



# **THE PSYCHOLOGY OF BESTSELLERS**

Why Books Go Viral

**Will Raywood**

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## Introduction

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In the gray, drizzling morning of 1924, a somber atmosphere shrouded the English town of Stratford-upon-Avon. A crowd of mourners gathered to pay their last respects to a beloved author who had captured the hearts of millions. This writer, once the darling of Queen Victoria herself, had amassed a fortune. Her bestselling novel, *The Sorrows of Satan*, had outsold the combined works of literary giants like Rudyard Kipling, H. G. Wells, and Arthur Conan Doyle. Her stories had even been adapted into plays and silent films.

Her name? Marie Corelli.

If you're furrowing your brow in confusion, you're not alone. Despite her staggering success during her lifetime, Corelli's name lapsed into obscurity after her death. One critic dismissed her as "a woman of deplorable talent who imagined that she was a genius, and was accepted as a genius by a public to whose commonplace sentimentalities and prejudices she gave a glamorous setting."

Writers like Marie Corelli, E. Phillips Oppenheim, Hall Caine, and Harold Bell Wright were the J. K. Rowlings and James Pattersons of their time. Harold Bell Wright, for instance, became the first American writer to sell a million copies of a novel and make a million dollars from writing fiction. Despite their commercial success, future generations forgot their names.

Now, consider another author who passed away in the same year as Corelli. Unlike her, he lived in obscurity, his genius unrecognized during his lifetime. Yet today, he is hailed as "the Dante of the twentieth century," his works studied in universities worldwide. He even has his own adjective—

Kafkaesque. Franz Kafka's works gained recognition only after his death, thanks to the efforts of his friend and literary executor Max Brod.

The stories of Marie Corelli and Franz Kafka raise a perplexing question: What makes a book a bestseller? Is it literary quality, storytelling excellence, critical reception, effective marketing, cultural impact, or "pure dumb luck"? Or perhaps there's something else, a secret ingredient only a thorough investigation can uncover.

It's simple, one could argue. No mystery there. Books have different adoption curves. In other words, they find their audiences over time in distinct ways. Some books achieve a steep adoption curve, becoming instant bestsellers due to their immediate appeal. Perhaps it's because they're sensational, easy to consume, and tackle issues relevant to contemporary audiences. Other books make their way into our culture much more slowly, as they're ahead of their time, but they too eventually find their audience.

Or maybe there are no general rules, and books find success for many different reasons. Each one has its own story.

This might be true to some extent, yet—as an author and narratologist—I'm not satisfied with these explanations. I want to understand the factors and general principles underpinning our emotional response to stories. There must be reasons why some fictional narratives spread like wildfire, igniting passions and impacting popular culture, while others die ignored or forgotten.

I approached this mystery as a detective investigation, examining evidence and eliminating suspects. In this examination, I relied on my scientific background, my knowledge of narratology and literary theory, and two decades of experience as a professional writer. In this book, we'll examine available evidence, combining historical data with cutting-edge research in

psychology, neuroscience, and sociology. We'll interrogate our "suspects" to determine which ones propel books into the limelight.

Who are these suspects? If you ask random readers why books go viral, common answers might include effective marketing, media exposure, prizes and critical acclaim, high-quality writing, storytelling talent, or relatable themes. If you ask published authors, some might say it's just sheer luck. When a book breaks out, is it simply because it came to public attention in the right place at the right time?

I suspected that the answer to this mystery lay in the complex interplay of factors, some beyond anyone's control. This phenomenon resembles a perfect storm—a rare event when atmospheric conditions combine in a specific way, with winds, rain, and other elements converging to produce unmatched intensity. Despite all our scientific knowledge and technology, we can't predict storms far in advance. We can't pinpoint exactly when and where they'll strike or how severe they'll be. Yet no one questions the importance of studying storms. Meteorologists continue to analyze data and develop models to better understand the conditions that lead to such events.

The same applies to narratology and the scientific study of bestsellers. We can't predict which books will succeed or why some stories resonate with readers while others do not. But this inquiry is far from futile. By analyzing the factors behind a book's success, we gain insight into the complex dynamics that drive the emergence of works capturing the zeitgeist of their time.

As is often true in mysteries, the guilty party might be the one we least suspect. My investigation led to surprising discoveries with far-reaching implications. These findings challenged not only my perception of the publishing industry, but also my understanding of collective psychology and the cultural role of stories.

Join me in this thrilling investigation that spans centuries and cultures, from *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes to twenty-first-century literary phenomena. This journey will lead us not only into the world of books and stories, but also into the very depths of human psychology.

# 01

## A Brief History: From Scrolls to Scrolling

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The first question we must answer may seem simple, but addressing it is a major challenge: What is a bestseller, and how did it become the holy grail of publishing?

Historically, this concept is relatively recent, born from the union of mass production and consumer culture. It didn't exist before the twentieth century, while literature has been around for millennia. Imagine ancient scribes painstakingly copying texts by hand, unaware that one day, their literary descendants would be obsessing over sales rankings and vying for prime display space in bookstore windows.

In the fifteenth century, Johannes Gutenberg's printing press revolutionized the written word. This innovation paved the way for wider distribution and readership, but it would still be centuries before anyone thought to track which books were selling the fastest. During the Renaissance, reading for pleasure was as unusual as playing on a computer was in the 1960s. With limited printing presses and a small literate population, books remained a luxury. Nevertheless, in the seventeenth century, a few titles achieved popularity among the educated elite, including *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes and *The Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan.

In the eighteenth century, a new form of storytelling took the literary stage: the novel—a long, fictional narrative in prose, usually written in an



accessible language. *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe cemented its place in history as one of the earliest English novels to achieve wide popularity. Yet, in the age of Enlightenment, most readers considered books primarily as tools for transmitting information and ideas rather than as entertainment.

This perception began to shift in the late eighteenth century when a new breed of novels captured the imagination of thousands of readers: the gothic novel. Born from the imagination of English aristocrat Horace Walpole, the genre reached new heights with Ann Radcliffe, author of several gothic romances, including *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Italian*.

The once odd habit of reading for pleasure transformed into a cultural phenomenon during the Victorian era, and writers could finally make a living from fiction. For instance, *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens became an international bestseller soon after its publication in 1859. Initially serialized in the journal *All the Year Round*, it then continued its journey in book form, captivating millions. To this day, it remains one of the most widely read stories in history.

Book publishing had become a serious business, with hundreds of writers competing for popularity. The first bestseller list, published in 1895 by a New York-based literary journal called *The Bookman*, was intended less for bragging rights and more to guide booksellers on what to stock.

Here's a quick quiz: Who was the number one bestselling author in 1895, according to *The Bookman* list?

- **A:** Mark Twain (*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*)
- **B:** Rudyard Kipling (*The Jungle Book*)
- **C:** Anthony Hope (*The Prisoner of Zenda*)
- **D:** Ian Maclaren (*Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush*)

The answer is: Ian Maclaren. Two of his books made it to the 1895 list—*Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush* at number one and *The Days of Auld Lang Syne* at number six. Yet today, only literary experts know his name. The last time I checked, *Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush* had 34 ratings on Goodreads, while *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* had over a million.

Mark Twain's books, to my knowledge, never appeared on bestseller lists. No surprise—his works faced censorship and bans in various schools and libraries. For instance, in 1905, the Brooklyn Public Library banned both *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* from its children's department. This case is not unique; authors who dared to write bold and provocative works often had a harder time than crowd-pleasers.

As the twentieth century dawned, bestseller lists became a staple in the literary world. *The New York Times* launched its now-famous list in 1931. Suddenly, authors had a new goal: seeing their names on a list that signaled commercial success.

But what exactly makes a bestseller? Is it simply a numbers game, or is there a “secret sauce” that turns a book into a must-read phenomenon?

Today, the definition of a bestseller is ambiguous. *The New York Times* uses a complex formula that considers sales from various retailers, weighting them based on the outlet's overall sales volume. This weekly assessment captures sales spikes that often occur around a book's launch. However, the method has significant drawbacks. First, it excludes perennial sellers, books that sell steadily over time. Aggressive marketing strategies, including pre-orders, can artificially inflate a book's initial sales, pushing it onto bestseller lists even if its long-term sales are weak. Second, the methodology excludes some important sales channels, and the rise of digital formats like e-books and audiobooks further complicates the picture.

The hard truth is that bestseller lists poorly reflect books' actual popularity; they are biased and susceptible to manipulation. Are there better alternatives?

Online retailers like Amazon display real-time sales ranks updated every few hours, offering a simpler approach that directly compares the number of copies ordered or downloaded. But this too is vulnerable to manipulation and doesn't indicate a book's long-term success. A robust marketing campaign can push a book to the top, only for it to drop once the campaign ends.

Industry professionals don't rely solely on bestseller lists. Tools like BookScan track and compile point-of-sale data from a wide range of physical and online bookstores. Publishers also use market intelligence services that gather sales data from Amazon and other major retailers, providing insight into how titles perform digitally. However, these tools, though advanced, still have limitations.

Tracking sales data in English-speaking countries alone is challenging enough—doing so across multiple countries is an even greater headache. Not to mention other factors that skew data, such as online piracy.

Online reviews and ratings offer an indirect measure of a book's popularity, though they should be interpreted with caution. Some authors benefit from active online reader communities, leading to more reviews. Ratings are also susceptible to manipulation, as fake reviews abound on the internet.

As this overview suggests, determining the exact number of copies sold is challenging even with modern technology. So how should we define a bestseller? Is it the book that sold the most copies in a given day, week, year, or in its lifetime? And what about books primarily downloaded through subscription services? Should those downloads count as sales?

Yet the exact number of copies sold isn't essential to our investigation. What we aim to identify are the mechanisms by which books by unknown authors manage to break through the noise and achieve widespread popularity. For our purposes, we'll define "bestseller" as a break-out work that brought its author fame.

