

Exploring Bestselling Novel Factors: The Technique, Structure and Narrative Writing from the Perspective of Buku Fixi Sdn Bhd

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Abstract

Bestselling novels in Malaysia can be defined as novels that are nominated for award-winning categories. The Malaysian book industry is still experiencing a decline today, not only in the number of books published but also in book sales volume in the current market. However, the branding and sales record books of Buku Fixi Sdn Bhd are consistently high in Malaysia. This study discusses the bestselling novel factors through the perspective of an indie publication house (Buku Fixi Sdn Bhd) by interviewing Amir Muhammad (Managing Director of Buku Fixi Sdn Bhd) and Nadia Khan (Authors of Buku Fixi Sdn Bhd). Qualitatively, three main factors contributing to the bestselling book sales of Buku Fixi are explored through its writing techniques, story structure, and narrative. Findings found that Buku Fixi

emphasizes in utilizing effective writing narratives as a surefire way to sell their bestselling books. This factor is an important formula for the company to remain relevant and strong in the Malaysian book industry today.

Keywords: Bestselling Novels, Buku Fixi, Techniques, Structures, Narrative Writing.

Introduction

The book industry has rapidly changed, as evidenced by the declining book sales at the Kuala Lumpur International Book Fair (KLIBF) since 2015. The shelf life of books in Malaysia is very short as the market is saturated with various books, and readers prefer to buy bestselling novels because of its author and content (Iszahanid, 2019). According to Ariffin (2016), the decline in book sales year after year has led to many book auction activities being published by the publisher as a last resort to save a publication for printing new books and paying author royalties. Publishers have to think of ways to sell the books in their store and take drastic steps to limit the publication of new books due to the current book industry's challenges.

Our country's book industry is in a state of shock because the public has no longer seen books as an option whether as a hobby or a tool to help them gain knowledge or fill their free time. The government is also ignoring the book industry, making the Kuala Lumpur International Book Fair (KLIBF) held every year to celebrate the country's book industry now becoming a platform for selling existing books by many publishers rather than introducing new books. It is even more depressing when the National Library of Malaysia, our country's book depository itself is only buying books for RM 2 million compared to in 2015 and the year earlier, at RM 40 million (Ahmad 2019).

In Malaysia, the bestseller novels can be defined as those who get the most nominations and won books awards with a *Berita Harian* Popular Readers' Choice Award, an award organized by the well-known bookstore, Popular Bookstore in collaboration with the *Berita Harian* newspaper. The nomination is based on the book's bestselling sales across all popular Bookstore bookstores throughout Malaysia. In addition to winning a book award, a bestselling novel is also dubbed so based on the count of its reprint numbers (Anwar & Ariffin, 2019).

Buku Fixi is one of the most widely published book publications and is virtually unaffected by the book industry's current state. According to Amir Muhammad (personal communication, 2020), Buku Fixi's primary strategy for staying consistent with the book industry is not to rely heavily on bookstore sales. According to him, sales of Fixi Books surged at most book festivals as well as public events such as the Kuala Lumpur International Book Fair (KLIBF) and even the Big Bad Wolf. In 2019, participating in the Big Bad Wolf book event helps to contribute more profit to the company than the sales at bookstores, which is one reason Buku Fixi continues to work with the Big Bad Wolf book event in 2020 as well. Analyzing the consistency of the sales of Buku Fixi at the nation's largest book fair, the Kuala Lumpur International Book Fair (KLIBF) which is held annually, in 2017, the company gained 30% more than 2016, and in 2018 the company posted a double profit on sales. These sales numbers jump to 83% compared to 2017, even though the book industry can no longer benefit from the book vouchers that the government used to provide. Buku Fixi manages to maintain this consistent success at the Kuala Lumpur International Book Fair (KLIBF) in 2019 despite bearing a slight decline in profits by 77% by 5% compared to the 2018 KLIFB. However, Buku Fixi can still be proud of these numbers as it shows their capability to remain

relevant. At the upcoming 2020's Kuala Lumpur International Book Fair (KLCC), the company is optimistic about hitting a sales target of RM 500,000.

