

## YA Cover Art: Changes and Social Impact in the Last Twenty-Five Years

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We've all heard the old adage, "don't judge a book by its cover," but let's face it, everyone does it. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the images and words we see on the cover of a book have a major impact on our perception of that book, and will often determine whether or not we pick it up off the shelf. Not only can we tell what age group a book is marketed toward simply by looking at the cover, but we can usually estimate the decade that the book was likely published in, assuming it still has its original cover art, of course. Sierra Carter, a writer for *The Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults*, writes that the cover of a novel "impacts readers' expectations of the overall story as well as the story's characters." Furthermore, Cat Yampbell, a critic of young adult literature, explains that often the cover of a book will be a determining factor of the book's success (348). If a publishing company chooses the wrong cover art for a book, it can have a major influence how well the book sells, and how it is received by readers.

Because cover art is so important, popular styles for cover art are always changing. Between 1990 and the present day, young adult literature has undergone a major face lift. In this paper, I wish to explore more deeply what changes have occurred over the last twenty-five years, and how these changes are affecting society's image of YAL. I will compare the cover art of books written from 1990-2004 to the cover art of books written from 2005-2015 in order to identify the changes that have been made in cover art production, as well as major trends in cover art today. I hope to discover how teenagers, and society as a whole, respond to these changes, and as well as how these changes have affected our perception of YAL.

So how has marketing affected cover art in the last twenty-five years? Before we can discuss the effects of these changes, we first must identify what they are. To find answers to this question I visited the Provo Public Library, and studied the covers of many YA novels written between 1990 and the present day. As I glanced through the covers I began to notice a few trends. First, the older covers were more likely to be drawings or illustrations, while more recent covers tended to be photographs. But of course there were exceptions on both sides. A second trend I noticed was that books written more recently tended to have simpler cover designs. It would appear this change started to occur somewhere between 2000 and 2005. For example, the original cover of *Just Ella*, published in 1999, shows an illustration of a finely dressed young woman standing in front of a castle corridor. A row of intricately carved columns are visible behind her. In addition, from the way the cover is drawn, it would appear a portion of the cover has been torn away, revealing another young woman in peasant clothing standing behind the first. The library also carries a copy of *Just Ella* with an updated cover, released in 2007. This cover is a photograph of half of the face of a teenage girl wearing a tiara. Behind her is a plain white background. Clearly, this cover is much more simplistic than the original. Other books such as *The Impossible Knife of Memory* (2014), and *Eleanor and Park* (2013) also featured fairly simple cover art. However, there were a few exceptions to this trend, such as *Wildwood Dancing* (2007), and *Wither* (2011).

Another much more obvious trend was the appearance of characters—often female—on cover art. When this occurred, often a part of the character's face was obscured or left out of the picture. One example of this is *Along for the Ride* (2009), which shows a teenage boy and girl sitting on a bicycle. While the rest of their bodies are in the shot, their heads are cut off. Another example is *Hourglass* (2011), which depicts a young girl whose face is completely obscured by

her hair. Lastly, while all colors of the rainbow were represented, there were clearly many more books that were dominantly black, white or grayscale. Kate Hart, an aspiring young adult author, provides some interesting statistics about cover art on young adult literature. After studying the covers of 624 young adult novels published during 2011, she discovered that an astounding forty-one percent had dominantly black, white, or gray covers. In addition, seventy-nine percent of covers depicted at least one female character. Twenty percent of covers showed characters whose heads were mostly or completely missing from the picture, and fifteen percent showed characters only from the back. A former YA book buyer for Borders, Ami Hassler explains that these changes have occurred because YA cover art is “driven by today’s fashion world.” She says, “Teens, particularly teen girls, are smart, savvy shoppers and they want the look of what they read to reflect current trends” (qtd. in Yampbell 357).

Not only have major changes occurred in cover art in the last twenty-five years, but today’s teenagers’ responses to these changes have, for the most part, been positive. I surveyed twenty-six teenagers and young adults about how they felt about ten YA book covers. Five of the covers were of books written between 1990 and 2004, and five were of books written after 2005. The survey asked participants to give each cover a score from one to ten on how interested they were in a reading each book based on what they saw on the cover alone. I then took the average of these scores to create an overall score for each cover. Not surprisingly, four of the five novels written after 2005 were in the top five slots, while the books written before that time populated the bottom half of the list. *Suicide Notes from Beautiful Girls*—the newest novel, set to be released later this year—received the highest score (6.54). The cover shows three burned out matches set against a grey-blue background. Black smoke curls from the matches. When asked what it was that make him or her interesting in the book, one respondent said, “The burned out

matches are really intense looking, which immediately caught my eye and made me want to read this book.” Another participant said, “Dynamic, simple photo. Great colors, but only a few. Wonderful play on shapes.” These responses show that readers are reacting positively to marketing’s latest techniques. Respondents loved the intense drama of the cover, mixed with its simplicity.

