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Institutions, Platforms and the Production of Debut Success in Contemporary Book Culture

Claire Parnell and Beth Driscoll

Abstract

Phenomenal bestsellers periodically galvanize book culture – a sector of media that involves cooperation between authors, publishers, digital platforms, media organizations, retailers, public institutions and readers – and reveal important insights into how the industry works. Most publishers actively seek bestsellers, using a range of strategies. Contemporary bestsellers, particularly from peripheral markets and by debut authors, are produced through the strategic joining of two co-existing modes of capitalism: conglomerate capitalism and platform capitalism. This article analyses the publication pathways and reception of two debut bestsellers by Australian authors: Hannah Kent's *Burial Rites* (2013) and Heather Morris' *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* (2018). To analyse these case study titles, we constructed publishing histories, collected 5 media reviews for each book from reputable publications and literary journals, and scraped the top 100 reviews on Goodreads. These case studies show how the particular textual qualities of each book, highlighted in publishers' marketing material, shape the media and reader reception of each book, and the mechanisms and strategic alliances with traditional institutional and platform networks at work in producing success in post-digital book culture. Bestsellers show the logics and systems of an industry in flux, and the strategies that can support a debut work to reach a mass audience.

Keywords

Bestsellers, Capitalism, Platforms, Publishing, Reception, Book Culture, Post-digital

Introduction

Bestsellers, defined by the high sales numbers they achieve and the hype they generate, are success stories that periodically galvanize the contemporary book industry (Driscoll and Squires, 2020; Helgason, Kärrholm & Steiner, 2014). They provide income and attention that help sustain the industry amidst conditions of continuous technological and economic change, as publishers adopt dynamic strategies to manage risk (Greco, 2019) and readers and professional critics explore new platform-based modes of influence. Bestsellers are produced through profitable interactions and cooperation between authors, publishers, digital platforms, media organizations, retailers, public institutions and readers. Despite their prominence, our knowledge of how and why bestsellers succeed is still evolving, particularly in the context of a changing industry and media landscape.

Tracking the context and reception of specific bestsellers reveals important elements of how the industry works. In the early twenty-first century, much of the activity that generates hype or buzz around potential bestsellers occurs in the digital literary sphere, and social media platforms have become central sites for marketing activities and book talk (Murray, 2018). This has led to a heightened role for emotional language and personal responses to the authenticity of a story, features that have long been incorporated into the marketing practices of conglomerate publishing, but which are even more prominent online (Driscoll, 2016). This is particularly evident on Goodreads, a paradigmatic site of platform capitalism, where publishers and platforms benefit economically from the data produced by readers' engagement including articulation of emotional reactions and thoughts (Nakamura, 2013). The focus on emotion and authenticity in discourse surrounding bestsellers thus synchronises with the operations of capitalism in two of its dominant twenty-first century modes: conglomerate capitalism and platform capitalism.

This article investigates the publication and reception contexts of two bestselling debut titles by Australian authors to argue that affective connections between books, publishers, professional critics and readers contribute to the production of bestsellers, and are particularly important in the case of first-time authors, where authors' brand names are only beginning to be established and are generally not a marketing focus or driving force for sales.

We focus on two bestselling titles by debut authors based in Australia, Hannah Kent's *Burial Rites* (2013) and Heather Morris' *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* (2018a). These books were published recently enough to demonstrate the influence of digital networks on contemporary success, but have had time to accrue a body of reception-related data. As Australian works,

they sit slightly outside the central Anglophone publishing powerhouses of New York and London, thereby illustrating a greater number of steps that must be completed to achieve success.

Our analysis of the publication contexts, media reviews and Goodreads reviews of each book illuminates the mechanisms of post-digital literary success. First, the books show different routes to publication for debut bestsellers, some allied with traditional institutions (for example university PhD programmes) and others, which are digitally networked. The particular textual qualities of each book, highlighted in publishers' marketing material, shape the reception of each book, as shown by the media and Goodreads reviews. In these reviews, prominence is accorded to the story of how each book was created and published as well as its emotional resonance. Even though debut authors are often well-networked within the industry, they tend to only become central in the public reception in relation to the genesis of the story. Emotion provides a dominant framework for this reception; readers and professional reviewers respond to the level of emotional engagement the book is expected to provide and emotion ties together the production and marketing processes by conglomerate publishers across digital networks. These features, we argue, show that contemporary bestsellers, particularly by debut authors from peripheral markets, are produced through a nexus of co-existing models of capitalism.

Publishing, Bestsellers and Capitalism

The theoretical framework of this article comes from publishing studies, a scholarly discipline that examines the production, circulation and reception of books. Publishing studies shares some of its concerns and methods with the adjacent fields of book history, media studies and reception studies (Murray, 2006).