# 02

## **The Myth of the Perfect Plot Structure**

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Imagine if there were a secret recipe for crafting the perfect novel—a Philosopher’s Stone that could turn any story into literary gold. This tantalizing idea has captivated writers, publishers, and literary theorists for centuries. The theory suggests that beneath every successful book lies an ideal plot structure that resonates with readers across time and cultures.

Storytelling is as much a science as an art. While writing may seem like a pure expression of inspiration, creativity, and the elusive spark of genius, it has much to do with science. This question’s importance reaches beyond academic interest; storytelling influences many aspects of life. Narratives permeate education, politics, business, marketing, and entertainment, providing powerful tools for communication.

Researchers from various fields have explored why stories are so compelling. One such researcher was Joseph Campbell, a literature professor who specialized in comparative mythology. He identified a universal pattern in myths and folklore that he called the monomyth, now known as the Hero’s Journey.

Since Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), researchers have amassed evidence from multiple disciplines confirming the existence of story patterns that resonate with the human psyche. Our brains are wired to respond emotionally to these structures.

Many successful stories build on the Hero’s Journey, including *The Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*, *The Lion King*, *Harry Potter*, and *The Matrix*. We also know that well-structured character arcs make stories more

compelling. A protagonist's transformation taps into our innate desire for growth, mirroring the neuroplasticity of our brains.

Psychology plays a crucial role in shaping our emotional response to stories. When we read a book or watch a movie, we're not passively consuming information. Our minds actively interpret, relate to, and respond to the narrative. The emotional connection we form with characters and their journeys is central to this process.

Psychology and neuroscience help us understand the complex interplay between the reader's mind and the text. When immersed in a story, our brains process events as if they were real, as if they were happening to us. We feel the excitement, joy, or anguish of the characters; their experiences become our own. Stories induce this state of engagement by tapping into our ability to empathize.

A study conducted at Princeton University found that when one person tells a story and another listens, the listener's brainwave patterns synchronize with the storyteller's. This synchronization occurs in areas of the brain involved in complex information processing, suggesting that the listener's brain actively engages in understanding the story's meaning, context, and situation. Research like this highlights storytelling's power to create a shared experience between storyteller and listener.

Engaging stories ignite a cascade of neurochemical responses in our brains. They stimulate the reward system, releasing dopamine and motivating us to keep reading. This neural response may explain why some books are so addictive—the so-called page-turners. Other hormones and neurochemicals, including oxytocin, cortisol, and endorphins, also play a role. Cortisol regulates stress, oxytocin fosters social bonding, and endorphins enhance feelings of well-being.

This powerful effect on our neurochemistry explains why we become so invested in fictional narratives, even though we know they're imaginary.

Beloved characters become part of our mental “family,” and their stories become as endearing as our own cherished memories.

Falling in love with a story is much like falling in love with a person; the same neural pathways are engaged. Our critical faculties take a backseat, letting emotions run the show. Some fans don’t hesitate to spend their hard-earned money to support their favorite authors and creators. For instance, Brandon Sanderson raised more than \$41 million on Kickstarter, with some backers pledging hundreds of dollars for four new books.

What causes such intense and lasting emotional investment in fictional narratives?

The flow state theory, postulated by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, offers a helpful framework. In his book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Csikszentmihalyi explains that flow is a state where you’re so absorbed in an activity that everything else fades away, and your focus is entirely on what you’re doing. A captivating novel can create this optimal experience by drawing readers into its world with engaging characters, intriguing plots, and vivid descriptions.

The story grabs your attention from the first page. The characters feel real, and their challenges are relatable. The plot unfolds in a way that keeps you constantly curious about what will happen next. The world is so vivid that you can see the scenes in your mind, hear the characters’ voices, and feel their emotions. You’re not just reading words on a page—you’re living the story.

This occurs because the novel strikes a balance between being challenging enough to keep you interested but not so difficult that it frustrates you. It provides mental stimulation that is pleasantly challenging. The pacing keeps you engaged, and each plot twist leaves you wanting more. Nothing distracts or pulls you out of this immersive experience.

The more you read, the deeper you fall into the flow state. Time flies as you lose yourself in the moment with the story. This flow experience makes reading incredibly rewarding, leaving you with a sense of satisfaction after finishing the book—you feel as if you’ve been on an unforgettable journey.

One might think crafting a story that triggers all the right neurochemicals and draws readers into a flow state is as simple as baking a cake. Stir in a dash of mystery, build suspense gradually, and let dopamine work its magic. Introduce likable characters and put them in impossible situations to release oxytocin in readers’ brains. And for a finishing touch, sprinkle in humor to generate bursts of endorphins, leaving readers with a warm sense of well-being.

But here’s the catch: creating this experience is more like juggling flaming torches on a unicycle across a tightrope than baking a cake. One misstep and suspense turns into frustration, your lovable protagonist becomes a cliché, and your humor falls flat. The art of triggering just the right neurochemical mix in readers’ brains requires finesse, timing, and a deep understanding of human psychology. While it might seem like a formula anyone could follow, achieving it gracefully requires true storytelling mastery.

So, what exactly makes a story gripping? Is it an optimal plot structure, unforgettable characters, imaginative settings, or a compelling theme?

It’s time to introduce the first suspect in our mystery: the perfect plot structure. The theory we’ll explore posits that an ideal structure exists, one that makes plots irresistible and guarantees an optimal reading experience. It triggers the right neurochemicals in the right doses and at the right moments.

Among the most influential books in this field is *The Writer’s Journey* by Christopher Vogler. Building on Campbell’s work, Vogler transformed the Hero’s Journey into a twelve-stage plot structure. Other structures have



also gained popularity with storytellers, including the three-act structure, its derivative the five-act structure, and Dan Harmon's eight-step story circle.

Blake Snyder took a step further in defining a formula for commercial films in his book *Save the Cat!* Unlike Vogler, who views the Hero's Journey as a flexible framework or "toolbox" for storytellers, Snyder presents a strictly regimented structure. Follow it to the letter, or deviate at your own risk! According to his formula, the inciting incident in a movie script must occur on page twelve—not ten, not fourteen, but twelve. Why? Because, according to Snyder, that's how it's done.

Most existing formulas—at least the popular ones—are akin to alchemy; they're based on personal experience and observation, sometimes anecdotal, rather than on solid theory and evidence.

Now, let's turn to the empirical evidence, examining literary history and recent bestsellers.

Exhibit A: *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes, published in the early seventeenth century. This whimsical tale of a delusional knight-errant and his faithful squire captivated readers with its blend of adventure, humor, and social commentary. The book is structured in two parts, and it doesn't strictly follow a three-act structure or a traditional Hero's Journey. At its core, it's a subversion of the classic quest narrative. Cervantes delivers his underlying message by transforming a heroic quest into a series of comedic misadventures.

Fast forward to 1719, and we're stranded on a desert island with Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. This survival tale captured readers' imaginations worldwide. Rather than following a conventional adventure structure, *Robinson Crusoe* draws on elements of spiritual autobiography, creating a narrative that functions as both religious allegory and survival story.

In the nineteenth century, Charles Dickens gave us *A Tale of Two Cities*, a historical novel set against the French Revolution. Its famous opening line, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” hints at the novel’s use of contrasts and parallel narratives. While we could examine *A Tale of Two Cities* through the three-act structure lens, with setup, confrontation, and resolution, Dickens’ episodic style and interwoven themes resist easy categorization. The story could loosely fit the Sacrificial Hero structure, as Sydney Carton undergoes a transformation resembling the Hero’s Journey, evolving from a disillusioned man to a selfless hero. Yet the plot does not neatly align with any established formulas.

In the twentieth century, the landscape of bestsellers grew even more diverse. Detective fiction, romance, fantasy, science fiction, and horror gained popularity, with some novels transcending genre to achieve lasting cultural significance.

What about more recent bestsellers? From J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series to Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*, and from Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* to Paula Hawkins’ *The Girl on the Train*, modern bestsellers appear to defy a single formula.

The *Harry Potter* series, for example, draws on established conventions, including the Orphan-Hero archetype and the coming-of-age narrative, but it combines them in a fresh, original way. Several publishers initially rejected Rowling’s first manuscript, finding it too long at 90,000 words and considering the plot too complex for its target age group. Moreover, its fusion of fantasy, boarding school story, and mystery was unconventional for children’s literature at the time.

We could continue to analyze dozens of other bestselling books, and each time we would arrive at the same conclusion: while these works are grounded in storytelling traditions, they also bring something fresh and original, revitalizing familiar themes for modern audiences. They often

blend genres in innovative ways, creating hybrid narratives that feel both comfortingly familiar and excitingly new. Many include elements of mystery or suspense, enticing readers to turn pages late into the night.

The only constant in the publishing landscape is that breakthrough books surprise everyone—both readers and industry professionals. No one anticipated that dark-themed stories about a boy wizard would captivate the world. Despite the relative popularity of novels like *The Giver* (1993) by Lois Lowry, the extraordinary success of dystopian novels with young adult audiences was unforeseen until *The Hunger Games* became a sensation. Even more unexpected was the rise of BDSM erotica with *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which transformed an obscure niche into a global phenomenon.

Bestsellers have always been remarkably diverse, and evidence doesn't suggest they share a single plot structure. Conversely, thousands of stories that follow well-established formulas fail to achieve success. This is evident not only in publishing but even more so in the film industry. Box office flops abound, with many commercial films failing to live up to the hype despite their rigid adherence to storytelling conventions.

Based on our understanding of human psychology, these observations make sense. A compelling story keeps the audience in a state of suspense and uncertainty. While the plot may hint at the general direction, some degree of unpredictability is essential. Formulas make stories predictable and therefore less enjoyable and memorable. While derivative stories can achieve some commercial success, they rarely become mega-bestsellers or enter the literary canon.

A memorable story requires several elements working in synergy to create an impactful experience. No single “ideal” plot structure exists; the optimal plot is the one that best serves the story itself.

