Judging Books by Their Covers:
Adolescent Meaning Making from Newbery Book Jackets

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By

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Abstract

More books targeted at young adults will be published in 2005 than any proceeding year in the history of the United States. The goal of publishers is to sell these books. Parents, teachers and librarians, on the other hand, tend to view literature as a tool to teach socially acceptable attitudes and values. Newbery Award winning books are a set often chosen for precisely this purpose. Newbery books represent the highest quality young adult fiction on the market, and are valued by librarians, publishers, teachers and young adults. The marketing of Newbery books, for adults interested in high quality adolescent literature, is partially accomplished simply by the presence of the award on the book jacket. But publishers believe that there is something perhaps equally important that can dictate whether or not adolescent’s will read these high-quality books: the image on the cover.

Marketing, editorial and artistic input is employed when designing a cover image, however a sort of conventional “publisher’s wisdom” also influences these designs. Cover images are essentially advertisements for the book, and as such should be analyzed for messages about cultural values and power distribution especially with regard to typically “othered” groups: minorities, lower classes and girls. Too often when publishers employ “visual shorthand” to market these books they also register commonly held stereotypes about othered groups in the cover.

Adolescent’s construct meaning from book covers. Two theoretical frameworks that attempt to explain how people make meaning from images are visual social semiotics and connotative analysis through semantic differential surveys. These frameworks were tested in a case study of Island of the Blue Dolphins. Four paper-back covers printed between 1970 and 2000 were distributed to one hundred eleven middle school students. All of the covers featured an image of the main character on an island. The analysis of student responses indicated that the connotative meanings attributed to the four book covers was different. The female character on the cover of more recently published books was interpreted more positively than earlier editions.

This pattern may not hold for all books, but it is clear that students make meaning of cover art images and that this meaning influences their expectations for the book. Cover art should be critically examined before publication to avoid a conflict between the values on the book jacket and the message in the text of the book.
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Introduction

I am interested in adolescent literature. Okay, the truth is that I love it. I’m 22 years old but still enthusiastically read children’s and adolescent fiction. I like Jerry Spinelli, Louis Sachar, Beverly Cleary, Patricia Polacco, Katherine Patterson and Judy Blume. Maybe the reason I still read these books is because they guided me through childhood and adolescence. They helped me understand my own life and clarified my own budding value-system. These stories helped me figure out who I was and who I wanted to become.

I sometimes wonder if young adolescents who consume literature today are getting the same thing out of it that I did. Cover art may be one reason that they are not, for even though the text of a book remains timeless, many of the covers I once treasured have shifted under new marketing hands. I believe that cover art is important because it constructs a visual framework for the story. I remember my own adolescence, gazing at the covers of *Sweet Valley High* and *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*. When I imagined the story that particular image of the character became the character in my imagination. But these cover images, as useful as they are for readers like me to imagine a story, are primarily valued by publishing houses to advertise a book. As a student of cultural studies, I am well aware that advertising sends a particular message out to consumers and often uses visual shorthand to connect values and beliefs to the product it is trying to sell. Cover art does the same thing, sometimes at the expense of the story itself.
These projects is about adolescent literature and cover art, and the way that cover art affects how adolescents make meaning, and perhaps infer a story, from the jacket of a book. The project is divided into seven chapters. Chapter one presents an overview of developmental theories that explain changes occurring during adolescence. Chapter two explores the adolescent’s relationship with the media, particularly the way that media offers role models that shape adolescent beliefs and values. Chapter three presents the Newbery award-winning books as an adult-mediated media selected to socialize young adolescents into the adult society. Chapter four discusses marketing strategies that influence the packaging of books, especially the images on book jackets. Chapter five describes two theories that explain how people make meaning of signs and images. Semiotic theory examines the role of signs and symbols while Osgood’s semantic meaning explores the connotation that images hold. Chapter six presents a case study of young adolescents responses to four covers of the Newbery Award winner *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. Chapter seven presents conclusions and recommendations for responsible cover art design.
Chapter One
Adolescence: Developmental Theories

“I am Miguel. For most people it does not make so much difference that I am Miguel. But for me, often, it is a very great trouble” ...and now Miguel, 1953

Marketers call them ‘tweens to signify their transitory status between child and teenager. Educators call them middle-graders and create special school environments to navigate the transition between elementary and high school. Psychologists call them adolescents, a word that comes from the same Latin root as “adult,” but whereas adultus means “grown up,” adolescents means “growing up”\(^1\). Between, in the middle, growing; though flying from different sources, this language hits on the fundamental theme of adolescence: change.

Adolescence is a time of great change, a time of transition, a time of formation. During these tenuous years, which our society tends to define as ten through fourteen, an adolescent will make some basic choices about identity. Books geared toward adolescents attempt to mirror their world and usually encourage adolescents to make healthy choices. This chapter will explore the changes of adolescence in five “arenas” – physical, social, emotional, moral/political and cognitive. The changes are introduced with text from Newbery award-winning books. I submit that these quotes aptly illustrate the connections between psychological theory and media. Adolescent media, as I will evidence later on, are designed to socialize the target audience to the norms of society.

Erik Erikson laid the foundation for currently widely accepted beliefs about adolescence. His importance is made clear in the abstracts of academic articles. Authors often cite Erikson to situate their work in adolescent psychology literature. He created the framework that later scholars attempt to fit into. And his major contribution is a “ladder” of development that showcases the stages of life, particularly the stages of adolescence.

The ladder has eight stages. Between late childhood and young adulthood, an adolescent moves through stages four, five, and six. Stage five, identity versus role confusion, typically begins around age twelve and involves the creation of an identity. Erikson writes that an identity is a “sense of psychological well-being. Its most obvious concomitants are a feeling of being at home in one’s body, a sense of ‘knowing where one is going’ and an inner assuredness of anticipated recognition from those who count” (Erikson, 68). Stage six, intimacy versus isolation, describes adolescent’s deep desire for significant relationships. Erikson notes that these relationships may be romantic or platonic. Literature marketed to adolescents often features characters struggling to find themselves and true friendship. Newbery classic *A Wrinkle in Time* opens with protagonist Kate Murry sitting on her bed in the midst of a storm, shivering and worrying:

> It’s the weather on top of everything else. On top of me. On top of Meg Murry doing everything wrong.’ School. School was all wrong. She’d been dropped down to the lowest section in her grade...During lunch she’d rough-housed a little to try to make herself feel better, and one of the girls said scornfully, ‘after all, Meg, we aren’t grammar school kids any more. Why do you always act like such a baby?...A delinquent, that’s what I am, she thought grimly. That’s what they’ll be saying next. A *Wrinkle In Time*, 1962

This obsession with the opinion of those around her, insecurity in her identity and uncertainty about how to act appropriately are hallmarks of adolescence.
Physical Change

Then suddenly, something happened. I can’t explain it…an alarm began to clang inside my body. I went hot all over, and I could hear my heart banging to be let out of my chest. ‘Let go, stupid,’ part of me was saying, while another voice I hardly recognized was urging me to hold him tighter. *Jacob Have I Loved*, 1980

Adolescence entails physical growth and sexual awakening. Physical growth might involve a growth spurt, putting on or losing weight and the development of secondary sex characteristics. This is precisely what is portrayed in Lois Lowry’s 1989 Newbery book *Number of the Stars*. Peter turns to Annemarie and tells her, “You’ve grown taller since I last saw you…You’re all legs!” (Lowry, 1989). During adolescence both boys and girls experience a growth spurt and the development of secondary sex characteristics such as a deepened voice, pubic hair and under arm hair. Boys often experience wet dreams and uncontrollable erections, and girls muddle through breast growth and menstruation. Perhaps more confusing than these outward physical changes are the hormones that start pumping, leaving adolescents with new, unusual pangs of sexual desire. Romantic moments abound in literature geared towards adolescents – a ghost writer for Sweet Valley High recently said that a Marxist and perhaps paranoid view of the mainstream novels for adolescence would be that the novels are socializing adolescents to be strictly heterosexual, hardworking and completely reliable (Lehr, 54). She called this view a bit paranoid and I agree, but those sweet moments that adolescents begin to dream about in real life certainly take place in the literature:

Calvin came to her and took her hand, then drew her roughly to him and kissed her. He didn’t say anything, and he turned away before he had a chance to see the surprised happiness that brightened Meg’s eyes. *A Wrinkle In Time*, 1962

According to Freud adolescence marks the beginning of sexual drives and aggression. Freud writes that adolescents often experience cognitive dissonance when their sexual desires don’t match up with societal norms or expectations (Fuhrmann, 19).
Such is the case with Sarah Louise Bradshaw, the protagonist in *Jacob Have I Loved* (1980), who is ashamed when she finds herself infatuated with a mentor:

> The Captain had to be seventy or more. I was fourteen, for mercy’s sake. Fourteen from seventy was fifty six. Fifty six. But then my mind would go to the curve of his perfect thumbnail and my body would flame up like a pine pitch. (Patterson, 117)

Many psychological issues knot around these physical ones. For example, how should an adolescent’s budding sexual desires inform the formation of a sex-role identity?

