Behind the BookScan Bestseller Lists: Technology and Cultural Anxieties in Early Twenty-First-Century Australia

BRIDID MAGNER

Following its introduction to Australia in 2000, the Nielsen BookScan sales tracking system has revolutionised the ways in which bestseller lists are created and communicated to the public. The transition to the BookScan system has marked a shift from partially intuitive modes of assessing consumer behaviour to a greater rationalisation of the consultative methods employed by the Australian book industry, characterised by the constant generation of sales data. With unprecedented precision, BookScan bestseller lists have revealed the comparatively poor sales of Australian literary fiction, against the more robust rankings of genre fiction, prompting claims that BookScan is hastening the demise of Australian literature.

Like many other new technologies, BookScan has been blamed for contributing to the decline of a specific kind of cultural production. The recurrence of references to BookScan in the Australian media suggests it has quickly become a locus for cultural anxieties about books. Commentators have found it more convenient to blame BookScan for changes within the book trade rather than considering the myriad reasons for the poor sales of Australian literature. This article rejects the claims that BookScan has been responsible for the “death” of Australian literature, arguing that it is crucial to consider the social context in which this technology is embedded.

Through an analysis of the Top 20 bestseller lists produced by Nielsen BookScan in 2011—ten years after the introduction of the system—this paper aims to show where Australian literary fiction was placed alongside other fiction in the chosen 52-week period. This data will be compared with the rankings of Australian literary fiction in the Top 500 titles for 2011, to offer a deeper view than the weekly Top 20s can provide. This small sample will be used to show how many Australian literary titles featured on the bestseller lists in the given year, and to consider claims that BookScan is serving to marginalise Australian titles within the literary field, and literary titles within the book industry overall. The overall purpose is to provide a more informed counterbalance to some of the wilder assertions regarding the effects of the BookScan system on local literary production and consumption.

The Origins of BookScan

In order to study the BookScan phenomenon, we need to understand what motivated the creation and adaption of this technology, how it works, and in what ways we make meaning through it. BookScan is currently used by both producers and consumers of books to gauge the popularity of titles, primarily
through the medium of the bestseller lists generated by ACNielsen and sent to subscribers. These lists are published in major newspapers, the main source of such information for consumers.

The BookScan system emerged from at least two important precursors, the Bookwatch and Whitaker BookTrack services developed in the United Kingdom. The Bookwatch system was initiated in the 1970s by Peter Harland, who produced bestseller lists for the *Sunday Times* by measuring over-the-counter sales as reported by chain stores and some independents. This methodology was suitable for Top 20 charts published in newspapers and magazines but less useful for the publishing industry, which required more in-depth statistics to show what was happening across the entire market. Whitaker BookTrack, created by J. Whitaker & Sons, provided the basis for the current BookScan system. The project began in 1993 after a two-year development phase. While there was some disagreement about how the system was to be developed, most people in the industry acknowledged the importance of a technology that could track the movements of books, thereby better informing business decisions.\(^1\) Although J. Whitaker & Sons poured significant resources into the system, it ran at a loss. In 1999 it was purchased by BPI Communications, a US subsidiary of the Dutch publishing company Verenigde Nederlandse Uitgeverijen (VNU). In May 2002, following a number of mergers and acquisitions, Nielsen BookScan combined the BookTrack business from the UK, the BookScan business from the USA and the Booktrack-ACNielsen joint venture from Australia under the single ownership of VNU (now named The Nielsen Company). As Michael Webster, then managing director of the Australian venture, has commented, this provided the opportunity to standardise the UK, Australian and US book sales products, allowing for global (or at least substantial Anglophone) integration of sales data. Subsequently, Nielsen BookScan has expanded into Ireland (in 2002), South Africa (in 2003) and New Zealand (in 2008).\(^2\)

An important enabling factor for the importation of BookScan into Australia was the contemporaneous introduction of the Goods and Services Tax. The new tax required booksellers to fully computerise their inventories in order to calculate the GST. By July 2000 when the tax was officially in operation, most bookshops had embraced up-to-date inventory management systems.\(^3\) This in turn provided the opportunity for bookshops to contribute accurate sales information to the BookScan system.

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\(^1\) Michael Webster, “Collecting, Measuring and Analysing Book Sales Information,” in *Making Books: Contemporary Australian Publishing*, ed. David Carter and Anne Galligan (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2007), 204–5. Thanks to Michael Webster, Alex Gionfriddo and Nielsen BookScan for providing access to relevant data.

