

To Judge a Book by Its Cover: A Genre Analysis About the Cover of a Book

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In this article, Lyons begins to investigate the simple genre of book covers. But, are they really that simple? Book covers are the information on the front and back of the book that includes topics about the author, the title, and the overall mood of the book that makes you want to read it. But this genre can get a bad rap because it can be easily underestimated. Book covers are strangely complicated genres that have a strong power over people. Lyons explores the power and different conventions of book covers and why we judge books because of them.

“There are some books where the backs and covers are by far the best parts.”

—Charles Dickens

Book Covers . . . So What?

Is there anything harder than picking out a book? I don't know about you, but nothing else makes me feel so unsure of myself. To you, it may be the design of the letters, the pictures, or even the color that draws you in. To me, it might be something different. It doesn't matter . . . whatever the reason, we *all* tend to judge a book by its cover. I'm a reader. I go to the library at least once a week. So how do I choose the perfect, most amazing book? Well, for me, the book cover plays a role. And, every week, when I walk out of the library with a book, I can't help but realize just how complex the genre of the book cover really is.

Before We Begin: An Important Distinction

Book covers are not the same thing as dust jackets. Before I continue sharing any of my further research, I want to make this clear. You have probably heard of a dust jacket. A dust jacket and a book cover sound like they would be the

same thing, but they're not. I actually thought this too, until I started to think about the design. Even though dust jackets are not as common in books now as they once were, I am almost certain that you have seen one. Dust jackets are thick paper removable coverings that come with some books. According to Wikipedia, "Most of these dust jackets have a small flap on the front and the back of the book." (I personally find these really annoying when I read). These flaps are used to protect the book itself against damage from dirt or mud. This is now completely opposite from the regular book cover, which is the actual covering of the book and often does not have this at all. According to *Front Cover*, "The first book covers had appeared in England. This was also the time when England was still discovering the rules of consumerism." For anyone that does not know and does not want to look it up on the internet, I will give you a brief description. According to Investopedia, "consumerism is a theory that all services and goods would be more successful economically. It is an example for the people, of larger amounts of goods and trades that are sold." Basically, all you need to know then is that book covers were created to help *sell* books.

Even though many of us would deny the fact that we judge the cover of the book, it's true. No, it does not mean that you are a bad person, or are "judgy," if you do. It just means that the marketing tricks played by cover designers are working. Believe me, there is nothing worse than coming home with a book that looks absolutely perfect, but, then, as you open the book and start reading, you realize it's terrible. Even though this doesn't happen to everyone, the ones who do experience this feel, *well*, dumb. Why did you pick *that* book, the worst one on the shelves? It looked good, you thought. Sometimes, in a time like this one, we may feel like we do not have the best sense of judgment. But, once I started to think about the genre of the book cover, I began to notice things that some people may have not seen. And, then, I kept asking myself questions as I researched. While pondering over this, it led me to my first main research question: *How does the cover of a book influence a certain audience to pick a book to read?*

Why Book Covers?

I chose to research the genre of book covers because it sounded very interesting to me. Since I would have to research this for a few months or so, I definitely could not lose interest in it, or the experience would be absolutely dreadful. As I have said, I am a big reader. I also wanted to pick something that I was familiar with and have a lot of experience with. Even though this topic is nearly impossible to research (I had a bit of a tough time finding the information that I needed), it is fun, and I knew it would hold my interest for quite a long time.

A History Lesson

First off, please don't skip this section because of the title. I know it sounds boring, but please stick with me. Back to the topic at hand, the first step of my research was to define the book cover. *What is a book cover?* According to my research, "A book cover is any protective covering used to bind together the pages of a book. These covers could be made out of paper, cardboard, or plastic" (Wikipedia, Book Cover). Okay, that's good. But I think I need to get a little more in depth than that. I think that I need to step away from Google for a bit and think about this myself. At first I thought that book covers included advertisements about the book, with vibrant colors and bolded words. Sounds simple, right? That's what I thought, too.

I began to look back to where book covers actually came from. As I did more research, I found out that the first "book covers" originated during the medieval times. The only flaw that I noticed was that these normally had no words or text on the front. This was because the purpose of this early "book cover" (really a dust jacket; remember my distinction earlier?) was to protect the book from being damaged. That's it. Even though there might have been a few gems or something on the spine of the book itself, they were most likely a little bit more boring than most. During this time, there were special ways of producing these book covers to fit in with the society and how goods were produced. Through my research I learned that there were a few new techniques for mechanical bookbinding introduced during book cover production in the 1820s. For example, I read that, "At first, the go-to material for bookbinding was cloth, and then it became paper. This was because it was extremely cheap, and became a staple for the economy. These easy, mechanically produced book covers originally became possible because of the mechanically produced paper, and the steam-powered presses, and other machines" (Wikipedia, Bookbinding). After reading this, I realized that this must be correct, considering that the first printing presses were invented in 1816 by George Clymer (Harry Ransom Center). I also identified that these printing presses were invented around the same time, when the latest in the 1800s was the monotype machine, which was much smoother and faster than other machines invented in past years. And since most of these machines were used to create paper, this fits in perfectly to the bookbinding process and how much easier it was for the economy to create this product in mass amounts.

