***The Thursday Murder Club*: Launching a Megabrand Author**

**A Publishing Case Study**

by Dr David Barker and Cat Mitchell

Abstract

In 2020, the Christmas book charts in the UK made headlines: Barack Obama’s eagerly awaited autobiography, *The Promised Land*, was beaten to the top spot by *The Thursday Murder Club* by Richard Osman, a debut cosy crime novel set in a retirement village. Not only did Osman’s book beat the former US president’s expected bestseller, it also broke records, becoming the fastest-selling debut crime novel of all time. Although Osman has a certain level of fame in the UK from his TV appearances and shows such as *Pointless*, his celebrity status doesn’t entirely explain the novel’s huge sales. This article tracks the acquisition, publication and promotion journey of *The Thursday Murder Club* in order to understand the industry and cultural context behind its success, and to interrogate the role of celebrity in the creation of author brands. The findings suggest that the unexpected scale of the success of the book was due to a number of factors, including in-depth editing by the novel’s agent, editor and author to tighten up the manuscript’s plot, an extensive and strategic promotional campaign, the pandemic which drove interest in the book’s genre and topics, and the quality of the writing itself. We find that the book’s success was accentuated by Osman’s celebrity status, rather than being entirely reliant on it. This research adds to a growing scholarship on celebrity authorship through the lens of an in-depth case study, and provides insight into the processes behind publishing a “celebrity” book and launching a megabrand author.

Keywords

Publishing; bestsellers; crime fiction; celebrity authors; marketing

Introduction

On Thursday 23 May 2019, a series of coordinated announcements was made about Richard Osman’s upcoming debut novel, *The Thursday Murder Club*. It was the first time that anybody outside of the publishing industry learned about this particular book deal – and anyone jaded by the steady flow of celebrities trying their hand at writing fiction, memoir or children’s books may well have shrugged at this latest addition to the genre.

In *The Bookseller*, *The Guardian*, on Twitter and elsewhere (Barnett, 2019; Wood, 2019, etc) the novel was described as the first volume in a “classic crime series” which was to be set in a fictional “luxury retirement village” in Kent. In typically breathless publishing industry style, these articles included quotes from those responsible for the deal: Osman himself, his agent Juliet Mushens (of the Mushens Entertainment agency) and his editor Katy Loftus (then Editorial Director at the Viking imprint of Penguin Random House). Osman described his pride at the prospect of becoming a published novelist, Mushens spoke about the book’s combination of humour and mystery, while Loftus highlighted the “Britishness” of the novel and drew comparisons between Osman and Agatha Christie. The size and competitiveness of the deal (Viking paying a “seven-figure sum” for two books, after a 10-way bidding auction) was flagged up. All of this, in a way, was standard publishing industry hyperbole for the announcement of a new celebrity book deal – see, for example, press coverage in *The Guardian, The New York Times* and elsewhere of Dolly Parton signing with Penguin Random House UK and Hachette in the US, in August 2021 for her co-authored novel *Run, Rose, Run* (Alter, 2021; Knight 2021, etc).

However, even in those first mentions of the book’s existence there were hints that this could, perhaps, be more than just another celebrity novel. While Viking acquired the rights to sell the book in the UK and in Commonwealth territories (excluding Canada), a string of other deals were announced on the same day. North American rights were picked up by Pamela Dorman Books (an imprint of Penguin USA), and the book had also been acquired very quickly by publishers in Germany, the Netherlands, France and Italy. For a celebrity whose fame stems from UK-based and broadcast TV quiz shows (in particular, *Pointless*), these international book deals suggested that publishers’ enthusiasm for the novel might be driven by more than its author’s name recognition.

So how did *The Thursday Murder Club* come to be written, acquired and published? In this article, we will explore the factors which led to it becoming the fastest-selling adult crime debut novel of all time in the UK market. Through interviews conducted with the book’s author, agent, and editor, alongside information provided by the publisher’s marketing and publicity team, we have been able to build up a picture of the process. We hope this might shed light on some of the issues in play around commercial fiction publishing, and also explore how much of this book’s unprecedented success was due to Osman’s celebrity and how much was due to a range of other factors.

Context

Despite the impact of Covid-19 in 2020 and 2021 in the UK, book sales have proved to be resilient. *The Bookseller*’s analysis of the UK market in 2021, for example (Tivnan, 2022), shows a large number of publishers showing revenue growth compared to 2019 – the most recent year to be unaffected by lockdowns. The “Big Four” publishers in the UK (Penguin Random House, Hachette, HarperCollins and Pan Macmillan) generated sales of over £700 million between them in 2021, across the 42 weeks of Nielsen Bookscan data available. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that consumers gravitated towards reading during the pandemic (Chandler, 2020; Starling, 2020; Flood, 2022), with fiction in particular seeing a boost over pre-pandemic years. This increase in the appetite for reading could have worked in The *Thursday Murder Club*’s favour, despite all the other challenges of the pandemic, including bookshop closures and supply chain issues.

It is impossible to ascertain exactly what percentage of recent UK book sales have been driven by celebrity authors. (Indeed, a precise definition of the term can be difficult, as there are some authors who start out as famous in other fields and then transition to become better known as writers – children’s author David Walliams being a case in point – while there are some authors whose celebrity is fuelled purely by the success of their writing, such as J.K. Rowling and Stephen King.) However, looking at highly successful UK titles in 2021 according to Nielsen Bookscan, we can get a sense of the market. Celebrities with significant book sales included comedian Bob Mortimer, TV and social media personality Stacey Solomon, musician Dave Grohl, actors Ben Miller, Miriam Margolyes and Stanley Tucci, TV presenter and columnist Jeremy Clarkson, the aforementioned David Walliams, adventurer and TV personality Ant Middleton, footballer Marcus Rashford and rugby league star Rob Burrow (among others).

