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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
filled with unknown books and authors, a book’s cover must provide visual intrigue to entice a consumer. Cover art is a key factor in a book’s success. Alan Powers explains the power of the cover:

The design of book covers helps to make a book something more than mere “information,” something that, even though it may have many thousands of identical siblings, still demands a relationship, something that when given, defines the values of the giver and recipient. The best book covers possess a form of hidden eroticism, connecting with some undefended part of the personality in order to say “take me, I am yours.” (11)

Publishers consider the entire design of a book, including the spine (which is often the book’s sole introduction to a potential consumer), the size, shape, paper texture, font, etc. “Grabability” is a key marketing concern. The book must visually leap off the shelf and “grab” the consumer’s attention so that the consumer will “grab” the book.

Materiality and Marketing

Although the quality and feel of a hardback may lead to its desirability, rising production costs and related cover price increases make hardcovers unaffordable for many. Paperbacks are often traced to English and American dime-novels or penny dreadfuls of the late 1800s or to the 1938 release of Pearl S. Buck’s *The Good Earth* in the United States. In Britain in 1935, however, Penguin created and introduced the first respectable mass-market paperback. The Penguin imprint denoted quality literature at affordable prices. These paperbacks were targeted at the masses and were sold in bookstores as well as newsstands, railway station kiosks, drugstores, and five-and-dime stores. While trade publishers paid royalties to authors, mass-market publishers either reissued trade paperbacks, purchased the product directly for a flat fee, or marketed works written by the publishing company’s in-house writers. Paperbacks were less expensive to produce. To maintain lower costs, mass-market books were smaller than trade books, measuring approximately seven inches tall by four inches wide, and lacked jackets, even in hardcover. In contrast, trade paperbacks commonly measured eight inches tall by five inches wide or larger and were designed for sale to members of the trade, booksellers, and wholesalers. Initially published in hardcover with expensive covers and jackets, trade paperbacks were released or reissued when sales permitted; these paperbacks were of higher quality and slightly more expensive.

In Adult Literature books, trade size denotes quality Literature (with a capital “L”), while mass market size denotes popular literature (with a lower case “l”). In Children’s Literature, however, size denotes audience.
In 1967, Penguin published S. E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* and began the market that would come to be recognized as Young Adult Literature. The format of the paperback of *The Outsiders* set the standard for the YA genre. Published as a mass-market paperback, *The Outsiders* was smaller and less expensive than the trade texts commonly used for Young Readers or the pre-teen audience. The book’s size set it apart from the trade paperbacks and suggested that the book was intended for a more mature audience—not a child, but a Young Adult. The more affordable price also enhanced its market. Books for Young Readers are often purchased by adults who perhaps can afford the cost for trade books; but teenagers who buy their own books are considered more cost conscious. The mass-market paperback is seen as the key way to attract teenagers to purchase literature.

Low cost and smaller size do not guarantee that books will reach teenagers. The Young Adult genre and market has been problematic since its inception. Defining and promoting the genre was, and continues to be, plagued by four major problems: audience, “acceptable” subject matter, location in stores, and marketing and publicity.

*The Young Adult Audience*

To whom, exactly, does one market YA literature? How does a book reach its intended audience and how is an intended audience determined? At what age does one move from Young Reader chapter books and novels into Young Adult novels? Motivated by pressure from peers, parents, and educators, children who read will move directly from Young Readers into Adult Literature, completely bypassing most, if not all, of the Young Adult novels. How can publishers create a market specifically for the teenage audience? Does YA need to encompass the ages of 12–18? 13–19? 12–25? 14 and up? Tracy van Staaten, associate director of publicity at Simon & Schuster Children’s Books, notes, “The biggest obstacle to teens is not knowing what to read. There are excellent books out there, but kids don’t know what they are or where to find them” (qtd. in Maughan, “Making”).

The subject matter of a YA book is different depending on whether the book is intended for a thirteen-year-old or a seventeen-year-old. Despite intended age determinations for these books, liberals and conservatives continue to battle over the age appropriateness of subjects such as relationships, sex, drugs, and death. Judy Blume, an author of books for young readers, caused a scandal in 1975 with *Forever* (1975), which is commonly considered the first YA book to deal with teen love and teen
pregnancy. Although Bradbury Press infuriated Blume by advertising the book as Blume’s first adult book, *Forever* is a Young Adult novel; it soon made its way into the teen audience (Foerstel 107). Sharyn November, senior editor at Puffin and Viking Children’s Books, said “Gatekeepers often underestimate what teens can handle. [Teens] know a lot. They self-censor when they read—they skip over what they don’t understand and focus on what makes sense to them at that point in their lives” (qtd. in Maughan, “Making”).

