novelist struggling to understand the dramatic forces driving his or her own work and a helpful marketing tool in the publishing industry and the film world. There are numerous commercial benefits to being able to frame a story in intriguing shorthand. For one thing, if a novel can't be summarized succinctly and engagingly, then word-of-mouth buzz isn't as easy to generate, and a marketing campaign is less likely to succeed; sales reps simply have a harder time selling the book to their bookstore accounts if they can't give a concise and appealing description. That's three strikes against any story so murky or complex that it can't be simplified to a tasty kernel. For example: When a rogue Russian sub commander who's piloting a vessel so technologically advanced that it could upset the balance of world power engages

in a cat-and-mouse game with a brilliant CIA analyst who has the entire U.S. Navy at his disposal, World War III is only one small mistake away. A resourceful young girl's innocent childhood is shattered and her family members threatened when she is thrust into the center of the racial turmoil that erupts in her small southern town. Just for fun, check out this one-liner for *The Wizard of Oz* (often credited to Richard Polito, a journalist in California), which makes Dorothy's story sound like a hallucinatory episode from the life of Charlie Manson: Transported to a surreal landscape, a young girl kills the first woman she meets, then teams up with three complete strangers to do it again. The literary version of "high concept" is what's known as "the dramatic question," which is another way of capturing in a single catchy phrase the dramatic energy coiled within a novel. Generally speaking, each genre has its own standard question. In mysteries: Will the detective catch the killer? Romance: Will the woman hook up with the man of her dreams? Horror: How will our hero manage to survive or defeat these terrifying events? Or in coming-of-age novels: How will the character's adult life be shaped by the events of his or her youth? Our twelve bestsellers are anything but coy about showing their hands from the beginning. Will the shark come back for a second bite? Will Scarlett ever marry Ashley? What will success do to Mitch and Abby McDeere? Will Anne Welles and her two girl pals find love and happiness in the big city? Will that faithless priest be able to save the little girl from the clutches of Satan? Good questions, sure. Most readers' interest would be piqued. But are these questions sufficient to attract and compel large numbers of readers? No. More is required. One way our twelve bestsellers stand apart is that each of them enhanced these dramatic questions by using unique and creative mash-ups of traditional genres. For instance, at its heart *The Hunt for Red October* is a detective story, and its dramatic question is straightforward. Will the detective, Jack Ryan, locate the rogue Russian sub commander and thwart his mission? But if that were all this story was about, it's doubtful it would have risen above the other popular novels of its time. Its grip on so many readers springs in part from Clancy's mingling the dramatic structure of the detective story with the familiar tropes of the novel of international intrigue, then combining that with elements of the sea adventure, and finally tossing in one inventive new ingredient, a feature that has become a staple of the techno-thriller: the use of cutting-edge hardware and technology, which plays a role as central as the characters themselves (not unlike science fiction). So in *The Hunt for Red October*, the potency of the standard dramatic question that fuels the detective story is increased exponentially when these additional elements begin to slosh together. An average reader may not observe any of this consciously, but even the most jaded among us can't help but be intrigued when we confront a never-seen-before species that somehow echoes other stories we've read and loved. We love the familiar and are excited by the new. A combination of both is irresistible. While it may not seem as fresh and original to us now, in its day *The Hunt for Red October* was almost experimental in its novelty. A large part of its success as both fiction and film was due to this crafty mixing and matching of genres and its use of a movie-friendly principle called "high concept" that helps seize our attention from the very first pages.

**THE SECOND ACT AND BEYOND** Once the reader has been snagged by a novel's high-concept premise, on one level we are drawn forward by the momentum of the unfolding story as one complication after another challenges the central character and the original dramatic question mutates into another question and another. How will Scarlett ever manage to marry Ashley Wilkes now that he's engaged to Melanie? And how will she achieve her dream when she impulsively marries Frank? Then there's the big annoying complication of the Civil War. How will Scarlett ever seduce Ashley when he's off being gallant at the front lines? And when Rhett Butler makes a beeline for Scarlett's affections, will she be able to resist his obvious charms and remain available for Ashley? There are lots and lots of plot complications branching off the trunk of this main dramatic question, but everything in this sweeping novel stays firmly rooted in Scarlett's single-minded focus to win the one man she can't have. Ashley, Ashley, Ashley. What are the consequences of Scarlett's bullheaded and maddeningly foolish love for Captain Wilkes? It takes a thousand pages to answer that question. In *The Firm*, Mitch McDeere's too-good-to-be-true first job also raises a dramatic question that takes a few hundred pages to resolve. Will this nice young couple grab the brass ring, or will the brass ring grab them? Once the reader begins to see the pickle Mitch and Abby are in, that question morphs into another even more lapel-grabbing question: How will Mitch and Abby ever extricate themselves from this perilous trap they've stumbled into? The first question *The Godfather* asks seems harmless enough. How will Michael Corleone resist being drawn into the family business? Well, for starters, he'll keep his distance and marry a girl who is the exact opposite of a Mafia princess. But once his father is the target of an assassination attempt and the family is forced into a war that threatens their very existence, the question is no longer about how he will resist. Now the question is, How will this good boy, a war hero, not ready for

