

More than Commerce? The Emergence of Female Psychological Thriller Writers in the 21st Century.

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Abstract

Since the publication of *Gone Girl* in 2012 female thriller writers have changed the crime fiction landscape. Of course, the success of writers like Gillian Flynn, Paula Hawkins and Celeste Ng is not just about them being female. They have reimagined the thriller from a female perspective to great commercial success. This article will examine whether their success is purely economic or if the rise of the female thriller author is a cultural matter, part of a new wave of feminism and exploration of the contemporary themes of domestic experience and complex, nuanced female characters?

Key Words

Bourdieu; Commercial; Female; Feminism, Paratext; Thriller.

Introduction

Analysis from Goodreads has found that reading is a gendered matter and readers predominately choose books by authors of their own gender (Flood 2014). Interestingly, the research found that women make up 80% of a female author's audience in the first year of publication (Flood 2014). On average women rated books by female authors 4 out of 5 against 3.8 out of 5 for male authors. Men also rated books written by women higher than those written by men at 3.9 out of 5 against 3.8 out of 5 (Flood 2014). It follows that the majority of the readers of female thriller writers are female and it is possible that male writers might consider themselves at a disadvantage in this lucrative genre. But is this just about commerce or are the books part of the plethora of mainstream feminist writing which has proved so successful in recent years?

Women's Reading Habits and the Psychological Thriller

In all categories of fiction (except fantasy, science fiction and horror) women purchasers outnumber men (Taylor 2019, 3-4). Overall sales of fiction books are 63% female and 37% male (Taylor 2019, 4). Fiction publishers can see a clear commercial benefit in targeting women readers. Author, Lee Child has described his readers as female, so the books women are reading are certainly not "cosy crime" (Taylor 2019, 128).

In addition, there is an impetus to finding new female thriller authors as the genre succeeds against the challenging business landscape of contemporary publishing. In 2017, the Association of American Publishers estimated that fiction sales in the United States (US) fell 16% between 2013 and 2015 (Milliot and Deahl 2018). The authors say that the predominant view is that it is challenging to get market or press exposure for new novels and authors. Citing research from the Codex Group to support this they surmise that authors are the primary driver for purchasing decisions.

Set against this challenging marketplace is the success of the thriller amongst female readers. As early as 2010, mystery, crime and thrillers were the most popular genre amongst readers in the US and female readers were consuming them at a higher rate than men, 57% compared to 39% (Marketing Charts 2010).

Commercial impetus: The Psychological Thriller

There is no doubt that the popularity of psychological thrillers has given the crime genre a huge boost. Paula Hawkins's *The Girl on the Train* saw 1.3 million print sales and 2.4 million eBook sales when it was published in 2015 (Writers Online 2018). In 2017, crime became the United Kingdom's (UK's) most popular adult fiction genre outselling general and literary fiction for the first time (Writers Online 2018).

The value of crime book sales increased from £106.3 million to £117.6 million (Writers Online 2018). The genre has great commercial value, and it makes sense for publishers to acquire and exploit this economic capital

In 2017, Shari Lapena's *The Couple Next Door* was the UK's bestselling crime title with 404,099 copies sold. This made it the UK's number three bestseller of the year (Writers Online 2018). For the same year in the US Statistica's research - cited by Writers Online - showed that mystery, thriller and crime remained the most popular genre. According to the 2018 Author Earnings annual report, mystery, thriller and suspense eBook sales accounted for \$187,673,043.62 of revenue (Writers Online, 2018). The numbers speak for themselves - the genre is extremely valuable to the publishing industry.

Thinking about Bourdieu and his concept of publishing delineated by fields, it is clear that these books can be placed into the commercial cultural field as they are products for mass consumption. Bourdieu tells us that the "contexts of cultural products are what let us think about them as cultural products in the first place" (Bhaskar 2013, 91). Publishers define what is and is not art in Bourdieu's view. His theory describing cultural fields provides a framework for analysis which places publishers in a role as a cultural or economic agent. Logically, using the model, we would consider these books and the companies publishing them as falling into the field of economic capital.

