



# Gardner Gab

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“Never argue with people who buy ink by the gallon.” Tommy Lasorda

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## The Incredibly Secret World of the *New York Times* List

I remember the first time I got “the call.” It happens on a Wednesday, which was news to me. Seems like you’d find out who hit the Sunday list of bestselling novels on, well, Sunday.

But actually, every Wednesday, around 5 p.m., the *New York Times* faxes out to publishers, agents and other industry insiders the upcoming bestsellers list for a week from Sunday (so not that Sunday’s list, but next Sunday’s list, just to be very confusing). Word to the wise, don’t call an author around 5 p.m. on a Wednesday if she or he has a book out. They won’t be very kind.

Of course, I didn’t know any of this. I’d just had my second paperback come out, *The Other Daughter*, and while there were whispers of *maybe, maybe, maybe*, second time mass market authors don’t exactly hold their breaths. Mostly, I knew it was a warm July evening, perfect to be outside with my new puppy, Murphy. If memory serves, some of my neighbor’s dogs had come over as well, a sort of “puppy playgroup.”

When the phone rang, I was laughing about some antic the dogs had done. I believe I was wearing sweats, and probably holding a garden trowel as it’s impossible for me to be outside during the summer without pattering in the garden. Most likely I was muddy, sweaty and doggy. That pretty much summarizes July in our house.

The phone call was from my editor, which made me very nervous. When you’re a new author, phone calls from the editor can go either way. I got the quick

version. You hit the list. Can’t talk now. Publisher wants to call himself to congratulate you. Act surprised.

This was easy to do as I was still shell-shocked as I hung up one phone call to receive another. Yep, my very soft-spoken publisher was trying to give me the wonderful news, except I could barely hear him above the barking dogs, and oh yeah, the dirt caked on my ear.

Slowly but surely, the news sank in. I’d hit the list. The List. The *NYT* list. I honestly wasn’t sure what to do.

My agent called next, confirming I’d heard the good news. What does this mean, I asked. You’re an eight-hundred pound gorilla now, he answered.

I hung up the cordless phone for the third time, and my neighbor, who’d finally figured out my red face was due to more than just heat-stroke, asked me what was going on. I told him I was a gorilla. It seemed to make about as much sense to him.

I called my husband next. My mom, my brother, my father, anyone whose phone number I could remember. I giggled a lot, pontificated mightily and mostly wandered the yard with my dog.

By bedtime, I had it all figured out. I had made it. I was brilliant and the whole world knew it. Now I would be showered with flowers and champagne. This was the life!

I was half-right. Next morning, champagne did arrive. Sadly, my current manuscript was just as dreadful as the night before. First key lesson of hitting the *NYT* list—your work-in-progress never

appreciates how gifted the rest of the world thinks you are. (Though, as a corollary to lesson #1, a glass of champagne can make that incompetence easier to bear.)

I received all sorts of reactions to hitting the list. Praise, puzzlement, awe. Other people simply wanted to know how I’d done it. I wrote a great book, I’d say. No really, they’d answer. Apparently some people believe you can buy your way onto the *NYT* list and they wanted to know my system.

According to rumors, it’s happened in the past. The *NYT* list tracks the number of books sold in a week, extrapolated out from a smaller sample size. Basically, the *NYT* gets reports from a select group of independents book stores, wholesalers, retail chains, etc., and uses those numbers as the basis for the list. Hence the phrase a “*New York Times*” reporting store.

In theory, a couple of authors figured this out, placed huge orders for their own books at “*NYT* reporting stores” and managed to inflate their sales numbers to hit the list. In response, the *NYT* list now includes a funny cross symbol to signal bulk orders. For the record, my listings have been funny-symbol free.

So has my life changed much since first hitting the list? Well, I am the first to pick up the phone come 5 p.m. on a Wednesday. And I have developed a taste for champagne.

### Lisa Gardner Bookshelf

*Alone* paperback available now

*Gone* hardcover available now