

The *Handbook for Mortals* and the Muddy Waters of YA Best Seller Status

Handbook for Mortals by Lani Sarem is not the first example of an author attempting to game the *New York Times* Best Seller list. This particularly bizarre incident unfolded rapidly, as YA bloggers, librarians, and enthusiasts worked together via Twitter to investigate how a previously unknown text, published by a debut author at a new imprint had debuted at #1. Twitter users raised red flags about the lack of traditional publicity, Advanced Reader Copies, or pre-release buzz that customarily accompany YA best sellers. Their investigations led to allegations that the author had purchased thousands of copies of the book herself from bookstores around the country that reported sales to the *Times*. Further investigation revealed the novel was an adaptation of a film script that Sarem had unsuccessfully shopped around Hollywood with the intention of starring in the film herself. Within hours of the initial Tweet challenges, the *Times* revised the Young Adult Hardcover list for August 27 without *Handbook for Mortals* at the top.

Like *Harry Potter* before it, *Handbook for Mortals* exposed the hidden mechanisms of the *Times* bestseller list and exposed the ways in which the seemingly objective apparatus is actually a culturally mediated subjective list open to manipulation and revision (Fitzsimmons).

This presentation will focus on the ways in which this controversy waded into the turbulent current of contemporary children's literature publishing, such as the increasing importance of Twitter and the influence of bestseller lists on library policies.

In addition, this controversy troubled the already muddy waters of existing cultural hierarchies within children's/YA fiction in new and potentially productive ways. For example, while "the association of money and childhood is not a comfortable one," Sarem appeared to violate the invisible line separating acceptable self-promotion within a profit-driven market from self-serving greed (Rose 87). Further, while YA publishing maintains a symbiotic relationship with Hollywood, Sarem sought to exploit that relationship. While traditional best seller list politics are murky at best, this controversy brought submerged and unspoken norms of YA publishing to the surface where they can be further examined.