Okay, I think that's enough of a history lesson for now. I think it's time I begin the next step in my research. I have a bit of background information about book covers. Now, it is time to consider the marketing techniques I have been thinking about.

The Secret Weapon

Don't worry, it's not really a weapon. It relates more to a marketing tool, as I have previously said. You may not realize it, but the designers of the covers of the books you are reading are taking advantage of you. Hang on, pause for a minute here. Please don't put down this article and go sue somebody because they are using mind control or something. (It's not like that; really, I swear.) Alright, now that I have solved this predicament, let's start again. "Whether you choose to believe it or not, the opinion you have of the last book purchase you made was a result of observing these attributes—to a certain extent" (Thacker). These attributes in the quote further read to include the price of the book, the design, and the genre of the book you are reading. The genre that you read depends on the style, the font, the pictures, and even the author of your book. Let's face it, book covers are spread across a vast variety of different genres (after all, they are for books and reading material). The potential buyers of the book may want a preview of the genre so that they know what to expect. This means that the information on the cover of the book plays a large role in the effectiveness of marketing to buyers. Most book covers have small bits of information that leaves the audience wanting more.



Figure 1:
The book cover of
Amityville Horror
by Jay Anson.

How About an Example?

Okay. The answer to my simple marketing question laid in looking at an example. So, I decided the best thing to do would be to analyze a certain book cover. Even though I am only providing you with one example of this genre, I think that you will get the point. I realized that the design of the cover is dependent on the genre of the book itself. Let's take horror books, for example (because I read them the least). When I went to Google and saw this book (see Figure 1), I kind of wanted to read it, which was kind of weird. I noticed that

the background design of the cover, the letters, and the overall mood affects and influences the decision of the audience whether or not to buy the book. In the example I was analyzing I noticed things like the hues of red, the font, and even the background image. Sometimes, we can find mood inside of different colors and patterns on the book cover itself. According to Infoplease, colors show a lot. “Some hues of red can relate to emotionally intense color, red stimulates a faster heartbeat and breathing. Black can also relate to authority and power. It can also seem evil and aloof. Yellow colors are also attention getters and very bright.” I saw evidence of this in the book cover I was looking at (*Amityville Horror*), but I have also noticed that colors are used frequently to convey emotions in other books, television shows, and even movies.

So, there you have it. When considering the main colors found on the book cover, they all relate to the main story’s plot. The designer of the cover I was analyzing obviously wanted the readers to understand that this book was meant to be horror and wanted to attract the right kind of audience. While also looking on the cover of the book, you can sometimes identify a background image on the back of the book. While some books may be left a little plain, this book shows a background image that may change your opinion of the book. (Since I hate the genre of horror, I could obviously tell that this was not for me, just by looking at the image). This may also happen for you, but not with this specific genre. It all basically depends on the reader’s personal preferences.

You also notice that the font on the book is very large and ominous. Beyond color, some books tend to include a small sentence about the book on the front of the cover. This small sentence included in some genres determines the different moods of the audience and who will be interested in reading the genre. Sometimes, these small phrases can be quotes from reviewers or the author, or they can be a quote found inside of the book, or they may even include the author’s personal preference about the book itself. This sentence or phrase also might play a role in whether or not the audience likes the book because it can set the mood of what they are going to be reading. Thinking about this, it pointed me to my next step in my research: *How would I write an effective book cover myself and make it persuasive to my audience?*

The Convention Detection

Now that I have a little bit of background information on book covers, it is time to consider a few of the rules or conventions of this genre. In order for my research to progress further, I needed to see how to make a book cover myself. In order to make the (almost) perfect book cover, you need to consider

the audience's point of view. What would I want to read? What am I looking for in the perfect book? By considering the "secret weapon," you are able to make a book cover ready to sell. My next step of the process was to research the different aspects of book covers and what it takes to write one.

Before I had begun my research and this article, I had made a short list of what I *thought* book covers needed to include to be considered "correct." This includes all of the conventions and rules that I had *thought* that you needed:

- Correct grammar and punctuation
- A title, the author's name, and a picture
- Bright images to catch the audience's attention
- Possibly a short description of the book on the front

I know, this small list is a little sad, but that is why I have decided to research this topic. As you can see by my conventions list, I wasn't quite correct. The images or colors on the cover are not limited to bright or bold. There are dozens of different marketing strategies that book designers may use. "The cover of your book is the first thing people will see—so you want to make sure that it looks professional" (Completely Novel). As I have said, the "secret weapon" they use is a variety of different ideas and designs. Some designs may be big and bold to catch the reader's eye. Yet, some designs are simple and blank and have a mysterious feel to them. These may make the audience curious and make them want to read it. Whether you like what is on the inside of the book or not, you are ultimately individually going to want to read the book because of the cover.

