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Judging a Book by Its Cover: Publishing Trends in Young Adult Literature

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Abstract

A book's materiality is often taken for granted. In the publishing industry, however, the paratext, specifically the book's cover, is the foremost aspect of the book. The cover sells the book; literary merit becomes irrelevant if the book does not, or cannot, reach the reader. Yampbell focuses on the cover art of Young Adult novels and explores recent trends in the marketing of YA literature to the elusive teen audience. A close analysis of the five different covers of Francesca Lia Block's *Weetzie Bat* (1989) demonstrates trends in contemporary publishing and posits potential rationales for the publisher change the cover.



Judging a Book by Its Cover: Publishing Trends in Young Adult Literature

Cat Yampbell

A tiger is superimposed on a woman's face. A large python winds its way down a bare female leg. Two eyes stare out from a black darkness. These images appear as artwork on covers of recent Young Adult novels. They are intended to attract readers to the promotional material, often referred to as a blurb, on the back cover and/or inside jacket. Together the cover and blurb should lure readers into purchasing the book. If it cannot reach an audience, the book will disappear among the hundreds that will annually go out of print. The packaging of the text, previously neglected by publishers of teen literature, currently is being carefully manipulated and altered as publishers and marketing experts recognize the necessity of visual appeal to succeed within the difficult arena of the teenage consumers. With holograms, digital art, and metallic jackets, YA book covers are becoming more abstract, sensational, unusual, and eye-catching to allure one of the most elusive audiences—teenage readers.

The materiality of a text is often taken for granted. A common assumption is that the inner text is the kernel of value and significance while the rest is merely a protective husk. In the world of publishing, the paratext is not only equally significant, but many industry people argue that the cover is the foremost aspect of the book. Regardless of the quality of the literature, its cover often determines a book's success. D. F. McKenzie acknowledges the impossibility of divorcing "the substance of the text on the one hand from the physical form of its presentation on the other" and has defined "a *text* as a complex structure of meanings which embraces every detail of its formal and physical presentation in a specific historical context" (qtd. in Marotti xi). The paratext *is* the text. Literary merit becomes irrelevant if the book does not, or cannot, reach the reader.

The cover of a book is often the reader's first interaction with it—the consumer's initial reading of the text. When a bookstore's shelves are



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