

## Book Covers: Past & Present

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### ABSTRACT

*'Don't judge a book by its cover' is rather a common expression that relates to the fact that a not so pretty cover of a book is no yardstick to an interesting novel. However, time and age have changed this perception. Marketing strategies and promotion, associated to the business line, have managed to penetrate and further influence the world of publication into selling books that is proven a competitive business today. Thus, books nowadays tend to be dressed with glossy and pretty covers in order to display attractive pieces on bookshelves. In line with this, this study is aimed at comparing the covers of English language books from various publications with same titles but published at different ages; the past and the present.*

**Keywords:** *Book covers, promotion, past, present*

### Introduction

This section is intended to give an overview of the importance of book covers in this era where competition as far as book sales are concerned, are high and escalating among various publishers.

Books have come a long way since many centuries and ages ago. Though there is a saying that reminds us 'don't judge a book by its cover', one cannot avoid choosing a book based on its cover. It is just pure human nature to choose something based on one's interest and favouritism can never run especially in deciding to purchase a common thing like a book from the bookstore. Each cent must be worth it for each purchase because reading the right book will definitely give pleasure, whereas reading a not so interesting book will be a rather wasteful investment.

Hence, book covers is a rather interesting topic as it intrigues one's curious mind to further look into the depths of the book and makes one wonder if the book may present a new realm of experience into a brand new exuberant world or just a nice company to that cup of steaming java by the window on a rainy day. Book covers too have changed tremendously due to the influence of marketing strategies and consumer's purchase power which has increased in this new millennium, with a widespread of variety and choices that one can pick from. Even the medium of purchase has varied since the last century as one is able to purchase his or her favourite book via Internet and credit card payment right from one's comfortable chair at home. There is no more any necessity to drive up to a bookstore after queuing in the traffic jam and walking past throngs of people, making the experience of buying a simple book of one's choice rather troublesome.

On the contrary, book covers in the past centuries were rather modest and unattractive. There were no many choices offered with limited number of publications due to constraints of the print and publish technologies. Readers were forced to be satisfied with the books purchased for competition among those limited publishers were rather scarce or probably nearly nil. Thus, the book covers presented before this age was rather unattractive and portrayed the lifestyles of the generation who lived before this time.

Hence, the research question that is intended to be looked into is:

- i) Are there any differences in the designs of the book covers found in Classic books between those published then and now?

## Literature Review

This section will explain the literature review related to the topic of uncovering covers of books with the same title but published during different eras.

### Types of book covers

There are 10 categories of designs of book covers spelt out by Rouwen Lin in *The Star* on its publication on 26<sup>th</sup> May 2013 and they are presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Categories book cover designs

| No  | Category             | Meaning   |
|-----|----------------------|---|
| 1.  | Get literal          | The title and the image related to the title will be portrayed on the cover.                    |
| 2.  | Box it up            | There are texts and images splashed on the cover in boxes.                                      |
| 3.  | Eye see you          | The covers have either one eye or a pair of eye that watches the readers.                       |
| 4.  | Run on               | The title of the book is typed on big and bold letters that ran on the cover.                   |
| 5.  | Defining silhouettes | The images on the book covers are made up of dark shadows or silhouettes.                       |
| 6.  | Instruct and command | These kinds of books have covers that shout commands and instructions to read the book.         |
| 7.  | Back again           | There are figures on the book cover whereby the character turns his or her back to the readers. |
| 8.  | Head chop            | Pictures of people but with the head chopped. The attires of the characters are highlighted.    |
| 9.  | Big and bold         | The titles of the books are in capital letters and are highlighted.                             |
| 10. | Lovely legs          | Sticking a pair of legs on the cover help will give the readers a hint of the characters.       |

Source: Rouwen Lin, *The Star* (26<sup>th</sup> May 2013)

Book covers are functioned to spill the readers a hint of some gist and acts as a sneak-peak of the storyline as far as the book is concerned. However, illustrations that say too much will alienate the readers (Lohmiller, 2008) and therefore, a book cover should not let out the secret or the climax of the storyline for it will not present any suspense to its readers and this will be taken as a boring book. The readers should be able to discover the book themselves (Lohmiller). Thus, it is important for publishers to choose the perfect book cover in order to hike the sales of books.