\(^2\) Ibid.

\(^3\) Ibid., 198.
In order to appreciate the influence of BookScan on the local marketplace, it is important to understand how the system operates. Firstly, Nielsen purchases point of sales data from book retail outlets in return for a package of data on current sales for the contributing bookshops. Nielsen then collates, updates and manipulates this data in order to publish it online for subscribers. It makes money from selling access to the collated data through subscription fees to publishers and other clients. The resulting data and cumulative sales figures are available to all subscribed clients. This means that the sales history of any book published after 2000–2001 is available to any company or individual who has full access to BookScan data. Booksellers who contribute to the system may use the package of data they receive in order to refine their ordering processes. However, my own qualitative research suggests that BookScan does not necessarily influence the decision-making of booksellers, especially independent stores in urban areas.4

Measuring Audiences
The introduction of BookScan into Australia needs to be seen in the wider context of the entertainment industries as a whole. Global entertainment corporations have emerged as dominant players within the publishing industry. Many of these corporations are now publicly listed, requiring predictable returns on investment and thus lessening the inclination toward risk-taking. The publishing industry, with its roots in a rather different commercial context and reputation as an old-fashioned gentleman’s industry, has taken longer to adapt to new market conditions than other media. This is especially true of the Australian publishing industry, which was significantly slower than the UK to adopt sales measurement systems.

In the media industries generally there has been a shift from impressionistic commentary on audience preferences to the use of more scientific methods. This trend is part of the rationalisation of media industries in which audience research is central to the decision-making processes involved at all stages of the creation of the media product. There is a growing body of literature on the role of audience measurement systems in the media industries,5 but, as Philip Napoli suggests, scholarly ratings analyses have overwhelmingly focussed on electronic, rather than print media audiences.6 Measurement services purport to reflect audience preferences, yet the practice of measurement can itself influence preferences. These preferences can only be effective once they are “tallied” and

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made public by measurement services such as Nielsen BookScan. Such systems are now central to the economics of media industries, and can provide a radically different picture of the content audiences are purchasing compared to the systems which were in place beforehand. This has certainly been the case in Australia, where the BookScan bestseller lists—at least in the early days—offered surprises to publishers, booksellers and consumers alike. This has led to claims that the BookScan system itself is altering the operations of the book trade.

Bestseller lists enable certain books to stand out in a marketplace that is saturated with new titles, all competing with other forms of entertainment. Bestseller lists, along with author tours, reviews, media appearances and cross-promotions, can function as what John B. Thompson calls “recognition-triggers,” drivers of sales that provide an accredited visibility, bringing a book to the consciousness of consumers.7 Despite the operational changes in the book trade caused by a changing media environment and the introduction of new technologies, bestseller lists remain central promotional tools in the marketing strategies of publishing houses.

Bestseller lists have a long history, playing an important role within the publishing industry for more than a century. The Bookman, founded in London in 1891, featured bestseller lists compiled using information submitted by bookshops from around the British Isles. In their article on the Bookman’s lists, Troy Bassett and Christina Walter identify three kinds of bestseller: those with large long-term sales, those with large short-term sales, or those with moderate sales over a longer term.8 The data from the Bookman lists suggests that the notion of a bestseller was then, as now, highly elastic. Before BookScan arrived in Australia, books with large short-term sales were likely to be the most prominent on the lists, whereas BookScan figures compiled over consecutive years can provide data about books with large sales both in the medium and longer terms. These “steady-sellers” may not appear in weekly and even monthly lists but may be identified by studying BookScan data across a five- or ten-year period.

Laura Miller observes that scholars and critics have long relied on bestseller lists to “indicate literary tastes or social trends for a given period.”9 She shows that rankings may not always be deserved, because “the authority of the list is more cultural than scientific.”10 Further, the bestsellers of a particular year may not necessarily have anything in common with each other except their bestseller

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10 Ibid., 286–304
status. Therefore, scholars who want to use such lists as records of popular tastes need to scrutinise more closely the context in which they are produced.