Psychologist Morrison writes that a goal of adolescent sexual development is to construct a sort of gender identity, a “style or way of enacting one’s maleness or femaleness personally, interpersonally and societally” (Morrison, 214). But that seems a little hard to accomplish when our society offers so many contradictory messages to young adolescents about how to “enact” their femaleness or maleness.

**Sex-Role Identity**

Everyone had to write a paper about his or her favorite hobby. Jess had written about football, which he really hated, but he had enough brains to know that if he said drawing, everyone would laugh at him. *Bridge to Terebithia*, 1972

She is nothing but an unnatural girl, a girl trying to act like a man. *True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*, 1990

Oftentimes during these years children will recognize that they are not the opposite gender and consequently cannot behave as they would like. Palmer, the protagonist in 2002 Newbery honor book *Wringer*, shudders when thinking of the typical male right of passage that will be expected of him. He doesn’t want to do it, but struggles against his friends’ influence, society’s expectation and his pride. Jesse of *Bridge to Terebithia* struggles with his love of traditionally feminine hobbies like drawing, singing and playing imagination games. He hides his hobby from his classmates to avoid ridicule. Charlotte, of *True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*, resents that she is unable to climb the
rigging of the ship like a boy and Caddie of Caddie Woodlawn longs to run with the boys on the plains rather than learn sewing with her mother. These conflicts are all different faces of the same thing; realizing that stereotypic gender identity is limiting and struggling for a resolution.

Susan Lehr describes the stereotypic woman as “passive, quiet, sweet, nice, emotional, more mature than boys, hard working, dependent, smart, shy, accommodating, beautiful, pretty or cute” (Lehr, 1). She describes the stereotypic man as “active, loud, aggressive, unemotional, independent, less mature than girls, strong, handsome, bold, curious, adventurous, tough, and naturally smart” (Lehr, 1). These stereotypes stretch far into the past. They are evident in Shakespeare’s work, Biblical directives and legal history. Adults heatedly debate what sex-roles should look like and what kinds of sex-roles are “natural.” Adolescents enter this discussion during early puberty, and their muddled reactions are reflected in literature, film and music.

Emotional Change

My face was burning. I’m not sure whether I was more embarrassed by the sound of my own voice or the snorts of my classmates. Jacob Have I Loved, 1980

Some things mothers just don’t understand. Wringer, 1997

Adolescence is a time of emotional change, when peer relationships take on a new importance in defining one’s identity, a factor that happens as adolescents become increasingly independent from their family. Riesman compares an adolescent’s peers to a jury. This metaphor, he argues, is appropriate because one’s acceptance by his/her peers in essential to adolescence (Reisman, 34). There are also frequent conflicts between adolescents and their parents as the adolescents seek to establish their identity and suddenly lean on their peer group more than their family. Fuhrman summarizes:
In short, the peer group, through its intrinsic reward system of acceptance and rejection, socializes adolescents into developing the behaviors and attitudes that will secure them a place in the world both now and in the future. (Fuhrmann, 99).

Parental and peer conflicts sweep across literature for young adolescence, as well as marketing to adolescents. Marketers refer to peer markets as “aspiration groups,” vocabulary that reveals their sense that adolescents buy products to appear to fit in with a particular social group (Martin, 167).

Intellectual Change/ Political Change

Now she was ten with long legs and no more silly dreams of pink-frosted cupcakes. And now she – and all the Danes – were to be bodyguard for Ellen, and Ellen’s parents, and all of Denmark’s Jews. Would she die to protect them? Truly? Annemarie was honest enough to admit, there in the darkness, to herself, that she wasn’t sure. Number of the Stars, 1989

No stupid, we’re trying to save the whales. They might become extinct. Bridge to Terebithia, 1977

Adolescence is a time of intellectual change, and marks the change from concrete to formal operational thinking. Developmental psychologist Jean Piaget identified these stages and concluded that adolescence marks the beginning of abstract reasoning, a time when individuals can imagine what could be rather than being tied to what is. Annemarie, for example, begins to see the larger political issues surrounding Denmark, and questions her own role in the larger scheme of things. Along a similar vein, many adolescents become interested in political causes. Erikson refers to adolescence itself as a stage of “impatient idealism” (Erikson, 1968). Idealism, according to Mary Pipher is a common characteristic of adolescent girls who frequently champion causes of the poor as well as endangered species (Pipher, 72). I witnessed this myself after the tsunami in 2005. The fifth grade class at my church decided to throw a bake sale for aid of the tsunami victims. Their enthusiasm was so fresh, so bright and hopeful that our entire church pitched in and
Old Navy agreed to match their funds two dollars to one. All told the kids raised over $1,200, an impressive amount.

Moral Change

May B’elle: “[Janice Avery] stole my Twinkies’’
Leslie: “I know she did Maybelle. And Jess and I are going to figure out a way to pay her back for it.”
(Bridge to Terebithia, 51)

Leslie: “Do you know why [Janice Avery] was crying?”
Jess: “How’m I supposed to know? Lord, Leslie, will you tell me? What the heck was going on in there?”
Leslie: “It’s a very complicated issue. I can understand now why Janice has so many problems relating to people.”
(Bridge to Terebithia, 74)

Moral development is arguably one of the most important tasks of adolescence in terms of maintaining a healthy society. Collins writes:

Creating in children and young people an awareness of right and wrong as defined by the society in which they live and empowering these young people to do what is right is one the most important things a society can do to protect and preserve itself.
(Collins, 158)

Kohlberg is a widely cited researcher of moral development in adolescents. He marked “justice” as the primary hallmark of a moral person and created a framework of stages to delineate where a subject fell in moral terms. As adolescents grew older (he tested 10-16 year old boys), Kohlberg found that they became more moral. His theories were built around Piaget, Dewey and Kant and his primary research subjects were boys.

Psychologist Carol Gilligan, who worked with Kohlberg, criticized many developmental theories as not being true to the female development experience (Gilligan, 1982). While Kohlberg emphasizes justice, Gilligan believes that for girls, relationships are just as important. In two of Gilligan’s works, she distinguishes between “justice orientation” and “relational orientation.” Justice orientation is founded on “separation” or the ability to rise above the particular concrete situation in order to establish just rules for
solving the conflict, whereas relationship orientation relies on images of responsibility and nurture that are typical of the moral imperatives of women. She argues that the adolescent girl has conflicting desires: to be true to her own developing identity and not to lose her connection with others. The above quotes from *Bridge to Terebithia* may aptly illustrate both Kohlberg’s and Gilligan’s points. When May Belle’s twinkies are taken, the children recognize that justice must be served. But Leslie’s ability to connect relationally with the “enemy” enables her to understand the total situation more fully. As a result, she responds quite differently than if she had been in “justice mode.”

Collins believes that literature may be “a conduit through which moral values can be communicated to the young” (Collins, 158). Other conduits obviously exist, including the “institutions” of church, school, family and the media.

**Conflicts within the models**

Although these models all describe the changes that take place in adolescence, they are not necessarily all “true.” The theorists disagree with each other’s emphasis. For example, Erikson did not agree with Freud’s focus on sexual desire. Kohlberg did not agree with Havinghurst and Erikson’s methods of defining particularly what occurred in adolescence; he believed that while all adolescence experience growth, the growth cannot be quantified as neatly as other psychologists make it appear. Gilligan clearly didn’t agree with very many of these theorists as well, arguing that girls develop strong relational values that are not accounted for in the theories. However across all the disagreement, the emphasis on adolescence as a time of growth and change is apparent.