In *Story Genius*, Lisa Cron argues that the biggest mistake writers make is misunderstanding the nature of a story. My own research has led me to similar conclusions. A story is much more than a sequence of connected events, or the plot; it's about the emotional journey of the characters.

Every captivating story, regardless of genre—whether romance, family saga, mystery, fantasy, or science fiction—is ultimately about human connection or the lack thereof. Romance celebrates human bonds, while mysteries often explore how those bonds can unravel and lead to crime. Fantasy and science fiction may transport readers to other worlds or distant futures, but they address timeless themes like friendship, ambition, freedom, love, and loss.

The allure of any story lies here: it's not the events themselves that captivate, but how those events affect people. And by “people,” I mean not only the characters in the story but, more importantly, the audience.

# 03

## The Relatable Protagonist

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The next suspect on our list is the *relatable protagonist*. This one seems like a no-brainer. Whether you're browsing the web or consulting AI, one of the first pieces of advice for novelists is often about that all-important issue of relatability.

It's crucial for audiences to identify with the protagonist—a concept known as far back as Ancient Greece. In *Poetics*, Aristotle noted that audiences experience emotions like pity and fear through their connection to the character. This identification allows the audience to undergo a process of catharsis, or emotional purification, through their engagement with the story.

However, “relatable character” remains one of the most misunderstood concepts in storytelling. Some writers assume that the protagonist must be likable and easy for the audience to relate to. But that's not necessarily true. “Relatable” doesn't always mean “ordinary and likable.” A skilled storyteller can make any character relatable, no matter how original, fantastical, or even nonhuman they may be.

Consider Dr. Watson: he is more relatable than Sherlock Holmes, yet it's Sherlock who became the superstar. In the original *Star Trek* series, it was Spock—arguably the least relatable of the USS *Enterprise* crew—who became an icon. In *The Next Generation*, viewers grew attached to characters like Captain Picard, Worf, and Data, rather than the more relatable Wesley Crusher.

Some stories even make us empathize with animals, monsters, aliens, and robots. So, how do you make your characters relatable? And how do you choose the right protagonist for your story?

Often, the story type itself informs the choice of protagonist. In the previous chapter, we discussed story patterns that resonate with the human psyche. We can categorize successful stories into several types, each calling for a particular kind of protagonist.

- The quest (*The Odyssey*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*, *Harry Potter*)
- Defeating the monster (*Beowulf*, *Dracula*, *King Kong*, *Jaws*, *Alien*)
- Individual versus nature (*Robinson Crusoe*, *The Call of the Wild*, *The Old Man and the Sea*)
- Individual versus society (*Crime and Punishment*, *1984*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, *Breaking Bad*)
- Fish out of water, or ordinary individual in extraordinary circumstances (*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Die Hard*, *Schindler's List*, disaster stories like *Titanic*)
- Superhuman, or extraordinary individual among ordinary people (superhero stories, *A Beautiful Mind*, *Sherlock*, *The Big Bang Theory*)
- Mystery (most detective stories, *Citizen Kane*, film noir like *Chinatown*)
- Romance and bromance (stories centered on a relationship, with or without a romantic element)
- Revenge (*Moby-Dick*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Carrie*, *Kill Bill*, *Gladiator*, many westerns)

- Heist (*Ocean's Eleven* and others)
- Workplace drama or comedy (*The Devil Wears Prada*, *The Office*, *Suits*, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, some military fiction)
- Fool triumphant (Charlie Chaplin films, *The Pink Panther*, *Austin Powers*, *Forrest Gump*)

Of course, narratives don't always fit neatly into one of these categories; most bestsellers combine elements from multiple story types. *Moby-Dick*, for example, is structured primarily as a revenge tale, but it can also be interpreted as a "defeating the monster" or "individual versus nature" story.

Some stories even defy classification altogether. *Gulliver's Travels*, for instance—should we call it "fish out of water," superhuman, or "individual versus society"? And what about *The Hunger Games*? Is it a Hero's Journey, "individual versus society," romance, or "fish out of water"?

Nevertheless, successful stories generally have a dominant type that shapes both their plot structure and choice of characters. In a "fish out of water" story, the protagonist is usually ordinary, helping the audience instantly identify with them. Take Alice from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. She's just a typical Victorian girl with a tendency to daydream. Nothing extraordinary about her—until she's thrown into a world of talking rabbits, mad hatters, and homicidal queens. Suddenly, her ordinariness becomes her superpower. Her straightforward, logical questions reveal Wonderland's absurdity, inviting us to laugh and wonder along with her.

Or imagine sending your well-meaning but clueless friend as an ambassador to an alien planet. Awkward moments are inevitable. The beauty of an ordinary protagonist is that they're our eyes and ears in this strange new world. They ask the questions we would ask, make the mistakes we would make, and react with the same bewilderment we would feel.

Consider Arthur Dent from *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. He's the epitome of an ordinary bloke, quite content with his tea and dressing gown. But when he's suddenly whisked across the galaxy, his very British ordinariness becomes both his charm and his challenge. His quest to find a decent cup of tea in bizarre alien worlds is something we can relate to.

The magic happens when these ordinary characters begin to adapt and even thrive in their new environments. If Alice can handle Wonderland, maybe we can handle that daunting job interview or nerve-wracking first date. In “fish out of water” stories, the protagonist's ordinariness becomes extraordinary when faced with the bizarre and unfamiliar.

Even in genres where you might expect larger-than-life heroes, a relatable protagonist can work wonders. Take John McClane from *Die Hard*. He's not a super-spy or an elite assassin—just a regular cop trying to reconcile with his wife. His everyman quality makes his extraordinary feats even more thrilling. We're not watching a superhero; we're watching someone like ourselves rise to the occasion.

Other story types also benefit from a relatable, likable protagonist. Tolkien's genius lay in choosing humble hobbits as the heroes of *The Lord of the Rings*. Frodo Baggins would much rather enjoy a second breakfast than save Middle-earth. Frodo represents *us*, ordinary people unexpectedly thrust into a grand adventure. His initial reluctance and ultimate courage make us root for him even more than we might for a conventional hero.

What if Aragorn had led the charge from the start instead of Frodo? Sure, the story would still be thrilling, but would we connect as strongly with a sword-wielding, destiny-bound king from the beginning? The Hero's Journey often works best when the hero starts from humble beginnings, like Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars* or Harry Potter.

“Defeating the monster,” “individual versus nature,” and “individual versus society” stories can also work well with an ordinary protagonist.



Take Stephen King's *It*, where a group of average kids (and later, average adults) confronts a terrifying, shape-shifting entity. We're not watching superheroes take on supernatural evil; we're seeing ourselves, finding courage to face our deepest fears.

In *Jaws* by Peter Benchley, Chief Brody isn't a seasoned shark hunter or marine biologist—he's just a cop trying to keep his town safe. His everyday struggles with bureaucracy and his own fears make the battle against the shark feel more intense and personal.

Survival stories often call for ordinary protagonists. Imagine being stranded in the wilderness with nothing but your wits and a Swiss Army knife. That's the appeal of an ordinary person versus nature story. In Jack London's *To Build a Fire*, the protagonist is simply "the man"; he could be any of us, struggling against the merciless Yukon winter. His ordinariness amplifies the stakes, making his fight against nature feel universal.

The most successful dystopian stories also feature ordinary protagonists. In George Orwell's *1984*, Winston Smith isn't a born revolutionary but a low-ranking party member who starts questioning the system. His ordinariness makes the totalitarian society feel more oppressive, and his small acts of rebellion more significant. In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred isn't a resistance fighter—she's just a woman trying to survive in an oppressive society while holding onto her identity. Her memories of a normal life make the dystopian world she inhabits chillingly possible.

So, does this lead us to our conclusion? Have we found our culprit—the ordinary, relatable protagonist—as the key to creating a bestseller?

Not quite. It's time to examine stories with extraordinary characters.

Sherlock Holmes is an obvious example. While brilliant, Conan Doyle's legendary detective is eccentric and often abrasive. He's not someone

you'd likely grab a pint with, but his aloofness and intellectual superiority are what make him fascinating. In a more modern example, consider Amy Dunne from Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*. Amy is calculating, vindictive, and morally ambiguous—far from a relatable everywoman. Yet her intricate schemes and psychological depth drove the novel's success.

Some protagonists became beloved despite their initial lack of likability. Take Scarlett O'Hara from *Gone with the Wind*. Scarlett is selfish, manipulative, and often cruel, yet her inner strength and determination make her unforgettable. Another example is Lisbeth Salander from Stieg Larsson's *Millennium* series. A brilliant hacker with a troubled past, she's hardly a people person. Lisbeth's unique skills and complex personality set her apart, making her journey compelling precisely because it's so far from ordinary.

These characters remind us that sometimes we read to escape the ordinary, to explore minds and lives vastly different from our own. Their extraordinary traits—intellectual prowess, moral ambiguity, or superhuman abilities—allow us to experience worlds and perspectives beyond our everyday existence. Readers are drawn to their flaws as much as their virtues.

Moreover, these complex protagonists challenge us, pushing us to question our own morals, abilities, and place in the world. They take us out of our comfort zones, inspiring us to think beyond the familiar and consider perspectives we might not encounter daily.

After all, as Dr. Seuss wisely said, "Why fit in when you were born to stand out?"

# 04

## Literary Style and Writing Finesse

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Attention, all aspiring novelists! Here it is, the secret of literary success. To dazzle those publishing gatekeepers—agents, publishers, critics—and eventually, your discerning readers, you must master the art of literary obfuscation!

Yes, my dear wordsmiths, forget clarity and simplicity. Instead, adorn your prose with the most resplendent, multisyllabic words you can unearth from the depths of your thesaurus. Why settle for mundane dialogue tags like “said” when you have “pontificated” and “soliloquized” at your disposal?

If your reader doesn’t need to consult a dictionary at least three times per page, you’re doing it wrong. If your sentences don’t twist and turn like mating snakes—so complex that the reader forgets how they started by the time they finish—can you truly say you’ve written at all?

