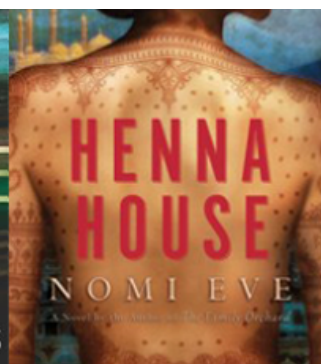


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You are here: [Home](#) / [Information](#) / What Makes a Book Successful? A Case Study of 4 Bestselling Books

What Makes a Book Successful? A Case Study of 4 Bestselling Books

Monday, January 7, 2019 by [Sabrina Ricci](#)



The Rabbit Who Wants to Fall Asleep

From August to October of 2015, *The Rabbit Who Wants to Fall Asleep* by Carl-Johan Forssén Ehrlin was a huge story in the media. Ehrlin is a behavioural psychologist and linguist and the book actually puts children to sleep. Originally the book was self-published, and according to [The Telegraph](#), it was “the first self-published work to ever top the Amazon charts.”

An advertisement for a restaurant in Edinburgh. The background is a dark, moody photograph of a restaurant interior with warm lighting. The text is white and yellow. At the top, it says "Advertisements" in a small font. Below that, "Edinburgh" is written in a large, bold, sans-serif font. In the center, "3 COURSE MEAL" is written in a smaller, bold, sans-serif font. Below that, the price "\$ 359.99" is displayed in a large, bold, sans-serif font. At the bottom, there are two smaller price points: "\$ 75.98" and "\$ 348.00" on the left, and "\$ 359.99" and "\$ 69.98" on the right. A "View Offer" button is located at the bottom right.

over 500 copies since its release in April 2014.

The reason for the success wasn't immediately talked about. Then [Publisher's Weekly](#) revealed that the [Daily Mail](#) wrote an article about how the book helps kids fall asleep, which led to more articles in other media outlets, including Forbes, The Guardian, NPR, and others. Shortly after getting all that press, Ehrlin signed with a literary agent and then Penguin Random House Children's bought the rights to the book for 7-figures, according to [The Bookseller](#).

And then in October of 2015, [Publisher's Weekly](#) wrote another article about *The Rabbit*, revealing the steps leading up to the article in the Daily Mail that ended up making the book so popular. It turns out that the book was 5 years in the making, and was Ehrlin's third book. He sold the book at seminars and classes and he had his book translated into six languages, which was key. All of his hard work led to word of mouth and sales; Ehrlin also "did some ads there saying the book existed and [people] could try it for free and see if they liked it or not." His book started selling a lot of copies on Amazon in the U.K. (the English translation). Amazon's executives then put Ehrlin in touch with writers from the Daily Mail, the Telegraph, and the Guardian.

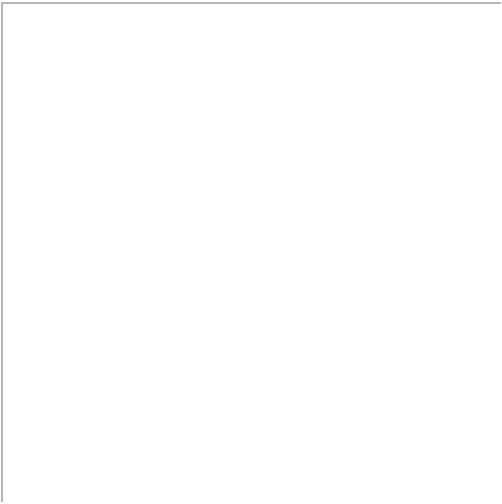
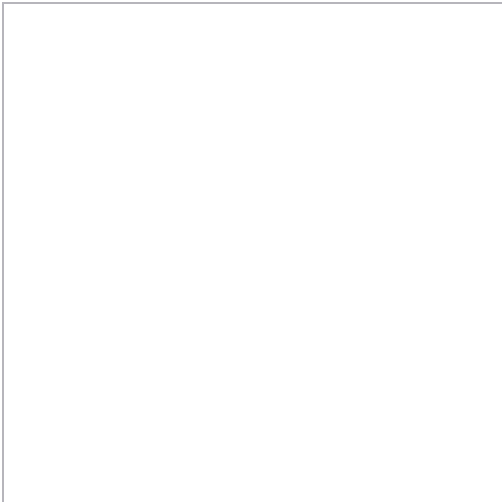
And interestingly, according to the article, "Ehrlin estimates that, actually, it was the day after the *Daily Mail* ran its story on *Rabbit* that the title became Amazon U.K.'s #1 bestseller. A few days later, it was topping Amazon bestseller lists in the U.S. and other countries."

