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Any book can be a best

by JOSEPH CONNOLLY

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 goll-less 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 Wolfstyle 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-

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 of (putting) appears evident. That they sell in huge quantities is indisputable.

By far the most popular of all despite its 1979 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 25 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 Moroccan 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 bestselling GNB and NIV the Society also offers the New King James (revised, authorized), the New American Bible, the New American Standard Bible, the Revised Standard Bible, the Authorized Version (King James), the Jerusalem Bible, the New Jerusalem Bible, the New Living Bible, the New World Bible, the Amplified Bible, 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 60,000 of each of these titles each year (with, surprisingly, the New Welsh Bible outselling rest) but many more are sold through bookshops. Also still available and still popular is the New English Bible (OUP/CUP), although 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," it 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 a 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 sooner or later be offered "the world's first hand-held electronic Bible". The sales literature for this King James version (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. Armed 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 Matthew V: 15 'neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel...'"

At £295, Franklin sold out of their initial 200 and 250 more are selling well. All versions 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".