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Article

The author as a brand or the hardship of fame: the Rowling case

El autor como marca o las inestabilidades de la fama: el caso Rowling

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Abstract

The importance of an author's brand image is studied, and the influence it has for its visibility. The case of JK Rowling is analyzed as an example of migration from its original niche, children's and youth literature, to adult literature, studying visibility indicators such as editions of his work, presence in the best-selling lists, web presence, and appearance in national and international databases. The viability of leaving the market niche protected by consolidated editorial and communication structures is discussed, as well as the anonymity file.

Resumen

Se estudia la importancia de la imagen de marca de un autor, y la influencia que tiene para su visibilidad. Se analiza del caso de J. K. Rowling como ejemplo de migración desde su nicho original, la literatura infantil y juvenil, a la literatura de adultos, estudiando los indicadores de visibilidad como ediciones de su obra, presencia en las listas de más vendidos, presencia web, y aparición en bases de datos nacionales e internacionales. Se discute la viabilidad de salir del nicho de mercado amparado por estructuras editoriales y comunicativas consolidadas, empleando además el expediente del anonimato.

The figure of the author in the publishing market: between prestige and communication strategies

Generating mystery surrounding the author is another marketing strategy used in literature. It is not new or recent and there are many authors who have resorted to it, either by conviction, or by commercial calculation, pursuing the commercial logic of supply and demand, which underlies the publishing business and the production and circulation processes of literature. Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon and Salinger are some of the most emblematic figures and paradoxically some of the best-known figures in the context of this phenomenon.

More recently, Elena Ferrante has generated interest and in a way mystery around her figure, voluntarily kept anonymous even by her publishers, who only contact her through correspondence related to the publication of her works. Protective of her invisibility, Ferrante (2017) reflects there on in her work *La Frantumaglia,* which includes, *inter alia,* part of her correspondence with her publisher, where it is stated:

> The media system attributes great importance to this link. It does not tell about the story of the book but about the writer's aura. If there is such a thing as an aura and the media promotes it, the publishing industry will be delighted to open its doors and the market will be more than delighted to welcome you. If there is not such a thing but the book is sold like hot cakes, the media make up the author-character by triggering a mechanism whereby the writer does not only sell his/her work but himself/herself, his/her reputation (p. 238).

This case would be nothing exceptional if she were not an international bestseller thanks to her tetralogy called *Neapolitan Novels* (*My Brilliant Friend* (2012), *The Story of a New Name* (2013), *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* (2014), and *The Story of the Lost Child* (2015)), a series that first appeared in 2011 and that has sold millions of copies. Due to the *horror vacui* around the author's figure, the fact that she has repeatedly rejected any kind of reference that can identify her has further multiplied speculation on her true identity: Godofredo Fofi, Michele Prisco, Fabrizia Ramondino, Marcella Marmo, Doménico Starnone or his wife, Anita Raja who precisely worked as a translator for Edizioni E/O, the publisher of Ferrante's books[1]. In any case, whether it is a marketing operation or a voluntary identity concealment, this determined anonymity has borne fruit in the media (Falkoff, 2016). In 2016, Time magazine named Ferrante one of the most influential people that year. The author was a finalist of the Man Booker Price in 2016, and also of the Strega prize. In the 75th edition of the Venice Film Festival, in September 2018, the series inspired by the Neapolitan saga of the writer, produced by RAI and HBO, will feature 32 chapters.

Carmen Mola is considered the Spanish Elena Ferrante, not because of the genre she cultivates, but because of her desire to keep herself away from the media, using a pseudonym and staying away from all sorts of contact but the epistolary one. The success achieved with her first novel, *La novia Gitana*, a bestseller in 2018, figured on the list of the most sold and whose rights have been sold to different languages, has increased interest in revealing her identity, boosted by the publication, in 2019, of her second book, called *La red púrpura*.