Publishing studies is attentive to the new economics of the book industry, including the rise of technology companies following the extensive digitization of the industry (Parnell, 2021a; Ray Murray & Squires, 2013; Thompson, 2012). An important component of these debates are the power relations that shape a globalized industry (Casanova, 2004; Sapiro, 2010). Bestsellers are a key product for publishing studies scholars to track, because they are the most widely travelled and visible products and their sales success has significant economic and cultural influence (Escarpit, 1966; Helgason, Kärrholm & Steiner, 2014; Nensel, 2017; Sutherland, 2007). While the compound word 'best' 'seller' indicates an objective, quantitative definition (a book that has sold better than any other), the term bestseller has no clear meaning

and is used relationally, for example to describe a book that sells more copies than others in its genre, or over a given period of time (Helgason, Kärrholm & Steiner, 2014). Many bestselling books are regularized as the outputs of established star authors, such as Nora Roberts or James Patterson. A bestseller from a debut author is a more striking event. Such bestsellers may be surprising, but they are also the outputs of a system oriented to maximizing the chance of a sales success.

Most publishers actively seek bestsellers using a range of strategies. Sometimes publishers acquire titles from agents, offering high advances to build these titles into blockbuster, marquee offerings, a practice that became dominant around the 1980s and continues to characterize leading trade events such as the Frankfurt Book Fair (Driscoll & Squires, 2020; Thompson, 2012). New, digitally-oriented strategies often work in tandem with established acquisition and marketing modes: for example, publishers may acquire titles that have found success on self-publishing or fan fiction forums, as was the case with the global megaseller *Fifty Shades of Grey* (Ellis-Petersen, 2015).

The different strategies through which publishers acquire and promote bestsellers can be conceptualised as components of two co-existing modes of late capitalism: conglomerate capitalism and platform capitalism (Pace, 2018; Srnicek, 2017; Steiner, 2018; Thompson, 2012). While conglomeration and platformization has significantly reshaped the contemporary publishing industry, it is specifically their capitalist function in shaping the economic structures in which books are sold that we are interested in here. Conglomerate capitalism has been a feature of the publishing industry since the consolidation of ownership that picked up pace in the 1960s, when a multiplicity of small publishers were merged into a few large corporations that dominate the field internationally (Sinykin, 2017; Steiner, 2018; Squires 2013). The last stage of conglomeration in publishing included processes of vertical and horizontal consolidation of publishing houses under transnational media corporations. The dominance of these publishers arises from the profitable connection between established intermediaries in the publishing industry and book supply chain (Thompson, 2012). These professional connections are leveraged by international publishing houses in the exportation of books and other intellectual property into various territories, whether in translation or as original work (Steiner, 2018). Many of these market mechanisms have been transformed by digital technologies and platform capitalism (Parnell, 2021a; Ray Murray and Squires, 2013).

Platform capitalism increasingly operates as a governing system of the post-digital publishing industry. Building on theorisations of digital capitalism (Fuchs, 2013; Pace, 2018; Schiller, 1999), platform capitalism positions technology companies as economic actors and

theorizes the intersections between digital processes and capital structures. This model of capitalism describes a system in which digital technologies constitute the central apparatus of a supranational market system and transform forces of production and structure of work (Fuchs, 2013; Schiller, 1999). This has resulted in radical decentralisation, flexibility and acceleration of work and the broader market through vast economic restructuring and the computerization of productive systems. Rather than eliminating previous systems of capitalism, platform capitalism is just one form of capitalism that co-exists today (Fuchs, 2013). Some aspects of older forms of capitalism endure in the digital sphere, including private ownership, wage labour and commodity markets. Other aspects, like the types of property, assets and capital, are transformed through internet technologies.

Bestselling books exist within both these forms of capitalism. Their commercial success is linked to distinctive marketing and reception practices, including prominently the development of the author brand and celebrityization of the author, honed by publishing conglomerates. Author branding occurs through 'subsidiary forms of circulation' such as advertising, television, radio, festivals, profiles, and book launches, which 'feeds back into future performances' by the author (Ellis, 2007: 91). For debut authors, authorial celebrity is produced by the marketing efforts of publishers and closely intertwined with the stories they are telling (Moran, 2000). In an epoch of media abundance, the author brand becomes central to the successful promotion and reception of books.

In contemporary book culture, much of this activity happens on digital sites. Bestselling books are entwined with a range of digital practices, users and algorithms, including those on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram; reviews and interviews on blogs, booktuber channels, and below-the-line comments on digital newspaper features. Each of these digital nodes is an internally rich and complex site of reception. In this article, we focus primarily on Goodreads as a site of reader reception, exemplary of the user practices of platform capitalism (Nakamura, 2013). We are interested in the interrelation of readers, media reviewers, publishers and authors across the institutions and platforms of conglomerate and digital capitalism, and how these relationships are expressed through statements about the publication stories of novels, the author as celebrity, and the emotional content of books. Our method for discerning these dynamics is the case study.

Methods

The methods for this research involve selecting information-rich case studies and analysing their publication contexts and media reception. Our case study titles were purposively sampled for debut works by Australian authors, published between 2010-2020, that became bestsellers: *Burial Rites* by Hannah Kent and *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* by Heather Morris.