For both consumers and producers, bestseller lists serve to mediatise books as objects of consumption. As studies have attested, the “bandwagon effect” (shoppers purchasing a product they previously had no interest in because it has become popular) is common in consumer behaviour following publication of sales rankings.\(^{11}\) Appearing on a bestseller list is not necessarily a mark of quality but people may be reassured (or curious) that many others have chosen the same book.\(^{12}\) Indeed, most chain bookstores position their most prominent displays according to bestseller lists, informed by BookScan data.\(^{13}\) One of Thompson’s interview subjects claims that there isn’t one list that’s important: “it’s the aggregate that is important, and it’s important because of visibility, because of the awareness they foster on the part of the consumer.”\(^{14}\)

One of the central concerns about bestseller lists is that the books they display will dominate the market, effectively knocking less popular titles out of contention. In his study of the *New York Times* bestseller list (which is compiled independently), Alan Sorenson sought to find out whether more books would be published if it were not for bestseller lists. Sorenson’s conclusion was that bestsellers appearing on the *New York Times* list actually expand the market rather than “stealing” sales.\(^{15}\) According to Sorenson, the bulk of the effect, or “uplift,” in sales was in the first week, and that the impact on sales is most pronounced among relatively unknown authors, new authors in particular.\(^{16}\) For authors who already have a loyal following, the *New York Times* lists have a less significant effect, which means that they seem to function best as vehicles for creating literary brands, rather than reinforcing recognised names.

**The BookScan Debate**

The lively debate prompted by the introduction of the BookScan system into Australia has raised some crucial issues about the ways contemporary Australian literature is categorised, marketed and consumed. The BookScan debate was effectively triggered by D. D. McNicoll and Rosemary Neill on 22 July 2006 in

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\(^{13}\) Miller argues that reliance on bestseller displays in bookstores tends to reinforce the divide between the relatively few books currently in fashion and the vast majority of titles. See *Reluctant Capitalists: Bookselling and the Culture of Consumption* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 99.

\(^{14}\) *Merchant of Culture*, 250.


\(^{16}\) Ibid.
the *Australian*, which is known for its conservative stance on cultural issues. As Mark Davis points out, “cultural disaster” stories and panics about the decline of national cultural values often feature in the *Australian*, which paradoxically advocates the pursuit of freedom via markets alongside the paternalist enforcement of moral-cultural values, without considering how one might “corrode” the other.17 McNicoll and Neill both criticised BookScan for effectively killing Australian literary fiction through its revelation of the “real” sales rankings. McNicoll claimed that BookScan is “killing off the highbrow novel in favour of the latest trendy diet book.” For Malcolm Knox, writing in the liberal *Monthly*, BookScan is in the service of a book publishing industry that is organised by “segmentation and internal markets” and is accelerating a “dual-streaming—rich books and poor books, a ruling class and an invisible underclass,” which tend to reward commercial ventures at the expense of “otherwise intangible ambitions.”18 Neill, McNicoll and Knox all take the position that BookScan bestsellers should not be allowed to dominate the market at the expense of more culturally “valuable” but less popular works. Ivor Indyk claims nonetheless that empirical research into the sales figures of literary fiction reveals the “baseline reality of literary publishing—its unprofitability, its fundamentally uncommercial nature.”19

Knox argues that BookScan reflects a “mass retreat from risk.” In this view, consumers read the BookScan bestseller lists and make choices based on what other people are reading: “thanks to BookScan and the way we use it, we live in an age of monsters.” He points to Nicki Gemmell’s *The Bride Stripped Bare* and Norma Khouri’s *Forbidden Love*, which were “mega-sellers” in 2003; “they appeared on BookScan, created a fuss, and then BookScan itself became their sharpest marketing tool.” He claims that these two books show how BookScan can skew behaviour, “creating a fever for keeping up with the crowd.”20 Knox’s argument that bestseller lists create “monsters” is not borne out by Sorenson’s research into the *New York Times* bestseller lists, which appear to have a relatively minimal effect on sales.21 In response to Knox’s article, Ken Gelder argued that “it would be difficult to imagine an Australian literary novelist expressing any greater contempt for readerships”; for Gelder, Knox “imagines readers under the influence of Nielsen BookScan and the publishing conglomerates, manipulated and undiscriminating.”22 This attitude towards readers was apparently shared by Andrew McCann, who claimed that the current state of Australian literary fiction

21 Sorenson observes that most sales occur soon after a book hits the shelves and gradually peter out (“Bestsellers and Product Variety,” 715–38).
is due to “the undifferentiated nature of the reading public and its dependence on a top-down dispersal of information.” BookScan is the ostensible focus of these polemics, yet Knox and McCann’s laments are reminiscent of those made by nineteenth-century authors such as Henry Lawson, who decried the poor sales of local productions and viewed the local reading public’s patronage of “thievish imported rags” as a major impediment to the establishment of a truly national literature. Indeed the apparent preference of Australian readers for the latest (overseas) trends at the expense of local literature has been a perennial source of complaint going as far back as the 1860s.

