

## Do Hoosiers Sell Best?

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In the days before television talk shows, writers took to the Chautauqua circuit to publicize their books. Legend has it that one famous speaker was making his first appearance in the state and sought to honor the local authors by asking all of the writers in the audience to stand. Needless to say he was taken aback when the entire audience, save for one elderly gentleman, arose *en masse*. The speaker recovered himself enough to point out the lonely gentleman seated in the front row, whom he called the only Hoosier alive who was not an author. A voice cried out from the crowd, "Oh, he writes, too." it said, "but he's a little bit deaf and didn't hear what you said."<sup>1</sup> The story is perhaps apocryphal, but as a former director of the Indiana Historical Bureau put it, "Indiana's literary productivity is one of those phenomena that is easily exaggerated."<sup>2</sup> Like most folk legends, the story contains a modicum of truth. Shumaker, in *A History of Indiana Literature* sought to substantiate the claim that "the production of Indiana writers is one of the more significant contributions to American literature made by any state or region."<sup>3</sup> In 1949 R.E. Banta identified nearly a thousand published authors in the state's first century.

Don Thompson continued his work and found another 2,700 writers in the next fifty year period.<sup>4</sup> Writers, it seems, "grew as naturally and as luxuriantly as the horseweed along the banks of the quiet Indiana streams."<sup>5</sup> When John Moriarty arrived in the state during the final days of World War II as the new Director of the Purdue University Libraries, he had little more than a passing knowledge of Indiana's literary wealth. But it didn't take him long to discover that Indiana was a state full of authors. The Connecticut-born librarian was challenged by the sheer weight of their numbers to measure not only the output of Hoosier writers, but their quality as well. Moriarty decided that the best way to evaluate their quality was to draw upon the popular tastes of the nation as measured by the bestseller list.

The term "best seller" came into being because it filled a need. It was coined just before the turn of the century to describe "not necessarily the best books but the books that people liked best."<sup>6</sup> Popular literature has long been viewed by social historians as an accurate reflection of the thoughts and feelings of the world that produced it. But the term

**Figure #1**  
**The Top Ten States** <sup>8</sup>

Rank	State	Score
1.	Indiana	216
2.	New York	215
3.	Pennsylvania	125
4.	Virginia	102
5.	Kentucky	94
6.	Missouri	80
7.	Ohio	73
8.	Michigan	70
9.	Minnesota	67
10.	California	64

"bestseller" has never been precisely defined. There is no automatic point where a book becomes a "best seller." Publishers, movies promoters and television admen all tout their products as "bestsellers." Many booksellers compile their own lists, as do news and book-trade sources such as *The New York Times*, *Times* magazine, and *Publisher's Weekly*. The criteria of each list vary according to the needs and wants of the compiler, further muddying the term's exact definition.

In her landmark work, *50 Years of Best Sellers*, Alice Payne Hackett used the term in a strictly comparative sense. Using trade sales figures, she listed the top ten titles for each year from 1895 to 1945 using the lists

**Figure #2A**  
**A Comparison of The Moriarty Study and a Reconstruction**  
**for the years 1900 - 1941 using Moriarty's Formula**

Moriarty Score		Rank		Reconstruction Score
216	Indiana	1.	Indiana	222
215	New York <sup>13</sup>	2.	New York	202
125	Pennsylvania	3.	Virginia	131
102	Virginia	4.	Pennsylvania	125
94	Kentucky	5.	Kentucky	99
80	Missouri	6.	Missouri	80
73	Ohio	7.	California	63
70	Michigan	8.	Ohio	
67	Minnesota	9.	Michigan	60
64	California	10.	Illinois	52
54	New Hampshire	11.	Maryland + DC	48
			New Hampshire	
51	Illinois	12.	New Jersey	46
48	Maryland + DC	13.	Iowa	41
			Minnesota	
31	Massachusetts	14.	Massachusetts	31
	New Jersey			
28	Maine	15.	Georgia	29
	Georgia			
	West Virginia			
24	Iowa	16.	Maine	28
22	Wisconsin	17.	Wisconsin	22
17	North Carolina	18.	North Carolina	17
16	Tennessee	19.	Delaware	11

compiled by *The Bookman* and later by *Publisher's Weekly*. Moriarty examined these lists and assigned points to each work of fiction based upon its rank. On his scale the number one best selling book of each year received ten points, the second best title got nine points and so on through the lists. Next he searched out the birthplace of each author. In the case of co-authors, each received the same score. Moriarty limited his study to fiction for a couple of reasons.

