

*Michał Rogoż*

## English-language best-selling novel series for children and teenagers in contemporary Polish media space<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, increasing numbers of people, especially young ones, are using the Internet and receive numerous hypertext messages enriched with audio and video content, which is not necessarily conducive to the readership of longer, linear texts<sup>2</sup>. A characteristic trend in the habits of these individuals is the more frequent reading of summaries, syntheses or other short texts<sup>3</sup>. In the twenty-first century, opinions referring to the concept by Marshall McLuhan, concerning the readers' rebellion directed against the traditional printed content and the gradual decline of the Gutenberg era have become popular<sup>4</sup>. This diagnosis also seems to be confirmed by studies carried out in recent years, showing that far fewer Poles systematically indulge in reading books<sup>5</sup>, increasingly using other communications media that strongly appeal to emotions<sup>6</sup>. Also noteworthy is the fact that at the same time in our country there appeared books that achieved extremely high sales and enjoyed interest far beyond the purely literary context. Usually, they were sagas translated from other languages. The range of their popularity had a global dimension. The phenomenon of sagas is not, of course, anything new<sup>7</sup>, but the key seems to be the

<sup>1</sup> A more detailed presentation of this topic was given in M. Rogoż, *Fantastycznie obecne. Anglojęzyczne bestsellerowe cykle powieściowe dla dzieci i młodzieży we współczesnej polskiej przestrzeni medialnej*, Kraków 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. R. Chymkowski, in cooperation with I. Koryś, O. Dawidowicz-Chymkowska, *Społeczny zasięg książki w Polsce w 2012 r.*, [online] <http://www.bn.org.pl/download/document/1362741578.pdf> [accessed 02.03.2015]

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>4</sup> M. Miś, *Zmierzch epoki Gutenberga*. „Wiedza i Życie” 2001, no. 6, p. 56–59; B. Bakalarz-Kowalska, *Czy zmierzch ery Gutenberga?* „Rocznik Ostrowieckiego Towarzystwa Naukowego” 2011, vol. 1, p. 115–119.

<sup>5</sup> In 2012, as many as 41% of Poles of age 14 or older did not read any book at all, and daily book reading was declared by 22% of those over 60, but only 8% of teenagers. R. Chymkowski, *op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> G. Leszczyński, *Magiczna biblioteka. Zbójcekie księgi młodego wieku*, Warszawa 2007, p. 9–10. It may be indirectly related to the collapse of the traditional division of culture into popular and exclusive; J. Kołodziejska, *Elitarne i popularne wzory czytania*, Warszawa 2013, p. 113–134.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. K. Jakowska, *O cyklu opowiadań. Z teorii i historii cyklu narracyjnego w Polsce*, Białystok 2011, p. 52–71.

close link between the reception of these works with their adaptations, including films and computer games on top of the information space in the media (primarily in the press and on the Internet)<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, these issues were considered as a fundamental research problem and it was decided to identify and describe them based on a detailed analysis of appropriately selected case studies.

The essential purpose of this research is, therefore, an attempt to show the presence of this phenomenon in our contemporary culture by presenting the Polish reception of several foreign bestselling novel sagas from the genre of fantastic English-language literature for children and young people. These are, in chronological order: *The Chronicles of Narnia* by Clive Staples Lewis, *Dark Materials* by Philip Pullman, the *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling, *Inheritance* by Christopher Paolini and the *Twilight* saga by Stephanie Meyer.

The study sought to show, from the perspective of library science and press research, specific presence of these books in the contemporary culture of media convergence, and to determine the consequences for their reception. Quantitative and qualitative analysis taking also into account the chronology and geography of the phenomenon, lead to my decision to reconstruct the polyphonic information space around the selected novels (and adaptations thereof) in the press and on the Internet. Taking into account the cultural background that determined the assimilation of these books in Poland and stimulated their above-average popularity, it was sought to recreate mechanisms that affect the creation of a new type of bestseller<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, it was attempted to describe the phenomenon by analyzing its presence in various media channels and causes underlying the popularity of selected products of culture. It was assumed that the multimedia discourse is a unique kind of medium describing the complex phenomenon of the books' reception, reflecting e.g. ideological disputes related to the message of individual books or their tendency to break clichés and cultural taboos. It was also decided to focus on the important aspect of marketing and the phenomenon of feedback between the reception of books and their adaptations.