In any case, both cases are not marked by the use of pseudonyms, a very common resource in the field of literature, but by the fact that such use is linked to success, and it is inconceivable without an identifiable attribution that works as a referent in a society influenced by spectacularisation. According to Polo (2009), marketing engineering shapes a very wide range where the consumer is excited by a bewildering variety of claims that turn the whole of society itself into a huge supermarket, and the author's claim is placed at the centre of a promotional network articulated around its presence as the main

commercial and strategic device. This is not a trivial strategy and is adapted to the buying patterns of society, both at national and international level. In Spain, the survey *Reading Habits and Purchase of Books* includes a question about the factors have a certain impact when it comes to buy a book. In the 2018 report (Spanish Federation of Booksellers Guilds [FGEE, as per its Spanish acronym], 2018), the theme is the first factor with 83.4%, but the author ranks second with 49.4% by far compared to the reviews and the professionals' opinion (28.3%), the title (14.8%), the cover (8.8%), the price (17.3%) and the publisher (1.6%). The impact of the author has become increasing important over time. In the first study of the series, in the year 2000, this factor represented 23.3%. The reports published in other countries emphasise this fact too. In a study published by the Australia Council of the Arts (2017) on reading practices, when respondents are asked about the reasons for choosing a book, the author ranks seconds with 78%. The same applied to France, Germany, the United States and other countries.

In general, cultural industries, and the publishing industry in particular, have a series of mechanisms that can be used -to a certain extent- to articulate a field structure inherent to them (Bourdieu, 2018) that reinforce the prototype character of each title (Cordón-García, 2010), on one hand, and the substitution of the creative nature of the work for the author's brand as an identification and reference element in the receptive pole, on the other hand. According to Roth (2018), becoming a celebrity means becoming a brand somehow.

Both Bourdieu, with his theory of the Literary Field, and Even-Zohar, with his Polysystem Theory (Díaz-Martínez, 2014), highlight the interdependence of the various factors articulated around books, without identifying any hierarchies or prevalences in relation to one another. However, the author as a brand simplifies and removes any complexity related to reading. As pointed out by Eagleton (2013b,

p. 194), "the reader is now compelled to give himself/herself to a strategic undertaking that is an actual test even for the most furiously vigorous individual...", waiving to contextual benchmarks that can be used as reception logbooks is a paradoxical and peculiar position, as it is contrary to normal practice in this industry, which usually imposes its commercial criteria on the author's interests, the latter have prevailed boosted -it is true- by an unexpected publishing success. According to Paolo di Paolo, "Ferrante's strength lies in the fact that she is not there rather than in her own books" (Noguera, 2016).

Michel Foucault considered the creation of a literature market where the writer produces a specific type of goods, linking it to its creator. In his zeal to encrypt the author's genealogy, he wondered: "Who is speaking? Who, among the group of speaking individuals, is entitled to use this type of language? Who is the holder thereof? Who gets his/her singularity and prestige therefrom...?" (Foucault, 2013, p. 54). Just like Foucault, Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida proclaimed the author's death, the crisis of certain kinds of authorship arising from intellectual property that had become brands, signatures of a qualifying nature. According to Barthes (2009), the author is a romantic concept that implies a presence metaphysics, justifying a unified, centralised and supervised knowledge[2].

In spite of Roland Barthes, the author's name is still in the centre of the system of social and economic relationships of literature as a brand and as a marketable product in other subproducts, which lead Hutcheon (2014) to defend the creator's position as a discursive authority in many spheres of contemporary art.

The debate on authorship and the anonymity sought by some authors suggests the need to relocate the author's status in the centre of a context where his/her purposes necessarily have to be linked to certain devices shaped by the machinery of the publishing industry. At

the end of the 18ᵗʰ century, Kant described art as carrier of "intentionality without a purpose". Adorno and Horkheimer then further developed this idea and stated that popular culture "lacks intentionality for the sake of a purpose" and suggested that such purpose was regulated by the market (Stuart, 2018, p. 228). This status as a good precisely leads to such an unequal distribution of success (Lipovetsky, 2015), because the work -as a good- is subject to certain planning and handling conditions that are inserted in a diffusion device of a mainly technological nature. As pointed out by Pineda, Fernández-Gómez & Huici (2018), it all has to be reduced to the status of a good and, in any case, developments do not occur at the level of "ideas" but to the level of "technology". François Jullien warns against the gradual loss of cultural identity promoted by a standardising and egalitarian market that affects both products and authors: "The *Harry Potter* series itself is stacked in all the small corners of the world and formats youth's imagination identically —which is increasingly obvious in the same globish" (Jullien, 2017, p. 33). These spaces have expanded exponentially due to the impact of the social media both of a general and specialised nature and of sales platforms used by publishing conglomerated, which normally include authors' websites, created to increase their presence and retain their customers. But authors are in turn compelled to grease this mechanism of personal projection, not only by conventional means, such as presentations, reading of their works, meetings with readers, press conferences, etc. but also working on their own promotion as an integral part of the business itself. Hence, unlike the pre-web environment, where the author was not directly connected to the market as he/she was connected thereto by means of his/her publisher, who acted as middleman and promoted and planned the author's work, today these functions are mixed and result in ambiguous relationships between the author and the market, but with the publisher too. As pointed out by Judt (2016), the author is permanently exposed, when referring to intellectuals, who depend largely on what they say or do more than ever.

