Readability levels and their impact on bestselling

and award-winning fiction

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Abstract

Novels that make the bestseller list are often thought to have earned the position through good reading quality. It may come as a surprise for some that for a majority of bestselling novels, this is not the case. Generally, bestselling novels have a lower reading level, usually between the 7th and 8th grade. Why do some novels become adult bestsellers if they, judging by their reading level, are written for children? There is a limited amount of research available on readability in bestsellers, leaving the question of 'what makes a bestseller?' shrouded in mystery. In this dissertation I shine some light on one aspect of why some novels sell and others do not. This has been done by comparing the readability scores of three bestselling novels and three award-winning novels against their prospects of saleability, in the hope of determining if there is any correlation. Each novel's reception by the public has been determined in part by analysing: Goodreads ratings, online reader reviews and interactions with the novel via social media. By comparing the public's reception of each novel with each book's reading level, correlations were drawn between a novel's language level and its saleability. It was found that reading levels are not necessarily higher in award-winning literary fiction than in genre fiction, and while a correlation can be found between reading levels and online reader reviews, after taking the contextual issues of each novel into account, it was concluded that reading level has little to no effect on the percentage of ratings received on Goodreads nor the amount of interaction readers have with a novel's marketing or promotional material. While reading levels provide insights into a book's possible commercial success they are not able to provide a definite answer, prompting the need for more quantifiable research to be carried out in this subject area.

Certification of Dissertation

I certify that the ideas, analyses, results and conclusions reported in this dissertation are entirely my own effort, except where otherwise acknowledged. I also certify that the work is original and has not been previously submitted for any other award, except where due acknowledgement and reference is made.

5/6/2019

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Signature of Student   Date

ENDORSEMENT

Dallas Baker.   5/6/2019

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Signature of Supervisor   Date

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Chapter 1: Background

Introduction

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single book found to be on a bestseller list must be of a decent reading quality. While this appropriation of Ms Austen's famous line might ring true for some, the average modern reader may be surprised to learn that it is actually the opposite that is true. Perhaps without knowing the technical term, every reader will have a vague sense of the level of readability for each piece of writing they encounter (Archer & Jockers 2016, p. 21). A novel is easier to read than a dense textbook and reading a children's book is easier than reading a religious text (Leith 2018). These are extreme examples, but the distinction stands clear. Though there are many long-winded definitions, by far the simplest definition of 'readable' is: 'easy and enjoyable to read' (Oxford 2018). However, when interpreted from a writer's perspective, being readable is not just about being easy to read – a readable book is a book well-written (Perry 2017; Piepenbring 2017; Gilliver 2015). Cambridge University Press (2019) defines 'well-written' as 'written in an effective or interesting way'. It is this use of effective writing that allows a novel to be readable.

In this dissertation, the main focus is on whether or not there is an identifiable relationship between readability and saleability. Put simply, the research question is:

> *Does reading level affect saleability to the extent that lower reading level books have a higher chance of appearing on the bestseller list?*

There is a limited amount of research available on readability in bestsellers, leaving the question of 'what makes a bestseller?' shrouded in mystery (Yucesoy *et al.* 2018, p. 8). The research laid out in this dissertation hopes to shine some light upon one aspect of why some novels sell and others do not. This has been done by comparing the readability scores of three bestselling novels and three award-winning novels against their sales and reception, in the hope of determining if there is any correlation. The novels that have been analysed are:

<u>Bestselling novels:</u>

- Diana Gabaldon's *A Breath of Snow and Ashes* – (2005)
- Philippa Gregory's *The Other Boleyn Girl* – (2001)
- Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows' *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* – (2008)

<u>Award-winning novels:</u>

- Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* – (2014) – Pulitzer Prize for fiction 2015
- Marlon James' *A Brief History of Seven Killings* – (2014) – Man Booker Prize for fiction 2015
- Robert Harris' *An Officer and a Spy* – (2013) – Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction 2014

Each novel's saleability has been determined by analysing their reception by the public. In order to determine the public's reception of each book, Goodreads ratings, online reader reviews, and interactions with the novel via social media have all been analysed. By comparing the public's reception of each novel with each book's reading levels, correlations have been found as to the complexity of the novel's language and its popularity with the public.

The ease of reading with plain English

Opinions on what it means for literature to be well-written differ (Perry 2017; Piepenbring 2017; Gilliver 2015). Morrow (2016) believes that to write effectively is to write in plain English. Writing in plain English has become a very popular style of writing within the last several decades, with some organisations, such as the Plain English Foundation, offering training workshops within the workplace. It has become very easy to pick up entire guides on how to write using plain language. The members of the association of plain-language professionals (PLAIN) created a catch-all definition:

> A communication is in plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended audience can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information. (Cutts 2013, p. xii)

It is understood that the plainer the English the easier it is to comprehend (Siegel 2010; Flesch 1946). As a testament to this, former President of the United States, Barack Obama signed the Plain Writing Act of 2010 (Siegel 2010; Sunstein 2011). This Act forced federal agencies to adopt clear government communication that the public could understand and use. Flesch (1946, p. 31) tells us 'plain talk is mainly a question of language structure and of spacing your ideas'. Readability scales use this very simple description as the basis for their tests (Flesch 1946). Although there are numerous readability tests that have appeared in the literature and online through programs and desktop applications (Kroeker 2018), the Flesch Reading Scale is by far the most prominently used and has become the industry standard (DuBay 2004, p. 22; Hartley 2016, p. 1523). The Flesch Reading Scale has been used to show a distinct correlation between

books that are mass consumed, such as bestsellers, and books that have a lower reading grade level (Flesch 1949). The correlation between bestsellers and their reading levels has forced those in the publishing profession to think about the usefulness of readability in the public sphere and its interpretation (Anderson 2016; Phillips 2016). Archer and Jockers (2016) and their *Bestseller Code* is a useful tool for 'moving the field forward' (Phillips 2016). However, by encouraging all writers to follow the same outline of elements in order to increase their chances of writing a bestseller, there is a danger of creating replicas of the same novel (CASE 2004; Reagan *et al.* 2016, p. 2). While the short-term results of readability can be easily seen, we must also think of the long-term consequences that writing with readability in mind could inflict upon the literary community (Lapointe 2016). This is especially valid when considering the longevity of well-written works against those that are bestsellers (Reid 2017a; 2017b).

There are numerous readability tests available (DuBay 2004). Some appear as written formulas such as Flesch (1949) and Fry (1977a), and others are made available through the internet such as the 'Hemingway Editor' (Kroeker 2018). The 'Hemingway Editor' not only provides the readability grade score, but also editing suggestions for clarity of text and ease of reading (Long & Long 2013). Each readability test creates a reading level scale using slightly varied methods and these slight differences in measurements can have a drastic effect on the outcome (Button 2016; Schwanenflugel & Knapp 2017). It is for continuity reasons that the literature studied were all tested using the same readability score, the Flesch Reading Scale. A good book is commonly acknowledged to be made up of a variety of factors that contribute to its success (Ferguson 2017; Button 2016; Harvey 1953; Archer & Jockers 2016). Even though reading scales are only one component, they can tell us a great deal about the prospects of the title and its author. Using Montseller and Wallace's early formula, and Rudolph Flesch's more modern readability formula to statistically analyse several hundred texts, Blatt (2016) has been able to (amongst other things) identify an author's favourite word. Blatt also demonstrates the statistical commonalities that can be seen across well-loved classics and bestsellers and comes to the very logical conclusion '…that our most popular books are not complex' (Blatt 2017, p. 19). Studies solely using the Flesch Reading Scale on bestsellers have returned similar results (Snow 2015).

When we think of a bestseller, we think of it being well-written, as we have been conditioned to think (Snow 2015; Morrow 2016). However, what the results from the Flesch Reading Scale tell us is that conditioning is wrong. The reality is in fact almost the opposite (Snow 2015). The

results show that all bestsellers have similar readability statistics and are typically written for the 6th grade and lower (Austin 2011). This result gives an interesting insight into a consumer's choice of book, as well as addressing the questions: 'how do bad books get on the bestseller list?' and 'why do some books sell and others don't?' (Blatt 2017), or as Archer and Jockers (2016, p. 17) succinctly put it: 'why some novels are read by millions of people and others barely sell a handful?'. Even though some are poorly written, the understanding for the low reading level amongst bestsellers is the public's desire for texts that are written simply and concisely (Flesch 1949; Perry 2017; Gilliver 2015). This correlation is not only found in today's bestsellers, according to Snow (2015) the same correlation can be found when the Flesch Reading Scale is applied to the age-old classics. This has given ground to the argument that readers are looking for writers with the ability to take complex ideas and make them easily understandable (Eunson 2012; Oppenheimer 2005).

Readability or our ability to understand

There is an argument in the literary community about the interpretation of 'readability' (Roth 2017; Winterson 2011; Shelly & Schuh 2001). Some view the low readability scores of bestsellers to indicate that readers are becoming 'dumber' in their reading preferences (Roth 2017; Winterson 2011). Perhaps this factor exists in other aspects of modern life. For example, Blatt (2017, p. 109) has pointed out that the Presidential State of the Union Address in the United States; an annual tradition where the president delivers a speech to a joint session of the US Congress, has dropped from a reading level at the 17th grade, pre-1900, to the 10th grade during the 2000s. This is to say nothing of speeches made during the 2016 Presidential campaign. Speeches by presidential hopefuls, such as Hilary Clinton and Ted Cruz, resulted in a Flesch-Kincaid Reading Grade average of between 10 and 7 (Kayam 2018, p. 81). In comparison, Donald Trump's speech reading grade level averaged at 3.96 (Kayam 2018, p. 81). While there are others who support the school of thought that to be readable is to be a better writer (Shelley & Schuh 2001), Perry (2017) argues:

> prose which is "readable" is prose which is skilled…Readable prose is, generally speaking, diligent in its sentence construction, erring from received rules of grammar only deliberately and to a clear effect.

Blatt (2017, pp. 109-113) and Eunson (2012) propose that although we may be getting dumber in our reading habits, we may also be producing better quality writers. Writers who are able to take complex ideas and rearrange the words so that the idea is simply, clearly and wholly

explained in a manner that the average reader can understand. As Gilliver (2015, p. 2) so appropriately and succinctly notes:

> …writing in plain language does not come naturally, and it does not mean writing the way we speak or dumbing down what we write. It means using words that you expect your audience to understand and formulating sentences and paragraphs to make your text easy to understand.

Due to Flesch (1949) proving that bestsellers are highly readable, Satlof (1976) found that when students were assigned these readable, bestselling books, they were able to produce better quality essays and were more readily engaged with class discussions. Proving that instead of the content being dumbed down for lesser minds, the succinct and engaging content engages the minds of others more readily when presented in a relaxed prose style (Satlof 1976). As a testament to this school of thought, and as previously mentioned, US Congress as well as other governments around the world, such as our own, have legislated that documents issued by the government, for their population, must be written in plain English, free of jargon (Gilliver 2015). This has then filtered down into academic and educational textbooks (Gallagher & Thompson 1981), journals (Shelley & Schuh 2001), and even newspapers (Björnsson 1983). As far back as the 1970s readability was at the forefront of the Australian public's mind, with various state governments requiring instruction manuals to be of a certain score on the Flesch Readability Scale (Satlof 1976, p. 6). There is also evidence to suggest that writing with readability in mind might do more than sell books (Korfiatis *et al.* 2008). When looking at Amazon product reviews, Korfiatis *et al.* (2008) found that when a review is readable it engages with more of the public and therefore can potentially increase or decrease the sales of the reviewed product. However, there is some concern that by only writing with readability in mind we are unknowingly limiting the kinds of writing we are being exposed to (Lapointe 2016; Althoff 2016).

Readability in publishing

If we continue to write whilst leaning heavily on readability we may end up facing some negative consequences in the near future (Kroeker 2018). There is a possibility that readable books, which are not only appearing on the bestseller lists, but are now being nominated for and awarded literary prizes, reduce the public's exposure to different kinds of literature, purely based on how easy or hard they are to get through (Winterson 2011). This has evolved into a fear that our reading tastes are narrowing, especially in regard to the limited range of fiction

genres that make the bestseller lists (Brown 2016). The most sold genres at the time of writing are suspense and thriller (Smith 2018; Jacobs 2018; Yucesoy *et al.* 2018, p. 8). We perhaps have the popularity of the *Gone Girl, The Girl on the Train* and *Big Little Lies* adaptations to movie and television to thank for this (Chapman, 2014; Yucesoy *et al.* 2018, p. 8), the popularity of the strong female lead, as evidenced in these three examples, is also a driving force for the popularity of the suspense and thriller genres (Heine *et. al* 1999, pp. 431-432; Erigha 2015, p. 84-85).

This fear of narrowing reading tastes has only become more apparent with the introduction of software programs and applications, such as Archer and Jockers' *Bestseller Code* (2016) algorithm, that can tell you the likelihood of your book becoming a bestseller. While not the only algorithm that is purported to predict bestsellers (Phillips 2016; Althoff 2016), it does have the potential to sway publisher's minds about first time authors (Althoff 2016) and, more recently, even offers manuscript appraisals (Reid 2016a; 2016b; 2017c; 2017d). Publishing companies are already using data analytics to help them choose which books will be published and which will not (Althoff 2016). Pan Macmillian consults both data and analytics and Simon and Schuster have actively hired data analysts (Althoff 2016). More appropriately in the education sector, publishers are using readability scores in regard to their textbooks to ensure students are grasping concepts contained in educational syllabi (Flesch 1946, p. 148; Kowarzik 2019). The American Council on Education describes the issues with textbooks before readable writing became widely used: 'An ordinary textbook is a compact body of factual statements which does not invite or permit fluent reading' (Flesch 1946, p. 148). This is mainly because the textbook was written for the teacher and not the student (Flesch 1946, p. 148). Thankfully, this take on education has changed dramatically. Cambridge University Press, an industry leader in publishing Australian educational textbooks, takes care to make their books understandable to their set demographic, which is school students (Kowarzik 2019). Each teacher commissioned as an author has their work peer-reviewed by 'teachers from different schooling environments across the education sector' (Alexander 2019), ensuring the content is at a level appropriate for the year group and covers all curriculum areas (Kowarzik 2019; Alexander 2019).

If the above reliance on algorithms increase, the narrowing of the kind of literature available for public consumption could become a reality (Lapointe 2016). We could start to see limitations in the kind of novels stocked in common places, such as libraries and popular book

stores (Ujiie & Krashen 2006, p. 34). Even though the use of computer-based algorithms will help those publishing houses still struggling since the introduction of eBooks and the rise in popularity and ease of self-publishing (Althoff 2016), there is a question that still needs to be asked. By introducing these algorithms in an effort to help the book publishing industry, are we, at the same time, putting the traditional novel in jeopardy? (Althoff 2016). The reality of today's book publishing world shows a grim view for the future of independent publishing (Lapointe 2016). Those works that are not deemed readable, but still have something important to share with the world, look set to sit quietly on the shelf, waiting for an unsuspecting reader to mistakenly discover them (Althoff 2016). While the discarded books' futures rest in the hands of the readers themselves, Weiland (2009) asks if the reader should rise to the challenge of a book not written for readability. She believes that books provide an endless source of education and readers should expect to not just be entertained, but to learn something when they sit down to read (Weiland 2009).

As has been discussed, the correlation between the Flesch Reading Scale levels and the books on the bestseller list have produced two main arguments in the literary world. First, seen through the increase of readable books, are we inadvertently writing for a dumber audience? Or are we producing better writers, ones with the ability to reproduce complex ideas in a fashion that is easily understandable by the average reader? Secondly, by encouraging authors to write with readability in the forefront of their minds, are we limiting the kind of literature we are exposed to? With the introduction of computer algorithms that give authors and publishing houses statistics on the probability of a manuscript becoming a bestseller are we limiting the saleability of other, perhaps not as readable, works? These arguments are well fought on both sides, and it seems that we must stand and wait in order to see the outcome of any long-term consequences for the literary world, brought about by the realisation of the correlation between readability and sales.

Chapter 2: Methodology

As discussed in the introduction, 'readability' can have far reaching effects in the book publishing industry as well as in the pop-culture zeitgeist. The 'Plain Language' movement of the 1960s brought the concept of readability into the forefront of the public's mind (DuBay 2004; Zhou *et al.* 2017). Rudolph Flesch was instrumental in this (Heydari 2012, p. 423), and his approach to readability has become 'the most widely used formula and one of the most tested and reliable' (DuBay 2004, p. 22). As previously discussed in Chapter 1, 'readability' is 'how easily written materials can be read and understood' (Richards *et al.* 1992, p. 306). In his 1948 paper, *A New Readability Yardstick*, Flesch described a formula for scoring the level of difficulty when reading a piece of text, known as the Flesch Reading Ease Score. It is this base formula that has allowed us to determine the readability scores for each of the six books analysed in this dissertation. The resulting scores per book were then used to compare each novel's readability, as well as determining any correlation between readability levels, as determined by Flesch, and the saleability of each novel, as determined by online book ratings, online book reviews, and the social media response to marketing techniques.

Flesch, Kincaid and their formulas

While almost every aspect of today's society requires one to read (Kaufman 2019; Crossley *et al.* 2017, p. 340), there has been a push in recent decades to make reading easier by taking a complex idea and making it simple and understandable for the lay person (Flesch 1946). For example, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the Obama administration made a significant move towards the widespread use of plain language by legislating the Plain Writing Act in 2010 (Siegel 2010). A precursor to this Act occurred in 1998, when then President Bill Clinton directed his federal agencies to ensure all documents and regulations were written using plain language for the sake of every American citizen (DuBay 2004, p. 55). This is what Flesch's readability scale was designed to do (Flesch 1946, 1948 & 1949). Flesch described his formula as being especially helpful in clearly showing specific faults found in writing (Flesch 1948, p. 226).

Originally, Flesch set out to improve the readability of newspapers (Linney 2017), eventually resulting in the Flesch Reading Ease formula (Flesch 1948, p. 229). Newspapers that brought their reading level down saw an increase in readership (James 2016; Flesch 1948, p. 221), sometimes by up to 40 to 60% (Mativier 2018; DuBay 2004, p. 21). While the Reading Ease

formula was used and popular in several sectors (Kincaid *et al.* 1975, p. 2), the resulting number was not immediately meaningful without comparing it to other scores within a table (Kincaid *et al.* 1975, p. 19). In 1975, the US Navy contracted J. Peter Kincaid 'to recalculate the Flesch Reading Ease Scores into a grade level…' (Wylie 2018). Kincaid's work resulted in the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level formula (Kincaid *et al.* 1975, p. 14). Today, the Grade Level formula along with the Reading Ease formula are the most commonly used formulas to test for readability, and are 'the most widely validated and used of all readability formulas' (Kincaid *et al.* 1975, p. 2). The Flesch formula is so popular and its use so widespread that it has been incorporated and embedded into the word processing software Microsoft Word (Heydari 2012, p. 423).

Both readability formulas (Reading Ease Score and Reading Grade Level) use the number of syllables per word, words per sentence, and sentences per 100 words as quantifiers to determine the final score (Flesch 1948, p. 228; Kincaid *et. al.* 1975, p. 14). For each of the formulas, the result is presented on differing scales and therefore the distinction between the two must be made clear. The Reading Ease formula, originally created by Flesch, aims to determine the 'level of education someone needs to easily read a piece of text' (Linney 2017). Texts are rated on a '100-point scale' (Heydari 2012, p. 424), where 80 to 100 is determined to be 'very easy' to read, and 0 to 40 is 'very difficult' (Flesch 1948, p. 230; Stockmeyer 2009, p. 46). For the average reader, the text should aim to be between 60 and 70 (Wright 2016; Stockmeyer 2009, p. 46), where '60 is a good target for plain understandable English' (Walwyn 2016). This result would then need to be compared to other scores within a table (see Table 1) and once correlated would give the level of education needed by the reader to understand the text (Kincaid *et. al.* 1975, p. 19). It was this drawn out process that spurred the US Navy into contracting Kincaid and his colleagues to develop a simplified formula (Kincaid *et al.* 1975, p. 5). The Flesch-Kincaid Reading Grade Level formula results in a number that represents the minimum US level of education needed to understand the piece of text (Stockmeyer 2009, p. 46; Blatt 2017, p. 107), eliminating the need for a separate comparison table (Kincaid *et al.*1975, p. 19). The result will typically land between grades 5.5 and 16.3 (Kincaid *et al.* 1975, p. 11), with the desired reading grade level being grades 7-8 (Linney 2017; Walwyn 2016). Because the US education system stops at grade 12, grades 13 to 16 are estimations of the difficulty of reading a tertiary or post-graduate student should be able to handle (Walwyn 2016).

Reading Ease Score	Style Description	Estimated Reading Grade
0 to 30:	Very Difficult	College graduates
30 to 50:	Difficult	13th to 16th grades
50 to 60:	Fairly Difficult	10th to 12th grades
60 to 70:	Standard	8th to 9th grades
70 to 80:	Fairly Easy	7th grade
80 to 90:	Easy	6th grade
90 to 100:	Very Easy	5th grade

Table 1: Flesch's Reading Ease Score comparison table (DuBay 2004, p. 22)

The mathematical equations for each formula are below:

Flesch Reading Ease Score (Flesch 1948, p. 225):

$$206.835 - 1.015 \left(\frac{total\ words}{total\ sentences}\right) - 84.6 \left(\frac{total\ syllables}{total\ words}\right)$$

Flesch-Kincaid Reading Grade Level (Kincaid *et. al.* 1975, p. 14):

$$0.39 \left(\frac{total\ words}{total\ sentences}\right) + 11.8 \left(\frac{total\ syllables}{total\ words}\right) - 15.59$$

The Flesch Reading Ease Score and Flesch-Kincaid Reading Grade Level formulas only point of difference is in their simplicity. Both formulas are 'capable of measuring the simplicity or complexity of any text. The formula itself is simple – just a couple of fractions weighted and then added together' (Blatt 2017, p. 106). However, where the result from the Flesch Reading Ease formula would then need to be compared to a table (Table 1), for the Flesch-Kincaid formula the resulting number is 'the grade level required to understand the text' (Blatt 2017, p. 107).

