

الأكثر مبيعاً وصيغة النجاح : هاري بوتر وشفرة دافنشي

**المدرس الدكتور زينب عبد الكاظم سلمان الشمري
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The Bestseller and the Formula of Success: Harry Potter and The Da Vinci Code

**Dr. Zainab Abdulkadhim Salman Al-Shammari
Mustansiriyah University , College of Arts , Department of English
Language and Literature
zainabalshammari33681@yahoo.com**

Abstract

What's so common about J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter and Dan Brown's Da Vinci Code? They have been at the head of the sales lists, and a text that is at the head of sales is often criticized. It is taxed for its artificiality and superficiality as it applies recipes with the aim of appealing to as wide a public as possible. These recipes are quite simple: a hero with whom the public can identify, a hero who evolves in a Manichean world. Our research tackles the relationship between bestsellers and mass literature, and the formula that ensures the market success of these books, choosing as examples the Harry Potter series and Dan Brown's The Da Vinci Code.

Key words : bestseller , Dan Brown , Da Vinci Code , Harry Potter , J. K . Rowling , marketing , mass literature , popular fiction , the success formula.

المستخلص

ما هو الشيء الشائع عن جي كي رولينج ، هاري بوتر و دان براون في رواية شيفرة دافنشي ؟ لقد كانوا على رأس قوائم المبيعات ، وغالباً ما يتم انتقاد متن الكتاب والموجود على رأس المبيعات.

وكان يخضع للضريبة بسبب اصطناعيته وسطحيته لأنه ينطبق عليه بأنه يهدف الى جذب أكبر عدد ممكن من الجمهور.

هذه الصيغة (الطريقة) بسيطة للغاية : بطل يمكن للجمهور التعرف عليه ، بطل يتطور في عالم مانوي

يتناول بحثنا العلاقة بين أكثر الكتب مبيعاً والأدب الشامل ، والصيغة التي تضمن نجاح هذه الكتب في السوق ، باختيار سلسلة هاري بوتر وشيفرة دافنشي لدان براون كأمثلة على ذلك.

الكلمات المفتاحية : الأكثر مبيعاً ، دان براون

، شيفرة دافنشي ، هاري بوتر ، جي كي رولينج ، التسويق ، الأدب الجماهيري ، الخيال الشعبي ، صيغة النجاح .

1. Introduction: Bestsellers and Mass Literature

The denomination “mass literature” is for some a combination of impossible concepts that literature is considered to be art, and as such is to be an elitist and high practice, but only for the general public to access and enjoy the by-products of artistic quality. Of course the designation of an object as “elitist” or “popular” is not absolute and depends on interrelated variables. Lee C. Harrington and Denise D. Bielby (2001: 6-7) show three such variables: accessibility, emotion and authorship. Primarily, as long as the degree of accessibility, the more accessible objects and the practical object, the more likely it is considered popular. Second is the degree of emotional compromise between audience and text: distanced experience indicates elitist cultural consumption in the minds that emotional reaction is characteristic of the popular. The third variable is the author’s degree: when a work unambiguously subscribes to an individual creative genius, it indicates its high character. It is evident that novels such as Ken Follett’s *Whiteout* (2004) or John Grisham’s *The Broker* (2005) are much more accessible, and raise more emotion and have lower sales than the kind of radiography of the North American abstract expression that John Updike performs in *Seek My Face* (2002).

2. Is there a formula of mass literature?

First of all, however, it is convenient to make a brief clarification about the concept of art. Many discard at the outset art as a technique or as a representation in full that only pseudo-art production. However, the theory of art as skill goes back to Ancient Greece and fundamentally maintains that art is “technical”. More concretely, the representative theory of art stipulates that art is the technique of eliciting emotions. It is typical of the technique to distinguish between mediums and fines, between plan and subjection. On the contrary, art itself is valuable by itself and there is a specific purpose, the bone, which is not a measure for a purpose. We do not mean that some examples of art have no purpose but simply that they are not a necessary condition for art. The modern art of masses, especially related to entertainment, has a markedly representative character that arouses emotions for enjoyment.