Notably Margaret Mead has argued against adolescence as a time of “storm and stress” pointing out instead that our culture has created adolescence to serve as the
liminal zone between childhood and adulthood. That social construction, she writes, is what makes adolescence so difficult, not any inherent difficulty of the period itself. What all of the models do accomplish, however, is to shed some light on the transition in our culture known as adolescence and the way that books attempt to mirror this world.
Bibliography


**Newbery Literature**


Chapter Two
Adolescents, The Media And Identity Formation

The media do not simply ‘reflect’ reality. Instead, they actively explain and interpret, deploying visual codes and textual techniques to suggest specific ways of making sense of the world…they offer a particular interpretation of youth, constructing images of young people that are infused by a wealth of social meanings. (Osgerby, 60)

The changes of adolescence lead to a well documented stage of isolation, a feeling of being universally misunderstood. Many adolescents experience estrangement from society in general as well as particular institutions like education, religion and the family. Where do adolescents turn in this tumultuous time?

Studies suggest that during adolescence parents, peers and the media are the three most influential factors in an adolescent’s life (Lachance, 47). However the messages that adolescents receive from parents in regard to sexual behavior, risk-taking behavior, buyer-behavior and general “coolness” are likely different from the messages coming from peers and the media. I suggest that during early adolescence the media becomes more important and significant, especially in regard to what Erikson calls the primary task of adolescence – identity formation.

Youth Are Spending More Time Consuming Media than Ever Before

A recent study shows that young adults between ages eight and eighteen spend an average of seven hours a day engaging with media such as the Internet, video games, music videos and CDs, television, books, periodicals and movies (Osgerby, 6). Early adolescents in the developmental stage referred to as “tweens” by marketers to signify that they are mini-teenagers, are more exposed to media now than ever before. Tweens
range in age from around eight through fourteen. Being a “tween” isn’t about a specific biological state of an adolescent’s body, but rather it’s about the state of the adolescent’s mind and attitudes towards consumerism. Many early adolescents start to mimic the buying behaviors of what they perceive to be the cool older kids. For some this “tween” stage occurs early, for others late, and for a few maybe it doesn’t really happen at all. Nonetheless, the presence of media in the daily realm of a growing child is likely to propel them into this target market. And the media are certainly present. The Kaiser Family Foundation (1999) reports that the average American child grows up in a home equipped with “three TVs, three tape players, three radios, two video recorders, two CD players, one video game player and one computer” (Osgerby, 6).

Youth Are Consuming More Products Than Ever Before

Youth today are hooked in, hooked up, wired and paying attention to the swirling world of youth culture, a culture which seems to center around a lifestyle of conspicuous consumption of a particular niche identity (Klein, 81). Haytko and Baker, professors at Southwest Missouri State University, recently reported that middle-school girls go the mall as much as once every two weeks during the school year and more often during the summer (Haytko, 71). These mall trips generally last between two and four hours. The goal is not necessarily to buy something (though they often do), but rather to just browse around and to “find something to do” (Haytko, 71). Adolescents make 40% more trips to the mall than shoppers in any other age group (Osgerby, 7) and spent up to $170 billion dollars in 2002 (Osgerby, 7). No wonder marketers are looking at this age group and attempting to cash in.
Research also suggests that these young teen-agers are more concerned with trends and brand names than their older counter-parts (Haytko, 72). Most psychologists explain this fascination with trends as being linked to the desire for social acceptance. Numerous studies have shown that wearing certain types of clothing, especially brand-name apparel, is a way adolescents “fit in” with their peers (Simpson, 638). Andrew Clark, writing in the Canadian periodical *Maclean’s* in March of 1999, noted that tweens didn’t want to be “talked down to” in the marketing: “‘Tweens want to be teens; they buy products that make them feel sophisticated.’” The aspirational age for a tween, he suggests, is eighteen (Clark, 43).

Identifying and obtaining the socially right clothes, attitude, music and technology proves a nearly fulltime activity for adolescents. One author writing in the *International Journal of Consumer Studies* refers to this period as “consumer socialization” (Lachance, 47). During adolescence the major influences on consumer socialization are parents, friends and the mass media.

I believe that the media are offering kids quick vehicles to social acceptance, and encouraging kids to express themselves by “buying” an identity. When young adolescents shop at Gadzooks or Limited Two they don’t simply buy a shirt; they buy a particular type of identity, a particular way of positioning themselves in the social mix with their peers. Clark writes, “In the 1970s and 1980s, adolescents could pretty much be divided into jocks, rockers and preps. Now…there are at least a dozen teen ‘tribes’ defined by their fashion, music and magazines” (Clark, 45). As a result many advertisers stop trying to market a product and instead try to market a kind of lifestyle, a particular type of
identity. Examples of media identities are available in literature, television, movies and
music geared towards teens and the young adolescents who are trying to imitate them.

**Media Identity In Literature and Film**

Lauren Myracle is an up-and-coming author with Amulet Books, a division of Abram
Books Inc. in New York City. She is currently writing a fourth novel for Penguin Group
Inc. She made a name for herself with her first novel, titled snappily *TTYL*, or in tween
lingo, *Talk To You Later*. Her fast-paced plots are infused with witty dialogue and long
IM conversations between middle-graders. The Amulet Books website indicates that
Myracle’s books are for “middle grade and young adult” readers. This is another way of
referring to the same market – tweens. Myracle’s latest book, titled *Rhymes with Witches* (a charm B dangles provocatively from the top right corner of the cover), relates Jane’s
struggle for popularity in a high school made up of tight cliques. The advertising copy is
below:

No one notices Jane—not the jocks, the stoners, the debaters, the drama geeks, the
cheerleaders, and especially not the Bitches, the school royalty made up of one girl
from each class who's so transcendentally beautiful and fascinating that no one can help
but worship her. Imagine Jane's surprise when the Bitches approach her to be their
freshman member. She wants this kind of popularity more than anything, but when she
discovers the sinister secret of the Bitches' power, she's forced to make the toughest
choice of her life. This savagely funny book will be the talk of the season.2

Notice Myracle’s use of identity shorthand to neatly categorize the social groups: “the
jocks, the stoners, the debaters, the drama geeks, the cheerleaders.” This method of
describing the typical lunchroom scene is widely used in popular literature, film, music
and magazines directed at young adolescents. The praise for Myracle’s book reflects its
media echelon: “Move over *Mean Girls,*” writes Michael Cart, a quote that is printed on

the back cover of every copy of *Rhymes with Witches. Mean Girls* is another example of media representation of teenage identities. A number of others seamlessly jump to mind: *Clueless, American Pie, Ten Things I Hate About You, She’s All That* and still more. It’s practically an entire sub-genre of movie that’s geared towards this age group. What potential effect might these kinds of media representations have on vulnerable adolescents who are struggling to achieve social acceptance and a sense of who they are? The media are trying to answer those questions for adolescents by offering them a sort of “identity rhetoric.”

**Identity Rhetoric**

Youth culture today offers only a handful of identities to young adolescents. Klein writes: “a predatory marketing machine that co-opted our identities, our styles and our ideas and turned them into brand food” (Klein, 81-82). Klein’s attack seems persuasive. Essentially she’s arguing that marketers take the “best” out of youth culture and regurgitate it as a consumer choice thereby defiling the identity’s original power born of genuine adolescent creativity.

Most identity can be neatly attached to a set of consumer choices. Skaters will wear Vans, young, tough boys will wear Tommy Hilfiger. Advertisers work like crazy to make themselves up to date and relevant with modern youth, to co-opt a youth identity that will provide them a niche in this huge market. Essentially by selling identities this way, marketers are encouraging kids to just “put it on” rather than work it out. Lauryn Hill discusses this in her somewhat recent *MTV Unplugged* CD. She talked about Bob Marley and how powerful he was as a performer and a social justice activist. Then she
expressed her annoyance that dreads and Bob Marley posters were so “in” when consumers didn’t even understand Marley’s message.