In using the above formulas, the resulting reading ease score and reading grade level provide the author or publisher with an opportunity to re-edit in an attempt to simplify the language and increase readership (Eunson 2016, p. 3.6; DuBay 2004, p. 54). However, we must

remember that readability scores can be somewhat subjective as Stockmeyer (2009, p. 47) reminds us that 'no mathematical formula can truly measure understanding'. Because 'readability' is not the same as 'comprehensibility' (Wright 2016; James 2016) the chosen formulas can only provide a score on the quantifiable aspects of the text. The formulas 'cannot measure context, prior knowledge, interest level, difficulty of concept, or coherence of text' (Heydari 2012, p. 426). Most literary works have been seen to 'fail' when scored using the readability formulas (Wright 2016), and this could lead to potential issues for authors: 'The perception is that if you use [readability formulas] to simplify your writing you end up over-simplifying' (Walwyn 2016). Punctuation is also a big downfall of the formulas, especially when used in a programmed platform such as Microsoft Word (Goldfarb 2006; Zhou *et al.* 2017, p. 105). When employing the Flesch formula through an online program like Word, punctuation can confuse the program, providing differing results on the same piece of text (James 2016; Goldfarb 2006, p. 2). Word also has its own limitations, for example the 2003 version of Word capped results at grade 12 (Stockmeyer 2009, p. 46; Goldfarb 2006, p. 1), while an update in 2007 allowed the results to reach the original top Flesch-Kincaid grade of 16 (Eunson 2016, p. 3.9; Stockmeyer 2009, p. 46). Despite these limitations, the Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level formulas have been used to quantify the readability of each of the novels analysed, in order to maintain continuity across all readability scores.

Comparing bestsellers and award-winners

The methodology in this dissertation has been used to compare bestselling and award-winning novels. The literature review, novel selection and comparison of readability scores against the public's response to the novel are all components that have been essential in determining how reading levels affect bestselling and award-winning novels.

The previously discussed readability formulas have been used to analyse the chosen novels and to determine their reading levels. Of the six books that have been analysed, all have been selected from the historical fiction genre. Three have appeared on the Publishers Weekly bestseller list and three have been named as award-winners. In an attempt to keep the comparisons as consistent as possible, the three bestselling novels have all been chosen from the historical romance sub-genre, and the award-winners from the historical literary sub-genre.

Historical fiction novels are determined by their plot setting. First popularised by Sir Walter Scott in the 1800s, historical fiction novels have a period of history as their setting (Johnson 2002). The Romance Writers of America (2017) define romance fiction as having 'a central love story' and 'an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending', they also define historical romance as a romance novel set prior to 1950. Literary fiction is ill-defined and 'does not fit into a genre' (Petite 2014). According to Fletcher (2008, p. 165) literary fiction novels 'are more often character-centered rather than plot-orientated'. The historical literary novels have been chosen because they have won a prestigious writing award and they are set in the past.

The readability scores for each of the novels have been compared with each other, both within and across the two sub-genres. As is the main premise of this dissertation, the scores have been compared with quantifiable units of their saleability. These include: online ratings, reader reviews focusing on language, and social media reactions to the novel. These comparisons show correlations present between the readability of each of the novels and their respective saleability. However, these correlations will only provide an idea as to if there is any relationship between readability levels and saleability. The analysis is not able to prove that having a lower reading level will increase sales (Asamoah 2014; Blatt 2017, p. 28).

All three of the bestsellers have appeared on the Publishers Weekly bestseller list, the internationally renowned website for the publishing industry (Publishers Weekly 2019). Gabaldon's *A Breath of Snow and Ashes* has appeared on the hardcover bestseller list (Maryles 2005). Gregory's *The Other Boleyn Girl* has appeared on the paperback bestseller list (Maryles 2008), and Shaffer and Barrows' *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* has featured significantly on both (Donahue 2009, 2010). The three award-winning novels: Doerr's *All The Light We Cannot See*, James' *A Brief History of Seven Killings* and Harris' *An Officer and a Spy*, have won the Pulitzer Prize (Pulitzer Prizes 2015), the Man Booker Prize (Man Booker Prize 2015), and the Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction (Walter Scott Prize 2014) respectively. While each of the award-winning novels have also appeared on the bestseller lists, there is evidence that winning a literary prize does boost sales (Ragusa 2017; Baker 2016). Further detail and analysis of the six books can be seen in Chapters 3 and 4.

Literary scholars such as Fry (1977b, p. 217) have demonstrated that reading levels change as a novel progresses. That is, a novel may start things off with a low reading level to entice the reader and progressively increase in difficulty, as a reader already engrossed in the story will

continue reading even if the language becomes more complex (Fry 1977b, p. 217). With this in mind, for this dissertation four points throughout the novels were chosen, 100 words were taken from each of these points to be analysed as the excerpt samples. These samples were then analysed by the Flesch and Flesch-Kincaid Reading formulas. The points where the samples have been taken throughout each novel are: the end of the first chapter (not including prologues), the beginning of the last chapter (not including epilogues), and two evenly spaced points throughout the body of the novel. By using four evenly spaced samples, this has allowed an average to be taken as an indication of each novel's overall reading level. The readability scores were then compared at their individual points across the novels and as whole novels by averaging the four readability scores. This analysis has provided the basis for any correlations. The averaged readability scores for each novel has been compared to its number of ratings on Goodreads. This has been done by comparing both the number of 5-star ratings with the number of 1-star ratings against the readability scores. This system is 'not a perfect metric, but it gives a relative sense of the reception and popularity of the book' (Blatt 2017, p. 21). When compared with the readability scores, the figures show a correlation that provide at least some level of insight into the readability of bestsellers and award-winners.

While reviews are a fairly emotion-driven platform for members of the public to share their opinions (Beaton 2018), they provide us with a representation of how the public perceive the product (Racherla & Friske 2012). By using online reader reviews from Amazon and Goodreads, reviews for each of the six books were able to be accessed in an effort to determine the public's perception of each book. Because of the possibility of fake reviews (Malbon 2013) or reviews that increase or decrease standings within either the Amazon or Goodreads websites (Malbon 2013; Fornaciari & Poesio 2014)**,** reviews needed to be selected in a way that reduced the risk of analysing a fake review. The selected reviews were therefore chosen for their focus on language or ease of reading. These were found by using the 'find' function of the web browser and searching for the following key words: hard, difficult, dense, prose, writing, written, voice, easy, light, clear, simple. These chosen reviews were capped at 20, with the intention of 10 to be sourced from Amazon and 10 to be sourced from Goodreads. Out of these 20 reviews, the number of times each key word was used by reviewers was tallied and it is these numbers that have been compared with the readability scores. In the comparison we are looking for a correlation between reading levels and the public's response to the novel, as specifically seen in reader reviews.

In the previous decade, there has been a rise in social media as a marketing tool (Paquette 2013; Geho & Dangelo 2012). Social media has also been seen to be an active representation of the public's perception of a topic (Shellabarger 2016). In order to use social media activity as a quantifier to be compared with each novel's reading level, the number of shares, likes, and retweets by fans were recorded from two of the biggest social media platforms that exist at the time of writing: Facebook and Twitter (Statista 2019a). These figures have been obtained in order to gain an understanding of how the public view the novel. The figures have been grouped per platform and compared with the readability scores. These comparisons have resulted in determining correlations between reader responses to the novel and the novel's reading level.

This methodology shows that readability can affect numerous facets of the novel. By finding the reading level of each novel we were then able to compare the scores with each novel's saleability. The saleability is then defined by the number of Goodreads ratings, the amount of specific terms used in reader reviews, and the user responses on social media. By comparing each of these aspects against the reading levels we were able to see a broad view of the public's perception and reception of the novels. In turn, a correlation was uncovered, leading to possible conclusions on the effect of readability on bestsellers and their saleability. Over the next two chapters, the comparison between the novels' reading levels and the Pception of the novels have been laid out. The final chapter sees a comparison between the chosen bestselling and award-winning novels and a conclusion on the effect reading levels have had on these books.

Chapter 3: Historical romance bestsellers

The three novels discussed below were chosen for this dissertation as all three appeared on the Publishers Weekly bestseller lists (Maryles 2005, 2008; Donahue 2009, 2010). All three novels fall within the genre of historical romance fiction, in that they all have a central love story and their plot settings range from the 16th and 18th centuries through to after the Second World War. In both Gabaldon and Gregory's work, love stories are central to their novels' plots, whereas Shaffer and Barrows' romantic love story is secondary, with a love story of friendship taking centre stage.

This chapter contains a brief description of each novel and their placement in history, as well as four 100-word excerpts from each novel. The excerpts were taken from the following points:

- end of the first chapter
- mid-point 1
- mid-point 2
- start of the final chapter.

Mid-point 1 and mid-point 2 are two equally spaced points between the end of the first chapter and the start of the final chapter. It should be noted that in order to keep the reading level results as accurate as possible there may be some extracts that are just under or over the 100-word limit, as Flesch (1948, p. 229) recommends that 'in a 100-word sample, find the sentence that ends nearest to the 100-word mark – that might be the 94th word or the 109th word'.

All three bestselling historical romance fiction novels are then compared in order to determine significant results from the analysis. Each novel has been analysed and compared on the following points: readability as determined by the Flesch and Flesch-Kincaid readability formulas, Goodreads ratings, online reader reviews posted to both Amazon and Goodreads, and social media activity focusing specifically on Twitter and Facebook. To read further information on the specifics of the analysis carried out on each novel, please see Appendix A.

A Breath of Snow and Ashes (2005) – Diana Gabaldon

A Breath of Snow and Ashes is Gabaldon's sixth novel in her *Outlander* series. The series follows Claire Beauchamp as she falls back in time and is forced to choose between the past and the future. As she falls in love with an 18th century Scottish highlander, she leaves behind her 20th century husband. The series starts just after the Second World War, and we follow Claire as she travels back to 18th century Scotland. *A Breath of Snow and Ashes* is set in 1772-1776 America, immediately preceding the American Revolutionary War. Gabaldon's *Outlander* series has also been made into a TV series of the same name, where each season follows the events of one book.
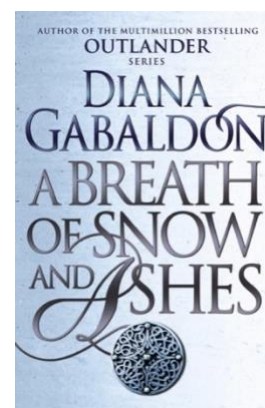
Table 2.1: Reading levels for A Breath of Snow and Ashes

Location	Extract	Ease Score	Grade Level
End of first chapter p.7	They were leaving. It occurred to him dimly that he might call out. If they knew he was white, they might help him. And they might not. He kept quiet. Either he was dying or he wasn't. If he was, no help was possible. If he wasn't, none was needed. *Well, I asked then, didn't I?* he thought, resuming his conversation with God, calm as though he lay still on the trunk of the tulip tree, looking up into the depths of heaven above. *A sign, I said. I didna quite expect Ye to be so prompt about it, though.*	96	2.1
Mid-point 1 p. 463	"Henri-Christian's doing well," I said, for lack of anything else. "Putting on weight." I let the remark trail off, bending over the rail to pour corn and scraps into the wooden feed trough. Dead silence. I waited a moment, then turned round, one hand on my hip. "He's a very sweet little baby," I said. I could hear him breathing, but he said nothing. With an audible snort, I went and pushed the bottom half of the door open wide, so that the cloudy light outside streamed in, exposing Fergus. He sat with his face turned stubbornly away.	84.4	4.1
Mid-point 2 p. 919	"Ulysses," I said, with certainty, and he nodded reluctantly. Ulysses was not only Jocasta's eyes, but her hands, as well. I didn't think he would have killed Phaedre at his mistress's command – but if Jocasta had poisoned the girl, for instance. Ulysses might certainly have helped to dispose of the body. I felt an odd air of unreality – even with what I knew of the MacKenzie family, calmly discussing the possibility of Jamie's aged aunt having murdered someone … and yet … I *did* know the MacKenzies. "*If* my aunt had any hand at all in the matter," Jamie said.	63.1	7.9
Start of last chapter p. 1376	We spent the remainder of the night sleeping – or at least horizontal – on the floor of the cabin, with the Bugs, Goose and his brother, Light – who confused me initially by referring to themselves as Jamie's "sons" – Scotchee, and Ian. On their way to visit Bird's village, the Indians – for Alexander Cameron was as much an Indian as the others, I thought – had met Jamie and Ian, hunting and accepted Jamie's hospitality. "Though it was a warmer welcome than we expected, Bear-Killer!" Goose said, laughing.	58.1	10.5

	They did not ask who Donner was, nor make any reference to the men whose bodies burned in the funeral pyre of the house.		
	Average	**75.4**	**6.2**

The Other Boleyn Girl (2001) – Philippa Gregory

The Other Boleyn Girl is currently the ninth book in Gregory's 'Tudor and Plantagenet' series. Despite its current ninth placing, this was the first 'Tudor' novel published by Gregory. The 'Tudor' and 'Plantagenet' series were later combined to create the mammoth 15-book series that now exists. The novel begins in 1521 and follows Anne Boleyn's sister, Mary, as she is made mistress to King Henry VIII. The novel concludes when Anne, herself, is made his queen and subsequently beheaded in 1536. Gregory's novel has also been made into the 2008 film of the same name. The novel is popular for its writing style from the point of view of a lesser known character of history. We see the events unfold of the King divorcing his first wife, marrying his second, the separation of church and state, and the demise of Anne Boleyn, all through the eyes of the Queen's sister, Mary Boleyn.
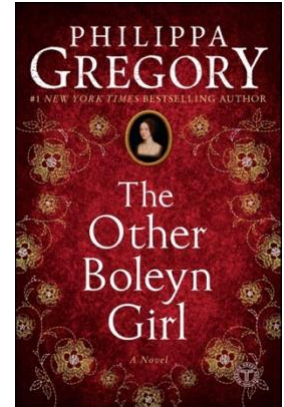
Table 2.2: Reading levels for The Other Boleyn Girl

Location	Extract	Ease Score	Grade Level
End of first chapter p.3	My mother was seated near me. In a rare moment of interest she glanced at me and remarked, 'You're very pale, Mary, are you feeling sick?' 'I didn't think he would be executed,' I said. 'I thought the king would forgive him.' My mother leaned forward so that her mouth was at my ear and no-one could have heard us over the creaking of the boat and the beat of the rowers' drum. 'Then you are a fool,' she said shortly. 'And a fool to remark it. Watch and learn, Mary. There is no room for mistakes at court.'	90.5	3.3
Mid-point 1 p. 173	They had cut the hay in the meadows on either side of the river and the sweet green smell hung on the evening air. Then we heard a shout and a couple of my father's men in their livery tumbled out of the guard room and arrayed themselves on the drawbridge, shading their eyes against the light. 'It's the young lord, and my lady Carey,' one of the soldiers exclaimed. A lad at the back turned and ran with the news into the courtyard, and we slowed the horses down to a walk as the bell rang and the guards came rushing out of the guard room.	75.3	9.3
Mid-point 2 p. 343	There are too many spies in your uncle's train for me to be undetected for long. We've been lucky, we've had our twelve days, and they've been very sweet. But I don't think we can have them again in England.' 'Oh.'	92.2	3

Location	Extract	Ease Score	Grade Level
	I turned my horse's head and felt the sun warm on my back. The waves washed in gently and my horse, fretting a little, shied as they splashed her fetlocks and knees. I could not hold her steady, I could not command her. I could not command myself. 'I think I shan't stay in your uncle's service.' William drew his horse up alongside mine.		
Start of last chapter p. 514	I took a boat downriver to Greenwich to fetch the queen's gowns and Catherine's extra linen, leaving William, Henry and the baby behind at the lodgings near the Tower. William was uneasy at my going without him and I was fearful too, it felt like going back into danger, returning to Greenwich Palace; but I preferred to go alone and to know that my son – that previous and rare commodity, a son of the king – was out of sight of the court. I promised to be no longer than a couple of hours and to stop for nothing.	63.7	10.4
Average		**80.4**	**6.5**

The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society (2008) – Mary Anne Shaffer & Annie Barrows

The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society has featured prominently on bestselling lists, both before and after the 2018 Netflix film of the same name was released. Set in 1946, Shaffer and Barrows' novel is written in an epistolary format. Through a series of letters, the reader follows Juliet Ashton's correspondence with the inhabitants of one of the Channel Islands, Guernsey. As research for a book, Juliet discovers how the lives of the townsfolk of Guernsey were affected during the German occupation of World War II. As she travels to Guernsey to continue her research she falls in love with not only the island, but the inhabitants themselves.
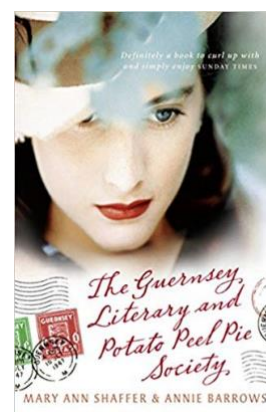
Table 2.3: Reading levels for The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society

Location	Extract	Ease Score	Grade Level
End of first chapter p.4	I can't seem to dredge up any sense of proportion or balance these days, and God knows one can't write humour without them. In the meantime, I am very happy that Stephens & Stark is making money on *Izzy Bickerstaff Goes to War*. It relieves my conscience over the debacle of my Anne Brontë biography. My thanks for everything and love, Juliet P.S. I am reading the collected correspondence of Mrs Montagu. Do you know what that dismal woman wrote to Jane Carlyle? 'My dear little Jane, everyone is born with a vocation, and yours is to write charming little notes.' I hope Jane spat at her.	71.1	6.8
Mid-point 1 p. 88	I love their letters and could not bear the thought of sending the originals to the bottom of the earth where they would undoubtedly be eaten by wild dogs. I knew the Germans occupied the Channel Islands, but I barely gave them a thought during the war. I have since scoured *The Times* for articles and anything I can cull from the London Library	61.4	10.5

	on the Occupation. I also need to find a good travel book on Guernsey – one with descriptions, not timetables and hotel recommendations – to give me the feel of the island.		
Mid-point 2 p. 172	It could not have been an easy task to call up your own terrible memories in order to tell us of Elizabeth's death. We had been praying that she would return to us, but it is better to know the truth than to live in uncertainty. We were grateful to learn of your friendship with Elizabeth and to think of the comfort you gave to one another. May Dawsey Adams and I come and visit you in Louviers? We would like to, very much, but not if you would find our visit too disturbing. We want to know you and we have an idea to put to you.	77.3	6.9
Start of last chapter p. 255	Dear Sidney, Terribly sorry to make you turn round and come right back across the Channel, but I require your presence – at my wedding. I have seized the day, and the night, too. Can you come and give me away in Amelia's back garden on Saturday? Eben to be best man, Isola to be bridesmaid (she is manufacturing a gown for the occasion), Kit to throw rose petals. Dawsey to be groom. Are you surprised? Probably not – but I am. I am in a constant state of surprise these days. Actually, now that I calculate, I've been betrothed only one full day.	77.9	5.1
	Average	**71.9**	**7.3**

Comparison of bestselling historical romance fiction

Reading levels

Through the use of both the Flesch Reading Ease Score (Figure 1.1) and the Flesch-Kincaid Reading Grade Level formulas (Figure 1.2), *A Breath of Snow and Ashes*' reading level appears to increase slightly the deeper the reader gets into the novel. Increasing the readability towards the end of a novel is safest, as the reader is already engrossed in the content and will continue reading, even if the level of reading difficulty increases (Fry 1977b, p. 217). *The Other Boleyn Girl*'s reading level shows quite a different pattern. Instead of getting harder to read as the novel progresses, Gregory's writing goes back and forth in reading level complexity throughout her novel. In contrast, Shaffer and Barrows' novel appears to have similar reading levels throughout the entirety of the story, despite the novel's epistolary writing style.

