

## **James Bond, Lord of the Rings, Narnia – the books we most pretend to have read**

Fleming, Tolkien and CS Lewis are the authors that people most claim – falsely – to have read. But why? And how does this year's most-fibbed-about list compare with those of previous years?

James Bond novels are the books we are most likely to claim we have read when we have not done so ...

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A few years ago, while working at a regional newspaper, I had to interview a local author about his self-published novel. It was a 500-page brick of a thriller with tiny, close type, a good third of which a professional editor would cheerfully have hacked out.

“What did you think?” the writer demanded. “Oh, I loved it,” I blithely lied, having managed about two pages before it brought on a migraine. He then quizzed me on the finer points of the sprawling, outlandish plot, and the individual characteristics and motivations of the cast of thousands. By the end, I was so exhausted I might as well have read the damn thing. But I think I got away with it.

Fibbing about our reading habits is, apparently, more common than we realise. According to the Reading Agency, which carried out a survey for the recent World Book Day, 41% of the 2,000 people polled admitted they had, in relation to the books they had claimed to have read, “told a lie, an odious damned lie; Upon my soul, a lie, a wicked lie”.

CS Lewis is currently the third most fibbed-about author, according to the Reading Agency Photograph: Hulton Getty

That's from Shakespeare's Othello – not that these mendacious millennial malefactors would know, for according to the survey, it's members of the younger generation (64% of 18-24-year-olds) who are most inclined to claim to have read books when they haven't done so.

Not that old Will gets a look in on the list of the most-fibbed about books this year. The 13 books we are most likely to claim to have read have one thing in common: they have all been adapted into blockbuster movies.

Ay, there's the rub (kids, that one's from ... oh, never mind). Speaking honestly, we've all done this at some point in our lives – the VHS release of Kes in the 1980s was a godsend to everyone doing their English literature O levels.

Top of the current list are Ian Fleming's James Bond novels, followed by JRR Tolkien's Lord of the Rings and CS Lewis's Narnia series. Perhaps more curious is the fact that people claim to have read The Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins and Dan Brown's The Da Vinci Code, when there are more copies of both novels languishing in charity shops than could be sold before Armageddon, so supply issues are not putting people off trying to read them.

So, why do we fib? Not for shame at not having read these books, but to impress people by pretending we have done. Men do this more than women; the Reading Agency says one in five men even lies about his reading during job interviews. It's probably de rigueur to have read Fleming's oeuvre if you're applying for a post at MI5, but it's less clear what career benefit there would be in claiming to have read Irvine Welsh's Trainspotting (chief Scottish toilet cleaner, perhaps) ...

Other situations when we lie about reading include when we first meet the prospective in-laws (“Sir, while I might appear to be a grubby, long-haired youth with designs on your daughter's body, allow me to appraise you of the salient themes in Khaled Hosseini's The Kite Runner”), social media (where no one can see your book shelves) and, of course, on dates (“I love Frank L Baum's The Wizard of Oz, especially how it starts off in black and white and then – oh, heck”