



There are some stories that transcend genre because they have mass appeal.

The secret to mass appeal is universal theme and wish fulfillment. There are certain situations that everyone can relate to no matter what genre they prefer to read or watch.

Even when a book is wildly successful, there will be readers who turn away from it; either because the content offends, the story touches a raw nerve, or the writer's technique does not suit them. You can't please everyone.

Stories with universal appeal have a better chance of capturing the imagination of the populace.

This week, we'll take a look at a few themes.

1. **Home Sweet Home:** We all want to belong somewhere and to someone. In addition to food, shelter, clothing, and safety, belonging is a core need. We have all been lost at some point, either on a highway or in a shopping mall. Many people have had to leave home to go to college, to work, or to war. We all miss home. Even if our home lives were crappy, we idealize what home should have been and we long for it. We long for it like we long for water when we are thirsty or food when we are hungry. Longing for home is the theme of the blockbusters *E.T.*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *Homeward Bound* among many others. It will resonate with readers across the globe.

2. **The Orphan:** Think of *Harry Potter* by J. K. Rowling, *The Lightning Thief* by Riordan, the musical *Annie*, or any other orphan tale. Abandonment by death or intent is a deep wound that people have a hard time overcoming. Even when they think they have overcome it, a story can come along and rip the scab off the wound. We relate to a character that is suffering the slings and arrows of the orphaned or abandoned child. We like watching them rise up the ranks in life. We like watching them fight to prove themselves worthy. We want to see them end up on top, connected, and loved. We want them to find a home: the place where they truly belong. Many people grow up feeling like they don't belong: to their families, their school, or their town. If they find out they were really a changeling left on the doorstep, they are given the chance to find the place and people they should have been with all along.



3. **The Wizard:** A good book often explores wish fulfillment fantasies. We all feel inadequate at some point. We have all felt bullied or helpless. I doubt there is a child out there that did not, at one point or another, wish she had super powers so she could fight back. They pretended in the privacy of their rooms to be witches or warlocks or superman. Those children grow up to read books and watch movies. This theme is another reason why *Harry Potter* went orbital. It had orphans, revenge, and supernatural powers. It is the allure of the all Marvel comics and the movies made from them. We want someone superhuman or magically enhanced to do what we often cannot. We want to imagine ourselves waving the magic wand to change things we cannot change. We've gone from Merlin of King Arthur lore to the plethora of supernatural tales jamming the bookstore shelves in the YA, Mystery, Romance, and Horror aisles. Some are better than others.

4. **Sweet Revenge:** We've all been angry at some point and wished we could wreak revenge. We wished we were bigger, stronger, smarter, or had more money or power. We vent about what we'd like to do to the motorist that cuts us off, the boss who embarrassed us, or the crook that stole our wallet. Most of us are rational enough to not run around shooting people. Joking or ranting about our revenge fantasies takes the heat out of the situation. Whenever a core value or currency is transgressed, it triggers this response. We love seeing the victim of the tale take revenge on our behalf. We want the good guys to win, for might to make it right. This is the appeal of all the blockbuster action movies. It is the appeal of *Braveheart*, *Oceans Eleven*, and *Mean Girls*.

5. **True Lovers:** We all want to be loved deeply and passionately, to believe that we are the only ones they could ever love, even if it isn't technically true. We want a lover that is willing to die for us, or to profess to be willing to die for us, or at least have our backs. We all want to be valued and praised and held high. Grand passion fueled all the major love stories: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Tristan and Isolde*, *Love Story* by Erich Segal and the dubious entry, *Twilight*. This example proves that no matter how badly structured or how annoying the characters, a book that taps into universal wish fulfillment can transcend the genre it targets. The thing modern writers so often fail to understand is that random hooking up is not deep, abiding passion. If the object of your affection can toss you off the bus at any stop, you aren't valuable. That is the opposite of the wish.

There aren't many modern obstacles to love, in the USA at least. A grand passion might play better in a Muslim country, India, or Africa. Most societal restrictions and taboos have been removed. We don't have arranged marriages. We don't have to get married. We can easily get divorced. Nothing much stands in the way of getting what we want, for a night



anyway. Reality shows try to tap into this theme, but they've missed the point. While a man or woman may enjoy having twenty creatures vying for their affection, it isn't real. The contestants know this. This is not how Cleopatra won Marc Anthony. None of those fawning narcissists are willing to die for love. They are not willing to fight Roman armies or slay fire-breathing dragons. Most of them are there seeking attention, not wishing to bestow it. Modern stories lack the longing for something you can never have or easily gain. The yearning and anticipation draw readers in.

6. **The Abused Victim:** Consider Stieg Larsson's *Dragon Tattoo* trilogy. Why did so many people love the books? They were not well constructed. They had plot holes galore: info dumps, redundant reveals, and muddy plot lines. They had brutal and explicit scenes that turned some readers off. Yet they sold like hotcakes and spawned two movie versions. The success lies with the abused character Salander. She was mistreated as child and abused as a woman. We love watching the hacker-girl (tattooed and pierced and slightly sociopathic) fight the system. She gets vicious, whacked out revenge and takes back her power. This theme still plays well in modern society. It could be set in 1800 England or 2010 New York. It is closely related to the underdog theme.

7. **The Underdog:** We love seeing the little guy prove everyone wrong. I think most people have felt like the little guy at some point in their lives. We love watching someone go from rags to riches, proving to the rich people, or the talented people, or the beautiful people that their assumptions were wrong. The story line tears down the artifice of the people on the top and shows that they aren't as happy, glamorous, or successful as they appear to be. It is human nature to wish for that to be true. To believe that the average person isn't missing out on anything that other people have. It so often proves to be true. The glamorous life isn't that glamorous. Money can't buy happiness and you shouldn't judge a man or woman by her clothes or financial status. We also love to tear down what we've built up. There's nothing like seeing someone that we've elevated fall off their pedestal. This covers everything from *Bad News Bears* and *We Are The Titans* to *Forest Gump*.

8. **The Secret:** Curious people dislike unanswered questions. They will hunt and probe until they've answered them. They build up huge conspiracy theories when the answers aren't available. The flip side is that people like to keep secrets. Shame or fear motivates them to do everything possible to keep the cat from leaving the bag. This is the broad appeal of Mysteries and Thrillers. We like piecing the clues together. We want super-smart sleuths out there solving crimes for us. We want a white knight in a blue uniform to catch the killer and find the missing child. We want to believe that justice will be served,



because it so often fails in real life. In fiction, the criminal is convicted and made to pay. This is the appeal of everything from *Columbo* to *Sherlock Holmes* to *The Night Stalker*. It is also the appeal behind vigilante stories. If the proper channels can't solve it, the everyman hero will do it for them.

There is a saying that there aren't any new stories; there are only new ways to tell a story. I would expand that to say there are only a few universal themes. The unique way you play with universal theme will give you the best chance of having a mega best seller. It helps if you write it well.

Life is too short for bad fiction.