Raise Your Hand If You've Read Knausgaard
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Is there any consistent relationship between a book’s quality and its sales? Or again between the press and critics’ response to a work and its sales? Are these relationships stable over time or do they change?

Raise your hand, for example, if you know what the actual sales are for Karl Ove Knausgaard’s *My Struggle*. This mammoth work of autobiography—presently running at three five-hundred-page volumes with three more still to be translated from his native Norwegian—is relentlessly talked about as an “international sensation and bestseller” (Amazon) and constantly praised by the most prestigious critics. “It’s unbelievable… it’s completely blown my mind,” says Zadie Smith. “Intense and vital…. Ceaselessly compelling…. Superb,” agrees James Wood. Important newspapers (*The New York Times* for one) carry frequent articles about Knausgaard and his work. A search on *The Guardian* website has ten pages of hits for articles on Knausgaard despite the fact that the first volume of *My Struggle* wasn’t published in the UK until 2012. In a round-up of authors’ summer-reading tips in the same newspaper, the academic Sarah Churchwell remarks that after sitting on the jury for the Booker prize she looks forward to being “the last reader in Britain” to tackle *My Struggle*.

One could be forgiven, then, for imagining that this is one of those books which periodically impose themselves as “required reading” at a global level: Umberto Eco’s *Name of the Rose*, Jostein Gaarder’s *Sophie’s World*, Peter Høeg’s *Smilla’s Sense of Snow*, Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom* all spring to mind, literary equivalents of internationally successful genre works like Stieg Larsson’s *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*, and E. L. James’s *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

Well, as of a few days ago UK sales of all three volumes of Knausgaard work in hardback and paperback had barely topped 22,000 copies. A respectable but hardly impressive performance. In the US, which has a much larger market, that figure—total sales of all three volumes (minus e-books)—stood at about 32,000. This was despite the fact that with Knausgaard’s growing reputation the powerful Farrar, Straus and Giroux stepped in to buy the paperback rights from the minnow Archipelago and bring its own commercial muscle to bear. On the Amazon bestsellers ranking, *A Death in the Family*, the first and most successful volume of the *My Struggle* series, is presently 657th in the USA and 698th in the UK, despite a low paperback price of around ten dollars.

So what is going on here? Should we be reassured that critics are sticking loyally by a work they admire regardless of sales, or bemused that something is being presented as a runaway commercial success when in fact it isn’t? Wouldn’t it be enough to praise Knausgaard without trying to create the impression that there is a huge international following behind the book? Or do the critics actually assume that everyone *is* buying it because they and all their peers are talking about it?

The truth is that one can only get hold of accurate statistics by subscribing to an organization called Nielsen BookScan. The figures in this article were obtained by pestering friends in companies who hold such subscriptions. Even BookScan isn’t entirely reliable since it doesn’t take in all independent booksellers. So actual sales will be slightly higher than those I have given, though independents notoriously do not account for a large slice of the market. In general, however, the public are only given hard figures when they are impressively high. It’s a reticence that encourages hype, especially in an age in which we have come to expect that these huge international bestsellers will happen, the publishers in particular treading water and looking around themselves like surfers hoping to catch the next monster wave.

Of course we have seen the same assumption of worldwide success with any number of novels that are presented as follow-ups to a previous international bestseller. Eco’s novels after *Name of the Rose*, Rushdie’s after *The Satanic Verses*, Franzen’s *Freedom* after *The Corrections*. Initial reviews of *Freedom* in particular were wildly over the top, *The Guardian* even giving the book a preview in prime position on its home page with the critic pronouncing the novel a major work while admitting that he hadn’t yet received a copy. We’re used to this kind of thing. But *Freedom* did sell, 68,236 in hardback in the UK, rather fewer in paperback, about half of what *The Corrections* sold. Rushdie’s *Joseph Anton*, a memoir telling of his years in hiding after the *fatwa*, commanded enormous column space in the press, understandably given the subject matter, but UK sales were just 7,521 in hardback and only 1,896 in paperback. However in these cases, as soon as the wave doesn’t happen the critical buzz quickly subsides.

The curiosity with Knausgaard, then, is that the impression of huge and inevitable success was given not with the precedent of previous international success, but solely on the basis of the book’s remarkable sales in the author’s native Norway. Norway, however, is a country of only 5 million people—a population that is half the size of London’s—and of course the whole tone and content of *My Struggle* may very well be more immediate and appealing for those who share its language and culture; it is their world that is talked about. So the great success was announced before it happened and continues to be announced as it continues not to happen. At the level of public perception, in a way, it *has* happened. People *believe* the book is major bestseller. Let us try to get the situation into some kind of perspective.
When I was growing up in the Sixties and Seventies we were given to believe that there was a distinction between literary fiction and popular or genre fiction. The latter would sell better than the former but would not be reviewed; at most thrillers and romance novels would receive a brief notice. They might also be advertised at the expense of the publisher. Apparently no one felt the need to talk about a book just because it sold a lot of copies. Publicity was left to publicists. Works of literary fiction on the other hand would be earnestly reviewed with no reference to their commercial success or otherwise.