For inspiration, consider this splendid sentence from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*:

“In my native town of Salem, at the head of what, half a century ago, in the days of old King Derby, was a bustling wharf,—but which is now burdened with decayed wooden warehouses, and exhibits few or no symptoms of commercial life; except, perhaps, a bark or brig, half-way down its melancholy length, discharging hides; or, nearer at hand, a Nova Scotia schooner, pitching out her cargo of firewood,—at the head, I say, of this dilapidated wharf, which the tide often overflows, and along which, at the base and in the rear of the row of buildings, the track of many languid years is seen in a border of unthrifty grass,—here, with a view from its front

windows adown this not very enlivening prospect, and thence across the harbor, stands a spacious edifice of brick.”

Of course, beautifully crafted sentences and vivid imagery contribute to immersion and leave a lasting impression. Books with exceptional literary style often receive critical acclaim, which can lead to long-term sales and cultural significance. *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov, for instance, is renowned for its lyrical prose and complex wordplay, contributing to its enduring status as a classic. Books with memorable phrases are more likely to be quoted and thus remembered. Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, with its wealth of witty epigrams, is a joy for essayists and bloggers alike. Stylistically rich works like F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* are also more likely to be taught in schools and universities, securing their place in literary history.

Research in experimental psychology supports the idea that vivid writing enhances narrative immersion, or what scholars call *narrative transportation*. “Storytelling” might even be a misnomer; we don’t just tell stories—we immerse our audience in a story’s world. Long before computer-generated imagery existed, our ancestors conjured dragons, sea monsters, and other mythical beings in their minds. The human brain is remarkably skilled at creating its own virtual reality, and stories tap into that innate skill.

Texts that show instead of tell draw readers into the story’s world more effectively. Compare these two sentences:

- “The lights become brighter as the sun sets, and the orchestra begins to play lively music while the voices in the room get louder.”
- “The lights grow brighter as the earth lurches away from the sun, and now the orchestra is playing yellow cocktail music, and the opera of voices pitches a key higher.”

Would you agree that the second sentence—quoted from *The Great Gatsby*—creates a more vivid and immersive experience? That’s the power of *showing* rather than *telling*. The first sentence gives us the information, while the second appeals directly to our senses, blending visuals and sounds. Phrases like “yellow cocktail music” create a synesthetic effect, combining sensory experiences to evoke a specific mood.

In literature, vividness requires precision. It’s not about using rare or literary words; it’s about choosing the right ones for the right context and timing. It’s about knowing how to combine words in striking and creative ways. In 1984, George Orwell gave a sinister twist to the expression “Big Brother,” a term typically associated with care and protection. The language of Oceania, Newspeak, redefines common English words and introduces political contractions like “Minitrue” (Ministry of Truth) and “Miniplenty” (Ministry of Plenty). Readers appreciate the irony: the Ministry of Truth spreads propaganda, and the Ministry of Plenty creates shortages.

Words aren’t just tools for novelists; they’re essential to the craft. Unlike filmmakers or video game designers, writers can’t rely on visuals or sounds to create an immersive experience. We have no choice but to leverage the power of language.

Style matters, of course. Yet many bestselling authors display writing skills that fall short of literary standards. Would you say that Dan Brown, James Patterson, Stephenie Meyer, or E.L. James demonstrate exceptional finesse with prose?

Some critics argue that bestselling books are the fast food of the publishing industry—deliberately simplistic in content and style.

Welcome to *Bestseller King*, where we promise stories cooked to perfection with just the right doses of sugar, salt, and spice to satisfy your cravings! Grab any of our no-nonsense thrillers off the shelf! With their

perfectly engineered blend of suspense, action, and twists, they'll satisfy your appetite for entertainment without the pesky need for reflection.

For those watching their “mental waistlines,” we offer the diet soda of literature: self-help books! Sip on their fizzy promises of life-changing wisdom without worrying about the efficacy of their oversimplified solutions. Disclaimer: None of them offer any real nourishment or life-changing value.

And let's not forget the kids' menu! Young adult novels—now with extra angst and a side of love triangle! Perfect for growing minds who'd rather avoid the hassle of nuanced character development or complex worldbuilding.

In the fast-food literature industry, quantity trumps quality. Why savor one meticulously made literary meal when you can binge on an entire series of cookie-cutter plots? Just don't expect any mental nutrition—we've stripped it out for maximum palatability.

Bon appétit, dear readers!

Why bother with literary subtlety when writing to market? Why invest in a unique style or voice if your only intent is to churn out formulaic stories for mass consumption?

Aspiring writers often fear that a market saturated with derivative books makes it hard for original, thought-provoking works to stand out. But history shows this concern is nothing new. In the seventeenth century, Grub Street in London gained a reputation as a hub for hack writers and printers who churned out low-quality, sensational, and often plagiarized works. *Grub Street* has since become synonymous with derivative writing.

Yet, amid this sea of mediocrity, groundbreaking and enduring works of literature have always managed to emerge. This paradox is crucial for authors to understand: while the book market has always been driven by

commercial interests and audience demand, it has never hindered innovation and originality.

While today's literary landscape may be crowded with books that chase trends, cater to fads, or attempt to replicate past successes, derivative literature is no barrier to creativity. Instead, it serves as a backdrop against which true innovation can shine. Great writing doesn't compete with Grub Street; it transcends it. The market noise can seem overwhelming, but there's always an audience eager for thought-provoking and meaningful stories.

What can we make of all this? One could draw a simplistic conclusion: there are two markets, one for commercial fiction and one for literary fiction, each requiring different types of books. Commercial fiction prioritizes plot over complex character arcs, while literary fiction focuses on the human condition, exploring deeper insights into characters, themes, and the complexities of life. Commercial fiction emphasizes storytelling, while literary fiction demands nuanced, sophisticated writing.

The problem is, this binary vision isn't just simplistic—it's misleading.

This division between commercial and literary fiction isn't supported by the facts. Exceptionally deep works can emerge from any genre. Take Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, technically a medieval whodunit, yet also a profound exploration of semiotics, religion, and medieval philosophy. Science fiction has given the world countless masterpieces, from H.G. Wells's visions of future evolution in *The Time Machine* to mind-bending tales about virtual reality and quantum paradoxes. From horror, we have writers like Stephen King and Anne Rice, who need no introduction. Fantasy, too, boasts works of remarkable cultural and philosophical depth, rivaling many literary novels.

Moreover, an elaborate literary style is not a reliable indicator of psychological complexity. Some literary books are shallow, while works

written in accessible language can hold great depth. *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, often seen as a children's book due to its simple language and illustrations, is filled with wisdom. Published in 1943, it sold an estimated 140 million copies worldwide, making it one of history's bestselling books.

Consider also Philip K. Dick, whose writing style is often described as unsophisticated and unpolished compared to his literary contemporaries. Yet, this didn't prevent his books from finding success and exerting a huge influence on science fiction and beyond. What made Dick's work resonate was the depth of his ideas, not his style. His exploration of paranoia, altered states of consciousness, and humanity's relationship with technology tapped into universal fears and concerns that remain relevant. His unrefined style suited his dystopian, unsettling themes. Dick's career shows that, in creative writing, unique ideas and an authentic voice can outweigh technical polish.

So, what can we conclude from our investigation so far? It's clear that literary style alone is no predictor of a book's success, nor is it an indicator of depth and quality. Some literary masterpieces achieve fame, while books written in a simple, accessible style also conquer hearts and minds worldwide. Simple doesn't mean shallow; some of the simplest stories hold the deepest truths.



# 05

## Critics' Darlings

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The next suspect on our list is a familiar one—favorable critical reception and literary prizes. One might assume that enthusiastic reviews from literary critics and prestigious awards propel books into the spotlight and secure their success. But does the evidence support this theory?

The role of literary critics in shaping the literary landscape has evolved over time. It began in the eighteenth century, when professional literary criticism emerged as a distinct discipline. With rising literacy rates and a flourishing publishing industry, the demand for informed literary guidance became apparent. Early critics, like Samuel Johnson in England, played a crucial role in establishing standards for evaluating literature and introducing readers to new works. Their opinions carried weight, influencing both public taste and authors' reputations.

In the next century, the influence of critics expanded further. Figures like Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve in France and Matthew Arnold in England assessed literary quality and shaped cultural conversations and national literary identities. Their reviews could make or break an author's career, and their endorsement often translated to higher book sales. With the rise of literary magazines and journals, their voices became even more powerful, creating a symbiotic relationship between criticism and the publishing industry.

The twentieth century brought diverse critical approaches and a broadening literary canon. Influential critics like T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis wielded considerable authority, both in academia and in the broader cultural arena.

The mid-20th century saw the emergence of accessible, mass-market literary criticism from figures like Edmund Wilson in the United States, who brought sophisticated analysis to a broader readership through newspapers and magazines.

As the latter half of the century approached, the landscape began to shift. The rise of bestseller lists introduced a new metric for literary success that sometimes diverged from critical opinion. Nonetheless, critics continued to play a key role in identifying and promoting talent, often championing works that went on to achieve both critical and commercial success.

Today, the role of the literary critic in the creation of bestsellers has become even more complex. Traditional print criticism, particularly for literary fiction, still holds sway, but it now coexists with a multitude of online voices. Book bloggers, social media influencers, and platforms like Goodreads have opened new avenues for book promotion and criticism, with the potential to quickly elevate a book to bestseller status.

Literary prizes, often judged by panels that include critics, remain influential in terms of sales and career trajectory. Established in 1901, the Nobel Prize in Literature was one of the earliest and continues to have a significant impact. Although the proliferation of literary awards means their individual impact on an author's career may not be as significant as it once was, prizes like the Booker Prize or National Book Award can still catapult a book to bestseller status.

But what about authors who sold millions of copies without endorsements from influential critics or prestigious prizes? In fact, some bestselling authors endured scorn and ridicule from critics and never won any awards.

