

# What makes a children's best-seller?

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There is no doubt that the extraordinary success of Harry Potter has thrown the spotlight very sharply on children's books. I recently read a comment in the UK *Bookseller* by a prominent London agent to the effect that one of the reasons why advances for children's books had risen to such dizzy heights was the fear by some publishers that they may well miss out – again – on an unforeseen publishing phenomenon. To be honest, I question whether we'll ever see the likes of Harry Potter again in my publishing career, but it is very nice to be a part of what has been dubbed 'The Golden Age of Children's Literature' – and one does have to assume that this term refers to more than the contents of JK Rowling's bank account!

I've been working in children's books for some twenty years now and it is both fascinating and heartening to observe the attention that the genre is now receiving. From endless criticism of Andy Griffith's *The Bad Book* to so-called 'celeb' authors and new terms such as 'crossover novels', there's a definite buzz around children's books. What is it that makes certain books stand out amid what can be a dazzling array on offer?

Interestingly, I think a lot of the elements that contribute toward creating a best-selling book haven't really changed over time – it's just the method and medium in which we are operating that has altered. For example, the story is still paramount. The ability to tell stories and be engaged with them is particular to us as humans and this will never change. And as a publisher, story and character are the two main elements that I look for when assessing a book. I'm looking for a story that I feel young people will engage with, that is told with a distinctive voice, and, ideally, that has characters

to whom the reader can relate and who grow and develop in a meaningful way.

The genre of the story can also be an important part of the overall appeal and it is not surprising that so many best-selling children's books contain fantasy elements, as for generations children's titles – such as *Peter Pan*, *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Water Babies* – have done so.

The difference nowadays is that major publishing houses have departments solely devoted to marketing and publicising children's books, with dedicated professionals determined to bring their books to the attention of the media, book-sellers, and of course the buying public. It is notoriously difficult to gain attention for children's books in the media, and even the prestige of winning awards isn't necessarily regarded as being newsworthy. That's why a so-called controversy – such as bare baby's bottom on a book cover – can often be such a bonus: it translates into public awareness, and thereby book sales.

So the actual packaging of the book can be important part of the appeal and can play a big role in getting books into the readers' hands. Hours are spent discussing the cover 'look' – an illustrations or a photograph? And then the actual image! We also consider important points such as the age and gender of the intended audience, the genre of the book (fantasy, mystery/adventure, contemporary fiction, historical fiction, non-fiction etc) and whether the book is for the general trade or more mass market (for example, Jackie French versus Mary Kate and Ashley).

The cover copy or text on the cover is also important. Blurbs must be accessible and relevant and any other selling lines catchy and to the point.

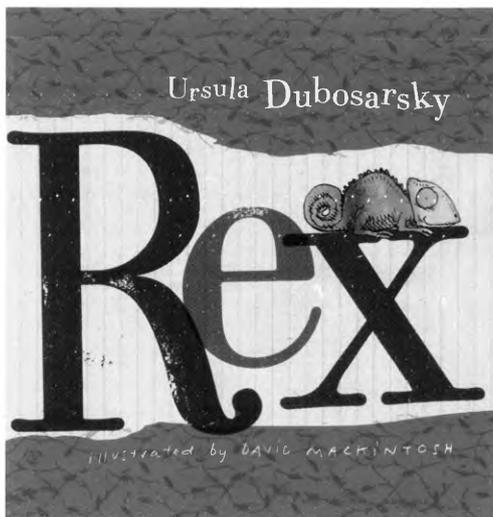
Another complexity in publishing children's books is that the books must appeal to two distinct and very different audiences – the main target reader, who is the child, but also to adults, such as parents, teachers and librarians. Unlike adult books, the selling situation for children's books is further complicated by the fact that the intended reader doesn't usually have the economic power to buy the item



2006 APA 54<sup>th</sup> Book Design Awards Best Designed Children's Series *Left Shoe and the Foundling*; designer: Liz Seymour



2006 APA 54<sup>th</sup> Book Design Awards Best Designed Young Adult Book *The King of Whatever*; designer: Marina Messiha



2006 APA 54<sup>th</sup> Book Design Awards Best Designed Children's Cover of the Year *Rex*; designer: David Mackintosh

intended for him or her. These two very distinct groups often have very different ideas about what children should be reading. In the case of the parent-child relationship though, 'pester power' often changes the equation rather dramatically!