All three novels have very similar average reading ease scores and reading grade levels. These average scores are as expected for bestselling novels (Austin 2011). By having a lower reading level, the author, editor and publisher are allowing for a greater audience to be able to read and understand the content (Snow 2015). This in turn increases the chances of the novel becoming a bestseller, confirming that bestselling novels are typically written at a lower grade level in an attempt to promote the novel's content to a wider, perhaps less educated, reading public (Snow 2015). Being sixth of a bestselling series means Gabaldon's novel already had a dedicated fan

base behind it. At close to 1400 pages, the sheer size of the paperback novel itself may intimidate a fair amount of readers (Lea 2015). With the increased page count it would be particularly important to make the content, and the reading level, as inviting to the reading public as possible.
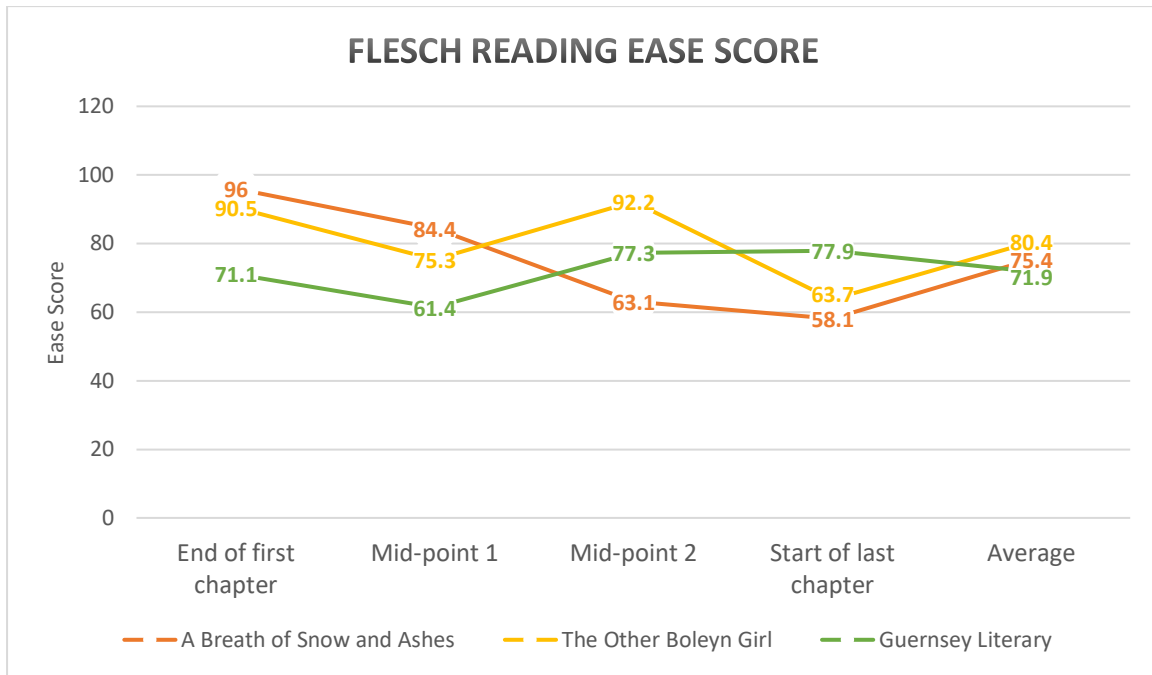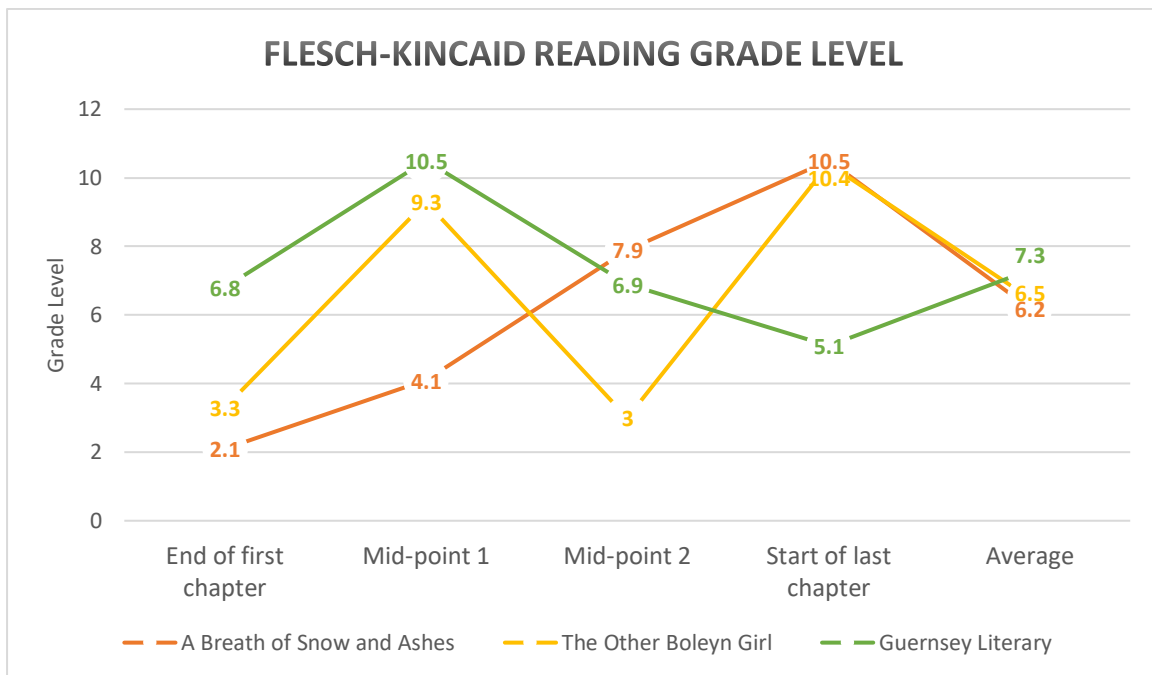

FLESCH READING EASE SCORE

Figure 1.1: Comparison of Flesch Reading Ease Scores

FLESCH-KINCAID READING GRADE LEVEL

Figure 1.2: Comparison of Flesch-Kincaid Reading Grade Levels

Goodreads ratings

On the site itself, Goodreads classifies its five ratings as follows:

- 5 stars: it was amazing
- 4 stars: really like it
- 3 stars: liked it
- 2 stars: it was ok
- 1 star: did not like it (Goodreads 2019)

By knowing the meaning behind the ratings, they can then be used as 'a trustworthy opinion from someone with familiarity with similar kinds of books' (Smith 2016). With such similar average reading levels, it is not surprising that the ratings, which are current at the time of writing, are relatively similar for all three of the novels. However, there are some differences that can be addressed.

By plotting the Goodreads ratings as a line graph, as shown in Figure 2.1, Gabaldon's novel appears to be the best received of the three bestsellers. However, the ratings decrease exponentially, indicating a sharp dropping off of reviewers that disliked the novel. In comparison to this, while the ratings still show a popularity for the novel, it should be noted that Gregory's *The Other Boleyn Girl* is the only novel of the three that has more 4-star ratings than 5-star. This can be explained by the novel's subject matter and the representation of specific characters. Although she is an historian herself, Philippa Gregory's often inaccurate historical fiction storytelling can upset some readers, especially when her subject matter is such a popular figure as King Henry VIII and his six unfortunate wives. Shaffer & Barrows' novel has similar ratings to Gabaldon's, but they are not as high, perhaps because *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* does not have the popular series following that Gabaldon enjoys (Yucesoy *et al.* 2018, p. 14).
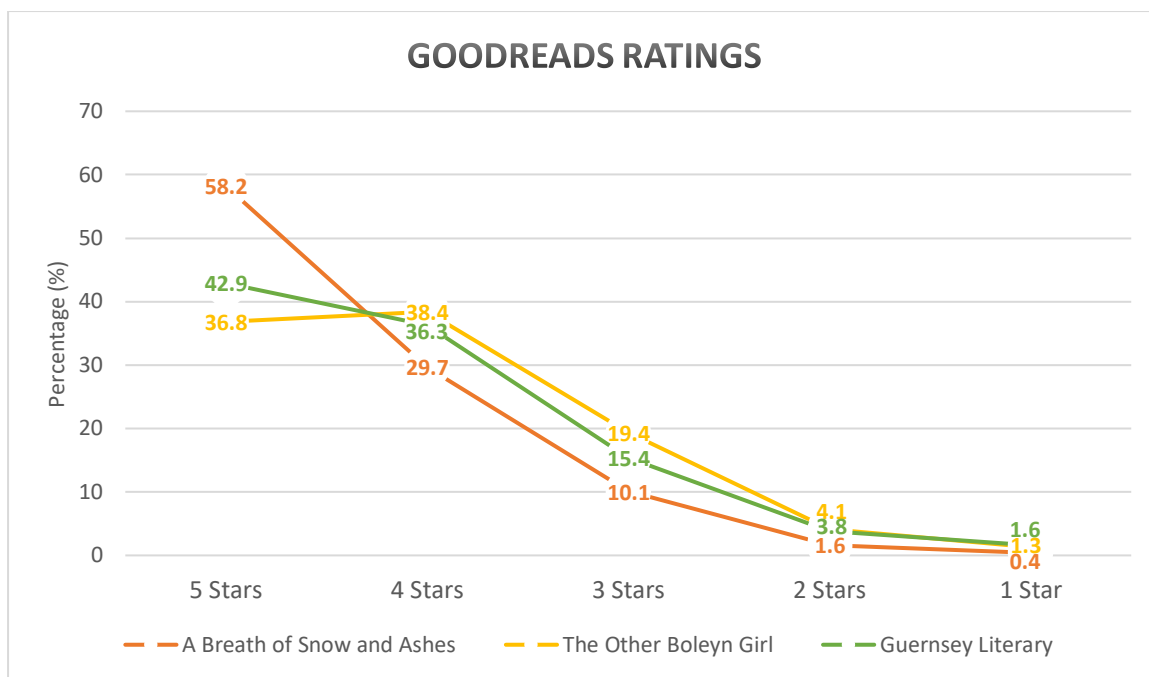
Figure 2.1: Bestseller Goodreads ratings

Online reader reviews

In order to gather online reader reviews, two sources were used: Amazon, arguably the number one online book seller (Plaster 2012), and Goodreads, 'the largest source of independent reviews on the Web' (Kaufman 2013). The key terms found in the 20 reviews chosen for each novel have been collated and are represented in Figures 3.1 and 3.2. Online reader reviews allow an insight into how the reading public received each of the three bestselling novels (Smith 2016). Overwhelmingly, all three novels' reviews were skewed positively, with minimal negative reviews, as can be confirmed by the Goodreads ratings seen in Figure 2.1. Appendix A, Figures 3.1a, 3.1b and 3.1c and Figures 3.2a, 3.2b and 3.2c show which reviews were positive or negative. Shaffer and Barrows' title had the highest amount of Amazon reviews referring to language of the three novels and so the sample size of 20 reviews were able to be split evenly between the two sites. Gabaldon and Gregory's novels, however, have significantly fewer Amazon reviews that referred to language and were not able to supply the ten language-based reviews needed, so the empty spaces were filled with Goodreads reviews. As a dedicated site for readers to express their thoughts on novels, it is believed that Goodreads members 'put more faith in book recommendations from a social network they build themselves' (Kaufman 2013). Amanda Close, from publisher Random House, supports this when she comments:

Because Goodreads is not a publisher or retailer, people feel that the information is not getting manipulated…People trust them because they are so crowd-sourced…You can't buy a five-star review there. (cited in Kaufman 2013).

Here, Close is referencing the unethical practices of some reviewers in falsifying positive reviews, as well as creating unnecessarily negative reviews for rival products (Bagley 2019).

A Breath of Snow and Ashes' sample of reviews are overwhelmingly positive as can be expected of a bestselling series. The main issue for those with negative views was the size of the novel, with not all readers able to get through all 1397 pages. Looking specifically at language, positive reviewers found Gabaldon's writing to be 'well written' and 'well researched'. The negative reviewers found the novel difficult to finish, which could be a comment on the length of the novel rather than the writing itself, even though the readability level rises throughout the novel.

Despite some reviewers' dislike for the character content of *The Other Boleyn Girl*, reviews still skewed positively. Most of the positive reviews liked the academic feel of the writing and the overall engaging nature of the story. Many negative reviews focused on their dislike of the portrayal of the Boleyn sisters – especially Anne Boleyn, the more popular of King Henry VIII's wives, and arguably the antagonist of the novel – not to mention the historical inaccuracies, for example Gregory's portrayal of Anne Boleyn. Bordo (2013, p. 220) explains 'the character of Anne is indeed more selfish, spiteful, and vindictive than she had appeared in any previous novel'. The negative reviews that focused on language, and therefore represented in Appendix A, Figure 3.2b, call the book 'poorly written' with 'amateurish writing'.

The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society was the only novel chosen in this dissertation that had an excess of Amazon reader reviews (Figure 3.1). Despite the lack of social media activity, the book was overwhelmingly well-received. It did, however, appear to experience the same issue as that of *The Other Boleyn Girl,* with too many inaccuracies about the island and its inhabitants for some readers. A majority of reviewers enjoyed the light-hearted novel with its well-written prose. Most of the negative reviews were centred on the dislike of the epistolary writing style, with some reviewers stating there was not enough change of voice between the different characters. Those negative reviews that spoke of language showed a dislike for the easiness of the writing, which at a 6th grade level, is well within what

is expected for a bestselling novel (Austin 2011), but may be too simplistic for those specific reviewers.
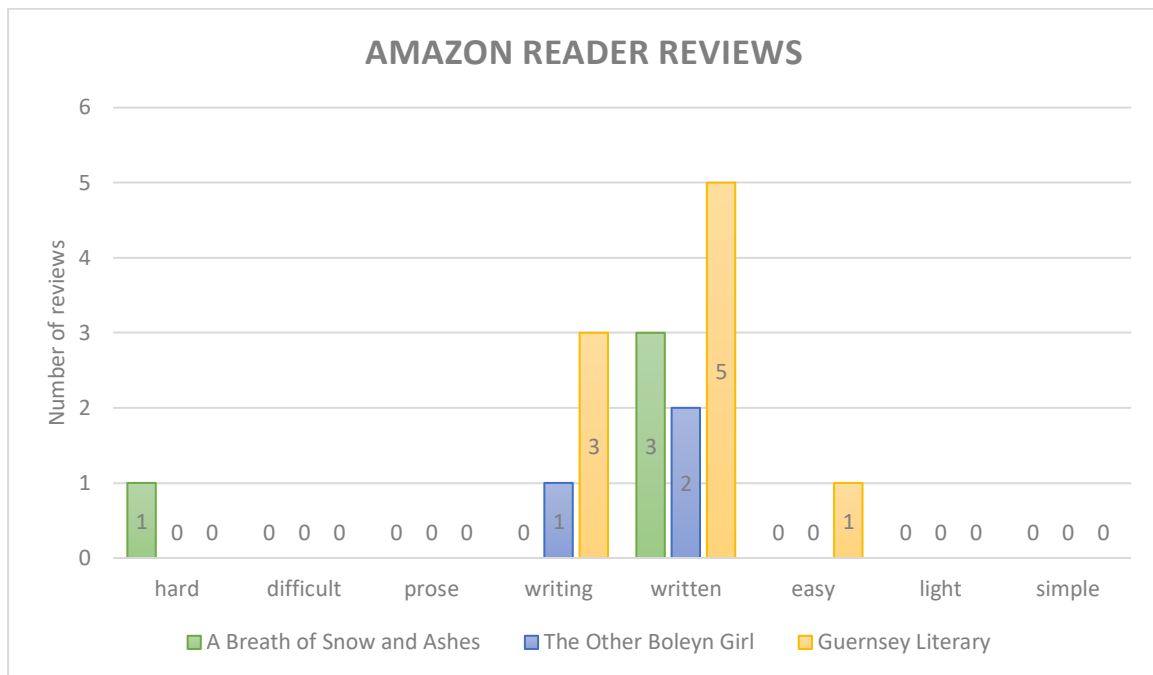
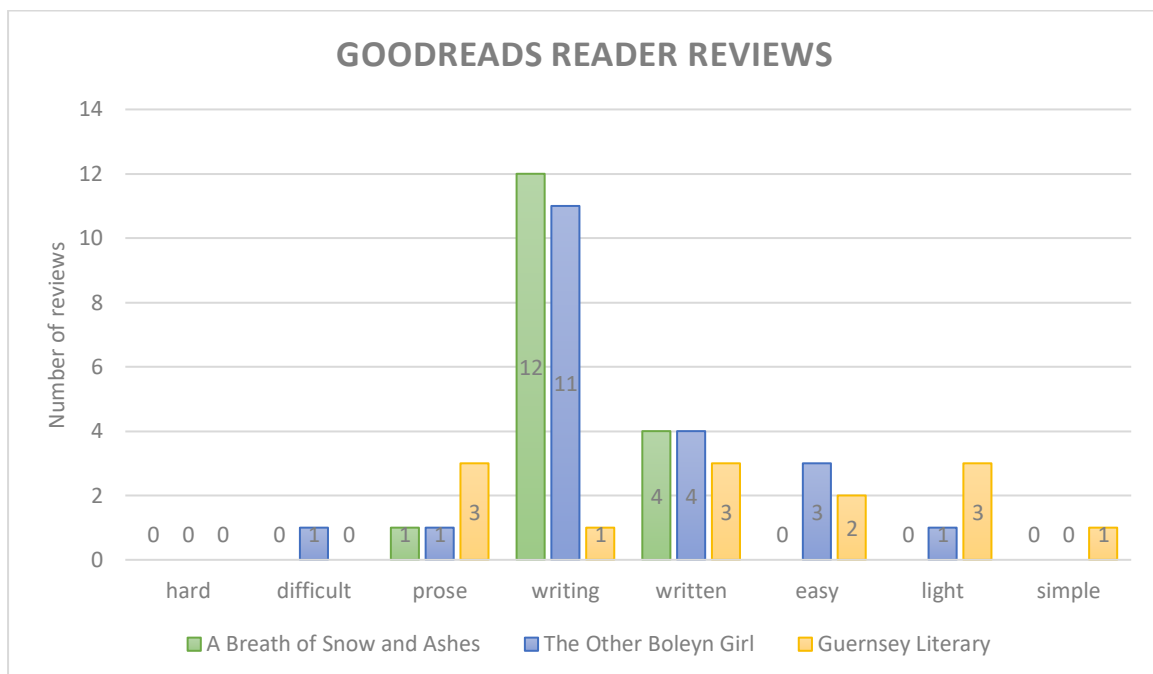*Figure 3.1: Amazon online reader reviews**

Figure 3.2: Goodreads online reader reviews*

* While 20 reviews per novel were analysed, there were some instances of a single review containing multiple terms. This accounts for the elevated number of reviews for all three bestselling novels.

Social media

All social media interactions with each of the three bestselling novels were taken from two of the most popular social media platforms at the time of writing: Facebook and Twitter (Statista 2019a). The amount of interactions for each novel can be seen in Figures 4.1 and 4.2.

Both *A Breath of Snow and Ashes* and *The Other Boleyn Girl* were first published before social media became a mainstream form of communication and so this should be taken into account when comparing social media activity. However, it is interesting to note that despite *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* being published in 2008 at the height of the social media age, it is this title that has significantly less social media activity. Despite all three novels having very similar reading levels (Figure 1.2), the amount of activity on the author and publisher social media accounts vary widely. It was not until 2010 that social media moved from a communicative platform to one centred on marketing (Peters 2017; Bosari 2012) and it is after this date that we see the majority of posts.

As *A Breath of Snow and* Ashes was published in 2005, when social media was in its infancy, finding social media posts for this novel was extremely difficult. There were no social media posts from either Penguin Random House UK, or its imprint Arrow Books, about this title specifically. Being her main series, the author, Diana Gabaldon posted extensively on both Twitter (Figure 4.1) and Facebook (Figure 4.2) to promote the novel and its corresponding upcoming season of the TV series. By having no character limitations, Facebook is the easier platform to post book content (Bennett 2011), significantly more interaction on Facebook can be seen in Figure 4.2, particularly in terms of comments and likes, and the relatively new addition of 'reactions'.

Published in 2001, also before social media platforms Facebook (founded in 2004) and Twitter (founded in 2006) were created (van Dijck 2013), it is no surprise that *The Other Boleyn Girl*'s publisher, HarperCollins, has no posts marketing the novel. A side account of the publisher, HarperFiction, saw limited posts on Twitter and no posts at all on Facebook. Almost all the posts about her novel came from Gregory herself. Despite having a large fanbase for her Tudor series, the timing of the publication of the novel would explain the limited social media activity. However, the resurgence created by the release of the film in 2008 and the publication of new covers for the paperback novels in 2011 could be thanked for the increase in interest the novel

experienced since social media has become a major platform for interaction between creators and their audiences.

Despite being published in 2008, with a majority of the posts found being posted after 2010, *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* sees reduced social media activity (Figures 4.1 and 4.2). The lack of social media activity could perhaps be accounted for by the fact that one of the authors passed away before the publication of the novel and the other does not have a presence on social media. On both social media platforms, the majority of activity was seen by the novel's Australian publisher Allen & Unwin (the specifics of these posts can be seen in Appendix A, Figures 4.1c and 4.2c).
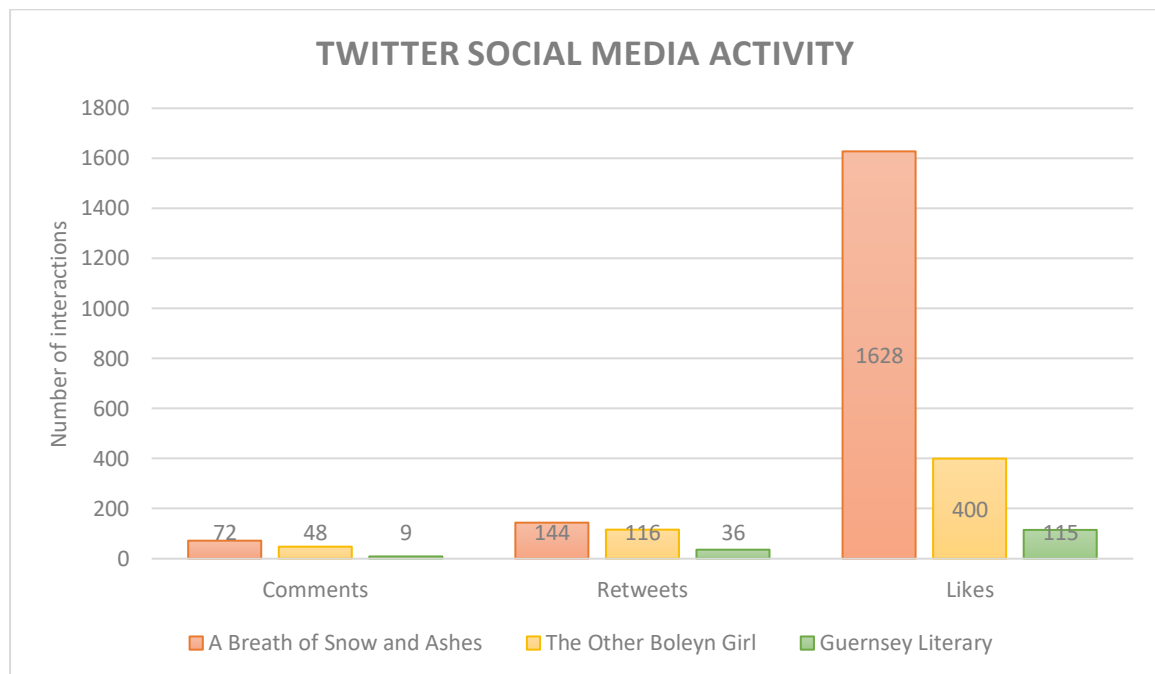
Figure 4.1: Twitter social media activity
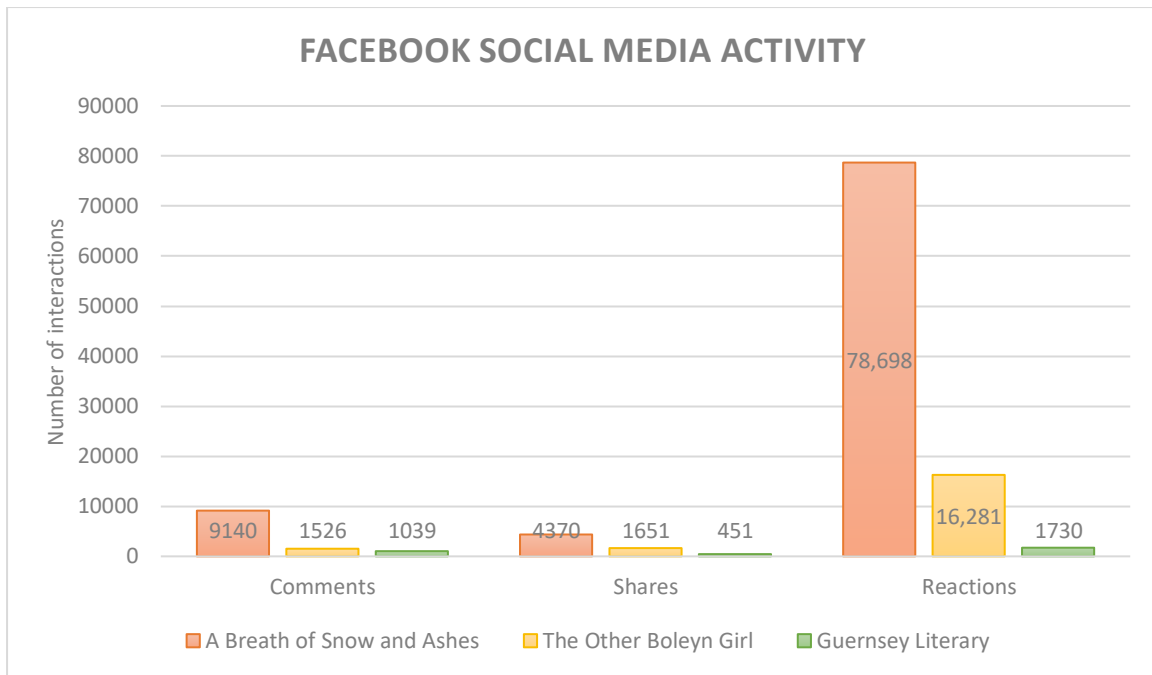
Figure 4.2: Facebook social media activity

Summary

All three novels have similar readability levels, Goodreads ratings, and online reader reviews. The only real point of difference is their social media advertising.