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| Bob Mortimer | *And Away…* | 329,768 |
| David Walliams | *Gangsta Granny Strikes Again!* | 281,138 |
| Dave Grohl | *The Storyteller* | 258,608 |
| Marcus Rashford & Cark Anka | *You Are a Champion* | 220,538 |
| Jeremy Clarkson | *Diddly Squat* | 209,339 |
| Miriam Margolyes | *This Much Is True* | 194,508 |
| Stacey Solomon | *Tap to Tidy* | 76,256 |
| Stanley Tucci | *Taste* | 62,331 |
| Rob Burrow | *Too Many Reasons to Live* | 56,706 |
| Ant Middleton | *Mental Fitness* | 53,841 |

Table 1: 2021 print sales of a selection of celebrity books published in that year

Many, but not all, of those books are in non-fiction categories; celebrities trying their hand at fiction can sell well but tend not to dominate the market in the same way (examples include the actor Celia Imrie, TV host Graham Norton, comedians Dawn French and Lenny Henry, and the politician Nadine Dorries).

Kean (2017) noted an increasing frustration with the number of celebrity book deals being announced, particularly in the children’s book sector. There was a backlash later the same year (Rudgard, 2017), when the World Book Day £1 titles for children were announced – and four of the ten were by celebrities. Novelist Joanne Harris (2017) argued in a blog post that “Celebrity authors are the complete opposite of diversity. Celebrity authors reduce children’s fiction to a small group of well-known faces, leaving less room for newcomers, originality, variety.” The announcement of celebrity book deals for adult fiction tends to meet with much less resistance – perhaps because fewer celebrities attempt this route to literary success. The announcement of Richard Osman’s deal for *The Thursday Murder Club* in May 2019 did not attract any negative coverage.

Agenting and Acquisition

Osman had been involved with the publishing industry even before *The Thursday Murder Club* was acquired. With his *Pointless* co-presenter Alexander Armstrong, he had worked on a series of commercial non-fiction books connected to the show, starting with *The 100 Most Pointless Things in the World* published by the Coronet imprint of Hodder in 2012. This book had been helped into existence by Juliet Mushens, who at that time was an agent with Peters, Fraser & Dunlop (PFD). Mushens kept in touch with Osman after she had moved on from PFD to work at United Talent before setting up her own agencies (Caskie Mushens and then Mushens Entertainment), and frequently asked Osman if he was going to write a novel. When he did carve out the time to devote a year to drafting his book in 2018, Osman sent it to Mushens, when it was ready:

“It was important me for to have someone whose judgment I absolutely trusted – Juliet. I could see that she was hugely ambitious and that she knew her stuff.” (Osman, 2021)

From Mushens’ perspective, her first read of the manuscript was cause for genuine excitement. She felt herself falling for the simplicity of the novel’s premise, as well as its twists and turns and its sense of humour (Mushens, 2021). Her response to Osman was that she would have loved the novel “even if you weren’t who you are” (Mushens, 2021).

Mushens was clear-headed about her new author’s fame. At the same time, however, she was convinced that this was a writer who was serious about the craft of crime fiction and who was steeped in its world as a consumer. As she told us, “he loves reading crime whether it’s Agatha Christie or Patricia Highsmith or Jeffery Deaver…so it felt very natural for him to write a crime novel” (Mushens, 2021). Writing a tightly plotted thriller is not the most typical move for a celebrity wanting to become an author. In Osman’s words, “you have to sit down and grind it out” (Osman, 2021).

We can see here two sides to Osman’s thinking. Firstly, it was important to him (aware of his celebrity status making it much more likely he’d be offered a book deal) that his novel be judged to be good by a trusted industry professional, and secondly that his book should be handled by people with the ambition to push it as hard as possible. Osman had not written his book simply to add another element to his Twitter bio: he harboured a desire to be taken seriously as a crime novelist. Later – in the initial *Guardian* article about the book (Barnett, 2019) – Osman was at pains to make it clear that he took crime writing seriously. His book, he told David Barnett, was not just “dashed off [as] a celebrity novel”. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Osman is an author aware of his own fame and subsequent platform, determined not to be seen as the stereotype of a celebrity cashing in by writing a book just because publishing houses will compete for his signature on a book contract. Accordingly, Osman was keen to be represented by an agent who understood his desire to be seen as and to become a genuine writer of crime fiction.

Once author and agent had agreed to work together, the next step was for Mushens to find the book a suitable home in the UK market (and elsewhere). She sent the book out to ten editors across the biggest commercial fiction imprints in London – some of which, given the consolidated nature of the publishing industry in the early 21st century, were within the same companies. Author and agent had agreed in advance that pre-empt bids (where one publisher could make an offer so large that any auction would automatically end) were not going to be allowed. While money was a factor, they wanted to meet with the interested parties:

“This was always intended to be a really long-term partnership. We didn’t want to make it so much about money as to who was the right fit for the book.” (Mushens, 2021)

Again, this has a different feel from what might be a more typical strategy for a celebrity author, where there can be an impetus to “cash in” on a level of fame which may, after all, be fleeting. After years of TV production and presenting work, we can assume that Osman’s need to earn a living from his writing was considerably smaller than that faced by most debut novelists. What Mushens and Osman were looking for was more akin to a business partnership which would last for several years.

When it came time to meet the various teams who were bidding to acquire the book, Osman used his TV production experience to help decide which imprint or publisher to go with:[[1]](#footnote-1)

“When we went into all the pitches, because I’ve always worked in teams and I’ve always employed people and been employed by people, I just got a sense as soon as I walked into Viking that it was a very democratic place. I got the sense of the authenticity of their enjoyment of the novel.” (Osman, 2021)

Loftus received the submission from Mushens at the same time as the other nine editors in the industry. Mushens then followed up, telling Loftus that many of the others were quickly taking the book to Acquisitions meetings, and this prompted Loftus (who was aware of Osman’s celebrity although not an avid watcher of his TV output) to start reading the book. Within hours she had told Mushens that Viking wanted to be in the running and then quickly started preparing her pitch for the internal Acquisitions meeting at Penguin General.

The strategy used by Loftus in that pitch is worth noting:

“I didn’t come at it from the ‘famous author’ point of view. When I pitched the book, I purposely just talked about the book – and then at the end of my pitch, I said “And it’s by this guy, Richard Osman. That’s going to make it more expensive, but our discussion today needs to be about what we price that at.” (Loftus, 2021)

Again, the tension between the novel being viewed or represented as a strong piece of commercial fiction, as opposed to “another celebrity novel,” is evident here. Loftus was very much aware of Osman’s platform (and how that could help sales) but chose to focus as much as possible on what she saw as the novel’s qualities.