Consider how critic Owen Wister referred to Harold Bell Wright's bestselling *The Eyes of the World* (1914): "stale, distorted, a sham, a puddle of words," and "a mess of mildewed pap." Critics similarly dismissed E. Phillips Oppenheim; a review of *Crooks in the Sunshine* (1933) noted, "Mr.

Oppenheim's crooks are so polished that they have no difficulty moving in the very best society... there is very little mystery in this book, but there is dress-suit crime galore." Ian Maclaren also failed to win over critics, who criticized his work for being overly sentimental.

Present-day bestselling authors don't always fare well when it comes to endorsements from influential critics. Harold Bloom commented, "The decision to give the National Book Foundation's annual award for 'distinguished contribution' to Stephen King is extraordinary, another low in the shocking process of dumbing down our cultural life. I've described King in the past as a writer of penny dreadfuls, but perhaps even that is too kind."

About *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Bloom declared, "The writing was dreadful; the book was terrible." A.S. Byatt criticized J.K. Rowling's books as "derivative of earlier children's writers" with "ersatz magic." Ursula K. Le Guin also expressed her reservations, describing the series as "stylistically ordinary, imaginatively derivative, and ethically rather mean-spirited."

Other mega-bestsellers, like *The Da Vinci Code*, *Twilight*, and *Fifty Shades of Grey*, faced similar criticism from literary circles and even some readers' communities. Critics claimed *The Da Vinci Code* was "based on a notorious hoax" and lacked artistic merit. *Twilight* topped the Goodreads "Worst Fantasy Books of ALL Time" list. And opinions on the cultural value of erotica books like *Fifty Shades* remain polarized.

Now let's consider the darlings of literary critics and see how they fared commercially.

The literary significance of authors like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner is indisputable, yet their sales figures paled in comparison to the bestselling novels of their time. Joyce's *Ulysses*, banned as obscene in the United States and United Kingdom, struggled to reach a

wider audience. Virginia Woolf and her husband set up their own press to self-publish her work, resulting in modest print runs compared with major publishers. William Faulkner faced financial insecurity for years, achieving stability only after receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1949, over two decades after publishing his first novel.

Authors who received acclaim only decades later—or even posthumously—are not uncommon. Edgar Allan Poe and Franz Kafka are classic examples, while more recent cases include John Williams and Cormac McCarthy. *Stoner* (1965), Williams's novel about the quiet life of a university professor, received critical acclaim for its prose and depth of character but sold fewer than 2,000 copies and was out of print within a year. Rediscovered in the next century, it enjoyed a surge in popularity and is now considered a classic of American literature. *Blood Meridian* (1985) by McCarthy met a similar fate: initially selling fewer than 2,000 copies, it was remaindered but eventually gained critical and popular acclaim. Today, first editions of *Blood Meridian* are collector's items, selling for thousands of dollars.

What about prestigious book awards? Surely, these awards launch novels into the literary stratosphere and ensure the author's success. Yet, facts don't always support this assumption. Some prize-winning authors still struggle to make a living from writing alone.

The evidence suggests that while critical acclaim and literary awards can elevate a book's status, they are not essential for commercial success. Many books achieve massive popularity without critical endorsement, proving that the relationship between literary quality—as defined by critics—and commercial appeal is anything but straightforward.

From a psychological perspective, this disconnect between critical acclaim and commercial success shouldn't come as a surprise. Literary critics and award committees operate within a particular intellectual framework that

often doesn't align with the tastes or experiences of the average reader. Their criteria for excellence—emphasizing literary technique, innovative storytelling, or socio-cultural significance—might not appeal to the broader audience that drives mass-market success.

The human brain is wired to seek validation from peers and like-minded individuals. This psychological phenomenon, known as *social proof*, plays a vital role in purchasing decisions. While a critic's recommendation might carry weight in certain circles, for many readers, the opinions of fellow book enthusiasts hold more sway. This is where sales figures and online reviews come into play.

When faced with numerous choices—common in the crowded book market—people often rely on heuristics, or mental shortcuts, to make decisions. The number of copies sold or the quantity of ratings on an online platform provides a quick way to assess a book's potential value, aligning with our brain's preference for efficiency in decision-making.

We should also consider *cognitive ease*. Readers tend to choose books that are more accessible and require less mental effort to engage with. While critically acclaimed works might offer profound insights or innovative styles, they can also demand more cognitive resources. In contrast, commercially successful books often provide a smoother, more effortless reading experience.

Does this mean critics don't matter? Some readers argue that sales figures are a more reliable measure of a book's value than critical acclaim or awards. But this reasoning assumes that bestselling books are inherently more deserving of attention than those that don't achieve immediate commercial success. Would we then argue that Marie Corelli, E. Phillips Oppenheim, or Harold Bell Wright were more worthy than Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain, or Franz Kafka?

The plot thickens when we consider challenging works of literature that achieved both critical acclaim and significant commercial success. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez, for instance, is a complex, multi-generational saga of the Buendía family, written in the distinctive style of magical realism. Far from a typical commercial book, it nevertheless achieved widespread popularity, has been translated into forty-six languages, and sold more than fifty million copies.

At this point in our investigation, we seem to have hit a wall. Our promising leads turned out to be red herrings. None of the factors we've explored can singlehandedly explain the emergence of bestsellers.

But what if the answer is simpler than we thought? Should we apply the principle of parsimony, or Occam's razor, and test the most straightforward hypothesis?

# 06

## **Marketing, Publicity, and Luck**

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If the key to bestseller status isn't a magical plot formula, likable characters, literary style, or critical acclaim, perhaps it has nothing to do with the book's quality at all. Is a bestseller's rise truly democratic, or is the game rigged from the start?

What if it's all about marketing and hype?

As unsettling as this idea may sound, scientific data could back it up. Big corporations have used marketing techniques that prove shockingly effective in shaping consumer behavior. Known as the "father of public relations," Edward Bernays orchestrated a campaign in 1929 to encourage women to smoke. He arranged for women to march in New York's Easter parade while smoking cigarettes, calling them "Torches of Freedom." This campaign successfully linked smoking to women's liberation, dramatically increasing the number of female smokers.

Consider another example: De Beers transformed the diamond engagement ring from a luxury item for the wealthy into a cultural must-have. Their slogan "A Diamond Is Forever," paired with a campaign targeting men, boosted diamond sales and shaped societal expectations around marriage proposals. This idea even entered popular culture, possibly inspiring the James Bond novel, film, and song "Diamonds Are Forever."

One might argue that marketing books is different from advertising cigarettes, jewelry, soda, or toilet paper. But is it? Posters for bestselling novels in subway stations or train platforms aren't much different from ads

for burgers or vodka. They rely on the same techniques to capture attention and rarely stand out for originality.

Perhaps there is no secret to launching a bestseller. Publishers invest heavily in advertising campaigns that increase visibility for a select few titles, so it's hardly surprising that these books end up on bestseller lists. Strong initial sales create social proof, setting off a self-reinforcing cycle. Popular books gain more visibility, driving even more sales and reviews, which boosts their visibility further. Bookstores are more willing to stock bestsellers and display them prominently, while online retailers feature them on their home pages.

It's also worth considering the role of algorithms in modern book discovery. Online retailers promote books based on sales and user engagement, further fueling the cycle. As a result, a few titles benefit from this powerful form of marketing, while many other books don't receive the same level of visibility.

Sales figures and abundant online reviews provide tangible proof of a book's popularity. To prospective readers, this form of social proof is compelling because it suggests that many others like them have enjoyed the book enough to rate it or leave a positive review. It taps into our instinct to be part of a shared experience.

Humans are social beings, and even the solitary pleasure of reading can't escape our social instincts. Herd mentality prevails.

A book that has sold millions creates a sense of cultural phenomenon that readers want to join. Enter the Fear of Missing Out, or FOMO. People want to know what all the fuss is about, so they buy bestselling books, motivated by curiosity or peer pressure. In this scenario, sales figures become a more powerful currency than critical acclaim, literary prizes, or any other form of endorsement.



So, mystery solved! Marketing departments at big publishing houses can take the credit for blockbuster books.

But what about self-published titles or books from small presses that unexpectedly turn into bestsellers? *The Martian* by Andy Weir began as a series of online posts. Encouraged by early readers, Weir decided to self-publish the entire novel on Amazon. *Fifty Shades of Grey* started as *Twilight* fan fiction before becoming a self-publishing phenomenon. Both books outsold works by established, traditionally published authors with extensive marketing support.

These are not isolated cases. Throughout history, some stories have reached wide audiences through word of mouth alone, without support from corporations, governments, or influential organizations. Conversely, some books have flopped despite costly, aggressive marketing campaigns.

Hmm, the mystery thickens.

But publicity doesn't always come from marketing. What if literary success is all about luck? Some books simply fall into the right hands at the right time, triggering the elusive social transmission mechanism we call word of mouth. It's mysterious, almost magical—intangible and mercurial, resistant to rigorous analysis.

Consider cases where controversy and censorship, rather than marketing, brought fame to a book. *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie didn't achieve fame for commercial reasons. Published in 1988, the novel sparked outrage in many Muslim-majority countries, leading to protests and book burnings. This global controversy attracted massive media attention, propelling the book into the spotlight.

Similarly, *The Da Vinci Code* drew criticism from the Catholic Church, other Christian denominations, and scholars for its historical and scientific inaccuracies. It also faced lawsuits and accusations of plagiarism. One

wonders whether the book would have achieved such staggering sales numbers without these controversies.

These examples illustrate how external factors like political, religious, and cultural conflict can influence a book's popularity—sometimes more than any promotional strategy.

What does this mean for authors? Should we write deliberately provocative books, hoping controversy will drive visibility? That strategy can backfire, as many controversial works are simply ignored. The web is filled with conspiracy theories and provocative material, making it difficult to break through the noise. Moreover, lawsuits are more likely to drain your savings and damage your career than boost sales. It's simply not worth the risk.

