

The Maze Walls of the City: An Analysis of the Bestselling Strategy of Haruki Murakami's Works

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Abstract: This paper provides an in-depth analysis of Haruki Murakami's *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* and its collaborative strategies with the publishing house Shinchosha, exploring the bestselling strategies on a global scale. Through the study of the novel's themes and structure, combined with Shinchosha's market positioning and marketing techniques, this paper reveals how literary works achieve commercial success through "hunger marketing" and other marketing strategies. The analysis shows that, in addition to the fame of Haruki Murakami himself and the publishing house, limited releases, a unique brand image, and a deep emotional connection with readers are key factors driving the bestseller status of Murakami's work. Furthermore, this paper discusses how Shinchosha effectively enhances the international influence of the work through media utilization in an "online + offline" format, successfully maintaining the market competitiveness of traditional printed books in the context of the pandemic and the digital age.

Keywords: Bestselling Strategy, Hunger Marketing, Literary Marketing, Market Positioning.

1. Introduction

In the current global literary market, the works of Japanese author Haruki Murakami have consistently garnered popularity among readers due to their unique style and profound themes. *The City and Its Uncertain Walls*, as Murakami's latest novel, not only continues to explore the complexities of human nature and the alienation of modern society but also showcases the immense market potential of his works from a commercial perspective. The successful release of this work provides an excellent case study for researching how literary works can achieve commercial objectives through modern marketing strategies.

Murakami's global bestseller status is inseparable from the meticulous marketing and publishing strategies behind it, especially in today's increasingly competitive landscape of digital reading and global markets. As Murakami's "old friend," how Shinchosha employs innovative marketing strategies and a strong brand effect to ensure the rapid global success of Murakami's new work becomes a focal point for discussion.

Therefore, this paper aims to explore the factors contributing to the bestseller status of *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* through a combination of textual and market analysis. It will investigate how to effectively enhance the appeal of the work while analyzing how these strategies align with the characteristics of Murakami's works and influence readers' psychology, thereby driving sales.

2. Overview of The City and Its Uncertain Walls

Haruki Murakami published the novella *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* (Japanese: 街と、その不確かな壁) in 1980. He regarded the work as a "half-finished product" that was not perfect, leading him to publish a revised version titled *Hard Boiled Wonderland And The End Of The World* (Japanese: 世界の終りとハードボイルド・ワンダーランド) in 1985. However, he felt a sense of regret and harbored the thought of "waiting another two years." After years of accumulated creative experience and contemplation, Murakami decided to rewrite this work to remedy the regrets of that time. He began writing *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* in March 2020, after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. After three years of work, spanning over 1,200 pages, his fifteenth full-length novel was published by Shinchosha in 2023.

The City and Its Uncertain Walls is referred to by Murakami as his "masterpiece that he has wanted to complete for 40 years." After a six-year hiatus, it crystallizes his life experiences and the essence of literature into a lengthy allegorical novel. The novel is divided into three parts: the first part recalls the passionate romance of a 17-year-old boy and girl in the real world, while the second and third parts depict the story of a middle-aged man who enters a mysterious city surrounded by high walls and engages in the work of "dream reading." In this new work, Murakami explores profound themes such as life and death, reality and fiction, and time and memory. These elements not only continue Murakami's consistent style but also showcase new breakthroughs in his writing.

Murakami divides the novel's structure into three parts: "I," Ziyi, and the boy in the yellow submarine hoodie. The protagonist, "I," resigns from the book agency where he has worked since graduating from university in his forties and finds new employment at a library in Z** Street, Fukushima Prefecture. Ziyi is the former library director and a local celebrity, while the boy in the yellow submarine hoodie immerses himself in the library. In his youth, Ziyi aspired to be a novelist and was an unparalleled library enthusiast, which also evokes memories of the young Murakami for readers.