To analyse these case study titles, we constructed publishing histories, including information about production, acquisition, prizes, and international rights sales. We then analyzed media and reader reception for the books. We collected 5 media reviews for each book from leading publications and literary journals and scraped the top 100 reviews on Goodreads. The media reviews were sourced from a Google search. Google's search algorithms give primacy to factors such as number of inbound links to the website to determine its importance, the number of keywords that appear on a page, the useability of the website (i.e. if it is mobile-friendly), location and time. As we were searching for media publications that are reputable, the Google Search algorithms worked in favour of this sampling method. Our dataset includes reviews from *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Monthly* and *Australian Book Review* for each book, plus *The Sydney Review of Books* for *Burial Rites* and *Kirkus Reviews* for *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*.

Goodreads reviews were included in the sample to account for the role of readers in mediating and bolstering buzz around bestselling titles. The practices that contribute to a bestselling title, such as reader interest and book buying, occur in dispersed spaces and often immaterial ways. Goodreads is a relatively open, archived resource of this interest. Goodreads reviews were sampled from the site's default algorithm and scraped using Outwit Hub on 30 July 2020. The default sorting algorithm on Goodreads is hidden behind a 'black box', however observations on Goodreads forums suggest that the algorithm incorporates the number of likes and comments on a review, the popularity of the reviewer based on connections and followers, and the length and recency of the review.¹ The date range of reviews showing in the default algorithm varied for each book: from 27 December 2012 - 13 July 2020 for *Burial Rites*, and 22 October 2017 - 17 April 2020 for *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*. The top 100 reviews represents a small sample for each book: as of December 2020, *Burial Rites* had 11,402 reviews, and *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* had 35,023 reviews. We performed word frequency analysis and content

¹ See for example the discussion at <https://www.goodreads.com/topic/show/17020568-default-review-algorithm>; <https://www.goodreads.com/topic/show/588691-reviews-don-t-show-up-in-community-reviews>

analysis on the Goodreads reviews in NVivo, with codes for author mentions and emotion words. Author mentions were coded to include both mentions of the author name and by title (e.g. 'the author'). Emotion words were determined to be any words or phrases that indicated sentiment or feeling about the text, author or reading experience, whether positive, negative or mixed (e.g. 'emotional', 'haunting', 'bleak', 'loved', 'sad'). Some of these words were used to describe the text; the love story is a major part of Morris' novel, for instance. Manual coding, rather than an automated word count, ensured that phrases were taken in context and indicated emotional responses.

The Publication Context of *Burial Rites*

Burial Rites, a work of historical fiction set in the nineteenth century, tells the story of Agnes Magnúsdóttir, the last woman to be executed in Iceland. As a product of the publishing industry, *Burial Rites* emerges from an established section of the media ecosystem, in which literary journals and university creative writing programs together foster new work (McGurl, 2009). The idea for the novel began when Kent, as a high school student, went on exchange to Iceland; her writing skills were developed through study of creative writing in her Bachelors degree, and a creative writing PhD during which she wrote the manuscript of *Burial Rites*.

While a PhD student, Kent co-founded literary journal *Kill Your Darlings*, where she is still an Editor and Publishing Director. *Kill Your Darlings* is one of Australia's best-known new literary journals, and has regularly received grants from the Australia Council and Creative Victoria. Kent and *Kill Your Darlings* co-founder, Rebecca Starford, had met when they both worked at *Australian Book Review* (Elson, 2017). In developing *Kill Your Darlings*, they worked with Jo Case — books editor at *The Big Issue* and later programming manager for the *Melbourne Writers Festival*. Starford went on to work at independent publisher, Affirm Press. This snapshot of connections shows that Kent was well-networked in Australia's literary scene before her first novel was published. Her networks arise predominantly through literary institutions rather than being associated with emergent networks of platform capitalism. Kent is not, for example, highly active on social media, although she joined Twitter in 2012 and has around 8000 followers. Her career pathway to becoming a writer is one typical of the late 1990s and early 2000s. As a product of university creative writing programs, *Burial Rites* belongs at least partly to what Mark McGurl (2009) has called, in relation to postwar American fiction, the 'program era'.

Burial Rites' publication process continued through traditional routes, benefitting from the symbolic capital of prizes. Kent submitted her manuscript to Writing Australia's Unpublished Manuscript Award in 2011. This was a moment when *Burial Rites* broke out from its existing institutions and networks and began accruing publicity on a larger scale. Kent received a mentorship from Pulitzer prizewinner Geraldine Brooks, and signed with literary agents in Australia, London, New York and LA who managed an international auction for the book. The advance for the US rights sale alone was estimated as being over a million dollars (Morris, 2013). *Burial Rites* was published by Little Brown & Company (an imprint of Hachette) in North America, and Pan Macmillan in the UK and Australia. The publisher's blurb for the novel reads 'Based on a true story, *Burial Rites* is a deeply moving novel about personal freedom: who we are seen to be versus who we believe ourselves to be, and the ways in which we will risk everything for love. In beautiful, cut-glass prose, Hannah Kent portrays Iceland's formidable landscape, where every day is a battle for survival, and asks, how can one woman hope to endure when her life depends upon the stories told by others?'