Looking at the annual sales data of Buku Fixi, according to Amir Muhammad (personal communication, 2020), the yearly sales of the company's books are consistent with the availability of top-selling books such as *Asrama 2* in 2017 with over 20,000 copies per year followed by *Gantung 2* in 2018 with sales 28,000 copies a year. The company's sales charts are static in 2019 but are still selling well because book events like Big Bad Wolf allow more books to be sold. The number of books the company sells annually is between 50,000 and 100,000 which is their yearly target. Indie companies like Buku Fixi do not print many copies for selected titles due to Malaysia's book industry's unfavourable state. Generally, for bestselling authors, the publishers would allocate 2000 copies of printed books while for new authors, Buku Fixi will allot up to 500 to 1000 copies of books. More copies of books will be printed when the book is sold out for more depending on market demand. This company's sales data volatility is not due to the lack of response in regards of the books, but rather, the company is taking steps to stop printing any of the bestselling books that cannot sell over 1500 copies a year to enable the company's bestselling books to be published and eventually allows for more books to be sold. In 2019 alone, the company stopped printing and selling 18 titles with a lukewarm sale. It has also been one of the company's critical strategies since its inception to stay relevant in the market and avoid dumping books in the warehouse and preventing book sales.

The definition of bestselling books abroad differs from Malaysia. Shisia (2018) says the Harry Potter series written by JK Rowlings is the best-selling book in the world with sales of 510 million books worldwide, followed by the Goosebumps series written by R.L. Stine with the cumulative sales of 350 million books worldwide. Most of the top 10 best-selling novels abroad are usually well-known for their adaptation to film format and normally these best-selling novels abroad are known as such by looking at the book's sales figures:

When books are described as best-selling, it is usually referring to the number of copies of that book that were sold and not the number that was printed or the number that is owned. The list is compiled based on the highest number sold as identified by dependable sources.

(Shisia, 2018)

Not only in Malaysia, but the decline of the book industry has also been experienced the book industry worldwide. According to Spring and Levett (2017), book sales around the world experienced fluctuations, especially in European countries. In 2013 the book became more widely accepted but this began to change in 2015 and the following year due to economic and political factors. The sale of e-books that initially received a great response and is expected to overturn the legacy of physical books through several e-book applications does not affect physical book sales as the average reader still wants the physical book in their hands.

The National Library of Malaysia's findings show that Malaysians generally read only 15 book titles a year, which is very disappointing compared to the time it is taken for them to browse social sites. In addition, this article also states that the book industry has only two lifelines. First, purchases made by libraries and government allocations while second, purchases made through book festivals and bookstores. In addition to government assistance, the author's written work also needs to change and this writing reform will eventually bring readers back to reading books (Hamzah, 2019). According to Davis (2006), bestselling book data is seen as an important symbol in the publishing industry in Australia. This data reflects the numbers of

books sold and interprets the actual state of the industry itself. It enables research to be done primarily to identify readers' interests and demand, it also serves to study the current market. In contrast to this, in Malaysia there is no references to sales data have been kept or recorded, a fact recorded through an article by Nielsen Book India & Asia Pacific Region Director Vikrant Mathur, describing Malaysia as an attractive market in Southeast Asia but due to the lack of proper shelving or keeping any record of bestselling books trending yearly, no one knows what book is most best-selling and most sought after each year. According to him, the data obtained is crucial to helping the Malaysian book industry grow (Iszahanid, 2019).

The Malaysian book industry only states that the number of books published each year when in fact it is not the most important factor in exploring the way the world of books survives to this day. Last year, 19,713 books were published and by 2020, Malaysia is aiming to publish 31,700 books alongside 31.7 million Malaysians. Former Tourism and Culture Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Nazri Abdul Aziz explained that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) stated that according to the advanced country national publishing standards, a title should be allotted for every 1,000 residents of that said country. It is clear from this article that our country's target today is mainly the number of books published rather than the more important sales figures (Dahili, 2020).

The immediate revolution of the book industry needs to be instituted immediately. With the decline in book sales and response, the industry needs deep insights and research to find new solutions and a growing concern for the Malaysian book industry. This study examines the in-depth analysis of novel bestselling novels through the techniques and narrative structure of best-selling authors in the market today whether it helps sell their novels or are there other techniques that best-selling authors can do to increase their book sales in the growing book market.

The question in this study is :

- What are the best-selling novel factors from the perspective of Buku Fixi Sdn Bhd?