So, what's the conclusion? Should we rely on chance? Philip Pullman wrote on his website that to get published, an author needs three things: talent, hard work, and luck. But does evidence support this claim? We can't measure or quantify talent, so it's impossible to verify empirically. In my opinion, authors should forget about the elusive notion of talent; a lack of talent isn't the reason for failure. It's often an excuse that some demotivated writers use to avoid learning the right skills and doing the hard work.

Natural storytellers are rare. They seem to intuitively understand what makes stories work, while writers without that innate ability can still learn storytelling through study and practice. When you read a brilliantly crafted novel, can you distinguish between talent and skill? Based on my experience, I believe that anyone with enough determination and passion for writing can learn and master storytelling skills.

What about luck? Some empirical evidence suggests it might indeed be a factor. In 2006, sociologist Duncan Watts conducted an experiment called MusicLab to test whether the music industry is a meritocracy where the best music naturally rises to the top. The experiment took place on a

website where participants could listen to and download music from unknown artists, aiming to explore how factors like social influence, luck, and talent affect a song's popularity.

In the first part of the experiment, visitors could download songs on the condition that they provided a rating. Researchers averaged these ratings as a measure of each artist's talent. To dig deeper, they set up multiple independent websites, each displaying the same songs but with additional details, such as download counts and average ratings specific to that site. Interestingly, the rankings of the same songs differed widely across the sites. A song's success largely depended on how the first few listeners reacted. If those early listeners liked it, the *bandwagon effect* kicked in, encouraging others to download and respond positively.

The results were eye-opening: songs that gained early popularity tended to snowball into bigger hits, while those that started slow often remained obscure, suggesting that social influence was key to a song's success. The experiment also revealed a surprising twist—luck had a significant role. Even songs with low initial ratings could become hits if they were fortunate enough to get early downloads, challenging the idea that talent alone drives success. Instead, both social influence and chance were found to be crucial in shaping popularity.

Could the same effect apply in the book industry? Possibly, though the MusicLab experiment had limitations we must consider before generalizing its findings. MusicLab operated in a controlled, simplified environment where participants made quick decisions based on ratings and downloads. In real life, a range of external factors influences purchasing decisions for both music and books, including marketing, media coverage, social media trends, and reviews. The experiment doesn't account for long-term marketing efforts or the role of influencers who can shape tastes over time.

Listening to a song takes just a few minutes and requires minimal time or attention. In contrast, reading a book demands more commitment, making the social dynamics observed in MusicLab less applicable. The bandwagon effect may still occur, but the engagement level required for books is higher, making it harder for social influence alone to drive trends in the same way as in music.

However, the bandwagon effect could explain why even mediocre books enrolled in Kindle Unlimited reach bestseller lists on Amazon. Subscribers to this service can download e-books with a click, so the effort required to acquire a book is minimal. In this case, reviews by early readers could be a deciding factor for a new book by an unknown author. Even so, an author's promotional efforts can still change a book's fate and reduce the role of luck. I never considered myself lucky, yet I managed to launch my self-published books successfully, despite having no author platform or endorsements. Based on my research and experience, I don't believe that chance is the primary factor determining a book's success, whether self-published or traditionally published.

If you think literary success requires luck, consider this—what if luck is simply a construct of our minds?

Research in psychology offers fascinating insights. What we perceive as “luck” is often a combination of hidden factors that converge to create opportunities. Our minds tend to simplify complex phenomena by attributing success or failure to chance when we don't fully understand those phenomena.

Richard Wiseman, a psychologist at the University of Hertfordshire, conducted research on how people perceive luck. In his article “The Luck Factor,” he concludes that luck is not merely a matter of chance or random events—it's largely influenced by people's thoughts and behaviors. Over a ten-year study, he discovered that individuals can create their own luck

through four main principles: being open to and noticing chance opportunities, making decisions based on intuition, maintaining positive expectations, and adopting a resilient mindset. These findings challenge superstitions and magical thinking, showing that luck can be cultivated and enhanced through specific actions and attitudes.

Most unknown authors who find success do so through word of mouth and reader engagement. A book often breaks out when readers share their experiences through reviews, recommendations, and social media. Books that evoke strong emotions, spark discussions, or offer unique perspectives naturally generate organic publicity. We can't attribute this reader-driven success to luck alone but rather to the book's ability to resonate with its audience.

# 07

## Narrative Brain Hacking

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In our investigation, we've examined the most obvious suspects, yet none of them can fully explain the rise of bestsellers. To solve this mystery, we must dig deeper, using insights from cutting-edge research.

A wealth of data shows that engaging stories trigger the release of neurochemicals in our brains—what's called the Angel's Cocktail: dopamine, oxytocin, and endorphins. Mystery and suspense stimulate dopamine release, capturing our attention and creating a sense of reward and pleasure. Empathy for the characters raises oxytocin levels, while humor and wit can produce that warm feeling of well-being, thanks to endorphins.

Research suggests that engaging stories “hack” our brains, activating the same pathways we use to build connections with others. This explains why we form such strong emotional bonds with stories, turning some of them into lifetime companions.

What I call the *Golden Triangle* in storytelling is a mental space where curiosity meets empathy and imagination. Stories that engage all three of these elements fully immerse readers in a fictional world and create a lasting impact. If I had to sum up this idea in one sentence, it would go something like this:

The mystery pulls you in; the characters and the world make you never want to leave.

Many bestsellers attract readers with an intriguing premise, mystery, or conflict, then keep them engaged with deeper elements like character development and worldbuilding.

Why is mystery so effective at drawing readers in? Because it taps into our innate drive to seek information, explore, and engage with new stimuli. Curiosity is not unique to our species, but humans exhibit a higher level of cognitive curiosity. Research in psychology and neuroscience supports the idea that curiosity is a major force behind our interest in stories.

Curiosity is a desire to close information gaps and resolve uncertainty. The Information Gap Theory in psychology suggests that curiosity arises when we perceive a gap between what we know and what we want to know. Fictional mysteries are crafted to create these gaps—posing questions, introducing uncertainties, or setting up unresolved tensions. Readers feel compelled to close these gaps, driven by a desire for resolution.

From a neuroscientific perspective, curiosity is linked to the brain's reward system, specifically involving dopaminergic pathways activated when we seek and receive new information. Our brains are wired to seek out novelty and resolve ambiguity, with dopamine released when we uncover new information. Fictional mysteries offer just the right level of suspense, making the process of uncovering clues and solving puzzles neurologically satisfying.

Yet, mysteries in fiction are not just about plot events—they're also about emotional investment. We want to know how mysteries impact the characters we care about, which is where empathy comes in. Empathy is among humanity's superpowers; we take it for granted, yet it's a complex cognitive and affective ability that underpins any society.

Empathy is associated with the mirror neuron system and brain regions that process emotional and social cues. Mirror neurons, activated when we observe others' emotions or actions, allow us to experience the feelings of

characters as if they were our own. As we empathize with characters, their emotional stakes become ours. We feel their frustrations, anxieties, and hopes, enhancing our investment in their journeys. This empathetic engagement keeps us interested in how the story unfolds for the characters.

The combination of curiosity and empathy already creates a powerful pull, yet many memorable stories also trigger a third essential component—imagination.

Imagination is the ability to form mental images, concepts, or scenarios not immediately present to the senses. This ability is closely linked to the brain's Default Mode Network, involving areas activated during daydreaming, visualizing, or contemplating hypothetical scenarios.

I see imagination as the ultimate tool for mind expansion. It allows us to explore abstract concepts, simulate future events, and generate fictional worlds—it's what enables us to “escape” reality and engage with alternative possibilities. Imagination is crucial to our emotional engagement with novels, as it allows us to mentally construct and emotionally experience the narrative world.

When we read, our imagination builds vivid mental images of the settings, characters, and events described by the author. This mental simulation transports us into the story, a phenomenon known as *narrative transportation*. It puts us in the characters' shoes, leading to an empathic simulation where we don't just think about what characters are experiencing; we feel it.

Imagination is also key to predicting and anticipating what will happen next in a story. As we follow the plot, we mentally simulate possible outcomes, theorizing about the resolution of conflicts or mysteries. This imaginative process keeps us invested in the unfolding events and helps us suspend disbelief, fully entering the world of the novel even if it contains fantastical or unrealistic elements. By imagining these scenarios, we



engage emotionally with stories that would otherwise seem impossible, as in fantasy, science fiction, or magical realism. This explains why many bestsellers include extraordinary, fantastical, or surreal elements.

The power of the Golden Triangle—curiosity, empathy, and imagination—comes from the synergy between its components. Curiosity combined with empathy triggers emotional engagement. Empathy paired with imagination allows us to experience a character's emotions as if they were our own. Curiosity coupled with imagination stimulates our sense of wonder, sparking a desire to explore realities and possibilities that extend beyond our everyday world.

If this hypothesis is correct, the key to literary success lies in storytelling—specifically in a story's ability to spark curiosity, empathy, and imagination. Let's test this hypothesis, starting with *Don Quixote*.

From the beginning, *Don Quixote* captures readers' curiosity with its protagonist. Alonso Quijano, an aging man who loses his grip on reality and believes himself to be a knight-errant named Don Quixote, embarks on absurd adventures. We wonder: How far will Don Quixote go in his delusions? How will his knightly quests unfold in a world that no longer values chivalry?

Despite his delusions, we can't help but feel empathy for Don Quixote. His unwavering belief in chivalric ideals and his pursuit of justice, honor, and heroism evoke sympathy. While his actions are often misguided, his intentions are noble. We relate to his longing for a world of order, morality, and meaning and may even see reflections of our own desire for purpose in him.

*Don Quixote* thrives on the interplay between reality and imagination. The story transforms the ordinary world into a fantastical realm of knights, damsels, and giants, igniting our own imagination. Quixote's delusional

perspective turns windmills into giants and inns into castles, inviting us to reinterpret the ordinary and see it anew.

Examining *Don Quixote*, we see that its lasting literary success is deeply tied to its ability to evoke curiosity, empathy, and imagination. Now, let's consider *Robinson Crusoe*.

