

ON TREND

What causes trends and how can we incorporate them into our novels? Kathleen Whyman asks the publishers...

Reluctant as I am to start a feature with a reference to bondage and sadomasochism, I can't write about publishing trends without referencing *Fifty Shades of Grey*. We've all seen the way a certain genre springs up and claims priority shelf space and this is exactly what happened when EL James's novel became a surprise hit – erotic romance with BDSM storylines flooded the market.

Similarly, after the success of Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*, the shops were full of psychological thrillers, many with the word 'girl' in the title. And who could have predicted 2015's love of adult colouring books or the uprising of unicorn-themed titles? So where do these trends come from and how can authors keep up with them?

Assessing trends

Monitoring and assessing trends is crucial for publishers. HarperCollins's Insight Team uses data and insight into consumer behaviour and mood to predict what might be big in the near future. For example, data showing that

wellbeing and self-help is a popular preoccupation might spark ideas for fiction content focusing on self-discovery.

'Alongside the science, there's also a fair amount of guesswork and instinct,' admits Charlotte Brabbin, commissioning editor at HarperFiction. 'It's important that we're plugged into the news and social media and talking to consumers.'

This tactic is echoed by Phoebe Morgan, editorial director at Trapeze. 'What people are talking about in their day-to-day lives is so important. Listen to your readership and work out what makes them tick.'

Previously taboo subjects, such as mental health, are on the rise in both fiction and non-fiction. Hannah Smith, editorial director of Head of Zeus (Aria), believes this is because readers take comfort in knowing they're not alone.

'We want to hear other people's stories and be assured there's a community out there who know what we're going through,' she says.

Heather Boisseau, director of publishing at Red Door Publishing, agrees. 'Themes of

mental health are being spoken about far more openly than before, and therefore resonate with readers,' she says.

In contrast, the popularity of up-lit (uplifting fiction, such as Gail Honeyman's *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*) responds to a need for escapism.

'There's still a voracious appetite for psychological thrillers, but recently there's been a resurgence in popularity for more uplifting fiction too,' says Nia Beynon, director at Boldwood.

'With social media and 24/7 news it's easy to be permanently connected, to the point where it's often hard to switch off,' adds Boisseau. 'Up-lit is a little relief from the chaos around us.'

Media influences

Keeping an eye on storytelling successes in other mediums – film, TV, podcasts, national news – is a good way to predict forthcoming trends.

Margaret Atwood's 1985 book *The Handmaid's Tale* has had a huge revival following the successful screen adaptation, which has subsequently resulted in a renewed interest



in dystopian fiction and feminist themes.

Gill Sim's humorous blog on parenting led to her bestselling book *Why Mummy Drinks*, which in turn spawned a trend for 'mum-lit'.

Netflix is increasing its offer of romantic comedies, including *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* based on the hit novel by Jenny Han, with an adaptation of Han's sequel due out soon.

'It's interesting to see the renaissance of romantic comedies,' says Katie Seaman, editor at Ebury. 'There's often a pattern to trends, a cyclical nature, as something can be popular, fall out of fashion,

then have a resurgence.

'The popularity of one area – like the recent dominance of psychological thrillers – can mean that readers then have an appetite for something different as a contrast, so now we're seeing an increased appetite for more uplifting women's fiction and feel-good romantic comedies.'

Trends also influence other aspects of the publishing process.

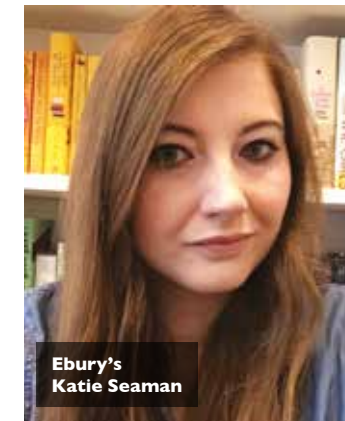
'Fashion trends dictate a cover look, cultural trends affect consumer targeting and other media impact content,' explains Beynon.