Young Adult publishers are journeying into new and potentially dangerous subjects. One YA editor notes, “As more and more edgy fiction is being published, the books are dealing with issues that hadn’t been dealt with before: oral sex, male rape, incest. There seem to be no boundaries any more” (qtd. in Milliot et al. 39). In 2004, bookstores were filled with YA books that addressed edgy subjects: Cynthia Voigt’s *When She Hollers* (1994) and Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak* (rape) (1999); Sarah Dessen’s *Dreamland* (2000) and Alex Flinn’s *Breathing Underwater* (2001) (emotionally, mentally, and physically abusive relationships); Patricia McCormick’s *Cut* (2001), Shelley Stoehr’s *Crosses* (1991), and Alice Hoffman’s *Green Angel* (2003) (self-mutilation); Margaret Bechard’s *Hanging on to Max* (2002) and Angela Johnson’s *The First Part Last* (2003) (teen fatherhood); and Linda Glovach’s *Beauty Queen* (1998) (most of the aforementioned issues as well as teenage exotic dancing, threesomes, and heroin addiction). Amazon.com enables teens to find particular issue books by clicking on “Teen Books,” then “Social Issues,” which provides headings such as “Dating and Intimacy,” “Drug Use and Abuse,” “Pregnancy,” “Suicide,” and “Violence.” A search box allows users to enter one’s own issue. Young Adult Literature has broken nearly every boundary of acceptable subject matter in trying to address real-life problems and intrigue teen readers.

**Location, Location, Location**

After books are finally determined “age appropriate” (or controversial enough to be financially successful), the problem is location in the stores in which they are sold. Where should these titles be shelved so they are easily accessible to the teen audience? While younger children will read, and often prefer to read books for older kids, teens will neither pick up nor read books which they determine to be for younger readers. Teens do not even want to be seen in the children’s area of a bookstore. One YA editor acknowledged this phenomena: “Teens are not likely to go to the children’s section of a bookstore. They want to be able to find books for
themselves without suffering the embarrassment of having to go into the
children’s section” (qtd. in Milliot et al 39). Before 2000, corporate
bookstore chains, such as Barnes & Noble and Borders, incorporated the
Young Adult section into the Children’s section. Teenagers were forced
to walk by picture books and young readers books to literature specific-
ally marketed to their age group. Teenagers would not enter the
Children’s section to access the Young Adult area. Lorna Ruby, juvenile/teen buyer for Tatnuck Booksellers & Sons, the largest independent
bookseller in New England, said, “We used to have the kids’ section
chronological by age. The YA section was way in the back. Girls went
back there and shopped but boys hardly ever came down there” (qtd. in
Rosen 85).

Booksellers’ gradual recognition of the many problems associated
with the YA market induced them to concentrate on marketing. This
resulted in two major changes: the location of Young Adult books in
bookstores and the label of those books intended for teenagers. Leslie
Morgenstein, co-president of 17th Street Productions (a developer and
producer of entertainment media for teenagers) and president of Alloy
Entertainment (a teen media entertainment company), acknowledged,
“There are big problems in retailing and merchandising books. We are
not seeing the same success that TV, film and movies are. Sales of teen
books have not taken off. Part of that is because teens don’t have a place
to go, they don’t know where to find their books” (qtd. in Maughan,
“Teenage Growing” 30–31). Bookstores began to separate teen literature
from the typical Children’s Literature area. To attract, rather than repel,
teen readers, Barnes & Noble and Borders moved and renamed the area
of books intended for the teenaged audience into its own section. By
2000 in most bookstores, the new YA section is still adjacent to the
Children’s Literature, but is outside the area for younger children. In
1999 and 2000, many publishers and bookstores reclassified these areas
because they were concerned that teens were unclear about the Young
Adult designation. In bookstores and on-line sites terms such as “Teen
Literature” and “Teen Series” were developed to clarify and magnify the
separation of the genres. Josalyn Moran, director of children’s books for
Barnes & Noble, said, “We felt the new moniker is one that teens are
more comfortable with” (qtd. in Maughan, “Teenage Growing” 31).
Borders, however, did not alter the section label from Young Adult to
Teen Literature. Ami Hassler, YA book buyer for Borders, explains, “We
still call the category Young Adult because our research indicates that
teenagers were not opposed to the section being called Young Adult, but
they did have a definite dislike for the name Teen.” Although Hassler
states that “sales have grown exponentially since 1998 [when the books were moved], other statistics suggest that for most publishing houses and bookstores, these alterations have not come to fruition” (Hassler). Currently, this theory has not worked as well as booksellers hoped. Moving the area may not have been enough.

After Young Adult book sales peaked in 1999, at $38.9 million, sales in 2000 and 2001 showed a steady decline. Although paperback sales in 2000 and 2001 outweighed hardback sales by nearly five to one ($25.5 million vs. $5.2 million), overall book sales dropped to $37.6 million in 2000 and $30.8 million in 2001 (Roback and Bean 75). The 2004 Children’s Book Council Industry Sales Survey for the years 1999 through 2003 reported that YA hardcover net unit sales increased 14.8 percent and YA paperback net unit sales increased 5.3 percent from 2002 to 2003 (Garrison). These figures would suggest that relocating and renaming of the Young Adult section may have been successful. Yet, according to the Association of American Publishers, Children’s and YA hardcover sales were up in 2003 (mainly because of the release of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*), yet paperback sales fell five percent (“Hardcover” 5). The AAP reports that this drop followed a decline in 2002 of 0.6 percent in paperback sales (Milliot “Most” 53). Ipsos BookTrends 2003 Sales Report also reported a rise in sales in 2002, but a 5.6 percent decline in 2003 (Rappaport). The report suggests that retail bookstores account for the drop: although consumers bought about the same number of Young Adult books in 2003 as they did in 2002, “the decline stemmed by cutbacks in buying of paperback books—especially trade paper bound titles which account for one-half of the units bought for teens 14–17 years old” (Rappaport).