The ultimate goal of literature is not an alternate world at the other end of this one. Anyone can freely traverse this world and swim in the dreams woven by literature, living happily and freely, with the library as the stage. *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* uses this theme to convey that "literature is both a private act and a public activity; anything that hinders it is a wall."

The author of *The City and Its Uncertain Walls*, Haruki Murakami, is a Japanese novelist, translator of American literature, and essayist. Born on January 12, 1949, in Fushimi Ward, Kyoto City, he grew up in Ashiya City, Nishinomiya, Hyogo Prefecture. He graduated from Waseda University with a degree in drama and opened a jazz café during his university years. In 1979, at the age of 29, Murakami began writing his first novel, *Hear the Wind Sing*. Every night after closing the café, he would spend two hours writing in the kitchen. Six months later, he submitted his work to the newcomer literary competition of the literary magazine *Gunzo* and won the *Gunzo New Writer Award*, marking the beginning of his literary career.

Murakami's writing style is straightforward and relatable, gaining popularity among a broad audience through themes that resonate with most readers. His fifth full-length novel, *Norwegian Wood*, published in 1987, became a bestseller in Japan, selling over 10 million copies by 2009 and over 15 million copies worldwide. It was subsequently adapted into films in various countries, sparking the social phenomenon known as the "Murakami phenomenon." Since then, Murakami's works have remained bestsellers. Other major works include *A Wild Sheep Chase*, *Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman*, *1Q84*, and *Drive My Car*. Murakami's works are characterized by a unique worldview not found in other authors, and he excels in various genres. The charm of Murakami's writing permeates his works, captivating readers, though it is often difficult to articulate the unique

feelings they evoke. His texts are also easily translatable, garnering numerous overseas readers. Yoshiko Shibata, a professor at the University of Tokyo and a renowned translator, has rated Murakami as one of the most influential modern writers in America. In 2006, he was the first Asian recipient of the Franz Kafka Prize and has since been considered a strong contender for the Nobel Prize in Literature among Japanese authors.

Since his debut, Murakami has translated several works, including *The Great Gatsby*, *The Birthday of the Children*, and *Babylon Revisited*. He has also published essays, travelogues, and other prose.

The City and Its Uncertain Walls is published by Shinchosha Co., Ltd. Shinchosha is one of Japan's most representative publishing houses, renowned for its literary publications, as well as weekly and monthly magazines.

2.1. Development History of Shinchosha

(1) Founding Stage

In 1896 (Meiji 29), founder Yoshisuke Sato launched the precursor to Shinchosha, the literary magazine *Shinsei*.

In 1904 (Meiji 37), with the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War, Sato decided to establish a new literary magazine called *Shinchō*, stating that literature was especially needed during such times. Thus, Shinchosha was born.

In 1914 (Taisho 3), the "Shinchō Bunko" was established, modeled after Germany's Reclam Verlag.

In 1927 (Showa 2), the publication of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* further solidified its position as a literary publisher.

In 1935 (Showa 10), the "Japanese Children's Library" was launched, significantly impacting young readers.

(2) Foundation Stage

In 1947 (Showa 22), the "Shinchō Bunko," focusing on Showa literature, began publication, alongside the launch of the monthly magazine *Shōsetsu Shinchō*.

In 1950 (Showa 25), the monthly magazine *Geijutsu Shinchō* was founded.

In 1952 (Showa 27), the "Modern World Literature Series," covering masterpieces of 20th-century world literature, was published, achieving remarkable sales and marking the beginning of the collected works era.

In 1956 (Showa 31), *Shūkan Shinchō* was established, pioneering the era of weekly magazines, with its inaugural issue selling out 300,000 copies.

In 1959 (Showa 34), the "Japanese Literature Series" was released, garnering significant attention.

(3) Development Stage

In 1974 (Showa 49), Richard Bach's *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* was published, selling over 1 million copies within three months.

In 1981 (Showa 56), the photo magazine *FOCUS* was launched under the slogan "Reading the Era through Photographs," ushering in the era of photo magazines.

