

Judging a Book by Its Cover: Fans, Publishers, Designers, and the Marketing of Fiction

ed. Nicole Matthews and Nickianne Moody

London: Ashgate, 2007. ISBN 0754657310; 214 pp., 18 black/white illustrations, \$99.95/£50.00 hardback.

In addition to the yellowed, faded ground designed to emulate the aged appearance of used books, this book's front cover shows two different 1957 thumbnail covers for Philip K. Dick's *Eye in the Sky*, each of which interprets its subject literally. Juxtaposed, the two thumbnails present a pair of eyes staring out with great alarm at the potential reader of *Judging a Book by Its Cover*. This cover tells us that this is a book about books, visuality, and populist genres. On the back, the blurb proclaims "This exciting collection opens up a new field of enquiry for scholars of book history, literature, media and communication studies, marketing and cultural studies." Clearly, for graphic design historians, the analysis of book covers is not new; this anthology presents a welcome incursion into graphic design history terrain by an interdisciplinary group of scholars.

The book has its origins in the Association for Research in Popular Fictions, based (like its editors, before Matthews moved to Sydney) at the University of Liverpool and Liverpool John Moores University. The contributors include publishing historians, industry professionals, educationalists, media studies and literary scholars, each working to understand writing within social context. The editors regard a "focus on the materiality of books" (xi) as essential to understanding the "interaction between culture and commerce," "individual and national identities" and "the ways in which book covers help form and reflect" genres. Several chapters show how covers can be used to shift books across genres.

The chapters are divided into four parts, in a clear and appropriate structure for the series of historical and contemporary case studies which comprise the book. Part one, "Approaches to the book cover," includes a contextual discussion by Alistair McCleery, charting the

influence of German publisher Tauchnitz on the development of UK paperback publishing, primarily at Penguin. Angus Phillips's analysis of the role of book covers in market "segmentation, targeting and positioning" (p. 20) describes how a slump in the sales of Agatha Christie's books which was remedied through new covers. Val Williamson's Liverpoolian case study of the fertile genre of "regional saga fiction" demonstrates that "The process of jacket design therefore, far from remaining the realm of the house art department, becomes a focus of editorial concern from early in the publication process." (p. 32-33) Williamson notes that more high-profile authors are consulted about their covers, and "artist's preliminary sketches and completed cover designs are circulated" at "meetings of the Romantic Novelists Association North West Chapter." (p. 39) In the final chapter of this section, editor Nickianne Moody reprises empirical research of twenty years ago, on the purchase of science fiction books. Moody recognises that "Popular paperback publishing is extremely remiss in acknowledging cover artists" but also shows how fan culture, with its careful documenting of cover artists, can be helpful. (p. 45) Moody describes Richard M. Powers' surrealism-inspired abstract design for Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* (1958) as highly influential upon New Wave science fiction of the late 1950s and 1960s until a turn to more narrative approach expressed through a "muted acrylic palette". (pp. 54-5). Surrealism - specifically Yves Tanguy - receives another mention in Gerry Carlin and Mark Jones's later chapter on the use of fine art reproductions for the Penguin science fiction covers from 1961-5. (p. 100)

Part two asks "What makes a book popular?" and three chapters answer with an examination of production values by Elizabeth Webby, a lucid analysis "specifically of the role of the strapline 'Booker Prize Winner' on the cover" (p. 74) by Claire Squires and Susan Pickford's fascinating study of negative cover blurbs for Jerome K. Jerome's work, which includes a review of a French debate about the paperback as a prostitution of its literary contents. (p. 89) The latter has in common with the first chapter of part three - "The

Record of the Film of the Book: ' Cultural Industries and Intertextuality" – a concern for the publication of literary texts in paperback; Carlin and Jones explore the "paperback intellectualism" of the 1960s. Rebecca N. Mitchell's chapter is a competent review of the much-discussed relationship between books and film adaptations, with the added observation that a film tie-in cover can detract, as well as enhance, a book's appeal. This chapter could have been more original if more tightly focussed on book covers. Alexis Weedon's account of online bookstores begins by describing the shopper experience at two UK branches of Waterstones as a comparison with the online browsing experience. Weedon supplies images of Tracey Chevalier's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (which might have served as a case study in the preceding chapter) contextualised within an in-store promotion and as presented by two different online booksellers. (p. 118, p. 120) Weedon notes that in the online environment, the thumbnail book cover "leads nowhere." (p. 122)

The book's final part, "Translating Covers: Moving Audiences and the Marketing of Books" opens with Melissa Sky's discussion of lesbian pulp fiction. Sky cites novelist Ann Bannon's dislike of the initial covers for her Beebo Brinker Chronicles and her assertion that cover artists seldom read the books they designed before going on to explore the reissue of the series in "kitschy, retro covers." (p. 145). Next, Chris Richards nicely explores overlapping markets for general and young adult fiction. The book closes with Pamela Pears' chapter on the cover images used to represent Algerian women's writing and the "never-changing Occident-Orient battle over images. We run the risk of forever exoticising the Algerian woman and of reducing her to a monolith, in spite of authorial intentions." (p. 170)

The diverse approaches in this cogent collection, spanning both industry and academy perspectives, are to be welcomed. The book is a useful contextualising tool and it contains much to inform designers, design students, design studies practitioners and design historians. It might have been made more useful in three ways. Firstly, the book's extensive bibliography (pp. 171-188) takes the form of a single alphabetised list, with no distinctions

between newspaper reports, pulp fiction titles and secondary analyses. It might have served students better had the references directly followed each chapter, or if the bibliography had been arranged according to type of material consulted, or had a bibliographic essay been included. Secondly, a developed case study of the design *process*, showing working drawings and decision-making, is sorely lacking. While other publishing professionals are among the authors, designers have no voice here, and receive short shrift, and there is no analysis from a graphic design historian. Thirdly, the thirteen chapters, plus introduction, are illustrated with eighteen black and white images – some chapters have no images, most have one or two, and one has three. Elizabeth Webby's account of Tim Winton's *Dirt Music* and other Australian novels (p. 65 ff.) exemplifies how a complete lack of illustrations forces a laboured description of several images in comparison. This is ironic given that Webby's chapter traces a connection between literary success and the care and expense lavished on book design. With the exception of one back cover, one retail installation and two online bookseller screen dumps, the images show the finished front covers of the books discussed, reflecting a tendency to obscure the design process. This book is a reminder that the people who know better than anyone else how and why book covers matter - designers and design historians - need to work at sharing what we know with a wider constituency through contributions to worthwhile and useful interdisciplinary studies such as this.

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