The concept of different types of capital is useful here. The psychological thriller has economic capital within publishing and this has extended to other media. Successful television and film adaptations have been made of *Gone Girl*, *The Girl on the Train* and recently *Little Fires Everywhere*. The spread across media and territories, however, indicates that these books and the stories they tell are more than economic capital. They speak to a wide audience and Bourdieu's binary choice seems limiting. The commercial value is clear but examination of the voices and issues within the books indicate that there is more to this genre.

Psychological thrillers fit firmly in Bourdieu's commercial field. But when considering culture it is also interesting to see that these titles are commercially strong across cultures. Across Europe, the US and Australia we see successful female commercial thriller authors. It is logical for their books to cross territories which are geographically or culturally close. According to Hofstede Insights, Australia, Germany the UK and the USA are all culturally close, albeit some are geographically distant (Hofstede Insights 2020). Books are crossing

cultural lines and similar reader appetites for suspense appear evident across continents. Romy Hausmann's debut thriller, *Liebes Kind* sold over 175,000 copies in Germany and translation rights have been sold in twelve territories worldwide (Chandler 2019). International publishers are seeking out female authored thrillers. These are bestselling books of their time providing economic capital to publishers, success to their authors and raising female voices globally.

Interestingly, the publishers most active in this area are not the feminist presses; they are the big commercial houses. Looking at the UK's top one hundred print bestsellers in 2018 crime was again dominant, but two publishers, Hachette and Penguin Random House, had the largest share of the market with 75% (Rowe 2019). These gatekeepers are not necessarily female but the fact that these books are not coming from feminist presses is not necessarily a negative. Those presses helped to move women's writing into the mainstream and make it appealing to today's commercial houses (Taylor 2019, 46-47). Historically "the greater clout of mainstream houses means they were able to buy off already established writers from the feminist presses" (Riley 2018, 60). Nowadays women's writing is not just part of the mainstream, it is the trend. Commercial houses are playing their part in disseminating women's voices. Whilst this is a lucrative trend to capitalise on it is about more than money.

Feminism and the Contemporary Psychological Thriller

It is apparent that these books have huge commercial value and capital, but to answer the question this article poses, it is important to consider whether they have more than just economic capital. They are literature of their time and possess a cultural component. Feminism in the 21st century has developed into a fourth wave in the last ten years with new battlegrounds focusing on issues like empowerment. In this context women writers are seen to be in a confident position to "assert their feminism" (Taylor 2019, 170).

The issues that feminists are focusing on are changing over time. First and second wave feminists fought for, and garnered, greater freedom, individualism, and social mobility. The third wave centred on gender norms, the marginalisation of women in society and intersectionality. The fourth wave takes this further. Feminists continue to advocate for greater representation of marginalised groups in politics and business, and are using media platforms to mobilise, empower and speak out against those who abuse their power. Issues around assault, harassment, and bodily autonomy are at the forefront of this wave. Movements like #MeToo and Time's Up have increased momentum in the 21st century and signalled the return to a visible form of feminism. These movements have begun to "hold our culture's most powerful men accountable for their behaviour" (Grady 2018).

Whilst progress, albeit slow, is being made in many areas women thriller writers are focussing on events that remain of real importance to women - domestic abuse, violence in the home and gender expectations (Taylor 2019, 130). Taylor states that "Mass media play a large role on depicting and reframing issues of gender role stereotypes" (Taylor 2020, 144). Her recent book, *Why Women are Blamed for Everything*, explores the victim blaming that remains prevalent despite decades of feminism. Women writing thrillers are also exploring these issues and abuses of power. Victims and protagonists are complex characters in their books and do not need to fit the mould of what society considers to be an appropriate victim.