To the typically modern urge to label and order, there is questioning and disruption. In this sense, the sacred and unchanging aspect of the museum must be thought of in its broader context, of the city whose dynamics are altered and intensified every day. When we think about this

movement of order and disorder in relation to literature, we approach our object of investigation in this article. Similar to the museum, Literature (the one commonly spelt with a capital “L”) suffers from the dynamics surrounding it, the changing aesthetic patterns, and the varying demands of new readers. But does literature really suffer? Or do we, in fact, suffer critics who are unaware of producing new labels or are they bothered when readers are not paying attention to them?

Such questions guide our discussion about the delimitation of literature and its reading public in contemporary times. For this, we deal with the common division between high and low literature, labels that can be considered “noisy”. Because they spread so strongly, they can limit readers in their individual coping with the fictional text and in establishing their own valuation of the text.

The obvious differences in cultural production and consumption do not identify themselves with those as in the arts, and we can always set grads. *Foucault’s Pendulum* (1989) by Umberto Eco is less popular nowadays than Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*. It could be said that in the history of literature this work of Eco fell far behind other editorial successes, such as Albert Camus’s *The Stranger* and Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*. Here we will deal with notable examples of popular literature that have been converted into great sales successes, and we will both apply terms equally if it is obvious that in all popular literature they are “bestsellers” in all sales successes of literature popular with the masses.

The extended equalization between “art” and “elite” seems to eliminate the possibility of a mass literature campaign of “mass art.” This position has found considerable philosophical support in what Noël Carroll, in her volume *A Philosophy of Mass Art* (1998), calls “the philosophical resistance to mass art”. She examines six arguments against mass art: the “massification argument”, the “passivity argument”, the “formula argument”, the “freedom argument”, the susceptibility argument, and the “conditioning argument”. In view of the philosophical attack, one can take the side of caution, as defended by much of the cultural studies (Browne, 1996) and focus on popular practices without entering into aesthetic considerations, challenging the elitist point of view and claiming the existence of mass art. We will attempt to focus the latter on an aspect of the debate of particular relevance to popular literature: the argument of the formulas, and the formula as a paradigm of the predictable, superficial and artisanal character of popular literature.

This is immediate to be defined by a definition of “formula” so that we could easily come to conclusions as to how sonnets and impressionist painting are formulas and, therefore, must be excluded from the domain of art. Unless one is in favor of such radical revisionism, the criterion of the first premise will give rise to classification errors resulting from its idealism. All art derives in some form from some formula, and the romantic myth of the artistic genius created from nothing is utopian. If the unique form is really impossible (even Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* would be close to the ideal), it is no less the only emotion. We can then ask how long it differs between individual and generic emotions. In both respects, this theory of art seems specifically designed for Modernism. Following the modernist principle, art is a process of self-discovery that the artist carries out by means of a new form.

The suspense of the dramas is characteristic precisely because it produces such tension or sadness. From this perspective, the artists develop the ability to provoke preconceived reactions of the public by means of formulas. Carroll (1998: 62) summarizes the argument of the following formula mode: If the work X is an example of art in the strict sense, then X does not essentially obey the formula neither in its mediums nor in its fines. The objects of mass art obey formulas both in their finances, the emotions they try to provoke (for example, the suspense), and in their mediums, these are the formulas that elicit such emotions. Therefore, the objects of the art of the masses are not the art examples themselves.

If we interpret the second premise literally, it is trivial to say that all art obeys a certain formula. If, on the contrary, it is interpreted in an evaluative way – that the formula impairs the originality – then it is false that the art of masses can be applied to the imaginative formulas. By supposing that there is a lot of art but many imagination but they are not discarded as art, in the same way, that we do not exclude elitist art based on formulas of artistic mastery. We can therefore conclude that the argument of the formula is based on an evaluative criterion to bring a classifying concept to art. The problem, then, is that art obeys not formulas, but the formulas are abused and lacking in imagination.

According to John G. Cawelti (1969), formulas differ from myths (for example: the myth of the hero's novel in the novel) in which myths are of a universal nature that formulas maintain a relation to a culture at a given time. It also reduces the range of arguments, characters, and situations. A

typical example of the formula is constituted by novels of intrigue. Lectors and spectators immediately recognize the conventions and do not hope that a mystery will be reflected in the first pages of a novel and that the culprit of a crime will not be discovered until the end.