Conceptual Framework

A study requires a conceptual framework to ensure that the study has a preliminary guide that enables the study to be carried out. The conceptual framework for this study is as shown in Figure 1.0 below.

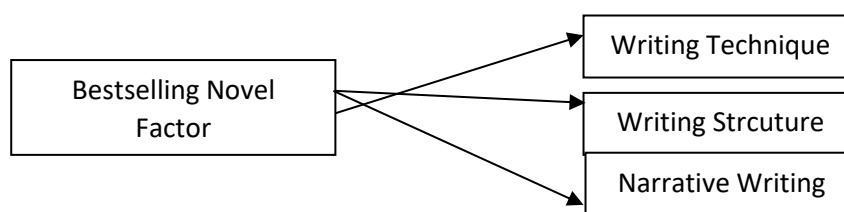


Figure 1.0: Conceptual Framework of Best-selling Novel Factors (Safei, Baharudin, Tibek, Sham, Ariffin, and Mohd, 2008; Campbell (2017); Basri (2007)

This conceptual framework shows three main factors that can influence the sale of bestsellers in the market and the book industry: writing techniques, writing structure, and narrative writing. Mawar Safei, Rosnah Baharudin, Siti Rugayah Tibek, Fariza Sham, Zamri Ariffin, and

Samsiah Mohd (2008) stated that one of the main factors of a popular novel is gaining popularity in the market is that a novel has a specific writing technique that can interest readers to read something in the novel. In general, the bestselling and popular novels use conventional plot-writing techniques that are easy to understand with the beginning, middle, and end formulas that often have endings. This general technique has always been a favorite of today's teenagers. Other writing techniques injected into a best-selling novel are flashback techniques, monologue techniques, coincidence techniques, and twist plot techniques that make a novel unique. Campbell (2017) states that the writing structure practiced by world-renowned author JK Rowling is to plot the plot structure of each Harry Potter story series on a paper with a pen. The plot structure written by JK Rowling is a box involving plot, title, date, character encounter, conflict, crisis, and detailed storytelling to make it easy for JK Rowling to type the story using a three-act structure. JK Rowling did this so she could keep track of what was going on in the plot as it was a long-running story and she would structure the plot completely on paper before daring to write her story on a computer even though it was a long way off. It shows that the world's best-selling author also wrote her plot structure to make it easier to write everything well. Basri (2007) explains that suspense-writing narratives can entice readers to read a book until the end of the story. The findings of this study found that two elements that make the audience or reader feel threatened to continue reading and reading are narrative techniques as well as character building in the story.

Method

According to Yahaya et al (2007), qualitative is a method by which researchers prove all human speech and action as a study and this type of research is relevant because the informant's opinions are related to their expertise and working field. This study uses a qualitative research design and data were collected using interviews and reviews of literature. Data were translated verbatim. This study has conducted face-to-face interviews with Buku Fixi Sdn Bhd Managing Director; Amir Muhammad and Nadia Khan, one of the bestselling Buku Fixi Sdn Bhd authors. The selected research method was the guide for the researcher to obtain and analyze the textual material at the maximum level to find the bestselling novel factors to serve as a guide for writers and the local creative industry. The results of this study were then recorded as the Findings Framework.

Results

Writing Techniques as a Best-selling Factor

Writers abroad have always dared to experiment and often try to highlight their novels' uniqueness. According to Stine (2019), a best-selling novelist posits that the existing writing techniques are irrelevant and too cliché' for modern writers to follow. Thus R.L. Stine has created a writing technique that starts with the beginning, ending and plot twist. R.L. Stine will put two or three plot twists in writing his book which will surprise the reader and will greatly interest them to read more of the book. Using this plot twist technique, R.L. Stine's book series *Goosebumps* is the second best-selling book in the world after the Harry Potter series, reaching 350 million sales to date since its sale in 1992.

Mastering Writing Techniques

According to Basri (2007), suspense or surprise narratives can entice readers to continue reading a book until the end of the story. The result of this study revealed two elements that make the reader feel threatened to continuing to follow a story narrative or to reading further

depends on the narrative techniques as well as the characters in the story. What this study seeks to do is look at the interdependent structures and narratives to form a framework that can manipulate the reader to continue reading a story using narrative techniques.