The SheepOver

John Churchman and his wife Jennifer self-published *The SheepOver*, a book about an orphaned lamb named Sweet Pea who the couple took care of, which also became a best seller. According to [Publisher's Weekly](#), John Churchman went to his local bookstore and asked if they would stock the book:

But as he showed the book to store co-owner Elizabeth Bluemle, an eavesdropping customer said she'd buy a copy. Bluemle pulled over another store browser to take a look. That customer bought a copy, too. Bluemle was sold: she told Churchman she'd take another eight for her shelves.

BOOK TO LITTLE, BROWN BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS in a three-book deal with a 6-figure advance.



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John already had a Facebook page where he posted photos of the animals on their farm, including sheep, a mini-horse, dogs, geese, ducks, turkeys, cats, and chickens. Their fans already cared about the well-being of Sweet Pea, and John and Jennifer launched a successful campaign on [Kickstarter](#) so they could produce a hardcover version of the story.

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According to [One Writer's Way](#), the campaign met their goal within the first 24 hours. And then of course they took a few copies to their local bookstore, became a hit, and last month the [New York Times](#) wrote a review.

The Girl on the Train

Otis Chandler, founder of Goodreads, wrote a [blog post](#) calling *The Girl on the Train* the “it” book of 2015. Apparently Goodreads was a major factor in the book’s success, and the momentum for the book built up quickly on Goodreads.

According to the blog post, influential readers helped the book become popular early on. [Karen](#), one of the top reviewers on Goodreads, wrote a rave for an ARC copy of the book four months before *The Girl on the Train* was published. This led to many people adding the book to their bookshelves, as a reminder to read the book when it came out. And that led to the book trending on Goodreads.

Riverhead Books, which published *The Girl on the Train*, gave away 4,000 advanced copies to booksellers, critics, and readers, and did two giveaways on Goodreads. There were 50 winners, though 2,400 people entered the giveaway.

More people posted reviews on Goodreads and buzz was building around the book, so they got more author interviews and paid for more advertising in the month leading up to the publication date. More people kept adding and talking about the book on Goodreads, which led it to be featured on the site. Then Riverhead Books did two more Goodreads giveaways, and this time 5,000 people entered.