First, the non-fiction titles were not consistently identified as a separate classification until 1919. Second, since he was working in an era before computers and machine sortable data, limiting the scope of the study also kept it within manageable bounds. For perhaps the same reason, Moriarty decided to exclude all foreign born writers as "not of interest for this checking."<sup>7</sup> Finally, he tallied the scores by state and found that Indiana let the nation in the production of

**Figure #2B**  
**A Comparison of**  
**The Moriarty Study and a Reconstruction**  
**for the years 1900 - 1941 using Moriarty's Formula**

Moriarty Score		Rank		Reconstruction Score
11	Delaware	20.	Kansas	10
			Tennessee	
10	Kansas	21.	Colorado	9
9	Colorado	22.	Mississippi	8
8	Mississippi	23.	South Carolina	6
6	South Carolina	24.	Texas	3
			Vermont	
3	Texas	25.	Connecticut	2
	Vermont			
2	Connecticut	26.		
<b>Not Rated<sup>14</sup></b>				
0	Alabama		Alabama	0
0	Arkansas		Arkansas	0
0	Arizona		Arizona	0
0	Florida		Florida	0
0	Idaho		Idaho	0
0	Louisiana		Louisiana	0
0	Montana		Montana	0
0	North Dakota		North Dakota	0
0	Nebraska		Nebraska	0
0	New Mexico		New Mexico	0
0	Nevada		Nevada	0
0	Oklahoma		Oklahoma	0
0	Oregon		Oregon	0
0	Rhode Island		Rhode Island	0
0	South Dakota <sup>15</sup>		South Dakota	0
0	Utah		Utah	0
0	Washington		Washington	0
0	Wyoming		Wyoming	0

popular authors.

Forty years after John Moriarty published his results, I stumbled across a passing mention of his work.<sup>9</sup> As a native Hoosier and a distant relation of Both Tarkington, I already possessed a working knowledge of many of Indiana's authors. So, with my interest piqued, I decided to test the validity of his findings. By a happy accident I chose to base my research on the latest edition of Alice Payne Hackett's *80 Years of Bestsellers: 1895-1975*.<sup>10</sup> This was supplemented with information from a decade's worth of *The Bowker Annual* to bring the lists up to the end of 1987. A \$500 research incentive grant from the Indiana University Librarian's Association (InULA) allowed me to hire a clerk to key in all 1,700 entries which have appeared on the *Publisher's Weekly* annual lists and its predecessors between 1895 and 1987. A Zenith Z-158 microcomputer and Dbase III+ simplified record keeping and sorting allowed the inclusion of both fiction and non-fiction titles as well as native and foreign born authors.

The actual methodology Moriarty used was not clearly defined in his article.<sup>11</sup> The first edition of Hackett's book covers 1895 through 1945, but Moriarty chose to concentrate only on the period "from the turn of the century to the beginning of World War II."<sup>12</sup> Juggling numbers by trial and error, I was able to pinpoint this period as 1900 to 1941. However, no matter how I juggled the figures I was not able to exactly match his results.

The differences between Moriarty's figures and my reconstruction are, I feel, minor and do not affect the overall results in any major way. The most striking difference is the discrepancy between his ranking of West Virginia and mine. Moriarty assigns the state 28 points, ranking it in a

**Figure 3**  
**Worldwide Rankings**  
**using Moriarty Points**  
**1900 - 1941**

Fiction		
Rank		Points
1.	England	409
2.	Indiana	222
3.	New York	202
4.	Virginia	131
5.	Pennsylvania	125
6.	Kentucky	99
7.	Canada	82
8.	Missouri	80
9.	California	63
	Ohio	63
10.	Michigan	60
11.	Illinois	52
12.	New Hampshire	48
13.	New Jersey	46
14.	Iowa	41
	Minnesota	41
15.	Scotland	39
16.	Australia	35
17.	Massachusetts	31
18.	Georgia	29
19.	Maine	28
20.	Ireland	27

three way tie for 15th place. In my research I found just two native West Virginian authors on the list. Linda Goodman put her book *Sun Signs* on the best seller list in 1969 and newsman Everard J. Appleton, who is often counted as one of Ohio's favorite sons, made the 1918 non-fiction list with his book of poems *With the Colors*. Since both of these works fell outside the era and scope of Moriarty's study, I assigned the state a zero for the reconstruction period. A large number of the differences can be attributed to the lack of many of the in-depth bibliographic and biographic tools we have today. Invaluable resources such as the *National Union Catalog*, OCLC and *BioBase* were not available until several decades after Moriarty con-

**Figure 4**  
**Worldwide Rankings using**  
**Moriarty Points**  
**1900 - 1941**

<b>Combined Fiction &amp; Non-Fiction</b>		
<b>Rank</b>		<b>Points</b>
1.	England	597
2.	New York	368
3.	Indiana	229
4.	Pennsylvania	199
5.	Illinois	158
6.	Virginia	144
7.	Massachusetts	122
8.	France	115
9.	Kentucky	113
10.	New Jersey	112
11.	Michigan	111
12.	Missouri	105
13.	Canada	88
	Ohio	88
14.	California	80
15.	Maine	72
16.	Maryland	70
17.	Iowa	61
18.	Scotland	60
19.	Ireland	59
	Netherlands	59
20.	Germany	51

ducted his study.