In reality this distinction was already breaking down. Literary authors like Graham Greene and Muriel Spark in the UK or Updike and Roth in the US were achieving very considerable sales in their own countries and genre authors like John Le Carré or Isaac Asimov were justly noted for their literary qualities. As early as 1950 the Italian novelist and critic Cesare Pavese was worrying about the blurring of lines between the trivial and the serious, complaining that the commercial was being presented as literary and the literary made as commercial as possible, indeed that literariness itself was becoming a genre. Literary prizes, he believed, were not immune; eager for winners to reach a wide readership and bring the prize more attention, juries would be encouraged to choose popular winners and writers would begin to write toward this mix of popularity and easy prestige.

Certainly now, for better or worse, almost all distinction between the way different kinds of novels are presented has largely disappeared. Newspapers review Dan Brown, Alice Munro, J.K. Rowling, and Orhan Pamuk with equal solemnity, attention being driven by the sense that the writer is winning prizes or moving copies or being pushed as the book of the season by a major publisher, not by a lucid curiosity for whatever may be written between the covers. At the same time serious publishing houses have discovered the trick of packaging genre fiction as if it was great literature; one thinks of the prestigious Italian publisher Adelphi, reissuing all seventy-five of Simenon’s Maigret novels in very much the same format and with the same $25 price tag as their editions of Thomas Bernhard, Sándor Márai, or Nabokov. Even the academics have joined in with whole conferences dedicated to, for example, the “problem” of translating the character names in the Harry Potter saga. No one wants to be left out of a global success.

Meantime, since most newspapers have gone online and many have their own online bookshops, a certain confusion seems to be developing between reviewing and sales promotion. Bestseller lists sit beside reviews on every webpage, as if commercial success were an index of quality, while one can often click on a link at the end of a review to buy the book. Literary novels come complete with stickers announcing them as international bestsellers as if this were a part of their literary achievement. In Europe publishers never forget to tell readers in how many countries the author’s work is published.

Although readers tend to prize writers for their independence from influence, they also seem eager to buy the works of writers who have attracted the highest number of readers; at the same time it’s hard to imagine that the writer him or herself will not be influenced by the confirmation that commercial success brings. Would J. K. Rowling have written seven Harry Potters if the first hadn’t sold so well? Would Knausgaard have written six volumes of My Struggle, if the first had not been infinitely more successful (in Norway) than his previous novels? Sales influence both reader and writer—certainly far more than the critics do.

In general I see nothing “wrong” with this blurring of lines between literary and genre fiction. In the end it’s rather exciting to have to figure out what is really on offer when a novel wins the Pulitzer, rather than taking it for granted that we are talking about literary achievement. But it does alert us to the fact that as any consensus on aesthetics breaks down, bestsellerdom is rapidly becoming the only measure of achievement that is undeniable.

Or put it another way: a critic who likes a book, and goes on out a limb to praise it, may begin to feel anxious these days if the book is not then rewarded by at least decent sales, as if it were unimaginable that one could continue to support a book’s quality without some sort of confirmation from the market. So while in the past one might have grumbled that some novels were successful only because they
had been extravagantly hyped by the press, now one discovers the opposite phenomenon. Books are being spoken of as extraordinarily successful in denial of the fact that they are not.

I can only encourage others (and myself, for I’m by no means immune) to hold on to the idea that what matters about a book for the reader is our experience reading it, not the number of copies it has sold. However, given that it is unlikely that critics, publishers, and retailers will ever stop using commercial success as a tool of persuasion, let us at least have easy access to the real sales figures. I might for example have picked up Knausgaard’s *Struggle* precisely to be able to talk about it with others, only to discover that the others hadn’t read him. But then I suppose we have all read the reviews. We can talk about those.

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Cass R. Sunstein
Raise your hand if you want to reimmerse yourself in the sordid story of Bernie Madoff, the high-flying financial wizard who well, you probably remember. The New York Times. 10. Can you raise your hand if you feel so strongly about not raising taxes you'd walk away on the ten-to-one deal?" Obediently, humiliatingly, disgustingly, all eight raised their hands. The New Yorker. Raise your hand if you've read Knausgaard Tim Parks | New York Review of Books | 19 July 2014 Karl Ove Knausgaard's sequence of autobiographical novels, My Struggle is getting huge press attention and fabulous reviews. BBC. 20. Like Knausgaard, Richardson resists finality, refuses to hand you a moment when her narrator has figured out life and can now be happy forever after. Each volume ends on some grumbly, inconclusive note: “She was just going home with nothing to say for herself.” Why has Richardson’s book vanished from our consciousness? As much as I have loved this book over the years I’ve been reading it (it’s a slow burn), even I can admit that, like Knausgaard, Richardson is as boring as she is fascinating—often at once. Both My Struggle and Pilgrimage—just look at those titles, would you, for two novels about nothing more than normal life!—are essentially anti-novels, much more like life itself than a novel usually is.