Manuscripts are shared with the wider publishing team (staff from sales, marketing, publicity, and so on) in advance of Acquisitions meetings. Everybody present at Loftus’ pitch for the book read, and loved, the novel. (And Loftus speculates that the same situation played out at nine other Acquisitions meetings at other imprints and publishers at the time – all of which likely played into the industry-wide buzz about the novel, long before publication.)

Having received initial bids from interested parties, Mushens and Osman then set up meetings (“beauty contests” as Loftus calls them) to find the most suitable partnership. For Loftus, this was where the hard work really started. How best to persuade this author and his agent that they should choose Viking?

“It was my job to think about the best way to run that meeting. I decided that we should have all of the team that would be working on it in the room, and that we were going to be very business-like and detailed about exactly how we would get him to Number 1.” (Loftus, 2021)

It is impossible to know if this approach differed much from those taken by the other teams in their pitch meetings. But Loftus’ decision to involve the entire team and to focus on their commercial aspirations for the book dovetailed with Osman’s view of the process, as noted above. The Viking team conveyed their enjoyment of the novel but also, in their business-like approach, mirrored Osman’s desire to work with a focused team of creative professionals – the type of working environment he had been used to in his 20 years at the production company Endemol.

In order to signal her team’s understanding of the author and his book’s sensibilities, Loftus, inspired by the novel’s cosy atmosphere, offered Osman and Mushens homemade sausage rolls and lemon drizzle cake at the start of Viking’s meeting with them. Loftus structured the meeting with a few minutes at the end so that she could meet one-on-one with Osman to talk him through her suggested edits to the manuscript and for him to get a clear sense of what it might be like to work with her. According to Loftus, she had no indication from Osman at the end of their meeting whether he might be on board, or not.

Mushens and Osman whittled it down to a final three, after the pitch meetings. The Viking and Transworld imprints at PRH were still involved, and one other. In the words of Katy Loftus:

“And then it comes down to money, plus what they’ve seen of you. We did a ‘house bid’ – so that meant that me [Viking] and Transworld who were still in the auction gave the same money.” (Loftus, 2021)

Viking were ultimately chosen by Osman and Mushens. Osman told us that he felt the team at Viking were going to be fun people to work with, but that they had also demonstrated a desire to work as hard for the book as he would (Osman, 2021).

The Editing Process

Any first-time novelist would expect their manuscript to be edited by industry professionals, and Osman was no exception. Initial developmental edits were done with his agent, Juliet Mushens, who felt that the original manuscript was overly complex. Mushens suggested “pulling out” some plot strands, with the goal of “making sure that the reader was always going to be able to solve [the novel’s mystery], too” (Mushens, 2021). Osman’s recollection is that this work cut the novel by about 20,000 words, and likened the editing process by Mushens to the structural work done by builders and designers: “She was able to open the whole thing up by taking out walls that didn’t need to be there.” (Osman, 2021)

A second round of developmental edits was then suggested by Loftus, once the manuscript had been acquired. Despite Mushens already having worked with Osman to simplify the plot of the novel, Loftus felt it needed further streamlining and suggested to the author that a particular plot strand could be removed in order to stop the middle of the book from sagging. Osman agreed with his editor’s point but chose to cut out a different plot strand instead – a change which Loftus felt worked as well as her suggestion, if not better (Loftus, 2021). A more forensic line edit was then done on the manuscript, although this was very light. As Loftus told us, “his voice is amazing and didn’t really need much work.” It is possible that Loftus’ reactions to her author’s editing ideas and overarching voice were influenced by Osman’s celebrity status but it seems more likely, from our interviews with those involved, that she genuinely valued and respected his input.

From his perspective, Osman was delighted with the editorial process, telling us that “98% of the notes” suggested to him by Loftus during editing were correct – another indication, perhaps, that this particular celebrity author interacted with the publishing process in an unusually exacting way.

Audience and Promotion

When *The Thursday Murder Club* was published in the UK on 3 September 2020, expectations were high. The book’s publication date was tagged as “Super Thursday” by parts of the UK media and bookselling industry due to the large number of commercial trade hardbacks being published on that day – a day seen as the starting point for the frantic pre-Christmas bookselling period. (In 2020, this was followed four weeks later by a second “Super Thursday” on which an even higher number of trade hardbacks, some of which had been pushed back by publishers from earlier in the year due to pressures from the pandemic, were released into a bookselling environment that was grappling with the various local lockdowns enforced because of the ongoing Covid-19 situation in the UK.)

*The Guardian*’s news article about “Super Thursday” (Flood, 2020) mentioned Richard Osman in its first four words, and this buzz was mirrored across other reporting (Waite-Taylor, 2020; Larman, 2020). It had become received wisdom in the publishing industry that – in terms of fiction, at least – *The Thursday Murder Club* was primed to be the debut of the season and that it was, in advance of its release, “pre-ordering exceptionally well” according to Bea Carvalho, the head fiction buyer at Waterstones (Flood, 2020).

But how did this industry buzz reach such high levels? As mentioned earlier, the 10-way auction itself may have fed into this, given how many publishing industry staff across the big trade houses had read and discussed the manuscript before Viking acquired it. Given the enthusiasm for the book, it is possible that a few hundred publishing employees knew of the book’s quality in the very early build-up to its release, and that this contributed to the buzz around its publication. According to Loftus, “That level of excitement across the industry is rare”. Osman’s agent, Mushens, noted that the team behind the book had a “stretch goal” to achieve 15,000 pre-orders, which would then almost certainly translate into the book entering the *Sunday Times* bestseller charts for hardback fiction at Number 1. In the end, 45,000 copies were pre-ordered by consumers – a number which is almost unheard of, although pre-order numbers are often not reported.