As bestselling novels, it is expected that all three books would have similar average reading levels. However, it seems that despite *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*'s extended stay on the Publishers Weekly bestseller lists, the novel has the highest average reading grade level at the 7th grade, which is still within the desired grade range as advised by DuBay (2004) and Blatt (2017, p. 110). Gabaldon, who has a strong series following by the time of publishing for her sixth novel, *A Breath of Snow and Ashes* is still at an average reading level of 6.2. This is despite the possibility that her fanbase would still consume the novel, even if the readability was slightly more advanced. While *The Other Boleyn Girl* is part of a bestselling series now, the novel was originally the first Gregory wrote in her Tudor series. Therefore Gregory did not have the series following that her later novels have enjoyed, supporting the need to have a lower reading grade level.

The percentages for each of the Goodreads ratings look similar across the three novels (Figure 2.1). Despite Gregory and Shaffer & Barrows' novels having significantly more reviewers rate their novels (Appendix A, Tables 3.1 and 3.2), it is Gabaldon who enjoys the most 5-star

reviews at 58.2%. For all three, the online reader reviews skew positively, which is the expected online review behaviour for bestselling novels (Chevalier & Mayzlin 2006, p. 346; Cui *et al.* 2012, p. 39) with an average reading grade level between 6 and 7. Almost all the reviewers spoke of the writing of each of the authors (Figure 3.1), with the Goodreads reviewers (Figure 3.2) being more adventurous in their word usage and mentioning the 'prose' of the novels. It is the amount of social media activity where the three novels differed the most. Between Twitter and Facebook the same pattern is present, this can be seen when comparing Figures 4.1 and 4.2. The amount of likes or reactions becomes the focal point of differentiation between the three novels.

The analysis of all three novels presented results that confirmed the hypothesis. Bestselling novels, with an average reading level of between the 6th and 7th grades, will experience high positive reactions from the reading public.

Chapter 4: Historical literary award-winners

The remaining three novels have been selected for this thesis as they have each been awarded a major literary prize. Each novel sits in the historical literary sub-genre of historical fiction and their subject matter ranges from occupied Paris during the Second World War, 1970s Jamaica, and late 1800s Paris. Each novel is critically acclaimed, having received multiple writing awards.

A brief description of each novel, their placement in history and the main prize they have been awarded can be found below. As in Chapter 3, the four 100-word excerpts for each novel have also been included, each taken from the:

- end of the first chapter
- mid-point 1
- mid-point 2
- start of the final chapter.

Mid-point 1 and mid-point 2 are two equally spaced points between the end of the first chapter and the start of the final chapter. It should be noted that the same sample size recommendations by Flesch (1948, p. 229) in Chapter 3 have also been made in this chapter to ensure the reading level results be as accurate as possible.

Each of the three award-winning novels were analysed and their analysis was compared. The specifics of the analysis carried out on each novel can be found in Appendix B. The novels have been analysed and compared on the following points: readability, Goodreads ratings, online reader reviews posted to both Amazon and Goodreads, and social media activity focusing specifically on Twitter and Facebook.

All the Light We Cannot See (2014) – Anthony Doerr

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2015, *All the Light We Cannot See* takes place in occupied France during the Second World War. Praised for its literary prose, Doerr's novel also appeared significantly on bestseller lists before and after being awarded the Pulitzer Prize. The novel has two main protagonists: Parisian Marie-Laure, a blind girl whose father takes her from occupied Paris to a seaside town to wait out the war; and Werner, a German orphan forced into the Hitler Youth due to his ability to fix radios.
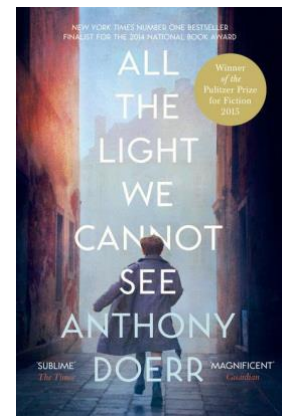
Table 3.1: Reading levels for All the Light We Cannot See

Location	Extract	Ease Score	Grade Level
End of first chapter p.16	An avalanche descends onto the city. A hurricane. Teacups drift off shelves. Paintings slip off nails. In another quarter second, the sirens are inaudible. Everything is inaudible. The roar becomes loud enough to separate membranes in the middle ear. The anti-air guns let fly their final shells. Twelve bombers fold back unharmed into the blue night. On the sixth floor of Number 4 rue Vauborel, Marie-Laure crawls beneath her bed and clamps the stone and little model house to her chest. In the cellar beneath the Hotel of Bees, the single bulb in the ceiling winks out.	71.4	5.4
Mid-point 1 p. 187	One final burst of frenetic gluing and sanding, and Marie-Laure's father has completed the model of Saint-Malo. It is unpainted, imperfect, striped with a half-dozen different types of wood, and missing details. But it's complete enough for his daughter to use if she must: the irregular polygon of the island framed by ramparts, each of its eight hundred and sixty-five buildings in place. He feels ragged. For weeks logic has been failing him. The stone the museum has asked him to protect is not real. If it were, the museum would have sent men already to collect it.	69.1	7
Mid-point 2 p. 356	Then they're around a bend and he feels only the presence of Volkheimer next to him, a cold dusk out the windows, bridge after bridge, hill after hill, all the time descending. Metallic, tattered moonlight shatters across the road, and a white horse stands chewing in a field, and a searchlight rakes the sky, and in the lit window of a mountain cabin, for a split second as they rumble past, Werner sees Jutta seated at a table, the bright faces of other children around her, Frau Elena's needlepoint over the sink, the corpses of a dozen infants heaped in a bin beside the stove.	36.7	21.1
Start of last chapter p. 527	She lives to see the century turn. She lives still. It's a Saturday morning in early March, and her grandson Michel collects her from her flat and walks her through the Jardin des Plants. Frost glimmers in the air, and Marie-Laure shuffles along with the ball of her cane out in front and her thin hair blown to one side and the leafless canopies of the trees drifting overhead as she imagines schools of Portuguese men-of-war drift, trailing their long tentacles behind them. Skim ice has formed atop puddles in the gravel paths.	72.4	7.7
	Average	**62.4**	**10.3**

A Brief History of Seven Killings (2014) – Marlon James

Winner of the Man Booker Prize in 2015, *A Brief History of Seven Killings* is unique in its use of Jamaican patois, as it covers the gangland events surrounding the attempted assassination of Bob Marley. Set between 1976 and 1991, the reader is introduced to a range of characters, each providing part of the story before and after the events that took place on the night of December 3, 1976. From gang-members to reporters, James' novel has brought him critical acclaim.
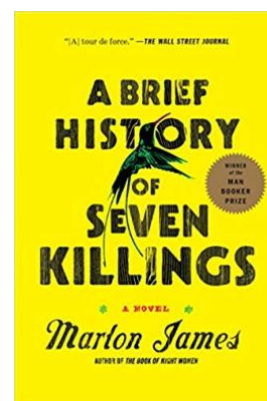
Table 3.2: Reading levels for A Brief History of Seven Killings

Location	Extract	Ease Score	Grade Level
End of first chapter p.15	They laugh and call me little pussyhole and I say that's what me call your mother last night when me fuck her and they laugh and another man, the man called Josey Wales, put the gun in my hand and show me how to point. I grow up in Copenhagen City and watch the guns change and know they don't come from Papa-Lo. They come from the two men who bring guns to the ghetto and the one man who show me how to use it. We, the Syrian, the American and Doctor Love out by the shack near the sea.	79.8	8.3
Mid-point 1 p. 235	Two white Datsun outside. Josey, Weeper, Bam-Bam and me get in the first. The rest get in the second. Uptown. Uptown always say the same things to me when I come up here. Green light. We coming coming coming like lightning and thunder. I want another line, just one more line and I fly. A blue car come in front of we and seem to be going where we going. The car is the Piper and we is the rat. We follow the short manager all the way up to 56 Hope Road. Red light say stop but green light say go.	96.1	1.9
Mid-point 2 p. 459	She in her nightie and bunny slippers screaming like her throat half cut, me behind her. Popped her off in the middle of the road, just as two station wagons passed. One stopped so I fired into the rear windshield and kept firing until they drove off and crashed into a tree seventy yards or so. With shit done I had to leave Chicago. But then after cooling out in New York for six months, I got a call. Seems word got around. Southside hit was sloppy and messy, but no failure. Collateral damage was hefty is all.	84.7	4.4
Start of last chapter p. 681	Every time I pass on the subway to take the bus I forget that the bus is so much slower. Price I pay for hyperventilating whenever I'm underground. At least I'm awake. Last week I slept past seven stops and woke up to some man in the seat across looking me over, like he was trying to figure out which body part to touch to wake me up. No men on the bus today. Eastchester is empty too. Maybe the Jamaican football team is losing a game somewhere. It says something about me that even in my own thoughts I'm such a considerable bitch.	77.3	5.7
	Average	**84.5**	**5.1**

An Officer and a Spy (2013) – Robert Harris

Winner of the Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction in 2014, *An Officer and a Spy* describes the Dreyfus Affair of late 19th century France. The novel follows Colonel Georges Picquart over a period of several years as he stumbles across a cover-up by the French army. As Picquart works tirelessly to free the wrongly convicted man, he himself is framed as a traitor to the French nation. Not only does Picquart and his supporters have to prove Dreyfus' innocence, but now his own.
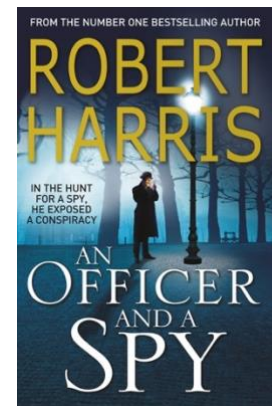
Table 3.3: Reading levels for An Officer and a Spy

Location	Extract	Ease Score	Grade Level
End of first chapter p. 25	'There is one way of getting a definite answer, of course.' 'What's that?' 'We could ask Dreyfus.' Gonse shakes his head. 'Absolutely not. He's now beyond communication. Besides, he'll soon be shipped out of Paris.' He lifts his feet from the desk and sets them on the floor. He pulls the stack of files towards him. Cigarette ash spills down the front of his tunic. 'Just leave it with me. I'll go and explain everything to the Chief of Staff and the minister.' He opens a dossier and starts to scan it. He doesn't look up. 'Thank you, Major Picquart. You are dismissed.'	91	2.1
Mid-point 1 p. 208	Around the walls are the locked cabinets and safes that contain the section's secrets. There is a map of France, showing the *départements*. The three windows are narrow, barred and dusty, their sills encrusted with the excrement of the pigeons I can hear cooing on the roof. 'I wonder,' I say casually, 'do you keep the original *bordereau* up here?' Gribelin does not turn around. 'I do.' 'I'd like to see it.' He glances over his shoulder at me. 'Why?' I shrug. 'I'm interested.' There is nothing he can do. He unlocks another drawer in the cabinet and retrieves one of his ubiquitous manila files.	74.5	4.8
Mid-point 2 p. 391	Let your friend Major Henry try to smear old Auguste as a traitor!' I sit back and consider this. The other advantage of Scheurer-Kestner is that he is a member of the moderate left but with plenty of friends on the right. He is by temperament emollient but determined. 'And what will the senator do with the information?' 'That will be up to him. Knowing his instinct for compromise, I would guess he'll approach the government to begin with, and try to sort it out that way. He'll only go to the press if the authorities won't listen.	74.4	5.9
Start of last chapter p. 574	Mercier's testimony is held to have been a disaster – a grave disappointment to his own side, as he failed to provide the promised 'proof' that Dreyfus was guilty, and an opportunity for ours, in that Labori – generally considered to be the most aggressive cross-examiner at the Paris bar – will now have the chance to challenge him on the witness stand about the secret file. All he needs is sufficient ammunition, and on Sunday morning I walk to his lodgings to help him prepare. I have no qualms about breaking the last vestiges of my oath of confidentiality.	43.1	15.2
Average		**70.8**	**7**

Comparison of award-winning historical literary fiction

Reading levels

Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* has the highest reading grade level (Figure 5.2) and the lowest reading ease score (Figure 5.1). Out of the three award-winning novels analysed for this dissertation, Doerr's novel had the most difficult readability. While it should be noted that all three novels had the same anomaly of a one-point peak in their reading grade levels; each oddly at a different extract point, it is Doerr's novel that had the highest scores and the highest peak, leading to the highest reading grade average.

Marlon James' novel begins with a reading level peak, and then slowly works its way back up from a reading grade level of 1.9. Leaving James with the lowest average reading grade level, which supports Winterson's (2011) belief that the Man Booker prize is falling short in terms of awarding quality literature. The novel is primarily written in Jamaican patois, making it difficult to understand for some readers. Whilst this difficulty of reading should translate to a higher readability level, the broken sentences of the dialect translate to shorter sentences with fewer syllables. This is an example of readability not being able to directly measure understandability (Heydari 2012, p. 426).

Harris' novel follows the typical pattern of the other two novels, but has its reading level peak at the start of the last chapter. This is the most sensible part of a novel to increase the reading level, as the readers are already invested in the story and would power through when the readability gets difficult (Snow 2015). *An Officer and a Spy*'s average reading grade level of 7 sits at the desired grade for fiction novels (Dubay 2004; Blatt 2017, p. 110).
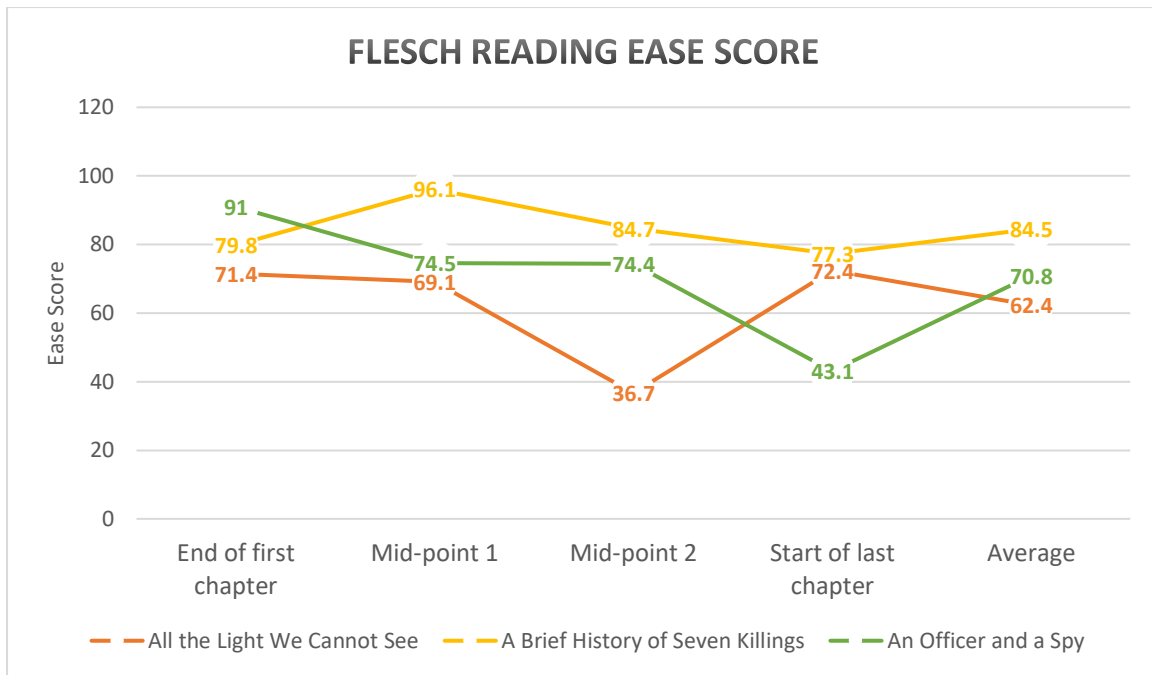
Figure 5.1: Comparison of Flesch Reading Ease Scores
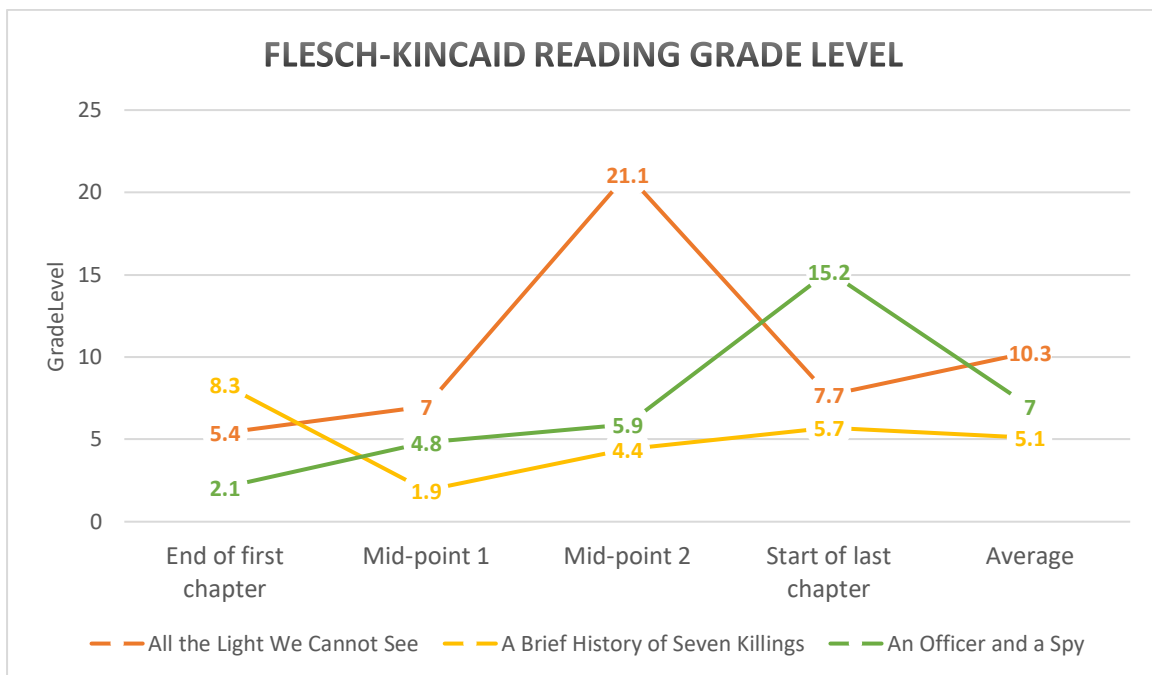
Figure 5.2: Comparison of Flesch-Kincaid Reading Grade Levels

Goodreads ratings

While all three novels were generally received well and were fairly similar in the Goodreads ratings (Figure 6.1), there are some notable differences.

By analysing Figure 6.1, it can be seen that Doerr's novel's ratings from 5 to 3-stars are almost straight. The best received novel of the three, *All the Light We Cannot See,* has the least 4 to 1-star reviews, suggesting that the least amount of people had serious issues with the novel.

A Brief History of Seven Killings' 4-star ratings are higher than that of its 5-star ratings, most likely because of its different sentence structure. Readers not familiar with the Jamaican patois dialect may have experienced some difficulty when reading the novel (Martis 2016). James' novel also has the highest 3 to 1-star ratings, suggesting there were more readers who experienced issues with the novel than readers of Doerr's and Harris' novels.