In 1988 (Showa 63), the Yukio Mishima Prize, Shūgorō Yamamoto Prize, and Japan Mystery and Suspense Grand Prize were established.

In 1989 (Showa 64/Heisei 1), the Japanese Fantasy Novel Grand Prize was founded.

In 1990 (Heisei 2), the international political and economic information magazine *Foresight* was launched.

(4) Challenge Stage

In 1996 (Heisei 8), Shinchosha celebrated its 100th anniversary.

In 2003 (Heisei 15), the *Shinchō Shinsho* series was launched, with Yoshinori Nishio's *The Wall of Idiots* selling over 4 million copies and becoming a bestseller.

In 2004 (Heisei 16), Yoko Ogawa's *The Professor and His Beloved Equation* won the first Bookstore Prize.

In 2005 (Heisei 17), *The Dignity of a Nation* was published, becoming a bestseller with over 2.5 million copies sold, popularizing the term "character."

In 2009 (Heisei 21), Haruki Murakami's *1Q84* was released, becoming a social phenomenon.

In 2017 (Heisei 29), Murakami's *Killing Commendatore* was published.

In 2019 (Heisei 31/Reiwa 1), *The Hills Of Silver Ruins, The Pitch Black Moon* (白銀の墟 玄の月) was published, selling over 2.5 million copies and becoming a social phenomenon.

In 2021 (Reiwa 3), Shinchosha celebrated its 125th anniversary.

2.2. Major Publications of Shinchosha

Shinchosha has published numerous classic literary works and bestsellers across various fields, including novels, essays, poetry, criticism, and academic writings. Among these, the Shinchō Bunko series is one of Japan's most influential collection series, featuring classic works by renowned authors such as Natsume Sōseki and Ryūnosuke Akutagawa. Recent bestsellers published by Shinchosha include Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* and *1Q84*, as well as Keigo Higashino's *Journey Under the Midnight Sun* and *Malice*. These works have garnered global attention and have become classics of modern Japanese literature, with their delicate prose vividly depicting the loneliness and confusion of adolescence, winning the hearts of readers.

Shinchosha not only holds profound influence in the Japanese literary scene but also promotes Japanese culture globally through the translation and promotion of Japanese authors' works. For example, many of Murakami's works have been translated into various languages and have achieved worldwide popularity. In addition, Shinchosha actively participates in the selection and awarding of various literary prizes, such as the "Shinchō Newcomer Award," to support literary creation and cultural exchange.

Since its launch in 1904, Shinchō magazine has been an important platform for Japanese literature. This literary magazine not only features works by many famous authors but also discovers a wealth of literary newcomers, providing them with a stage to showcase their talents.

2.3. Shinchosha and Haruki Murakami

Shinchosha frequently collaborates with Haruki Murakami, publishing novels such as *Killing Commendatore*, *1Q84*, and *Kafka on the Shore*.

On September 12, 2019, Shinchosha launched a dedicated website summarizing all the books by Haruki Murakami published by Shinchosha, categorizing them into long novels, short stories, essays, and translations. The long novels by Murakami published by Shinchosha also have special pages, resembling an online cover exhibition. Upon logging into the website, readers are greeted by Murakami's latest work, *The City and Its Uncertain Walls*.

The City and Its Uncertain Walls is a "sudden" new book. One day, Murakami cheerfully invited his editor to have tea together, saying, "How about we go for a cup of tea?" After they met and chatted for a while, Murakami said, "Here, this is for you," and handed the manuscript of the new book to the editor. The editor never pressures Murakami for the manuscript, patiently waiting, and the content of the work is almost never disclosed in advance [1].

3. The Influence of The City and Its Uncertain Walls

3.1. Sales of The City and Its Uncertain Walls

Since its release on April 13, 2023, *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* has garnered widespread attention and acclaim in Japan. This novel has not only achieved remarkable sales domestically but has also sparked significant reactions in the international market. It ranked first in the overall bestseller list for the first half of 2023 and was the top-selling book in Japan, marking a decade since Haruki Murakami's own *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage* in Heisei 25 (2013). The Oricon charts recorded this book as number one in 2023, achieving a three-week consecutive reign. Within a month and a half of its release, the cumulative sales of the e-book exceeded 400,000 copies[2].