Early excitement about the book from professionals across the industry who had read it during the acquisitions process could have filtered out to retailers and potential future readers (both inside and outside of the industry) through platforms such as Twitter. But although this potential buzz built by industry professionals had a possible influence on the sales activity, the concentrated efforts of the marketing and publicity teams in driving the large number of pre-orders cannot be underestimated. Despite celebrity authors bringing an expectation of automatic high sales numbers due to their pre-existing fans and platforms, campaigns for books such as Osman’s still become “lead priority” titles that are given additional marketing and publicity resources to help them reach their full sales potential.

**Promotional Campaign Objectives**

The promotional campaign for *The Thursday Murder Club* was therefore unsurprisingly extensive, with plans being drawn up far ahead of publication. Information about the marketing and publicity campaign was obtained from Georgia Taylor and Olivia Mead, half of the team behind the book’s communication strategy.

The initial budget for the campaign was £40,000, and the key objectives for the campaign were to:

* Launch a new fiction mega-brand series
* Establish Richard Osman as a respected author
* Achieve *Sunday Times* number 1 fiction hardback on publication
* Sell 100,000 hardbacks by the end of 2020

Their initial overarching message was: “this book will make you feel better” (Taylor et al, 2021).

Despite claims from the campaign team about the audience for the book being “everyone”, it is evident that they had two segments in mind when approaching their marketing and publicity plans: a core group of Richard Osman’s fans, and more general prolific crime readers. This meant they had a two-tiered approach to producing and pitching content: they targeted Osman’s fanbase through his pre-existing channels using his own authentic voice via social media and newsletter content, and also reached general crime readers through more traditional means such as review coverage and bookshop events.

**PR Strategy**

The team started working on their plans as soon as the book was acquired in May 2019 and were aiming for “an unmissable, year-long campaign” (Taylor and Mead, 2021) in the run up to publication and beyond. The goal of this long-term approach was to build as many pre-orders as possible, to reach that number 1 *Sunday Times* bestseller spot[[2]](#footnote-2). Similar to Osman’s editor, the campaign team felt they had something special – both with the scale of Osman’s platform that they could use for promotion, and with the quality of the book itself.

In 2019, ahead of the campaign activity beginning, the team conducted some Consumer Insight research into how Osman was perceived by the public, and they identified their main challenge for the campaign was transitioning him from a TV personality to a respected brand author in his own right; they were very keen to avoid the perception that he was just another “celebrity with a book” (Taylor and Mead, 2021). There was also a challenge around how much time he had available, as his voice was central to much of the marketing activity (meaning the team required his input for social media and newsletter content), but his campaign commitments would have to balance with his expected busy TV filming schedule.

However, they then faced a much greater and unexpected challenge: a global pandemic and nationwide UK lockdown in March 2020. By this point, they already had a substantial amount of activity lined up and they had to radically alter what was planned.

Taylor and Mead said they were “blessed with a hard-working author” (Taylor and Mead, 2021) and also cited their early start with the campaign as being particularly beneficial at what could easily have been a disastrous moment. According to the campaign team, as they had worked with Osman since acquisition, they had built a solid relationship and he trusted their instincts when plans needed to change.

They also had a strong foundation for their campaign. Pre-pandemic, their first tactic had been to order a huge proof print run, to give early copies to as many people as possible. This included hardback “super-proofs” (Taylor et al, 2021) for VIPs which the team hoped would lead to early quotes from authors and influencers to include on the blurb and marketing material, alongside straight cover-adapt proofs (which are paperback proofs that look similar to the final copy of the book) for circulating more widely. This meant that, alongside the number of people who had read the book during the acquisition and auction period, hundreds of people across the industry had read the book before publication and were ready to champion it.

At this early stage, the campaign team had also used various key moments to slowly build buzz:

“We had also revealed the cover in partnership with a host of retailers and used other key news ‘moments’ to boost pre-orders through Richard’s channels (800k Twitter followers in Sep 2019) including the audiobook announcement and the news that the film rights were sold to Steven Spielberg” (Taylor et al, 2021)

The campaign was therefore already in a strong position before the national lockdown began, but the lockdown presented another unexpected challenge: the publication date itself. As mentioned above, due to the pandemic having pushed back some publication dates from earlier in the year, 2020 effectively saw two Super Thursdays, meaning the scale of the competition was greater than expected.

The team recognised that the publication date issue could potentially jeopardise the important *Sunday Times* chart position that they were hoping to achieve. Along with the issues caused by an uncertain consumer and retailer landscape following lockdowns, they knew that an extensive pre-order campaign would be more important than ever.

For the publicity campaign to drive these pre-orders further, they decided to pull three key pieces of PR forward by one week: a print interview with the *Sunday Times Magazine*, a BBC Online interview and Osman’s first major broadcast interview with the BBC’s flagship evening magazine programme, *The One Show*. They believed they were in a better position to negotiate changing the timing of these interviews due to being in conversation with journalists and producers so early in the campaign, though the draw of Osman himself could potentially have also contributed.

*The Sunday Times* interview on 16 August (Dean, 2020) shot the book up into the top 100 Amazon chart for the first time, and *The One Show* interview running on the Thursday before publication was also a huge success, with the team reporting 3,700 pre-orders on Amazon alone in the one hour after it aired. The impact of these key PR moments contributed to it going into publication week in Amazon’s top 10 and it achieved the *Sunday Times* chart position they were hoping for.

Alongside these changes to the PR activity they had organised, the team also had to pivot on events; before the March lockdown, they had already organised a three-week book tour for Autumn, which would have been a key part of launching Osman as an author and gaining retailer support. They began to assess virtual event options, though Osman was nervous, as due to his background in TV, production value was particularly important to him.

In the end, the campaign team decided on a hybrid approach to events. They planned two high profile events in publication week targeted at their two key segments: one with At Home With Four Indies[[3]](#footnote-3) chaired by bestselling crime writer Mark Billingham to reach the engaged crime book community, and one with Waterstones and Penguin Live, chaired by his *Pointless* co-host Alexander Armstrong, to reach his celebrity fanbase.

