Publishing Is Late to Brandification: How Do We Catch Up?

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Honors Thesis I
April 27th, 2026

A child gestures to his parents while scrolling on his iPad to purchase the new *Harry Potter* figure set for the new HBO rendition. His room is already decked with Gryffindor gear—from wall-hanging Quidditch jerseys to look-alike Hedwig owl plushies—and his parents even have a couple Slytherin and Hufflepuff coffee mugs lying out for everyday use. Surely, they don't need *another*. But it's another promise, another story to be a part of.

"Where did this even start?" they might ask themselves as they consider the purchase for their child. *It was… the books, right?* Somewhere under the child's bed, tucked in the corner, lies the seven-part *Harry Potter* series, last read maybe ten years ago. Perhaps they'll come back to them when the new series comes out, for they'll feel new again.

Novelty. It grips, it excites—it's something children can't get enough of, and in the increasingly digital-focused environment we live in, it's necessary. So much media and information is pushed at them daily. Their favorite YouTube videos, Roblox games, and FaceTime with friends are a click away. How can we expect a book to break its way through while in competition with all of these more engaging experiences? A book might have a fantastic, beautiful story, but their favorite Super Mario game is available to watch and experience in national theaters. They can play four different Mario-related games on their Nintendo Switch. And, yes, they'll probably buy the new Mario book too.

The important word here is "too." The unfortunate reality for the publishing industry now is that books can no longer sustain themselves as books. This is true for many other publishing sectors as well, such as nonfiction, adult fiction, YA fiction, and more. It is not because books have become "bad." Rather, it is because they have become *less engaging* in comparison to the slew of experiences offered to us.

Corporate America has always been in a steady progression toward prioritizing the bottom line, retaining customers, and commodifying every product it touches. This is no surprise. However, the publishing industry, as with other related creative industries, has been able to lag behind. But it's catching up, and we are seeing a problem with those in the industry being reluctant to acknowledge it. Books are created to sell; therefore, they are products, just like any other product on the market. They fulfill a consumer's needs and desires, and if they do so successfully, the consumer will come back for more. If the gaming, film, and music industries have made peace with brand-first thinking, why is the publishing industry hesitating? Would Sabrina Carpenter be as big of a star if she didn't go on tour, stay active on social media, and sell merchandise? Why can books not do the same? What is the industry's hesitation costing them?

To be clear, the book publishing industry, and specifically the children's publishing sector, has always sold other products adjacent to their books. This is called *synergy*, where two or more elements and/or actions produce a greater effect than they would by themselves. Synergy in book publishing dates back to 1744, when John Newbery published *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* and packaged it with a pincushion and ball, sold alongside the book itself.[1] Lissa Paul calls this the founding gesture of children's book advertising, the "holy trinity" of instruction, delight, and toys, and she frames the entire industry as a 250-year balancing act between the "m and m's" of morality and money.[2] Her point, in addition to mine, is that any current claim that publishing used to be solely about the literature and art of writing is historically false. We have always been trying to brainstorm ways to sell the story better.

However, there has been a noticeable shift in the late twentieth century, which Daniel Hade traces in his 2003 panel essay *Storyselling*. Hade argues that books with occasional

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[1]Lissa Paul, "Are Children's Book Publishers Changing the Way Children Read? A Pocket History," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (2003): 137.
[2]Paul, "Pocket History," 137.

synergetic tie-ins have given way to publishers managing every book as part of a brand identity, and he describes how a single character like Clifford the Big Red Dog now functions as what he calls a "container" for an idea that can be poured into a book, a backpack, a video, or a T-shirt with equal ease.[3] This is evident in Scholastic's 1999 annual report, where the company explains that it strives to build books into "multimedia assets," and in Pearson's 2000 annual report calling its characters "the most prized and enduring brands in children's publishing."[4] Look at the words: "enduring brands," "multimedia assets." Publishers have taken Newbery's pincushion-and-ball guidance as a building block for a much bigger strategy.

Here is where I want to draw a line that the existing literature does not. Hade names the *brand container* as a structural metaphor for what a successful piece of children's IP becomes once corporations get hold of it: a vessel for the abstract idea of "Cliffordness" (he coins this term in reference to his Clifford example) into which any product can be poured. The container is the noun, the static thing that lives in the consumer's mind. What I want to call *brandification* is the verb. It is the active, ongoing strategic process by which publishers build, defend, and continuously expand brand containers as the central organizing logic of their business. Synergy is the tactic; the brand container is the structural result; brandification is the strategic shift that makes synergy and containers the default operating mode of an entire industry. Newbery did synergy. Hade described the container. What I am arguing is that the publishing industry as a whole is now undergoing brandification, and that is the change worth naming. Characters become brands, books become assets, and a clear structure presents itself that will continue to gain traction significantly in the next century: book publishing is no longer an industry of standalone stories, but rather an industry of brand portfolios that happen to publish books.