All these phenomena have a special impact on so-called border literature, or crossover literature instead, according to the specialised terminology. These works can be read by very different age groups or have transcended the boundaries of the specific population segment they were initially conceived for. This term also refers to those works that have been treated in different ways on the media that can convey them (books, comics, films, television, games, etc.). It is interesting to study them as the elements inherent to the publishing industry can work in very different ways depending on the recipient's location and the consideration as a product granted by the industry. One of the names that best suits this definition in its different acceptances is .J K. Rowling, the author of the acclaimed *Harry Potter* series, published between 1997 and 2007, with more than 500 million copies sold worldwide, distributed in more than 200 countries, and translated into 80 languages, and the origin of eight blockbusters and concomitant products. With a strong online presence and a website where contents are created and distributed, Pottermore has been awarded all kinds of recognition and awards. The first edition of the saga was distributed in Spain in March 1999, published by a small, independent publishing house, Salamandra. Three million copies were sold in just three years (Vila-San-Juan, 2003)! Rowling also attracts interest for her endeavours to transcend the thematic and chronological niche where she has traditionally been placed, i.e. children and youths, and also because she has tried to leave it by means of novels that initially leveraged the author's brand and then tried to get do without it, generating an interesting ignorance-recognition-strengthening phenomenon where we can clearly identify the structural strength of the publishing industry, the miseries and servitudes thereof, but also the power and inertia the most significant aspects of the publishing industry. This change also

has a formal nature, as the last *Harry Potter* book was published in 2016, *Harry Potter and the cursed Child*, is a theatre play, a genre without a market. However, in the case of Rowling, two million copies were sold just in the first few days in the United States and one million copies in the United Kingdom approximately.

Objectives and Methodology

In order to study the status of Rowling as an author and the consolidation of her brand, we analysed the editions of Rowling's works published in Spain, on one hand, and their success and impact, on the other hand. Academic visibility was also dealt with by studying her production in the main international databases.

For phase one, which dealt with the editions of J. K. Rowling's works in Spain, we analysed the ISBN databases and the union catalogue of the National Library of Spain, using editions of a distinctive nature only, made for Spain, or from Spain for Latin America.

In order to measure the success and impact of Rowling's work, we analysed the annual reports prepared by the Spanish Federation of Booksellers Guilds (FGEE, as per its Spanish acronym) and the Ministry of Culture, Education and Sport (MCED, as per its Spanish acronym), to analyse the rankings that follow different criteria (most popular, bestsellers, most popular and best fold authors, etc.) used to model the preferences of the reading public.

The visibility of J. K. Rowling's work was studied by analysing the Isi Web of Science, Scopus, Proquest and MLA databases, in the case of international scientific production, and the databases of the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC, as per its Spanish acronym) and the Bibliography of Spanish literature, in the case of national scientific production.

Results and discussion

J. K. Rowling was an unknown author, with difficulties to publish her first work (the first manuscript of *Harry Potter* was rejected by a dozen publishing houses). However, in 1995, a publishing house called Bloomsbury decided to publish *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone,* which will soon become one of the most popular international bestsellers (Pollack & Belviso, 2016). The formation of the name, its constitution as a reference and as a consumption item is linked to the success and the diffusion structures put in place by the publishing house. Rowling's success in Spain leaves no doubt at all.

The *Harry Potter* series spread and consolidated quickly as a bestseller in Spain. According to the ISBN database, 270 editions of it have been published, 282 according to the database of the National Library of Spain. Rowling's name was soon linked to a success story consumed around the world. This presence became even more punchy thanks to the complementary material published by some publishing houses such as Ediciones B: calendars, posters, stickers, diaries, colouring books, etc. The foregoing became an extension of the brand image that significantly helped to its implementation. Such consolidation was confirmed by the release of a series of films based on the saga between 2001 and 2011.

The annual reports published by the Spanish Federation of Booksellers Guilds between 2000 and 2018, with the exception of 2013 and 2017, the survey *Reading Habits and Purchase of Books* in Spain, include headings related to the most popular books and authors in different age groups and categories. The *Harry Potter* series and its author, J. K. Rowling, rank among the bestsellers and the most popular books.

