**GOING VIRAL**

**AMERICAN BESTSELLERS FROM THE 18TH CENTURY UNTIL TODAY**

**Room and time:** Seminar Room (Attems-gasse 25, Top Floor) - Friday, 16:00-17:30

**First session:** October 13, 2017  
**Course number:** 512.312

**Lecturer:** Univ.-Prof. Dr. Stefan Brandt  
**Office hours:** Thursdays, 4-6 p.m.  
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**Description:** What turns a book into a bestseller? Why do some bestselling books seem restricted in their popularity to the historical context in which they were produced, while others remain well-liked and ‘trendy’ for decades and centuries? The term ‘bestseller,’ first used in 1889 by the *Kansas Times & Star*, points to the traditional distinction between ‘high-brow literature’ on the one side and ‘popular/mass literature’ on the other. Even in postmodernity, an age devoted to the blurring of boundaries, popular literature is often regarded as “derivative, banal stuff,” as Pulitzer-Prize winning author Jennifer Egan has famously put it. This course takes its participants on a journey throughout the history of American literature, from its colonial beginnings to the contemporary era. How have bestsellers such as Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* (1794), Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* (1936), or, more recently, Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* (2003) shaped literary and cultural practice in the United States (and, by implication, marketing mechanisms)? To what extent do these books reflect the dominant narrative parameters and *zeitgeist* of their times? Do bestsellers really signal a “democracy of readers […] against an aristocracy of critics,” as literary historian Jill Lepore has suggested? Or are they cater to mainstream, trivial tastes in literature? The seminar will discuss the ‘anatomies’ of various bestsellers, paying special attention to the composition, background, and aesthetics of these texts.

**Teaching and Learning Method:** This is an interactive course. Participation in group discussions as well as contributions to the discussion forum on the Moodle course site will be part of the final grade. Each meeting will be held by experts who organize the session by means of questions, games, illustrations, video clips, and group work. The most relevant facts will be conveyed in a short information block (or a fact file on a handout). Experts upload their questions 6 days in advance!

**Materials:** All printed texts will be made available on Moodle.

**Aims:** The course aims at examining the main features of U.S. American bestsellers and their cultural functions.

**Assessment:** A.) **regular attendance** (no more than 2 absences!) and **active in-class participation**, as well as **seven (!) entries** in the discussion forum (1/3); B.) **presentation** as part of an expert session plus **3-page handout** and **online questions** (1/3); C.) **research proposal** (2 pages) and **final paper** (10-12 pages) (1/3). You need to pass each section to pass the course.

**Deadline for Final Papers** (including declaration of honesty): Thursday, February 15, 2018. There is no (!) extension of this deadline. Please indicate on a post-it attached to your final paper if you would like to get detailed feedback!

**SYLLABUS**

**13 October**  
**Introduction – The ‘Bestseller’: Composition, Genealogy, Marketing**  
Basic texts:  

**20 October**  
**The Tearjerker – Charlotte Temple and the Early Sentimental Novel**  
Main text (reading required):  
Additional text:  
Keywords: Deathbed Scene, Early Transnational Authors, Seduction Novel, Sentimentalism, USA/UK.

**27 October**  
**The Religious Epic – Ben-Hur and the Christian Bildungsroman**  
Main text (reading required):  
Additional text:  
Keywords: Bible, Bildungsroman, Enlightenment, Film Adaptation, L. Wallace.
10 November  Popular Children’s Literature – Charlotte’s Web and the Politics of Empathy
Main text (reading required):
Additional text:
Keywords: Animals, Anthropomorphism, Children’s Fiction, Death/Mortality, Empathy.

17 November  Educational Literature – The Power of Positive Thinking and the Genre of Self-Help Books
Main text (reading required):
Additional text:
Keywords: Advice Books, Autosuggestion, Christianity, D. Carnegie, N.V. Peale, Positive Thinking, Protestantism.

24 November  Shocking Bestsellers – Peyton Place and Sensationalism
Main text (reading required):
Grace Metalious, Peyton Place (1956). [Moodle]
Additional text:
Ardis Cameron, “Blockbuster Feminism: Peyton Place and the Uses of Scandal” (2012). [Moodle]
Keywords: Coming of Age, Feminism, Fifties, Film, Scandal, Sensationalism.

01 December  Horror Fiction – Stephen King’s It as the Ultimate Nail-Biter
Main text (reading required):
Stephen King, It (1986). [Moodle]
Additional text:
Keywords: Childhood, Clown Hype, Gothic, Horror, Stephen King, TV series, The Uncanny (freud).

12 January  The Historical Romance – The Notebook and the Power of Emotions
Main text (reading required):
Additional text:
Sarah Churchwell, “Master of Sentiment: The Romances of Nicholas Sparks” (2012). [Moodle]
Keywords: Film, Historical Romance, Romantic Fiction, N. Sparks, Sentiment.

19 January  Political Bestsellers – The Kite Runner and Transnational Fiction
Main text (reading required):
Additional text:
Keywords: Afghanistan, Film, K. Hosseini, Soviet Union, Taliban, Transnational Bestseller.

26 January  Young Adult Fiction – Collins’s The Hunger Games and the Dystopian Bestseller
Main text (reading required):
Additional text:
Keywords: S. Collins, Dystopia, Film Adaptation, Katniss character, Young Adult Fiction.

2 February  Crime and Conspiracy – Brown’s The Da Vinci Code and Cinematic Storytelling
Main text (reading required):
Additional text:
Keywords: D. Brown, Conspiracy, Crime, Da Vinci Myth, Film, Mystery ‘Robert Langdon,’ Religious History.