Kent moved from a national, relatively highbrow literary network into the global publishing industry, where her book was framed as a mainstream, commercially appealing novel. The dynamism and excitement of book culture is partly produced by moments like these: when books move between focused, small-scale communities and broader arenas of circulation and reception. This can also be a transition from a peripheral national literary field to a prominent position in global culture (Casanova, 2004).

The Reception of *Burial Rites*

Burial Rites was a bestseller in Australia and a high seller in the US, although not to the extent hoped for by its US publisher (Sullivan, 2015), and not at the level of a megaseller such as *Fifty Shades of Grey*, or indeed *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*.

Burial Rites was longlisted, shortlisted, or won, nearly 20 Australian and international prizes, including being shortlisted for major awards including the National Book Award International Author Of The Year and the Baileys Women's Prize For Fiction. Prizes themselves constitute a broad field, with different awards oriented towards different kinds of books (Dane, 2020; Driscoll, 2014; English, 2002; Marsden, 2021). Perhaps in line with *Burial Rites'* broad market appeal and positioning as mainstream fiction, several of the awards it won were industry-based (eg booksellers') or readers' choice awards.

Burial Rites was also widely reviewed. Some of these focused closely on the book. Sarah Moss in *The Guardian* includes no biographical information about the author, and concludes '*Burial Rites* is beautiful and compelling, and, with the flaws of a good first novel, it's the announcement of a writer to watch' (2013). Steven Heighon in *The New York Times* (2013) offers historical context to the events described in the novel, then focuses on the flaws and strengths of the prose, for example writing 'These gripping pages demonstrate the way narrative urgency can discipline a writer's style and pre-empt self-indulgence, a flaw that's far too common in the book's earlier monologues'.

In contrast, Australian reviews tended to blend their account of *Burial Rites* with information about its author and publication context. These reviews show interest in the international consecration of the novel as represented by its advance deals. Million dollar advances are very unusual for Australian authors, where the average author income in Australia is \$12,900 per year (Zwar et al., 2015), creating something of a tall poppy scenario. Bronwyn Lea in *Australian Book Review* begins her review with a description of the bidding war for rights to *Burial Rites* (2013). Alexandra Coghlan in *The Monthly* (2013) refers to the 'heavyweight PR' as 'a pressure this competent debut could do without'.

A long essay in *The Sydney Review of Books* by Ben Etherington includes analysis of the prose style in *Burial Rites* and the novel's publishing context and marketing. Etherington's meta analysis of reviews of *Burial Rites* then identifies the 'the hype surrounding the novel's advance' as a challenge, because 'a reviewer can easily be destabilised by the interpenetration of literary and commercial value.' Etherington concludes that Australian reviews show 'no favouritism for Kent as a first-time novelist attracting international attention – she is not 'our Hannah' yet [...] It hardly seems worth pointing out that the novel's commercial success and critical reception in Australia are at odds' (2013). The media reception of *Burial Rites* thus ranges from commentary on the novel to uneasy engagements with its advance and reflections on how these two components interact.

Goodreads Responses to *Burial Rites*

The high level of book talk online about *Burial Rites* is commensurate with the novel winning people's choice prizes - this is a book readers love to engage with. *Burial Rites* was published in 2013, and is less intensely digitally networked than more recent books. But Kent's novel is still part of what Simone Murray (2018) calls the 'digital literary sphere', and the novel's

enmeshment in this sphere has become more thorough over time, showing the increasing role of digital practices in contemporary literary culture.

On Goodreads, *Burial Rites* has been rated 62,860 times (with an average rating of 4.01 out of 5), and reviewed 9,107 times. Of the 100 sampled Goodreads reviews, the author was mentioned in 57% of reviews (51% by name, and a further 6% as the author). Two examples are 'Hannah Kent has announced her arrival in the literary world with an absolute gem of a book, which just flows from first page to last. Stunning!'² and 'The author did an incredible job of fictionalizing Agnes' story.' This rate of mentions, just over half of reviews, indicates that mentioning the author is an important but not essential component of reviews for this book. It shows how an author name can develop into a brand, by being involved in the reception of a debut book.

Strikingly, 84% of the reviews described an emotional reaction to the book. One example reads:

I thought I had emotionally prepared myself for what was to come, but I wasn't expecting such an amazing story[...] all my emotional preparedness was for naught. I ended up swallowing a huge lump in my throat, and felt nearly gutted by the time I turned the final page.³

The level of emotion in this review, and across the dataset, is very high. Emotional language is a feature of many Goodreads reviews (Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo, 2019), and in this case may be especially high due to the novel's focus on loneliness and the anticipation of death.

