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THOSE given to believing everything they read in the papers might draw as a conclusion from the recent rash of critics' choices and bestseller listings that the books bought in the hugest quantities during 1989 were by Julian Barnes, Martin Amis, Michael Palin and Denis Healey. Wrong. As usual the top seller by several miles was the responsibility (at least in part) of quite a different quartet: the Bible.

If cumulative sales of the Bible (together with those of English dictionaries) were frankly reflected in bestseller lists, it would be a rare week when anything else would achieve a look-in. Is it wonderful weird or just plain baffling in this increasingly goliathic age — when the range of books available grows wider with each passing year — that this one book should go on selling hand over fist month in month out even while many non-profit making religious organizations are ready and willing to give them away?

"It does seem odd," agrees David Wilkinson, book buyer for Harrods — "but it is still a title which if not monitored can go suddenly out of stock." Harrods sells many thousands of copies of the different versions every year, with demand traditionally doubling at Christmas and Easter.

"When Hodder brought out that paperback New International Version some months ago — the one with a Manhattan Tom Wolfe-style cover — we sold 200 in a few weeks. And the leather-bound deluxe editions go well: 50 a week at Christmas."

All this is nothing, however, compared to the sales annual-

Any book can be a best

by JOSEPH CONNOLLY

ly achieved by Britain's greatest source, the Bible Society. As they explain: "Contrary to most parts of the world we in English-speaking countries have a wealth of Bibles. The most modern are the result of the establishment of translation from ancient texts as a sophisticated and precise process recent significant archaeological discoveries and a commitment to the faithful communication of the Bible's message."

The Prince of Wales may be displeased to learn that sales of the modern texts hugely outstrip those of the more traditional versions. Whether people love the new texts remains debatable but that they are more accessible (or as it has been suggested less offputting) appears evident. That they sell in huge quantities is indisputable.

By far the most popular of all despite its 1970 vintage is the The Good News Bible published by Collins. (For every person who winces at the title there are thousands who go out and buy it.) Runner-up is Hodder and Stoughton's New International Version.

It is estimated that nearly one-and-a-quarter million Bibles and Testaments are sold in the UK each year, the Good News Bible commanding a 33 per cent share of this market, 18 per cent going to the New International Version. The Bible Society therefore calculates that more copies of these

two Bibles are sold in Britain than of all other versions put together and sales are now rising each year in Britain. The GNB sold 374,000 copies in 1986, 380,000 in 1987 and 410,000 in 1988. During 1988 the NIV sold 275,000 (including export sales).

These figures are staggering even when one considers that they do not reflect sales of a single standard product. For

while most other books are available only in hardback or

paperback (dictionaries again

being the exception) The Good

News Bible comes in no fewer than 60 formats ranging

from £9.50 softcover editions on

up via serviceable hardbacks

and a bewildering array of

"presentation" editions (some

frankly horrible) to superb

Persian leather "pew" and

pulpit" Bibles at £145. Along the way are all manner of compact editions, part works, illustrated and large print versions, as well as the mandatory Morocoo bindings, with optional padding and zips. Every one of these finds a ready sale — as do the further 60 formats of the NIV.

Certainly Bibles tend to

bring out the best and the

worst in book designers, as is

clearly demonstrated by the

Bible Society's range, in which

superb and suitably sedate

bindings jostle with the impossibly kitsch. After a time,

it is difficult to differentiate

one edition from another, for

all are referred to by acronyms, and woe betide anyone

who confuses his VUL with his BISH let alone his NEB

with his NIV.

-seller

In addition to the best-selling GNB and NIV, the Society also offers the New King James (revised, authorized), the New American, the New American Standard, the Revised Standard, the Authorized Version (King James), the Jerusalem, the New Jerusalem, the Living Bible, the New Welsh, the Amplified Bible, Moffat, the William Barclay and the J. B. Phillips in addition to dozens of Bible studies concordances and evangelical works.

The society alone sells from

10,000 to 80,000 of each of

these titles each year (with,

surprisingly, the New Welsh

Bible outselling rest), but many

many more are sold through

bookshops. Also still available

and still popular is the New

English Bible (OUP/CUP), al-

though last September the

presses of Oxford and Cambridge collaborated in publishing the Revised English Bible which is the result of 15 years' scholarship and liaison with all of Britain's Christian churches as well as with the Bible Society.

"When the New English

Bible was published in 1970,"

says OUP's Nigel Lynn, "it

sold out on day one. It still

sells 30-40,000 copies a year."

One third of a million copies

of the Revised English were

printed this year (100,000 for

the UK) and three months on

at 50,000 UK reprint has just

been delivered. "The market

is really huge," says Lynn.

And so it was inevitable, I

suppose that we should soon

er or later be offered "the

world's first hand-held elec-

tronic Bible". The sales litera-

ture for this King James ver-

sion (available from Franklin

Computers) goes on at length

about it being "hand-held" as

if unaware that this has been

a feature of many Bibles for

some considerable time. Ar-

med with this miracle (so to

speak) "you simply enter a

key phrase of word and the

unit's searching technology

brings the relevant chapter

and verse to the large four-

line 214-character LCD screen.

Type in 'valley' 'shadow' and

'death' for example and the

23rd Psalm appears on the

screen in seconds." The men

at Franklin are very eager to

tell you more: "Enter 'lamp'

and the thesaurus provides

'candle' as an option — which

can in turn lead you to Matt-

thew V: 15 'neither do men

light a candle and put it un-

der a bushel

At £285, Franklin sold out

of their initial 200 and 250

more are selling well. All ver-

sions of the Bible sell well all

of the time. Can the Bible

Society offer an explanation?

"Well," I was told disarmingly

"it is such a good book."

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