The second strand to this hybrid approach involved in-person stock signing tours in three key areas with high proportions of independent bookshops and Waterstones stores. The campaign team said this was the biggest surprise success of the campaign, as it was incredibly effective; it meant Osman was able to meet and thank booksellers and sign 1000s of books at a time when the logistics of the book supply chain were disrupted due to the pandemic (Taylor and Mead, 2021). It also gave an opportunity to push heartfelt social media content out to Osman’s highly engaged followers and followers of the bookshops themselves (Osman, 2020a; 2020b; 2020c; 2020d; 2020d). The independent retailers in particular galvanised on this and got over 700 pre-orders between them, an usually high number, particularly as pre-orders tend to be done primarily via Amazon.

Alongside events, reviews were also key for the campaign team; these felt particularly crucial for establishing Osman as an author in his own right rather than a “celebrity with a book”. However, there was now even more competition for Autumn book review space than usual with so many publication dates moving due to the lockdown earlier in the year. As a result, the campaign team adapted their pitches for the new 2020 mood, making their messaging emphasise themes around community, kindness, joy and escapism. Their key takeaway became that it was “the book we need right now” (Taylor and Mead, 2021).

Many reviews were secured as a result of this pitch reworking, and they often mirrored the team’s PR messages back; they focused on his writing talent, and highlighted the joy and escapism in the book. For instance, the *Daily Mail* called Osman “An exciting new talent in crime fiction” and the *Daily Express* called the book “One of the most enjoyable books of the year” (Amazon UK, 2022).

As the Autumn progressed, setting new targets to adapt to successes was crucial to keep the momentum of the campaign going. The campaign team also reworked their hooks and went back to the press with constant updates on the book’s progress so far. They felt that this was invaluable in amplifying the book’s success and Osman’s profile as an author. For instance, when the book hit the number 1 *Sunday Times* spot on publication, they used this news moment to announce the acquisitions of books two and three (Chandler, 2020b). Other key PR content included high profile TV interviews with *BBC Breakfast* and ITV’s *Lorraine*, interviews with *The Guardian* and *Daily Mail*, and broadcast interviews with Virgin Radio’s Chris Evans, and BBC Radio 4’s *Saturday Live*. Osman’s success in beating Barack Obama to the Christmas number one slot also made headlines, alongside the book’s record-breaking sales (Flood, 2020; BBC, 2020; Chandley, 2020). For the sake of comparison, Obama’s *A Promised Land* sold 170,000 copies in hardcover between its publication on 17th November 2020 and the end of that year, while *The Thursday Murder Club* sold over 350,000 copies in hardcover during the same six-week period. (Michelle Obama’s memoir *Becoming* dwarfed both by selling 530,000 copies in hardcover in its first six weeks at the end of 2018.)

Another part of keeping up this momentum was focused publicity activity in the lead up to Christmas. The sales team had identified that Christmas shopping was starting earlier than normal in 2020 due to uncertainties about postal delays related to the pandemic, so the team decided to focus on two key moments for sales: the October half term break (usually falling in mid-to-late October across the UK) and Black Friday (27th November 2020).

Again, the team reworked their pitch to focus on the book’s huge success and the phenomenal reader reactions to re-target some important PR slots. They felt that talking to the media constantly since acquisition was helpful in achieving this new wave of coverage so last minute, although again, Osman’s reputation may have played a part in this too.

A key piece of PR was an interview on Graham Norton’s chat show, which aired on Black Friday. This saw 7,300 copies of the book sell in one hour following the broadcast, with Norton himself describing the book’s successes and Steven Spielberg buying the rights.

Their final target for 2020 was to have one last push closer to Christmas as consumers moved mostly to shopping online, and as part of this they secured a *Times2* interview and an interview on ITV’s breakfast television programme *Good Morning Britain*. These PR moments, alongside the Graham Norton interview, led to an increase in sales of 33% across all retailers (Taylor and Mead, 2021).

**Marketing Plans**

Similar to the PR plans, the initial marketing strategy needed to be reworked after the pandemic hit, and four key changes needed to be made.

Firstly, there had always been a plan to start an author newsletter, written in collaboration with Osman himself. They had planned to launch this as a monthly email from March to target a sub-section of his large online fanbase who could become key champions of the book. They also hoped this would be a key pre-order driver in the first half of 2020.

However, after lockdown began, they reworked the positioning of its content, changing the copy of the first newsletter with Osman to reflect a more appropriate and comforting message, and adding a quiz for subscribers to do at home. It was a huge success; in a matter of days, the newsletter subscriptions doubled to 12,000 and the open-rate for the first newsletter was 68%. Although open-rates can be difficult to compare with the content of newsletters varying so greatly, according to Mailchimp (2019), the average open-rate is around 21%, meaning Osman’s first newsletter related to *The Thursday Murder Club* was a huge success.

As a result of this success, they increased the newsletter to being weekly until September, and found that it was a stable tool to build pre-orders in an unstable time. It included a weekly quiz alongside competitions and retailer support. By the book’s publication date, they had over 61,500 subscribers, with an impressive 45% open rate and 70% click-through rate.

The second aspect of the marketing campaign that needed to be reworked was the huge media package: they had planned a stunt event on publication with outdoor adverts, but this was no longer appropriate with movement of the public being so limited. Instead, they pivoted to build an online package to support the PR campaign and reflect 2020 consumer habits. This involved a social, programmatic, and radio advertising campaign, including an advert on Magic Radio Network which featured an audiobook extract.

Thirdly, they needed to rethink their OOH (Out of Home) adverts[[4]](#footnote-4), as their expense (these often cost £10,000 at a minimum) was unlikely to be worth the money with so few members of the public travelling and commuting. Instead, they decided to extend their POS[[5]](#footnote-5) (Point of Sale) that they had on offer for bookshops, so these could almost become an outdoor advertising campaign in themselves. This made sense as consumers were more likely to be shopping locally than travelling, and it led to many window displays in bookshops across the country (for example; Waterstones York, 2020). The POS packs were made bespoke for different retailers and included standees, shelf talkers, window clings[[6]](#footnote-6), posters, bunting, and bookmarks. The campaign team felt this was particularly crucial as it was important to support physical shops, especially independents, who were struggling to battle against the dominance of digital sales in the wake of bookshop closures.