Word frequency analysis⁴ shows that the six most common words are details that would be included in most reviews: the name of the main character, the setting and the author name, plus the words story, book and read: Agnes (260), Story (195), Book (181), Iceland (131), Read (102), Kent (102). The next most frequent words also relate to the plot (eg executed, murder) and include the title of the novel. Other frequently used words are more particular to this reading experience: Beautiful (46); Feel (44); Felt (42); Love (33); Hard (33); Written (31); Haunt (33); Cold (30); Atmosphere (24); Emotion (25); Heart (19); Dark (18); Star (18); Landscape (18); Truth (17). One review reads, in total 'So haunting, so beautiful.'⁵

² We have chosen to provide links to the reviews, to acknowledge their authorship, but not to name the reviewers in this article, in order to respect their privacy. We have also maintained original spelling and punctuation of the reviews to respect the vernacular forms of Goodreads.

<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/864853469>;

<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1795941155>

³ <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1795941155>

⁴ Numbers based on NVivo word frequency analysis of top 1000 words, minimum length of 3 and including stemmed words.

⁵ <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/981928233>

Reader responses indicate an emotional experience tied to Agnes' story; the same story that Kent discovered as a student in Iceland, mediated through her lyrical prose. Emotion ties together the production and marketing processes of conglomerate capitalism, and the reception of the book on digital networks. This emotion works together with *Burial Rites*' high advance and the buzz it created, and the development of Kent's author brand through a pathway of university creative writing programs, prizes and literary journals, in a mix of strategies that support the success of the novel. The distinctive combination of practices from conglomerate and platform capitalism at work for Kent's book, however, differs from the practices that supported the later bestseller from debut author Heather Morris.

The Publication Context of *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*

Heather Morris' *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* follows the survival story of Lale Sokolov, a Jewish Slovakian man who was imprisoned at the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camps where he worked as the camp's tattooist and met and fell in love with his future wife, Gita Furman. *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* developed through both professional and grassroots networks across media sectors. Morris' author website recounts her background growing up in small town New Zealand, marrying and raising three children, returning to higher education as an adult and then working in the social work department of a medical centre for over twenty years, while pursuing her interests in writing through attending screenwriting seminars and writing courses. Her author biography concludes with the phrase 'And then I met Lale Sokolov' (Morris, 2019).

The origin of *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, which is also Morris' origin point as an author, has been recited many times as a central feature of the book's publicity. As the story goes, Morris was introduced to Sokolov in 2003 through a friend of his son, shortly after Furman had passed away. After three months, Sokolov's dog put a tennis ball on Morris' lap and upon seeing that his dogs liked her – and deciding he liked her – he told her that she could tell his story (ABC Conversations, 2018). Morris and Sokolov met twice weekly over the next three years, forming a close relationship. The frequent repetition of this story through the book's marketing prioritises the relationship between Morris and Sokolov and positions Morris as his mouthpiece.

Originally writing Sokolov's story as a screenplay, Morris positioned herself within legacy media systems by attending screenwriting seminars and writing courses. Film Victoria, a local film production company, optioned the film rights when she had a 'reasonable draft of the screenplay' (Morris, 2018b). With the option, Film Victoria paid for professional researchers to work on historical details and developed the script with Morris (Harari, 2019; Morris, 2018b).

When the script did not proceed to production and the rights reverted, Morris began entering it into several screenwriting competitions in the US. The screenplay was a semi-finalist in the 2014 Final Draft Screenwriting Competition and was awarded sixteenth place in the 2015 International Screenwriters' Association competition. Finaling in prizes did not propel the script beyond its established networks in the same way they did for Kent, however, Morris still benefited from the symbolic capital and feedback provided. Two independent script consultants urged Morris to adapt the screenplay into a novel in order to improve its chances of being made into a feature film (Kickstarter, nd).

In 2015, Morris launched a crowdfunding campaign on Kickstarter to fund the process of self-publishing. Here, the text became truly digital and began to take advantage of the network structures of platform capitalism. Kickstarter can be a valuable platform for independent authors and publishers to find, build and leverage audiences (Parnell, 2021b). In choosing to convert the story into a novel, Morris also tapped into an established pathway of film adaptation; books have been a prominent source for adaptation in the film industry since the golden age of Hollywood (Murray, 2012). The campaign drew the attention of Angela Meyer, commissioning editor at Echo Publishing, a Melbourne-based imprint of Bonnier Zaffre and in October Morris posted an update on Kickstarter to say she had signed with Echo (Harari, 2019).

Here, Morris benefited from the expertise, support and connections of a small publishing imprint within a large conglomerate. A proactive editor, Meyer worked through a structural editing phase during which Morris added around 58,000 words to the story. Once complete, Meyer also supported the sale of rights through to Echo's multinational parent Bonnier Zaffre and beyond. The level of international interest pushed the initial publication date from September 2017 to 27 January 2018, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz (Kickstarter, nd).