The discrepancies in statistics make it nearly impossible to determine the success of the alterations in bookstore location and moniker. Diane Roback and Joy Bean note, “The book publishing industry, and the area of children’s books in particular, are notoriously underreported statistically. And for the statistics that do exist, the categories of children’s books don’t always correspond to how publishers categorize their own books, which can make the numbers confusing and/or unusable” (72). Moving and renaming the YA area does not appear to have provided the necessary stimuli for teens to find, and purchase, literature intended for them.

**Marketing**

In the early twenty-first century, publishers began to reformat tradition-ally sized teen books into trade size and traditionally sized Young Reader
books into mass market or teen-size books to suggest that these books transcend the boundaries of age, and to promote the same books to a larger market. Angus Killick, former vice president and director of retail marketing at Penguin Putnam, said, “The chains are very proprietary about where to place a book, so for some of our titles we want to get them shelved in as many different places as we can. There’s no way that a nine-year-old kid goes to the adult fantasy section, and adults do not browse the YA section” (qtd. in Maughan, “Teenage Growing” 28). Many books, such as Elizabeth George Speare’s *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* (1958) and Scott O’Dell’s *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (1960), are classics previously marketed solely for Young Readers, but now also available as mass-market paperbacks. Teens associate the larger size books with younger children. This expansion enables teens to read Children’s Literature classics without being concerned about the appearance of the book. Killick continues, “We are treating teens as adults, which is how they want to be treated. If you produce books that look like adult books, [teens] are more likely to buy them” (qtd. in Maughan, “Teenage Growing” 28). Teenagers seem to favor smaller, slimmer books that can easily fit into a jacket, pocket, or purse. In the late 1990s, publishers introduced a new, trim hardback size at a lower price to entice teen interest in hardback books. This failed as teens favored smaller, lighter, less expensive books. Some publishers refuse to give up; Andrew Smith of Random House believes that “if a book is big enough and the buzz is big enough, we can sell a lot of hardcover copies” (qtd. in Rosen 86). While this may be true of publishing phenomena, such as J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series, in general statistics suggest otherwise.

*Publishers Weekly* and BookExpo America conducted a 1998 survey on teens’ reading and recreational habits. Surveying one hundred teenage book buyers, the study indicated that teens spend nearly ten percent of their disposable income on books. Every three months, “book-buying teens” (the key phrase) have approximately $600 of disposable income; about $50 is spent on books (Scott). In a far larger survey in 2001, the Rand Youth Poll, showed that only one percent of teens’ total spending is on books (DiMassa 2). The *PW/BEA* study reported that seventy-nine percent of teens polled prefer paperback books. Boys buy thirty-six percent of their books in hardback compared to the fifteen percent purchased by girls. Fifty-seven percent of the teens agreed that the book’s cover is the greatest influence on their choices. For recreational activities, reading was the last choice for boys and the third to last choice for girls, beating the Internet and playing computer or video games (Scott).
Publishers also are encouraging authors to use one-word titles, such as Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak* (2001), Patricia McCormick’s *Cut* (2000), Melvin Burgess’s *Smack* (1998), M. T. Anderson’s *Feed* (2002), and *Thirsty* (1998). Publishers believe that the single word title is snappy and hip. The starkness of the single word enables an immediate focus on the title. The publishers hope a sparse title will generate curiosity and enhance the grabability factor. Following this trend, publishing companies are renaming their YA imprints with one-word tags such as Scholastic’s “PUSH,” Penguin Putnam’s “Speak,” Harper’s “Tempest,” Houghton Mifflin’s “Graphia,” and Simon & Schuster’s “Pulse.”

In 1999, the book industry accounted for only 0.07 percent of all advertising spent in the United States; this is about $160 million of more than $215 billion spent on advertising (“Your Ad” 1). Although the numbers have most likely risen, quality literature still remains upon the shelves: unadvertised, untouched, and unsold because of consumers’ ignorance about its existence. The lack of publicity in the book market reflects the common publishing adage that advertising does not work for books. An unnamed marketing director from a major publishing house acknowledges this belief: “We all know that advertising doesn’t work for books unless you have enough money to make it significant and repetitive. It’s mostly to please the author and agent” (“Your Ad” 1). If the author is neither famous, nor a celebrity, initial publicity is not in the budget.

While online bookstores and word-of-mouth via email and chat rooms have significantly helped book sales in the last several years, new imprints have strengthened their advertising to support their authors and raise sales. Many publishers have created websites, either for the teen audience or to accompany their teen imprints. Sites—such as www.thisisipush.com, teens@random, harperteen.com, teenreads.com, and alloy.com—highlight publishers’ new authors, new books, and backlists and provide forums for teens to teen culture including, of course, the books themselves. The expectation is that teenagers will discuss and promote the house’s YA titles. Smith states, “The key is having a book that really does deliver. Then teens will tell their friends and build the buzz for you” (qtd. by Rosen 85). Despite the new online sites, publishers continue to depend on word of mouth for publicity.