Recently the examples of popular literature, *The Da Vinci Code* and *Harry Potter*, have been converted into true worldwide cultural phenomena, contradicting the hypotheses of Cawelti, that such oriented products could hardly achieve a worldwide acceptance. Its impact on the soil alone has produced a change in the publishing market, in popular literature, and among its own vectors. In both cases the critique has tended to dismiss any merit derived from their narrative dimension but to find that it obeys conjectured formulas, and has focused on external and circumstantial factors to explain the phenomenon, remaining as much of its merit. Here we cannot give the magic formula of the success of sales, but to analyze the cultural function of the cases in which for the first time millions of vectors from all over the world have coincided in reading and enjoying a history of the same time.

3. Harry Potter: from the magic of reading to the magic marketing

How is it possible that the story of a young wizard had been converted to the book but sold all over the world in the shortest time? At more than 500 million copies that have been sold from the first five deliveries will be added to four million copies of the sixth solo in the first 48 hours of their release.

Published in 1997, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* is the first volume of a sequel that will include seven volumes and will be available in movies, video games and other types of derivatives. The success of the series made its author, J. K. Rowling, the richest woman in England. The novels tell of the life and misadventures of the young wizard and his group of friends, including Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley. Like the mythological heroes, Harry Potter is an elected figure and will raise many challenges throughout the series. It is obvious that Rowling's literary production has a mythological substratum; it suffices to linger over his fantastic creatures – Cerberus, giants, centaurs – to be convinced of it.

The question is more difficult to dispute if it is considered that it is the story of an English orphan who lives in Privet Drive, typical English middle class neighbourhood, in the house of his ultra-conventional uncle and attends the Hogwarts magic school of Hogwarts, in the pure style of

a British private boarding school. And to further complicate the matter, the enormous success of the seven-volume cycle comes precisely at a moment when audiovisual culture dominates among the youngest people, nullifying the imagination – according to the bad alarmists who think that the people’s reading habits have been lost. The current predominance of television, films, video games, and especially the use of the Internet in daily life has led some to suggest that the influence of audiovisual culture is marginalizing all that is written on paper. In this cultural context, the localism of *Harry Potter*, coupled with a lack of interest in reading among pre-teens, had presaged the failure of the history of the wizard.

Andrew Blake (2002) has sought the keys because, against all odds, not only the young but also many adults have been wary since the beginning of stories that magic has taken place in a universe parallel to the daily reality of everyday life of their “England of prosperity”. Blake’s analysis situates *Harry Potter* within a cultural movement that has “reinvented” English in a moment of identity loss contributing to the “recanalization” of Great Britain, with a commercial collection drawn from a Victorian London and a boarding school in the highlands of Scotland:

“Coca-Cola... sponsored a reading scheme called ‘valued youth’. Under the caption ‘Be Part of the Magic’, a web page featuring flash-animated wands exhorted young people to help other young people to read – in return for which Coke promised to donate ‘thousands’ of books to schools and public libraries in the UK, and ‘millions’ more to schools and libraries all over the world. Meanwhile Scholastic, the American publishers of the Harry Potter books and leading pioneers in the gradual privatization of education, used Daniel Radcliffe – who plays Harry Potter in at least the first two movies – in the front line of their own literacy campaign. Scholastic distributed posters on which Radcliffe is quoted as advising: ‘You don’t need a messenger owl like Hedwig to get the message: Read! Because reading is pure magic! Join me and kids all over the world on December 14th at 12 noon and Read for 2002’” (Blake 2002: 30-31).