It makes sense that this is happening as a cultural phenomenon. "Given that women have never owned the majority of the media, we have long had to get out stores to other women through alternative sources" (Baumgardener and Richards 2020, 91).

Politicians are speaking out about violence against women and making sure that voices are heard. Jess Phillips MP said, the "truth about violence against women is hard to hear. It makes us feel unsafe; it is other; it is not us. The truth is we won't be safe *until* we face it" (Phillips 2017, 102). One way women are exploring this issue is through literature. Taylor's research on women's reading habits found paradoxically that women said crime fiction made them feel safe and secure (Taylor 2019, 129). This may be because of women's experience of day to day life. Laura Lippmann, the author of the Tess Monaghan series

explained in *The Guardian* that women think about crime in a very personal way “because they know what it’s like to be prey” (Hughes 2016). The books they are reading are “light on gunplay, heavy on emotional violence” (Rafferty 2016).

The appeal of the female writer and her brand of thriller can also be seen as a response to women telling their own stories. From a feminist angle it has been called an act of solidarity - women reading crime fiction written by women. “In the act of writing and reading crime, we finally get to be the villains and the heroes that, as human beings, we truly are” (McGrath, 2019). But equally, it can be argued that these books still frame violence against women as entertainment and it is fair to debate whether this should be used for commercial purposes irrespective of the author’s gender.

Women writers in the genre are also giving voice to the hidden taboos and conflicts of equality. Leila Slimani’s *Lullaby* examines a mother’s place in society and the conflict between a life with children and one outside the home. It examines class and the invisible women, in this case the nanny, who work supporting empowerment for others often whilst having a precarious existence.

The ambiguity of modern motherhood is explored and decades of feminist debate about whether women can hire help at home with a clear conscience are tapped into.

Case Study: Paratext of the Contemporary Psychological Thriller

Turning to what paratext can tell us about this genre, Genette’s work forms a useful framework. He sees paratext as combining the book itself as an object and vehicle for presentation, and the epitext stemming from the work of the publisher in shaping the presentation and reception of the work. The paratext allows the reader to understand the content and genre of the book.

Genette does not see pseudonyms as having a paratextual affect unless the reader is aware that one is in use. But the use of pseudonyms is an interesting phenomenon through history and forms part of a book’s peritext. It seems wrong to discount this in this case. The proliferation of successful female writers in this genre has led to some interesting cultural quirks, one such being occasions of male authors using a female pseudonym. In history the

opposite has been common. Female writers as prominent as the Brontë sisters masqueraded as male. However, a British crime writer, Martyn Waites, used Tania Carver as a female alter ego. Carver's books were commercial thrillers for a female audience and more successful than any of Waites's previous books (Gilbert 2017). This development came via a gatekeeper, Waites's editor. The editor was looking for a woman, specifically a high-concept female thriller writer. The gatekeeper function was vital in crafting the image of the author and commissioning a book in a specific genre. The gatekeeper fulfilled their role responding to a trend and creating a new niche product for their market.

In other cases, the explosion in female orientated crime fiction in the last decade has led to an increasing number of male authors adopting gender-neutral names to publish their work, for example, S.J. Watson (Steve Watson) and J.P. Delaney (Tony Strong).

A Goodreads survey cited by *The Guardian*, found that "women are predominantly read by women" (Oswell 2015). Adopting gender neutrality may help a new author's work where women are the primary market. Here we see Bourdieu's economic capital in evidence once more.

From looking at peritext of the alias, we can take the paratextual analysis one step further and look at the covers for a successful psychological thriller written by a woman. Here is the cover, of Celeste Ng's novel, *Little Fires Everywhere* in four international markets – the US (Figure 1), the UK (Figure 2), Germany (Figure 3) and France (Figure 4). The cover is important as it forms a key first point of contact with the reader.