Another advertising campaign that publishing houses are attempting to reintroduce is an old technique—the sampler magazine, either in print or online. These catalogs focus on new and noteworthy books to generate consumer interest. Like the old buyer’s catalog, sampler magazines incorporate new and backlisted products. Scholastic’s teen imprint...
PUSH is complemented by its online sampler at www.thisispush.com; Penguin’s teen imprint, Speak, has its sampler, Preview, on the Penguin Putnam website. In Preview’s “Letter from the Editor” in the September 2004 online newsletter, Tracy Tang, president and publisher, promises that “What all Speak books will have in common are high quality paperback editions, compelling covers, and above all, wonderful writing by acclaimed authors” (Tang). The promises of “high quality paperbacks” and “compelling covers” take precedence over “wonderful writing” despite the “above all” disclaimer. The order these attributes are highlighted is significant; the focus remains on marketing and the paratext.

The more enticing the cover, the more it stands out in samplers. In 1998, Kate Klimo, publishing director for Random House Children’s Publishing, acknowledged, “The marketplace is tougher today. You need every advantage when everybody is competing for the same customer, the same shelf space. More than ever, the cover is seen as packaging, the poster for a book” (qtd. in Maughan, “Paperback Reissues”). In 2004, the marketplace continued to be difficult. Book covers are more graphically sophisticated as they try to capture the elusive, yet profitable, teen audience.

Teenage Research Unlimited reports that in 2001, thirty-two million teens spent nearly $172 billion, approximately $104 per teen per week (Rosen 84). Alloy Entertainment, an online company that sells trendy products to teenagers and tracks youth trends, reported that in 1999 teens influenced more than $450 billion in purchases, mainly in music. There are approximately 30 million teen consumers (Maughan, “Teenage Growing” 28).

While major bookstore chains continue their desperate attempts to attract and maintain the teenage market, publishers are altering the paratext, particularly covers, spines, and sizes, to charm teen readers. Andrea Martin, marketing manager for Tyndale Kids noted, “It’s a challenging market to reach because the trends come and go so fast. A lot of teens prefer to read adult books. . . . From the research I’ve done, this is an age group that’s a lot more savvy than they used to be, and a lot more mature” (qtd. in Kiesling 32). If a teenager is not looking for a specific title, author, or genre, the cover is the factor that sells one book over another. In 1991, Betsy Groban, vice president and associate publisher of children’s books at Little, Brown, said that the cover of a book is “absolutely the single most important thing about the physical object that is a book” (qtd. in Feldman 1).

In the 1970s and early 1980s, artists creating teen novel covers used primarily watercolors to depict pensive looking teens in a scene from the
book, or during a key moment for the protagonist. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, photographs of brooding, contemplative teenagers gradually replaced watercolors. Sophisticated graphics in many media forced publishers in the late 1990s to create dramatic and stimulating, “fast and furious” book covers. Craig Walker, vice president and editorial director of trade paperbacks at Scholastic, noted, “It’s amazing how quickly art looks old. Style has changed so much for teenagers . . . older covers were painted from models and look really dated. We wanted to give these books a more contemporary look and give teens the kind of graphic image they’re now used to looking at” (qtd. in Maughan, “Paperback Reissues”).

In 2001 through 2003, the trend was toward less realistic, more representational covers—no people, just images—to achieve cross-gender, multicultural appeal. M. T. Anderson’s *Burger Wuss* (1999) hardback cover depicted an angry, if not slightly demonic-looking digitally created fast-food server against a background of flying fries, spattering ketchup, and a falling hamburger. The 2001 paperback edition is different. The top half of the cover is black, on the bottom a flattened cheeseburger, like a McDonald’s, perches precariously on a lime green band, as if on a shelf. Jerry Spinelli’s *Star Girl* (2000) features an aqua blue cover; the main image is a lime-green girl stick figure. Above her head is a bright yellow, five-point star. The cover does not provide the book’s title, only the author’s name in yellow across the top. The words “Star Girl” only appear on the spine, in yellow. Many publishers seem to believe that unusual, ambiguous graphic images, such as these, are more exciting and necessary to compete with modern visuals and have a cross-gender appeal.

In 2003 and 2004, characters, rather than symbols, returned to book covers, but in a technologically unprecedented manner. Graphics created with computers enable book jackets to feature imaginative, innovative covers that may increase the teen “grabability” factor; improved printing techniques also increased the use of eye-catching holograms, foil, and matte lamination. Borders’ YA book buyer Ami Hassler notes, “The covers in this category are driven by today’s fashion world. Teens, particularly teen girls, are smart, savvy shoppers and they want the look of what they read to reflect current trends. Hence, the covers that have bold single images or use the most popular colors of the season tend to fare very well” (Hessler). *Confessions of a Backup Dancer* (2004) by Anonymous, as told to Tucker Shaw, exemplifies this current trend in YA book covers. A posterized, color image of a young woman dancing is on top of a silver metallic background. The title is in large, lime-green,
capital letters. The metallic cover and posterized image seduce the consumer into taking a closer look. Another newly altered cover is Patrice Kindl’s *Owl in Love* (1993) showing a sepia-tone, close-up photograph of a young girl with colorized features. An owl photograph is superimposed on her face. The words “Schoolgirl by day, owl by night...” are under the title. In 2004, covers attempted to represent the book as a whole, rather than one scene.

In their book, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright theorize, “In today’s complex media environment, the people who produce advertisements are compelled to constantly reinvent the ways in which they address and hold the attention of increasingly jaded consumers, who are always on the verge of turning the page or hitting the remote control” (190). Intrigue, innuendo, and sensationalism create products that force the grabability factor.