Harris' novel also experiences higher 4-star ratings than 5-star ratings. This could be the fault of its content, the coverage of the Dreyfus affair, rather than the language used throughout the novel, which we know to be at a grade level of 7 (Figure 5.2). *An Officer and a Spy* and *All the Light We Cannot See* have the same percentages for the 2 and 1-star ratings, an indication that although readers may have had small issues with each novel, they were not big enough issues to warrant lower ratings.
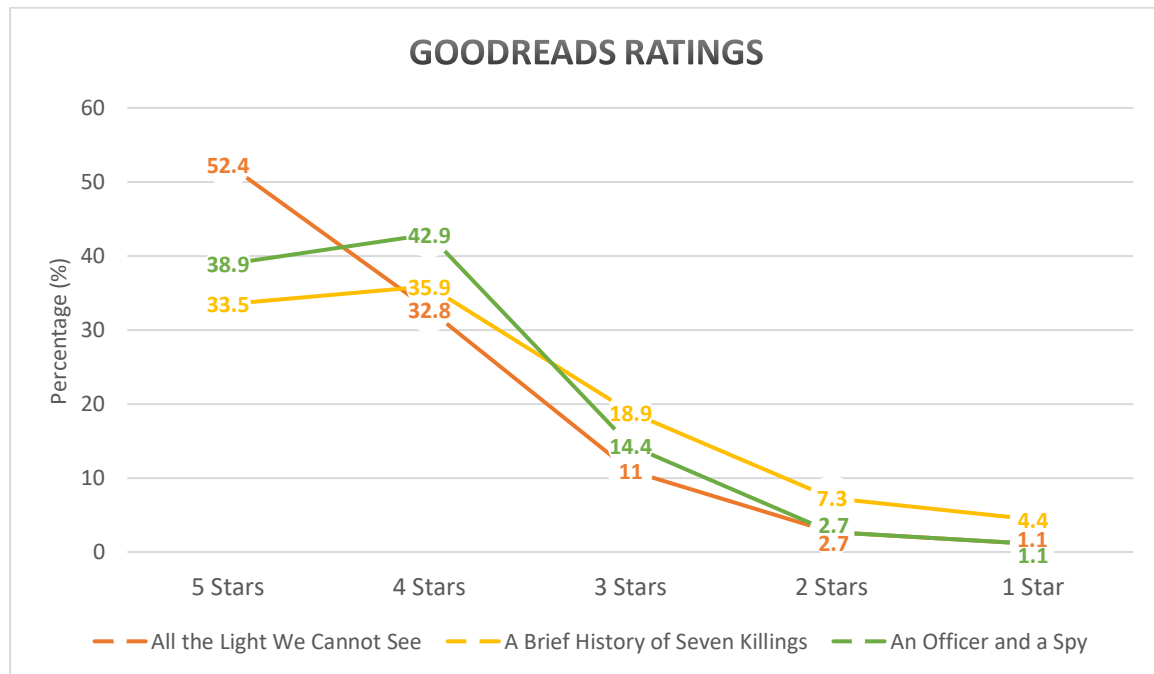
Figure 6.1: Award-winning Goodreads ratings

Online reader reviews

Both Amazon and Goodreads sites were used to collate the reader reviews. Because there were no reviews found using the key terms 'hard', 'voice', 'light', 'clear', or 'simple' in regard to language, they have been removed from Figures 7.1 and 7.2. These two Figures are displaying the reviews for the three novels from Amazon and Goodreads respectively. Replicating the analysis used for the bestselling novels, the 20-review limit was split evenly between the Amazon and Goodreads websites as much as possible. Because Goodreads is the primary site for book reviews (Plaster 2012), it was used to fill up the empty spaces where Amazon fell short in regard to reviews that discussed the language of the novels.

Doerr's Pulitzer Prize winning *All the Light We Cannot See* was received well, particularly in terms of the novel's prose. A small amount of the Goodreads reviewers found the language too dense and the prose 'bloated', indicating that some readers may have struggled with the 10th grade level reading average. In contrast, it may also be interesting to note that one Amazon reviewer found the text 'easy to follow'.

In contrast to Doerr's overwhelmingly positive reviews, *A Brief History of Seven Killings* was the only novel out of the three award-winners to receive complaints of 'difficulty'. This struggle to read the novel was likely due, in part, to James' heavy use of the Jamaican patois. While this dialect of the English language (Martis 2016) consists of broken English, with its shorter words, resulting in lower reading levels (Flesch 1948, p. 228), the heavy use of patois made some readers struggle to understand the content and get through the novel. This confirms, once again, that readability formulas are not able to accurately measure understandability (Heydari 2012, p. 426). James' novel did receive a high score for reviews praising the 'writing' in the novel. This could be due to the increased amount of Goodreads reviewers in comparison to Amazon reviewers, making the chances for Goodreads reviewers to be familiar with Jamaican patois more likely (Kaufman 2013).

Out of the three award-winning novels, Harris' *An Officer and a Spy* received the fewest negative reviews with only one, which complained about the density of the novel. This is an interesting point, especially considering that Doerr's Pulitzer Prize winning novel received three negative reviews. *An Officer and a Spy* received numerous positive reviews from both websites complimenting the quality of the writing. This is consistent with an average reading

grade level of 7 enabling the novel to be accessible to a wide range of readers, increasing the ability of the novel to sell more copies (Snow 2015). The novel's ease of reading and Harris' straightforward language clearly resonated with the reviewers.
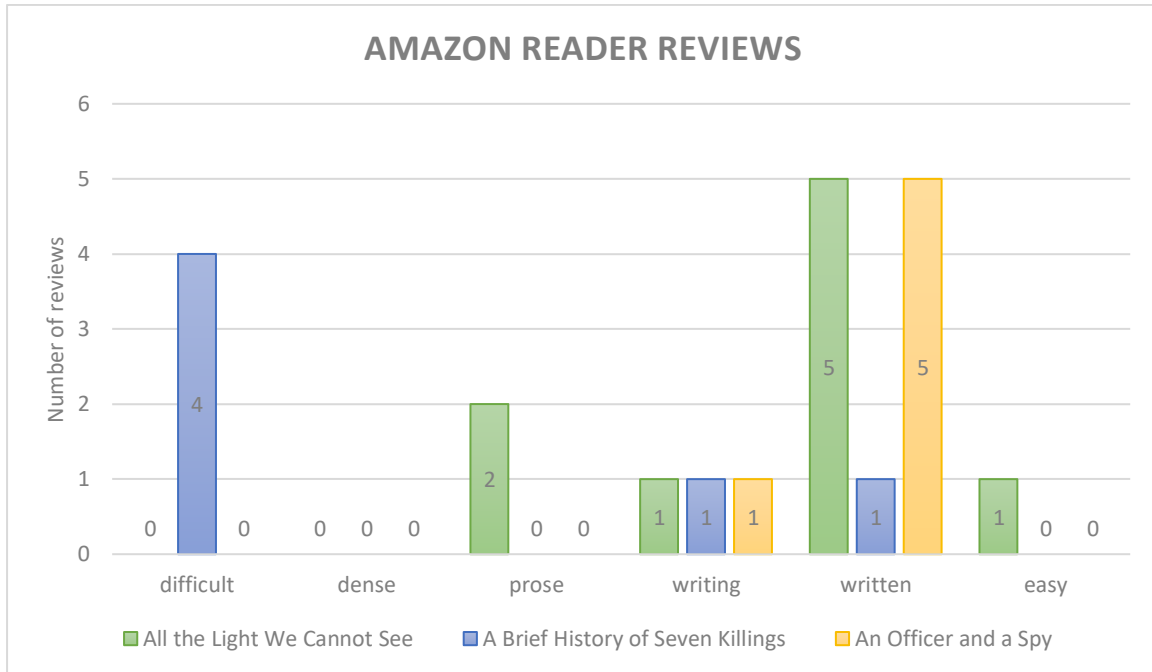
Figure 7.1: Amazon online reader reviews*
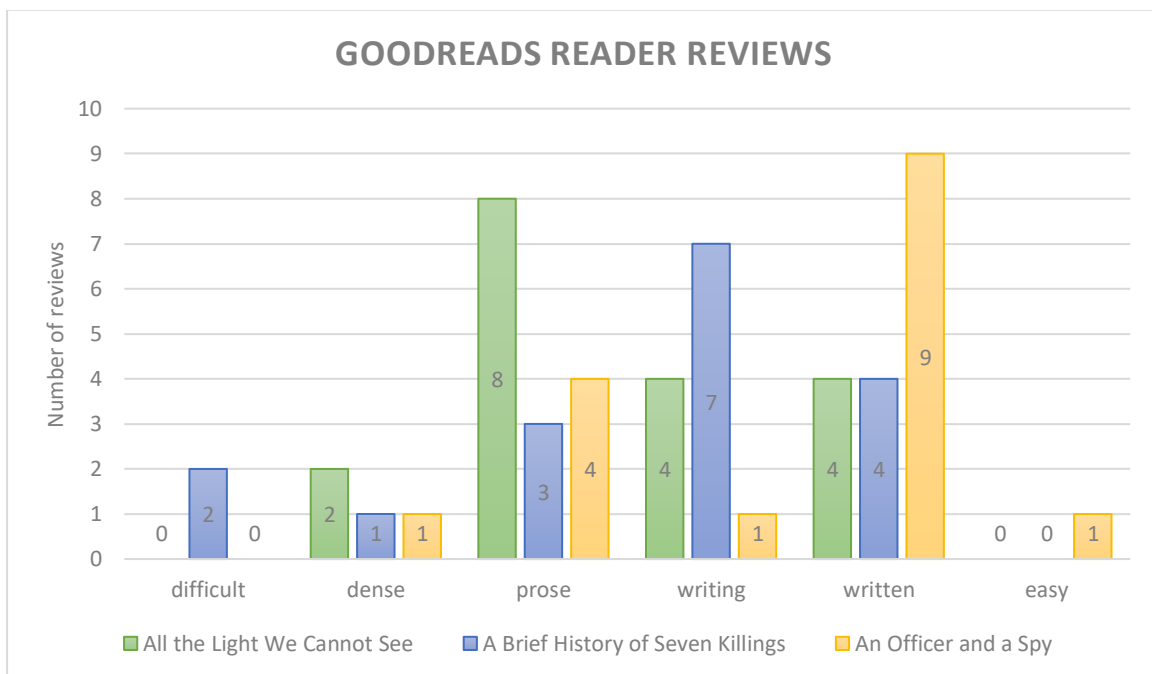
Figure 7.2: Goodreads online reader reviews*

* While 20 reviews per novel were analysed, there were some instances of a single review containing multiple terms. This accounts for the elevated number of reviews for all three prize-winning novels.

Social media

Each of the three award-winning novels received varied results in their social media activity. For much the same reasons as the bestselling novels, Facebook (Figure 8.2) has significantly more activity than Twitter (Figure 8.1). This is due to the design of each social media platform and their use by marketing managers to advertise novels (Bennett 2011). All three novels were published in the early to mid 2010s and therefore were published at the height of the social media age. All posts were taken from each of the novels' imprint publisher, the main publisher, the author, and the account for each of their main awards.

With its Pulitzer Prize win, Doerr's novel is popular across both social media platforms. Both the imprint and the publishing house fared relatively well on Twitter and had quite similar results on Facebook (see Appendix B, Figures 8.1a and 8.2a). Doerr's Twitter account is used for personal posts and not promoting his work, but his Facebook account received the most activity out of the four accounts analysed. While this could be, in part, due to his status as a Pulitzer Prize winning author, his presence on Facebook would also increase activity (Patel 2016).

Compared between the two platforms, the amount of Facebook activity for James' novel outshone the amount on Twitter, as can be seen in Figures 8.1 and 8.2, yet, between the three books, *A Brief History of Seven Killings* was outdone by Doerr's novel. However, James' strong social media presence allowed him to enjoy the highest amount of activity on Twitter. The Man Booker Prize account received strong numbers of retweets, shares, likes and reactions for both platforms, in comparison to the imprint and publishing house which fell significantly short in Twitter activity and was only marginally better on Facebook (see Appendix B, Figures 8.1b and 8.2b). With the lowest average reading grade level of 5.1 allowing the novel to theoretically reach the most amount of readers (Lea 2015), reactions to *A Brief History of Seven Killings* should then be the highest across the three novels. While that might be partly true, as displayed in Figure 8.1, unfortunately that is not what we see in Figure 8.2. This is most likely due to the strong usage of Jamaican patois, which we know, from Figure 7.1, alienated some readers.

The limited amount of social media activity across both platforms for *An Officer and a Spy* could be in part due to Harris' choice of content. Covering the Dreyfus Affair of late 18th

century France, the topic may be a little further away from the collective memory than what is experienced when reading Doerr (set during the Second World War) and James (set between 1976 and 1991). Figures 8.1c and 8.2c, in Appendix B, show that between the imprint, the publisher, and the Walter Scott Prize accounts, Harris' personal accounts were by far the least active across both platforms. This lack of marketing via social media could partly explain the novel's lack of popularity amongst the reading public (Peters 2017), especially when the averaged reading grade level is sitting in the 'sweet spot' at 7 (Austin 2011). As seen in the Figures below, out of all three of the award-winning novels, *An Officer and a Spy* receives significantly less activity across both social media platforms. The novel even received the fewest total reviews on Goodreads (Appendix B, Table 5.3).
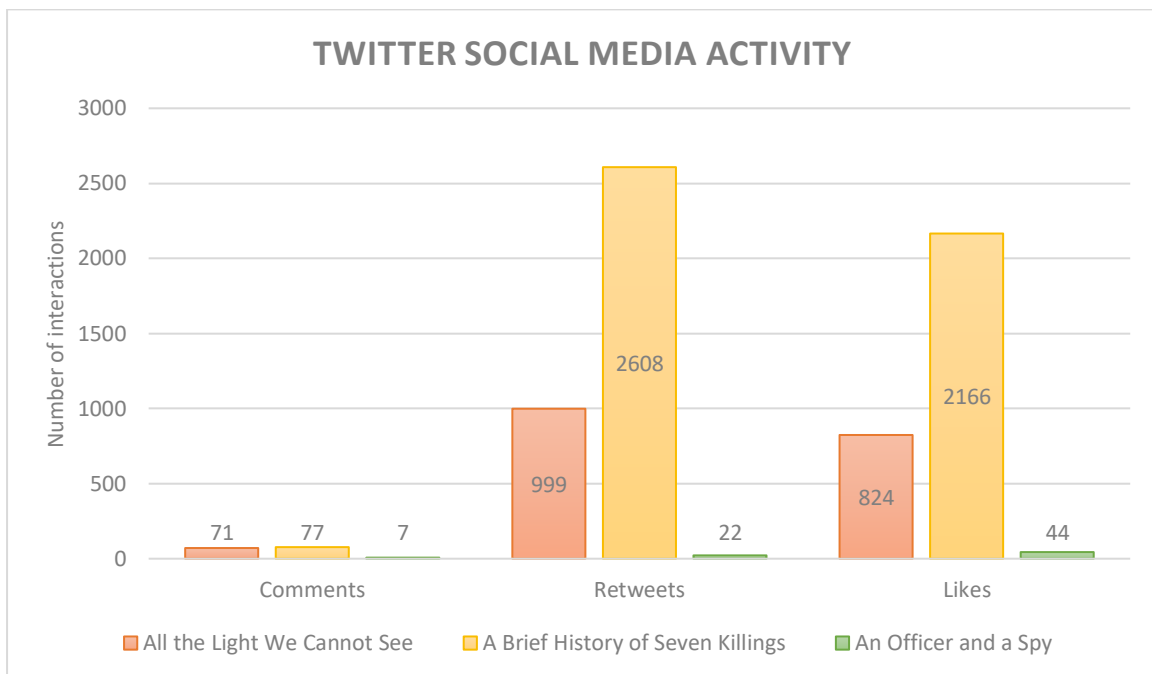
Figure 8.1: Twitter social media activity
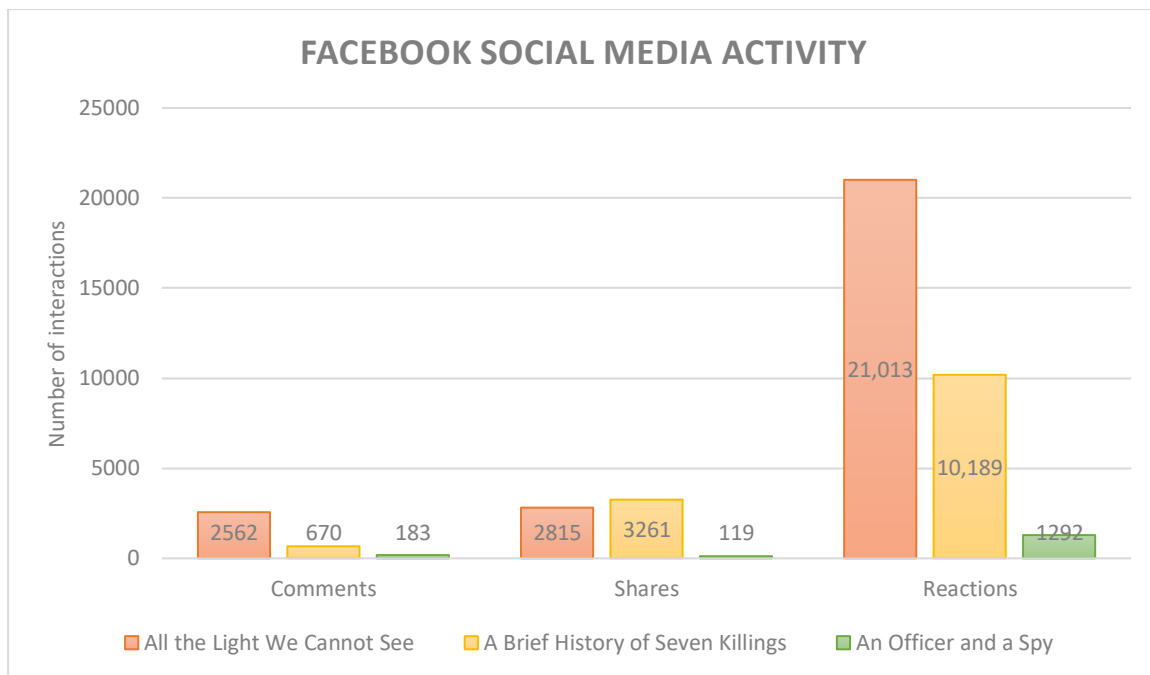
Figure 8.2: Facebook social media activity

Summary

The three award-winning novels chosen for this dissertation all display slightly different readability levels. Goodreads ratings, online reader reviews, and activity on social media platforms.

By having been awarded prestigious writing awards, it is generally expected that these novels have a higher readability level than their bestselling counterparts (Leith 2018). In Figure 5.2, we see this to be true only for *All the Light We Cannot See*, which has an elevated average reading grade level of 10.3. *An Officer and a Spy* has the expected average reading grade level for a commercially successful book at 7 (Snow 2015). While *A Brief History of Seven Killings* has a slightly lower average reading grade level, which according to Dubay (2004, p. 22) and Flesch (1948, p. 230) is classified as 'very easy' at grade 5. The only novel that supports the theory that more complex literary writing results in awards, is Doerr with his Pulitzer Prize win. In contrast, the novels written by James and Harris are pitched at a level of understanding that is less than what some readers may want in an award-winning novel (Winterson 2011). This could be an indication of the limitation of quality literature being written (Lapointe 2016) as was briefly discussed in Chapter 1.

The three novels have similar Goodreads ratings (Figure 6.1), with the exception of *All the Light We Cannot See*, whose 5-star ratings outshone both *A Brief History of Seven Killings* and *An Officer and a Spy*. While Harris' and Doerr's novels have almost identical 1 and 2-star ratings, it was James' novel that experienced the highest of the 1 star 'did not like it' rating – a clear indication that a great many reviewers were not fans of the heavy use of Jamaican patois. Whilst most of the reviews centred on the author's writing, many reviewers also commented on each of the novels' prose, which is something to be expected from literary works of fiction. James' was the only novel to receive reviews mentioning the difficulty of the writing (Figures 7.1 and 7.2), despite his low average reading grade level (Figure 5.2).

The amount of social media activity was not only significantly different between the three novels, but also between the platforms themselves. Twitter displays a dismal amount of comments, with *A Brief History of Seven Killings* easily surpassing the other two novels in terms of retweets and likes (see Figure 8.1). The amount of activity on Facebook tells an almost entirely different story (Figure 8.2). While *An Officer and a Spy* has extremely low amounts of activity, the Pulitzer Prize winner, *All the Light We Cannot See*, surpasses the Man Booker Prize novel, *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, in both comments and reactions, while the two are relatively close in terms of the number of shares they both receive. It is James' social media presence that accounts for the high amount of Twitter activity, and it is most likely Doerr's reputation as a Pulitzer Prize winning author that garnered him over 20,000 Facebook reactions. The analysis of all three award-winning novels produced results that largely confirmed the original hypothesis. Award-winning books generally have a higher reading grade level than what is usual, as was seen with the Pulitzer Prize winning *All the Light We Cannot See*. However, James' and Harris' novels *A Brief History of Seven Killings* which won the Man Booker Prize and *An Officer and a Spy* which won the Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction, both prestigious writing awards, showed surprising results with lower than average reading grade levels, especially for award-winning novels.

Chapter 5: Discussion and conclusion

Discussion – comparison of bestsellers and award-winners

Throughout Chapters 3 and 4, six historical fiction novels were analysed in order to determine if their levels of readability affected their potential saleability. Results varied in the four analysis areas of: readability, Goodreads ratings, online reader reviews, and social media activity. It is within these four areas that we discuss the results of the analysis and conclude if there is any correlation between audience reception and readability.

Readability

By comparing Figures 1.2 and 5.2, it is easy to see that the three bestsellers have similar average reading grade levels, whereas between the three award-winners there is quite a large range, from grade 5.1 to 10.3. A possible reason for the wide range of reading levels in the award-winners could be the expected literary nature of the novels, where literary fiction is ill-defined and 'literary writing can and does compass and mingle with any number of other genres' (Leith 2018). It is interesting to note that the Man Booker and Walter Scott prizes have, in these instances, been awarded to novels with lower reading levels (Figure 5.2) (Winterson 2011). Are we starting to see the limitations in the quality of recognised literature in order to promote novels with lower reading levels (Winterson 2011; Roth 2017)? It is most likely that several other factors were considered by the judges and it is these factors that determined the winners (Ferguson 2017; Harvey 1953).

Each of the six novels show different patterns of reading levels (Figures 1.1, 1.2, 5.1 and 5.2). The assumption that each novel starts off easy to read, and gets harder the further the reader ventures into the story (Fry 1977b, p. 217) is not represented in the chosen novels. Gabaldon was the only exception to this, where *A Breath of Snow and Ashes* was the only novel analysed that did have a steadily increasing reading level. It would appear that the reading level did not affect the number of weeks each novel spent on the Publishers Weekly bestseller lists (Maryles 2005, 2008; Donahue 2009, 2010). All three bestselling books returned a very similar average reading level (Figures 1.1 and 1.2) despite their varied lengths of time spent on the bestseller lists.

Similarly, assumptions can be made about the average reading levels of each award-winning novel and the award they won. However, it is important to note that there are far too few novels analysed in this dissertation to be able to make a concrete correlation between reading levels and being awarded a specific writing prize. What can be said, however, is that reading level is not necessarily higher in award-winning literary fiction than in genre fiction such as historical romance.