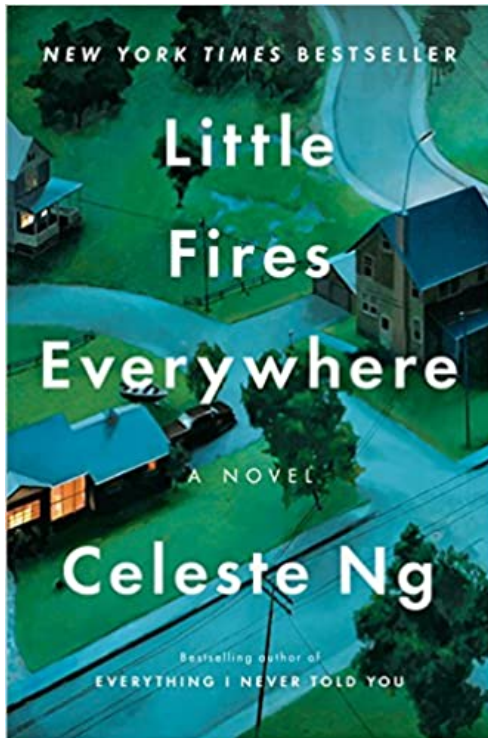


Figure 1. US edition

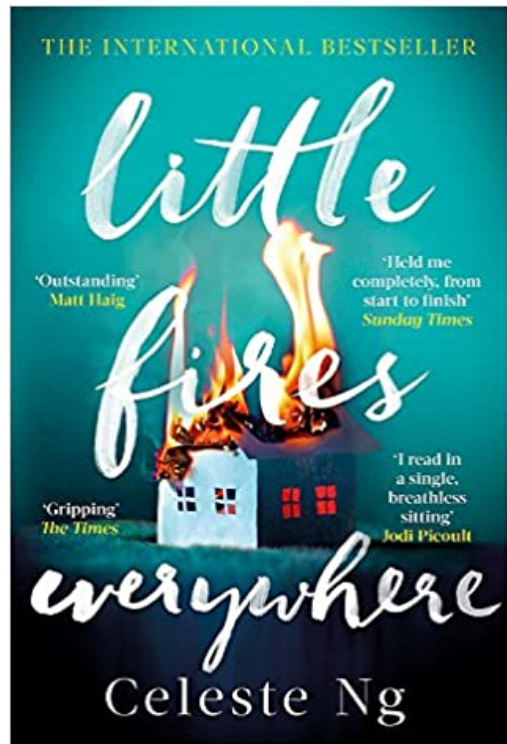


Figure 2. UK edition



Figure 3. German edition

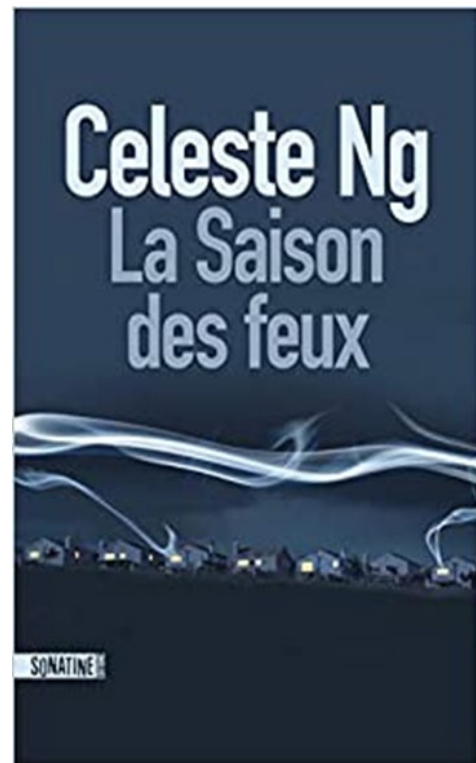


Figure 4. French edition

Each of these covers is bold and uses colours that would not be considered traditionally feminine. The covers have both the title and author's name in a bold format. This is vital in the modern commercial marketplace where many books are purchased online and covers circulate digitally. Whether buying or considering a book the reader is now most likely to see it in thumbnail form in an online store, as part of an online review or social media post. Easily decipherable bold lettering is important regardless of an author's gender.