Covers must compete with the visual sophistication of consumers. Hayley Morgan, a former actress and model who studied teens for Nike’s marketing division, is currently the brand manager for Thomas Nelson’s Extreme for Jesus line of books and Bibles. She concluded that teen marketing strategies should apply to marketing teen literature. Morgan suggested that publishers need to appeal to teens with short attention spans. She explained, “They’re the ones with five different screens open on their computer monitors, TV and music playing in the background” (qtd. in Kiesling 30). Graphic artists and CD cover artists are currently among the artists designing book covers. Innovative album covers have inspired the book industry.

Teen novels must look cool, yet sophisticated; the covers must be innovative and refreshing but mature, resembling an adult book, not one for younger readers. Essentially, the book cover cannot be embarrassing to a teen. Roger Chartier noted, “No text exists outside of the support that enables it to be read; any comprehension of a writing, no matter what kind it is, depends on the forms in which it reaches the reader” (qtd. in Marotti xi).

## Misrepresenting the Text

A problem that has antagonized readers of all ages is a misleading cover. If a book is not written by a well-known author, or the publishers do not plan to financially invest in marketing a title, the creation of the cover art is often assigned to an in-house artist. Alison Donalty, art director at HarperCollins Children’s Books, explained, “The designer’s job is to take the input of editorial, sales, marketing, the chains, etc., and translate
that into a salable package that will please everyone involved” (qtd. in Britton 29–30). In a perfect world, cover illustrators read the entire manuscript beforehand; time constraints often do not allow this. Sometimes, artists skim the book or just receive a blurb. Chip Kidd described his job as figuring out what the stories “are going to look like, and how the unsuspecting consumer will perceive them for the first time” [emphasis mine]. Kidd notes in the 1995 Print article that often there is not enough time to read the book for which he 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.

An inaccurate cover is clearly evident in Budge Wilson’s The Leaving and Other Stories (1992). A book of coming of age tales, The Leaving presents defining moments of nine young girls. The events are neither traumatic nor violent, but reflect common experiences. The cover of The Leaving depicts a teenage girl looking over her shoulder in terror as a kерchiefed figure who carries a suitcase walks into the woods. White letters against the dark blue background of the sky warn, “You can never go home again.” The cover misrepresents the collection and misleads potential readers. Teens interested in tales of terror and mystery may be drawn to the cover and subsequently be disappointed by the content. The book failed to reach readers of realistic fiction who were most likely its intended audience. Donalty notes, “It’s been said that when a book does well, it’s the writing, but when a book bombs, it’s the jacket” (qtd. in Britton 30). The inaccuracy of the cover may be why, in 2004, The Leaving is out of print, despite its excellence.

In an informal discussion in the early 1990s at Books of Wonder, an independent New York City children’s bookstore, noted fantasy author Tamora Pierce confided her disappointment with the original United States paperback covers for her Song of the Lioness series. The books trace the adventures of Alanna, a young princess who switches places with her twin brother so that she can become a warrior and he can learn magic. While Pierce was pleased with the covers of the hardbacks, the paperback versions looked to her more like “soft porn” than children’s fantasy (Maughan “Paperback Reissues”). The covers of the paperbacks use vibrant jewel tones to depict a buxom, long-legged vixen who wields a sword. The hardbacks, in muted browns, grays, and greens, depict a pre-adolescent girl dressed as a boy, looking pensive, but determined. Shannon Maughan, writer and editor for Publishers Weekly, recollects when Pierce’s works were redesigned:

Repackaging a book can also be championed by an editor as a labor of love. Such was the case with the Song of the Lioness Quartet and the
Immortals Quartet. . . . Assistant publishing director Mallory Loehr said, “I had read the books back in the mid- to late ’80s and had loved them. . . . That’s one of the nice things about publishing. You can try to revive books you remember from when you were a kid.” Stearns of Harcourt echoed that sentiment: “It’s nice to come across a book that you love and be able to put a new face on it and introduce it to people who can appreciate and enjoy it.” (“Paperback Reissues”)

Loehr was able to convince Random House Children’s Books to repack-age the titles in 1997 using vibrant colors and portraying a spunky, redheaded young woman accompanied by her horse or a cat, an image that could attract readers of fantasy and animal stories.

In 2002, the first book of the Quartet, Alanna: The First Adventure, was released in trade paperback size for a younger audience. The cover art is in muted jewel tones and greens, rusts, and browns. The main character strokes her palomino horse that is leaning down affectionately; a castle with flags and gargoyles is in the background. In contrast to striking neons and black or innovative graphics on many YA novels, this new cover looks romantic, placing it in a timeless past rather than a hurried present. To appeal to younger readers, the new cover shows a younger heroine than on the mass-market paperbacks. The text is being marketed to a dual audience. A text is a commodity and the greater the potential numbers of consumers, the more likely that the book will stay in print, satisfying publishers, booksellers, and authors.

Books that are not selling or are outdated often go out of print. Walker acknowledged, “We cannot repackage something that appears to be dead in the water, because it does not make sense financially. But any valuable property deserves to be remade” (qtd. in Maughan, “Paperback Reis-sues”). Reissuing books with new covers is a popular and often successful marketing attempt. Michael Stearns, Harcourt Brace editor, observes “If a cover has been out there long enough, the eye passes over it as something known. With classics you need to jog people’s attention now and then. If you can change the look and give books bright new packaging, people will look at them anew” (qtd. in Maughan, “Paperback Reissues”). To keep book covers fresh, reissues may have unusual images, art by popular illustrators, or contemporary graphics.