Meanwhile, according to Buku Fixi publisher Amir Muhammad (personal communication, 2020), Malaysian novels should include 'fast pacing' techniques in writing so readers can read the book faster by turning to the next page one after the other. This technique is a common technique for novels from abroad. He added that indie novels normally practiced this technique by using the short word, which in turn will enable the reader to read faster. All types of novels can apply the same technique as well, so various elements need to be included to make the reader look forward to the next novel. The plot-twist technique often referred to as the 'trademark' of Buku Fixi is just the opinion of the earlier readers of the Buku Fixi as Buku Fixi emphasizes 'fast pacing' in its storytelling so the readers will feel threatened to read on to the next book.

Malaysian Writers Have Less Writing Skill Techniques

Foreign writers have a deeper understanding concerning the techniques they should master in writing. Anwar (2019) classifies writers in Malaysia to write only using their heads and are less exposed to proper writing techniques. If an author masters mastery of these techniques and structures, it will transform his or her writing techniques in various ways, particularly in terms of plot, characters, background, and point-of-view. Based on the article written by Anwar (2019) it clearly shows that authors in Malaysia are less exposed to the application of techniques and structures. According to Nadia Khan (personal communication, 2020), the bestselling author of Buku Fixi says writing cannot be taught but can be learned. Besides, a lot of reading will allow a person to master certain techniques in writing. For her, writing techniques in the books that she wrote were the characters' strengths. The stories that she creates are usually character-driven and these characters must move strongly from the beginning to form a strong story and narrative.

Good Writing Structure as a Best-selling Factor

With technique, foreign writers also designed their writing structure before actually starting writing their novel. Campbell (2017) proposes that the writing structure practiced by world-renowned author JK Rowling is to write down each Harry Potter book's plot structure in the series on paper with a pen. The plot structure written by JK Rowling includes plot, title, date, character encounters, conflicts, crises, and detailed storytelling to make it easy for JK Rowling to type the story using a three-act structure. It was created by JK Rowling so that she could keep track with what was going on in the plot as it was a long-running story and she would structure the plot completely on paper before daring to write her story on a computer even though the book was a long way off from the one that she is currently working with. It shows that the world's best-selling author also wrote his plot structure to make it easier for her to keep track of her story and ensure that all her narrative to be well-planned and keep it interesting. Structures in book writing should be general and therefore becomes the best medium for experimental authors. Nadia Khan (personal communication, 2020) states that as a book writer and scriptwriter, she only uses a three-act structure in her film scripts or dramas since it deals with circumstances and binding situations.

This is different from books because authors cannot limit themselves to just one structure. For example, the novel *Gantung* (2013) plays with two timelines while *Kelabu* (2011) follows an adventure structure. The author of a book should be free and bold in experimenting and

should not be subjected to a single structure in writing. She believes that interesting structural factors will also assist in the sale of a novel because the uniqueness of the book makes it different from the others. According to Amir Muhammad (personal communication, 2020), he claims that the novel structure of those under Buku Fixi is free in the hands of the author, as publishers do not like to set strict rules and guidelines because he wants the authors of his company to create a storyline that is perceived as interesting to their readers. To him, the overall structure of a book had to be planned before one starts writing because it would eventually end up to be interestingly connected dots after writing. If the story is interesting to the reader, the best-selling factor will come automatically.

Narrative Writing as a Best-selling Factor

Narratives are certainly a strong factor for a book to become a bestseller. According to a study by Visser et. al (2015), J. K. Rowling, a bestselling author is known for her work in storytelling - a strong narrative that won over marketing and her readers' feedback. JK Rowling's novel narrative through the Harry Potter series and her two other novels using other aliases, which are *Cuckoo's Calling* (2013) and *The Casual Vacancy* (2012) are perceived as very unique and different from each other. This strange narrative often garners public attention and one of the factors that a novel receives a wild response.

