

Bonus - What's the Deal with Bestseller Lists?

Hi there! You're listening to The Lazy Genius Podcast! I'm Kendra Adachi, and I'm here to help you be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't. Today is a bonus episode - what's the deal with bestseller lists? We just launched The Lazy Genius Kitchen into the world, and it became a New York Times bestseller which is so much fun and I'm so grateful. And also there are multiple lists chosen in different ways, and I often get asked, especially by aspiring or professional authors "how do you get on the New York Times?" and I get asked enough to spend a few minutes on it today for this little bonus episode. So here's a little behind the scenes of bestseller lists.

First thing, I am not an expert. I'm a published author, but that doesn't make me an expert. Second thing, there is not a lot written on this topic because third thing, it's kind of secretive? Not in a CIA way, but there's a lot of keeping the cards close to your chest. Publishing is a strange industry and way more arbitrary than you might think, especially with bestseller lists. So let's jump into the mystery, shall we?

First thing. The main published bestseller lists are the New York Times, Publisher's Weekly, USA Today, Indiebound, and The Wall Street Journal. If you're an author and your book shows up on any of these lists, you can call yourself a national bestseller. Amazon counts too, but Amazon rankings show up in different ways, at different intervals, and are not printed or released in the same way. Plus Amazon is just tracking Amazon, not indies or other outlets.

Second thing. All of these lists are calculated and chosen differently which is why a book might be on one list but not any others or why it's surprising that one book didn't make a certain list while another one that sold fewer copies did.

Third thing, these lists are calculated over different timeframes. Sometimes it's data from Sunday to Saturday, others are Monday to Sunday. But it's usually a week. Also pretty much all books are published on Tuesdays which I find super interesting, and it also makes sense. You want to give your book the best chance to sell as many copies in as much time as possible, so it's industry standard to release books on Tuesday.

My second recently released book, The Lazy Genius Kitchen, released on Tuesday, May 3. All of the sales that happened before that - so all of those pre-orders - and the sales that happened through the weekend following were counted as first week sales. That's another thing that's important to know. All pre-orders count toward book sales that first week which is why your first week is almost always the highest number of sales you'll ever ever have. Unless you become a book club pick for Oprah or Reese, or something causes your book to just culturally catch fire. Otherwise, an author's best and likely only chance to make a bestseller list is that first week.

Okay, let's start with the most straight-forward list: Publisher's Weekly. Publisher's Weekly rankings are broken down into a few categories - top 10 overall, hardcover fiction, hardcover nonfiction, mass market, children's, and a few others. Publisher's Weekly is chosen and ranked

purely on book sales. Just book sales. It gets that data from something called Bookscan which tracks about 80% of all printed books in the United States. Bookscan is obviously connected to the big online retailers like Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and Target, and they're also connected to a high number of independent bookstores. Not all, but a high number. But the number published by Publisher's Weekly doesn't include all independent bookstore sales, it does not include sales to libraries, or books sold outside of bookstores like at gift shops or something. Publisher's Weekly also doesn't include ebooks. It's printed books only. I'm not sure if it includes audiobooks or not. That's a piece of information I haven't been able to find. So while it's the most straightforward list with an accurate and published sales number (the only list that does that, that lists the actual number of books sold), it's still not complete. No list is complete. For example, *The Lazy Genius Kitchen* was ranked #11 in hardcover nonfiction on Publishers Weekly which is absolutely amazing, and the sales were listed at 11,772 copies. And that's a public number. But if you include ebooks, the sales that week were 14,668. Some lists count ebooks and therefore the sales number is higher. So Publisher's Weekly is just book sales broken into multiple categories and is seen as highly accurate but also doesn't include ebooks.

The Wall Street Journal bestseller list is also based on sales from BookScan. But their categories are different, I don't honestly know if they include ebooks and the Internet is divided on that, and The Wall Street Journal is behind a paywall online, or you have to look in the actual paper. So it's a bit less public but still amazing and counts as a national bestseller.