Digital visibility of her books is articulated through the website created by J. K. Rowling,

Pottermore. It is not a regular website, as it has gradually incorporated complementary contents to Rowling's work since it was launched in 2012: interventions of the author herself, interactive visits to the world of Harry Potter and its characters, developments and comments on them and, above all, it has been set as an exclusive sales outlet of her work, on paper and in electronic form (both for e-books and audio books) in multiple languages. One of Rowling's milestones is her ability to avoid the lobbying of large distributors and to impose her conditions on platforms such as Amazon or Itunes. This digital visibility is complemented by thousands of websites and fan clubs devoted to the dissemination of her work through news, comments, community translation of her works before the official translations are published in each country, etc. It presents a unique case that has shaped a powerful author brand, and genre switches have been marked by the original niche, that of children's and youth literature.

The Casual Vacancy was published in 2012, her first novel aimed at an adult audience since the successful entry into the market of the *Harry Potter* saga. One million copies of *The Casual Vacancy* was sold in the first three weeks (Foster, 2015), placing this book in the *bestsellers*[3] slipstream, an environment where the author had been moving freely since her publishing journey started. Moreover, in England it became the best-selling book in a shorter space of time in the last three years[4]. In Spain, the publishing house Salamandra published it in 2012. The original print run amounted to 300,000 copies. With this book, Rowling also changed her publishing strategy and publishing house, has she left Bloomsbury, the British publisher that trusted her groundbreaking project for a young audience, and joined Little, Brown and Company, a publishing house whose origins date back to the 19th century, has the advantage that it is part of a large publishing group such as Hachette Livre, which acquired it in 2006.

The work had a costumbrist nature, larded with some intrigue, following the typical bestseller formula (Herralde, 2019; Jockers & Archer, 2016; Vila-San-Juan, 2011; Viñas-Piquer, 2009). The author's name obviously contributed to this success, as she had significant convening power over an audience fascinated by her previous work, confirming the "pull factor" theories, namely the author's ability to attract interest in his/her bibliography resulting from momentary (for example, a film, a prize, etc.) or continuing success (López-de-Abiada & Peñate-Rivero, 1996) and acquiring visibility of a derivative nature, mainly supported by the social media (Cordón-García 2004; Cordón-García & Gómez-Díaz, 2018).

Its publication in Spain had to be moved forward in view of a community translation project launched by Harry Potter fans in September that year. Therefore, the book, which would initially be published in April 2013, was finally published in December 2012. The BBC and HBO produced a miniseries based on the book, and the publishing house took advantage of this fact to launch a new book in 2015 with a new cover, that of the TV series.

The book did not produced the expected return in terms of publishing, as in the clash for Rowling's new book, *The Cuckoo's Calling,* the publishing house Espasa was finally in charge of its publication in Spain, after it was known that J. K. Rowling was behind the pseudonym Robert Galbraith. The book was published in 2013 in Great Britain. A few months later, in July, retailers started to return the copies thereof, but the Sunday Times revealed who was behind the name on the cover, Robert Galbraith. Robert Galbraith turned to be J. K. Rowling. On one hand, the author tried this change of narrative register and, on the other hand, she tried this risky but encouraging change of name.

The book became a bestseller in the rest of the world after the author's name was known.

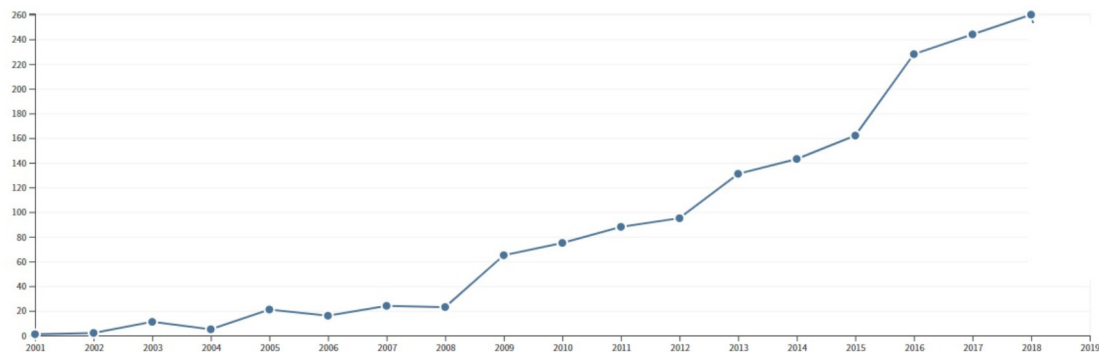Número de veces citado al año

Fig. 1. Evolution of the quotes related to Rowling's works in WOS.