prime-time Mafia work, meet the minimum job requirements? Then once he has taken command, the question changes again. How the hell is this all-American kid who seems to be in over his head going to live up to the God-father's dark example? When it becomes clear in the early pages of *The Dead Zone* that Johnny Smith has the gift of precognition, our first question is a natural one. How will this ordinary kid employ this extraordinary perception? Will he, like many in his place, use his new skills for fun or profit? Sure, that could be a titillating story line, but we find out pretty quickly that's not where we're headed, because Johnny isn't greedy or self-indulgent. This psychic has a virtuous heart and wants to use his powers for some benefit to the world. So what saintly purpose will Johnny decide upon? That's the question that drives us through the heart of the book and right into the depraved mind of Frank Dodd, a murderous fiend whom Johnny brings to a just and bloody end. Okay, good. But now what? Will Johnny simply keep assisting the police and solving crimes, bringing to justice one killer after another? How do you top a vicious serial murderer like Frank Dodd? Greg Stillson is the answer. Turns out that Stillson has monstrous plans for the entire world. A killer to the thousandth power. We watch as Johnny's simple wish to use his talent for the greater good evolves into a dark obsession. Step by step, he reaches the horrific conclusion that he must kill Greg Stillson before this tyrant-in-the-making can rise to power and bring darkness to the entire world. When good John Smith sets off on a lone-wolf mission to assassinate Stillson, the reader is both jittery and fascinated. We can't help ourselves from asking a new and troubling question: Is John crazy or is he sane? Don't all lone gunmen have similar visions or voices commanding them to do the unthinkable? It's these last dramatic questions that keep us riveted to the end.

**MAGNETIC RESONANCE** What starts as a simple premise (Scarlett wants to marry Ashley) is made ever more engaging by the complications and difficulties that arise. The challenges that Scarlett must overcome, which force her to dig deep into her bag of tricks to keep her original dream alive, generate an emotional response in readers in direct proportion to the intensity of her determination. All the heroes in these novels are men and women of deep conviction and fervent, stubborn resolve, capable of passions that rise well beyond the normal range of human experience. Even the seemingly laid-back and world-weary Robert Kincaid in *The Bridges of Madison County* is stirred to proclaim to his lover Francesca, "I have been falling from the rim of a great, high place, somewhere back in time. . . . And through all those years I have been falling toward you." Even the waffling priest Father Damien Karras and the long-winded professor Robert Langdon find the strength within themselves to become men of action as the danger before them erupts. In the end, this clarity and intensity of purpose, and the decisive actions these men and women undertake, differentiates the main characters of bestsellers from those thoughtful, inward Hamlet types who often parse and debate and dither and vacillate before rising from the couch to take a swat at the problem. We are told by the latest scientific research that readers respond empathetically to fictional characters. (This is news?) Cognitive scientists and literary scholars have been teaming up lately to try to unravel the chemistry and biology behind our attraction to folks like Scarlett and Mitch and Michael Corleone. One of their scientific methods consists of sliding novel readers into MRI machines to see what regions of their brains light up while they are reading texts of different levels of difficulty. (I'm not inventing this.) While preliminary results are a little sketchy, there seems to be a connection between activity levels in the brain and those novels that require the reader to decipher the secret thoughts and motives of their central characters.

**Revue de presse** Passionately and thoroughly entertaining.... Hall examines 12 of the most successful novels of the 20th century and reverse-engineer[s] them, mining their separate defining qualities and their comparative appeal to readers. Referential and cleverly elucidated, the book raises many good points about the precise methodology of bestselling novels.--

**Kirkus** sFascinating. Every would-be writer, and every knowledgeable reader, should read this book. It brings a valid understanding to publishing phenomena that seemingly were unexplainable. With this book, you see the forest and the trees.--

**MICHAEL CONNELLY** I learned more about fashioning a bestseller from *Hit Lit* than from any other book, or any experience, I've encountered in my thirty-five years as an editor and publisher. Even established and successful authors need this guide.--

**OTTO PENZLER**