Critics and reviewers have not been late to comment on the tremendous worldwide appeal of the cycle, some of them accepting the limitations of style, its clichés, and its lack of subtlety, its inability to visualize the scenes in a book that is not precisely a model of an infantile classic (Henscher, 2003), but it is also convincing to apologize for Philip

Nel (2005), according to which JK Rowling receives the collateral damage of the capitalist system and intends to compensate them with works of charity. The author presents herself as the inheritor of Jane Austen in her capacity for satire and narrative ambiguity (Nel 2005: 245-6). After reading *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Harold Bloom was not over-enthusiastic. In his review titled "Can 35 million buyers be wrong? Yes", we read:

"I read new children's literature, when I can find some of any value, but had not tried Rowling until now. I have just concluded the 300 pages of the first book in the series, 'Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone,' purportedly the best of the lot. Though the book is not well written, that is not in itself a crucial liability. It is much better to see the movie, 'The Wizard of Oz,' than to read the book upon which it was based, but even the book possessed an authentic imaginative vision. 'Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone' does not, so that one needs to look elsewhere for the book's (and its sequels') remarkable success". (Bloom 2000)

In general, it is clear that the critical position is limited to showing the shadow before the success of one book with literary quality. As a notable example, the writer AS Byatt appealed to psychology to unravel the success of *Harry Potter* and argued that the books' appeal to children lies in the childish perspective from the time the books are written. Of course for adults, the explanation has to be an unrenunciably infantilism. From the past, the author signals a danger that we must observe, and is the "equal" effect of the cultural studies, which equate popularity with literary merit and, therefore, denying the latter (Byatt 2003). This valuation is one of the elitist argument to which we alluded to the commencement by which only literary merit is appreciated by a minority, and that much remains to be left to a work by the mere time to achieve a great diffusion in a very short time.

Thus, the Harry Potter formula for success follows a puzzle. Looking for a moment at the worldwide launch campaigns, which flood with every single title from various advertising spots on the media, is astonishing as it extends from the very beginning. Evidently, there is something more global than the story of the English magical inmate: Harry is the scene in the house of his tutors and tutors, the Dursleys, to be rescinded by the giant Hagrid. It is also an orphan misunderstood by many adults and despised by some of its companions. For the rest, he receives the support and understanding of other adults that allow their

independence and is revered by their unconditionally. It is then about other stories of childhood, adolescence and maturity that are universal. To these themes, we can sum up the ambiguity of a character that attracts children and adults, the mix of genres, the modernity of the inmate, the combination of heroism and celebrity, the enthusiasm of the public and the despair of criticism, the mystery and their solutions, and the entertainment machinery at full yield. The ingredients in the sound of the whole new, but the measure of each one that makes it unique.

4. *The Da Vinci Code* – Is conspiracy theory the bestseller paradigm

Recovered by medieval Neo-Platonism and the Kabbalah, hermetic knowledge proves to be inseparable from scientific knowledge since it will influence Copernicus, Kepler and Newton. However, the “degenerations of the Hermetic model have to lead to the conviction that power consists in making others believe that one has a political secret” (Eco 1992: 38). Actually, the conspiracy theory is much older than we think. According to Popper, “Homer conceived the power of the Gods in such a way that whatever happened on the plain before Troy was only a reflection of the various conspiracies on Olympus” (Popper 2002: 165). For Popper, the conspiracy theory would be only a version of this theism, which “comes from abandoning God and then asking: ‘Who is in his place?’ His place is then filled by various powerful men and groups – sinister pressure groups, who are to be blamed for having planned the great depression and all the evils from which we suffer” (*idem* 166).

In the same way that the Knights Templar spend their lives in the search for the Holy Grail convinced that this is the way to eternal life, the writers of popular literature are striving to find the formula of the sales to achieve the status of a national bestseller, or much better, international, as becoming rich and famous will allow them to have an unmistakable popularity derived from continued success. Precisely the Knights Templar and the Holy Grail are the ingredients of Dan Brown’s novel for adults with the greatest impact around the world, *The Da Vinci Code* (2003). No doubt, this book represents the international bestseller paradigm. In one of the many volumes published in response to this controversial novel, D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe’s *The Da Vinci Myth vs. the Gospel Truth* (2006), we read:

“Unless you have been living on Mars, you certainly have heard of the runaway best-seller, *The Da Vinci Code*. It has dominated the *New York Times* best-seller list for more than 150 weeks—often in first place.