Many publishers refer to this trend as repackaging or branding. At a Publishers Weekly conference in 2003, one editor acknowledged the difficulty of selling new or unknown authors. “Books are now being merchandised like soda pop and washing powder. In the retail environment these days, it’s all about real estate” (qtd. in Milliot et al. 38). In publishing, authors are the commodity, the “real estate,” the brand names. Sturken and Cartwright write, “A consumer culture is a commod-
ity culture—that is, a culture in which commodities are central to cultural meaning. . . . The role of the brand is central to commodity culture” (198, 227). Recognizing the power and appeal of easy identification and recognition, publishers treat book covers as labels to advertise brand-name authors. Klimo noted, “It’s a branding-happy world. That’s the cause of much of the re-jacketing being done” (qtd. in Maughan, “Paperback Reissues”).

Initially, most authors’ works are released at different times; usually, each book is published using a different cover artist. To brand books, publishers are hiring one illustrator for all of a particular author’s work to create unified covers so readers visually recognize favorite authors via cover art. Walker observed, “More focused packaging encourages readers to look for similar titles in the line” (qtd. in Maughan, “Paperback Reissues”). When books are repackaged, the original readers who remember the first cover may be confused when they cannot find the cover they knew. A return sale may be lost. For this consumer, a new cover may feel like a betrayal. Beverly Horowitz, deputy publisher and editor-in-chief at BDD Books for Young Readers, explained, “In a year, we repackage 40 to 60 individual titles. It happens every week. We’ve got to get the kid, the teacher, the librarian and the bookseller to pick up the book. So we have to appeal to many visual expectations simultaneously” (qtd. in Maughan, “Paperback Reissues”). A common industry belief is that covers become stale; they need a facelift to suit the times and the potential audience.

Five Covers—Ten Years: The Repackaging of Weetzie Bat

Once upon a time there was a girl named Weetzie Bat. She lived in a land of glitter and glitz; a place where Marilyn’s tiny footprints were immortalized in cement at Graumann’s Chinese; where you could buy tomahawks and plastic palm tree wallets, or the wildest, cheapest cheese and bean and hot dog and pastrami burritos at Oki Dogs; a place where there was a Venice with columns and canals, even, like the real Venice but maybe cooler because of the surfers. A place called L.A. (Block Weetzie Bat jacket flap, 1989 hardcover)

Francesca Lia Block’s Weetzie Bat has been repackaged five times since its initial publication in 1989. The exception is Dangerous Angels, the anthology of the Weetzie Bat books published in 1998. Touted as “one of the most original books of the last ten years” by The Los Angeles Times Book Review, Weetzie Bat is a postmodern fairy tale set in contemporary Los Angeles (Block Weetzie Bat back cover, 1999). Block weaves stories of contemporary damsels in distress (including Weetzie, her gay friend
Dirk, and Slinkster Dog), their respective heroes (My Secret Agent Lover Man, Duck, and Go-Go Girl), and their quests for self-fulfillment, love, and happiness. Weetzie is not concerned with “happily ever after,” just “happily” (Block *Weetzie Bat* 88, all editions except 1999).

*Weetzie Bat* deals with issues such as premarital sex, date rape, and out of wedlock pregnancies to a biracial couple, witchcraft, and a ménage à trois between two gay men and a woman who want a baby. Yet, *Weetzie Bat* is not an issues novel. It has been awarded an American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults as well as an ALA Recommended Book for Reluctant Young Adult Readers (Block *Weetzie Bat* back cover, 1996). *Weetzie Bat*, text and covers, were recognizably postmodern even before the movement was identified in Children’s Literature, often credited to Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith’s *The Stinky Cheeseman and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* (1992) (Stevenson 32). No matter who the artist, *Weetzie Bat* covers are nontraditional, embracing postmodern characteristics such as the nonlinear, the fragmented, and the self-critiquing. The art on the five editions indicates the fragmented, illusory world of the characters.

The eighty-eight-page *Weetzie Bat* was published in 1989 in hardback form as A Charlotte Zolotow Book from Harper & Row; the original cover was by Stephen Spera (fig 1.). Its spine was bright orange; the title was in black, block letters. The cover was a collage of red, orange, apricot, green, and purple poster board fragments that have been torn from a larger page. On top of the poster board was a photographic image of the hair, headband, forehead, and sunglasses of a nameless, non-gender-specific person; its right hand was raised, either lifting or lowering the glasses. The rest of the person has been cut away, paralleling the manner in which the conservative, white, male-dominated society cuts away, removes, or alienates those who do not or will not conform to the hegemonic ideology of proper behavior and the societal norm. The image and text appear as if they have been cut from a magazine, separated from the original whole to create a new whole with its meaning. The text of *Weetzie Bat* celebrates those who are torn from society, individuals who find each other and find happiness outside of the box that society defines as the norm.

