

Times: They are a'changin': Student Bestsellers of the 1970's

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Popular books on college and university campuses usually reflect the mood of the times. Ten years ago, as the tumultuous decade of the 1960's was coming to its end, students were reading and discussing the works of anti-war, anti-establishment writers Kurt Vonnegut, Joseph Heller, and Richard Brautigan. But the 1970's have proven themselves a quieter, more introspective decade. The causes which dominated campus life at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the late 1960's have been replaced by interest in curriculum reform, grades, and sports. How have reading tastes changed now that the campus atmosphere has changed so much? What are the popular books of this generation of students? Are they still reading the favorites of the late 1960's?

A recent article in the *Washington Post's* "Book World" section addressed these questions. Garrett Epps identified some books popular with today's college students and contrasted them with campus bestsellers of a decade ago. Intrigued by his article, we decided to find out what students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill are reading now. We conducted an informal survey by talking with students, fellow librarians, and managers of the Bull's Head and Little Professor Bookstores. The Bull's Head is the campus bookstore, while the Little Professor is adjacent to the campus. A scan of the House Undergraduate Library circulation records also helped us categorize some favorite books of students at UNC-CH.

In the late 60's and early 70's student reading focused on the problems of society. *The Population Bomb*, *Future Shock*, *Soul on Ice*, and *The Greening of America* were campus bestsellers. Today, sales of these have been replaced by books on self-improvement. *Pulling Your Own Strings* by Wayne W. Dyer, *Looking Out for Number One* by Robert Ringer, and Gail Sheehy's *Passages* have all sold well in Chapel Hill bookstores. Alan Lahein's *How to Get Control of Your Time and Your Life* is a current favorite of local readers. Career concerns are also strong. The Undergraduate Library's copies of the career planning guide, *What Color is Your Parachute*, by Richard Bolles, circulate heavily, while career-conscious females are still borrowing *Managerial Women* by Margaret Hennig and Anne Jardin.

Black studies and women's literature have entered a new phase. *Soul on Ice* and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, which were read widely by students in the late 60's, are now bought primarily for course use. Current favorite Black authors are novelists, poets, and playwrights. These include Alice

Walker (*Meridian*), Toni Morrison (*The Song of Solomon*), and Ntozake Shange, whose latest collection of poetry is *Nappy Edges*.

The feminist movement, which was just gaining impetus ten years ago heralded by the writings of Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, and Kate Millett, has shifted gears. Nancy Friday's *My Mother My Self* and Ann Douglas' *Feminization of American Culture* are popular, current non-fiction titles, but many student readers favor the female novelists. The novel, *Women's Room*, a national bestseller now available in paperback, continues to sell well in local bookstores. Students report reading Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* and Florence King's *Southern Ladies and Gentlemen*, but they have also rediscovered Virginia Woolf, Ayn Rand, and Anais Nin. Interestingly, the works of novelist Willa Cather are making a comeback, at least on the UNC Campus.

Many of the works popular on campus a decade ago never saw the national bestseller list. However, some of those books most frequently mentioned by present students are already bestsellers. In 1978, *The Thorn Birds* (McCullough), Fowles' *Daniel Martin*, and Michener's epic *Chesapeake* were quite popular in Chapel Hill. Tastes in 1979 appear more historical, as Tuchman's *Distant Mirror* and T. H. White's autobiographical *In Search of History and Manchester's American Caesar* are selling.

Favorites of the 60's included the writings of Richard Brautigan (*Trout Fishing in America*), Tom Wolfe (*Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*), Ken Kesey (*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*), Joseph Heller (*Catch 22*) and Kurt Vonnegut (*Slaughterhouse Five*). Although interest in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* was revived a few years ago with the release of the film, sales of the works of these authors are reportedly sluggish. *Slaughterhouse Five* is the exception with frequent sales in local bookstores. Perhaps the only 60's style writer to catch the imagination of this generation is North-Carolina-born Tom Robbins, author of *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*.

Campus humor, virtually nonexistent during the gloomy 60's has been rekindled. The *Peanuts* books were the most popular items in the humor category a decade ago, but they were dull compared to the likes of the *National Lampoon's* publications, whose sales are at a peak. Their *Sunday Newspaper Supplement* is selling especially well, as are Trudeau's *Doonesbury* collections. Surprisingly, college students are also buying Erma Bombeck's works. Kliban is a local favorite. Perhaps an indication of the large number of cat lovers at Chapel Hill.

Few categories of books have survived the decade as well as science fiction and fantasy. Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* was the science fiction work with the gratest impact on the college generation of the late 60's. His books are still extremely popular. Favorites of the late 70's include Anne McCaffrey's *White Dragon* (one of her *Dragonriders of Pern* series), Ursula Leguin's works, and Herbert's *Dune*. Stainslaw Lem, the Polish science fiction writer, also has a devoted band of UNC readers. The publication last year by the University of Texas Press of *The Book of Merlyn* has rekindled interest in the Arthurian legend. T. H. White's classic, from whence spring Camelot, *The Once and Future King* has enjoyed a revival. For relaxation from courses, some students turn to reading mysteries. Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers remain popular with students. An-up-and-comer with students is P. D. James, the female English author of *Unnatural Causes* and *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*.

Perhaps today's student has not entirely forsaken social issues, but has substituted diet and economics for revolution and ecology. *Diet for a Small*

Planet, Vegetarian Epicure, and the *New York Times Natural Foods Cook Book* are finding their way into local kitchens. In economics, Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* continues with limited sales, although his more recent *Guide for the Perplexed* sells better.

Whether the present favorites will retain their popularity through the next decade depends on student concerns, although the perennial bestsellers, such as the works of J. R. R. Tolkien, may be above the fluctuations of contemporary issues. A 1961 article in *Nation* put Tolkien, along with Hermann Hesse, at the "Top of the Pops." Today Hesse is out, but the *Hobbit* and the *Lord of the Rings* continue to sell in paperback as well as hardcover. The *Silmarillion* was one of the UNC-CH Bookstore's bestsellers last year. Tolkien's works may be considered campus classics. They do not directly address any issues but are simply enjoyable to read and catch student imaginations, reason enough for any book to survive the times.

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"Rx for Library Public Relations" Public Relations Pre-Conference

PLACE: Public Library and Civic Center, Charlotte, N.C.
MAIN SPEAKER: Peggy Barber, ALA Public Information Office
CEU's: 6-10 CEU's available through UNC-C
TIME: Oct. 16, 7:00 p.m.-
Oct. 17, 8:30 a.m.-9:00 p.m.

TOPICS

Group

Dealing with our publics
Planning and budgeting
Film & slide showing
Critique/swap and shop
Evaluation of your PR program

Mini-Sessions

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Internal Communications
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