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Why you don't need to write much to be the world's bestselling author

James O'Sullivan

6-7 minutes

When we speak of bestsellers, we're often referring to books that have sold fewer copies than one might think. By the estimation of award-winning author Donal Ryan, there are times when 300 sales might be enough to make a chart topper – the bestseller mantle tends to have more promotional than monetary value. Of course there are the literary blockbusters — titles like Harry Potter and The Da Vinci Code — books that ship hundreds of millions of copies. But combine the sales of JK Rowling and Dan Brown, even throw in John Grisham, and you're still lagging behind the sales figures of the world's true bestselling author — James Patterson.

According to his publisher, Patterson has written no fewer than 114 New York Times bestsellers. His total bibliography is upwards of 150. He is, without doubt, one of the most prodigious literary figures that the world has ever seen.

Patterson's success is unusual, in that he isn't quite a household name; rather, he is a master of the airport novel, an author whose success has largely been achieved as a writer of commuter fiction. Patterson divides opinion: Stephen King

describes his work as “terrible”, reviewers have deemed it “subliterate”; yet in 2015 he received the National Book Foundation’s Literarian Award for his philanthropic efforts in encouraging Americans to read.

Patterson’s prodigious output is accomplished through the use of collaborators: co-authors offered a chance to make their name under the tutelage of the world’s most commercially successful author. He is engagingly transparent about his process: co-authors work from a narrative framework provided by Patterson, who either then re-writes what they come up with or provides notes on bi-weekly drafts. The narrative frameworks he provides emerge from his understanding of the literary market, informed by his years of experience as an advertising executive. He has been described as a co-publisher, more of a brand than a writer. This is a distinction worth exploring, because it is Patterson’s name that looms largest on his covers.



The Duchess of Cornwall and James Patterson read to children. Kirsty

Wigglesworth/PA Archive/PA Images

Digital detectives

Using digital methods, if sufficient samples are available, the extent to which someone actively contributes to the actual words of a text can be tested. The field is called stylometry, and it has been previously used in author attribution studies involving popular figures like Harper Lee and JK Rowling.

A colleague and I applied stylometric methods to the work of Patterson in order to form an impression of how much he contributes to the writing of his books in terms of the actual words used. The results of the study show that, in each of the collaborative novels (we checked all where there was a relevant sample to test against – where the co-author had written individual texts), the dominant style is that of Patterson's co-authors. This is quantitative evidence that, when collaborating with a junior party, Patterson's contributions to the literary process are more concerned with plot than style. This isn't a "gotcha!" moment: Patterson has always given the impression that he's more about the plot. But it is confirmation that the world's bestselling author may not principally be a writer.

At a superficial level, this tells us something about Patterson's practices, how it is that he has managed to sustain such prolific output. But it also challenges notions of authorship — what is the significance of Patterson's name on a dust-jacket? Is it mainly an endorsement, a valuable moniker which generates sales? Or is he properly seen as an author, just one who is attracted to the possibilities of narrative structure over

those of language?

Patterson's work might contain little to provoke the consideration of literary critics, but his restoration of the novel's popular traditions — his approach to literary capitalism as both author and corporation, creator and trademark – gives us cause to query our own hierarchies relating to story and expression. After all, the novel's 18th century beginnings are embedded in commercialism. Critics tend to value style over structure, yet the public are clearly drawn towards the latter. Is plot what makes an author, and style an artist?

All about story

The intention here is not to revive the tired debate between "high" and "low" art. Structure is rich in creative potential, and plot was essential to the novel long before movements like high modernism sought to subvert the popular by privileging style. At the same time, the role of the critic, and indeed, the reader, is to appreciate, interpret, and communicate that which is hidden in the nuances of artistic expression. One is unlikely to find an abundance of such nuances in a text that is all plot.

One could point to the film and music industries, where collaboration is the norm, in defence of Patterson's approach. Most creative practices, certainly those that have been commodified, involve interaction with some form of producer or director. In the literary world, publishers and editors guide a manuscript before turning it into something tangible for dissemination. Patterson might be seen as a literary director, or even a producer, emulating the practices of contemporary

ghostwriters or predecessors like Dumas, though this is something of an unfair comparison, considering Patterson's 19th-century French counterpart was widely suspected of outright plagiarism, described as "only a myth".

Patterson is all about story. He has turned the instruments of late capitalism to the task of commodifying storytelling. He is far from the first author to attempt such a commodification: King, Rowling, Stephenie Meyer and many other popular writers have privileged story over style. But Patterson is a curious figure among his peers, and our research suggests that "author" in its widely accepted sense isn't always the most appropriate term for his role within the writing process.