



The ingredients for a blockbuster novel

Big, brash and frequently brutal, it is a genre unto itself



Living the technicolour life ... a woman drinking champagne. Photograph: moodboard/Corbis

"What I really want to read is a proper, old-fashioned blockbuster like they used to do. You know?" a friend said to me a couple of years ago. And I did know. I knew exactly the sort of book she was talking about. That conversation planted the seed of the idea which became my first novel, *Luxury*, which is just that – an old-fashioned blockbuster, brought bang up to date.

When I started writing *Luxury*, I did a lot of thinking about what makes a novel a blockbuster, as opposed to a saga, or chick lit. While the traditional definition of a blockbuster is simply a mega-seller, like their cinematic counterparts, to call a book a blockbuster implies something more than simply selling in droves – although of course one always hopes they will do that as well.

I did a lot of reading around the subject, devouring reams of exotic locations and deliciously deviant behaviour. I read Shirley Conran, Irvin Shaw, Tom Wolfe, Jackie Collins, Sally Beauman. I started making lots of lists, of the "essential ingredients" of a blockbuster.

Blockbusters are, invariably, long. There is no such thing as a slim blockbuster. They make their presence felt on the bookshelf with their heft and, frequently, the raised metallic lettering on their spines. *Luxury* is, if anything, at the svelter end of the scale, at around 550 pages; they can easily run into four figures.

These are big books not just physically, but in every way. The lives of the characters in a blockbuster happen on a grand scale. Poverty is extreme, the frequently chronicled rise to stratospheric wealth even more so. There is little in the way of middle ground. Addiction devastates, ambition turbo-charges, passion fuels an inferno. Whether it is the sexily scandalous Hollywood excesses of Jackie Collins, or the catastrophic meltdown of Atlantan titan of business Charlie Croker in *A Man in Full*, these are lives lived in technicolour.

Blockbusters often span both decades and continents, skipping through years and countries with ease. There is usually a major city involved, often counterpointed by a country escape, or a remote and exotic location. In *Luxury* this role is played by an elite and ultra-exclusive private island hotel which caters to the every whim of its

pampered and famous guests; in Conran's Savages, one of the greatest blockbusters ever, almost all of the action takes place on the desert island where the characters are marooned, their city lifestyles a distant memory.

People very often aren't nice in blockbusters. These are not the sympathetic characters of chick lit, the sweet girls searching for love. Instead, here are characters who can walk into a room and ask, "Which one of you bitches is my mother?" (in Shirley Conran's Lace) or who, like my own Nicolo Flores, are so consumed by envy and the addictive desire for revenge that they spend most of their lives trying to bring down the friend who betrayed them.

Blockbusters teem with detail: great chorus lines of supporting characters, colourful backdrops, jewels and glamour and sex. They are page-turners, where story comes first – though this doesn't mean they can't be literary as well – Irvin Shaw's Rich Man, Poor Man, is a perfect example, and there's plenty of Dickens that would, if it were written today, fall neatly into the blockbuster category.

They are the literary version of the cinematic epic, of a huge sandwich loaded up with all of your favourite things, of a box set of Dynasty. A shameless guilty pleasure.

[Next](#)

[Previous](#)

[Blog home](#)

[Ads by Google](#)

[Hiring Freelance Writers](#)

Write from anywhere and get paid twice a week. Writers apply today!

www.DemandStudios.com

[Proofreading Today](#)

The course that will really prepare you for freelance work...

www.editrtrain.co.uk

[London: -70% Coupons](#)

1 ridiculously huge coupon a day. Get 50-90% Off London's best!

www.GROUPON.co.uk/London

Comments in chronological order (Total 17 comments)

 Staff

 Contributor



[davidabsalom](#)

9 December 2009 11:29AM

Aren't most of your book's role models more than twenty years old? I think you may have missed the boat.

Recommend (1)

[Report abuse](#)

[Clip](#)

| [Link](#)



[SJ13](#)

9 December 2009 1:03PM

Hurrah for the blockbuster! 80's fashion and music have enjoyed a great revival in recent years - some might say the resurgence of the blockbuster is rather more welcome.

Recommend (3)

[Report abuse](#)

[Clip](#)

| [Link](#)



sUNEEL

9 December 2009 1:56PM

I will spare you my unfashionable and too serious, most probably, elitist ideas on the meaning and importance of fiction and the role of the Blockbuster within them. But I really have to comment on the last line:

A shameless guilty pleasure.

There is no such thing. Guilt does not exist without shame.

Recommend (4)

[Report abuse](#)

[Clip](#)

| [Link](#)



CapslockHolmes

9 December 2009 2:43PM

Oh look, it's an advert for your book!

What an absolute panful of utter bum.