*City of Bones* (2007) also received a high score (5.75). Unlike other recent covers, this one is fairly complex. The cover is split into three sections. The lower section shows a graveyard, with the skyline of a city above it in the second section. On top is the torso of a shirtless, tattooed man. One respondent admitted to liking the cover because, “the colors are interesting and the figure on the front is emitting light somehow which is also very interesting. The overall effect is very aesthetically pleasing for me.” Another answered that the cover had “intrigue” because “there’s no face.” Several female participants admitted to liking the cover because of the shirtless man. Another reason teenagers may be attracted to this novel is because the color scheme and overall style of the cover looks very much like the covers of other dystopian novels, a genre that has been very popular of late, thanks to books such as *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*.

*Leaving Fishers* (1997) received the lowest score (4.01). On the cover is a group of teenagers with folded arms and serious expressions. One participant said, “It looks like the cover art for a cheesy soap opera-esque movie or TV show. It looks too serious for a book for young adults.” Another said that “the characters looked snobby.” Others said the color scheme was “bland” and the cover was “outdated.” What interested me most about these responses was that the biggest complaints participants had about the cover were the color scheme, and the faces and expressions of the characters. When questioned about *Along for the Ride* and *City of Bones*,

several participants specifically said they liked that the faces of characters were not included on the cover. Perhaps this was because they felt this made the book seem more relatable. They could picture themselves on the cover, or any face they wanted. Perhaps if the publishers of *Leaving Fishers* had excluded the faces of these teenagers, it would have received a higher score.

Another result I found quite surprising was how popular *Blue is for Nightmares* (2003) was. It took second place on the list with a score of 5.92, even though it was published prior to 2005. Interest in the book may have been generated because of the book's genre. The dark colors, the candle and the title make it very clear that this is a horror or suspense book. One participant wanted to read the book because of "the aspect of horror" the title implies. Several others gave similar responses. However, because *Blue is For Nightmares* was still published somewhat recently, publishers were already in the midst of making the changes we have discussed. Like many newer novels, the cover of *Blue is for Nightmares* is fairly simple: a navy blue background with a lit candle on the left. The title appears in curly print in the center of the cover, and is the main feature of the picture. Several teens said they would be interesting in the book because of its simple cover. "The simplicity is nice," one respondent said. Another mentioned that "there isn't a lot of stuff on the cover which makes me curious about it."

Interest due to simplicity was not something readers felt in Edward Sullivan's 1998 experiment. Sullivan, a writer and critic of YAL, conducted a survey much like mine. He asked twenty-one teenagers ages eleven to seventeen to rate YA covers on a scale of one to five and explain their answers. His teenagers gave *Rats Saw God* (1996) some of the lowest scores because, "it doesn't tell you anything about the book." (Sullivan 181). In fact, of the twenty-one participants, nine voted it as having the worst cover out of eleven books shown to them. Sullivan explains, "The participants expected the cover to give them a good idea of what the story would

be about; they were frustrated with this one because it did not. A book's cover builds expectations for the reader, and one wonders how often it meets those expectations” (181). This complete reversal of thinking surprises me. Teenagers in the 1990s liked knowing what they were getting into before they started a book. On the contrary, teenagers today seem to enjoy books that leave them guessing about what’s inside.

Teenagers seem to respond well to recent cover changes such as greater simplicity, characters whose heads are missing from the picture, black and white color schemes, etc. but how accurately are these covers able to give a sense of what the books is about? In my survey I asked participants to guess what they thought each book was about, based solely on the cover. Two of the book covers I asked about were romance novels. The first was *Both Sides of Time* (1995) and *Along for the Ride* (2007). When asked what *Both Sides of Time* was about, every participant was able to correctly guess the genre of the book, and that time travel was involved. The style of clothing the characters wore helped respondents know that the book took place sometime during the 1800s. In addition, one respondent correctly guessed that the novel was about “characters living in the same place but at different times.”