Salamandra published the other two novels of detective Cormoran Strike series, *The Silkworm* and *Career of Evil*, published in 2015 and 2016, respectively. Although none of the three books produced the commercial return *Harry Potter* series and other books derived therefrom, the soon became bestsellers[5] due to Rowling's name effect on all her works. According to Baggini (2016), using the pseudonym Robert Galbraith in her novels aimed at an adult audience had a positive impact on Rowling, but we should point out that it only occurred after the real name of the author was known. In 2017 and 2018, the BBC produced three episodes of the *Cormoran Strike* series, although it did not have the same impact as other works by de Rowling.

The visibility of Rowling's work can also be identifies through references and quotes received in the professional and academic sphere. Her work has been studied from multiple perspectives, ranging from Literature, Didactics, Psychology, Marketing or Neuroscience. Her work can be traced in the world's most important databases. *Web of Science* (WOS) retrieves 572 hits for the period between 1999 and 2018. The evolution of the quotes related to Rowling's work has followed an increasing trend (figure 1).

The total number of quotes received in scientific papers amounts to 1,700, 1,650 of which focus on the *Harry Potter* series and works derived therefrom. The theme perspectives from which the work is analysed are multiple (figure 2).

Scopus, the other major database, has similar results, although the number of quotes doubles and amounts to 3,500. The main thematic areas are Humanities and Social Sciences, just like on WOS (figure 3).

The author's visibility can also be traced in the media and professional magazines. The *Proquest Central* website covers more than 160 thematic areas and is the largest aggregated database focusing on journalistic content. This reference resource offers a diversified combination of resources, including scientific and professional journals, general information publications, books, newspapers, reports and videos. On consulting the Proquest databases, we obtained 601,712 hits, of which 8,477 are scientific papers, and almost 500,000 are news items. It is worth stressing that there are 3,600 doctoral theses on this subject, which attests to the interest in the Harry Potter series (99% is devoted to this work or aspects related thereto)

Fig. 2. Thematic areas in research on Rowling's work on WOS.

from the perspective of basic research. Google Scholar offers a perspective of the projection of the works and the author through these quotes. J. K. Rowling is quoted 26,000 times, compared to the *Harry Potter* series, quoted 172,000 times. The other books, mainly those written under the pseudonym Robert Galbraith are barely quoted compared to her previous works. *The Cuckoo's Calling* is quoted 2017, *The Silkworm* is quoted 240 times and *Career of Evil* is quoted once only. It is true that joint search by the main character of the series, Cormoran Strike, delivers better results, 450 quotes, but they fall far short compared to Rowling's main works.
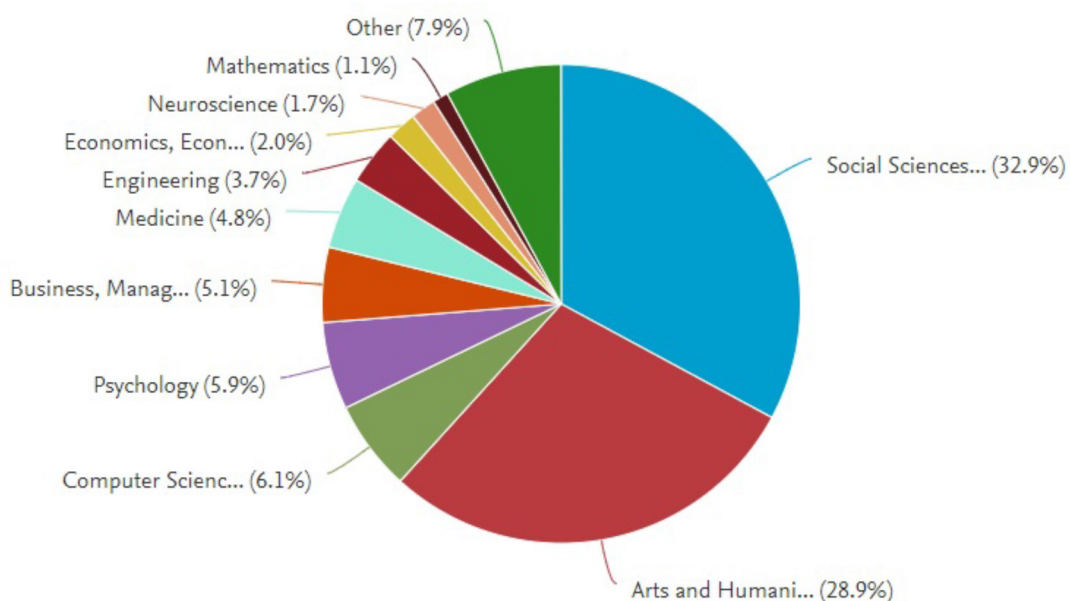

Fig. 3. Thematic areas in research on Rowling's work on Scopus.