Can anyone shed any light on why this shameless little tirade of self-promotion and self-aggrandizement has been allowed? Doesn't seem at all appropriate to me....

Recommend (10)

[Report abuse](#)

[Clip](#)

| [Link](#)



francaisenyc

9 December 2009 3:38PM

The Guardian is awful these days, proper cat food.

Please try harder on all fronts.

Recommend (4)

[Report abuse](#)

[Clip](#)

| [Link](#)



MsDoc

9 December 2009 5:27PM

Actually, the author is completely right - they don't do blockbusters like they used to.

Big, hefty books, with thrilling story lines and naughty characters, they are indeed a shameless guilty pleasure. Perfect for when you want to immerse yourself in a good read without having to wreck your brain cells - I believe it's called 'entertainment'!

Recommend (1)

[Report abuse](#)

[Clip](#)

| [Link](#)



VirginiaMoffatt

9 December 2009 6:32PM

Not my kind of thing - but good luck to you Jess. I know lots of people love this stuff.

And for the people who are being so rude. What is the difference between a "literary" writer puffing their book and a "blockbusting" writer? It may not be to your taste, but it's a necessary part of a book's promotion. You didn't have to read this article nor do you have to read the book.

Recommend (1)

[Report abuse](#)

[Clip](#)

| [Link](#)



[mullets](#)

9 December 2009 8:33PM

shouldn't this really be on, say, the Sun website?

Recommend (2)

[Report abuse](#)

Clip

| [Link](#)



[MonsieurBoulanger](#)

10 December 2009 10:32AM

Your ideal book sounds rubbish.

Recommend (3)

[Report abuse](#)

Clip

| [Link](#)



[Irishscouser](#)

10 December 2009 11:21AM

The ingredients for a blockbuster novel, well it's very simple really....

Take a cliché driven genre, add some celebrity nonsense, mix it with the zeitgeist of the day and abracadabra...you have your novel...or just send it to the publisher who is best friends with your Dad...that is usually a normal route...oh... there's no nepotism in the book world...just look at the surfeit of trash novelists whose Dad's are famous or alude to be famous...er Cecilia Ahern

Recommend (0)

[Report abuse](#)

Clip

| [Link](#)



[SamBooksMad](#)

10 December 2009 11:34AM

I am totally with Jess. In these grey and grim times there is nothing I like more than a fun, escapist read - long live the blockbuster!

Recommend (0)

[Report abuse](#)

Clip

| [Link](#)



[CapslockHolmes](#)

10 December 2009 12:00PM

What is the difference between a "literary" writer puffing their book and a "blockbusting" writer?

Nothing. That's not the problem. The problem is that this is the books blog of one of the largest newspapers in the UK, not the author's personal promotion website, so posts like this shouldn't really be allowed. And the fact that it's pretending to be something other than an advert for the author's own book is kind of insulting.

Recommend (7)

[Report abuse](#)

Clip

| [Link](#)



[mintay](#)

10 December 2009 2:18PM

...or just send it to the publisher who is best friends with your Dad...

Preposterous! It's not like Jessica Ruston is related to anyone famous. Oh no.

Recommend (0)

[Report abuse](#)

Clip

| [Link](#)



[megsanders](#)

10 December 2009 9:39PM

well i've actually read it - has anyone else who's commented so far? and i can tell you, it was absolutely brilliant. i read and enjoy a wide variety of genres and i reckon there's room for them all (with the exception, possibly, of misery memoirs).

Recommend (1)

[Report abuse](#)

Clip

| [Link](#)



[BrandonEllis](#)

12 December 2009 4:02AM

I agree. Major books need to have larger than life characters with a powerful story. I think a little controversy is always good as well in a story. I write a lot one such place as at <http://www.stogblog.com> but I think that you missed one big point. Some of the greatest books you have never even heard of. Marketing and Influence drive sales and success I believe even more than the content. But develop strong characters and evoke emotion and your getting somewhere.

Best of Luck:)

Recommend (0)

[Report abuse](#)

Clip

| [Link](#)



[Udithd](#)

15 December 2009 10:55AM

This comment was removed by a moderator because it didn't abide by our [community standards](#). Replies may also be deleted. For more detail see [our FAQs](#).



[Udithd](#)

15 December 2009 11:01AM

My previous, rather succinct, comment is probably going to be censored, so I will refine it.

It is precisely this kind of fatuous and inane vomit, that is responsible for the endless array of bourgeois detritus that has made the last decade of literary culture the most unremarkable, mediocre and arbitrary of this century.

I hope that anybody that reads your 'blockbuster', goes blind.

Recommend (0)

[Report abuse](#)

Clip

| [Link](#)

Comments on this page are now closed.

