

Why an artist turned 6,000 unwanted copies of ‘The Da Vinci Code’ into ‘Nineteen Eighty-Four’

By Anny Shaw
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Artist David Shrigley with copies of his limited-edition run of George Orwell's "Nineteen Eighty-Four," constructed entirely from pulped, second-hand copies of bestseller "The Da Vinci Code." Ben Birchall/PA/AP

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(CNN) — It all began in 2017, when a charity-owned thrift store in Swansea, Wales, put a notice in its window imploring people to stop donating copies of Dan Brown's "The Da Vinci Code." On average, the shop was receiving one copy per day. The plea went viral, catching the eye of the British artist David Shrigley, who decided to try and collect as many copies as he could, amassing 6,000 books over six years.

The brainwave to pulp them and turn them into copies of George Orwell's "Nineteen Eighty-Four" came when Shrigley re-read the dystopian novel during the pandemic — 2020 marked 70 years since Orwell died, meaning the book was out of copyright and could be published by anyone.

Over the weekend, copies of Shrigley's limited-edition version of Orwell's classic went on show in the thrift store that inspired the project, which he dubbed "Pulped Fiction." Displayed in rows from ceiling to floor, the black-and-white covers have a dizzying effect. "It's like you've entered a totalitarian regime where there is no choice. This is the book, and you're going to read it," Shrigley quipped in an interview.

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The artist first read "Nineteen Eighty-Four" when he was an art student in the 1980s. On reading it again, he said he realized "that it was still a really resonant book, (and) that it seemed even more relevant than when I first read it when you were invited to see it as a parable of Soviet or Chinese communism."

In today's climate, Shrigley sees the "subversion of language" in the book as more revealing of contemporary society, particularly when it comes to the words employed around war. "Ethnic cleansing is now the name for what used to be called genocide," he said. "Russia's invasion of Ukraine wasn't a conflict; it was war. Conversely, it's not a culture war. It wasn't a war between Betamax and VHS, and it wasn't a war between Blur and Oasis. Those were arguments."

Shrigley cited how the writer Margaret Atwood, when her 1985 novel "The Handmaid's Tale" was made into a TV series in 2017, said there wasn't anything in the book that hadn't already happened in the United States. "From the removal of women's rights to the removal of civil rights from the general population. These weren't invented phenomena. They were things that were actually happening at the time," Shrigley said.



The Oxfam thrift store in Swansea, Wales went viral in 2017 after it printed this sign imploring people to stop donating copies of Dan Brown's "The Da Vinci Code." Ben Birchall/PA/AP

The artist thinks the same could be said of "Nineteen Eighty-Four." "War is presented as peace. Enemies are invented for us. We're invited to think that black is white, and white is black. Day is night, and night is day," he said. "This is a book that people should read. It's still really relevant."

Though his project is not intended as a piece of library criticism, Shrigley describes "The Da Vinci Code" as "a holiday book about a fairly benign conspiracy — unless you happen to be a Christian and are quite offended by it, which is fair enough."

Does he think Brown would approve of his project? "He's a difficult man to get hold of," Shrigley said. "We've heard from his publicist, and there's been nothing negative. There's been no cease-and-desist." (Brown's representatives did not respond to CNN's request for comment.)

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A collaborative effort between Shrigley, his studio team and others, including the graphic designer Fraser Muggeridge, "Pulped Fiction" is arguably Shrigley's most conceptual work to date. (In a bizarre twist, Muggeridge's grandfather, the journalist and broadcaster Malcolm Muggeridge, proofread the original novel for Orwell.)

Costing "well into six figures," the project has been self-funded, and Shrigley said he may not make his money back — not that he cares. In Swansea, the newly printed books are selling for £495 (\$600) for the first 250 customers, while the remaining thousand will be sold for £795 (\$963) on Shrigley's website.

"I'm in a position in my life now where I can actually afford to take risks and do things that I want to do, even though they don't necessarily really fit in my canon of work," Shrigley said. "The really interesting thing about a work like this is that the conversation informs the work. It's the conversations that you have which further its progress."

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