[3]Daniel Hade, "Storyselling: Are Children's Book Publishers Changing the Way Children Read? (Digested Version)," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (2003): 140.
[4]Hade, "Storyselling," 140.

Stepping back into the present, corporate American logic has more than leaked into the publishing industry. How do we know? The Big Five (Penguin Random House, Simon & Schuster, HarperCollins, Macmillan, and Hachette) have already made the transition. We can see that these companies no longer operate as brands to solely publish a single story, but rather operate as brand-portfolio managers. Take away the books as products and they are no different than a holding company like Disney or a media conglomerate like Bertelsmann; the underlying logic is asset management across a portfolio. They acquire authors the way studios acquire IP, and they make acquisition decisions based on factors like series, adaptation, and brand-extension potential. An author who doesn't stay active on social media, or isn't motivated or willing to expand their story (not strictly speaking about writing a series, but being open to other multimedia assets), will likely not be selected at one of these houses. A book that has craft and beauty but lacks any way to expand it into a saleable brand will likely be turned down. It is, from a certain perspective, an unfortunate truth in the industry. Perhaps these negative feelings, or the comfort of the habitual, have caused others in the industry to be reluctant to accept it.

We are seeing this reluctance in multiple different forms ranging from small publishing companies to authors themselves. A 2021 *New York Times* report on social-media followings and book sales notes that some publishing contracts now specify the number of social-media posts an author must make before and after a book is released.[5] The implicit message is that authorship is no longer separable from brand maintenance, and many authors resent being asked to function as their own marketing departments. Because literature is a humanity and is compared to other mediums like painting, sculpture, and film, there has always been a cultural belief that books are a reserved art. Literature certainly is an art form; there is no denying that. Yet propping books up

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[5]Elizabeth A. Harris, "Millions of Followers? For Book Sales, 'It's Unreliable,'" *New York Times*, December 7, 2021.

as standalone, “speak for themselves” objects in a consumption-filled society leaves them with little chance to come to fruition. Whether this is a good or bad change is a subject for another paper. But because of this belief in books-as-art, a significant number of practitioners are uncomfortable naming what their employers (e.g., the Big Five) are doing. This is a tension Hade himself names when he describes editors and marketing directors who “believe passionately in children’s books, but who may now find themselves stymied in attempting to reconcile company goals and vocational ideals.”[6] The vocational ideals are still there; it is just that the job they support has changed underneath them.

Another reason for reluctance is a lack of knowledge on how to keep up with this shift, that is, how to progress toward brandification. This is especially common at indie presses and with self-published authors, a population that Margret Beditz, writing in *Publishing Research Quarterly*, identifies as facing the steepest brand-building learning curve precisely because they lack the in-house marketing infrastructure of the Big Five.[7] Without proper information, it is easy to assume that the answer to Big Five dominance is to simply double down on craft and ignore the entire critical brand layer. To extend this argument, a lot of authors themselves still hold onto the idea that a writer’s job is to write and the marketer’s job is to market. Book signings and book tours are great, but they can’t always cut it anymore. A useful counter-example is self-published children’s author Alonda Williams, who built a brand around her picture book *Penny and the Magic Puffballs* by inviting parents to submit photos of their daughters wearing their hair in the same “puffballs” as her main character. Williams included reader photos in the back of the book and gave away one free copy daily for fifteen days leading up to launch. This

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[6]Hade, “Storyselling,” 140.
[7]Margret Beditz, “The Dynamic Landscape of Marketing Children’s Books: Publishers Find Consistent Success Through a Combination of Online and Traditional Marketing to Adults and Children,” *Publishing Research Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (2018): 160.

pulled in over a thousand fans in the first three days of her campaign, and she eventually sold more than five thousand copies.[8] The book's craft mattered, but the ritual of readers as participants, not consumers, was what built the brand.