Fourth and finally, the marketing team adapted their partnership with the Reading Agency (a charity that promotes the benefits of reading), producing book club packs for libraries aimed at remote meetings. They also worked with Reading Friends, which focuses on relieving loneliness. This felt like a particularly important partnership both for the content of the book – they wanted the campaign to reflect outreach and celebration of older people – and also for the particular moment of publication too, as lockdowns had caused an increase in feelings of isolation (Local Government Association, 2020). These packs included conversation starters and book extracts.

All of this work was supported with an online influencer campaign, with 75 bookstagrammers and book bloggers taking part in the on-publication tours (for example: Eva, 2020; Fraser, 2020). The aim of this element of the campaign was to reach heavy book buyers and committed crime fans, who might not necessarily have already been following Osman’s social channels or be aware of his celebrity status.

Reflections on the promotional campaign

The campaign team themselves cited their strategic thinking and clear targets as key to the campaign’s success, along with reassessing their objectives consistently and starting as early as possible. They also felt there was a certain amount of luck, with the tone and messaging of the book so closely matching with what the public needed at an uncertain time (Taylor and Mead, 2021).

The team also recognised that another challenge in the campaign was getting the balance right between entertaining content and persuasive sales messaging, which Osman was concerned about too (Taylor and Mead, 2021). As a result, they decided to give him more control over the messaging than they might have usually done with an author as he knows his audience and how to connect to them so well.

The next step in the ongoing campaign, alongside the paperback activity, was considering the extent to which the pre-order campaign for the sequel could lead to further sales of this book, and how to keep the momentum going all the way to the new book’s hardback publication date in September 2021. As part of this early campaign activity, there had already been a Waterstones solo newsletter on 18 March 2021 promising signed copies of the sequel, *The Man Who Died Twice,* alongside messaging to promote the paperback of *The Thursday Murder Club*. By early 2021, the sequel had already secured 1,000s of pre-orders (Taylor and Mead, 2021). This gives an early glimpse of the success of their first objective: to launch an ongoing, megabrand series.

Although, as mentioned earlier, it could be assumed that celebrity books sell themselves – with loyal fans and huge social media platforms leading to automatic sales – this thorough and strategic campaign undoubtably fed into the surprise success of the book. The timing of key PR and marketing moments clearly had an impact on pre-order sales and reaching the bestseller slot, and targeting key moments during the Christmas gift-buying period was an effective way to keep up this sales momentum.

Results and Sales

By the end of its first week on sale, *The Thursday Murder Club* had become the fastest-selling adult fiction debut since *The Casual Vacancy* by J.K. Rowling in 2012. And quite soon after that first week, it became apparent to all involved that the continuing sales trajectory was way beyond what anybody working on it had predicted (Taylor and Mead, 2021).

Milestones achieved by the book include:

* *Sunday Times* #1 fiction hardback on publication
* Overall #1 that week, selling 45,000 copies in hardback and 72,000 across all formats
* Christmas #1 for 2020, selling 134,514 in the final week
* Fastest-selling adult crime novel since records began
* Third bestselling hardback novel since records began
* As of 14 June 2021, it had sold 1.4 million copies across all formats, including over 1 million in hardback

Mushens and Loftus both told us of their surprise:

“I always thought the book would do well but I absolutely did not, by any stretch, realise that it would do this well. I don’t think any of us could have imagined it.” (Mushens, 2021)

“As part of our acquisitions process we have to do a Profit and Loss sheet, and we put in a number that was blown out of the water! It was still the biggest number we’d put against a fiction book for years.” (Loftus, 2021)

Looking at other commercial fiction books written by celebrities and brand name authors and published in hardback by major imprints in the UK in the autumn of 2020, four of the most direct comparisons might be *Because of You* by Dawn French, *Home Stretch* by Graham Norton, *Troubled Blood* by Robert Galbraith, and *The Sentinel* by Lee Child and Andrew Child. None of these offer a perfect parallel, as all authors have a track record from previous novels but in terms of celebrity standing you could make the case for French and Norton being at least as familiar presences on British TV (and radio, in Norton’s case) as Richard Osman, and for Galbraith and Child being the type of mega-brand authors to which Osman’s agent and publishers were aspiring. These four novels were released in either September or October. As discussed, the increase of the UK’s second Covid-19 wave made selling books – and gathering that data, on Nielsen’s part – more challenging as the autumn wore on. But each novel’s first full month of hardcover sales reported by Nielsen are still instructive for the sake of comparison:

* *The Thursday Murder Club* (Richard Osman): 156,000 hardback units
* *Troubled Blood* (Robert Galbraith): 116,000 hardback units
* *The Sentinel* (Lee Child): 83,500 hardback units
* *Because of You* (Dawn French): 20,700 hardback units
* *Home Stretch* (Graham Norton): 11,650 hardback units

This is a small comparative sample but it does offer a glimpse of the scale by which Osman’s novel outpaced the competition during that sales period in the UK.

To make a comparison with other megabrand authors, as we can see in table 1, Osman’s hardback sales figures are markedly higher than most of the other annual bestsellers over the last ten years, only being eclipsed by Dan Brown’s *Inferno*, the fourth of his mega-selling Robert Langford series of thrillers. Even J.K. Rowling’s adult fiction debut in 2012, *The Casual Vacancy*, fails to get close to those achieved by *The Thursday Murder Club*.

**Table 2: Annual UK bestsellers in Hardback Fiction, 2012-2021[[7]](#footnote-7)**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Publication Date | Title | Author | Sales (units sold) |
| 2021 | *The Man Who Died Twice* | Richard Osman | 587,000 |
| 2020 | *The Thursday Murder Club* | Richard Osman | 592,000 |
| 2019 | *The Testaments* | Margaret Atwood | 320,000 |
| 2018 | *Past Tense* | Lee Child | 214,000 |
| 2017 | *Origin* | Dan Brown | 419,000 |
| 2016 | *Night School* | Lee Child | 182,000 |
| 2015 | *The Girl on the Train* | Paula Hawkins | 546,000 |
| 2014 | *Personal* | Lee Child | 153,000 |
| 2013 | *Inferno* | Dan Brown | 641,000 |
| 2012 | *The Casual Vacancy* | J.K. Rowling | 395,000 |

The Impact of the Pandemic

As covered earlier, the novel may have benefited from the public’s increased appetite for reading fiction following the initial UK lockdown in March 2020. The novel was also published at almost the exact moment when it became clear that a “second wave” of Covid was about to hit the UK. By late September, new restrictions were brought in and by mid-October a new restrictions (including the closing of bookshops in many areas) were introduced, followed by a second national lockdown in November 2020, forcing the closure of all non-essential retail. Online book sales were unaffected by this, as were book sales through essential retail outlets such as supermarkets – although some supermarket chains didn’t allow book sales in their stores.

