

Audio Transcript
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with *Mike Blinder*

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[The USA TODAY Best-Selling Books List is back. Meet the new editor, Barbara VanDenburgh.](#)

In this episode of "E&P Reports," we meet the new editor of the rereleased USA TODAY Best-Selling Books List, Barbara VanDenburgh. We talk with VanDenburgh about why bringing back the USA Today lists is important and how she feels about her new role with national influence over the very competitive book publishing industry.



[music]

0:00:03.8 Announcer: This is E&P Reports, a vodcast from Editor & Publisher Magazine, the authoritative voice of news media since 1884, serving newspapers, broadcast, digital, and all forms of news publishing.

0:00:19.4 Mike Blinder: And greetings once again. Mike Blinder, publisher, E&P Magazine. If you are listening to this program on a podcast platform that you prefer, well, I love alliteration, please follow us. Watching us on YouTube, look below me, there is a subscribe button, a bell to the immediate right. If you hit those two things or click them or smash them, whatever they say in today's world, you'll get an update each and every time we upload a new episode of E&P Reports. I've got a new guest. We had never had Barbara VanDenburgh on our program. Barbara, welcome to E&P Reports.

0:00:55.5 Barbara VanDenburgh: Thank you so much for having me. It is, of course, my pleasure.

0:01:00.0 MB: It's our honour. You had a lot of years in Arizona at the Arizona Republic, mostly doing arts and entertainment features for the...

0:01:09.0 BV: Yeah.

0:01:10.2 MB: Right.

0:01:10.6 BV: Yeah, that's right. I worked for the Arizona Republic for many... I'm still based in Phoenix, but I worked in at the Arizona Republic for many years, and I mostly was an art and entertainment reporter and editor, and now I'm at USA TODAY.

0:01:24.6 MB: Yes, you are. But you got all that...

0:01:25.2 BV: I mean, everything books.

0:01:28.0 MB: You have some accolades. I did a little digging; not stalking, digging. You were the 2018 Best of the West award for short form feature writing. Congratulations. 2015 Arizona Press Club Award for arts criticism. I would love to have known who you were criticizing and why, but we wanna ask you about this one. It seems this is great, the 2015 Gannett Innovation Challenge.

0:01:54.1 BV: Oh, yeah. Well, one of my... Between the Arizona Republic and USA TODAY books editor, I was on a corporate digital innovation team and five of the most interesting, cool work years of my professional life. And basically we were just coming up with ideas, brainstorming, researching, launching new products, handing them off to somebody else to manage, and then coming up with something else. So it was just a really exciting, on-the-edge-of-innovation time of my life, and we won the Gannett Innovation Challenge.

0:02:33.8 MB: All the pictures of you on Google Images have you around books, which is no



surprise since you're currently, congratulations, the book editor of the USA TODAY Network. Congratulations. But now it's been revealed, you're also a nerd. So... [laughter]

0:02:52.1 BV: I think I'm now revealed. I mean, it's the story of my life. [laughter]

0:02:58.2 MB: But we will have hopefully a wonderful conversation about USA TODAY and what you guys are doing in the world of literature on the backside of this message.

0:03:07.8 Announcer: This episode of E&P Reports is exclusively sponsored by BLOX Digital formerly TownNews. Even though the name has changed, their commitment to the media industry is as strong as ever. BLOX Digital is now even better positioned to deliver integrated solutions like content management, audience development, advertising revenue, video management, and more. Join the over 2000 news publishers worldwide that power their ongoing digital transformation with BLOX Digital, serving over 141 million monthly users who view over 6.5 billion pages of content each year. You can trust BLOX Digital to empower you, to connect you at scale with the community you need to reach. BLOX Digital formerly TownNews now reimagined to help meet the news publishing challenges of tomorrow and beyond. Learn more at bloxdigital.com.

0:04:12.2 MB: All right. You are the books editor at USA TODAY.

0:04:16.3 BV: Well, we have had a books editor for a long time. Before I came on, we had the great Jocelyn McClurg who was with USA TODAY for many years, and I stepped into her very, very large shoes. I don't know what size her feet actually are, that's not a commentary on her actual shoe size. Metaphorically speaking, I stepped into her very large shoes.

0:04:32.9 MB: Metaphorically, yeah, yes.

0:04:35.2 BV: And so we had a long running USA TODAY best-sellers list. I believe it's in its 30th year. We're celebrating its 30th anniversary. And we went on hiatus in December to... It was in desperate need of some technological revamping. And so we went on hiatus to sort of crack the nut, solve the problem of automating the booklist, and now I'm so happy to be able to say that it's back.

0:05:09.2 MB: Well, now this is interesting. Here comes the nerd and the technology changes. So you've given a kind of a fresh look. And this is the new books... What do you call it? Do you call it "the best of?"

0:05:23.8 BV: It's the USA... I'll just tell you a little bit about it and how it works. It's the USA TODAY Best-selling Booklist, that's the official name. We call it the People's Booklist though among us because it's entirely determined by data and sales numbers. There's no curation, there's no editorial oversight in the sense that we are not hand-picking or selecting or making curatorial decisions about what ends up on the list. The list reflects what people are buying and hopefully reading, entirely data-driven.