The series of novels were selected on the basis on predetermined criteria of adequacy and analyzed according to a repeated pattern that takes into account the chronology of issue, translation into Polish, changes in graphic design in case of new editions, adaptations, other books thematically related to the series and information on these issues appearing in different media channels including newspapers and magazines, on top of Internet discussions.

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<sup>8</sup> I. Socha, *Czytelnik jako interdyscyplinarny przedmiot badań w nauce o książce, literaturoznawstwie, socjologii i psychologii – odrębność czy komplementarność?*, [in:] M. Kocójowa (ed.), *Biblioteki, informacja, książka: interdyscyplinarne badania i praktyka w XXI wieku*, Kraków 2010, „ePublikacje Instytutu INiB UJ”, series 3, no. 7, p. 287, [online] <http://skryba.inib.uj.edu.pl/wydawnictwa/e07/n-socha.pdf> [accessed 8.01.2014]

<sup>9</sup> One must realize that the reception of alien cultural content is filtered through one's local experience, where a special kind of reinterpretation of the content takes place according to a model of reality adopted by a given community. On the other hand, the advanced globalization is leading to the emergence of homogenous content, which is not connected in any way with a particular cultural space, and therefore acceptable everywhere with an even value. D. McQuail, *Teoria komunikowania masowego*, tłum. M. Bucholc, A. Szulżycka, Warszawa 2008, p. 263–264, 273–274.

The study sought to present the characteristics of each cycle and highlight those elements of these editions that could have a significant impact on their reading reception (the covers, illustrations, recommendations, advertising slogans). In the case of books that referred to my themes of interest, they, or their adaptations tried to point out the scope and manner of reference.

An important issue related to the reception of individual bestsellers was their translation. The development of the global computer network (where illegal versions of the texts appeared rapidly) and easy access to earlier English editions, enabled readers to confront the original texts with their translations. Therefore, attempts were made to analyze the emerging opinions, comments and discussions, and to capture the possible involvement of fans in the formation of translations. Considering various adaptations of literary texts (especially cinematic ones), the focus was not only on the feature differences arising from this specific medium, but also on the effect of the adaptations on the level of interest in particular stories.

A key element of the study was to characterize the presence of related information connected with the book series (and their adaptations) in the press and on the Internet. Materials reflecting press reception were collected using printed and electronic versions of the *Bibliography of Journal Contents* (*Bibliografia Zawartości Czasopism*), the *Bibliography of History and Criticism of Literature for Children* (*Bibliografia z Zakresu Historii i Krytyki Literatury dla Dzieci...*), the *Polish Bibliography of Literature* (*Polska Bibliografia Literacka*) and the digital archives of „Gazeta Wyborcza”, „Rzeczpospolita”, „Super Express”, „Polityka” and „Wprost”. The materials were obtained on the basis of the above-mentioned database (several thousand publications), newspaper articles collected by the Museum of Children’s Book of the City Public Library in Warsaw and by independent queries.

The collected materials were subject to two types of observation. In terms of quantity (including the criteria of chronology and structure of magazines and newspapers) I analyzed the contents of three newspapers („Gazeta Wyborcza”, „Rzeczpospolita” and „Super Express”) and two weeklies („Polityka” and „Wprost”). They were chosen deliberately because they belong to the popular media and opinion leaders, and besides, they represent different ideological options and have differing thematic profiles. In contrast, qualitative analysis applied to several thousand publications contained in these journals, as well as in dozens of other writings of a different character (from popular to scientific), aiming, first of all, to capture the diversity of media discourse accompanying the described phenomenon.