Amir Muhammad also agrees to this fact (personal communication, 2020, in which he states that a best-selling book usually has a good narrative and is unique compared to the others with simply a beautiful book cover because the cover of a book it is simply a decoration of a novel to make it more interesting. According to Nadia Khan (personal communication, 2020), narrative plays a very important role in a story. Story or narrative processing needs to be taken into account regardless of the genre in which it is written. She has written novels of various genres, mentioned that the best way to attract readers is through an interesting and unique novel narrative that contrasts and differs from those from other authors. In addition, according to Basri (2007), suspense-filled narratives can entice readers to read a book until the end of the story. The findings of this study found that two elements that make the audience or reader feel threatened to continue reading further are due to the narrative techniques as well as the character building in the story. Nadia Khan (Personal Communication, 2020) added that the characters in the book are the pillars of the story and that the characters play an important role in the story and a vital aspect in exciting the reader to read a book.

Good Narrative Contributes to Buku Fixi Constant Marketability

The duration of a novel's shelf life will eventually become its selling point. The narrative that is easy to understand, unique, and connected with the reader is a factor that makes a novel last in the market. According to Amir Muhammad (personal communication, 2020), the narrative of a novel equates to the novel's life span. Narratives that a reader can relate themselves to will almost always make the work a popular name. For Amir, the shelf-life of a book is a subjective topic, but only the author itself can understand the best, what kind of narrative they produce. A strong and effective narrative will provide good reader feedback and this will allow the book to be spread further and be recommended by readers to other readers. For years, he believes that narrative factors are the most important factor in ensuring a book to become a bestseller for being a book publisher for years.

The Strength of the Horror and the Thriller Genre from Buku Fixi

This genre's dominance is seen as one of the selling points of some of the bestselling works. Thriller crime novels dominate Britain's best-selling charts today with an increasing record amounting to 10 percent. Some of Britain's best-known authors are Dan Brown, Stephen King, and James Petterson. This genre's dominance has also been widespread in Malaysia where thriller crime-ridden local novels have also sold tens of thousands of ringgits. Most of them are Indie novels like Buku Fixi which earn high sales and sell tens of thousands of books each year. Buku Fixi has a huge profit and is still well-received by readers as these novels target young people to make purchases of their books until Fixi Book's sales soar. Although eventually almost all the books are shown to be in decline, this shows the thriller genre all over the world including Malaysia has tactics and formulas that generate incredible responses amongst readers (Iszahanid, 2019).

This agrees with Amir Muhammad's opinion (personal communication, 2020) in saying that the horror and thriller genre when associated with readers, will garner more responsive and positive attention from potential readers. This is due to the age of the characters in the books is close to the readers themselves as well as the characters in the books of Buku Fixi are shown to still be in school and this particular age is the target readership of Buku Fixi which will allow some of Buku Fixi books to be sold for an even longer time. As for Nadia Khan (Personal Communication, 2020), she mentioned that the genre factor plays a very important role in the market, and she has previously written that the genre is well-understood and well-received by market demand. However, a more dominant market will allow for publishing a lot more books. The diversity of genres should focus on writers and the book industry as it can make a difference in selling works.

Effective Narration in Buku Fixi

The emergence of indie books in 2010 changed the book publishing landscape, according to Abdullah and Isaac (2016). The rise of Indie publishers to the open book market has been seen as an exciting development as their books' content shows innovation and is more accessible to young people, especially students. Content, book covers, and interesting titles and strong social media marketing entice young people to become a reader and start reading, especially men, in buying their books from indie publications. In the meantime, Ashari et al (2018) noted that the value of indie book sales from 2013 to today shows their dominance in the local bookstore charts and even beat the sale of mainstream books. Readers' interest in this genre of writing is linked to the uniqueness of their writing approach. This article's results have found that five factors make it important for readers to buy and read the book, such as title, book cover, content processing, messages and graphics, and the role of new media. Buku Fixi is considered the most beloved Indie book publisher and a favorite among young readers. A bookstore owner once told Amir Muhammad (personal communication, 2020) that most book market only accepts cookbooks, romance novels, and religion references books because the average Malaysian reader is female.

This made him felt challenged because he believes both thriller and horror genres had their group of fans. According to the reader's earlier response during its first years, Buku Fixi has since then became known for its way of storytelling that captures young readers' interests and thus encourages new readers to start to pick up and read a book. The indie movement has made a major change in the narrative aspect that has always been dominated by the romance novels' market as well as those books that manage to top the bestselling lists in

bookstores that already feature indie books in the first place. Nadia Khan (personal communication, 2020) believes that narratives in indie novels allow her to always try and challenge new things as her readers await her new published work and this motivates her to come forward with her best masterpiece. However, indie book publishers need to be consistent in introducing new ways to attract readers as in recent years more indie publishers are coming to the mainstream market and this will lead to huge competition in the publishing world and thus will eventually be the reason for the market to be saturated in the future.