But this identity isn’t necessarily based on much more than a set of consumer choices and a few interests. It might be read as “rhetoric” which is used in English classrooms to describe a conventional type of speech used in a particular situation. There is certain rhetoric for love poetry, for a political candidate’s opening speech, for flirting. But at the heart of rhetoric is a degree of falseness, shallowness, and a simplicity that doesn’t reflect the complex identity of the adolescents themselves. And moreover it’s discouraging adolescents from performing authentic self-discovery, but rather to buy something to get into a social clique. It’s an inversion of the healthiest form of development.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet criticizes Romeo for expressing his love in traditional poetical rhetoric: “O! swear not by the moon, the inconstant moon/That monthly changes in her circled orb/ Lest they love prove likewise variable” (*RJ* 2.2.115-117). Juliet reads something false in Romeo’s words, a sense that Romeo is simply reading from a script that is more informed by literary classics than his authentic feelings for her. I believe Klein is articulating similar concerns about the media, and rightly so.

Just as Juliet saw Romeo’s words as being false, so perhaps many parents and educators fear that this identity rhetoric of the media is a shallow, scripted version of their developing young adolescent. They might long to shake their kid out of his $120 Nike shoes and tough slang, to ask where their kid who used to draw for hours and talk to his mother while she cooked dinner disappeared too. But while this sort “identity play” might be seen as part and parcel of growing up, it really plays to the worst parts of our culture.
Advertising shorthand becomes particularly nerve-racking to adults when applied to young adolescent’s sexual identity.

**Sexual-Identity Rhetoric**

Sut Jhally directed a film titled “Tough Guise” that unpacked the development of men’s sex roles in the United States through media. He explored our masculine hero myths, which, through movies like “Rambo” and “Braveheart,” encourage strong, emotionally inarticulate boys obsessed with big muscles. Similarly in documentary “Killing Us Softly” Jean Kilbourne examined the influence of advertising on the development of girl’s sex roles. She found that women were consistently “othered,” sexualized and silenced through the ads. Both Jhally and Kilbourne found that popular culture sets forth a very limiting sexual identity. Donald Rushkov’s documentary “Merchants of Cool” suggests that media conglomerates have purposefully created roles for developing boys and girls. He dubs these roles the *mook* and the *midriff*. The *mook* is a young man, in the tradition of Tom Green, who is an absurd spectacle. He is immature, loud, boisterous, active, rude and outrageous. Rushkov traces the character’s presence across different aspects of the media. You can find the *mook* on a commercial for MTV, but also in an ad for Abercrombie and Fitch. He is used to sell everything. The corresponding girl’s role, the *midriff* is by comparison silent, mature, passive and very sexual. Rushkov’s work ties nicely into Kilbourne’s “Killing Us Softly” which notes the same typical portrayal of silent, sexualized women in magazine advertisements. These roles are one option for a budding adolescent who is struggling to understand sexuality and socialization, and marketers have noted them carefully.
Both of these “roles” place a high value on the appearance of the body and sexual desirability. Considering the combination of media influences and biological changes taking place in early adolescence, it is unsurprising that many tweens struggle with healthy body image, which is perhaps highly depressing for parents who don’t want to see their children fretting in front of the mirror or leaping into bed.

Parental Response

Parents might find the close relationship between their early adolescent and media a bit puzzling. They might wonder, well what are they doing, seeing or listening to all this time? Peter Leslie writes:

With astonishment, dismay, curiosity or even fear, the adults find themselves on the outside, looking in at a vast industry with an annual turnover of many millions which is entirely devoted to the satisfaction of the caprices and whims expressed by those who, only a few years ago, were expected to be seen and not heard. (Leslie, 1965)

Many educators and authors encourage tweens to get some direction from home to be responsible consumers. Simpson’s position is representative of this literature: “marketers target this group heavily to capitalize on their discretionary purchasing power…Consumer education in school and at home should foster decision making skills among tweens that will last into adulthood” (Simpson, 645).

During adolescence there is significant evidence that students sort of “tune out” from the classroom. Naomi Shihab Nye, a poet who writes mainly for adolescent girls, wrote in the prologue of her newest book A Maze Me that she didn’t remember any of the teachers from middle-school. It was, she said, as though there was a blip in her mind, a hole in her memory (Nye, 2005). During this “storm and stress” period, educators and parents are eager to identify media that are high quality, media that meet adolescents
where they are and encourage them along this path of self discovery, media that resonate
the values of intellectual growth, authenticity and friendship.
Bibliography


Chapter Three
The Role of Newbery Books in Adolescent Media

Parents who aren’t sure how to guide their kids through the modern day media maze may rely partially on other institutions (schools, religious institutions) to properly socialize their children. Education responded to the unique characteristics of adolescence by creating the middle school, a school that is tailored specifically to the needs of this age group. Like educators who argue that a special environment is necessary for middle-grade students, literature specialists have argued that during this time reading special books is useful, and reading itself takes on a new and lasting significance: it shows kids where to go.

Bibliotherapy is the use of literature to encourage an adolescent to “know him/herself better, understand human behavior and to find interests outside of self through a structured discussion of shared literature” (Adler, 758). Proponents of bibliotherapy include Spache and Berry. They write that bibliotherapy propels adolescents through development, shows them that they are not alone and socializes them according to society’s norms. A book like *A Wrinkle in Time* or *Are You There God, It’s Me Margaret* and dozens more seem highly applicable to this kind of goal. In fact, Adler and Clark have examined Newberys for this purpose, and they suggest that a strong connection exist between the work of Gilligan and Erikson and the plots of Newbery books (Adler, 769). Critics of bibliotherapy write that it basically can’t work because there are too many potential interpretations of a book and that books should not be used
for “the practice of psychic medicine” (Walsh, 1981). The significance of books in the socialization of adolescents is emphasized by children’s literature experts: “the adolescent looks to stories to discover insights into the meaning of life, values and beliefs worthy of commitment, ideal images and authentic role models worthy of commitment” (Appleyard, 1990). How should teachers and librarians identify appropriate, distinguished and well written books that will meet adolescents where they are, particularly when the discussion of what kind of literature is appropriate and high-quality is controversial?

The question of what kids should know and how kids should develop is incredibly broad and heated. Should kids be taught to question, think critically or simply follow orders? What version of history should kids learn—one true to the United State’s complicated past or one that sweeps historical stories into neat pro-USA packages? How should kids learn about sex? Should condoms be passed out in the classrooms or should adolescents be taught abstinence only? This sort of healthy debate arises in regard to questions of adolescent gender identity as portrayed in literature used in the classroom.

Gender Roles In Literature – A Discussion Punctuated by the Feminist Movement

Some children’s literature experts believe that children’s literature should present an idealized world for children to imitate. Feminists want equal representation, deconstruction of traditional gender stereotypes and powerful female role models. Mem Fox, an author of children’s books, writes that children are evilly “engendered,” a problem literature must try to unravel. She views presenting idealized gender roles as an absolute responsibility of author and aligns herself with other children’s authors such as Newbery Award winner Jane Yolen. Other writers would also like an idealized world, but they paint a drastically different view of women’s roles, probably because they feel quite
differently about the feminist movement. *Focus on the Family*, a conservative non-profit located in Colorado Springs, presses for more traditional roles for women. Indeed, one conservative author claims that the entire feminist movement is a curse from Satan meant to destroy effective Christian families (Andrews, 46). Pat Scales, past Newbery Chair, blames the sixties. The sixties, she says, changed so much in the United States – including children’s literature. Since the sixties there has been a more heated debate about what traditional roles should look like in the media, in the “family” and in the children’s book.

Katherine Patterson is perhaps the most widely respected author of adolescent literature in the USA today. She’s received a lot of heat for her characters, particularly her mother figure in Newbery Award winning *Jacob Have I Loved*. The mother receives a full education only to “waste” her life toiling in a difficult family on a poverty-stricken island off the coast of Maryland. Katherine Patterson was hurt by the attacks on her character and responded thoughtfully: “No matter how much a writer believes in equality of the sexes, she can’t rewrite history…The trouble is, you see, that people want me to do something that I won’t do. They want me to set out examples of what life should be like for children” (Lehr, 25). Other authors and educators who use books to urge kids to question stereotypes but not to completely overthrow traditionally held sex roles seem to echo Patterson’s position. For example, Charlotte Huck, a feminist librarian, genuinely believes that boys are more active than girls, and that this basic difference (whether biologically or culturally based) is not something that can or should be altered. She disfavors adolescent books that try to overthrow all sex roles, claiming that they are too unrealistic to impact the daily lives of kids. Therefore she maintains that Charlotte,
protagonist of Avi’s Newbery Honor book *True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*, is actually a boy running around in girl’s clothing (Lehr, ix).