The book still exists in a cross-media context. In 2018, the Australian industry newsletter *Books + Publishing* announced that *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* would be adapted as a television miniseries by U.K. based production company Synchronicity. The 'multi-part, high-end international drama series' was set to be released in January 2020 to coincide with the 75th anniversary of the closing of Auschwitz, however there has been no news on its development since the initial announcement (Synchronicity, 2018).

This debut has become the first in a series of Holocaust novels by Morris. The second book, *Cilka's Journey*, focuses on a secondary character from *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* and the third, *Three Sisters*, based on interviews with three sisters who were in Auschwitz together, is due to be published in late 2021. This genre of Holocaust biofiction based on interviews with

survivors has become a feature of Morris' author brand. This practice is emphasised in another book by Morris and published by Echo, *Stories of Hope* Morris, in which Morris explores the 'art of listening – a skill she employed when she met Lale Sokolov. It was her ability to listen that led him to entrust her with his story' (Echo Publishers, 2020). The story of Morris listening to Sokolov and the relationship that developed between them is central to Morris' author brand, and this is reflected heavily in the reception of the novel.

The Reception of *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*

The Tattooist of Auschwitz was a phenomenal success, selling over three million copies worldwide and spending time on bestseller lists in the UK, US and Australia (Books + Publishing, 2018; Mansfield, 2019). It was translated into 17 languages with rights sold in 43 countries. It also attracted the attention of a number of awards. In 2018, it was a Goodreads Choice Award Nominee in the Historical Fiction and Debut Author categories. In 2019, it was shortlisted for the Australian Book Industry Award General Fiction Book of the Year and the Matt Richell Award for New Writer of the Year and the audiobook, narrated by Richard Armitage, won the American Audio Publishers Association's Audie Award for Fiction.

These sales numbers and prizes combined with the narrative at the forefront of the publicity set in motion the focus of the media reception. The news articles and reviews tend to focus on the story of the story (the relationship between Morris and Sokolov) as well as the authenticity of the novel. Reviews in *The New York Times* and *The Monthly*, both written by Christine Kenneally, focus on the issue of factual inaccuracies, including inconsistencies around Furman's identification number and access to penicillin at Auschwitz. Kenneally notes that the 'Additional Information' section at the end of the novel 'adds gravitas to the book' but also 'raises questions about how we talk about what is true in a novel based on a true story'.

Kenneally expands on this question of accuracy in *The Monthly* in 2020. She writes that 'central to the [*The Tattooist of Auschwitz*'s] promotion was the idea that the novel's story was real. Morris told journalists that it was 95 per cent true, and she spoke about it as 'Lali's story'⁶, not as a novel' (Kenneally, 2020). This concern over accuracy is echoed in Jane Housham's (2018) review in *The Guardian* and by Tali Lavi (2018) in the *Australian Book Review*. The *Kirkus* review (2018), while mostly positive, ends with a wish that Morris 'had somehow found a way to present her material as nonfiction'. The trueness of the story was thus central to the book's media reception as well as its publicity campaign.

⁶ The spelling of Sokolov's first name is one of the points of contention with which Kenneally is concerned.

Much of the media attention around this book is framed, or at least written, by a few people. In addition to reviewing the book for *The New York Times* and *The Monthly*, Kenneally is a guest on an episode of the 7AM podcast (2020), a co-production by *The Saturday Paper* and *The Monthly*, where she discusses the controversy around *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*. In addition to Housham's short review, there are three articles about Morris' books written by *The Guardian's* book reporter Alison Flood. The limited number of voices represented in media reviews amplifies the positions of each reviewer as well as narrowing the tone of reception. The consolidation of book reviews in traditional media outlets (Nolan & Ricketson, 2013) sits alongside the expanded reception from readers offered through digital sites.

Goodreads Responses to *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*

The Tattooist of Auschwitz is a highly networked book and many readers have responded to it through online platforms. On Goodreads, the trueness of the story features heavily in reviews, though few express concerns about its accuracy. Of the 100 Goodreads reviews sampled, 37% mention that *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* is based on a true story, and a further 14% mention that it is based on interviews between Morris and Sokolov or otherwise imply that it is a true story. Truthfulness and the relationship between Morris and Sokolov are reinforced by Morris and her editor Meyer in their engagement with posts. When a Goodreads user asks why the book is described as historical fiction if it is a true story, Meyer replies:

As with Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark*, the decision was made to release the book as fiction 'based on a true story' because of those moments where creative or dramatic license was taken [...] The story is based on what Lale shared with Heather over many years [...] The dialogue, for example - at first I thought Heather had invented much was said, but many of the conversations are word for word what Lale told her. I have seen videos of Lale, too, and can confirm this...⁷

Most questions asked on Goodreads either went unanswered or were answered by other Goodreads users, however, this response by Meyer, along with another one by Morris, emphasises the 'story of the story' and demonstrate the proactive role of author and publisher in shaping the framework of reception for this bestseller debut.