Although the precise effects of BookScan figures on consumer choices are difficult to trace, the new transparency of sales data has certainly had an impact on authors, especially in their dealings with prospective publishers. Since 2000, authors’ sales figures are routinely considered before new manuscripts are accepted by a publishing house. If they are novice authors, the figures of similar books of the same genre are consulted to decide whether to take the risk on an unknown quantity. In this way, BookScan can help to minimise risk for the publisher. Knox argues that BookScan plays a large part in producing “ex-novelists,” as a result of its merciless revelation of their sales track records. Arguably, though, BookScan can also serve to empower bestselling authors as their sales are now a matter of public knowledge, offering greater opportunities for negotiation.

There are, however, weaknesses in BookScan’s approach that render it less useful than it could be, even though it is much more precise than previous methods of collecting bookselling data. Jane Palfreyman, executive publisher at Random House, says BookScan inhabits a grey area when it comes to independent bookstores: since BookScan surveys only about twenty-eight percent of that sector, its sales figures can be “really out of whack.” Similarly, Henry Rosenbloom, managing director of Scribe publishing house, has drawn attention to BookScan’s incomplete coverage of the book trade. Although it is very accurate for large discount department stores and for chains such as Angus & Robertson, he argues that it has only partial coverage of the independent bookselling sector, which sells

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24 Preface to Short Stories in Prose and Verse (Sydney: L. Lawson, 1894), 2.
26 “The ExFactor,” 54.
28 Since this comment was made, the Angus & Robertson chain has been effectively liquidated following the collapse of the RED group.
a high percentage of Scribe’s titles. At present, BookScan surveys approximately 300 independent bookshops, whose returns are weighted to reflect the whole market. AC Nielsen checks the weighting annually with major publishers to ensure accuracy. Independent bookshops have around twenty to twenty-two percent market share in Australia, which compares well to the UK, where the independent share is said to be around five percent, and the USA, where it is below eight per cent. The main gap in BookScan’s coverage of bookshops tends to be small, specialist independents whose sales in a particular category can be high.

The gaps in coverage of the independent sector are managed through statistical weighting, or informed “guesstimates.” Booksellers rely on BookScan to keep a check on what is selling around the country (and what is not). Therefore, it is of assistance in making decisions about what to order and re-order. Rosenbloom notes that this has led to booksellers reducing their initial orders, and adopting a wait-and-see policy with new releases. This lowers the aggregate initial order for a new title, making it harder for publishers to meet their initial budgets, and anxious about meeting them at all. Publishers, especially large ones (who get a comprehensive and sophisticated range of data), rely on BookScan to see what titles and genres are selling, where they are selling, and how their competitors are doing. They also use BookScan to judge whether to reprint successful titles, and to help them decide how many copies to print.

The shift from a “game of bluff” to a computerised system has been difficult to accept for some publishers and agents. One publishing executive described BookScan as being “a big wet blanket for publishing” as it “takes all the fun out of doing deals.” Agents have also made complaints because their hype about an author’s success can now be checked against BookScan figures, potentially lessening their profit margins. Well-known Australian publisher Hilary McPhee has commented that BookScan has created a situation in which bestsellers are of the utmost importance:

Now the book trade has always been subject to hype and rumour and fabrication, so people make up their sales figures when it suits them. They can’t do this any more. So what’s happened, is you get a situation where, we’re told, in publishing houses the decisions are made on the basis of the information that’s coming out of BookScan. Which means that bestsellers rule.

This situation contrasts markedly with the Australian industry as it was in the period from the 1960s to the 1980s, which McPhee describes in her memoir Other People’s Words (2001) as a “creative phase” in local publishing, which

produced a canon of literary authors who were strongly supported by government arts funding. Peter Kirkpatrick has argued that the boom in literary fiction in the 1980s and 1990s was actually something of an aberration in the history of Australian writing, a result of several factors including the impact on national culture of the Bicentenary, the growing significance of Literature Board funding and the rise of creative writing courses at universities. Kirkpatrick notes that the rise of cultural studies, as well as global changes to the publishing industry, are now having their effects. However, he argues that “it would be a mistake to read yet another change in the weather as portending apocalypse.”