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This book has sold more than 40 million copies. Now comes a movie based on the book, almost guaranteed to be a blockbuster hit. This major motion picture, directed by Ron Howard and starring Tom Hanks (the Jimmy Stewart of our day) will no doubt get its message across to millions and millions of people who never read the book. This is a significant piece of work in our country. That is why it is important to address it.” (Kennedy and Newcombe 2006: 9)

The cultural value of the narrative is always used to support its literary merit, but it appears as a materialization of the feeling of a society. If popular fiction is an instrument for consolidating a dominant ideology, it is merely its reflection, following the subject of debate, but what does not offer is that *The Da Vinci Code* has changed something in the way of considering the success of sales, the publishing market, and there are the relationships between fiction and reality. *The Da Vinci Code* has had an unusual impact despite the avalanche of criticism against its personages, its argument, its plot, and its historical content. To be sure, it was not written to win the Pulitzer Prize, but otherwise, it was written to reach the general public. In the case of such a book, its interest will not be literary, but sometimes a book has generated more variations on the theme, in historical, religious, scientific, literary, esoteric, parodic, periodical, television, and not to say the space it occupies in the Internet. The reason is probably that there is no other novel today that reflects to a greater number of people their anxieties regarding such important questions as religion or history.

The most serious accusations are precisely the lack of historical rigor, their uninformative and mythical effect. Of course, we are not comparing, speaking of reality and fiction. What is fiction? Fiction is not in the creation of an alternative world, it is a mechanism activated by the author which – when it is successful – leads to acceptance by the reader of the recreated worlds. There are no limits to these possible worlds and to those in science fiction. A novel such as *The Da Vinci Code* confuses the writers and why it achieves such a recreation of the world of fiction that replaces the reality during the reading. But there is no success, but if someone continues to believe that these things are closing the book, you have serious problems. On the positive side, books like *The Da Vinci Code* are having a unique value so that the ingenious generations discover the rediscovery of the lecture poster, and of the past, they are creating an appetite for history, art, and literature. This appetite is

quenching some writers but may also contribute to others. Who has resisted the urge to seek a book of art and see Leonardo Da Vinci's "The Last Supper"? However, even for critics, *The Da Vinci Code* reflects feelings and widely extended attitudes, along with all the negative ones: human credulity and disengagement.

Dan Brown manipulates the story is a key to fiction and mixes the Knights Templar with the Priory of Sion, and the Opus Dei, which is often interlaced with the masonry and a large moving group that ends in the violent signing of Jacques Saunière, curator of the Louvre. The impact of this windshield is its appeal to contemporary vectors at various levels and this appeal includes a response to the times in which we live. No one has determined the level of "reality" that the speakers from all over the world bestow upon this fiction, in our intuition we have a little bit. But the tone of the responses reveals that they are the ones who discover in the misunderstandings that they make the fiction as if it were a history manual.

5. Fiction, reality and ideology

All of the above will have us replanting the caution about the formulas in popular literature. Rather than reiterating that, by the way, the formula states that popular literature is of interest to critical scholars, the key question that must be planted and answered is why it arises and extends so far. Cawelti (1969) suggests that formulas represent cultural functions that in modern cultures have been adopted by the art of masses. Faced with the religious ritual that articulated the most basic cultural values in more homogeneous cultures, multicultural reality has derived from the articulation of two values to the average mass. Uniquely and not exclusively, the formulas of popular literature articulate entertainment media known to all. Understood in the most superficial way, the formulas provide vehicles of escape from the reality by providing alternative realities in which they have well triumphed, the enemy defeated, the mysteries resurrected, and the love matched. Much more difficult is to explain in a reliable way how formulas articulate desires and unconscious needs.

The escapist interpretation is not the only one that simplifies and from totally oppressive perspectives. Celia Brayfield notes that the "escapism" of her accusations does not refer to the life of the bell to the comprehension of the same. The authors do not apply popular literature to escape the reality of the bell that causes misunderstanding. For them,

popular literature explains the reality in acceptable terms (Brayfield 1996: 7). Storytelling is a universal practice that exists in all societies. In its written form it reaches its prototype in the international book market: a history enjoyed by millions of vectors coming from different social, cultural and political spheres in a limited period of time. Mass consumption if possible thanks to production in marketing and marketing, however, the formula for sales still remains unresolved. All the publicity that goes with these windfalls cannot deny the effectiveness of word-of-mouth, especially today where word of mouth crosses all borders instantly through emails, chats, phone conversations, and mobile messages. On the other hand, the conditions for consumption are favorable thanks to the prices and their availability (bookstores, airlines, supermarkets, Internet). The commercial phenomenon that stands in the way of marketing is only an element to capture the attention of a community, the interests are somewhat more complex.