As I posed this question earlier, what is the cost of reluctance and hesitation to change? The cost is both figurative and literal: beautiful books and significant financial investments going to waste. As Beditz notes, there is an overabundance of content in the book publishing industry.[9] In a highly digital society, the barriers to entry are lower than they ever have been. Self-published authors from BookTok (a community on TikTok) can get famous in days. Publishers can release more books if they prioritize ebook readers, because the cost of printing, warehousing, and physical distribution drops dramatically in a digital channel.[10] The authors and companies that are winning are the ones who build brands before the book, or had brands built for them, like *Harry Potter*, *Goosebumps*, or even Colleen Hoover, an author whose name now functions as its own genre signal, a guarantee of emotionally heightened romance regardless of which specific title a reader picks up. Even classics are getting brands built around them. People know what kind of person you are if you read Jane Austen or Dostoevsky or Camus. Each name holds a weight that signals what to expect of you. Books already present us with a story, a character, and a way of living. Brands elevate those into a lifestyle. The ones that hesitate are those that assumed the work would speak for itself. It's like a homemade shampoo product sitting on the shelf next to a trusted, lifestyle-focused bottle from Procter & Gamble. It just isn't feasible.

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[8]Beditz, "Dynamic Landscape," 160.
[9]Beditz, "Dynamic Landscape," 163.
[10]C. D. Miller and R. D. Wang, "Product Digitization and Differentiation Strategy Change: Evidence from the Book Publishing Industry," *Strategic Management Journal* 45, no. 7 (2024): 1247.

To answer how brandification should be implemented in the publishing industry, it is important to focus on the mechanics of synergy itself. Reusing *Harry Potter* as an example, it is evident how every additional format (films), product (branded clothing), experience (Universal Studios theme park), and partnership (Lego, Hasbro, Warner Bros.) is a prism that refracts the same core identity: the story of a magical world in which there was "a boy who lived." Having the books on their own still makes for a great story, but adding more elements invites a wider audience to experience the fun of the universe. In more formal terms, each additional prism creates a stronger identity. Daniel Bunyard, in his 2020 *LOGOS* essay "Why We Buy Books," theorizes books as constructs built out of "prismatic elements" like title, cover, format, author reputation, packaging, and even price. These elements combine multiplicatively rather than additively to generate a book's expectancy value.[11] A brand container further scales this mechanism. Every new partnership and product becomes another prism, and because the elements compound rather than add, a richly developed brand universe produces an expectancy value no standalone book could ever match.

Another great example of a company (or rather just two individuals in the beginning) that successfully branded their story is *Elf on the Shelf*. This book makes for a great case study because it shows how the synergy mechanism worked smoothly to create a highly recognizable brand. Twin sisters Chanda Bell and Christa Pitts, the authors of the book, along with their mother Carol Aebersold, submitted the manuscript to numerous publishers and were rejected by every single one.[12] Instead of giving up, they self-published the book and packaged it with a red-suited elf doll they made themselves, selling the bundle at small holiday fairs across Georgia

[11]Daniel Bunyard, "Why We Buy Books," *LOGOS* 31, no. 2 (2020): 47.
[12]Deborah Lynn Blumberg, "The Elf on the Shelf Founders on Evolving from a Beloved Holiday Business to Multimedia, Year-Round Brand Expansion," *CO— by U.S. Chamber of Commerce*, 2025.

and North Carolina.[13] They built their own business rooted in branding, not just for the sake of literature-as-art. They crafted their brand so well that when most of us think of *Elf on the Shelf*, we think of a real elf, not just simply a fun children's book. Bell and Pitts made the Elf into a ritual: a Scout Elf arrives in the home each December to watch the children, flies to the North Pole each night to report to Santa, and, crucially, cannot be touched, because that would cost him his magic. This allowed for the book to be the ritual manual, and the product to be the ritual itself. That way, consumers cannot have one without the other; this shows how effective synergy can be when executed correctly. When each piece of the brand depends on the others to function, the consumer is purchasing access to a system, not a standalone item. From there, the ritual grew into a widely celebrated annual Christmas performance, then to fan evangelism on Instagram and TikTok, and finally to a multimedia universe: a Netflix studio deal for preschool programming, live-action projects, and a major motion picture; the recent novel *The Rise of Nicholas the Noble* published in partnership with HarperCollins; a console video game with Outright Games; and brand partnerships with Hershey, Flipz pretzels, Basic Fun!'s Lite-Brite, and Sandals' Beaches Resorts, where families can book an in-room "Very Important Elf" butler service. Today, families across twenty-nine countries have adopted more than thirty million Scout Elves, elf pets, and elf mates.[14]

The key takeaway from both *Elf on the Shelf* and *Harry Potter* is to resist the urge to treat them as flukes. By analyzing these with the discussed theoretical frameworks, it is evident that they were not mistakes, they were not just lucky, and that something like this would be rare to happen again without intentional design. Of course, many environmental and economic factors have changed since both of these first gained popularity, but the structural logic behind them is

[13]Blumberg, "Elf on the Shelf Founders."
[14]Blumberg, "Elf on the Shelf Founders."

still highly relevant to publishers today. Brandified publishing is not the exclusive territory of the Big Five. Bell and Pitts started with nothing; the sisters pooled personal savings, took on credit card debt, and convinced their parents to cash in their 401(k) to afford a minimum order of five thousand dolls.[15] The lesson is not that smaller players need to spend more money to compete. It is that they need to spend it strategically, against a carefully planned brand structure rather than scattered across a single book release. The Big Five have scale, but the structural logic of brandification is available to anyone willing to think about a book as the entry point to a system.

