

# Are Books Bound by Their Brands?

By Edwin Colyer

You can't judge a book by its cover, but everybody does. You might like the artwork, the title, or the publisher's blurb, but above all, you will likely chose your next bedtime read because of who wrote it. The author is what really matters; loyalty to writers runs deep.

In many ways every author is a brand, though they may not see it that way. "Author branding is rather subconscious," suggests Patrick Jansen-Smith, managing director of Transworld Publishers. "People don't think 'Let's go and brand an author.' The author's brand is his or her work.

"Authors become brands if they write a certain kind of book. They build up brand loyalty — you know what you're going to get when you read one of their books. By the nature of their craft you won't get something wildly different. You know what you are going to get."

Take one of Jansen-Smith's most successful authors: Terry Pratchett, author of the highly branded Discworld fantasies. Pratchett has sold 30 million books, translated into 29 languages worldwide. You can quickly identify Pratchett fans from a cursory glance at their bookcase; every book in the Discworld series has distinctive artwork. The characters remain consistent throughout the series, as do many of the recurring jokes. And you can set your calendars by his books, which appear in bookstores about 2 months before Christmas.

But Pratchett himself has become a brand too, even sporting a trademark look of his own. He's a humorous rogue ("He grows carnivorous plants as a hobby; they are a lot less interesting than people believe," is typical of a liner quote), and his hat rarely misses a photo shoot. "The hat is a Zen disguise," he is quoted as saying in a recent Guardian newspaper interview. "If I take it off, I'm just another bald-headed, bearded man."

"It is clear that the more established authors — whether consciously

or unconsciously — see themselves as a brand in the sense of nurturing an identity the public can identify with, and that represents a set of values," comments Lynne Brown, Dorling Kindersley's brand manager for health and sex writers Dr. Miriam Stoppard and Anne Hooper. "Their awareness of this is underlined by examples of fiction authors adopting a pseudonym so they can step outside their usual oeuvre without damaging audience expectation or indeed trading on it. Many authors work hard to protect and enhance these values by the other products/organizations they allow themselves to become identified with."



Brown insists that this type of branding is hardly new. "Although the concept of a 'brand' did not exist then, it is clear that authors such as Dickens were definitely seen as representing certain values and indeed guaranteeing a caliber of product that could be relied on. If that is part of what you would call brand values then they had them. Perhaps the non-fiction area has a shorter history so the whole idea of brand is newer here. Still, names such as Mrs. Beeton come to mind as representing a set of values that people recognized and valued."

Nevertheless, publishers confess that branding is becoming a more conscious marketing activity. And authors are their central brand equity. "This is clearly a collaborative process," Brown explains, "where all the parties involved work towards establishing and then maintaining the brand identity. The process starts as soon as the author begins to establish their identity as a writer. The core values of the

author's brand clearly grow out of their personal value system/interests, etc."

For Dorling Kindersley these brand values are managed via the look and content of the books that go under an author's name. But the really savvy publisher can make much more of its brand portfolio.

"Perhaps what turns an author from an author into a real brand is when they move across media," argues Susan Knopf, senior vice president and director of Parachute Publishing, citing the highly successful Goosebumps series and the Mary-Kate & Ashley books. "An author brand is a situation where readers expect a certain kind of entertainment from a writer, but they are interested in trying new things from that author. They have and want to share an experience with the author. That's different to an author who just writes a new mystery every year."

"It was children who gave RL Stine permission to turn into a brand," Knopf continues. "That wasn't just putting a logo on something — that's short lived — but using the essence of Goosebumps: something scary, a roller coaster ride, and the unexpected."

Yet Knopf observes that many publishers — and their authors — are still reluctant to embrace full-blooded branding. "Any author has potential to be a brand. Some of it is what they do; some is what we do. Not every author has the desire, not every author has the opportunity. Most authors want to write the books they feel compelled to write. For a branded property you need something visual, you need more of a message, more of an image.

"Publishers are into selling more books. The key is to spot the opportunity [to brand] and surround yourself with people who want to do it," says Knopf.

Yet not all publishers have the luxury of big-name authors to splash across their covers. And even if they

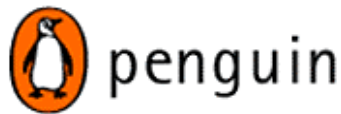
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do, they should not neglect the importance of their own corporate brands. This is perhaps a more controversial area because brand recognition of the publishing house rarely filters down to the casual reading public. Okay, so maybe you do judge a book by its cover, but few check the spine for the publisher's logo. Who cares whether the book is from Bantam Dell or Little, Brown and Company?

Terry Pratchett is a good example of the primacy of the author's brand. He only moved to Transworld in 1998, yet you would never guess it from the look and content of the books alone. They still have the same artwork, same design and same read, despite the different publisher.



Penguin is perhaps the most recognized in the English-speaking world. This publisher has even run advertising campaigns and pushed its corporate image, presumably hoping that greater sales of books generally will benefit it indirectly. Nevertheless, it is still hard to believe that many would buy Penguin before an author of their choice.

However, Dorling Kindersley has carved a market for itself with its highly successful brand of reference books. "DK has always tried to deliver best in field in any topic area. To achieve that it may be more effective to gather together a group of contributors rather than to rely on a specific author for a book," says Brown. "Thus, it is clear we need an identity that will encourage readers to recognize the value of such titles as readily as they may recognize a named author.

"The DK brand is very important to us and its continued development is key to us going forward. We are, in fact, currently investing in various research and market testing to enable us to understand better what DK means to us and our readers."

Yet for most publishers the corporate brand will remain the preserve of literary circles. By building a reputa-

tion for a certain genre, successful marketing, and lucrative deals, (or perhaps by demonstrating an ability to promote and brand writers) publishers can attract the authors that really get the sales going. The most successful publishers will be those that can use their own corporate brand to attract and create the author brands.

Brown, one of the few people in the industry who holds the title "brand manager," believes that stronger, conscious branding is inevitable and necessary. "In recent years in an ever more crowded market, the consumer has come more and more to rely on brand identity as an indicator for purchase. We believe this is now true in all industries and no less so within publishing — particularly in the non-fiction area. Our sense is that this will continue to be a strong ongoing trend but it is of course essential that the expectations raised by the brands be satisfied in the delivery."

So next time you judge a book by its cover, remember that the branding carries inside too.



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~ About ~

## Patron Saint Productions

Patron Saint Productions is a publishing consultancy specializing in online marketing strategy, campaigns, and training. It was founded by Steve O'Keefe, a 20-year book publishing veteran who has launched online marketing campaigns for more than 1,000 books and dozens of publishers.

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