In contrast to the previous “creative phase” identified by McPhee and Kirkpatrick, the early twenty-first century has been characterised as comparatively barren in terms of the publication of Australian literature. As the Book Industry Strategy Group report of 2011 states, “the overall ‘store’ of Australian works—literary and general—has been affected by the relative decline in the number of new authors entering the field, in part due to the reduction in available grants funding for literature.” Davis argues that by 2000, “almost no major Australian publisher was aggressively seeking or promoting new literary fiction and literary fiction was no longer the cornerstone of the industry’s self-perception,” a consequence of the cessation of the “cultural-nationalist, protectionist moment.” However, Graham Huggan argues that this statement “is no more convincing than its tiresomely ubiquitous conservative correlate, that Australian literature is dead.”

**Australian Bestseller Lists**

Prior to the arrival of BookScan, bestseller lists tended to be “ad hoc and often eccentric.” Lists were often created by newspaper editors phoning bookshops and asking them for their bestselling titles. Publishers were also called to verify the number of copies “in the trade” to get a sense of whether a particular title could actually be a bestseller. It may not always have been in the publisher’s best interests to tell the whole truth about a title’s sales, however, leading to what Thompson describes as “concealment, selective disclosure and calculated

33 *Book Industry Strategy Group Final Report to Government*, September 2011 (Canberra: Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research): 86. The report also points to the impact of cheap imports and consumer tastes moving to favour a greater range of book genres as contributing to the lessening of numbers of new authors entering the field.
36 Webster, “Collecting, Measuring and Analysing Book Sales Information,” 199.
inflation.” Often these informal lists were compiled according to what should have sold rather than what had actually sold.

Caroline Lurie has described the previous methods of constructing bestseller lists in Australia as patchwork and whimsical, based on different kinds of samples, all of them partial and quite narrow. In 1996, for example, the Australian Book Review published lists based on information supplied by different booksellers in various state capitals. These lists featured well-known writers of literary fiction along with “serious” non-fiction titles. The Australian’s now defunct Review of Books would survey one shop in one state each month before it shifted to BookScan bestseller lists. Similarly, the Herald Sun’s Saturday edition would include a Top 10 list sourced from a different Melbourne bookseller each week. These might be seen as particularly unscientific examples of bestseller lists, based on extremely small samples, compared to those compiled by the Age and Sydney Morning Herald, which were based on data from groups of bookstores in New South Wales and Victoria respectively. The Independent Booksellers of Victoria, which gathered book sales data from urban and regional shops, were consulted to produce the Age’s bestseller charts for the weekend edition, revealing an effort to account for book sales across the state.

Joel Becker, the current CEO of the Australian Booksellers Association, composed bestseller lists for various publications such as the Sydney Morning Herald, the Australian and the Weekly Book Newsletter from 1996–2001. Becker would collect and aggregate data provided by selected bookshops. The Sydney Morning Herald bestseller list was comprised of weekly sales figures from a selection of chain and franchise shops, including Dymocks and Angus & Robertson in Sydney. Becker says that the sample did not include discount and department stores and was intended to be “representative” not “comprehensive.” For the Australian, Becker surveyed a selection of ten to fifteen independent shops per issue; he claims that the data was “accurate in terms of what it counted,” and notes that it was “weighted” in order to account for the gaps in coverage. Bestseller lists from the pre-BookScan era were also edited, and typically excluded activity books and publications intended for consultation rather than reading. A relatively unedited list from the Herald Sun of 11 December 1999 retains such items as the Guinness Book of Records (2000) at no. 1 and the Official Pokemon Collector Stickerbook at no. 3, titles that would generally be culled from published lists.

Since BookScan arrived in 2000, lists can be compiled in a less laborious fashion. Within three days of the receipt of information from retailers, the

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37 Merchants of Culture, 198.
39 For instance, the two bestseller lists published in ABR in the Feb/March 1996 edition were sourced from Readings in Melbourne and Gleebooks in Sydney (8).
40 Joel Becker in conversation with the author, 7 March 2011.
Top 5000 sales of the week are compiled and distributed to subscribers. While reasonably accurate, the lists found in the newspapers continue to be edited—for instance, books sold in packs, such as Little Golden Books and Mills & Boon, are taken out as they tend to skew the lists, being perennial favourites.41