In the international market, although the English version of *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* has yet to be officially released, the pre-order situation has been exceptionally robust. Penguin Random House announced that the English version will be translated by the renowned translator Philip Gabriel and is set to be released in Europe and North America on November 26, 2024. Pre-orders are already available at various internationally recognized bookstores, including Amazon and Waterstones [3]. This pre-order craze indicates the book's sales potential worldwide, and the international literary community's positive reviews have further elevated its global recognition. European News described the book as "a profound masterpiece exploring the intertwining of the human psyche and dreams" [4]. Additionally, many literary critics have highly praised the book, declaring *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* as "one of Haruki Murakami's most significant works in recent years."

3.2. Global Influence of The City and Its Uncertain Walls

The City and Its Uncertain Walls has performed exceptionally well in the South Korean market. The Korean translation ranked prominently in the comprehensive bestseller list in September 2023, maintaining the top position for several weeks. The novel has remained at the top of the rankings a year later, reflecting the affection of South Korean readers for Haruki Murakami and his works. Data shows that the largest demographic among readers purchasing the book is those over 40 years old, comprising 36.7%. Readers aged over 30 and over 50 account for 30.3% and 16.3%, respectively, showcasing the widespread appeal of this work across various age groups. In terms of gender, female readers slightly outnumber male readers, comprising 51.8% and 48.2%, respectively.

Additionally, *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* has achieved outstanding results in the South Korean e-book market. In the comprehensive bestseller list of YES24, a leading e-book retailer in Korea, this work ranked first for four consecutive weeks, starting from the top position two weeks before its official release. A representative from Kyobo Book Centre remarked, "Haruki Murakami is a representative Japanese novelist beloved by Koreans, and every new release fills bookstores across the country" [5].

The City and Its Uncertain Walls has attracted considerable attention not only in Asian markets but also internationally. In an article on the literary aggregation website Literary Hub, Emily Temple elaborated on the background and content of the work, emphasizing that Murakami continues his signature writing style, creating a dreamlike and metaphor-rich world through delicate descriptions and symbolic plots. This unique narrative technique intricately weaves reality and dreams together, prompting readers to continually reflect and explore human emotions and psychological states throughout their reading experience. The article also mentions that critics generally believe Murakami has showcased his exceptional literary skills in this work, noting that the novel not only serves as a continuation and expansion of his earlier works but also provides profound reflections on contemporary society [6].

This summer, *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* is set to launch its Chinese translation, with fierce competition among various publishers in China for the rights to this new work. Ultimately, Reader Culture won the rights with an exceptionally high copyright fee. This autumn, signed "collector's editions" of the novel by Haruki Murakami will be released in countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Spain, Germany, and the Netherlands. This will mark the first time a long novel by Murakami has been released in a "collector's edition."

4. Marketing Strategies for *The City and Its Uncertain Walls*

"Hunger marketing," also known in Japan as "scarcity marketing," refers to a strategy where companies artificially create a sense of scarcity for certain products through limited or delayed sales, thereby stimulating consumer desire and ultimately benefiting the company's profits. From a social psychology perspective, information about product scarcity influences customers' purchasing behavior primarily in two ways: first, through the subconscious recognition of the principle that "scarcity increases value," consumers often use the opportunity and possibility of purchasing a product as a criterion for evaluating its value [7]. Second, according to Brehm's "psychological reactance theory," when scarcity limits and threatens the purchasing freedom that consumers currently enjoy, they may develop a stronger desire and impulse to possess that product once they can no longer tolerate the loss of their purchasing freedom [8].

