



THE HAZEL TREE

Edition 4, October 2013

Best-Sellers

Certain books are known as stereotypical 'classics' which everyone is expected to have read – *Great Expectations*, *The Great Gatsby* or *Moby Dick*. This kind of intellectual literature expands the horizons of how we think by challenging the concepts which dictate how society operates. Taking *Great Expectations* as an example, the nature of feminism is explored through Miss Havisham and Estella, and the way the Victorian era treated women. It acts as a portal to the industrial revolution around this time, as well as tracking the familiar progression from childhood to being an adult. Educational literature is crucial to us to understand the past and other cultures, and should not just be read superficially but analysed in more detail to discover the writer's destination.

Why, then, in 2012 was *50 Shades of Grey* the best-selling book, with the two sequels stealing second and third place? It is in fact the best-selling book in Britain since records began, according to the Telegraph. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* also breaks records selling 5.3 million copies, while *Moby Dick* remains on the list of top five abandoned classics people don't finish reading. There is a clear paradox in what we are expected to read and what we often enjoy.

What factors motivate readers to choose a book? The perception of *50 Shades of Grey* is that it is a sexually orientated, poorly written book aimed at women. In spite of this reputation it continues to sell millions of copies. Even without reading the book and speculating on this fact alone, I see a couple of reasons why. There is a definite human instinct to be nosy, which is satisfied by the ability to have an intimate peer into the love lives of others. This can also be seen through the millions of viewers 'Big Brother' attracts each series – the revealing of secrets attracts us. Adding to this are people's enjoyment of romance and women's love of an attractive male hero, which are both offered by *50 Shades of Grey*.

Cleverly, there is also aspirational element of such a character for men. By writing about something which is not an everyday occurrence and people don't normally read about, E L James is invoking an element of shock in readers. This appeals to the same aspect of people which enjoys gossip and watching documentaries about extreme human beings or the paranormal. Looking at television too, shows such as 'Wife Swap' and 'Made in Chelsea' are not only aired in more than one country but are nominated for prestigious awards – they contain no educational value or even acting ability, but people are drawn to them to pry

and be entertained. *Harry Potter* takes this a step further. Where *50 Shades of Grey* is different from the everyday life of most people, *Harry Potter* is complete fantasy. Clearly a plot like that offers little or no reflection on the society we live in or the past in the way that *Great Expectations* does, but escapism is an appealing aspect of literature to many people; it allows release from the responsibilities and worries which plague us normally. This would explain the interest in the book from adults, even though children and teenagers were the initial target market.

It still can't be denied that the books which are classics are considered such for a reason, and the importance of learning to interpret the message of the material as well as expand the imagination and breadth of knowledge should be recognised. But it seems the most money, in terms of books sales, lies in guilty pleasures. That said, I have no problem living in a society where the desire to attend a wizard school equals the wish to learn from Charles Dickens or Shakespeare. The seriousness with which we are often expected to approach literature needs to occasionally be lightened, as does the seriousness we encounter in reality. Whimsical best sellers may be frowned upon, but the sense of release and entertainment they bring is much-needed.

(Sophie Rolfe)