The story of the story is a prominent feature of Goodreads reviews that mention the author. The author is mentioned in 33% of the Goodreads reviews, of which only 23% name

⁷ <https://www.goodreads.com/questions/1282620-if-this-is-the-true-story-of-lale-and>

Morris. Some of these mentions occur simply as a version of 'by Heather Morris' while others that refer to 'the author' provide commentary around the writing style or how the story came to be written. Beyond her relationship with Sokolov, Morris' author brand does not seem to be an important factor for these Goodreads reviewers.

Words or phrases that signify emotion appear in 51% of Goodreads reviews. While this is a majority, it is significantly less than for *Burial Rites* and what may be expected for a Holocaust novel. Among the most common emotion words are: Love (101); Feel (31); Horror (29); Emotion (22); Hope (21); Harrowing (9); Shock (9); and, Fear (9). Some of these words appear in the context of describing the story. Love, for example, is most often used to categorise the book as a love story rather than describe reader reaction. Others describe a lack of emotion in context such as, 'The subject matter may be heart-rending but this book is not making me feel anything - the characters are like cardboard cut-outs.'⁸ When emotion is evident in reviews of *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* it tends to be polarised and sometimes contradictory.

Like *Burial Rites*, *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* is an industry success, and like *Burial Rites*, its production and reception traverse a number of media institutions and platforms. Morris' novel is distinctive for its cross-media connection with the screenwriting sector, and deeper integration with platform capitalism through her use of crowdfunding platforms, where her publisher discovered her. Discovery is a significant theme in the production and reception of *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, from Morris' discovery of the story, to her publishers' discovery of the manuscript, to readers' discovery of the book. The story behind the book is the key source of fascination, eclipsing emotional engagement and the author's individual brand.

Truth, Emotion, and the Interplay of Capitalist Modes

Burial Rites and *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* followed two very different paths through the book industry, achieving different kinds of success. Kent received a newsworthy seven figure advance for *Burial Rites*, which won a number of awards and was favourably received but did not achieve the megaseller sales numbers its publishers hoped for. *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, on the other hand, was a digital find by a small publishing outpost with no reported advance of any kind. It was sold internationally before its publication and found great commercial appeal, selling millions of copies worldwide. While the media reception for *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* was not as favourable, the amount of mainstream media attention the controversies surrounding this novel generated may have added to its bestseller status. At play in both of these publishing

⁸ https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/2296550204?book_show_action=false&from_review_page=1

stories was a confluence of industry buzz (a big advance for Kent and international rights sales for Morris), successful marketing that focused on the kinds of books they are, and favourable reception through awards, media and/or reader reviews. Central to these factors, and evident in the responses by readers, is the importance of the story behind the book; that is, the way they came to be through their creation and production.

The historical material in *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* and *Burial Rites* is highly relevant to their success. As historical fiction, these books are part of a broader trend of Australian books that reach international success, which are often historical, and set in countries other than Australia. Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark* (1982) (which Meyer references in her Goodreads reply), Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2005), and Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (2013) are examples of books that became international bestsellers, award winners and, in the case of the former two, blockbuster films. *Schindler's Ark* and *The Book Thief*, like *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, are Holocaust novels, while Flanagan's is a World War II novel largely set in Asia. The setting of these novels, and their centring around globally significant historical events, is undoubtedly a factor in their appeal in an international market, where the national origins of transnational bestsellers are 'washed away' (Driscoll & Rehberg Sedo, 2020). The perceived Australianness was very much absent in the promotion and reception of both Kent's and Morris' novels. *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* and *Burial Rites* became global literary texts, engaged in an international literary system and independent from their national literary field (Casanova, 2004).

As works of historical fiction, each novel's true material was central to their promotion and reception. Trueness and ethics are particularly sensitive issues with Holocaust books as artefacts of living memory. The relationship between Morris and Sokolov and the truthfulness of her retelling of the story is a strong throughline in the reviews and media coverage of the book. Research - a basis of truthfulness - was also discussed in the reception of *Burial Rites*, though in a much less sensitised way. This is partly due to the different kinds of literary projects each novel represents: where Kent engages in a literary recreation of the story of Agnes Magnusdottir, *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* is framed as a retelling, with some creative license, by Morris. The reduced sensitivity around truthfulness for *Burial Rites* also arises from the greater independence between Kent's author brand and her novel. Kent's reputation was built through the institution of the university and through literary journals. In contrast, Morris' positioning in the role of interlocutor of Sokolov's story was the central element of the marketing and reception of *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, and indeed her status as a listener has become the foundation of her career.