By limiting his study to American authors, Moriarty missed an important discovery. Many of the books read and loved by Americans during that period were not written by Americans. England had a two to one lead in the nativity of best selling authors. Indiana came in second worldwide, with New York bringing up a close third, but not quite as close as Moriarty indicated. The next ranked state, Virginia, lags a distant fourth, and the scores fall off sharply after that. For the period Moriarty studied, the combined scores of England, Indiana and New York accounted for over one-third of all best selling authors. Better than half of

the best selling fiction produced during the first four decades of this century came from just five locations.

The addition of the non-fiction titles, changes the picture substantially. England still leads, but New York moves into the number two position. Indiana comes in a strong, but distant third.

In the decades since Moriarty conducted his study nearly a thousand more titles have appeared in the annual lists. Indiana has fared better than most states since the "Golden Age of the Hoosier Literature" adding 93 M-points since 1941. Columbia City native Lloyd C. Douglas did more than his part when he set an all-time record with his thirteen appearances in

**Figure 5**  
**Worldwide Rankings**  
**using Moriarty Points**  
**1895 - 1987**

<b>Fiction</b>		
<b>Rank</b>		<b>Points</b>
1.	England	819
2.	New York	795
3.	Indiana	315
4.	Pennsylvania	275
5.	Illinois	265
6.	Virginia	204
7.	Canada	159
8.	California	138
9.	Ohio	111
10.	Kentucky	108
	Maryland	108
11.	Missouri	106
12.	Maine	98
13.	Australia	92
14.	Minnesota	88
15.	Michigan	78
16.	Massachusetts	77
	New Jersey	77
17.	New Hampshire	74
18.	Iowa	72
19.	Scotland	69
	Texas	69
20.	Georgia	69

the annual lists. After thirty-five years as the undisputed champion of the lists, James a. Michener tied Douglas for the honor of being the most popular author of all time. *The Robe*, perhaps the best known of Douglas's work today, is the only work of fiction to appear in the lists four times. It debuted in 1942, reaching the number one spot the following year and falling to second place in 1944. Eleven years after it first appeared, *The Robe*, a novel about the time of Christ, returned in paperback to outstrip all fiction sales again in 1953, another unequaled achievement.

Many talented Hoosiers have appeared in print since Moriarty studied the lists. Rose Lockridge, Jr, Ernie Pyle and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. are perhaps the best known. But nothing could stem the tide of bestselling novels that flowed from the Empire state. Just four New York born writers: Herman Wouk, Harold Robbins, Danielle Steel and James A. Michener, have produced thirty-three top selling novels in recent years. Michener, as noted above, has recently tied with Lloyd Douglas for the honor of being the most popular author of the century.

With 795 points, New York has a better than two-to-one advantage over Indiana, dropping the Hoosier state to third in the worldwide ranking for the nativity of best selling authors. But Indiana has been producing fine writing "nearly as regularly as corn and limestone,"<sup>16</sup> so she can't be counted out yet. The Hoosier state may no longer be the number one state but "whatever may be included in the future activities of the state, it is fairly certain that the Hoosier will continue to write."<sup>17</sup>

### Endnotes

1. Shumaker, Arthur W. Introduction to *A History of Indiana Literature*. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1962.
2. Peckham, Howard H. "What made Hoosiers Write?" *American Heritage* (Autumn 1950), 24-27, 59-60.
3. Shumaker, *A History of Indiana Literature*, 3.
4. Thompson, Donald E. *Indiana Authors and Their Books: Supplement 1917-1966*. Crawfordsville: Wabash College, 1974.
5. Banta, R.E. "A Word About Indiana Authors." In *Indiana Authors and their Books: 1816-1916*. Crawfordsville: Wabash College, 1949.
6. Melcher, Frederick G. Foreword to *Fifty Year of Best Sellers*, by Alice Payne Hackett. New York: R.R. Bowker, 1945.
7. Moriarty, John H. "Hoosiers Sell Best." *Indiana Quarterly for Bookmen* 3 (January 1947): 7-14.
8. *Ibid.*, 8.
9. Zeller, Nancy. "Indiana Authors." In *Popular Culture in Indiana* (A Souvenir of the 3rd National Popular Culture Conference). Indianapolis: IUPUI, 1973. p. 1.
10. Hackett, Alice Payne. *80 Years of Bestsellers: 1895-1975*. New York: R.R. Bowker, 1977.
11. Moriarty, *Indiana Quarterly for Bookmen*, 8.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Moriarty's findings have been cited and misquoted by dozen's of articles during the last forty years. The figures used here are those used by Moriarty in his original article.
14. Alaska and Hawaii were not states at the time of the Moriarty study and have been omitted from this list.
15. South Dakota was omitted from the published results of Moriarty's finding. It has been inserted here with its presumed ranking.
16. Shumaker, *A History of Indiana Literature*, 28.
17. Beeson, Rebecca Katherine. *Literary Indiana* Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1925.