To use Nixonian language, there is likely a “silent majority” of children’s literature authors that agree with Huck but don’t publish specifically on that point. In the field of education discussion abounds about gender roles and adolescent development, but little of it really is about overthrowing or re-teaching gender roles completely. Kathleen Odean is particularly relevant to this project as she once headed the Newbery Committee. Since that time she has edited a few books including *Great Books for Girls* and *Great Books for Boys*. In the introduction to these books, she discusses how she chose which books to include based on expanding the accepted gender roles for boys and girls. While trying to expand the gender roles for children, she is not trying to overthrow them. Furthermore she uses methods that are unsavory to extreme feminists. She works with the typical boy stereotypes that say that boys like action stories, and gives them action stories with protagonists who show more emotion (Odean 1998). She works with typical girl stereotypes that say that girls like romance, and provides romance stories that show girls in a more powerful light (Odean 1997). So how can librarians muddle through this maze? Are they left merely recommending books that are personally appealing, each pushing his or her own agenda through the literature “sold” (as past Newbery committee member Penny Markey put it) over the desk to young readers? No. They look for indicators of quality to help guide them through the hundreds of books published per year. The Newbery Award is a powerful indicator of quality in children’s literature today.

**Why the Newbery Award?**

“It is my hope that Newbery books offer children some answers they may not be getting from the media.” Pat Scales, former Newbery Chair (2/15/2005)
The Newbery Award is widely cited as the most prestigious children’s literature award (Odean, Horning, Peterson, Gillespie). In the publishing industry and the library world, the ALA “Youth Media Award Press Conference” is referred to as “The academy awards of children’s literature.” During this press conference eleven prizes are awarded to various “bests” of youth media. The Newbery is announced last, and the room falls silent for the announcement, which will be reported in countless literature, publishing and library trade journals across the country. The President of American Library Association to Children stands before the audience, the Newbery book tucked behind her back. This year there were around 1,000 people in the room, a mix of publishers, reporters, librarians and students. Everyone was really jazzed. When ALSC President Gretchen Wronka held a hardback copy of *Kira Kira* over her head and announced it as the 2004 Newbery, a small wave of surprise swept across the room and then was drowned in uproarious applause. Part of the hype comes from the long and prestigious history of the award.

The Newbery Award is one of the oldest children’s book awards in the country. The American Library Association first awarded it in 1922. A publisher named Frederick Melcher, who worked at *Publisher’s Weekly* in New York, conceived of the idea and ran it past his librarian friends. He thought it would be unseemly for a publisher to award “the most distinguished” of children’s books, but believed that if a reputable “unbiased” source could celebrate children’s literature it might add to the momentum that was sweeping through New York publishing houses at the time. He was right. He pitched his idea to an enthusiastic ALA executive board in 1922. The official goal of the Newbery was this:
To encourage original and creative work in the field of books for children. To emphasize to the public that contributions to literature for children deserve similar recognition for poetry, plays or novels. To give those librarians, who make it their lifework to serve children’s reading interests, an opportunity to encourage good writing in this field.³

The award became so popular that in 1937 the American Library Association added the Caldecott to celebrate distinguished illustrators. Until 1973 the same committee chose the Newbery and Caldecott awards. Frederich Melcher himself presented the award to the author at a summer celebration until his death in 1963.

Once a book is declared a winner or a runner up, it is ordered nationally by almost every library (Nilsen, 1970). And this remains true today. Penny Markey, director of 88 children’s library departments in southern California, told me that her librarians were atwitter for the Newbery to be awarded and money had already been set aside for multiple copies to be bought for each branch (Markey, 1/15/2005). The Newbery author is called for speaking tours publicity signings and is practically guaranteed that future work will find an audience (Barstow, 1/16/2005). Barbara Barstow, chair of this year’s Newbery committee, commented to me that her favorite part of the choosing process is calling authors to announce that they’ve won. The Newbery committee is composed of 15 librarians from around the country. All fifteen are present when the call is made. I love to picture the scene. They sit excitedly around a large conference room table. The committee has just spent the last 48 hours together, bickering, pleading, complimenting and maneuvering to pick a final winner. Finally the winner has been chosen. A telephone is brought to the head of the table, plugged into a wall underneath a lamp. The Newbery Committee Chair smilingly dials the author’s home phone number and then the author’s professional world is changed forever. Jerry Spinelli, a one-of-a-kind author of Maniac

Magee, was able to quit his day job as an editor. Caldecott winner Mary Azarian
(*Snowflake Bentley*) shrieked that she could finally afford decent plumbing in the
bathroom. Lois Lowry, on a ship in Antarctica when awarded *The Giver*, was tough to get
a hold of but thrilled by the news. Whatever response flies out, the author is in for a roller
coaster ride. Let’s examine the process by which a Newbery book is chosen.

The Newbery Award, whose prestige has now been established, is left in the
capable hands of fifteen American Library Association members. The committee
librarians hail from different parts of the country and from different types of libraries.
University librarians mingle with small town librarians and city librarians. No publisher
or author is allowed to enter the committee; however booksellers and book critics are
occasionally on board. Booksellers may include owners of a small independent
bookstore, such as the Blue Marble in Kentucky. I am consistently surprised at how far
reaching the network of such sellers seems to be. I interviewed a librarian from California
and she knew of the Blue Marble (Markey, 1/15/2005). I also chatted with author Patricia
Polacco, who currently lives in Michigan but is published out of New York, and she was
on warm terms with both owners (Polacco, 11/07/2004). Past Newbery Chair Pat Scales
is friendly with Judy Blume (Scales, 2/15/2005), and future Newbery Chair speaks fondly
of author Jerry Spinelli (Barstow, 1/16/2005). When I hear of these connections, I usually
comment to the interviewee, “The book world really is personal, isn’t it?” and almost
invariably they respond something like “you have no idea.” At any rate, the committee is
made up of fifteen of these well-connected, well-respected librarians. How the committee
is assembled, however, bears a few words of explanation.
It begins in January of the year proceeding the award year. Of the fifteen committee members seven are elected from a slate of no fewer than fourteen, seven members are appointed by the president-elect of ALSC (this year librarian Ellen Fader) and one chair is elected from a slate of two. There are no technical requirements for committee members except that they have no personal or professional bias and are able to receive books that are up for consideration. The other seven who are approached are usually chosen to fill in the gaps on the committee. If mostly southern librarians were elected, a few from the rest of the country will normally be appointed. I’m told that “gaps” that are looked for include geographical location, type of library, race and ethnicity (Markey, 1/15/2005). It is a great honor to be approached. Penny Markey, a sharp-minded dark-haired woman, smiled remembering her excitement at the invitation. This year she was approached to be on the Sibert Award Committee, which is the ALA’s award for non-fiction. She told me she was trying to simplify her life, but she decided to do it anyway. Just because it’s hard to pass up such an opportunity.

In the mid-winter meeting the committee has an introductory meeting. The meeting is open to any member of the ALA and serves a few purposes. First, the committee can formally meet each other (it seems most of them are on familiar terms anyway) and the committee chair can formally greet the committee. This greeting usually emphasizes the sort of leadership style that the chair will employ. A few basics guidelines pave the way for all of the chairs. They are laid out in the online Newbery manual\(^4\). Essentially the Chair should be an unbiased mediator between committee members. Beyond this, however, leadership is lies in the Chair’s hands. I interviewed the Chairs for

\(^4\) http://www.ala.org/alas/alsc/boardcomm/Newbery_Manual_Nov04.pdf
the 2005 Newbery and Caldecott committees, Barbara Barstow and Gratia Banta respectively. The women approached their roles, as well as this primary meeting, quite differently.

