

The 'literary bestseller' - how to market a contradiction in terms

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This research was conducted by **Marie-Pierre Pouly** at the **University of Limoges, France**

Summary

Using Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) as a case study, the author explores what makes for a 'literary bestseller': a seemingly contradictory cultural phenomenon which enjoys both serious scholarly attention and a mass market success. Based on interviews at Penguin Books, analyses of press coverage of the novel, as well as charting *White Teeth's* swift absorption into the academic canon of English literature (for instance in scholarly literature and school syllabi), the author argues that Penguin's marketing strategy was crucial in resolving this apparent contradiction between critical and mass appeal.

The secret of *White Teeth's* double success was based on acknowledging and embracing the tension between critical and commercial success

Even at the acquisition stage, the manuscript of *White Teeth* was acknowledged by its editor to possess literary and commercial appeals. This was in part due to inherent qualities in the book's writing – such as the many witty references to British and American popular culture. These were deployed in a knowing, postmodern strategy which would appeal to high-minded readers – and these qualities were embraced and foregrounded in the marketing strategy.

Penguin's PR team generated a buzz around *White Teeth*

This centred on the discovery of a major new literary talent (and the £250,000 advance the publishing house had invested in Smith). Meanwhile, the design and marketing teams worked on an eye-catching book cover and a marketing campaign that would attract attention from more general book consumers. Penguin aimed to balance the potentially devaluing effects of the media hype and marketing on the book's literary cache by purposefully building up the persona of an author striving to create a long-term literary work recognised by peers. Smith herself also reiterated the political message of the novel by deconstructing the ethnic stereotypes attributed to the characters (and the author).

This summary is by **Philip Abraham, King's Knowledge Exchange Associate**

Keywords

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