Next up is USA Today. USA Today doesn't do categories. They're just like here are all the books. They also don't take as much of a stance on "we have incredibly accurate data across all book sales ever" like Publishers Weekly but instead are focused more on creating a comprehensive list on what is selling well across a wide variety of stores in different parts of the country. It really is "Here's what America is reading in one long list." There are 150 titles published each week, and it includes everything on that one list. Paperback drugstore romance novels, business books, children's books, everything. It doesn't list sales numbers like Publisher's Weekly does - remember, Publishers Weekly is the only that does that, but it does include how many weeks a book has been on the list and what their previous ranking was, kind of like the Billboard song charts. Being on this list is really quite cool because of how comprehensive it is across all genres. *The Lazy Genius Kitchen* was #39 on the USA Today list and was a handful of spots away from books like Jennifer Grey's memoir, a Jack Reacher book that's been on the list for 17 weeks, *The Body Keeps the Score*, and *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. That list was the only time I will ever be more popular than *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*.

We'll be right back...

So the lists left are Indiebound and New York Times. The Indiebound list is put together by the American Booksellers Association and takes sales data just from independent bookstores. The interesting thing with this one is that it's not based on overall sales volume but on how high a book sells at a store compared to others. So one independent bookstore could sell 50 copies of its top seller, and another bookstore could sell 5 copies of the same book as its top seller and

the topseller-ness is what's important, not necessarily the number of sales. It's kind of like what books are buzzy at most independent bookstores, not necessarily how many copies were sold of them. The Lazy Genius Kitchen was ranked #18 in nonfiction hardcover bestsellers which is crazytown for a book like mine. You guys love independent bookstores, so the fact that so many of you purchased from your local store is amazing and the very reason why The Lazy Genius Kitchen ranked on Indiebound. Amazing.

And the final list that's the most arbitrary and weird but also the most lauded is the New York Times. Y'all, this is the most convoluted thing, and I'm going to get a little personal with this one.

But first, here's what we know, and it's not a lot. The New York Times bestseller list is an editorial decision. It's an editorial decision. It's not based solely on numbers at all. It doesn't use Bookscan, at least according to the most recent reporting. Instead, the New York Times has specific independent bookstores and outlets that it pulls data from to get an idea of what's actually selling well in both print and ebooks. It also has categories that are more about the format than the genre. There's a combined print and e-book fiction list, a combined print and e-book nonfiction list, hardcover fiction, hardcover nonfiction, paperback fiction, paperback nonfiction, several children's categories, and then there is a catchall advice, how to, and miscellaneous list which is where cookbooks or The Lazy Genius Kitchen which isn't a cookbook but is shelved with them, where that lands. That's also the list where religious nonfiction and productivity books go, which technically The Lazy Genius Way is kind of both of those things. So the New York Times is categorized by format, not genre.

But how are those books chosen? When I announced on Instagram that The Lazy Genius Kitchen had made the New York Times, so many of you so generously and kindly said things like "of course it did!" or "I'm not surprised" which was incredibly kind and encouraging. And yet the thing about the New York Times is you just have no idea what they're going to choose because it's literally a group of people in a room. It's an editorial decision. It's not data driven. The people in that room do consider book sales. They want to see what's resonating with readers across the country. But they also want to choose titles that are representative of what's relevant in the culture, which authors are selling well and getting national press of some kind, and the New York Times seems to really value sales in a wide variety of formats and across a wide variety of retailers. If a book only sells well as an Amazon ebook but nowhere else, it's very unlikely to get a nod from the New York Times because that is not the editorial decision they want to make.

An example. A couple of years ago after George Floyd was murdered and the country started a long overdue exploration into recognizing and changing systemic racism in the US, people started to read. How to Be An Antiracist by Ibram Kendi, White Fragility by Robin Diangelo, Be the Bridge by Latasha Morrison, and many other antiracism books by Black authors were that week's New York Times bestseller list. Those authors had a ton of sales because people were seeking information and guidance in this space, but also the New York Times was making an editorial decision to stand with Black authors and their books at a time when the entire country was seeing racism in its architecture. And it was a powerful editorial decision to see that list.

So the long and short of the New York Times list is that it's the most lauded of the lists to make, it has the most clout, but it's also the most arbitrary. So many authors sell more books in a week than the authors that make the list, so often it feels unfair. I'll say specifically for the advice, how-to, and miscellaneous category, there's also a pattern of not having the same kind of books populate the list. You're not going to have ten cookbooks. You're not going to have ten religious nonfiction books. You're not going to have ten time management books. There will be some sort of variety, so if my book were to come out the same day as Ina Garten's next cookbook and three or four other super popular cookbooks, the chances of my book making the list go down significantly. Some of it is honestly luck to be peaking when someone else isn't. Which is gross but also the reality of the list.