While branding, and what Hade calls the brand container,[16] is not the only way to market a book, it is one of the most effective approaches available today, and it is increasingly the only one that survives the volume of competing content readers now face. It is easy to look at brandification and deem it as a foreign framework being pushed onto publishers when you completely separate book publishing from standard consumer goods (toothpaste, groceries, jewelry). However, as we have seen in the examples in the previous section, publishing operates on the same fundamental logic as any other consumer-goods category. Books are products, so we must treat them as products to sell in large quantities.

Bunyard proposes a theoretical framework he calls the prismatic-elements model, grounded in his own data work as a Penguin commissioning editor. He outlines that *expectancy value* is much more important than *experienced value* when readers buy books.[17] Imagine yourself in a local bookstore, shopping for books that match your appreciation for America in the early 1900s. You love the vibe of the flappers, the dancing, the freedom; you want some of your style to match that. When you grab *The Great Gatsby*, you are buying it for what it promises: an immersion into the mood of jazz-age glamour, decadence, and tragic romance. You aren't buying

[15]Blumberg, "Elf on the Shelf Founders."
[16]Hade, "Storyselling," 140.
[17]Bunyard, "Why We Buy Books," 45.

it for what it will deliver, simply because you haven't yet read it. As Bunyard explains, the expectancy value sits entirely outside the actual content of the book and is jeopardized only if the experienced value, once consumed, is greatly out of step with what was promised. His central example is *A Brief History of Time*, a book that has sold over ten million copies despite being notoriously bought-but-not-read. The promise of the title, which is to briefly understand the universe, generated significant expectancy value, and the book's reputation continued to drive sales even as readers consistently abandoned it.[18]

By taking this theory and sizing it to a bigger scale like the brand container, it is clear that a brand universe (like *Harry Potter*) is an expectancy-manufacturing machine. Every trailer, partnership, merchandise drop, Instagram reel, or TikTok adds another promise before any product is consumed. When a reel pops into your algorithm saying "The top three *Harry Potter* books to make you feel magical in the upcoming summer season," you're being offered a promise, or rather an exchange: you purchase these three books, and we'll deliver the promise of escape into a wizarding world that will make your summer feel enchanted instead of ordinary.

Furthering the framework, Bunyard also draws on Self-Determination Theory.[19] This framework includes three psychological growth needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Unlike basic deficit needs (hunger, thirst, sleep), which stop preoccupying us once they are met, growth needs are never fully saturated, meaning we are always capable of feeling more autonomous, more competent, more connected, and we will actively keep seeking opportunities to deepen all three. Great books can fulfill all three simultaneously, but most fulfill only one or two. For example, a beautifully written novel may deliver relatedness and autonomy but offer little in the way of competence-building. The brand container structure solves this problem

[18]Bunyard, "Why We Buy Books," 45.
[19]Bunyard, "Why We Buy Books," 30. Bunyard draws on the work of Edward Deci and Richard Ryan in self-determination theory.

because it almost always satisfies all three at once. A brand satisfies autonomy in how you engage with the universe, competence in mastering its lore, and relatedness in belonging to its fandom. This is how people get so hooked on series like *Harry Potter*. This goes hand-in-hand with Bunyard's other proposed motivations for buying books, which are hedonic (the pleasure of the experience itself, the affective thrill of inhabiting a story), utilitarian (the practical use of the book as a tool, like learning a skill, solving a problem, fulfilling a function), and self-identificatory (the sense that owning or reading the book confirms or constructs who you are).[20] Again, a book usually only hits one of these, which is still viable, but hard to compete with when there are brands that hit all three. Taking *Elf on the Shelf* this time as the example, fans experience the pleasure of the story, the utility of a family ritual during a holiday, and the self-image of being the kind of parent who participates in magic-making for their children. Every December, the Elf returns and reactivates all three motivations at once. This is an achievement that no standalone children's book is structurally capable of producing.