Findings Framework

Based on three key elements of the study that are the factors of Buku Fixi Sdn Bhd best-selling novel, a findings framework was created to see that all of these elements are intertwined with each other to make this study a comprehensive study. To obtain an effective findings framework, all of the elements that support the main elements provide a framework guide to the study. In writing techniques, the main thing that needs to be mastered is writing techniques and a deep understanding of writing techniques. For a writing structure, a general writing structure often appeals to the reader without the conventional structure bonding and a good writing structure should be a planned one. For narrative writing, the study found that an effective narrative will contribute to the life of the book. At the same time, the power of horror and thriller genres today is a powerful narrative today. An effective and effective narrative will keep books on the bookshelf and sell well. The findings framework of this study can be interpreted in Figure 2.0 below. To write a best-selling novel, a writer must emphasize mastering writing techniques, grasp deep understanding of these techniques, plot structure and open structure, and understand narrative, genre, and the importance of effective narrative.

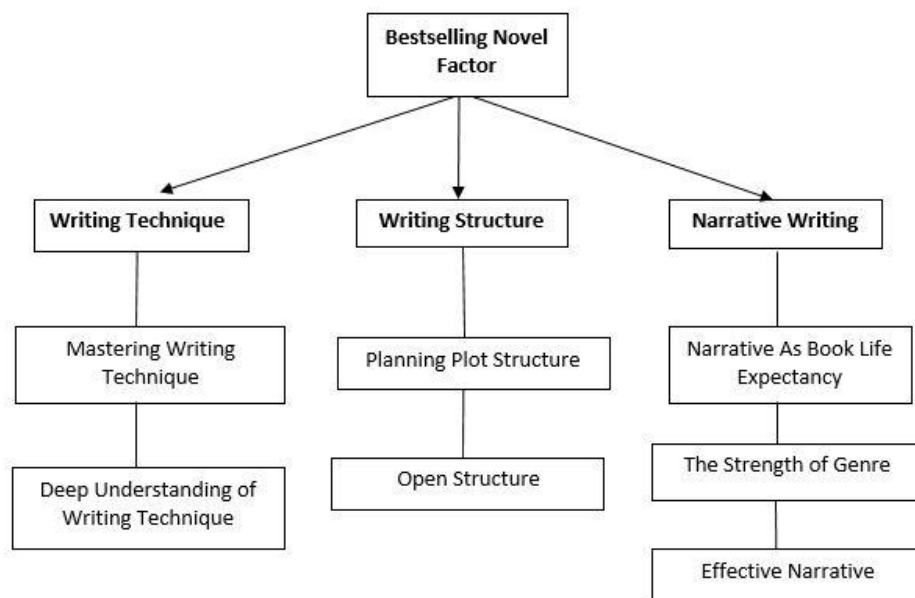


Figure 2.0 Findings framework of Bestselling Novel Factors: The Technique, Structure and Narrative Writing from The Perspective of Buku Fixi Sdn Bhd

Conclusion

Overall, the competition between publishers that concentrate on publishing the same genre, as well as the declining state in book sales today, necessitated them to embrace a drastic change for a publisher to survive. Looking at the factors that involve bestselling novels was done to discover the best ways to sell a novel in the market particularly in both publishers and bestselling author's perspectives. Publishers in Malaysia's book industry have to improve their marketing strategies and find important formulas to extend a book's shelf life. The goal of publishing more books that eventually become auction books must be avoided by all publishers. Instead of constantly selling books, Amir Muhammad (personal communications, 2020) as the publisher of Buku Fixi said their company will recycle the books if they cannot sell them after a few years. He added that many book auctions today would not be able to solve the book industry's problems. Therefore this study has examined the factors involved in creating bestselling novels and found that effective narrative factors are a major factor in ensuring the emergence of a best-selling novel. This factor can be seen as a recommendation for the book industry for them to transform the quality of the published book in the future into a better direction and as an alternative as we seek to revive our deteriorating book industry today.

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