The emotional responses in reviews are closely tied to the kind of reading experiences each book offers, suggesting that emotion plays a part in both conglomerate and platform capitalism. Emotion is a prominent lexical feature of Goodreads reviews, emblematic of intimate reading and journaling practices (Driscoll & Rehberg Sedo, 2019). Our analysis showed that Goodreads reviews of *Burial Rites* used more emotional language than reviews of *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*. This perhaps surprising finding makes more sense when the texts of the novels are considered.⁹ Kent's novel, with its lyrical prose, promises an intense, private reading experience; Morris' book, while also dealing with emotional content, is positioned in the realm of history and world events. Morris' novel presents an emotional balance between the romantic hope of a love story and the horrors of the concentration camp, while Kent's narrative focuses its lens on the intensity of the grim Icelandic historical setting. These emotional notes are also evident in the marketing of the books, and we expect this also shaped reader responses. Overall, our comparison of the publication contexts and reception of novels by Kent and Morris shows that reader responses often mirror the marketing emphasis by publishers; publishers send signals that frame how readers express opinions. The role of publishers in the creation of a bestseller extends beyond the quantity and intensity of their marketing drive to include the qualitative framing of a potentially successful book.

These factors show that the successes of *Burial Rites* and *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* involve activities across both conglomerate and platform capitalism. Moreover, the success of these books suggests that producing a bestseller in the contemporary industry requires a successful interplay between these two modes of capitalism. While the manuscripts found different pathways to their acquiring publishers – Kickstarter versus PhD program – both books ended up travelling internationally through conglomerates and having digitally networked lives, tying the two modes together. Our case studies show that prizes, especially for unpublished work, remain important sources for the accumulation of symbolic capital, which is important in and transferable across both models of capitalism. Intensified connections between traditional and digital media products can also be seen in media and technology companies that trade in the commercialisation of intellectual property through adaptations and transmedia ecosystems, such as Wattpad, Webtoon and Tencent (Parnell, 2021a). Rather than being independent and competing modes of capitalism, conglomerate capitalism and digital platform capitalism are closely interwoven, as the discovery of these debut successes shows. The greater commercial success of *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, along with other books that have traveled similar

⁹ We note, though, that as there are more Goodreads reviews for Morris' novel overall, it is possible that the 100 reviews sampled do not fully reflect the full range of emotion expressed by readers.

digital-first routes and found megaseller success such as *Fifty Shades of Grey*, suggests that greater integration between these two forms of capitalism can produce higher sales.

Conclusion

Publishing a hoped-for bestseller is always a risky venture, especially when it is written by a debut author: each new bestselling author is by definition unusual in the book market. This article's analysis of two bestsellers cannot be used to draw general conclusions about which books become bestsellers and why; rather, the article has identified some of the underlying processes that contribute to success.

The publishing pathways and reception of Hannah Kent's *Burial Rites* and Heather Morris' *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* show that highlighting specific textual qualities, such as emotion or truth in historical retellings, as well as the story behind how the books were created, can contribute to post-digital literary success. These frames of reception reflect the points of emphasis in the publishers' marketing material and contribute to the development of the authors' brands as foundations for further success. Both Kent and Morris have gone on to publish similarly positioned books; Kent's follow-up to *Burial Rites*, *The Good People*, is also based on true historical events of a murder (in this case, in Ireland in 1825), and, as mentioned earlier, *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* forms the start of a series of books based on real people who survived World War II.

The primacy given to these features in newspaper reviews, industry publications and Goodreads reviews demonstrates that traditional and online media platforms have common ways of receiving new bestselling books. Yet there is a difference in emphasis across these reception sites. In Goodreads reviews for both *Burial Rites* and *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, emotional responses and discussions of the truth of the story are centred on the book's personal resonance with the reader. Media reviews tend to scrutinise the books' objective validity and position in world history. These varying engagements with emotion and truthfulness create a complementary discourse across platforms and media organisations, generating the buzz - and consequent sales success and cultural influence - of bestsellers.

Our case studies show that no one form of capitalism is sufficient for producing bestsellers in the contemporary post-digital market. In order to minimise risk, books need multiple nodes of engagement across both platform and conglomerate capitalist spheres. Publishing bestsellers no longer relies predominantly on large advances and the buzz they produce. The new, integrated model, in which books with publishing paths like *The Tattooist of*

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Auschwitz can find success, suggests that smaller publishers without the financial capital of large houses can produce bestsellers. This could possibly, in time, diversify the kinds of stories that become bestsellers. As was shown with the #PublishingPaidMe hashtag on Twitter in 2020, the advance system unfairly disadvantages authors from marginalised backgrounds, including critically acclaimed and celebrity authors like Roxane Gay, Jesmyn Ward and N.K. Jemisin (Flood, 2020). Beyond this, there are possibilities for self-published authors to compete in this model of contemporary publishing capitalism; at least in the early stages where a book is discovered. Given the lowered barriers to entry for self-publishing compared to traditional publishing, this may too work towards diversifying contemporary book culture (Parnell, 2018). In these ways, the two modes of capitalism can strategically work together; the advantages of platform capitalism can offset the limitations of conglomerate capitalism and vice versa. Bestsellers show the logics and systems of an industry in flux, and the strategies that can support a debut work to reach a mass audience.

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