Barbara felt that this preliminary meeting was mainly business oriented. She did not strongly encourage all of the committee members to attend, and for various reasons they did not. The committee must make a few decisions; such as how will they officially discuss books? Will it be an open or structured discussion? Many potential formats exist, each laden with a particular set of strengths and weaknesses. For example, in a similar setting, ALA Notable book awards, the 2004 committee had a semi-structured setting. The book was introduced with an annotation that was written by the committee member who had nominated the book for consideration. This annotation ranged in length from a long sentence to a short paragraph. After reading the annotation, committee members could comment at length on their own opinions of the work. This discussion would continue for seven minutes until the Chair called for a vote. If the book received a certain number of votes it would be considered again at the end of the day. Each committee decides this sort of structure, how potential books will be approached and considered. However Barbara put these questions on hold until the committee had begun examining the books in depth. She reiterated that she would be an unbiased source, that she would “lead with equanimity” and the committee should never know her own personal opinions. She told them that she intended to “push them beyond compliments of literature they enjoyed and lead them through questions” and encouraged them to start small book groups at home to get a sense of people’s feelings about the book beyond their own. Her main objective, she told me, was to ensure that all of the committee member’s voices
were heard. I asked her why she kept repeating this goal and she paused thoughtfully. She told me that leaders in the library world often swayed inexperienced people, and that the committee many times was composed of both the experienced and the inexperienced. Barbara realized that older, more professionally respected librarians would probably hold sway merely by what books they chose to recommend, but she as a Chair would attempt to keep a few voices from dominating the discussion.

Gratia’s approach to this meeting for the Caldecott committee, however, was entirely different. She felt that the meeting held great importance and strongly urged her entire committee to attend. All attended. She viewed the meeting as a sort of grand social allowing the committee to get together and talk about things that mattered, namely good books. She too, worried over dominating experienced voices; however she felt that the most effective way to deal with this concern was to encourage the committee to become socially comfortable. She talked to experts in ALSC about children’s illustrations, and provided her committee with a handout. She told me her goals, “get to know everybody is the top goal, build a strong team spirit” (Banta, 1/17/2005). Unlike Barabara, whose primary concern seemed to be diffusing the dominating voices in the committee, Gratia worried about diffusing the dominating voices beyond the committee, voices that came from reviewers, publishers and marketers. She shared with me a fascinating vignette about a Caldecott honor book of 2003, Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus. Hyperion press published the book and the editor absolutely loved it. She personally convinced the staff of Hyperion to throw a large (though I don’t know the exact number) percentage of the marketing budget specifically to this book. The book was put in the front window of several big chain bookstores, pushed by the salesmen in meetings and reviewed by
prestigious papers. The editor casually told Gratia, “Given all that work, we really weren’t surprised when it won.” Gratia was horrified. She laid it all on the table:

We must be critical of the marketers! Just as we’re critical of TV and fashion, we must set a pace where we’re not influenced by a heavy marketing campaign. We have traditionally not been swayed – of course, as Barbara Barstow pointed out, there is a thin line between accepting a publisher’s invitation to dinner and pushing their book in a meeting. We can’t be bought that cheaply. I’m delighted to say that I’m in a profession that isn’t that superficial. (Banta, 1/17/2005)

After spending an hour with Barbara and Gratia, I realized that I wished I could do another senior project. A project that would simply explore the different leadership styles of these awards committees, and how their styles led to various books winning. However we must move beyond these wonderful book women and their fascinatingly different opening meetings to what happens after the first meeting.

Penny Markey puts it simply: “The UPS man arrives” (Markey, 1/15/2005). She reported that her UPS guy came around suppertime several nights a week bearing a box of freshly published books, most of which came straight from the press. Publishers are encouraged to send members of the Newbery committee (as well as all other ALA award committees) copies of their books that they believe may fit the necessary criteria. Some publishers are discriminatory in their sending while others send their whole season. At this happy moment, the committee begins to read. Barbara recalled how everyone always loved the first box of books (Barstow, 1/16/2005). The committee members call each other excitedly, complimenting each new book. They hurry to write their annotations. After the fifteenth box, however, the retrospective glances at the first box are less promising. The reviews become discriminating. And then, after the July meeting which celebrates the past year’s Newbery, the real finagling begins. Barbara Barstow, Gratia Banta and Penny Markey all compared this stage of the process to a game. Say a committee member becomes attached to a book. He or she strongly believes the book
fulfills the necessary criteria. So the official annotation is written up, the book is formally nominated, but the committee member allows some of the finest praise to remain unsaid. He or she holds onto it until the January mid-winter meeting. Around December the committee grows tired. They begin to knock a few dozen books off the original list. However, depending on the year, the list remains fairly substantial until Mid-Winter meeting. At Mid-Winter, all of the books that remain on the list are brought into a room with the committee. They are placed, in some official order, on a long conference table in the center of the room. One by one the books are discussed and voted on. This entire process is a secret. Those who I interviewed encouraged me to attend an open awards committee, ALA Notable Books. At this committee meeting, I learned several of the issues that arise when debating over a book, which the Newbery folks said mirrored their own discussion.

1. Does this fulfill our criteria more fully than other options?
2. How long is the book? How long should the book be? Is it too long or too short to fulfill its intentions and possibilities?
3. How well was the book edited?
4. Will the book appeal to the intended audience?
5. Is the book literary enough? Is it too literary?
6. Who is the author and what is the significance of giving them this award at this point in their career?

Many of these questions are highly debatable, depending on how one understands the criteria for choosing the award. These are the official criteria for choosing a Newbery Award:

The medal shall be awarded to the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children published in the United States during the preceding year. There are no limitations as to the character of the book considered except that it must be an original work. Honor books may be named. These shall be books that are also truly distinguished.
This last term is outlined more clearly in the following criteria section when the manual provides six considerations in identifying truly distinguished literature: “interpretation of theme or concept; presentation of information including accuracy, clarity and organization; development of plot; delineation of characters; delineation of setting; appropriateness of style.”

Despite these guidelines, there is a wide variation in the opinions of committee members. During the final days of the Mid-Winter meeting the committee members work to get each other on board to name the final Newbery. After discussing each book on the table to see how well it fits the above criteria, the committee votes. Each committee members can choose three books to put on their ballot. First place on the ballot earns the book four points; Second place earns the book three points and third place earns the book one point. A book must receive at least one vote to remain on the table. After tallying the results, the remaining books on the table are discussed again. This process repeats itself until a book wins by garnering eight first place votes and is eight points above the next book. As Barbara said, “This isn’t really actually difficult. It’s just annoyingly complex. We need a lot of food throughout the process” (Barstow, 1/16/2005).

All of the interviewees agreed that the Newbery is an award greatly influenced by its time. Penny Markey did a study in graduate school of the Newbery books that spanned a decade and wrote about the connections between themes of the times and the themes of the books. For example, Sounder, a 1970 Newbery classic, she thought was partially influenced by the death of Martin Luther King (Markey, 1/15/2005). However despite these connections, all interviewees were hesitant to categorize the Newbery itself as political. Rather Gratia, Penny, Pat and Barbara saw the Newbery as an indicator of
quality literature in the children’s field. This sentiment is mirrored in the media attention and critical attention that the award receives.

Since its conception it has received attention from major children’s journals like the *Horn Book Magazine*. Newbery book lists are consistently offered in the back of language art text books to inspire students to read them. Across hundreds of articles is an underlying assumption that kids should be reading Newbery Award winning books.

**Critical Attention**

Much critical attention has been paid to Newbery Award winning books. They have been analyzed for sexism (Henderson), racism (Henderson) and classism (Taylor). They have been surveyed to note changes over time (Solt, Newton). Questions have been raised about how widely they are really read (Shackford). Concerns have been addressed to how readable they are (Schafer). They have been analyzed for Jungian archetypal roles (Roberts). Gender roles in Newbery Awards have been examined through various studies (Powel et al). The protagonists have been analyzed for moral valor (Rihn). Representations of minorities such as the elderly have been analyzed (Peterson). They have been analyzed as a tool for in the classroom to motivate adolescents to read (Thomas, D’Angelo). All of this critical attention reflects the widely held belief that the Newbery Award is highly influential in children’s literature.