In recent years, an increasingly important place for the functioning of cultural products, especially certificates of their reception, is cyberspace. The study attempted to account for both the organization of web content around topics of interest and to the dynamics of the discourse on the books and their adaptations. Although I focused on the Polish Internet, due to inability to define its borders precisely, I also took into account pages in Polish located on foreign servers. There is no doubt that a full and detailed analysis of all existing websites that contain references to the books that interested me is impossible, so I focused on the ones with the highest positions in the most popular Internet search engine, Google. However, characterizing the directions of Internet discourse, in appropriate cases, results in invocation of much larger queries.

Key data on network traffic around the works in question was obtained by using the available online webometric programs and statistics kept by Google. With the tool comparing the number of individual searches of given phrases (Google Trends), it became possible to determine the level of their popularity at selected time intervals, as well as diversification of Internet activity in individual provinces. This tool has enabled me to identify the most commonly used phrases, as well as those that, over a certain period, had the largest increases in popularity.

For the commercial success of books included in this study it was very important that they were written in English. Thanks to this fact, they immediately entered the world's largest markets – the US and the UK, which in turn contributed to making their adaptations by the Hollywood film industry. Not without significance was also the fact that information on these series was disseminated in the first place through numerous English-language websites. The books appeared in Poland mainly through translations, but their growing popularity also meant that subsequent volumes were already somewhat assimilated in two circuits: the English-speaking and Polish one, which is supported by, among others, the increased activity of Polish Internet users at times of the foreign releases.

The way information related to the individual bestsellers is disseminated indicates an active nature of modern readership and fits the typical globalized universe of participatory culture. One can assume that the cause of such great interest in the analyzed titles is the sum of at least the following factors: the characteristics of literary works that affect their narrative attractiveness, the social needs satisfied by this type of content, and finally, various types of marketing efforts and social engineering that make up the contemporary readership culture. Very important was the fact, that they took the form of series or sagas, which facilitated the promotion of both books and making of films. The formation of such literary series resulted largely from the logic of the publishing industry, oriented on achieving high returns, which was indispensable to extending the interest in readership, which would be impossible to achieve in the case of a single-volume editions.

The considered novels all contained universal, timeless messages and were directed not only for the young readers. They consisted of a deep archetypal layer appealing to human needs and desires, and a role-envelope constituting of the implementation of certain stories that are attractive for the customer. They also skillfully used fantastic elements. In individual books, an interpretation or reinterpretation of classic myths or religious motives was performed. The books featured distinct characters with whom readers could identify themselves. Thus, they easily became close to the young recipient, as regardless of their imaginary fantastic environment, the characters experienced similar life problems and dilemmas as the contemporary young people.

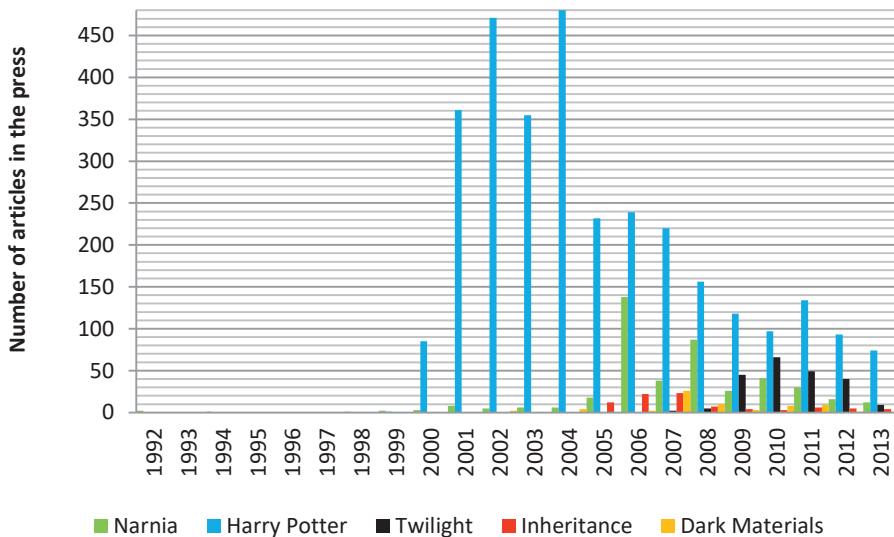
Individual works were written in the genre of the modern epic. They focused on the stories of protagonists' struggles against disruptive events in the history of a particular universe. The characters, according to the genre of contemporary epic, acted as anointed marked ones destined to perform heroic tasks, and they had to reconcile their ordinary lives with the inevitable confrontation that affected the fate of the whole community. The individual plots can, therefore, be read symbolically as a kind of a universal parable about the human fate.