On the other hand, when asked about *Along for the Ride*, every participant correctly guessed that it was a romance about teenagers, but few could come up with answers beyond that. Some thought a bicycle might be involved, but were unsure how. One participant thought the story was “a cheesy love story about a teenage girl, teenage boy, and a cherry red bicycle.” Another answered, “a sappy romance between a guy and a girl who met while someone was riding a bike.” Actually, while the story does have romantic elements, the bicycle is barely involved. Furthermore, while romance plays a part in this novel, it is only a supporting role, while other issues take the lead. The cover places the romantic aspect of the novel directly in the

forefront, so that potential readers think that that's all there is to it, when that isn't necessarily true. While the covers of both *Along for the Ride* and *Both Sides of Time* let potential readers know the books are romances, *Both Sides of Time* gives its readers additional details about specific aspects of the book so that potential readers who are interested in more than just romance will be attracted to the book.

*Just Ella* (1999), whose various cover descriptions can be found at the beginning of this paper, is another example of a cover that can be misleading. The 1999 cover of the book gives readers a fairly complex idea of what the book is about. We know there is a princess in a castle, but she also has an identity as a commoner, and her expression shows that she is displeased about something. Her clothing also lets us know that this likely take place in some sort of medieval, fairytale land. In contrast, the 2007 cover only lets the reader know that the book is about a princess. Moreover, it looks like it may even take place in modern times. Yet beyond that, no other details are divulged. Of course, as has been previously mentioned, teenagers today seem to enjoy the simplicity of cover art because it leads to curiosity about the book. However, while in some cases simplicity works very well, the problem with it in many cases is that it reduces the content of a book to just one detail. This can be problematic because most YA books aren't about just one thing, at least the well-written ones aren't. Complexity in plot and characters are the hallmark of good storytelling. To reduce a novel like *Just Ella*, a novel that combats many issues teens today deal with, to a simple story about a princess is a tragedy. To do so is to limit the number of potential readers who will pick this book up off the shelf, and thus limit the number of teenagers who will be able to glean knowledge from it. When teens who took my survey were shown *Along for the Ride*, they could identify the genre, but could not guess any other aspect of what the book may be about. In fact, one participant said of *Along for the Ride*, "It doesn't have

any apparent elements that interest me. It looks like it focuses only on romance.” The same could be said for the updated cover of *Just Ella*. It’s a book about a princess; perhaps it’s a fairytale. However, just as *Along for the Ride* is about more than romance, *Just Ella* is much more than just a fairytale.

This problem is perpetuated because many artists never read the books they design covers for. Cat Yampbell explains, “often there is not enough time to read the book for which [an artist] must design a jacket, or the manuscript is not even provided, merely a summary of the story. As a result, the cover is superficial, ineffective, incorrect, and/or misleading” (359). Perhaps this is what happened to *Along for the Ride* and *Just Ella*.

Because simple covers often label books with one detail of the book alone, too often only specific audiences are attracted to a book. More specifically, many recent book covers tend to attract only certain genders. Caitlin Plovnick, editor for *No Flying No Tights*, a blog dedicated to children and YA book reviews, conducted a survey of 926 participants in which she asked participants what gender they thought a book was marketed toward, based solely on the cover. The results of the survey revealed that when the cover depicted a person, participants believed that the gender of that person was almost always the gender the book was marketed toward. This seemed to be the most polarizing factor. If there was a picture of a girl on the cover, it must be a book for girls. If there was no girl on the cover, either gender could read the book. However, this wasn’t always true to what the content of the book depicted. Plovnick writes, “It’s interesting to note when the content of a book turned out to be the opposite of what people concluded. For example, *Candy* by Kevin Brooks is about a guy and written by a guy, but as there is a girl on the cover, it’s concluded to be for girls.” As Plovnick’s comment would suggest, it would appear

that more and more books published recently are given not only misleading covers but also covers that limit the audience likely pick up the book.

Just like with *Candy*, many books are seen as being marketed for girls only, thus it becomes socially unacceptable for males, especially teenage males, to be seen reading them. From the results of her survey, Plovnick discovered that typically books are either marketed for females, or for both males and females, but are rarely expressly for males. In fact, out of sixty-four books, participants voted that only three were written specifically for males. Genderization seems to be a major problem with recent cover art. Because many books are marketed, or at least appear to be marketed toward a certain gender, potential readers are limited to mainly reading books that match their own gender.