0:06:00.0 MB: And that doesn't matter whether they're taking the audio version, the digital version, or God forbid, the cut-down-a-tree, turn-it-into-pulp-and-paper version.

0:06:11.1 BV: That's my entire house. It's a fire hazard of actual physical books. [laughter]

0:06:15.7 MB: I have a 20-year-old daughter whose favorite spot is between the shelves at a bookstore. I get that. So it doesn't matter what the format is, it's based on the actual demand of the public as opposed to editorial critique. There's no editorial critique or words of wisdom or thoughts around these titles?

0:06:34.4 BV: Not to the best-sellers list. Obviously we do books content apart from the best-sellers list. So we're constantly reading what's coming out. We're doing stories, we're interviewing authors, we're making book recommendations. But this best-sellers list is just completely data-driven. It doesn't matter what we are reading, what we say you should be reading. This is what the people are actually reading.

0:06:55.7 MB: And if for anyone who hasn't visited it, it doesn't separate the list by fiction, non-fiction, or does it?

0:07:02.0 BV: You can separate it into genres if you're interested in a particular genre. So you can sort... If you wanna see just romance books and what's selling in the romance world, you can do that. If you wanna see non-fiction, you can do that. But our master list of... And we do the top 150 every week, the master list of the top 150 is all genres. So if the best-selling book of any given week happens to be this sort of modest ripper romance, that's at what's number one. If the next week it's a celebrity memoir, that's what's at number one. We don't separate it by... The master list isn't separated by genre, though you can search by genre.

0:07:37.7 MB: Well, the world's changed now. I'm in my 60s, I started in media in the 1970s as a disc jockey and worked myself up into radio management before I went to television. That's my background. In radio, we determined the hits. In other words, there was these magazines, we get billboard, radio and records that reported on the records that were added around the country. And by playing that music, actually over towers, and people had radios in those days, we could make a record or a song popular that people would rush to record stores and buy either in an album format or 45. I love books too and then I would go to bookstores and whatever was there, you would grab and read or you'd go to the New York Times and see what their best-seller lists. What influences today in a social media click-driven world, in your opinion, now that you're one of the top editors of books in the country, what makes a book a star? What gets it on a list in today's world?

0:08:40.7 BV: You know what? A lot of it is just social media and what happens to go viral on social media. The story of our booklist last year before we went on hiatus was Colleen Hoover, who she had been a relatively unknown, self-published author. She, I believe she lives in Texas, she's in her 40s and she's just been quietly writing romance novel, largely romance and romantic thrillers, for the past decade or whatever. And she went viral on TikTok. There's a whole subsection of TikTok called BookTok. She went viral on BookTok, and all of these book influencers, young people in their 20s were reading Colleen Hoover and hyping Colleen Hoover, and she just dominated our best-sellers list last year.

0:09:30.4 BV: She is now rept by major publishers. She just had a conference. There's an entire conference that's just for her books that she was at recently. And it's just, that wouldn't have come



from... [laughter] That wouldn't have come from me or anybody else hyping her book in a newspaper. That was determined by BookTok, her popularity. And now she's just all over our best-seller. I think she's still at number one or number two this week.

0:09:58.5 MB: And let's get to a more serious topic. I don't know where you lean politically and it's none of my business, but democracy in my opinion and an E&P's opinion 'cause we do editorials and this is under attack, there are books now being banned. My wife and I watched a movie over the weekend, we streamed it, about a book that Judy Blume wrote for girls. We loved it. It was a fascinating, wonderful... I never read the book; my wife did when she was younger. Point is, that book is banned in Florida and in schools. What's your position on that? USA TODAY, so you are now a senior editor in a very critical category, books, authors, publishing. Can you give us an opinion on what's going on?

0:10:42.1 BV: We're champions of books. We're champions of banned books. We do not believe books should be banned. We do not believe that access to books should be limited. We've done lots of reporting about banned books over the last couple... It really is as bad as it looks. We've done reporting. We've seen the numbers. We've spoken with the American Library Association. And there are more banned books and banned books attempts than there have ever been since we've been recording the numbers. It's largely politically motivated. It's largely arch-conservative groups like Moms for Liberty, very targeted campaigns to get books that are largely LGBTQ or deal with race, or have some critical elements like critical of America and the way that people are treated in America. Those are the books that are largely being challenged and banned. And we thrive on the... USA TODAY only exists and thrives because of the First Amendment and free ready access to literature, I think is part of that. And so, yeah, we do not support book-banning.

0:12:06.4 MB: Have you noticed any trends? This is a question that I... I was just reading the biography of L. Frank Baum. I mean, for those... It should be a famous name to many, the writer of the original Wizard of Oz. But one of the reasons that his... It was more of a brand. Every year he wrote a different story about this fictional world. One of the reasons that some historians say that that story took off was because of the troubled world at the time, people were getting into escapism. Are you noticing now with all the polarisation, all the bad things going on, is the topics, the substance of fiction shifting more to fantasy? Do you notice anything that's looking more towards "I just gotta pick up a book and escape for now," or is still...