Goodreads ratings

All six novels generally showed similar results in regard to their Goodreads ratings percentages (Figures 2.1 and 6.1). *A Breath of Snow and Ashes* fared the best with the highest percentage of 5-star ratings at 58%. Gregory, James and Harris' novels all have a higher percentage of 4-star ratings than 5-star. While this difference is relatively small, *An Officer and a Spy* has the largest gap at a difference of 4%, *The Other Boleyn Girl* and *A Brief History of Seven Killings* have only a difference of 2%. This, however, appears to have not affected the reading levels as all three novels with higher 4-star ratings have similar reading levels to those that received higher 5-star ratings, especially within the bestsellers (Figure 2.1).

There does not appear to be any correlation between the percentage of ratings received on Goodreads and reading level. Despite having the highest average reading level at grade 10.3, and therefore requiring the highest grade of education to read and grasp the content of the novel (Stockmeyer 2009, p.46; Linney 2017), *All the Light We Cannot See* received the second highest 5-star rating of the six novels at 52% (Figure 6.1). With the lowest average reading grade level of 5.1, *A Brief History of Seven Killings* did receive the lowest 5-star percentage rating at 33%, and even though the novel received more 4-star ratings at 35% this was the lowest 4-star percentage rating when compared to *An Officer and a Spy* and *The Other Boleyn Girl* whose top rating was also 4-stars. There is the strong possibility that despite both the Flesch Reading Ease and the Flesch-Kincaid Reading Grade Level formulas resulting in James' novel being the easiest to read, the heavy use of the Jamaican patois writing style may have meant that readers not familiar with the dialect struggled to advance through the novel, as some reviewers mentioned in their online reader reviews.

Online reader reviews

By reviewing the reader review graphs for Amazon (Figures 3.1 and 7.1) and Goodreads (Figures 3.2 and 7.2) it is easy to see the differing reception of each novel. *A Brief History of Seven Killings* experienced the highest amount of 'difficult' reviews, most likely due to the use of Jamaican patois despite having the lowest reading level out of the six novels. This confirms that reading level is only to act as a guide as to the grade needed to read the novel, but it does fall short when measuring understandability of the context of a text (Stockmeyer 2009, p. 47; Wright 2016; James 2016). Whilst reading level is an informative tool within several areas (Eunson 2012 & 2016), like everything else, it does have its limitations (Heydari 2012, p. 426). Out of the 20 reader reviews chosen for each of the six novels, it was only the award-winners that received reviews mentioning the 'density' of the novel (Figure 7.2). This could be a reflection of the kind of reader that is reading the award-winning literary novels. But it is interesting that all three were criticised by at least one reviewer for their density when their reading levels are so varied. This suggests that perhaps, despite the reading level, literary fiction does require a higher level of reading in order to comprehend the text. While James and Harris' novels only received one negative review mentioning 'density', Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* received two. Even though there is a large variation in reading levels between the three novels, the gap between *A Brief History of Seven Killings* and *All the Light We Cannot See* is a large five grade difference. This indicates that while all three novels are slightly harder to read than their bestselling counterparts, reading level formulas do have issues in measuring the context or coherence of a story (Heydari 2012, p. 426).

A seen in Figure 3.2, *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* was the only novel of the six to be referred to as 'simple', and *A Breath of Snow and Ashes* the only novel to be referred to as 'hard', although this reviewer could have confused the language of the writing with the difficulty of getting through a sizeable novel. It is interesting to see the polarising issues readers had with these novels as both had very similar average reading grade levels at 7.3 and 6.2 respectively. It should also be pointed out that Gabaldon's novel was described as 'hard', when its reading grade level is a grade lower than Shaffer & Barrows' novel that was described as 'simple'. This proves once again that readability is only one aspect of what makes a bestselling novel (Archer & Jockers 2016).

Despite having the lowest reading grade level of the three bestselling novels, *A Breath of Snow and Ashes* was not reviewed as 'easy', 'light' or 'simple', where both *The Other Boleyn Girl* and *Guernsey* were, even with their slightly higher reading levels. This is possibly due to other factors such as the size of Gabaldon's novel in comparison to the relative thinness of Gregory and Shaffer & Barrows' novels, rather than perhaps a distinction in the readability of their writing. By taking contextual issues of each novel into account, a correlation can be found between reading levels and online reader reviews.

Social media

When compared with the number of comments, retweets and shares that any of the six books received, it is evident that likes and reactions were by far the most popular with social media users. This comparison can be seen when analysing Figures 4.1 and 4.2 for the bestselling novels, and Figures 8.1 and 8.2 for the award-winning novels. The only exception to this preference for likes and reactions was the number of retweets received by *All the Light We Cannot See* and *A Brief History of Seven Killings,* which was slightly higher than the number of likes and reactions.

For all six novels, Facebook produced the highest amount of activity (Figure 4.2 and 8.2). This is due to the increased number of Facebook users at 2.38 billion (Statista 2019b), as opposed to 330 million (Statista 2019c) Twitter users. Both platforms are also used differently as marketing platforms. Being highly popular with users, Facebook is more established as an advertising platform, while Twitter has fewer advertisements and is centred on the creation of original content (Bosari 2012), Facebook has also evolved into sharing content rather than creating content (Kastrenakes 2016). It is suspected that social media users would post their personal thoughts on a novel on Twitter more often than they would on Facebook (Bennet 2011). Unfortunately this is not within the scope of this dissertation and therefore no data has been collected to support or disprove this.

Out of the six novels analysed, *A Brief History of Seven Killings* received the highest number of retweets when compared across all testing points on Twitter (Figure 8.1). *A Breath of Snow and Ashes* received the highest amount of reactions on Facebook (Figure 4.2). At 78,698 reactions (as of the time of writing), Gabaldon's novel holds the highest number of social media activity across both platforms. This is most likely because of her strong fan base following.

Even though Gregory and Harris both have strong fan bases that surround their novels as well, explanations can be made for why their social media followers are not as active as Gabaldon's. While it is number nine in the series, *The Other Boleyn Girl* was the first novel Gregory wrote in her Tudor saga. Coupled with the fact that the novel was first published in 2001, several years before the birth of social media (van Dijck 2013), being the first of a series meant that *The Other Boleyn Girl* did not experience the buzz Gregory's current fan base creates around the release of her new novels. These two issues provide a plausible explanation as to why despite being a popular novel currently, *The Other Boleyn Girl* falls short in social media activity. Harris has a similar issue with his novel, *An Officer and a Spy*. The novel was published in 2013, in the height of the social media age, and Harris was already a popular author with several bestselling novels under his belt. Yet when compared against the other five novels, *An Officer and a Spy* received the least amount of social media activity on both Twitter (Figure 8.1) and Facebook (Figure 8.2). This is most likely because the novel is the least well known of the six, despite having a desirable grade 7 reading level, and being the winner of 'one of the most prestigious literary prizes in the world' (Buccleuch 2018).

Due to these vastly different levels of social media activity, it must be concluded that reading level has little to no effect on the amount of interaction readers have to a novel's marketing or promotional material.

Conclusion

In contrast to the above analysis of the six historical fiction novels, and by using the same method as laid out in the previous chapters, the average reading grade level for this thesis is 16.3. Both Flesch and Flesch-Kincaid's formulas describe a level of education needed to read and understand a text (Stockmeyer 2009, p. 47; Blatt 2017, p. 107). While all three bestsellers only require an education of up to grade 7, and the award-winning novels require a more varied education level of between grades 5 and 10, this thesis requires four years of tertiary study in order to understand the grade 16.3 material (Walwyn 2016).

Through the comparison and analysis of the above three bestselling historical romance and three award-winning historical literary fiction novels, conclusions can be drawn in regard to the effect of reading level on the overall saleability and reception of a novel. While reading

level can provide valuable data about the complexity of a text, it does have to be emphasised that this kind of data does have its limitations. It is clear through the research of others (Archer & Jockers 2016) that there are more than several factors that allow a novel to sell well. While readability is one of them, it does not appear to have as much an impact on the wider reading community as some would have us believe (Dubay 2004, p. 55; Althoff 2016).

The research carried out in this dissertation has shown that readability in novels can potentially impact the readers' reaction and therefore the commercial success of the novel. Even though readability levels in bestsellers generally hit the ideal grade level of between grades 6 and 7, reading levels are not necessarily higher in award-winning literary fiction than in genre fiction such as historical romance. It was also determined that there was no correlation between the percentage of ratings received on Goodreads and reading levels, nor does there appear to be any discernible impact by reading levels on the amount of interaction readers have to a novel's marketing or promotional material. However, when the contextual limitations of the Flesch and Flesch-Kincaid readability formulas are considered, a correlation can be found between reading levels and online reader reviews.

While this dissertation is just the beginning of analysis in this subject area, there are already possible implications for the future of the significance of reading levels in literature. What has been studied in this paper is a small sample of the available literature in this field. It is the hope of the author that this dissertation allows the researchers that follow to build and grow our knowledge of the inner workings of this field, all the while centring on one key question: what makes a bestseller? While some, such as Archer and Jockers (2016) already have a head start with their 'Bestseller Code' algorithm, there is still more research to do and infinitely more books to read.

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Appendix A: Specifics of bestseller fiction analysis

A Breath of Snow and Ashes

Table 4.1: A Breath of Snow and Ashes *Goodreads ratings numbers*

Rating	Number of reviewers	Percentage of reviewers
5 stars	70,530	58.2%
4 stars	36,025	29.7%
3 stars	12,274	10.1%
2 stars	1893	1.6%
1 star	513	0.4%
TOTAL	**121,235**	**100%**
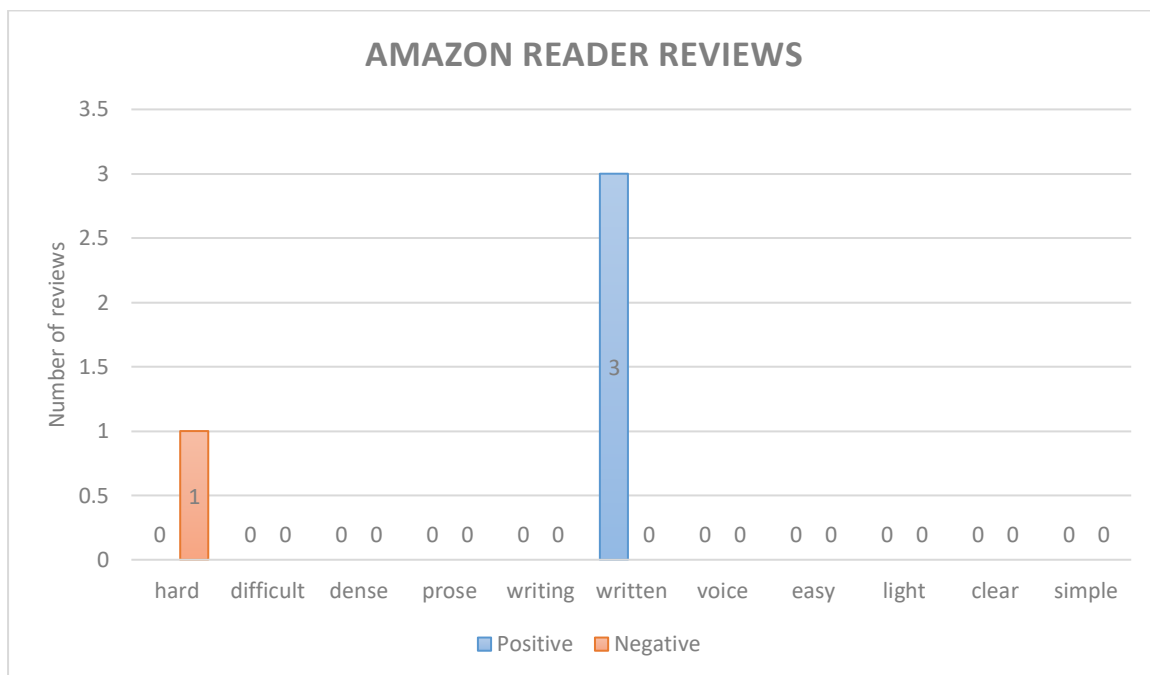
Figure 3.1a: A Breath of Snow and Ashes *types of Amazon reviews*
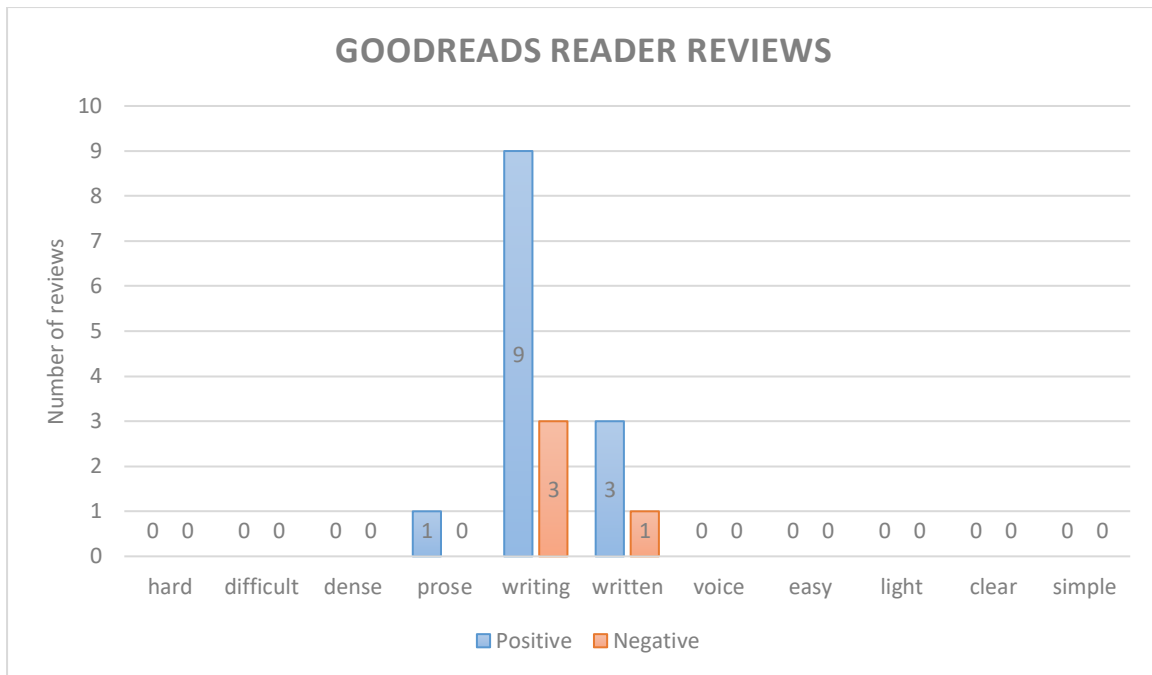
Figure 3.2a: A Breath of Snow and Ashes *types of Goodreads reviews*
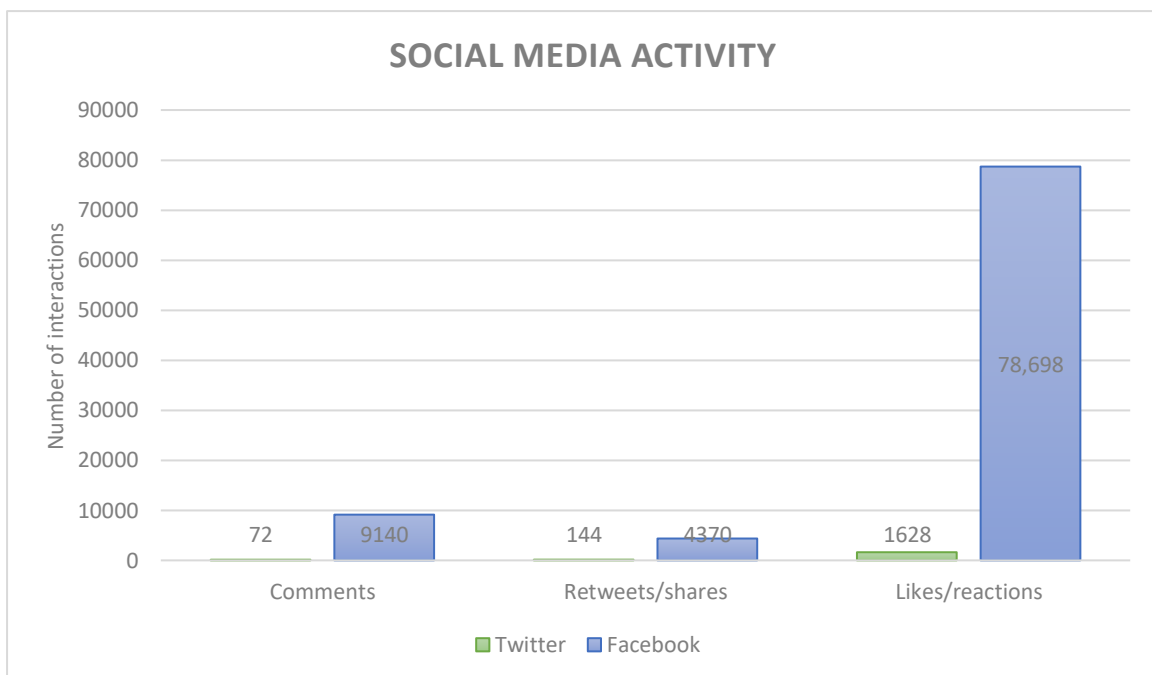
Figure 4.1a: A Breath of Snow and Ashes *social media activity**

* All posts by the author, Diana Gabaldon.