4.1. Shinchosha's "Hunger Marketing" Strategy

Shinchosha, the publisher of Haruki Murakami's works, rarely leaks any information before the release, instilling a sense of "hunger" in readers. On the release day, explosive sales occur, akin to Apple's midnight sales events. Murakami himself almost never appears in the media, privately reading thousands of reader emails but only responding to about one-tenth of them. The combination of "Shinchosha + Haruki Murakami" is highly coordinated with the "hunger marketing" approach.

The City and Its Uncertain Walls is the first of Murakami's works to launch both an electronic and a print version on the same day. On the release day, a countdown event was held at Kinokuniya, the largest bookstore in Shinjuku, Tokyo, attracting a large crowd of fans waiting for the launch. Many people cheered at midnight and quickly formed a line at the counter, a scene reminiscent of New Year's Eve celebrations every January 1st.

4.2. The Fermentation of "Hunger Marketing"

4.2.1. The Enthusiasm of "Empty Nesters" Critics

After the "carnival" on the release day, *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* received enthusiastic responses from various sectors. For example, Japanese critic Tsuji Tokuharu reported purchasing the e-book on the release day and finished reading it in one go on Amazon Kindle. Within just two days of publication, he published a long review titled *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* and "Aging" on his forum website, note. Another critic, Chinese literary figure Ryo Fukushima, published a lengthy review titled *Did Haruki Murakami Successfully Remake Himself?—A Commentary on The City and Its Uncertain Walls* ten days later. Notably, both Tokuharu and Fukushima are renowned "empty nesters" (individuals who drift through the internet daily without much interaction), yet they produced reviews and submitted posts on social media with an irresistible reaction and speed.

4.2.2. Promotion Through Haruki Murakami's Radio Program

Derived from Haruki Murakami's essay collection *Murakami Radio*, the radio program "Murakami Radio" is personally guided by Murakami, featuring themed song selections and dialogues. This

program is a collaboration between Shinchosha and Tokyo FM and started airing in 2018. For someone who rarely accepts media interviews or appears on radio programs, this is a significant creative opportunity [9].

In April 2023, Japanese novelist Tetsu Ogawa was invited to comment on *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* during Murakami Radio and his own program "Street Fiction," discussing how Murakami influenced him and the magical realism style. He carefully avoided spoilers while reflecting on the 1980 edition of *The City and Its Uncertain Walls*, and he reported the book's impressive achievement of ranking first on eight monthly lists of Japan's online bookstore Honto. Murakami himself also hosted an event on the Murakami Radio website, where he gave away copies of the new book *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* to three listeners, thereby enhancing the program's effectiveness and boosting the book's sales.

4.2.3. Surge in Media Popularity

A similar situation has also unfolded in the media. Once *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* was released, it quickly garnered widespread attention and heated discussions. This novel is not only Murakami's first new work in six years but also embodies his creative aspirations of forty years, marking a significant milestone in his literary career.

The surge in media popularity is reflected not only in the enthusiastic discussions among readers but also in the high praise from literary critics. Japanese literary critic Kazuhiro Yokoo pointed out that the protagonist of the novel explores his deeper consciousness and listens to the voice within, showcasing the depth and breadth of Murakami's literary creation. Additionally, Harvard University professor Jay Rubin also highly praised Murakami's new work, stating that it addresses the fundamental issues of life and possesses significant literary value.

A search in the "ELNET National News/Magazine Reporting Database," which compiles reports from across Japan's news and magazine outlets, revealed that the response to *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* in the week following its release far surpassed that of *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage* and *Killing Commendatore*. This increase was particularly notable between the sixth and seventh weeks. By the eighteenth week, with the commencement of "Summer Reading Week," the book's social impact rose to another level.