In 1991, the paperback was released with cover art by Lilla Rogers (fig. 2). The back and spine was dark pink, with the top two-thirds mustard yellow and the bottom third pink. The title, author’s name, and secondary characters’ names appear handwritten, in an uneven mix of capital and lowercase letters, in black marker. This style, known as brush lettering, was innovative for a book cover. Rogers said that her cover was
Figure 1. Cover art for the 1989 hardback edition of Francesca Lia Block’s *Weetzie Bat* by Stephen Spera. Copyright 1989 by Stephen Spera. Reprinted by permission of Harper & Row. All rights reserved.

Figure 2. Cover art for 1991 paperback edition of Francesca Lia Block’s *Weetzie Bat* by Lilla Rogers. Copyright 1991 by Lilla Rogers. Reprinted by permission by Harper & Row. All rights reserved.
atypical at the time, as it did not depict “the realistic, scenic look; it was floating stuff which back then was avant garde” (Rogers). The focal point was a collage of yellow sunglasses, palm trees, and a pink-and-white Empire State Building. A baby blue car, a bottle of red nail polish, Grandma Fifi’s house, Slinkster Dog, a small peace sign, fish skeleton, and flower are loosely sketched; the immature art suggests a childlike innocence and naiveté with which the novel’s characters view life—through rose-colored glasses, or, in Weetzie’s case, “pink Harlequin sunglasses” (Block Weetzie Bat 4, all eds. except 1999).

In 1992, Weetzie Bat was again repackaged again (fig. 3). This time artist Wendy Braun created an eye-popping cover using fluorescent hot pink for the back cover, spine, and author and title on the front cover. Braun’s cover is a postmodern collage including a papier maché Grandma Fifi house, a model of a pink Thunderbird convertible, marbles, feathers, plastic pigs, red lipstick, silk roses, pink sunglasses, foil stars, lavender tulle, a paper palm tree, and a big “lanky lizard” (Block Weetzie Bat 23, all eds. except 1999). These objects are placed against a colorful, painted background of roses and birds, cutout paper pigs, and puffy moons and stars. This fantasy suggests magic and wonder in a world where all is glitzy and glamorous.

Braun’s collage proposes that Weetzie’s world creates a conglomeration of nontraditional friendships and relationships. Like Rogers’s cover, Braun’s also conveys childlike innocence and boundless joy. Grandma Fifi’s magenta-and-yellow house looks as if it was created by a child. A style common to outsider, or naïve, art is used to invoke the spirit of a child’s sense of wonder. The seemingly careless placement of the objects celebrates freedom and a refusal to conform. None of the covers so far show a genie’s lamp, which, while granting wishes, also brings death, sadness, and disillusionment. Instead, the art represents moments of friendship, belonging, and happiness. In 1992, Weetzie Bat probably boasted the only neon, hot-pink spine and back cover on the Young Adult shelves. This promoted grabability and probably sales.

Weetzie Bat’s revision in 1996 was an attempt to gain male teen readers. While it may be problematic to use the female/male dichotomy to determine demographics, publishers often rely on this culturally prescribed dualism. In Gender Trouble, Judith Butler acknowledges,

Gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts . . . gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out “gender” from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained. (6)
The publishing industry is a product of its culture as a producer as well as a site of cultural creation and meaning. Through its varied marketing strategies, it often perpetuates, albeit sometimes unintentionally, divisive binaries—hegemonic notions of gender definition and division. Sales drive the bottom line for publishers, so they want to figure out how to expand their audience. Consequently, they are forced to consider, and act upon, these and other culturally constructed labels that, as Butler notes, “appear as the language of universal rationality” (13). To attract a larger, more diverse audience, Weetzie’s publishers selected David Diaz to redesign the covers of the first four books in the series, after doing the cover for the final book in the Weetzie Bat quintet, Baby Be-Bop (1995). In the same year, Diaz won the Caldecott Award for his multimedia illustrations of Eve Bunting’s Smoky Night, a picture book portraying a child’s view of Los Angeles riots. His artwork targeted a multicultural audience; Harper hoped that Diaz covers might attract teenage males. Perpetuating gender dualism, the 1996 Roehampton Survey indicated boys are more influenced by a book’s cover than girls and that “the most important single factor concerning preference for characters is that of being the same sex” (Pinsent 76). The earlier covers had been clearly
marketed to an accepted societal construct of feminine teenagers. Diaz’s covers would brand the series and potentially perpetuate further sales to teens who liked the book, but remembered neither the title, nor the author.

Diaz’s vision of *Weetzie Bat* features a dark taupe color on the front and back with muted purple highlights; the spine is the same muted purple with the title and author’s last name in a mustard yellow (fig. 4). The front cover is nearly consumed by large, unusually shaped, black letters, highlighted in oranges and yellows for the author’s name and purples and yellows for the title. The main image is a non-specific gendered, non-specific race person holding what appears to be a blue teapot; the genie’s lamp has finally surfaced. This cover has the least vibrant colors; it highlights a text portent of joy, sorrow, love, and death. When a genie from a “golden thing” (Block *Weetzie Bat* 22, all eds. except 1999) grants Weetzie three wishes, she wishes “for a Duck for Dirk, and My Secret Agent Lover Man for me, and a beautiful little house for us to live in happily ever after” (24). The genie responds, “Your wishes are granted. Mostly” (24). “The beautiful little house” is Grandma Fifi’s, who dies on the next page, leaving her house to Weetzie and Dirk. Diaz’s cover stresses the dark and more subversive elements that lie below the glitzy glam of Weetzie’s world.