There are several annotated bibliographies of Newbery Award winning books (Horning, Peterson, Gillespie) and in all of the introductions to these books, the authors

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5 *Connecting the Dots: A Handbook Series for Teachers of English Language Arts, Grades 6–8.* 2002  
*Project Success Enrichment: Language Arts Manual, Introductory Unit & Bibliography.*, Bronson, Carolyn 1996  
state that the purpose of the book is to help educators and parents provide high quality to literature for children/adolescents (Peterson, Gillespie). This literature may be used in the classroom to meet adolescents where they are psychologically (remember the connections between psychological theory and Newbery content; p. 1-11) while still challenging them intellectually and nurturing them socially.
Bibliography


Scales, Pat. Personal interview. 15 February. 2005.


Chapter Four
The Fly In the Ointment:
Book Jackets Pose a Particular Reading

The fly, the fly. The fly in the ointment. The fly in the ointment was this…
-Lauren Myracle

While Newbery books may be favored among parents and teachers, their realistic effect on the life of an adolescent is murky. If an adolescent gives a book a fair bit of time and attention the chances that the book will deeply influence them drastically increases. The cover of the book influences how much attention an adolescent will give a book. The cover is not chosen by a well-read and well-intentioned team of librarians to celebrate distinguished children’s literature, but rather represents the way that the publishing house wants consumers to see the book (Powers, 10). The cover is not going to live forever, but merely dresses up a book and sends it zinging towards its target audience. The cover is a marketing device. The creation of cover art has a long and complicated history, and represents one of the largest divides in the publishing world today. This chapter explores some of the issues surrounding book jacket design.

History of Book Jackets

Book jackets emerged in the late 1800s in England to protect the original covers. Alan Powers, a cover design expert, writes longingly of the old fashioned covers that often displayed complex, intricate handiwork and fantastic detail. In the 1920s, however the book jacket took on new significance as publishers printed ad copy on the jacket backs and flaps (Pelt, 11). This “blurb” offered an opportunity for publishing houses to
advertise other offerings and provided “the most effective means to establish contact with the reading public” (Pelt, 11).

Increased competition in the industry before World War I inspired the first tentative wave of designed jackets (Powers, 6). Towards the 1920s in the economic boom and publishing renaissance, jacket design became quite common (Curl, 10). Powers writes that the advent of movies contributed to an increased visual literacy of consumers; they were apt to look at a cover and recognize a particular genre of book (Powers, 7). Marketers employed image-advertising to sell other goods, such as medicine or canned food.

In the 1930s the “dime store novel” was introduced, in part due to the technological development of a new kind of glue (Radway, 568). Books were made cheaply. An image often took center stage in the jacket, a small promotion for the book inside. Every few years, classic books were reissued, reprinted, reproduced and sent out to once again grace the shelves of bookstores. An old classic like *Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter has seen over a dozen covers and illustrations, most suited to a particular kind of buyer of an era (Powers). Notably at this point there were few or no books targeted solely and intentionally to an adolescent audience; therefore while cover art stories are scarce for adult and children’s books I have been unable to find any research concerning their development in young adult (YA) books. Even the phrase “Young Adult” (and by the way, Newbery books straddle the murky creek between children’s books and YA books) has only gained currency in the last fifty years. The current YA market was a result of
publishing movements in the fifties and sixties, which was highly connected to the changing role of youth in American culture overall during this period\(^6\).

In the eighties children’s and young adult books surged in popularity. More books were published per year than ever before, causing publishers to vie for shelf space and publicity, a competition that continues today. This competition yielded a few interesting bedfellows. For example, the bookstore chain Barnes and Noble sells publishers shelf space – literally! Similarly Random House reserves the front table of every Borders for their publications. The game is tough, and publishers are looking for ways to distinguish their product. They wonder, “What kind of jacket draws a reader to a book? What makes a child want to hold it in his or her hand? And what makes a person buy it?” (Stevenson, 139). These questions are particularly revealing – a publisher is interested in attracting the attention of not only the reader, but the buyer as well. Parents and children, and book buyers are all targeted in cover design. Defining a target audience is one of the main objectives in ad development, and it seems to be equally relevant in the creation of book covers. In a way much of this work had already been done in the twenties and thirties.

Certain images are already associated with certain genres of books. Flying saucers or shining unicorns promise a science fiction, while a shrieking girl (or RL STINE in gory lettering) promises a teen thriller. These words and images act as signs, conveying to potential buyers a definitive message about the content of the book. These signs not only convey what genre a book is in, but also may “brand” a publisher’s line of books. Although it is recognized that books must be revamped or refreshed every few years,

\(^6\) For more information about the changing role of youth in American culture, examine Kathleen Knight Abowitz’s article “What is a Teenager”: http://www.units.muohio.edu/eap/departments/edl/eduleadership/courses/334/334_What_is_teenager.html
many publishers want to have a brand identity to send consistent messages to prospective buyers (Maughan, 127).

**How Cover Art Affects Book Sales**

Jason Epstein, former editorial director of Random House, worked for Doubleday after he graduated from college in the late forties. Depressed by the high prices of classic hardbound books in the fifties, he imagined a softbound quality book that would be a fifth of the cost – and sold the idea to Doubleday. Doubleday agreed to repackage a few classic back-listers under Epstein’s direction. Epstein employed artists from around New York with whom he had personal connections; in fact, they were his wife’s friends from college. The project was a tremendous success. Funky paper couched in hip art persuaded a new generation to invest in the classics. Epstein’s career was launched, and he eventually landed the position of Editorial Director of Random House. He wrote, “the distinctive format announced the intentions of this series unmistakably and had much to do with its success” (Epstein, 65). This story is particularly fascinating in the way that Epstein relates it. He does not frame it as a marketing campaign that successfully sold old backlist books to a new target audience. Instead, he emphasizes that the format showed the “intentions,” namely to provide cheap books for a prospective audience. He is emphasizing the integrity of promoting and publishing books themselves rather than the satisfaction in selling them.

However books, are in fact, a commodity and their packaging has much to do with sales. Affirmation of this can be found in recent article titles in *Publishers Weekly*: “Hipper, Brighter and Bolder: Publishers struggle to make book jackets stand out on ever more crowded shelves” and “Paperback Reissues: Everything Old is New Again.”
Advertiser Jerry Fisher writes in *Entrepreneur*, “Make no mistake: book titles are advertising headlines and the jackets they emblazon are one-page ads for the books. What’s more, they’re some of the best ads you’ll ever see.” Whitney Cookman, creative director for Doubleday, agrees, “When you’re talking about book covers, you’re talking about the single most important marketing tool you have in getting people’s attention” (Campbell, 1). However many publishers are hesitant to frame the purpose of book design in this way, despite data revealing that cover art boosts sales. Book designers like Eric Curl and Wendell Minor often identify as artists, and publishers fancy themselves as promoters of ideas, not sellers of widgets. This tension reveals a fundamental difference in attitudes towards publishing between marketing/sales teams and other involved in the process.

**A Difference In Values**

When I proposed exploring the cover of a book as an ad, my advisor (who is himself a successful children’s author) was skeptical. He was concerned that the book cover is not really an ad at all, and pointed out that many children’s illustrators are the designers of the covers. This is certainly true. If illustrators are designing covers, how can one assert that “marketing specialists” design them? Nonetheless several studies reveal the cover’s importance in attracting customers, and marketers and advertisers unflinchingly categorize the book jacket as an ad. Furthermore, even if the people designing the art are illustrators, the people choosing the illustration and the overall layout of the cover may well be marketers. This hesitancy to accept advertising’s role in cover art choice may not stem from denial that there is a “marketing component” to cover art, but rather from the contradictory values of advertising and publishing.
Identifying and exploiting visual shorthand is a value of marketing. Tapping into the meaning of certain images, and tying those images to products so that people buy the products is the ultimate goal of advertising. Advertising analyst Simone Dupont writes, “So what these ad images do, then, is to pour meaning into people’s lives and into the life of society. And central to this meaning is the all-important sense of belonging to a specific social group” (Dupont, 1).