The novel arouses curiosity by presenting a tale of survival on a deserted island. The premise immediately raises questions: Will Crusoe survive? What dangers will he face? How will he escape and return to civilization? The story keeps readers engaged with a strong sense of anticipation about how Crusoe will adapt to his isolated environment.

*Robinson Crusoe* taps into one of the most primal human fears—complete isolation. As Crusoe faces the psychological toll of solitude, readers empathize with his loneliness, frustration, and yearning for human connection. His internal struggles to maintain hope and his resilience in the face of despair elicit a deep emotional response from readers.

Defoe's vivid, realistic descriptions of the island, Crusoe's daily routines, and his survival strategies create an immersive experience. We watch as he cultivates crops, builds shelter, and trains animals, creating a fully realized, tangible world in our minds. We explore the island alongside him, imagining the hardships and triumphs of life in the wild.

*Robinson Crusoe* supports our hypothesis by showing how curiosity, empathy, and imagination work together to make the novel more than just an adventure tale. It's an emotional and imaginative journey that continues to resonate with readers across cultures and centuries.

Now let's move on to an epic fantasy trilogy considered one of the most successful and influential works in modern literature: *The Lord of the Rings*. From the start, *The Lord of the Rings* sparks curiosity with the mystery surrounding the One Ring and the ominous rise of Sauron. What

is the true nature of the Ring? How can Sauron be defeated? How can a humble hobbit and his companions succeed in their perilous mission to destroy the Ring?

Despite being set in a fantastical world, *The Lord of the Rings* resonates with readers because of its characters' emotional depth. Frodo Baggins embodies the ordinary person thrust into extraordinary circumstances, and his burden of carrying the One Ring evokes empathy. We connect with his feelings of fear, doubt, and the crushing weight of responsibility.

One of Tolkien's greatest achievements is his creation of the vast, detailed world of Middle-earth. From the Shire's peaceful hills to the foreboding land of Mordor, every part of Middle-earth is filled with its own history, languages, and cultures. Tolkien's elaborate worldbuilding sparks our imagination, transporting us into a world that feels alive, immersive, and uncannily real.

We could continue analyzing dozens of bestselling novels, and the hypothesis above would hold true for nearly all of them. But if this theory is sound, we should also find examples of novels that didn't achieve success because they failed to trigger all three elements—curiosity, empathy, and imagination.

Such examples are plentiful in the book market. For instance, *Fates and Furies* by Lauren Groff had the makings of a literary phenomenon but faced mixed reactions. Released in 2015, it garnered significant media attention, including an endorsement from President Barack Obama, and was positively received by critics, who favorably compared it to *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn.

However, online reviews reveal that many readers didn't connect with the characters or the story. The novel is an account of a marriage from two perspectives: that of the husband, Lotto, and the wife, Mathilde. The premise wasn't particularly intriguing for many readers, and they found it

difficult to form an emotional connection with the main characters, whom they often found unlikable. The novel also didn't capture readers' imaginations, and its highly stylized, dense language didn't always facilitate immersion.

Now let's consider a book at the opposite end of the literary spectrum—a *Star Wars* novel. *Aftermath* by Chuck Wendig hit shelves at a strategic moment, riding the wave of excitement leading up to the new *Star Wars* trilogy, beginning with *The Force Awakens* in 2015. Set between the fall of the Empire in *Return of the Jedi* and the rise of the First Order, *Aftermath* promised to fill a gap many fans were eager to explore. The potential was immense: the return of beloved characters, a galaxy in turmoil, and a high-stakes adventure. The marketing was strong, and initial sales were promising, with readers eager to dive back into the galaxy far, far away.

Everything seemed aligned for success, but *Aftermath* quickly became one of the most criticized entries in the *Star Wars* literary canon. While the premise did spark curiosity, the story failed to elicit empathy. Many readers struggled to connect with the new characters, who felt underdeveloped and forgettable compared to iconic figures like Luke, Leia, and Han Solo. The characters' interactions lacked the charm and camaraderie that *Star Wars* is known for.

Also, the plot was too derivative and predictable to sustain a state of suspense. The novel included numerous interludes, cutting away from the main story to depict events across the galaxy. While these vignettes were intended to illustrate the broader state of the post-Empire galaxy, they often left readers feeling disconnected from the main storyline. Rather than adding depth, these scenes felt distracting, as the book seemed more focused on worldbuilding snapshots than on developing a compelling, character-driven narrative.

As these examples show, evidence supports our theory. A book's success doesn't hinge solely on publicity but on its ability to elicit curiosity, empathy, and imagination in readers.

Until now, we have focused on fiction, yet many of these observations apply to creative nonfiction as well. Both genres must affect readers emotionally to have a lasting impact, employing storytelling strategies that place the narrative within the Golden Triangle.

Stories that effectively challenge myths or reframe familiar ideas often find success. Take finance books, which are typically dry and technical, yet *Rich Dad, Poor Dad* by Robert T. Kiyosaki turns its subject into an engaging, eye-opening story.

The book presents a compelling contrast between Kiyosaki's two father figures: his biological father, "Poor Dad," and his best friend's father, "Rich Dad." Poor Dad, who follows the conventional path of education and stable employment, struggles financially. Rich Dad, who lacks formal education, embodies an entrepreneurial mindset, emphasizing financial independence through investing, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy.

By contrasting these two archetypes, Kiyosaki simplifies complex financial ideas. He personalizes financial advice, presenting it through relatable characters, which makes abstract concepts concrete. Readers don't just hear about financial theories—they see them in action through the choices and consequences faced by the two dads.

The book's central message—that anyone can become financially independent through smart investing and financial education—resonates with a wide audience, particularly those who feel trapped in the rat race or were taught to follow a traditional path to success. It provides actionable advice and, perhaps even more importantly, helps readers cultivate a positive, proactive mindset.

In conclusion, a book's success lies at the intersection of two factors: the strength of its storytelling and its psychological reception by readers. A book with a well-structured story may still fall flat if it doesn't resonate emotionally or cognitively with its audience. Conversely, a book with an engaging premise may struggle due to ineffective storytelling choices. In a truly successful work, nothing is random; every element contributes to an immersive and impactful reading experience.

# 08

## **What Does It Take to Write a Bestseller?**

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The last question this book will address is perhaps the most provocative for an author: should you try to write a bestseller?

Aiming to write a bestseller can be both motivating and intimidating. On one hand, such an ambitious goal can inspire an author to refine their storytelling and writing skills. It's also an incentive to develop a deep understanding of the business side of publishing. And, of course, sales figures do matter to some extent—higher sales can lead to better publishing deals, more marketing support, and a chance to reach a larger audience. However, focusing solely on creating an instant bestseller can be counterproductive.

While certain elements can increase a book's chances of broad appeal, predicting massive sales is difficult, if not impossible. Authors who study market trends, popular genres, and successful storytelling techniques may improve their chances. But chasing popularity may compromise their own creative vision. Trying to please everyone is often the surest way to please no one, and it's usually the bold, artistic risks that help a work stand out.

Predicting the success of a new book with certainty is impossible—unless the name on the cover belongs to a celebrity with a large and dedicated following. Many industry professionals believe that an author's track record in a genre is one of the best predictors of sales. If previous titles reached bestseller lists, the next one is likely to do well. But if earlier books generated only modest profits, the assumption is that the next may also perform modestly. Yet this is by no means an absolute rule.

Some now-famous authors spent years—even decades—building their fan base before their sales surged. Conversely, some authors who were once popular now see their sales decline with each release. Like any business, publishers prioritize profits, so their loyalty wanes quickly when sales disappoint.

I don't believe authors should obsess over book sales. Focusing only on sales can overshadow more meaningful metrics of success. Early in your career, your goal should be to establish a core fan base, or at least a following. Few readers will become lifelong fans after reading just one book. Repeated exposure to your work over several years builds trust and familiarity between you and your readers. Some experts advise authors to publish at least four books in the same genre before considering strategic changes. Perseverance and consistency are key; many authors see significant increases in sales only after publishing a dozen or more novels.

Evidence suggests that a loyal following provides the best foundation for a lasting career in creative fields. A steady fan base supports you financially and psychologically better than occasional sales spikes. Readers who feel a personal connection to an author are more likely to buy future books, recommend them to others, and actively participate in the author's community. Cultivating this loyal following allows authors to grow at a sustainable pace, building a career that doesn't depend on a single bestseller but on a body of work that resonates with a specific audience.

Turning readers into fans is a major challenge, not only because of market saturation. Earning admiration is difficult; earning the admiration of thousands—or millions—is, of course, even harder.

Writing commercially viable books isn't enough to achieve the ambitious goal of going viral. To trigger social transmission, a book must be exciting enough to spark conversations and debates. It's not just about an intriguing premise; it's about setting and meeting expectations. The story must create



a flow—a state of optimal reading experience—by being not too difficult to follow, but not too easy either. It must navigate the Goldilocks zone between the new and the familiar, between tradition and innovation. Finding this balance is crucial for success. Stories that stick too closely to established formulas can feel derivative, while those that are wildly original may confuse or frustrate readers.

Another essential element for virality is a theme that resonates with the target audience. A story that taps into the zeitgeist, like *The Handmaid's Tale* in the context of gender politics, is more likely to succeed because it connects with readers on a psychological level.

Some books have become bestsellers by promoting a philosophy that strikes a chord with a core audience, leading to a passionate fan base that spreads the message. A good example is *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson. Published in 1962, the book examined the detrimental effects of pesticides on the environment and human health. Although the topic was scientific and technical, Carson wrote in an accessible, compelling style. She opened with a fictionalized account of a town silenced by pesticide use—a powerful metaphor that engaged readers emotionally and imaginatively. The book challenged the unchecked use of pesticides, advocating for responsible stewardship of Earth's ecosystems. Carson's message had a massive global impact, inspiring an environmental consciousness that transformed public policy and culture.