On top of the problem of genderization, many YA books that are marketed solely toward girls are seen as fluffy, silly or somehow less-literary, simply because of how their covers look. From my trip to the Provo Public Library, I discovered that books by female authors were more likely to have these “girly” covers. As always, exceptions exist, such as Scott Westerfeld’s *Uglies Series*—a male author but with a covers that depict teenage girls, and J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter Series*—a female author, but a book marketed to either gender. Unfortunately though, as I searched the shelves of the library I realized that these were the exceptions, not the general trend. Maureen Johnson, author of several popular YA books, writes,

“If you are a female author, you are much more likely to get the package that suggests the book is of a lower perceived quality. Because it’s “girly,” which is somehow inherently different and easier on the palate. A man and a woman can write books about the same subject matter, at the same level of quality, and that

woman is simply more likely to get the soft-sell cover with the warm glow and the feeling of smooth jazz blowing off of it.” (qtd. in Bartel)

As Johnson says, many books marketed toward girls are seen as fluffy, silly or less-literary, whether or not that really is the case. Part of the problem is that authors don't generally have a large part in the design of their books. Bennett Madison, a YA author who has been through the publishing process several times says, “Generally, your publisher asks what you think after it's finished and too late to actually change much. Then you can ask for little adjustments” (qtd. in Gallaway). Stefanie Pintoff says that few authors have “cover approval” but many have “cover consulting,” but what exactly that means varies for each publishing house (qtd. in Gallaway). Most authors end up like Madison—they can give advice, but the publisher can choose whether or not to accept the advice. In the end, the publisher, not the author, has the final say.

So how does all of this affect society's perception of YAL? We have seen how teenagers react to YAL, but how do adults react? I would argue that the genderization of book covers leads to many books being taken less seriously than they deserve. To find out more about this topic, I perused the covers of Newbery award winning books since 2005, as well as Michael L. Printz award winning books since 2005. I also looked at the list of ALA Best Books for Young Adults from the past two years. My assumption was that if genderization was not an issue, than books with strong preferences toward one gender would be winning these awards just as often as non-genderized books were.

When examining Newbery honor books, I noticed that for the most part, the covers were much more likely to be illustrations and not photographs. Furthermore, most titles tended to be fairly gender neutral. The Michael L. Printz award books had a similar story. Almost none of the books featured covers with a person on them. Since characters on covers appears to be a major

defining quality of the “gender” of a book, with few exceptions books without a person on the cover can be considered gender neutral. However, other considerations such as title and word font are also important. ALA Best Books for Teens had more genderized books than the Printz and Newbery award lists, but by and large, the results were the same: fewer people on covers, creating more gender neutral books. A few exceptions to this rule included *Everything Leads to You*, by Nina LaCour and *And We Stay* by Jenny Hubbard, both of which were clearly marketed toward females. It may be going too far to say that committee members who decide which books get these honors consciously take cover art into account, but it also cannot be denied that genderized covers are mostly excluded from these lists. It would appear that genderization of cover art plays a role, even if it’s a small one, in how seriously our society sees YA novels, and whether or not the content of these novels can be deemed “literary.”

My exploration of YA cover art and how it has changed in the last twenty-five years has lead me to a lot of surprising conclusions, and has allowed me to consider things that would not have occurred to me otherwise. Recent changes include an increase in the presence of characters on covers, excluding the heads of these characters from the picture, greater overall simplicity, and more dramatic color schemes, particularly with the use of black and white. One positive aspect of these changes is that teenagers today seem to react positively to them. Perhaps updated covers will attract reluctant readers and continue to keep other teenagers reading. However, these changes can also cause a lot of problems regarding what type of audience they attract. Genderization, a common trend of recent cover art, can also be a major problem because it could potentially mean that a book will be taken less seriously. Unfortunately this seems to be most true for books that are marketed toward females, or that are written by female authors. It’s hard to say how this problem can be fixed. One solution might be that publishers monitored

genderization, and created fewer covers with depictions of characters on them. Another solution might be giving authors more power over the covers of their own books. Unfortunately the biggest reason cover art exists is to generate sales. If a certain trend works, then publishers will keep using it until it no longer generates sales. This means that change in this area can be hard to create. As readers all we can do is try our very best not to get sucked into the myth that a book's cover determines the quality of its content.

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