**Methodology**

This section will look into the methodology adopted in finding out if the designs opted for book covers have changed over the years for the purpose of reprinting and promotion of book sales.




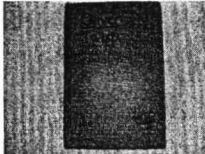




This study will look into the designs that are printed on the covers of eight classic books. The eight books from the classic edition will be picked randomly and the designs on their covers will be studied and compared based on their publication years – then and now. Thus, it will be able to satisfy the research question presented that is to find out if there are differences in the designs of these classic book covers and the reasons behind it.







**Results and Findings**

This section will explain the results and the findings of the study after the classic books taken from different eras are compared.

A total of eight classic books were chosen randomly from a website that deals with online purchase of books; [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com), and the books are presented in the table below. Classic books that are published in 2013 are compared to the books that are published between 1920 till 1955 and the designs that are used on the covers are proven different. This is because, most of the classic books have only the titles as run on as their book covers, whereas the latest published books have different designs and the publishers have got bolder with the image choices and colour variation.

Table 2: Books of past and present

| No | Book published in 2013  | Book cover designs                    | Books published in 1920-55   | Book cover designs |
|----|---|---------------------------------------|--|--------------------|
| 1  |  | Get literal                           |   | True image         |
| 2  |  | Get literal                           |  | Run on             |
| 3  |  | Get literal /<br>Defining silhouettes |  | Run on             |
| 4  |  | Get literal                           |  | Run on             |

|   |  |                     |  |             |
|---|--|---------------------|--|-------------|
| 5 |   | Get literal         |   | Get literal |
| 6 |   | Head chop           |   | Get literal |
| 7 |   | Defining silhouette |   | Run on      |
| 8 |  | Get literal         |  | Run on      |

Source: www.amazon.com

Thus, it is proven that in order to keep up with the customers' needs and preferences, book publishers too have taken this opportunity to improvise their publication business so that the book covers will be able to attract its readers. Unlike the era in the 1950, books were rather unattractive as there were no many choices to choose from various publishers.

In the words of Lohmiller (2008), he too agrees that book covers do have an impact to a reader's choice. The images and the writing on a book cover is the first window to the storyline of the book. If the readers feel that their anticipation is not satisfied, they might not opt for that particular book and thus, will look for another more appetizing book. As Lohmiller (2008) puts in his words:

*I learned the importance of book covers in my first year as a librarian when I began reading the young adult titles in our collection. I chose Chris Crutcher's *The Crazy Horse Electric Game* because on its cover were three kids celebrating an apparent victory on a baseball field, and I needed a sports book in my repertoire. One boy was hoisting another boy, whose arm was pumped in triumph, while a girl (with big hair and short shorts) gazed at him with pride and joy. Once I began reading the book, however, I realized that this was the scene from the first chapter. The hero then gets into a water-skiing accident and is partially paralyzed, his parents' marriage crumbles over their guilt and grief, and he is quickly alienated from his friends, family, and past life. He runs away to Oakland, California, to a world of gangs, drugs, and pimps (one whom he befriends), and struggles to make a new life for himself. Gritty stuff. Hardly your typical sports story. But anyone who sees the cover will expect baseball action, a little romance, and a triumphant ending. Those who want rough edges will avoid this, and those seeking simplicity will be quite surprised. And most will reject the book because, frankly, the kids look a little dorky. In 2003, HarperCollins reissued the book with a different cover. A young man extends his mitt*

*towards the camera, his face obscured by his arm. Action, intensity, and baseball. Now that's more like it.*

## **Conclusion**

In a nutshell, it is vital to have interesting book covers as designs in order to attract readers. Without covers, hardcover books can become confident blocks of wood—they don't shimmy or slide in your hands or atop tables (Mod, 2013). Thus, the industry of designing book covers alone is actually an important one as glancing through books and getting attracted to a book cover is the main function of a book cover, especially in this era. Book covers will make you pick the book off the shelf simply because you love the cover, then have it all make sense once you have committed to the story (Mod, 2013).

## **References**

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