In both fiction and nonfiction, books that appeal to readers' deepest longings and fears while addressing contemporary societal issues have a higher chance of becoming influential. Books gain traction and fame based on the emotional responses they evoke and their ability to trigger social transmission mechanisms—that's how they go viral.

Books always exist within a specific socio-cultural context, and understanding this context is essential for any author. If the context isn't

favorable, a book might not reach a wide audience initially, but it can be rediscovered and gain traction decades later in a more receptive time.

Becoming a full-time writer requires knowledge, skill, and perseverance. Yet, the result is worth the effort. Writing provides a sense of creative freedom that few other activities can match.

Creative writing goes beyond filling pages; it fills something within you. As you shape a world or wrestle with a character's choices, you uncover layers of your own thoughts, fears, and dreams. The act itself brings a sense of purpose—there's a thrill in the struggle, a joy in discovering where the story wants to go, and a deep satisfaction in seeing it come to life. It's hard work, yes, but that's what makes it rewarding. When you finish a piece, you hold more than words; you hold a part of yourself, transformed and shared.

I hope I've convinced you that storytellers are more than mere entertainers. Storytelling is a fundamental aspect of the human condition, yet it's often misunderstood in our society. Viewed as an innate talent, it doesn't receive enough attention in our education systems, which is unfortunate.

Of course, what we've covered in this book is only a brief introduction to the science of stories. We haven't even touched on some of the narratological concepts any author should know and master. Turning creative writing into a viable career requires an extensive skill set. To succeed, an author must master the principles of storytelling, understand human psychology, and be prepared to navigate the business side of writing.

I wish someone had explained all this to me when I first started out. Instead, I had to learn the hard way, through study, trial, and error. Drawing on more than two decades of experience, I've written a series of guides for creative writers and storytellers to share what I've learned along the way.

I invite you to explore my work, and I hope these guides will be a valuable resource on your journey.

Best of luck in your writing endeavors, and remember to keep an open and positive attitude. Knowledge, skill, and grit are your best tools; wield them with confidence, and you will prevail.

***Thank You for Reading***

Thank you for reading this book, and I sincerely hope you found it valuable in your journey. I'd be very grateful if you could take a moment to leave a review. Your feedback not only helps me, but it also helps other readers discover this resource.

Thank you for your support!

For more on my research, other works, and ongoing projects, visit my website <https://willraywood.com>.

## **My Writing Journey: Excerpt from *Trust Your Story* by Will Raywood**

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My venture into writing began at a very young age. I composed my first story, scrawled on a piece of paper, before I even learned to read. Becoming an author was my greatest passion and my *raison d'être*. Yet, that nagging inner voice of self-doubt never let up. “You can’t make a living as a writer,” people would say. “Look at how many books are being published. Do you really think you have what it takes to succeed where so many have failed? Do you honestly believe your ideas are unique enough to get any attention?”

Such questions fueled my self-doubt. What if I lacked the necessary talent? What if I never produced truly groundbreaking ideas that would captivate readers? What if inspiration failed me? What if I lacked the self-awareness to realize my work was subpar?

The “what ifs” were endless, yet I persevered—writing, learning, and refining my craft. My first taste of success came at the age of twenty when a journal published one of my short stories. That initial accomplishment prompted me to pursue a degree in literature, although it didn’t silence my self-doubt. Opting for a more “practical” path, I pursued my other passion, eventually earning a PhD in neuroscience.

I found joy in scientific research, despite the financial challenges that many young scientists face. My first rented studio barely had room for a bed and a sink, lacking even basic amenities like a bathroom or a shower.

Despite my enthusiasm for scientific inquiry, something was missing. Each time I entered a bookstore, I had a bittersweet blend of emotions. As I browsed the shelves, I couldn’t help but wonder if my own “paper children” would ever find a place there. The idea seemed like a distant

fantasy. And yet, why shouldn't it be possible? I believed I had stories worth sharing, narratives that could resonate with others. Those stories deserved to see the light of day.

For years, I grappled with this conflict between my creative aspirations and my fear of failure. But I never stopped writing. Whether for family and friends, or just for myself when no audience was available, I wrote to make sense of the world, to connect with my deepest emotions, and to boldly explore uncharted landscapes of artistic creation. Even when it was a lonely journey.

My breakthrough came when I recognized that my background in science provided me with valuable insights into the human mind, thereby enhancing my storytelling skills. This realization instilled the confidence I needed to finish my first novel and submit it to dozens of publishers. At the time, I had no industry connections, author platform, or social media following. While awaiting responses, I finished my second novel and submitted that as well.

What happened next astonished me.

After several rejections, I received an offer from a publisher interested in my second novel. Shortly thereafter, another offer came in. Ultimately, four publishers expressed interest in my work. Several months later, I held my first "paper and ink baby" in my hands. It wasn't perfect, but it was the embodiment of my dream. And it was beautiful.

Since that time, I've authored numerous books under various pen names, spanning both fiction and nonfiction. I've had the honor of joining the Society of Authors and have published books both traditionally and independently. I've successfully marketed novels without initial reviews or endorsements, only to earn heartfelt five-star reviews from my readers. Those are the only endorsements any writer truly needs.

Here are the lessons I've gleaned from my journey: You don't need to be a literary genius or devise a groundbreaking concept to succeed as a writer. Your books don't have to top bestseller lists or win prestigious awards. You don't need to be a celebrity, a social media influencer, or a marketing expert. Over the past fifteen years, I've mentored writers who now enjoy fruitful—and even lucrative—careers. Ignore anyone who questions your ability to succeed; no one starts off as a master. Writing and storytelling, like any other skills, are developed and honed.

Storytelling is both an art and a science of sharing. Every gripping story, regardless of genre—whether romance, family saga, mystery, fantasy, or science fiction—is fundamentally about human connection or the absence thereof. Romance fosters human connections, while mysteries often reveal how these connections break down, resulting in crime. Fantasy and science fiction might transport readers to otherworldly realms or distant futures, but at their core, they address timeless themes like friendship, ambition, freedom, love, and loss.

Don't fixate on sales, reviews, or literary awards. The heart of your endeavor is storytelling, a language all its own. Learn it, master it, speak it fluently. What truly matters isn't your feelings or even those of your characters—it's the emotional experience of your audience.

If there's a secret to success, it's this: Don't aim to impress; aim to engage. Storytelling is the art of emotional exchange. To truly connect, you must be willing to share.

Think of all creators as travelers on a journey through unfamiliar and often surreal landscapes—places of joy, awe, and unbridled creativity. This journey will introduce you to truths that challenge your preconceptions and force you to reevaluate your beliefs. Along the way, you will probably cross the dreaded Valley of Despair. This is not your destination but a

crucial stage in your journey—a test of your resolve and an opportunity for reflection.

Trust your story. Never give up hope, and let your creative flame burn bright. Don't let anything discourage or demotivate you. Your spark of creativity is precious, and no one can extinguish it. Own it, cherish it, and never let it go.

# **Trust Your Story: Master Storytelling and Build a Successful Creative Writing Career**

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## **Where Art Meets Strategy: Your All-in-One Guide to Writing Success and Financial Freedom**

What separates bestselling authors from the rest? It's not just talent, it's strategy. *Trust Your Story* reveals the insider secrets to building a thriving writing career in today's evolving publishing landscape.

Written by a professional writer, scientist, and mentor with over two decades of experience, this guide blends cutting-edge research with practical advice, empowering you to:

- Develop confidence in your writing by understanding the science behind great storytelling
- Master the art of plotting, with vivid examples from bestselling books, films, and hit TV shows
- Create unforgettable characters and immersive worlds that keep readers hooked
- Build your unique author brand while maintaining artistic integrity
- Master book marketing with compelling titles, attention-grabbing taglines, and cost-effective launch strategies
- Navigate both traditional and self-publishing, understand market trends, and build multiple income streams
- Cultivate lasting reader connections through newsletters and social media
- Leverage emerging technologies, including AI, to stay competitive



- Protect your intellectual property, understand your legal responsibilities, and manage your author business like a pro
- Develop resilience and a winning mindset with proven psychological techniques to overcome writer's block and burnout

Packed with expert insights, hands-on exercises, and actionable strategies, *Trust Your Story* will help you take control of your writing career and create with confidence.

**It's time to trust your story and turn your passion into lasting success.**

Get your copy of *Trust Your Story* now! Available in paperback and e-book.

<https://willraywood.com/index.php/books/>

# **The Natural Laws of Story: Master the Art and Science of Engaging Narratives**

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## **Write Stories They'll Never Forget.**

Why do some stories captivate millions while others—even beautifully written ones—fade into obscurity?

In *The Natural Laws of Story*, writer and scientist Will Raywood takes you on a fascinating journey into the neurological and psychological forces that make stories resonate. Drawing on two decades of expertise and groundbreaking research, he unveils three natural laws of storytelling that transform good writing into powerful, memorable narratives. He introduces the transformative 4Ps framework—Place, Purpose, Protagonist, and Plot—a practical method for creating emotionally resonant and structurally sound stories.

In this guide, you'll discover:

- How to harness the power of human psychology—curiosity, imagination, and empathy—to create stories that forge lasting emotional connections
- How to enhance the synergy between character, theme, plot, and worldbuilding to maximize emotional impact
- How to hook readers with powerful openings and deliver satisfying endings
- Step-by-step techniques to outline your novels and build plots that keep readers engaged
- How to balance originality with tradition, crafting stories that feel fresh yet timeless

- How to build dramatic momentum, maintain internal consistency, and effectively leverage the power of symbols

With vivid examples from bestselling novels, blockbuster films, and hit TV shows, plus hands-on exercises and checklists, *The Natural Laws of Story* empowers writers of all levels to move beyond plot mechanics and tap into the primal power of emotional connection.

**By the final chapter, you'll not only understand great storytelling—you'll have the tools to master it.**

Get your copy of *The Natural Laws of Story* now! Available in paperback and e-book.

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