In the 1990s, Children’s Literature often responded to and addressed issues such as race riots and culture wars. Diaz’s art reflects darkness and suggests an end to childhood innocence for Weetzie and her friends and points to the difficulties of adulthood. Would the darker cover attract the new audience? *Publishers Weekly* writer Angie Kiesling acknowledges, “Publishing at its core is a reactionary industry, responding to current trends, prevailing attitudes and, inevitably, demographics” (30). The new cover was more “acceptable” for teen males.

In nine years of teaching *Weetzie Bat* in Children’s Literature courses at two different colleges, I did not find one male undergraduate who said that he would want to be seen in high school carrying the texts with the Rogers or Braun covers. These unscientific survey results showed the male undergrads unanimously agreeing that the earlier covers were for girls and could be embarrassing for them to carry; the Diaz covers, they said, would hardly be noticed.

Diaz’s cover was the darkest, in both sense of the word, of all of the *Weetzie Bat* covers. Although his more subdued cover was less feminine, *Weetzie Bat* was still not attracting male readers. The cover may have been more acceptable, but it wasn’t enough. *Weetzie Bat*, even with its non-specific cover, neglected to reach a different demographic and failed to generate more sales.
In 1999, the previously eighty-eight-page book became one hundred and thirteen pages when it was completely reformatted. The different shape, released virtually simultaneously in hardback and paperback, suggested that *Weetzie Bat* was new and noteworthy. The size signified the publisher’s recognition that young readers are reading mass market teen novels; these teens need books that are differentiable from those for younger readers. Measuring approximately six inches high by four inches wide, which is shorter in height than trade or mass market paperbacks, the book was designed to stand out on a shelf, through its size and dramatic cover image.

To celebrate *Weetzie Bat*’s tenth anniversary, HarperCollins made the paratext reflect the text’s fresh and unique style. Besides the new format, thicker, higher quality paper gave the book a luxurious feel. The paperback cover incorporated jacket flaps to imitate a hardback and add to the grabability factor. The book’s description on the inside flap was altered and shortened to attract readers with shorter attention spans. “Once upon a time in a land called Shangri-L.A., a bleach-blonde punk pixie named Weetzie Bat lived a life of surf and slam. But Shangri-L.A. can be Hell-A., too, and Weetzie wanted something celestial and sparkling to keep her safe” (Block *Weetzie Bat* inside jacket blurb 1999 ed.).

Suza Scalora’s cover art returned the book to the realm of the patriarchal designation of the feminine. In neon shades of pink, yellow,
green, and orange, the main female image is a blur of motion and light. Scalora’s photograph generates a sense of movement and freedom as a character with short hair and a sequined mini-dress appears to be dancing on both the front and back covers (fig. 5). The inside jacket flap portrays the same character, broadly smiling, hands clasped to chest. The girl’s image is tinted lime-green on the front, various colors of orange, pink, and green on the back, and bright orange on the inside flap. The vivid use of color and the character’s poses suggest unbridled joy, freedom, and celebration. College student Suzanne Reid and middle school student Brad Hutchinson describe the new cover: “The style mirrors MTV—technically impressive; superficially glitzy, sensual and attractive; portraying the exciting side of sex and experimentation” (Reid and Hutchinson 3). Diaz’s attempt to masculinize or de-feminize the cover to engage male readers was abandoned; Harper’s staff recognized that Weetzie Bat does not, at least not yet, crossover to males. Whether ironic or intended, Scalora’s cover evokes a mood similar to the initial hardcover by Spera—mystery, movement, and fragmentation. The cover also returned to its original concept, abstract intriguing art suggesting a life outside of the norm; a colorful world of glamour, and adventure rather than a black-and-white world of safety and conformity; a world that will appeal to teens who are forced to live within the constructs of home, school, and peers, which they may perceive as oppressive. Sturken and Cartwright address perceptions of art:

It is important to recognize that works of art and media rarely “speak” to everyone universally. Rather an image “speaks” to specific sets of viewers who happen to be tuned in to some aspect of the image, such as style, content, the world it constructs, or the issues it raises. When we say that an image speaks to us, we might also say that we recognize ourselves within the cultural group or audience imagined by the image. (45)

Regardless of cover art, Francesca Lia Block’s Weetzie Bat continues to appeal to female teenagers, and HarperCollins is currently focusing its attention, at least for this novel, on that demographic.

It’s a postmodern book market—fragmented, abstract, self-referential. Contemporary book covers must reflect the times and connect with consumers. Changing covers, as exemplified in the history of Weetzie Bat covers, are the norm. Book-buying teens have a visual extravaganza from which to choose as books seem to leap off the shelves. John Berger wrote in Ways of Seeing (1972), “In no other form of society in history has there been such a concentration of images, such a density of visual messages” (129). More than thirty years later, images are more plentiful and sophisticated. Sturken and Cartwright observe that visual images
“are central to how we represent, make meaning, and communicate in the world around us” (1). A cover often determines whether the book will be purchased. The cover images attempt to communicate to promote grabability. As publishers concentrate on book packaging perhaps even more than the text itself, covers have become more graphically innovative. Covers may not keep a book in print nor in readers’ hands, but in the current market, book industry people agree: The cover is the key—the cover sells the book.

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