In Spain, the number of articles devoted to Rowling's work, reviewed in the CSIC database and in the bibliography of Spanish literature is less than thirty.

Conclusions

A study published in *Nature* (Liu *et al.*, 2018) magazine showed that fame and success are seasonal that lasts for five years at most, and is totally random. Unlike more than 30,000 bibliographic profiles of artists under study, this does not apply to a specific species of authors, and J. K. Rowling is definitely one of them. She is a rare example of survival not only at a publishing level, but at a media level too. Her works are published repeatedly and interest therein transcends the bibliographic sphere and reaches other fields of creation that have expanded its projection and feed back the name's brand. According to Zizek (2018), we are now facing a phenomenon whereby identity is globalised that is part of cultural capitalism, namely an entertainment industry that is the core of cultural industries and that ultimately represents the nature of actual culture (Byung-Chul, 2018). Nevertheless, this generic nature only takes shape when it can be enshrined (Lipovetsky & Juvin, 2011), when the brand marks the production strategies and the reception logics.

The case of JK Rowling illustrates these circumstances well, world bestseller with the series of books and movies of Harry Potter, present in all kinds of social networks and digital environments, her name is imposed when she decides to migrate from gender leaving the barracks of success, linked to children's and youth literature. However, this imposition is a consequence of the pull effect integrated in her name as a brand. When The Cuckoo's Calling was published under a pseudonym, sales were very poor and many copies were returned to the stores. The work was reincorporated in the dynamics of bestsellers (Visser & Kaai, 2015) only after the publishing house took action and revealed the author's name. Nevertheless, such publishing projection arises from different dimensions,

far more modest than those experienced by the author with the *Harry Potter* series. Her experience as an author aimed at an adult audience is far more limited, although she benefits from returns derived from previous works. This is evidenced by the low number of works aimed at an adult audience published by her and by the fact that they have no impact from the point of view of research. The absence of quotes in specialised databases is an evidence of the little interest she attracts as an author in her most contemporary dimension.

On one hand, research shows that the power of those brands that are well worked on from the point of view of publishers, conferring the author a visibility that enables him/her to grease the marketing mechanisms at his/her disposal, and on the other hand, it also shows that all authors have difficulties leaving their sphere of publishing influence, although he/she has all the factors that may promote these moves.

Notes

1. The algorithms of her handwriting were even compared to those of other writers to find out who is behind the pseudonym. By following this procedure, Professor Luigi Galetta and Università della Sapienza got to Domenico Startone and Anita Raja, who categorically denied being the author.

2. Before them, Brecht and Benjamin had already started to tear down this idealised author concept by stating that authors are basically producers, just like any other manufacturer of social products (Eagleton, 2013a)

3. Nielsen stated that 124,603 copies of *The Casual Vacancy* were sold in the first weekend in the United Kingdom. It may not seem much compared to *Harry Potter* (2.6 million copies thereof were sold in that country), but this number is 10 times more than the number of copies of the second best-seller of the week (*The Power Trip,* by Jackie Collins). Similarly, Little Brown states that 375,000 copies of *The Casual Vacancy* were sold in the first six days in the United States. The book ranked first in USA Today's bestseller classification, beating *Fifty Shades of Grey,* by E. L. James, for the first time in 23 weeks. Nielsen also stated that *The Casual Vacancy* ranked 25th in the annual classification

of sic-fi books and first in the classification of hard cover books.

4. This fact confirms the conclusions of a study on the acceleration processes in the consumption of concepts conducted by researchers of the Manx Planck Institute and the technical universities of Berlin and Denmark, whereby the rotation rate of popular culture has experienced a significant acceleration due to the impact of the amount of information available and the change in consumption patterns (Lorenz-Spreen *et al,* 2019)

5. Amazon published a list of best books in 2013. The novel *The Cuckoo's Calling,* published by J. K. Rowling under the pseudonym Robert Galbraith, ranked third in the list of bestsellers for an adult audience. On their part, both *The Cuckoo's Calling* and its sequel, *The Silkworm,* ranked between the first four best-sellers in e-book format of Apple's iBook store in 2014.

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