This world interest is explained ideologically. The novel was interpreted as an attack on religion and the Catholic Church and reduces explanation by offering a plot theory of history, these symbolic goods that have been converted into a cultural phenomenon to meet demand. The question is why now? Because, according to the author, the demand for the sacred has been “undone” in forms of magical, esoteric irrationalism, and about every “conspirator” who has ever been trapped in the millions of soap opera buyers. Let us observe from a coincidence that Bloom (2000) alters the degradation of the windshield vectors to “book buyers”. So we have to conclude that the diffusion of mass culture does not explain the phenomenon so that we do not hack that the explanation is in the way that the fulfilment of the world of “believing without belonging” is fulfilled. Dan Brown would call on his supporters to confirm that it is more legitimate to believe that in the world there are more things to see than rationalism has changed.

In his volume *Paradigms of Paranoia*, (2005), Cole points out that there is a predominance of interrelated fillings which favor the diffusion of conspiratorial explanations of reality. Among them would be the permanent uncertainty created by the widespread prospect about the existence of conspiracy fuels, a feeling of pervasive control of reality that leads us to believe that we are somehow in control of these forces. On private land, such convictions acquire a surrounding religious character in the fulfilment that the world faces mysteries that transcend existence.

However, in the public domain, Cole describes the conspiracy as “a new meta-narration of a postmodern era” (Cole 2005: 15-16) which can be found both in the postmodern literary experiences of Pynchon or DeLillo, as well as in the popular fiction that encompasses it, from *The Da Vinci Code* to *The Matrix* trilogy.

The three previous formulations come from different ideological positions and to the contrary but coincide in signaling how literature creates alternative realities that allow us to understand our own life. However, according to Dan Brown, there is a danger:

“That is the definition of *faith*—acceptance of that which we imagine to be true, that which we cannot prove. Every religion describes God through metaphor, allegory, and exaggeration, from the early Egyptians through modern Sunday school. Metaphors are a way to help our minds process the unprocessable. The problems arise when we begin to believe literally in our own metaphors.” (Brown 2003: 341-42)

These are ironic words in that Dan Brown himself seems to give literal value to the language, the metaphors, and the conspiracies of his novel. Both Dan Brown and J. K. Rowling create the illusion that one can control a world characterized by uncertainty. The mysteries of life can be solved as they decipher codes with magic. After finishing each book everything falls in its place and there is no missing puzzle, how much we know will fit when the narration is completed in the next delivery. In Rowling’s case, the seventh book is announced and we will find Harry more adolescent and rebellious. With respect to Dan Brown, he seems to sound alarms about new and evil manipulations of history. Hopefully, it will provide similar levels of entertainment and reflection.

6. Conclusions

We have started this analysis by wondering what is so common about J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series and Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code*, the novels which have been at the head of the sales lists when we know very well that a text that is at the head of sales is often criticized and more than often taxed for its artificiality and superficiality as it applies writing formulas, and the writers’ purpose is to address the widest reading public possible. These formulas (or recipes) are quite simple: the novel is about a hero with whom the public can identify, a hero who evolves in a Manichean world. For this, the author will appeal to the sensitive line of the reader, an orphan, for example, love stories or a hero who, close to defeat, will eventually win. This vision, cynical and quite widespread, lacks rigor and is not enough to explain the reasons for publishing success.

A text becomes a best-seller when it manages to reconcile the two ends of the anthropological path: the underlying centrality and the social-historical. The analysis of the significant structures of the texts reveals

synchronicity between the here and the elsewhere; that is to say, between liquid modernity and the archaic past. Harry Potter and Robert Langdon crystallize contemporaneity in all its complexity. Distorted, the contemporary man is in search of answers and, to do this, he must push the limits of the interpretation, made incarnate by the irruption of the magic thought and the hermeneutical libido. This magma of meaning ends up imposing itself on the author and finding an echo in the readership; that is his power.

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