After the deep shock of the first Covid wave in the spring of 2020, there was a renewed sense of the vulnerability of the elderly. (According to the Office for National Statistics – Webb, 2020 – over 80% of those people who had died in the UK from Covid-19k by the end of May 2020 were age 70 or older.) Did this collective experience enhance the novel’s success? Both Mushens and Loftus believe it may have been a factor.

“I have a theory that part of its success is because it was a time when we were being told that over 70s were dying – but it was ‘fine’ because they’re over 70. But this is a book that points out to us how integral these people are, what they’ve been through, and the lives they’ve lived, and I think that’s one of the reasons it took off in the way it did.” (Mushens, 2021)

While Katy Loftus explained to us that for any novel to go this far beyond publishing norms, context is key:

“People needed something to escape into, and to feel hopeful about. Covid affected older people and the book is about a group of old people who aren’t like how old people are typically portrayed in books. They’re full of verve and life, and they’re fully rounded people. Without Covid, the book would have been really big but that was definitely one of the factors that turned it into a phenomenon.” (Loftus, 2021)

It is difficult to ascertain with any accuracy how much of a factor (if any) the pandemic context played in the book’s early success. Richard Osman, in his interview with us, didn’t mention Covid – focusing instead on the novel’s mainstream appeal and on its accessibility.

However, the pandemic may have driven an increased interest in the novel’s genre and a growing awareness of Osman himself. A Nielsen Book survey (The Nielsen Company, 2020) done during the third wave of the pandemic in June 2020 showed that people were reading more “crime/thriller/adventure books” during this time, and that their reading habits were mostly driven by a desire for entertainment and escapism. According to *Reuters* (Sandle, 2020), TV viewing figures also unsurprising rose sharply during the months of lockdown, with an “average six hours and 25 minutes a day watching news and entertainment” for adults in the UK. Although much of this could be accounted for by streaming services, traditional broadcasters such as the BBC – which broadcasts Osman’s shows – “briefly achieved their highest combined share of broadcast TV viewing in more than six years in March”, though it had dropped again by June as a result of production delays on new shows (Sandle, 2020). *The Guardian* (Harrison, 2021) also reported a rise in the popularity of quiz shows during 2020, including *Pointless* and *House of Games*, referencing the easy escapism and routine they offer. This could potentially mean the public’s awareness of Osman increased during this time, which could then also have led to further sales of his book when it was released in Autumn.

Mainstream appeal

Osman has a clear vision of himself as an author, “not pretending to be Kazuo Ishiguro” but instead writing purely for the sake of entertainment:

“If you do that, and it doesn’t sell then it hasn’t done its job. The more it sells, the more I feel I’ve done my job. Again, it’s that issue of barriers to reading, and there are not many barriers to reading this book in terms of accessibility and in terms of enjoyability.” (Osman, 2021)

It is unusual to hear a debut novelist talking so openly about actively trying to remove any “barriers to reading” their work, particularly in a British literary culture which often focuses its attention on cleverness and originality in search of the new prize-winning sensation.

Given his experience at TV production company Endemol between 1999 and 2020, Osman is a novelist steeped in thinking about audiences and how TV concepts might translate into viewing figures. In his words, “My whole career has been: come up with an idea, sell it to someone” (Osman, 2021). Describing himself to us as a born salesman, Osman discussed the pride he felt in *The Thursday Murder Club* and his resulting determination to do whatever he could to help Viking sell the book as widely as possible. He was also very aware of the differing expectations across the two creative industries in terms of possible audience reach:

“Publishing is an entirely different industry that sells in a very different way. In publishing if you can sell 100,000 books then that’s an insane mega-hit, whereas I work in an industry where 100,000 is a disaster.” (Osman, 2021)

For context, *Pointless*, the daytime quiz show Osman co-presents with Alexander Armstrong, reached a peak audience of 7 million in 2014 and averages around 3 million viewers (O’Sullivan, 2021; Wyatt, 2014).

So in Richard Osman not only do we have a celebrity author, we also have an author with two decades of commercial experience of conceiving a project and trying to pitch it to the broadest possible audience. Osman brings a platform, as do all celebrity authors. But perhaps more important to the book’s unprecedented success in the months following its release was his determination to work with his publishing team to bring that book to the widest, most mainstream audience possible – an audience that is not, for the most part, made up of avid book buyers.

It might be worth considering more closely that idea mentioned above by Osman, of 100,000 hardbacks sold of a novel qualifying as a “mega-hit” book. There’s a comparison to be drawn with a comment made to us by Katy Loftus at Viking, when we were discussing what publishers can actively do to sell a book. Her theory is that a publisher like Penguin Random House can “get maybe 80,000 people” to buy a book in the UK market if all the conditions are right (author platform, author likeability, title, concept, cover design, review coverage, media appearances, etc). What happens after that, in her opinion, is dependent on word of mouth. In Loftus’ (2021) words, “what you then want is all of those [80,000] people to recommend it and maybe buy it for everyone they know – and that’s what we saw happening.”

Why might the word-of-mouth factor have been so powerful with *The Thursday Murder Club*? According to YouGov Profiles data released on World Book Day in March 2020 (pre-lockdown), Osman’s novel would appear to hit a number of sweet spots with British readers. The most regular book readers in the UK, according to the report, are aged 55 and older, with 34% of people in that group claiming to read for pleasure every day. Across all age groups there is a gender divide, with 27% of women reading every day compared to only 13% of men. In terms of book formats, 47% of those surveyed said they typically read hardbacks, compared to 60% for paperbacks and 24% for ebooks. Looking at genres of fiction, the category of crime/thriller comes out top, with 33% of readers saying it was their preferred choice when reading for pleasure – and that figure increases to 40% in the over 55 age group.