All the bestsellers creatively used the popular role-playing patterns of travel and fight. Most plots followed the characteristic pattern resembling computer adventure games, consisting of “completing” consecutive levels, which generally entailed gaining specific experience and obtaining the necessary artifacts that were used in subsequent duels.

In terms of scale and observed diversity of phenomena associated with the reception of individual novels, the *Harry Potter* saga stands out the most distinctly among others, as its readership quickly reached unheard sales, which, interestingly, lasted for several consecutive years. It is no wonder that it has synonymised with commercial success both in the press and on the Internet forums, and the number of publications devoted to it was the biggest among all the analyzed works (Fig. 1).

The extraordinary interest in the story about a young wizard in the press was noted for more than a decade and the expiration of this subject was very slow, partly due to subsequent adaptations of individual volumes. *The Chronicles of Narnia* also enjoyed quite significant and lasting interest in the press, which was the result of, among others, a clear link between the books and Christian culture, which is well rooted in the Polish society, and the common presentation of the Narnia saga as an alternative for the “iconoclastic” series by J.K. Rowling.

It is worth noting that Narnia themes were revitalized by Hollywood adaptations of the books and they are likely to continue being present in the media, as further film adaptations of the septology are planned. A much smaller response to the saga by S. Meyer was noted in the press which could be due to, among others, the fact that it was a mirror phenomenon, to some extent, to the one that occurred earlier and in a much larger scale. Around this cycle, unlike in the case of *Harry Potter*, no



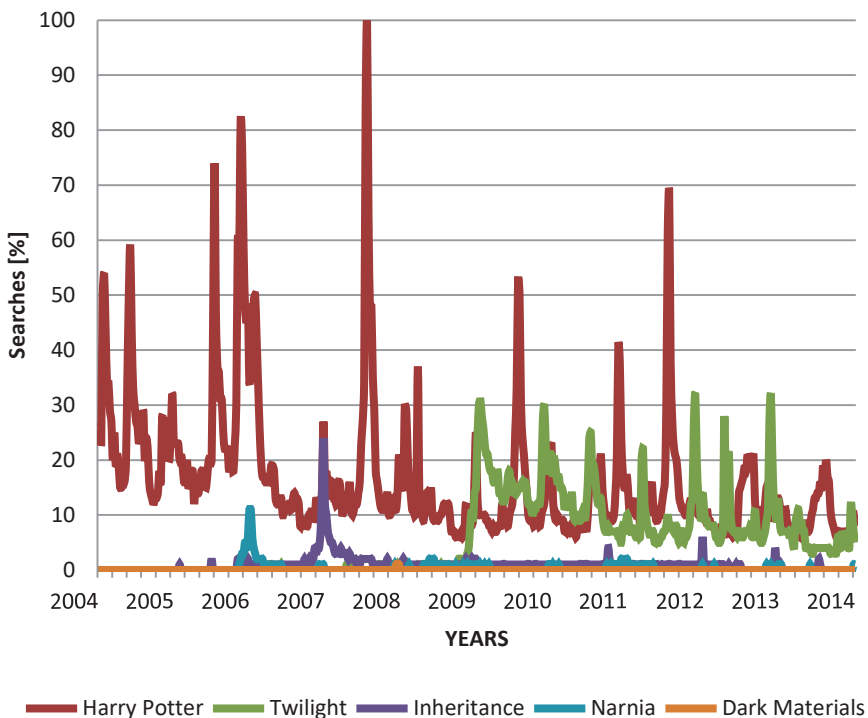
**Fig. 1.** The temporal distribution of opinions related to the presence of English-speaking series of best-selling books for children and young people in the Polish press („Gazeta Wyborcza”, „Rzeczpospolita”, „Polityka” and „Wprost”)

