

# The Novel That Sold 1,000 Copies a Week in 1903

Mary Augusta Ward's "Lady Rose's Daughter" was the blockbuster best seller of its day.



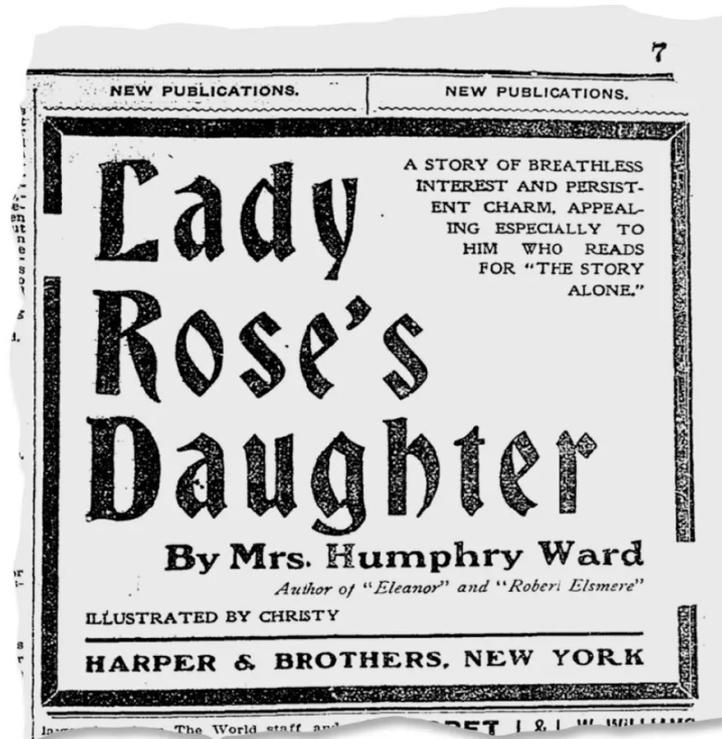
By Tina Jordan

Dec. 28, 2023

At the turn of the 20th century, the Book Review regularly ran an article called "Books in Demand," which was a list of the most checked-out books at the New York Public Library (and in many ways a precursor of our best-seller lists).

The first week of 1904, the most popular novel at the library was "Lady Rose's Daughter," by the British author Mary Augusta Ward. Billed as "a story of breathless interest and persistent charm," it was about "a girl whose gentle nature rebels against British society."

Reviews were a bit snippy when the book came out in early 1903. "It is certainly a book that captures the attention," an unnamed critic wrote in the Book Review on March 14, 1903, but "it is not particularly edifying. Its philosophy is narrow and insular. ... But it is literature — the real thing, and big. For once, and we can hope for always, Mrs. Ward has forgotten to teach or preach."



Ward's earlier books were "Eleanor" and "Robert Elsmere."

"Lady Rose's Daughter" was the lightly fictionalized story of Julie de Lespinasse, who, a century earlier, had presided over a famous Parisian literary salon despite her social standing as the illegitimate daughter of a countess. This led to "a great outcry that Mrs. Humphry Ward did not invent the situation out of which she developed her new novel," as the Book Review put it.

But Ward — a hugely successful writer — was upfront that the inspiration for "Lady Rose's Daughter" had been "that treasure house of human psychology, the world of French memoirs." Perhaps, the Book Review noted, the hubbub could have been avoided if the author "briefly noted the fact on the title page or in the preface, but to have done so would deprive her critics of a precious opportunity to display the extent of their erudition."

All the drama likely spurred sales of "Lady Rose's Daughter," which had been serialized in Harper's Magazine before its publication. By July 1903, The Times reported that the novel had "swung into the full stream of popular interest" and was selling "at the rate of 1,000 copies a day" (which would be considered excellent even now).

manuscripts... called "The Anglo-Bacon Century and the Civilization of the English-Speaking People." It is evidently time the old short story... Subsequently, it regularly to its columns, and for many one laugh, Miss Duham's... reality to mind, as do Mrs. Greene's three boys in "Winslow Plain." The latter re- important transac-... tation's life, and still compact... to retain its hold on the interest and at-... tention of the reader from the beginning to the end.

"The most appealing type of heroine ever presented in fiction."  
—HENRY M. ALDEN.

"No woman whose moral standards were primarily conventional could have understood the temperament of Julie Le Breton."  
—HAMILTON W. MABIE.

# Lady Rose's Daughter

By  
Mrs. Humphry Ward

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"Readers have rarely been led with such interest along the course of any novel."  
—W. D. HOWELLS.

"The most human story that Mrs. Ward has written."  
—JEANNETTE L. GILDER.

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An ad for "Lady Rose's Daughter" included several blurbs, including one declaring Ward's protagonist "the most appealing type of heroine ever presented in fiction."

In the Book Review's gossip column — yes, there really was such a thing — a literary agent named Jeannette L. Gilder speculated that "Mrs. Ward could have received no less than \$25,000 for the serial rights," and estimated that royalties on the book itself would be "over \$150,000."

"Miss Gilder asserts that 'there is no doubt that Mrs. Humphry Ward is the best paid of living novelists.' But," the Book Review concluded, "her publishers are reticent as to the figures."

Publishers Weekly would later anoint "Lady Rose's Daughter" the best-selling novel of 1903.

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