The Small Stuff

According to Fred Showker, the author of *Book Cover Design Tips & Tricks*, "There are many things that you want to consider. You want to know the material. What is the mood of the book? Could the characters be matched in the setting? Another information topic includes the readers. Who is the target reader? What production tools could be useful to catch my readers' eyes?" After I had researched the conventions of book covers, many of the generic conventions include word weight, good eye flow, color breaks, readability, and correct grammar conventions and spelling (Book Cover design concepts, Fred Showker). I noticed that I didn't think most people pay attention to these details, and yet they are quick to judge with one glance of the book. This shows that the cover of a book plays a large role in its marketing effectiveness. Most of the audience that you want to buy your book

would want a preview of the book they are about to read. This is because they want to know what type of book they are investing their time in, and they want to know the overall emotion of the book. With this thought in mind, it leads me to my next section of research.

Book Covers in the Wild

On the board in Mrs. Kieffer’s classroom it said, “Primary research.” Since, sadly, I had no idea what that meant, I turned to the almighty Google once again. According to The Daily Egg, “Primary research is new research, carried out to answer specific issues or questions. It can involve questionnaires, surveys or interviews with individuals or small groups.”

To help to further my research, I sent out a (sort of) informal survey and a series of questions that would be helpful to my research. My audience in this survey was my other classmates. I asked them what genre of books they read and if they judge books by their covers. These were the results I got for one of the last questions on the survey.

What to you, is the most important part of a book cover? (18 responses)

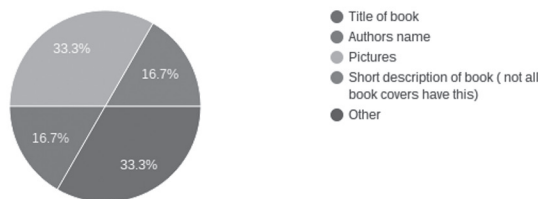


Figure 2: Participant responses to what is the most important part of a book cover.

As you can see in Figure 2, 33.3% of my classmates said that both the pictures and the title of the book are the most important parts of a book cover. I expected this since the conventions and rules of book covers are somewhat vague. On the lower half of the results, 16.7% of my classmates said that the short description of the book and the author’s name are most important. If all of this information is clumped together, it shows that most of my generic research is correct. It shows that the different marketing tools in book cover designs work on this audience. Even though, to me, there is not one that is more important than the other, some members of the survey may choose books based on covers that use one certain trick more than the other. And, as I have stated earlier, the genre of the text and the overall mood plays a role in what marketing strategies to use.

This was another one of the survey questions that I asked my classmates. Once again, I was happy with the results of these responses.

Do you think that the cover is important in choosing a good book? Choose one.
(18 responses)

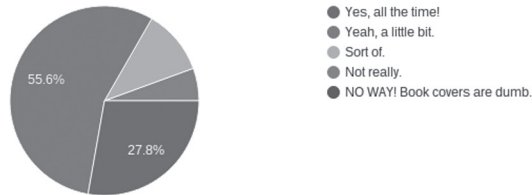


Figure 3: Participant responses to whether a book cover is important in choosing a book.

55.6 % of people said “yeah, a little bit.” In second place, 27.8 % said “yes, all the time!” Behind them, 11.1 and 5.6 % said “sort of” and “not really.” This to me shows that my audience has a pretty decent understanding of book covers and what a large role they play in a person reading a book. As for the people at the bottom who think otherwise, I think that the way they pick out books is different. They may also read slightly less than the people at the top of the list (though, this might not be true). I also wonder if this is because these people may not have as much experience picking out books, or if they just get very lucky with their choices.

In order to not just target 8th grade audiences for their opinions, I decided I wanted to raise my age range slightly. I also sent out the survey to my college pen pal so that she could answer the same questions that the 8th grade survey takers did. Interestingly, I noticed that she answered almost the same as most of my classmates did. I personally sent her questions through a letter (which was required for the class). It included the same questions that I had asked my classmates to answer. Here are her answers:

“I think that the front cover aspect would be definitely be the photo or picture that depicts or represents the book as a whole.”

“While the cover is an important part of the portrayal of a book and the first thing you see, I do not like to judge the book by the cover. Though, the cover, however does draw me in but from there I typically read the summary and make my decision based off of that.”

If you compare the two responses from my college pen pal and my other classmates, you see that the majority of the 8th grade responses are, for the most part, similar to her response. Based on all of these responses, people within these two ranges of age are both influenced by marketing tools by

designers and are familiar with the undefined power of book covers. Even though one person of a different age doesn't represent all others, I do think that this information does somewhat help in my overall primary research.