Half Baked Harvest released a new cookbook at the end of March, and that thing has not left any bestseller list since. It's been on the New York Times bestseller list for six weeks. And here's what's funny. Tieghan has sold way more copies than a lot of the nonfiction books that are currently on the "combined print and e-book nonfiction" New York Times list, but she's not listed there. She's only listed in the advice, how-to, miscellaneous list because that's just where cookbooks go. But she's been on that list for six weeks.

The week we were waiting for the list that The Lazy Genius Kitchen could be on, I knew Tieghan wouldn't lost her spot on the New York times list. No chance. Also the week before my book came out, there were two cookbooks that debuted on the New York Times list by famous people. Alton Brown released a new cookbook as did Daphne Oz. The Times likes books written by well-known authors, even if those books don't sell as many copies. I'm not saying Alton and Daphne didn't. They sold plenty to make the list, but celebrity authors in general are weighed more heavily by that editorial group, at least based on a long period of observation by many people. Celebrities have a better shot because of the whole editorial decision based on what's happening in the culture. So with Half Baked Harvest there and two celebrities writing cookbooks, plus a beautiful new cookbook that debuted the same day mine did, Mi Cocina, which means "my kitchen" in Spanish, written by Rick Martinez. It's a beautiful book and had a lot of buzz and presumably a lot of sales. So even though I was already a New York Times bestselling author with The Lazy Genius Way and even though I had sold almost 15,000 copies of my book and even though I had national press, it was still totally a crapshoot. Never a shoe-in. Because nothing about the New York Times list is predictable and sometimes even fair because it's not based on numbers alone. It's an editorial decision. So I did make the list, along with Rick which was so fun. Tieghan for sure stayed put which I expected, but the other two cookbooks from the week before did not stay because, again, they're not going to have half that list filled with cookbooks. That's the list where Brene Brown goes! You're not going to take away Brene's spot! But the point is it's all kind of wonky.

To get a little personal here, I wanted to make New York Times again, and I had to do a lot of personal work in conversation with my friends and other writers, my husband, my therapist to come to a place where I could want something, where I could work hard in the hopes of getting something, but where I could also know that I'd be okay if I didn't get it. I don't have a great

track record of dealing with failure very well which is why I historically don't try things I don't think I'll be great at. Not a great life plan, guys, and I'm enjoying being a beginner in many places over the last decade. But I knew I was lying to myself if I said making the New York Times didn't matter, if I said I didn't care. Because I did. It would be so cool to have written two books and both be New York Times bestsellers. Bonkers fun. But where I landed was that if I didn't make the list, there's literally nothing more I could have done to make it. We sold almost 15,000 books, and there are books on multiple New York Times lists that have only sold a third of that. We had national press. We had a great book that people loved. We had sales in multiple places. I had already been on the list once which I think likely helps you get in the door more easily. We made The Lazy Genius Kitchen Show. You all have shown up in massive numbers to make this book a success. Ultimately, we had an incredible book launch. Absolutely incredible. Fun, successful, energizing, and the book is helping you. Right now, The Lazy Genius Kitchen is making your kitchens work better for you. That's what ultimately matters, right? That's absolutely what matters the most. Which is why even though making the New York Times mattered to me, it didn't matter the most. And I had some language on how to handle the disappointment of not making it while I waited for the list to come out. If I didn't make it, it had nothing to do with me. I wrote a great book, my team created an incredible launch, and my community is the best on the Internet. We have everything to be proud of, and the launch was worthy of the biggest celebration no matter what happened with the lists. The fact that the book made it was amazing, and maybe you could say I deserved it? But a ton of authors deserve it and don't get it. That's just the truth.

It's a tricky thing to care about something that's so arbitrary and doesn't ultimately matter but also really does. In the same breath, many authors are like "I don't care and also I really really care so much." It's a weird place to be because the New York Times is a weird list to make because it's a weird way to choose books based on a weird list of requirements. Just some humans in a room. So making it was incredible, but also if I hadn't made it, it would still be incredible.

And that's the deal with bestseller lists. This ended up being way longer than I anticipated, but no matter. There you go. There's the behind the scenes of bestseller lists as far as I understand them. And no one fully does. It's a wild, weird industry, you guys. I hope this was a fun, interesting listen, and I'm guessing if you're here at the end, it was. Thanks so much for listening, and until next time, be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't. I'm Kendra, and I'll see you on Monday!