Seven-year cycle

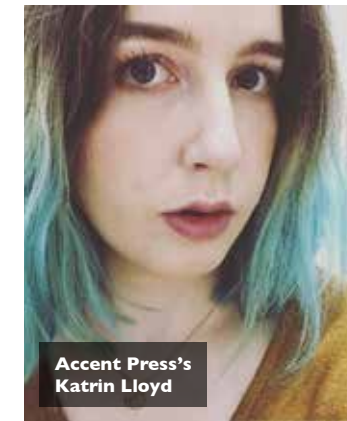
Katrin Lloyd, commissioning editor at Accent Press, has noticed that industry trends go through a seven-year cycle.

In her experience, when a genre experiences rapid and enormous success, there's then a countdown to when readers will start looking for the next big thing. Once they've found it, the first genre either becomes nostalgic and regains success that way, or it evolves to entice audiences again.

'If the seven-year cycle is



Ebury's
Katie Seaman



Accent Press's
Katrin Lloyd



Bookouture's
Leodora Darlington

anything to go by, erotica is set to make a comeback,' Lloyd says. 'My prediction is that it'll boom in a different format with a different style. There are whispers around a more audio-driven market for the genre and readers are calling for more plot-led storylines.'

Author action

So how can authors use trends to their advantage?

Leodora Darlington, publishing executive at Bookouture, advises talking to your editor or agent about what the market's doing.

'There's no harm in opening up a conversation about writing something new,' she says, 'providing you're with a publisher that moves quickly and would work with you.'

Phoebe Morgan suggests going down the IP project route – where a publisher comes up with an idea and commissions an author to write it. The publisher owns the intellectual property (IP) in the idea rather than the author.

'Your publisher could be looking to fill a specific gap in their list. If you speak to them, they might ask you to write a particular type of book to sit in that space,' she says.

Charlotte Brabbin's tip is to think about cultural milestones or anniversaries that are coming up. Harry and Meghan's wedding, for example, sparked many contemporary romance ideas.

It's also worth scouring IMDb to see if there are any upcoming films that tap into

What people are talking about in their day-to-day lives is so important

cultural moments or influence wider interest in certain topics.

Another way to work with trends is via characters. For example Morgan asked an author she'd commissioned to write a rom-com featuring a woman who worked in tech.

'It's a small part of the storyline, but taps into the concept of women taking on jobs that historically might have been thought of as male – something that needs to happen in the 21st century,' she says.

Follow your heart

However, Phoebe Morgan stresses that you need to write the book you want, so you enjoy the writing process.

'The market is moveable and publishers don't have crystal balls – though how we wish we did!' she says. 'It's always best to write something you'd love to read.'

Leodora Darlington feels the same. 'A writer has to love their project, so I'd advise against writing for a trend unless you're deeply passionate about telling that particular story.'

Trying to keep up with a trend runs the risk of writing

a story that comes across as unauthentic, as Hannah Smith has seen.

'Remain true to your writing style,' she says. 'Never try to incorporate something that doesn't naturally fit into your brand or your story, otherwise it's clear to the reader and publisher that you're writing to the trend.'

'The most important thing is to write what you're passionate about,' adds Katrin Lloyd. 'Trends come and go, but writing about something you love is always a powerful thing.'

Katie Seaman points out that a good publisher will be able to identify the readership for your novel and know how to reach them so that your book is read by the widest possible audience and does well, regardless of whether it fits into a current trend.

'There are probably only a couple of key trends at one time but we don't stop publishing other genres,' she says.

Keeping an eye on emerging trends clearly makes good commercial sense and if you can write quickly to fit the trend – or perhaps incorporate an element of it into your novel – you could well reap the benefits.

However, trends don't last long so you're probably better off writing the novel you want to write.

As Katrin Lloyd says: 'When a manuscript's passionate and well-written it radiates with potential, and this could be the start of a brand new trend.'



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