When we asked Osman if he had any kind of reader in mind when he was writing *The Thursday Murder Club*, he told us:

“I think I have a sensibility which is quite mainstream – that’s where my heart is. I definitely wasn’t writing *for* anybody, apart from myself. This book is my perfect book, really, it’s the kind of book I wish someone else had written. And usually when I do something that appeals to me, it has quite broad appeal. My sensibilities are just naturally quite mainstream.” (Osman, 2021)

Again, we could suggest that there is a connection here with Osman’s extensive work in TV production. His role at Endemol was very much aligned with what might be considered mainstream television formats. With those sensibilities having been refined over 20 years in that industry – and also by his interactions with 1 million followers on Twitter – it is not a stretch to believe that when a concept or idea appeals to Osman, it may very well also appeal to a mainstream audience in the UK.

Loftus was very aware of this; she was banking on more than simple name recognition, as she was convinced that “the book worked for the type of people that follow him and love him” (Loftus, 2021). The book therefore worked on two different levels. Firstly, Osman’s celebrity fanbase and his book’s potential fanbase were likely to overlap significantly. Viewership of daytime TV shows including *Pointless* is heavily skewed towards an older demographic, with one report (Moore, 2018) suggesting that around 80% of the *Pointless* audience is over the age of 55. This is mirrored somewhat by research (Nielsen, 2014) into the American market for crime and mystery books, finding that 47% of that readership is over the age of 55. Secondly, Osman’s own interests aligned with the book’s plot and genre – two factors that are not always present for celebrity authors.

Osman also speaks passionately of his novel as an authentic piece of commercial entertainment and of his belief that readers would see through such a project if it had been created out of cynicism. Osman clearly feels a sense of duty, stemming from the privilege afforded him by his fame:

“I really am aware that you can leverage being on TV… That’s why I feel a genuine responsibility to sell as many copies as I can and to make the book as good as I can, and to raise all ships.” (Osman, 2021)

Conclusion

Through tracking the book’s publication process and subsequent promotion, it is clear that there is a wide range of possible reasons behind The *Thursday Murder Club*’s success.

Despite widespread acceptance of the quality of the book’s content, it is hard to fully divorce Osman’s celebrity status from his record-breaking sales. Firstly, it is impossible to say whether Juliet Mushens would have become Osman’s agent without his fame. She would presumably have still spotted the talent in his writing, but would he have known to approach her, and would his work have stood out amongst the many submissions a literary agent typically receives every day. Similarly, would publishers have taken such swift action in bidding for the book without Osman’s name attached and the expectation of sales from a pre-existing fanbase? Katy Loftus’ acquisitions pitch, although initially omitting Osman’s name, still ultimately led to a decision that was based – at least in part – on his platform and fame.

Osman himself is acutely aware of his platform and how it helped him and his book. He spoke to us of how being on TV had, quite possibly, provided him with a short cut of “a good three or four years” of initial struggle as a writer to get a book deal from a major publisher.

As well as fast-tracking the agent and acquisition process, his platform and status could also have impacted the success of the promotional campaign. Firstly, Osman himself had existing media contacts from his TV production and presenting background. Katy Loftus spoke openly about this:

“It’s his contacts, too. One of the biggest things that makes fiction sell is an appearance on TV. Most debut authors don’t get that opportunity. And Richard was on, all over TV, so that undoubtedly helped.” (Loftus, 2021)

Even without those contacts, Osman himself – as a well-known TV personality who regularly appears on various panel shows, alongside his own game shows – would have had a pull for retailers and press over unknown debuts. And as the campaign team worked at the UK’s largest publishing house, with the resources and cultural weight that brings, they would likely have had additional pull due to their pre-existing contacts and the reputation of the business.

It is therefore difficult to say whether a similar book – that was well-written and plotted, and fed the public’s appetite for joyful content at an uncertain time – would have reached this same level of success without the dual impact of Osman’s status and the largest publishing house in the country backing it.

However, our analysis of sales figures shows that Osman’s debut went far beyond the success of other titles by celebrities of a similar status, suggesting that the success of this book wasn’t down to his fame and status alone.

Many factors combined to create a genuine phenomenon in the publishing marketplace, including: Osman’s commitment to work flat-out with his publishing team at Viking in selling the book, the editorial choices made by Loftus and Mushens, the communication team’s strategic marketing and PR campaign, and the novel’s clever premise, accessible storyline, striking cover design, mainstream sensibility and its overlap with the reading habits of large portions of the British – and, perhaps, sentiment created by the Covid pandemic. A concentration purely on Osman’s celebrity status side-lines the impact of the publishing expertise, commercial awareness, and hard work and behind the whole process.

The international success of the book could be an indicator of its intrinsic quality, divorced from Osman’s UK-based fame, but could the acquiring editors at these publishers and imprints have been gambling that some of the book’s likely future bestseller status in the UK would travel to their markets? What seems more reasonable is that they viewed the manuscript as having potential for the crime fiction audience in their country, particularly readers who might be open to something more quirky than the average thriller, shot through with typically British humour.

Overall, it seems to have been a combination of skill, timing, talent, hard work and luck that launched Richard Osman’s as the industry’s latest megabrand author.

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1. From the publisher’s perspective, we did not interview those teams who ended up losing out on the book but we did harness insights from Katy Loftus at Viking. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is because any sales made before publication are counted towards the first week of sales, so high numbers of pre-orders mean a book will be more likely to outsell others in its publication week and reach the charts. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A series of virtual events organised by four independent bookshops (Hackett, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Out of Home adverts are any adverts seen outside of the consumer’s home, including billboard adverts e.g. on the London Underground [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Point of Sale marketing is a type of marketing that happens at the “point of sale” – for instance, inside a bookshop or a supermarket [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. These are all examples of POS marketing. Standees are images often printed on card with an easel back to allow them to stand up on their own; shelf talkers are adverts or posters designed to be displayed on the shelf where the book is sold; and window clings are images, letters or graphics that can stick to a window [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Via Nielsen BookScan (print sales only) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)