Although the BookScan service was available to newspapers and magazines from 2000, many were reluctant to embrace it at first, leading to staggered adoption rates. According to my own research, the Age was the earliest adopter, shifting from data supplied by the Independent Booksellers Network to BookScan data in February 2002. The Australian, Sydney Morning Herald and Financial Review followed suit later in 2002, with the Courier-Mail adding BookScan data to its range of bestseller lists in mid-2003. Meanwhile some major newspapers, such as the West Australian, Canberra Times and Hobart Mercury, chose not to publish BookScan bestseller lists regularly, favouring occasional sampling of figures, mostly for seasonal articles on the book trade. The slowest adopter was perhaps the Adelaide Advertiser, which did not use any BookScan figures until 2007, when figures were quoted in its shortlived “Best Read” section. Importantly, for periodicals that previously published data generated solely from their region, the switch to BookScan effectively changed the focus from state book sales to nationwide figures. This effaced the regional specificities to be found in state bestseller lists, in favour of the more homogeneous national lists.

The ways in which newspapers and other periodicals choose to represent the sales information have a significant impact on how it comes across to readers. If they choose not to have a designated list for “fiction,” then the Top 10 is likely to be dominated by cookbooks, sporting autobiographies and genre fiction. Newspapers tend to publish the Top 10 out of a possible Top 100 that they are sent by BookScan, but they display the information in slightly different ways. The Age initially published two categories in its A2 section, “Fiction” and “Non-Fiction,” which changed to “National” and “International”; it now has “National” and “Independent” categories, possibly because the national and international titles were too similar. The current distinction between “National” and “Independent” provides a snapshot of the national Top 10 compared to the most popular titles bought from independent stores, and the lists may vary considerably. The Sydney Morning Herald chooses to collapse fiction and non-fiction into the two categories “Bestsellers” and “Independents,” which assumes that titles that are popular in independent bookshops are not bestsellers across the entire market. Brisbane’s

41 Little Golden Books are sold in generic packs of twenty-four to retailers. Each title has an ISBN but the pack also has an ISBN. Most major retailers tend to use the pack ISBN for inventory control, not the individual title ISBNS. Mills & Boon have a series of five to six titles (such as health & travel). Each title has an ISBN but major retailers usually record every sale under the first title’s ISBN. The total volume and value figures for sales of the packs are always correct, but it is impossible to measure individual ISBN sales for these titles.
*Courier-Mail* currently has the most complex bestseller lists in Australia with five categories: “Bestsellers,” “Independents,” “Libraries,” “Ebooks,” and “Audiobooks.” These lists are compiled using information from Nielsen BookScan, the Brisbane’s Better Bookshops network, Brisbane City Council libraries and information from Amazon and Apple’s iTunes store. Thus the *Courier-Mail* has chosen to supplement BookScan information with data sourced from other providers, to offer a broader view of patterns of consumption in Queensland. In this way BookScan data can co-exist with other sources to create a more comprehensive picture of sales and lending behaviour.

Despite the small differences between publications in terms of the categorisation and editing of bestseller lists, the fact that most Australian periodicals receive their information from the same source—Nielsen BookScan—means that the bestseller lists tend to be homogeneous, with the same titles appearing on the Top 10 week after week across the country.

**Bestsellers in 2011**

Ten years after the introduction of BookScan into Australia, the Top 20 BookScan weekly bestseller lists of 2011 provide valuable data about the much-debated position of literary fiction within the book marketplace. To summarise, this data shows a clear distinction between literary and genre fiction, with the latter dominating the lists. In the fifty-two weeks of data collection, literary fiction titles by Australian authors appeared only three times in the Top 20. *Caleb’s Crossing*, an historical novel set in America by Australian expatriate Geraldine Brooks, appeared from Weeks 17–28 at the no. 8 spot. Anna Funder’s novel *All That I Am*, set in Germany, came in at no. 20 in weeks 36–37, and finally Christos Tsiolkas’s 2008 novel *The Slap* reappeared on the Top 20 in Week 40 due to the television screening of a mini-series adaptation in October–November. As evidenced by these (few) examples, the appearance of literary fiction in a Top 20 bestseller list is a relatively unusual event. Historically, this is not a new phenomenon, since literary fiction has occupied a relatively minor role in relation to commercial fiction in the Australian market, yet bestseller lists before 2000 gave the impression that Australian literary fiction enjoyed more significant popularity.