Finally, Bunyard offers one last theory relevant to this paper: the "universal ratio." He observes that across a series of books in which the core elements and motivations stay the same, each new title in the series typically sells only thirty-five to forty-five percent of what the previous title sold.[21] Sequels, in other words, decay predictably. The market responds to the sensation of novelty, and that sensation halves with each doubling of repetition. On its face, this ratio should seem to disprove the brandification thesis: it should be killing the *Harry Potter*s and *Star Wars*es of the world. But it isn't, because synergy across a brand universe keeps presenting the same underlying story as novelty through the new prismatic surfaces discussed above (a new film franchise, a stage play, a theme-park land, an HBO series, a console game). Branding is,

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[20]Bunyard, "Why We Buy Books," 30–31.
[21]Bunyard, "Why We Buy Books," 40.

essentially, a way to beat decay for much longer than a standalone book series would on its own. The container does not violate Bunyard's ratio so much as it outruns it by continuously introducing new prismatic surfaces faster than any single one can decay.

Taken together, these three frameworks—expectancy value, Self-Determination Theory, and the universal ratio—explain why brandification works so consistently across cases as different as *Harry Potter* and *Elf on the Shelf*. Brandification is not just a corporate strategy; it is a structural answer to the underlying psychology of why people buy books at all. Publishers who treat the brand container as optional are betting against the most stable findings in the field.

Taking all of this into account, what do the next steps look like for catching up? For the Big Five, catching up means fully admitting to what they already do and investing in it without any hesitation. This means drawing up legalities around AI in the industry on how it will be used (it is now not an option to opt out), acquisition-to-adaptation pipelines, cross-platform development from day one of picking up a manuscript, and franchise architecture in the acquisition conversation rather than after first-novel success. A full-scale franchise plan (such as films, merchandise, partnerships, theme-park-grade IP licensing) doesn't need to be set in motion with the release of the novel, but it should be in place for activation if the novel does succeed, so that the brand-building infrastructure is ready before the title needs it rather than scrambled together after the fact.

For indie presses and self-published authors, catching up looks like treating both the author's brand and the book's brand as equal priorities, as Beditz argues.[22] Social media presence, niche communities, ritual-style products and experiences, partnerships, and designing books from conception as potential entry points into something larger all matter equally to the success of the work itself. The long-term brand value of a manuscript should now always be

[22]Beditz, "Dynamic Landscape," 168.

considered before acquiring. It is much harder to scramble something mediocre together after the book sells than to plan something extraordinary before the book even begins the editorial process. This leads me to my last point: editors, marketers, sales teams, and publicists need to accept that catching up means letting go of the Hade-style ambivalence. Brandification can have both. The idea of book-as-art is not lost; it just doesn't stand alone anymore. The brand container can be simultaneously extractive and participatory, meaning it can sell merchandise to the consumer and produce real shared family rituals and memories at the same time, as the *Elf on the Shelf* case demonstrates. So while the people in the industry who are reluctant to change continue to mourn the standalone book, others are learning how brandification can function in a way that retains the craft values that publishing was built on.

Brandification undoubtedly transforms reading. Hade is right to say that. Paul is right that children's publishing was never a pre-commercial Eden; the industry has balanced morality and money since 1744.[23] Bunyard is right that the psychology underneath is stable and knowable, not some lucky thing some authors or publishers happen to stumble upon. Miller and Wang are right that the digital landscape forces publishers' hand by lowering barriers to entry, multiplying competition, and eroding the differentiating power of physical book attributes in a landscape of ebook readers.[24] Finally, *Elf on the Shelf* and *Harry Potter* are right because they ran the playbook that all of these scholars separately describe, and the market rewarded them for it.

Brandification is still new to the industry, but it is clear that it has won. The Big Five will tell you that. The interesting thing to sit on is what gets preserved, what gets lost, and what continues to change in this framework. *Elf on the Shelf* produces real family memory and also trains toddlers to associate magic with a branded toy. Both are true at once; it is a kind of

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[23] Paul, "Pocket History," 137.
[24] Miller and Wang, "Product Digitization," 1247–1248.

dialectical thinking the field will have to get comfortable holding. This is a permanent tension in the branding structure. It shouldn't be resolved, for it is what holds the framework together. Those in the industry should prioritize navigating the tension going forward: "How do we add to it?" "How do we balance it through different genres of books?" Those should be the questions to resolve in the future. Although brandification is new to the industry, it is not a new theory in our economy. The publishing field already has so much evidence available to it because of being late; those in the field need to use that to their advantage to guide the future of the book.

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