In Germany, the UK and the US the cover also draws attention to the fact that Ng is a bestselling author. We can see each of these factors, the bold author name and title and the highlighting of the author's profile as harnessing the commercial impetus behind the book.

However, the covers are not just practical. They feature artwork that is more than just visually striking. The domestic theme is evident in all four covers. Jaya Miceli, the US cover designer, noted the "evening hues, the aerial view of winding roads and the light in the homes, the idyllic sweet suburban street. You know that all can't be right here" (Penguin Random House 2017). The cover aesthetics are also important in fitting the tone of the book

and Miceli notes that her favourite part of her job is reading manuscripts (Penguin Random House 2017). This brings us back to culture versus commerce. For the designer these books are more than just a product, there is love for the manuscript. This in turn must filter down from the publishing house's ethos consolidating the belief that these stories contribute to culture as well as commerce.

Finally, we turn to the epitext for a successful female psychological thriller. The marketing campaign is part of the publisher's epitext and *Little Fires Everywhere* provides an interesting case study. The book was a bestseller that spent over six months on *The New York Times* hardcover bestseller list following a year-long marketing and publicity campaign. This case study focusing on epitext, specifically in relation to Goodreads, provides an opportunity to identify and evaluate the marketing strategies used by Ng's publisher and to look at why the female author and reader are important.

Women are more likely to be members of book groups than men and to recommend books to their peers (Finkelstein and McCleery 2005, 130). More recently they are also the gender most likely to go to websites such as *BookBub*, Goodreads and book club websites like Richard and Judy to get ideas of what to read next (Taylor 2019, 5). It is interesting to see commercial publishers directly using these demographics to target women. Sixty nine percent of book clubs are exclusively female (Taylor 2019, 178). Goodreads has created a strong virtual community since it began in 2006 and now has 75 million members. Celeste Ng, called it "an amplified version of friends recommending books to other friends" (Suzanne 2018). It is no surprise that the publisher saw this as a valuable way to target readers in the pursuit of commercial success.

This community was nurtured and had a significant role in building pre-publication visibility for *Little Fires Everywhere*. When it was released in September 2017, the novel had 30,089 'Want to Read' signals. By June 2018, it had 160,379 ratings at Goodreads making it their most-rated book published in 2017. Word of mouth remains important in promoting books and women are more likely to recommend books to others. Social media is a contemporary way of amplifying this (Ruiz 2015). It also allows very direct targeting of women's reading communities. Nurturing communities makes sense for a commercial

publisher. Brand communities “buy more, remain loyal and reduce marketing costs through grassroots evangelism” (Fournier and Lee 2009).

To summarise the epitext, it is clear that this book was immediately positioned as important with significant resources behind it and directly targeted a female audience. These decisions can be seen as part of a publisher’s work within the field of large-scale production. But a community is not something a publisher can buy. It must actively connect with the work too. These psychological thrillers by women resonate and it seems likely that this is deeper than just commerce.

Conclusion

The numbers speak for themselves; female thriller writers have garnered huge commercial success for their publishers in the last decade. But they are part of something bigger. They tap into current cultural and feminist concerns. Megan Abbot, quoted in *The Guardian* saw the business angle clearly but the issue is not binary. She said that she felt there was a “feeling among women that finds echoes in current crime novels” (Hughes 2016).

These books are speaking to a growing refusal to be victimised and a need to explore the politics of the household (Hughes 2016). These are contemporary issues of more than commerce.

However, the commercially motivated mainstream publishing houses who have seen such success with these books are the same houses that are vulnerable to trends. Looking ahead, the question must be what the next commercial trend is. Publishing is not a swift process so the gatekeepers must remain as agile as possible to spot the next big thing. Will the thriller retain its readership or is a new genre set to capture the zeitgeist of the 2020s?

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