And despite the groups who are often called 'gatekeepers' in the world of children's literature, many less-than-liter-

ary titles become huge best-sellers, and it is often a combination of fashion and word-of-mouth that drives their success. Series such as 'Goosebumps' and the 'Babysitters Club' are a good example of this phenomenon.

Marketing is, of course, a factor in creating best-sellers, although schoolyard word-of-mouth is one of the most successful ways to drive sales. Harry Potter was initially a 'sleeper' until children who had discovered it spread the word.

One interesting phenomenon contributing to children's best-sellers is the number of adults buying and reading children's books. These crossover titles include *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon (which appeared on both the adult and children's best-seller lists in the UK for many months), Harry Potter and the Narnia series. Interestingly, all of these books have been repackaged for the adult market - presumably with the idea that adults don't want to be seen reading children's books.

While I obviously don't have any problems with being caught reading a children's book, I do appreciate that



# EVIL GENIUS

CATHERINE JINKS

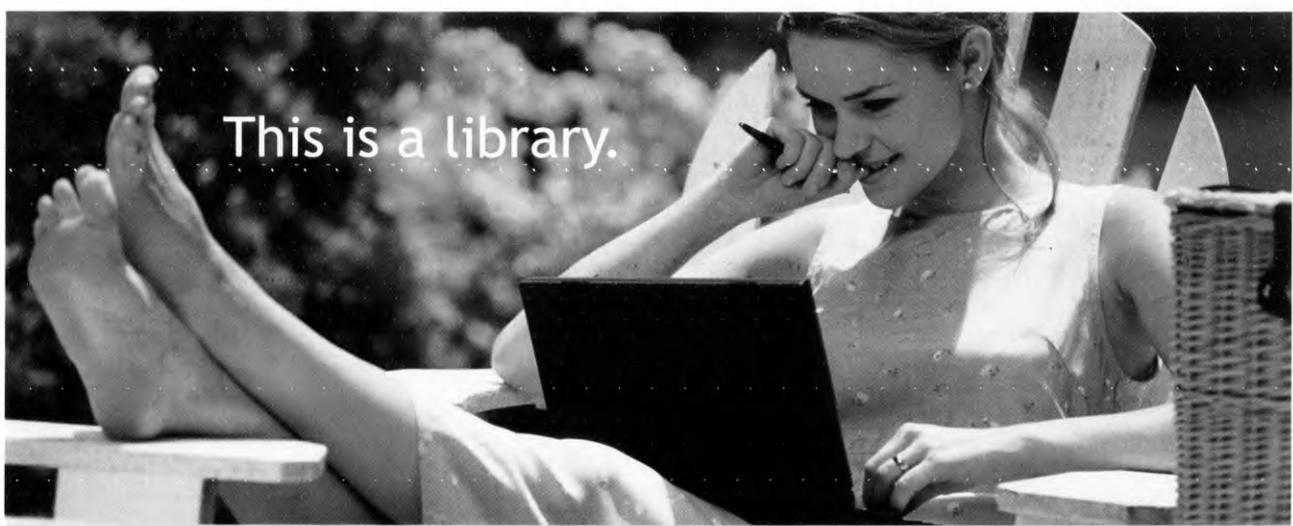
2006 APA 54<sup>th</sup> Book Design Awards  
Best Designed Young Adult Book

*Evil Genius*; designer: Ellie Exarchos, Scooter Design

other adults mightn't feel the same way. I'm just thrilled that the audience for children's books can swell in this way and that adults are either discovering new treasures or revisiting old favourites from their childhood. ■



2006 APA 54<sup>th</sup> Book Design Awards  
Young Designer of the Year Award  
*Ghost Tide*; designer: Natalie Winter



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