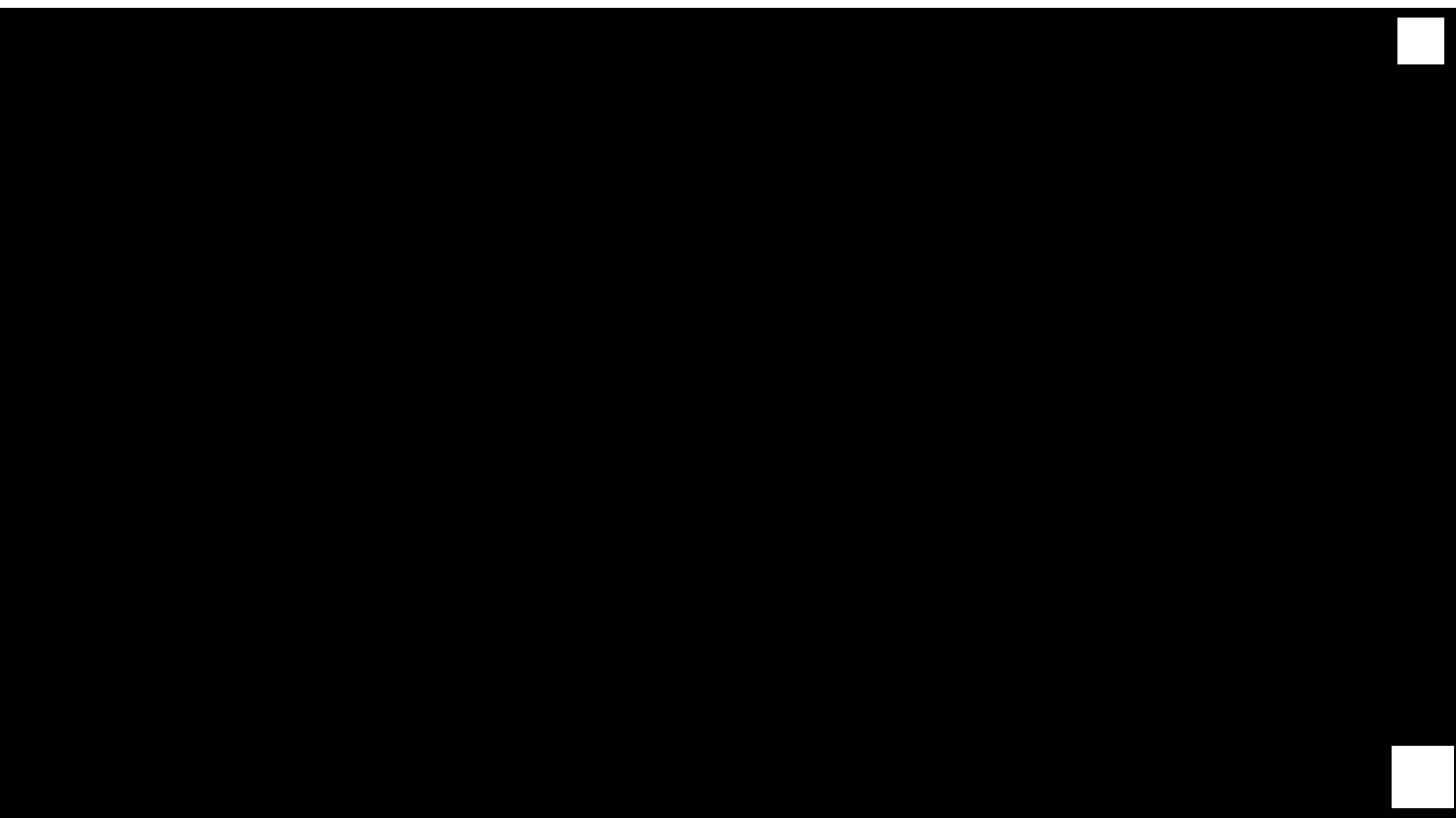
Within two weeks, the book was a New York Times best seller, and authors such as Stephen King started talking up *The Girl on the Train*. According to the blog post,

nightstand. *The Girl on the Train* had become part of the zeitgeist — it was a conversation topic. And to be part of the conversation, you had to read it first, which people did in droves.

Henna House

Henna House by Nomi Eve is a coming of age story about a young woman named Adela, who lives in Yemen in 1920. Nomi shares in an article on [Publisher's Weekly](#) that a big secret to her success is her 100 Book Club Challenge. The idea is to meet with 100 book clubs, either in person or via Skype.

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She shared the challenge on Facebook and the invitations came quickly. In the end she met her goal within only 6 months.

Eve said that she thinks one reason she hit her goal so quickly was because she posted photos of her book club meetings on Facebook, her website, and Twitter. She even hosted two book clubs who traveled to see her in her house.

Key takeaways: What made these books so successful?

There's no "one size fits all" marketing strategy, and I think all these books had a bit of luck. But as the saying goes, "Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity." And that definitely fits for these four books.



A lot of work was done upfront, and I don't believe there is ever such a thing as a true overnight success. That said, there are a few common threads the four books in this case study seem to have.

Here are a few tactics that may help you with your own books:

- Make your book available in as many places as possible. Sometimes that means translating your book to reach the biggest potential market.

- Take the time to produce the highest quality book. People notice.
 - Get people to talk about your book. Word of mouth is important and has an amplifying effect. One way to encourage word of mouth is via giveaways.
 - Reach out and make connections. Influencers who like your book are incredibly helpful, especially at the beginning of your marketing efforts.
-
- Connect with people in a meaningful way. Don't be afraid to share your experiences.
 - Share your story. Media outlets can really help a book achieve success, but in many cases you have to know someone who can introduce you or be willing to write about you.
 - Plan multiple marketing strategies. The more options you have, the more opportunities you give yourself.

Editor's note: This post originally appeared May 2016.

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