Source: my own research based on analysis of digital press archives.

multifaceted cultural discourse arose, concerning e.g. criticism and interpretation of the text, inter-textual relationships, issues of adaptation, or social acceptance. *Twilight* was more of a phenomenon of the Internet than press polemics. Also, the interest in *Inheritance* and *Dark Materials* extinguished relatively quickly. Certainly, the not entirely successful film adaptations had a significant impact on this, and in both cases they included only the first novels from the series.

On the Internet, the same way as in the case of the press, the largest interest was aroused by the story of *Harry Potter*. The greatest observed traffic was correlated with the premiere of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* in Polish movie theaters, which also coincided with the release of the last English-language part of the saga. Since 2009, significant network traffic has also related to the *Twilight* saga. However, it never reached such values as Rowling's septology. The interest in other titles was much smaller, although there were short-term gains attributable to premieres of film adaptations.

The variety of content appearing on websites related to the plots of popular novels manifested itself not only in a large number of themes, but also in the internal structure of the websites, their interactive capabilities, opinions of the audience, references to the numerous variants of interpretation and multifaceted presence of the work in contemporary culture.



**Fig. 2.** The relatively large traffic around the English-speaking series of bestselling books for children and young people in Poland in years 2004–2014

Source: adapted from Google Trends (measurement date: December 31, 2014).

Internet content is characterized by varying degrees of merit, depending, among others, on the degree of education, and above all – the competence of readers. In addition to serious criticism, there were frequent emotional entries posted by teenage readers. The main subject of description was treated in a different way, as information or rumors, a source of creative inspiration, the object of praise or criticism, and finally as a starting point for formulating a more general views. But apart from this it should be noted that these possibilities of communication on the Internet contributed to a significant intensification of interaction between readers.

A particularly important factor affecting the presence of the analyzed books in the media and social circulation were their film adaptations, especially that technical progress that has been made in the filming technology allowed for the creation of reliable artistic visions that through a variety of special effects were potentially able to cope with the adaptation challenges. The productions required large amounts of money, but with relevant advertising provided that the expenditure could be returned and give high profits. Of course, funds involved in the promotion of films significantly strengthened the market position of the books. Decisions on making film adaptations were connected with high financial risk, and for this reason, further parts of series characterized by moderate popularity (*Inheritance, Dark Materials*) were never filmed. On the other hand, in the case of large audiences, revenues were further increased by dividing the filming of the last volume in two parts. The popularity of the film adaptation, to a large extent, determined further reception of the book. Failed productions further affected relatively fast fading of the interest in books, which already become niche topics in the media. Significantly, graphical Internet search engines positioned film posters higher than original illustrations from books. Even the widespread cover images from the *Harry Potter* novels took a distant place in ranking by Google. Thus, the film images dominated the web presence, somehow imposing a clearly defined pattern of the imaginary characters, places and objects on customers.

It is worth noting that never before did debut novels (Rowling, Meyer, Paolini) gain such wide media recognition in such a short time. Interestingly, the new author position was used as a marketing strategy, and the writers themselves gradually became celebrities who are quoted not only in the context of literary creation. Bestselling authors are often seen as trendsetters, introducing new fashions to public life<sup>10</sup>.