The Other Boleyn Girl

Table 4.2: The Other Boleyn Girl *Goodreads ratings numbers*

Rating	Number of reviewers	Percentage of reviewers
5 stars	157,037	36.8%
4 stars	164,090	38.4%
3 stars	82,664	19.4%
2 stars	17,351	4.1%
1 star	5565	1.3%
TOTAL	**426,707**	**100%**
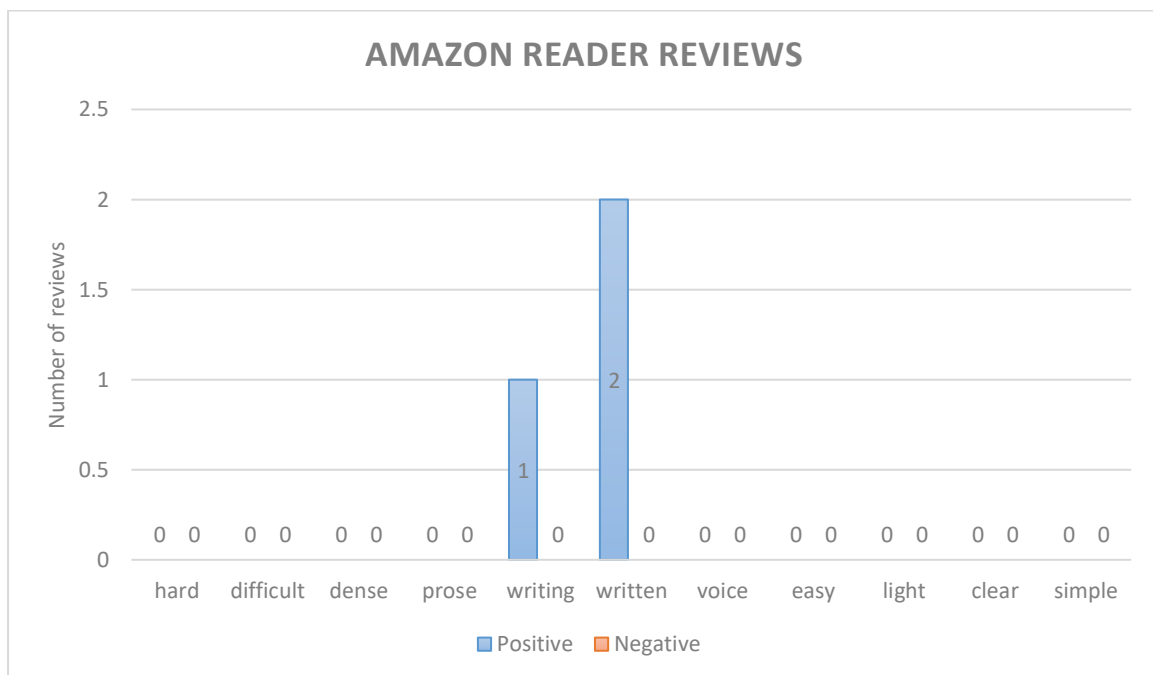
Figure 3.1b: The Other Boleyn Girl *types of Amazon reviews*
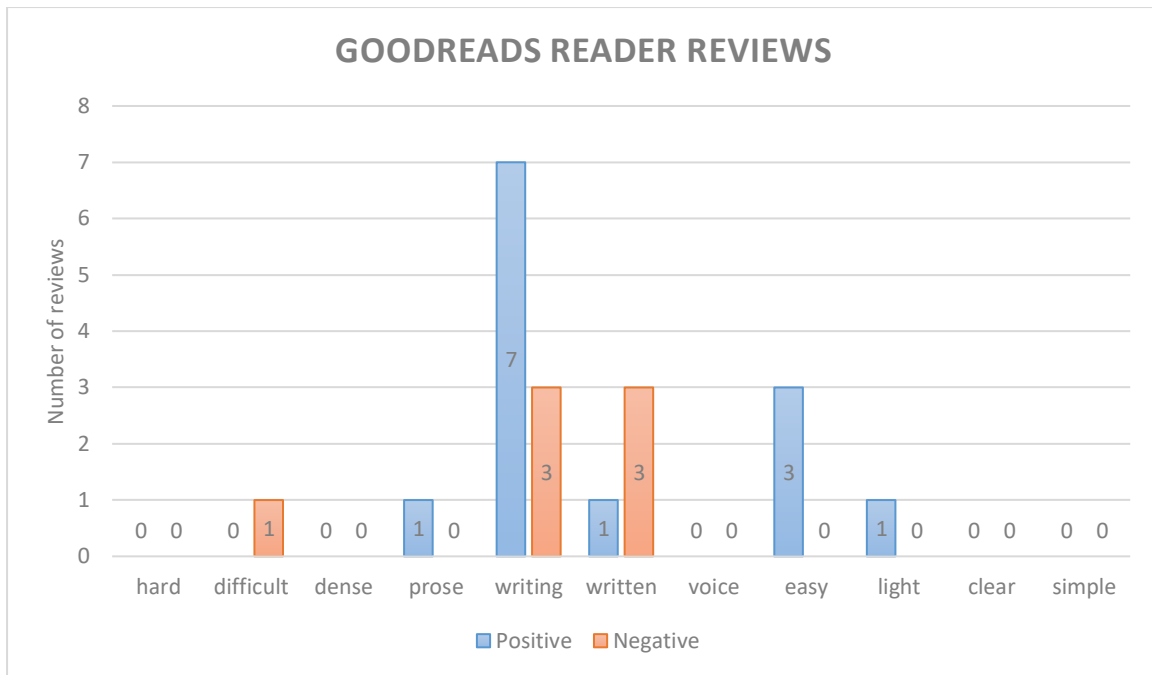
Figure 3.2b: The Other Boleyn Girl *types of Goodreads reviews*
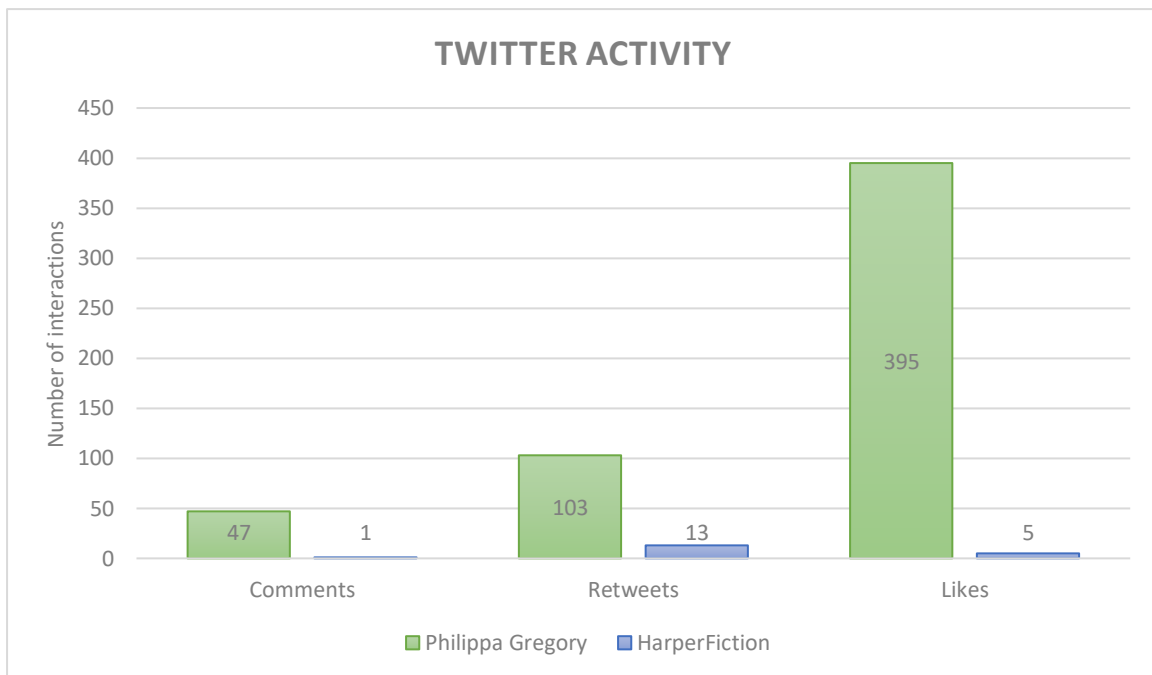
Figure 4.1b: The Other Boleyn Girl *Twitter activity*
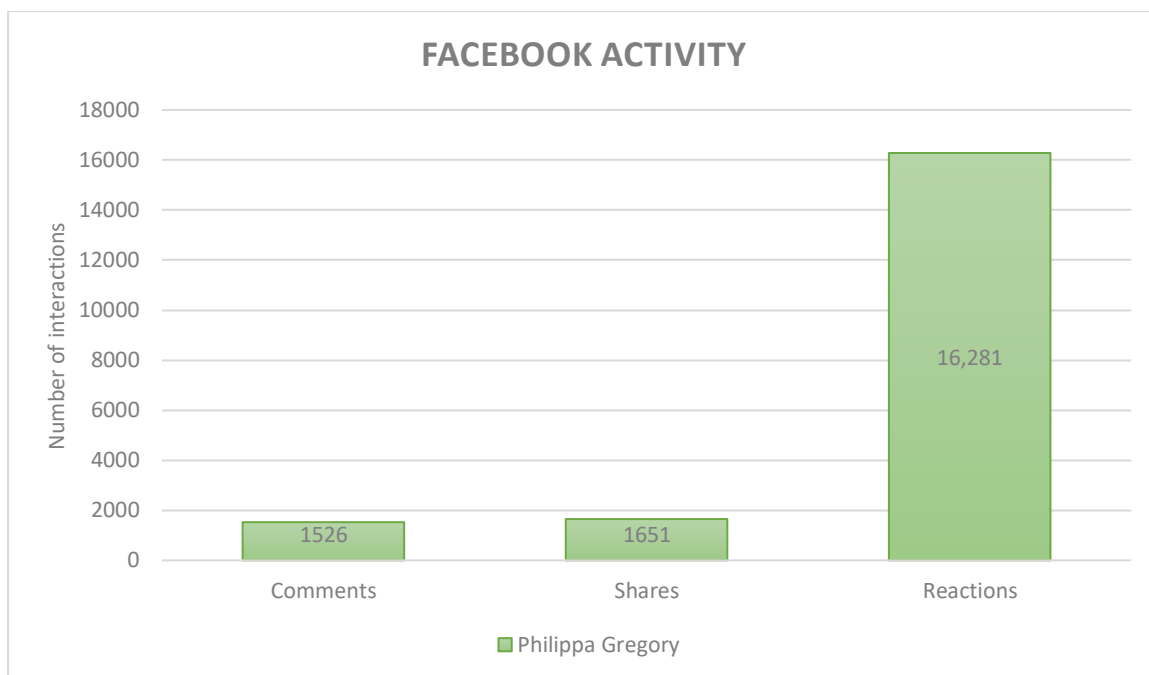
Figure 4.2a: The Other Boleyn Girl *Facebook activity*

The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society

Table 4.3: The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society *Goodreads ratings numbers*

Rating	Number of reviewers	Percentage of reviewers
5 stars	224,299	42.9%
4 stars	189,805	36.3%
3 stars	80,723	15.4%
2 stars	19,719	3.8%
1 star	8227	1.6%
TOTAL	**522,773**	**100%**

Figure 3.1c: The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society *types of Amazon reviews*
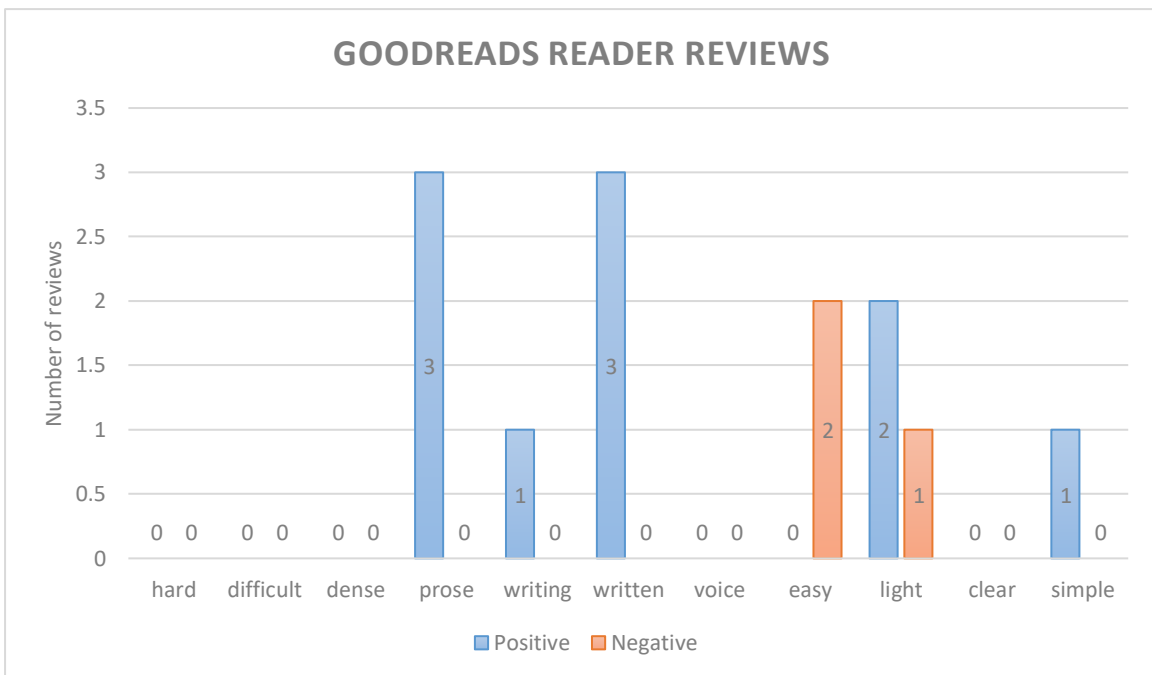
Figure 3.2c: The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society *types of Goodreads reviews*
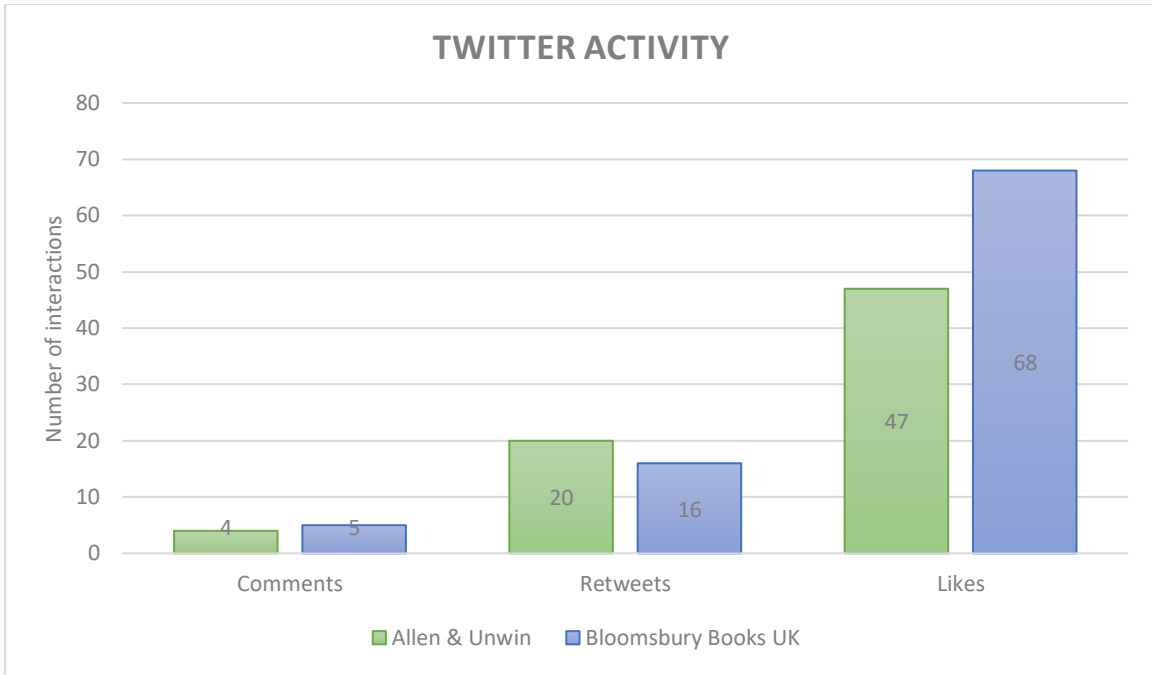
Figure 4.1c: The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society *Twitter activity*
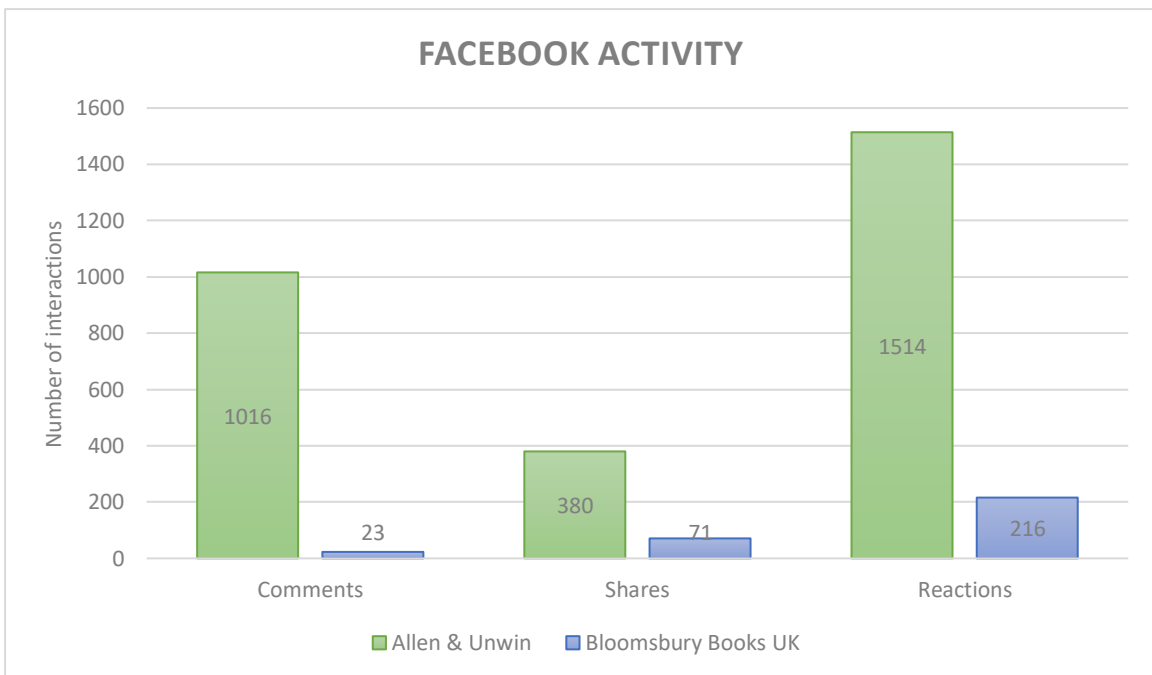
Figure 4.2b: The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society *Facebook activity*

Appendix B: Specifics of award-winning fiction analysis

All the Light We Cannot See

Table 5.1: All the Light We Cannot See *Goodreads ratings numbers*

Rating	Number of reviewers	Percentage of reviewers
5 stars	412,530	52.4%
4 stars	257,885	32.8%
3 stars	86,816	11.0%
2 stars	20,955	2.7%
1 star	8888	1.1%
TOTAL	**787,074**	**100%**
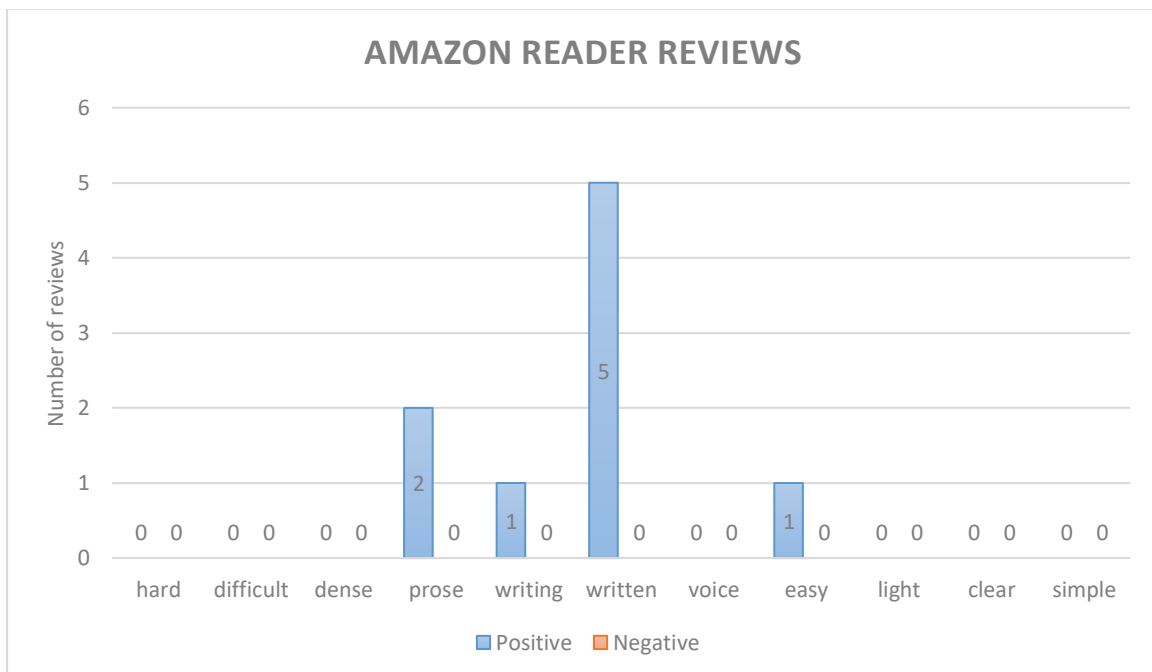
Figure 7.1a: All the Light We Cannot See *types of Amazon reviews*
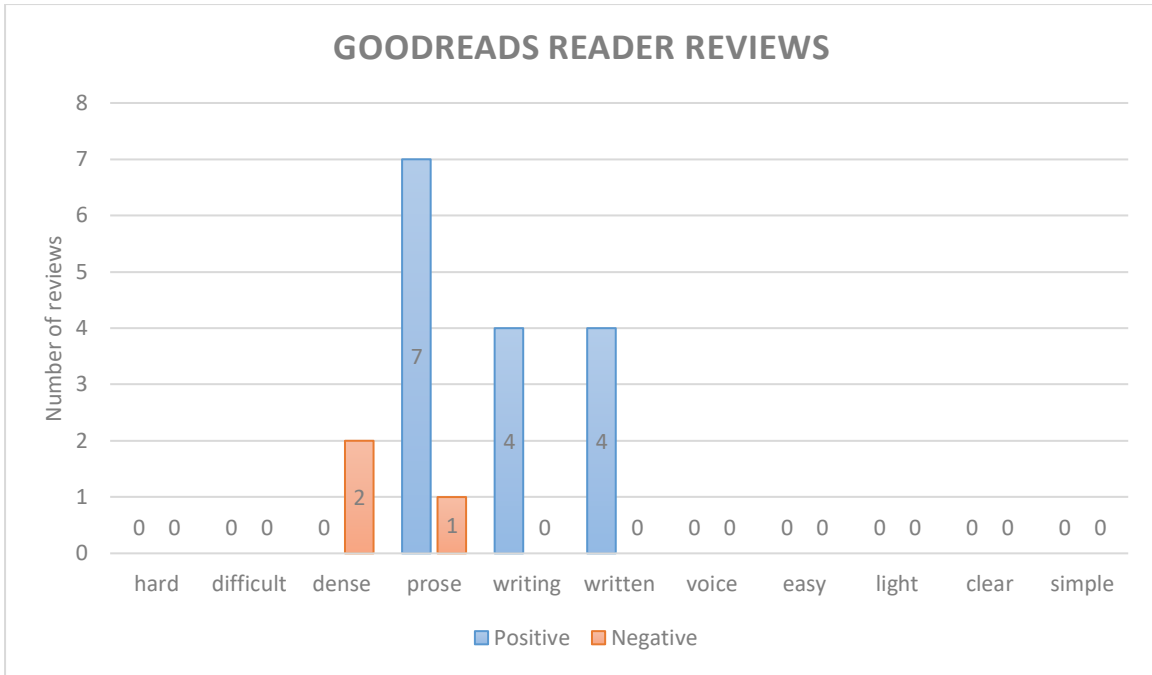
Figure 7.2a: All the Light We Cannot See *types of Goodreads reviews*
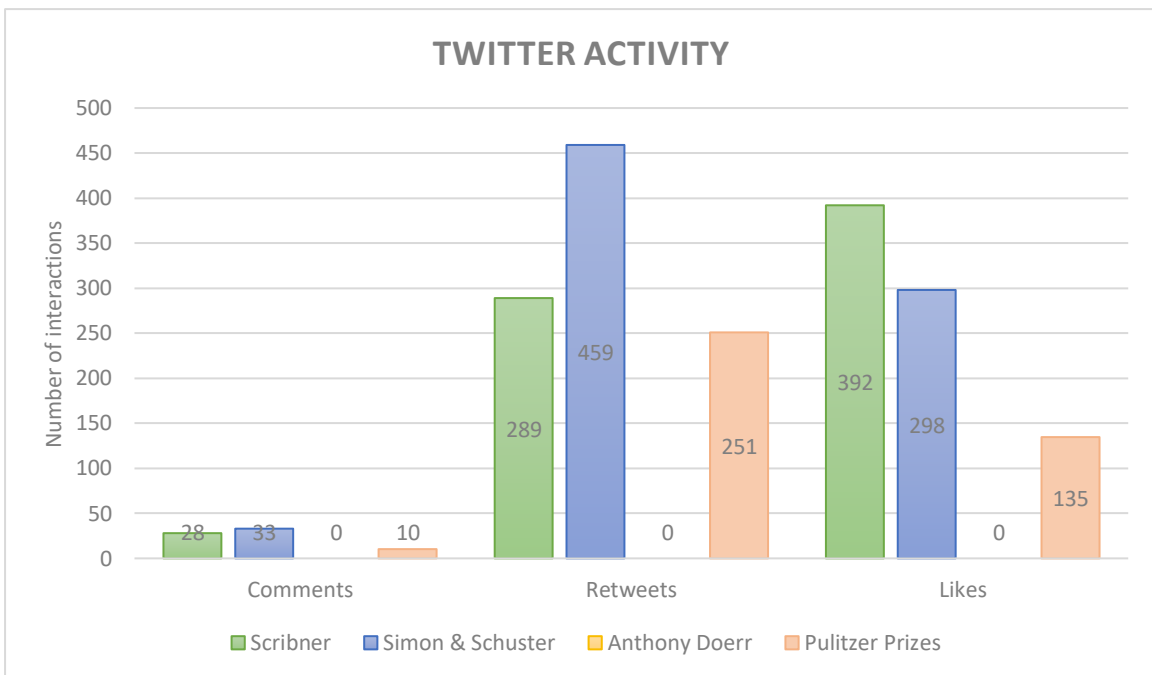
Figure 8.1a: All the Light We Cannot See *Twitter activity*
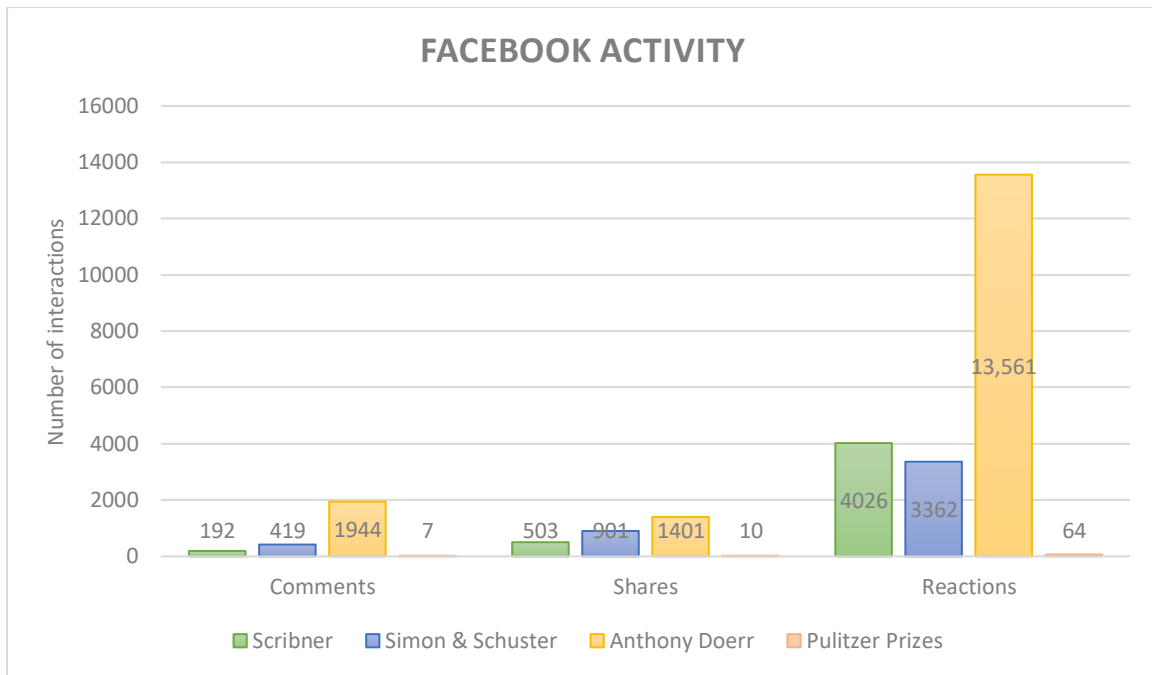
Figure 8.2a: All the Light We Cannot See *Facebook activity*