4.3. Marketing Techniques Unique to Literature

In the July 2023 issue of *Shinchō*, the longest-running literary monthly magazine published by Shinchosha, Murakami included a passage from his speech: "The COVID-19 pandemic and the Russo-Ukrainian war have intensified people's fears and doubts. More and more walls are being built, separating people and nations. It seems that everyone faces a choice: to hide behind the walls, preserving safety and the status quo, or to step outside those walls, knowing the risks, to seek a more liberated value system." This mirrors the dilemma faced by the protagonist of *The City and Its Uncertain Walls*, who is caught between two worlds: a tranquil city free of desire and pain, encouraged by walls, and the painful, desire-filled, and contradictory reality outside those walls.

This is an excerpt from a speech Murakami delivered at Wellesley College in April 2023, titled "Writing Novels in Times of Pandemic and War," which included the original English manuscript as well as a Japanese translation published in the monthly magazine [10]. The discussion encapsulated the structure of *The City and Its Uncertain Walls*, from the protagonist's perspective to the narrative construction, and linked it to the real world, perfectly illustrating the power literature can bring to the world through a shared belief in globalism. By featuring its published literary works in its magazine, Shinchosha employs this strategy to "consume" consumers, allowing readers to experience the strong resonance that literature can evoke while reading the magazine.

5. Insights on the Bestseller *The City and Its Uncertain Walls*

5.1. Success of the "Hunger Marketing" Strategy

Shinchosha employed a "hunger marketing" strategy for the publication of *The City and Its Uncertain Walls*, which involved maintaining strict confidentiality regarding the content and information prior to the official release. This strategy successfully sparked readers' curiosity and desire to purchase, leading to explosive sales on the very day of release.

The hunger marketing strategy necessitates ensuring that no information related to the new book is leaked before its release. Shinchosha effectively controlled the flow of information about the new book, sustaining high anticipation among readers. Additionally, Shinchosha made the unprecedented decision to launch both the electronic and print versions of the book on the same day, catering to different reader demographics while also increasing the diversity of sales channels.

5.2. "Celebrity Effect" and Literary Marketing

The novel's release coincided with the global outbreak of the pandemic, during which Murakami explored the metaphor of the "uncertain walls" in his book, addressing the intersection of reality and fiction as well as humanity's psychological state in the face of the unknown and uncertainty. The narrative is rich with Murakami's distinctive metaphors and imagery, featuring elements like libraries, cats, and lonely boys, which evoke a sense of familiarity for readers.

Shinchosha's publication strategy employed a combination of online and offline channels to enhance sales and fully leveraged the literary work for marketing purposes. The approach of "literature publishing literature" differs from standard product marketing strategies. This diverse publication strategy attracted the attention of critics, and Shinchosha successfully utilized media and celebrity influence to further enhance the visibility and discourse surrounding *The City and Its Uncertain Walls*.

Shinchosha's publication strategy for *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* offers valuable insights for the publishing industry and serves as a reference for marketing strategies in other fields. By controlling information, leveraging the celebrity effect, and employing unique literary marketing techniques, they successfully propelled this literary work to the pinnacle of the bestseller market. The global response anticipated after the book's release in Europe and America in 2024 is promising.

Moreover, some argue that literature is a serious domain, and using marketing techniques within it is impure. However, shying away from marketing theory solely for the sake of literary purity overlooks the marketing potential of authors with dedicated readerships, universities with students, and publishers with books, all of which possess a consumer base. Considering the distinctions between pure and popular literature, pure literary works often emphasize quality over quantity in their publication strategies, typically opting for conservative print runs and targeted promotional efforts. In contrast, popular literature tends to favor broader distribution and publicity to attract readers. Pure literary works usually focus more on depth and intellectual content, often with a limited target audience, while popular literature appeals to a wider demographic.

The City and Its Uncertain Walls combines strategies from both pure and popular literature, employing conservative "hunger marketing" for pure literature to ignite strong anticipation among readers before release and utilizing the popularization of popular literature in subsequent promotions to effectively boost the work's dissemination. Therefore, when publishing literary works, the choice of publishing strategy should align with the characteristics of the work. It is crucial to select appropriate marketing promotions based on the different content to achieve broader market penetration.

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