The popularity of a book was not determined by opinions of professional reviewers, as exemplified by the critically acclaimed *Dark Materials* trilogy which, however, did not achieve commercial success such as *Harry Potter* or *Twilight*, which received rather unflattering reviews. The tendency to ignore the voice from authorities, characteristic of today's popular culture, is confirmed here<sup>11</sup>. The criticism focused on two main aspects of the message carried by analyzed books: ethics and aesthetics. The first involved the conviction of non-compliance between the model of education promoted by individual books, offending, according to some, the principles of social ethics, and in the case of the cycles by Rowling, Pullman and Mayer also of the Christian religion firmly rooted in our culture. The latter evaluated the individual literary

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<sup>10</sup> Compare: M. Mołęda-Zdziech, *Czas celebrytów. Mediatyzacja życia publicznego*, Warszawa 2013, p. 196–198.

<sup>11</sup> Compare: P. Czaplinski, *Powrót centrali. Literatura w nowej rzeczywistości*, Kraków 2007, p. 88–132.



texts and recognized the dissonance between the readers' extraordinary fascination with individual books and their objectionable style or composition. The severity of the criticism in the press or on the Internet was usually proportional to the popularity of books, therefore, the much more iconoclastic story of *Dark Materials*, was not met with such a wide range of criticism as the series about *Harry Potter* and the vampires of Forks. It is worth noting that while individual books were variously assessed they always evoked a lot of emotions, which was skillfully aroused and used for their promotion. It is significant fact that often the same features considered as advantages by some, were seen by others as faults.

With the increasing popularity of particular titles, phenomena that influenced their perception and transformed local cultural space were spawned. The specificity of Polish culture resulted in, among others, referencing these books to Polish literary heritage and even in attempts at finding their potential prototypes in our native tradition. Despite numerous discussions and controversies concerning the translation of individual novels into Polish, the translations had a considerable linguistic potential, with the visible effect of transferring meanings from the literary sphere into the native colloquial language, for example, "mugole" (Muggles). This phenomenon was reflected in the youth slang, to a much greater extent, in which exemplifications of certain literary phenomena have become an illustration of various concepts.

At the core of creating a new type of multimedia bestsellers, there are, no doubt, economic factors aimed at intensifying profit by multiplying the content that is attractive to the public. The possibility of its creation stems largely from the development of modern presentation technologies, progressive convergence of the media and all the consequences of the civilization changes associated with globalization, the development of communication through images, lifting barriers of space and culture and free flow of information, to which the Internet has substantially contributed.

The result of the multi-analysis has become better diagnosis of the presence of a few extremely popular English-speaking novel series in Poland addressed to a young audience, but above all, better focus to the unprecedented reception of a book closely related to the media and thus the necessity of applying new concepts, tools and research methods that must be constantly improved and developed.

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### Abstract

The essential purpose of the study was the attempt to illustrate the reception of several foreign media cycles of bestselling English-language novels from the field of fantastic literature for children and youth. These included, in chronological order: *The Chronicles of Narnia* by Clive Staples Lewis, Philip Pullman's *Dark Materials*, the Harry Potter septology by J.K. Rowling, *Inheritance* by Christopher Paolini, and the *Twilight* saga by Stephanie Meyer. Through quantitative and qualitative analysis, taking also into account the chronology and geography of the phenomenon, it was decided to reconstruct the polyphonic information space around a selected novel (and adaptation) in the press and on the Internet. Taking into account the cultural background that determined the assimilation of these books in Poland and stimulated their above-average popularity, it was sought to recreate mechanisms that affect the creation of a new type of bestseller. It was also decided to focus on the important aspect of marketing and the phenomenon of feedback between the reception of the books and their adaptations.

**Key words:** children's literature in English, young adults' literature in English, bestsellers, the media, reception, Poland

Michał Rogoż  
Pedagogical University of Cracow  
Institute of Information Sciences