A Brief History of Seven Killings

Table 5.2: A Brief History of Seven Killings *Goodreads ratings numbers*

Rating	Number of reviewers	Percentage of reviewers
5 stars	7586	33.5%
4 stars	8123	35.9%
3 stars	4293	18.9%
2 stars	1658	7.3%
1 star	987	4.4%
TOTAL	**22,647**	**100%**
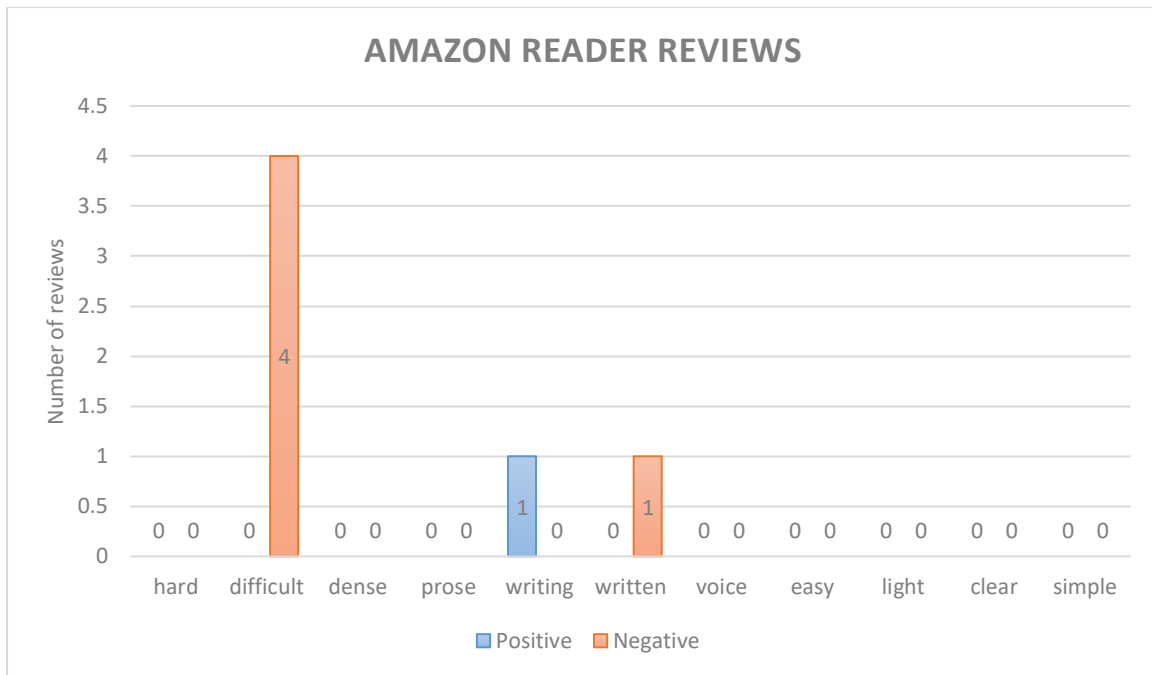
Figure 7.1b: A Brief History of Seven Killings *types of Amazon reviews*
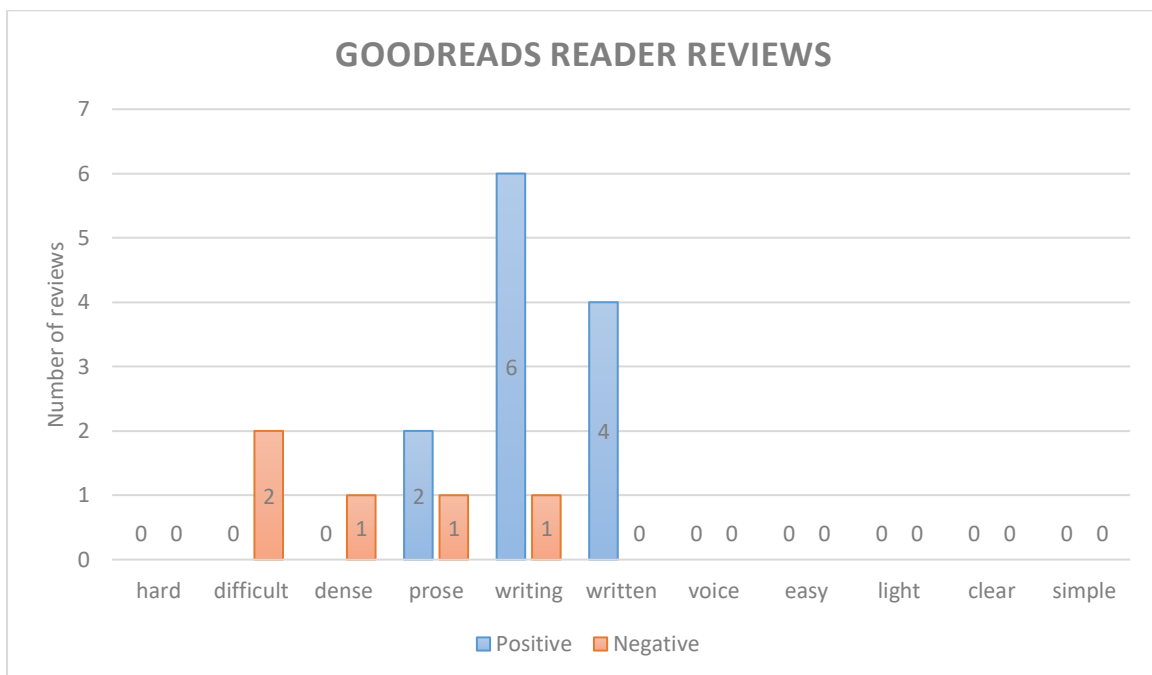
Figure 7.2b: A Brief History of Seven Killings *types of Goodreads reviews*
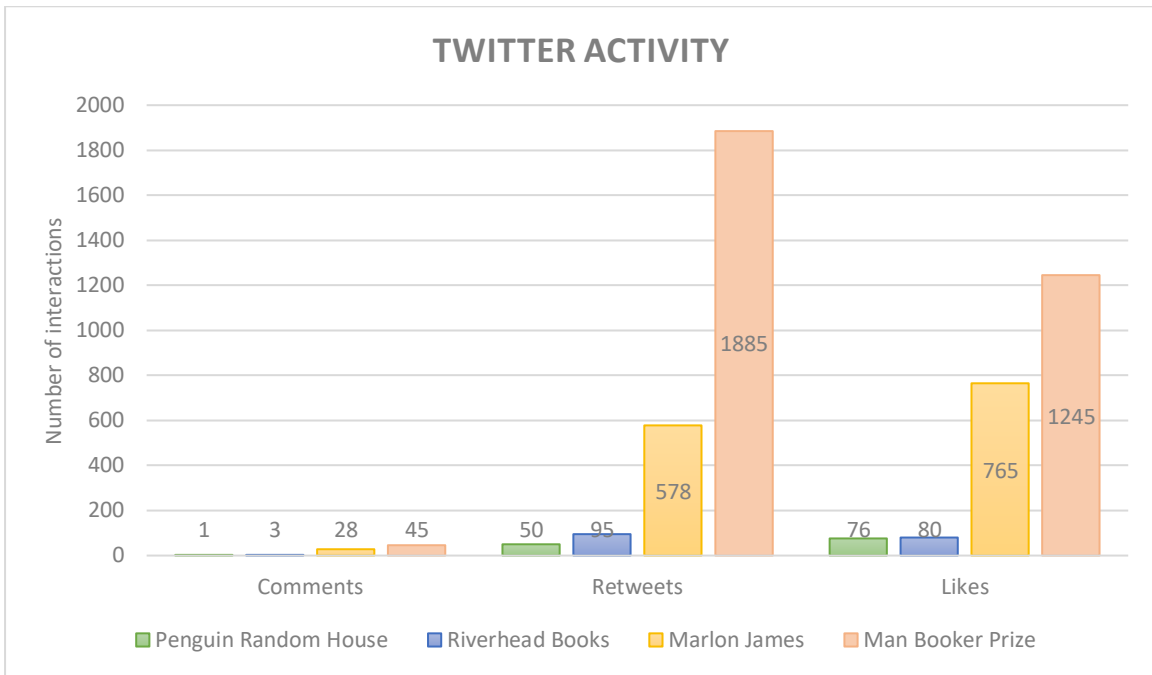
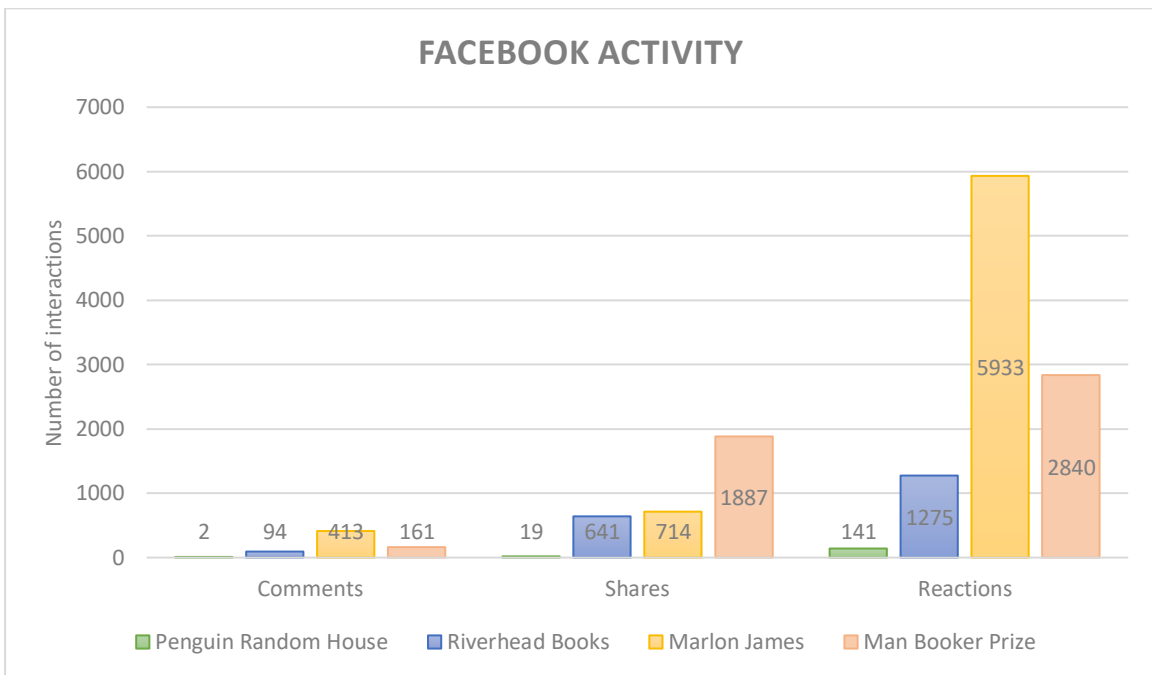*Figure 8.1b:* A Brief History of Seven Killings *Twitter Activity*

Figure 8.2b: A Brief History of Seven Killings *Facebook activity*

An Officer and a Spy

Table 5.3: An Officer and a Spy *Goodreads ratings numbers*

Rating	Number of reviewers	Percentage of reviewers
5 stars	7165	38.9%
4 stars	7898	42.9%
3 stars	2657	14.4%
2 stars	496	2.7%
1 star	202	1.1%
TOTAL	**18,418**	**100%**

Figure 7.1c: An Officer and a Spy *types of Amazon reviews*
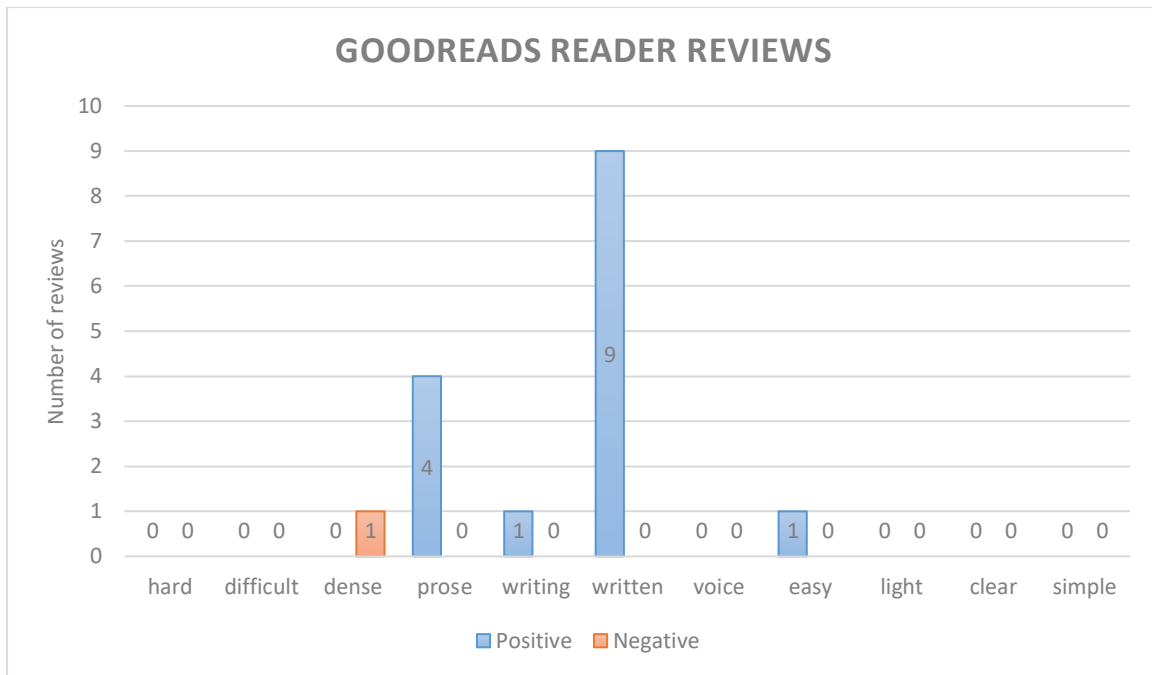
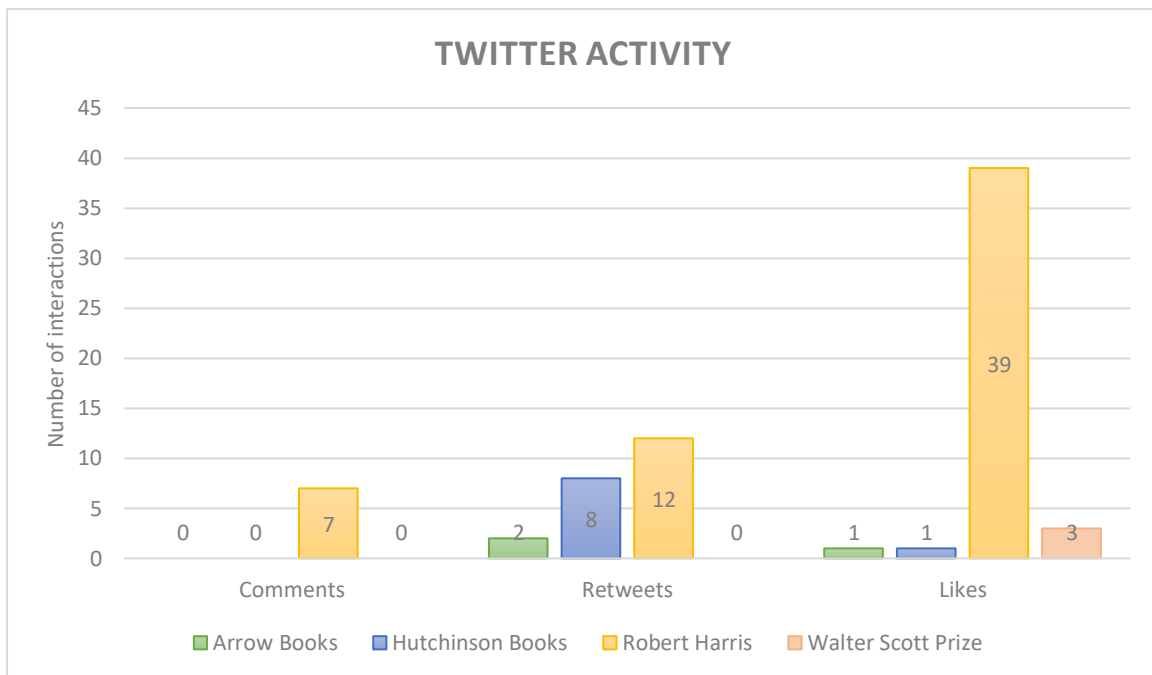*Figure 7.2c:* An Officer and a Spy *types of Goodreads reviews*
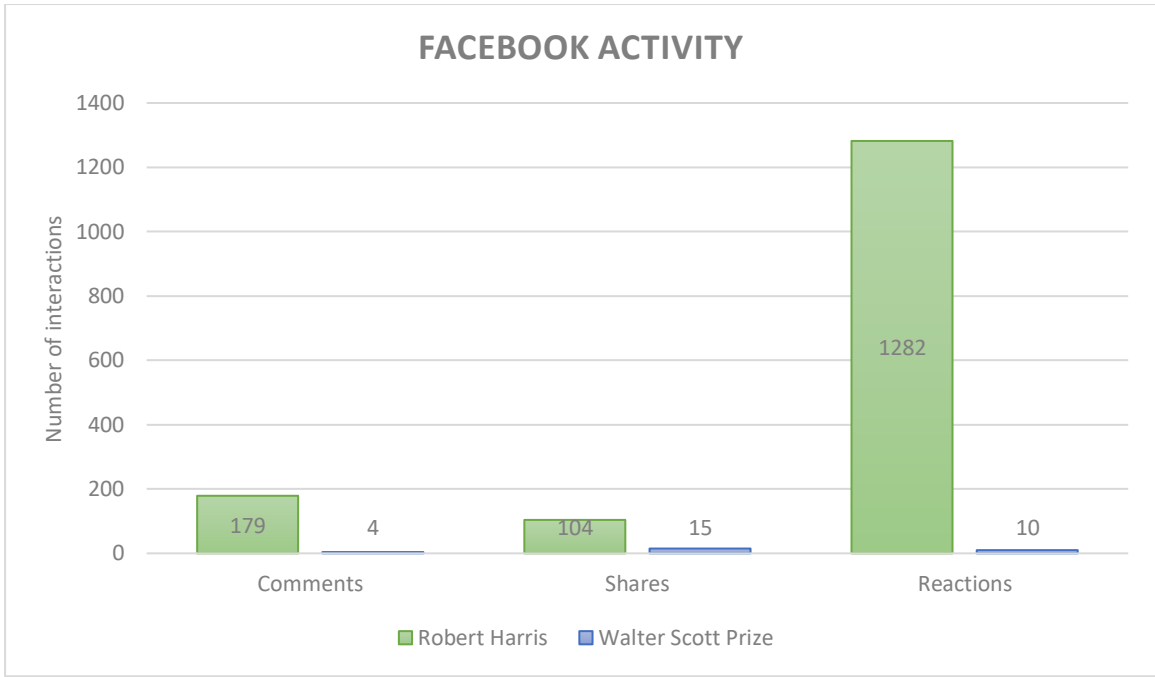

Figure 8.1c: An Officer and a Spy *Twitter activity*

Figure 8.2c: An Officer and a Spy *Facebook activity*