The Nielsen BookScan Top 500 books for 2011 list includes twelve Australian literary fiction titles, all featuring beneath the Top 20. *Caleb’s Crossing* appears at no. 25, followed by the 2011 edition of *The Slap* at no. 62 and the 2010 edition at no. 132. With the sales of the two editions combined (67,096 units), *The Slap* just surpasses *Caleb’s Crossing* (66,313 units). Elliot Perlman’s novel *The Street Sweeper* comes in at no. 255, with Tim Winton’s “classic” *Cloudstreet* appearing at no. 298 (following a successful television adaptation first screened during May–June 2011). Two titles appear in the 300s: Kate Grenville’s *Sarah Thornhill* at no. 354 and Kim Scott’s *That Deadman Dance* at no. 398. Gregory David
Roberts’s *Shantaram* (479) and Gail Jones’s *Five Bells* (482) complete the total for Australian literary fiction.

BookScan does not have a dedicated “literary” category—instead it has a “General & Literary Fiction” category—and literary novels are often distributed between other genres, as in the case of *Caleb’s Crossing*, *Sarah Thornhill*, and *That Deadman Dance*, which are all in the “Historical & Mythological Fiction” category. What is “literary” is of course often difficult to define, particularly in the case of new fiction, and the literary credentials of a book like *Shantaram* might be debated, since it is a hybrid work with elements of autobiography, travel and popular fiction. The assignment of books across rigid sales categories then raises some difficulties for assessing claims about the demise of Australian literature.

In the Top 500 for 2011 list, the number of Australian literary titles is roughly equivalent to the eleven overseas literary fiction titles, which included Man Booker Prize–winners Julian Barnes’s *The Sense of An Ending* (no. 130) and Howard Jacobson’s *The Finkler Question* (no. 389). This result does not support criticisms that overseas literary fiction eclipses local books. Replicating trends evident in the United Kingdom and the United States in 2011, by far the largest number of titles came from the “Crime, Thriller & Adventure” category. There were sixty titles in this category in the Top 500, demonstrating the current dominance of this variety of genre fiction.

A small sample of bestseller lists collected from the *Herald Sun*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Courier-Mail*, *Australian* and *Age* from 1999–2003 shows that literary fiction appeared more often in the Top 10s in the pre-BookScan era. It was not unusual to have three or more literary titles in the Top 10 for a particular week. For example, the fiction bestseller chart in the *Age* on 16 December 2000 features Peter Carey’s *The True History of the Kelly Gang* at no. 1, Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* at no. 3, Kazuo Ishiguro’s *When We Were Orphans* at no. 5 and Margaret Drabble’s *The Peppered Moth* at no. 7. Since this list was compiled by the Independent Booksellers of Victoria group, it is more “literary-fiction heavy” than a similar list compiled using data from discount and department stores and chain stores would have been. Arguably, pre-BookScan bestseller lists, especially those that used data solely from independent stores, created a kind of caste system that has now been reversed.

**Reading the Data**

The many recent changes and realignments in the contemporary publishing industry have led countless commentators to predict the death of books, publishing, print, reading, or all of the above, prognostications typically “based on assumptions

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42 In a *New York Times Book Review* podcast, Gregory Cowles observes, “it’s startling to realise that every book on the fiction list right now is either a mystery or a thriller or some combination of the two.” Audio file, 13 January 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/pages/books/review/index.html.
and attitudes, not data.” Sweeping generalisations about the death of certain types of media, particularly books, are cyclical and more prevalent during times of major change. While debates about the “death” and/or “decline” of literature in Australia (and elsewhere) tend to become dichotomised, the close scrutiny of relevant data can deliver a more nuanced picture.

Rather than relying on hearsay and anecdote, a useful way to consider the state of Australian literary fiction is to turn to appropriate data. However, different approaches here may yield markedly different results. Mark Davis has undertaken research via the AustLit database to determine the production of Australian literary fiction between 1996 and 2006, discovering a fifty percent decline in this period, while Katherine Bode, using similar data, argues that the decline is more in the region of twenty-five percent, and that the numbers of Australian literary titles have fallen gradually since the 1970s rather than the steep decline since the mid 1990s that Davis proposes. Somewhat differently, David Carter interrogates figures generated from the AustLit database on literary novels as a proportion of total novels during the period 1990–2006. His analysis indicates that the proportion of literary titles to all fiction titles remained reasonably consistent in this period, although in 1996–97 and again in 2002 literary titles fell while total numbers rose. Carter finds that literary titles have varied between thirty-two percent (1990) and fifty percent (2005) of all fiction titles published, with most years hovering between forty-two and forty-six percent. Carter claims that these figures might be taken to indicate a relatively stable situation, with only minor or temporary deviations from a norm of around 130–140 titles annually. With numbers of literary fiction titles remaining relatively static, Carter argues that the figures don't suggest a market that is expanding significantly, though claims of decline are difficult to substantiate.