0:12:54.8 BV: Oh, I think there's a... Yeah, I think there's a lot of... I was just speaking to the editors at Amazon. We did a story somewhat recently about Amazon's top 10 books of the year. And I was speaking to the editors at Amazon who are just steeped in this. They're steeped in what people are reading and they know what's selling at Amazon. And they said everybody's looking to escape. There's a lot of fiction. People are really, really into fiction, fictional stories, things that'll whisk them away, things that have an element of romance to them, sometimes an element of fantasy. If you look at our best-sellers list, I think there's a reason Colleen Hoover dominated our list so much last year because it's a lot of big emotions and romance and just these big sweeping feelings. And I think it's just a way for people to get lost in feelings and emotions and romance for a while and get away from the real world. And so, yeah, there's definitely a lot of that. The editors at Amazon said that fiction and escapism are really dominating.

0:14:00.0 MB: Another trend for escapism, and I'm sure you're aware of it, and really, if you analyse COVID, it was one of the many crises that have impacted our society, crisis accelerates change. That's something I believe in as a closet historian. So without a crisis, you never get change. COVID accelerated many things, of course, e-commerce, the retail, but it also accelerated escaping on streaming, that you would find a character or a series or a show and escape in it one episode after another, after another. Are you seeing it? 'Cause it all starts with an author, right? A character, a story, which sometimes, God forbid, comes from a book, right? Jack Ryan, you know what I mean? Are you seeing some of these topics or fantasies looking like they're being written so they could eventually become a multimedia story? Or is that just... And I'm asking your opinion.

0:14:58.2 BV: Oh no, yeah, I think people are... I think authors have... I don't think there's a lot of money anymore in being an author. There's a ton of books being released every year, and most books don't end up on the best-sellers list. And even if they do, it's only for a little while. I think most authors, they don't make a lot of money in residuals, right? The way that the business works is you might get an upfront, you might get, okay, \$20,000, \$25,000, \$40,000, it depends on how much potential they see in your book. It could be more. They could get into... Publishers can get into a bidding war over it, but typically you receive an advance and then you have to pay off on that advance before you start making residuals from that book. And a lot of people never end up clearing that advance. So there's not a ton of money in bidding especially a fiction author. The money is in the movie deals. The money is in the licensing right. That's where the money is. And so I think most authors, not all, but I think many, many, many, many, authors have potential movie deals in mind, have licensing rights in mind, and are writing towards that hope.

0:16:12.8 MB: Or like a Harry Potter section of a theme park someday, or just...

[laughter]

0:16:17.2 MB: I really wanna go all the way. Final question, if I may. You gotta have a favourite, and I know you may not be able to say it on the... You are in charge of the reimagined, rebuilt, brand new, exciting, polished USA TODAY booklist. Was there one that really stuck out recently that you just could not put down, may I ask?

0:16:43.3 BV: Oh gosh, yes. We just did... So I run a book club in Phoenix, Arizona from an independent bookstore called Changing Hands, and I've been running it for eight years as of last month. We just had our 8th year book club anniversary, and we did this book, it was one of the best conversations we have ever had. It came out, I believe in May, it's called Chain Gang All Stars by Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah. He is a very young author. He had written a book of short stories before called Friday Black and this is his first novel. I believe it was also chosen for Jenna Bush Hager's book club, her Read With Jenna book Club; I believe that was a Read With Jenna pick. And it's just so... First of all, plot-driven. It is set in this kind of dystopian, slightly futuristic America where prisoners are roped into, perform gladiatorial combat that's televised, like it's a sports show.

0:17:44.7 BV: So it's like American Gladiators meets Coliseum fighting, but like in modern-day with prisoners who are roped into fighting to the death for other people's entertainment. And it just raises so many questions and conversations about the carceral state in America about sports, for special sports and what we put athletes through for entertainment. Just a lot of socially relevant



questions. So it's a deep read, it's something that you're meant to think about and talk about, but also it's just an incredibly adventurous, exciting read. It's very plot-driven, and I think you can... It's just, it's enjoyable and it's thoughtful, which is sort of my sweet spot.

0:18:32.8 MB: Usatoday.com/booklist, correct me if I'm wrong, is where they're gonna find the rebirth booklist of USA TODAY. And Barbara VanDenburgh, this has been an honor and a pleasure. You must be pretty darn excited about leading up this, what we call Vertical for the USA TODAY network.

0:18:54.4 BV: I am. I know that people missed it profoundly while it was on hiatus and it's just... It makes me very happy to be able to share positive book news and to be able to bring this list back. I know it meant and still means a lot to so many people, both readers and writers, publishers, and just people who are looking for the next book to read. And so I'm just really happy that it's back.

0:19:18.3 MB: Thanks so much for your time.

0:19:20.2 BV: Oh, thank you. It's been such a pleasure.

[music]