What's the Big Deal Anyways?

Okay, one more survey example, and then I promise I am done.

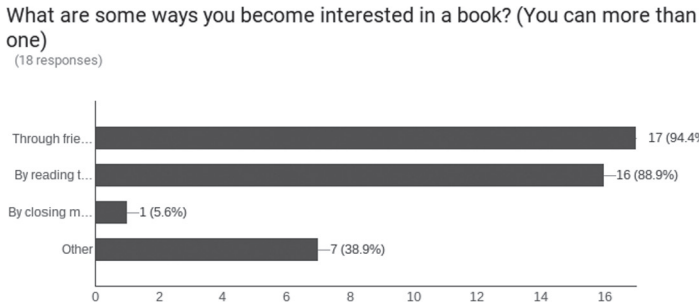


Figure 4: Participant responses to ways they become interested in a book.

According to Figure 4, those surveyed became interested in a book in very specific ways. Since the information is a little cut off in my image, here are the four options that those surveyed chose from:

- Through friends or other people telling me about them
- By reading the cover and the blurb on the back of the book
- By closing my eyes and choosing a random book off the shelves
- Other

I know, these options may seem a little simple, but they represent what I think most people relate to when they pick out a book. I also bet that you are still wondering about the title of this section. What's the big deal anyways? I guess a few of you are thinking this in your head as you read: "What's the point? Can't our misjudgment of a book easily be avoided?" Well, that's what I thought, too, until I looked at the survey responses. 94.4% said the first option, 88.9% said the second option, 5.6% said the third option, and 38.9% said the fourth option. (Just in case you don't know, they all add up to more than 100 because you can choose more than one).

Hang on a minute, pause, slow down. After I read the options over and over again, I realized that I had hit the jackpot. Eureka! I noticed that the majority of people said that they rely on friends and others to pick out their books for them. Bingo. *But what exactly does that mean?* I think that it means that,

most of the time, you don't choose your own book. Others do. It's almost like a chain of people passing excellent reviews about a book. Even though it's not your fault, and you sometimes can't help it, you almost have to pile on and read the book. This happens even if it is not a genre for you, or if it looks terrible. This is because, most of the time, you become completely blindsided by peer pressure and/or recommendations from other people. So yes, *THAT* is the big deal, in case you were wondering.

Okay, okay. I'm sure there are a few people who are reading this who are thinking to themselves, "What? No way, I don't do that! I totally pick out books all by myself!" Alright, you got me there. But let me ask you one thing before you jump to conclusions. Think of an extremely popular book that you have read before. Let's take *The Hunger Games* series, for example. (No, this does not count the movies. If you have not read the books before, then think of another one.) Where did you learn about that book before you started reading it? Friends? Family? Online? Chances are, you or someone you know has chosen a very popular book just based on someone else talking about it to you/them. Even if you heard about the book online, who wrote that article or social media comment or something? People wrote that (at least, someone did).

I definitely can relate to these findings based on personal experience because I have read many books that I have learned about online. In fact, one of my favorite book series, the *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling, I learned about by reading reviews and recommendations online. But, I know that I have also gotten book recommendations from friends at school or at home. Even if you don't know these people, the reviews from friends, family and/or strangers play a large role in crafting your emotions towards a specific book. But, no, that doesn't mean they are doing that on purpose, and, no, they can't read your mind. Hang on, hang on, am I rambling again? Alright, a promise is a promise, I'll be done here very soon. Let me just slow down for a second to see where my research has taken me.

The Research Road Map

At the beginning of my research into the genre of the book cover and how it influences people to buy books, things seemed simple, but there were ultimately many turns and twists that led to many different destinations about my initial topic ideas. While I ran into many dead ends and problems, I noticed these ends led to new roads and ideas for research. Basically, I have decided that the research might never end. You can always find a new path to research. But sadly, based on how long this article is getting and my need for sanity, I will have to cut you off here at the end of this conclusion.

My research began with a simple idea. But, because (not in spite) of this, my knowledge of this topic continues to progress and grow as my research ideas and my imagination expand. I think maybe I began to create my own sort of genre and to develop my own new ideas that nobody has thought about before. As I concluded this chapter in my research, I took a step back and thought, “Wow!” I was surprised by how my ideas on this genre have changed throughout this process. No, I still cannot write the perfect book, genre, or even article, but I can at least try. In a few years, I will be excited to see how the genre evolves and how it grows as I age. I noticed as I concluded that these small conventions of the book cover do not fit together in one piece of the giant metaphorical genre puzzle. But then I thought maybe they’re not meant to come together. I think that perhaps they are possibly best left a little out of place. I think it’s time that I let you judge.

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