Jason Ensor's recent empirical study of the publishing of Australian novels suggests that reports of Australian literature’s death have been greatly exaggerated. The statistics that Ensor has generated show that literary fiction appears to be the preferred species of Australian novel selected by publishers for reprinting in domestic and international markets. Katherine Bode notes that while a reduction in Australian novel and poetry titles (since 2000 and 1994 respectively) might appear to affirm claims of a crisis in Australian literature, a data-rich “distant” reading of the field indicates a more complex picture. It demonstrates that Aus-

43 Dave Eggers et al., Introduction to McSweeney’s Quarterly 37 (Spring 2011), n.p.
45 “Boom, Bust Or Business As Usual?” 238.
46 Ibid., 238–39.
Australian novels have fallen at other times, without leading to the death of this form. Moreover, the strong growth in Australian auto/biography over the past few decades counteracts assertions of a crisis. Although large publishers appear to be shifting away from Australian literary fiction, these companies do not represent the entire industry. Bode argues that Australian literature and publishing are changing but this change should not “be reflexively ascribed the status of a crisis.”

The narrative of decline in literary publication is not necessarily supported by Carter, Ensor or Bode’s analyses, but Mark Davis argues that the position of Australian literature is likely to worsen with the increasing use of new technologies. Nathan Hollier questions Davis’s assumption that new technologies will be used in ways that strengthen the free market and kill off literature. Hollier contends that there is no reason why BookScan might not be used to assist literary publishing in a more regulated publishing market, one in which government was concerned to ensure the continuing existence of particular literary texts for cultural reasons. BookScan bestseller lists have certainly shown us that Australian literary fiction rarely sells in significant numbers, yet this clearer view of “real” sales could be seized as an opportunity to appeal for greater institutional support for a form that is not economically self-sufficient.

**Conclusion**

Book sales aggregation systems were invented in response to a perceived need on the part of the publishing industry for accurate statistics. At first not all members of the book trade recognised the usefulness of BookScan, and the take-up of the technology was by no means uniform. This is also evidenced by the different rates of adoption of BookScan bestseller data by the major metropolitan newspapers in Australia. The transition to the BookScan system marks a shift from intuitive modes of assessing audience behaviour to a greater rationalisation in the Australian book industry. Critics have taken aim at BookScan for its effects on local literary culture, while others have praised it for ushering in a new era in the publishing industry. Like many new technologies BookScan was attacked at first but is now increasingly relied upon by a range of companies and organisations.

BookScan data has provided a starker view of the dearth of Australian literary titles in the bestseller lists but there is no empirical evidence to show that the system itself has contributed to a decline in sales. The methodology for counting

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48 “Publishing and Australian Literature,” 44.
51 The collapse of the RedGroup and the withdrawal of Borders and New Zealand-based chain Whitcoulls from the BookScan panel has revealed the level of industry reliance on BookScan for accurate figures. See “Whitcoulls Pull the Plug and Let Down the Whole NZ Booktrade,” *Beattie’s Bookblog*, 15 September 2011, http://beattiesbookblog.blogspot.com.
sales has changed since the advent of BookScan but this in itself cannot tell us all we need to know about the state of Australian literature. This requires the comparison of a range of figures, yet alternative sources of information are becoming rarer, with BookScan data becoming the most widely used currency within the booktrade. A number of institutions now rely exclusively on Nielsen rather than producing their own figures. The Australian Publishers Association used to provide members with publishing statistics but now uses BookScan data instead. In the absence of Australian Bureau of Statistics reports on the publishing industry (which ceased in 2004), there is simply not enough alternative data available to provide a comprehensive point of comparison.

Instead of claiming that BookScan has sounded the death knell for Australian literature, it is more appropriate to consider the environment that called it into being. As a powerful new data-processing system, BookScan—along with other factors such as the global rationalisation of the publishing industry and the decline in institutional support for Australian literature—have re-awakened anxieties about the health of Australian literary fiction that have been circulating since colonial times. BookScan is merely one measurement system amongst many, yet it has been controversial precisely because it provides data about books, which still possess a privileged cultural status despite, or perhaps because of, the threats posed to their existence by changing commercial and industrial contexts.

RMIT University