This process may offend many involved in publishing. Newbery author Jean Craig George calls marketers “intrusive.” Book designer Eric Curl writes that his art is “menaced by the fallacious doctrine that the loudest shout brings in the most customers” (Curl, 10). Deep respect for ideas, stories and facts draws many intellectuals to publishing. According to Jason Epstein, the publisher has a much more important goal than worrying about sales. He writes in lofty idealism about the role of a publisher in society: “I believed and still do that the democratic ideal is a permanent and inconclusive Socratic seminar in which we all learn from one another. The publisher’s job is to supply the necessary readings” (Epstein, 56). Epstein assures those dismayed by fast-talking marketers in the boardrooms: “The dominance within today’s publishing houses of marketing specialists and the chains they cater to is not absolute” (Epstein, 107).

In fact Epstein believes that the emphasis on marketing is a relatively new phenomenon which is splitting the industry into “two quite different and incompatible businesses – a dominant one producing mass merchandise for the malls and another committed to the traditional search for backlist candidates” (Epstein, 105). Gratia Banta, Chair of the 2006 Caldecott Committee, agrees. She believes that marketing began to play a much larger role in cover development in the 1980s with the development of the...
mass media paperback (essentially a cheaper way of binding and printing books that enabled them to be more cheaply made, sold and distributed). However now that marketing is certainly part of the development of covers, publishing houses are left wondering how to deal with it.

A Publishing Dialogue

Perhaps a deep-seated love of books among those whose lives revolve around them has saved the book from succumbing to all the deleterious effects of marketing and promotion that might be thought to threaten it...book buyers are not the kind of consumers who take kindly to being treated like fools. (Powers, 10)

Publishing houses have chosen deal with the tension differently. There are examples of publishing houses that send decisions about cover art directly to marketers. There is even some professional advice that urges this course. John Huenefeld has written a widely used textbook on setting up small-scale independent publishing houses. In the book production chapter under cover art is simply written MKT, marketing. Huenefeld assumes that marketing people will exclusively make those choices. There are several advertising companies on the web who claim to “design covers that sell.”7 They promise that a cover can be provided in a week, but include in small print that only the concept of the book must be mailed; there’s no need for their staff to read the total document. Can you imagine an author’s response to such a cover? It might be like Newbery Award winning Mildred D. Taylor’s response to the covers of one of her books: “[It was] so distasteful to me, so unlike anything I had described, that I tore all of the covers from those editions then sat down and cried” (Minor, 64).

On the other end of the spectrum, some houses leave cover art decisions entirely up to editors or artists, leaving the sales department simply to convince book buyers to

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7 http://www.alphaadvertising.com/coverss/
buy the book. Cosette Kies, a student surveying the developments in cover art over time, writes in surprise about the role of intuition in choosing covers and calls the “conventional publisher’s wisdom” used in choosing covers “remarkably unsophisticated” (Kies, 89). But this “conventional publisher’s wisdom” is a well-established factor in many publishing decisions. Powers writes that the cover art of the nineteen-forties, for example, often merely reflected the personal preferences of the house’s directors (Powers, 8). Epstein shares an anecdote about Bennett Cerf’s friendship and encouragement of William Faulkner, who eventually made a lot of money for Random House. Had Cerf treated Faulkner as a budget item, those books would have been published elsewhere. It was Cerf’s intuition that served the house the best in the end (Epstein, 85). Similarly, some publishers celebrate the role of editorial or artistic intuition in choosing cover art: “Encouraging an intuitive approach to jacket design [Paula Wiseman, editorial director of Harcourt’s new Silver Whistle imprint] tries to make the jackets as compelling as possible” (Stevenson, 141). What does compelling mean? Apparently it’s entirely up to the designer to define.

However it seems that most houses employ the skills of both marketers and editors. Philomel, for example, leaves cover choices up to editors with the caveat that marketers must approve. Editors can freelance the covers, and then the covers are accepted or rejected in a meeting attended by sales, marketing and editorial staff. Patti Gauch, Vice President and editor, shared a revealing story about cover art.

Patti was managing the production of a children’s fantasy book, and to her delight had procured the services of the Dylans in designing the cover. The Dylans are children’s book illustrators who have won several awards for their work. They are married and live
in New England. The cover arrived and Patti, jubilant, called the Dylans to thank them and went out to lunch. While at lunch, the President of Philomel caught a glimpse of the cover and flew into a rage. He called the interns into his office, shut the door, and yelled to the room that the cover was absolutely unacceptable. It was too bland, it wouldn’t attract any attention whatsoever on a shelf. A panicked intern called Patti, who drummed her fingers on the table and began to think. The President called a meeting with Patti, marketing people, sales people and editors. He set the date for Monday. Patti related this story, eyes shining and asked, “What do you think I was thinking?” I replied that I didn’t know. She said, “I didn’t want the control to go to the marketing people, that’s what I was thinking.” So she went out, bought an armful of the best selling children’s fantasy books and drafted an agenda for the meeting. Patti ended up facilitating the dialogue about the cover, and ensured that her voice was not lost among the many departments who all had a “claim” in the decision. She finished her story with satisfaction, “That’s how those decisions are made. Look how many people were in the room! The President of the company, editors, editorial assistants, designers, marketers! And everyone had a stake.” She had to go in prepared. At other moments during the interview Patti expressed the highest respect for marketers, but nonetheless she didn’t want someone else’s agenda to make the decision. Her aggressiveness paid off, and Patti was very happy with the final cover (although it wasn’t the Dylan’s original).

Several houses have hired creative directors, or designers to wade through the tricky waters of cover design and layout. Farrar, Straus and Giroux hired Michael Ian Kayes, an “art-director,” to handle cover art choices. His title itself reflects the emphasis on art rather than sales. This emphasis may be representative of the values of the house
itself: “Kaye works for a literary house where marketing conventions are not so hard-sell and where his introduction of suggestion in jacket design has been enthusiastically accepted” (Heller, 44). Kayes was hired in the 1980’s and designed hundreds of jackets on his own. His goal is to combine the input of marketing, editorial, authors and potential audience members as well as his own artistic intuitions. He compares jacket design to “a big logic puzzle” (Heller, 49).

One advantage of hiring a creative designer, or design team, is that this person can create a unified style for all of the books published by the house. Steven Heller, author of Jackets Required, calls this unified style a “visual persona.” Alan Powers concurs that this “visual identity” is important to send a united message to consumers. And although Powers is resistant to marketing terminology, he has put his finger on something many marketing people are considering as well, although they refer to it as a “brand.”

**Marketing Goals: Creating a Brand**

“It’s a branding-happy world. That’s the cause of much of the rejacketing that’s been done.” Kate Klimo, publishing director for Random House (Maughan, 126).

The idea of creating a brand for one’s books is well documented in literature about publishing (Epstein, Powers, Heller, Stevenson). A brand generally is defined as a particular look that unifies and distinguishes books that are related in some way. The books might be a “box set” done by a certain author, like a RL Stine look, or a Roald Dahl look. They might be members of a larger series, like Sue Grafton’s alphabet mystery series or The Baby-Sitter’s Club. They might be unified for having won an award, or even just being under a particular imprint. Often there are multiple “brandings” going on in the jacket of one book. For example, let’s examine the book How To Be Your Wife’s Best Friend, published by NavPress in 1996. This book (pictured below) is
branded in several distinct ways. First, its title links it to several other “how to” books published by NavPress. The small pinecone on the spine (which cannot be seen) brands it as a Pinion Press imprint book. The distinct size further links it with the NavPress series, as does the cover style. These branding devices are designed to immediately identify this series to consumers. However the “gift sized” book is a larger branding device used across the industry to place this book in the typical genre of friendly, emotionally satisfying gift books.

Once a book is branded successfully it will rarely be redesigned, even when switching from one type of binding to another: “A book with an established visual identity as a hardback will probably keep the same cover in paperback, although publishers who deal in reprints and imports are more likely to create an overall identity for their imprint,” (Powers, 9). The cover of *Julie of the Wolves* is a good example of this (discussed later). After settling on a sort of “brand image,” the general design scheme didn’t change in any overtly obvious way for over forty years.

Perhaps more aware of branding than the typical consumer, booksellers assess the importance of cover art: “In our study last year of booksellers’ assessments of publisher marketing efforts, 75% of the 300 booksellers surveyed said that, of all elements of the book itself, the look and design of the cover was the most important” (Rawlinson, 8).

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8 http://www.navpress.com/Store/Product/0891098755.html#ProductDetails
Other Marketing Devices Related to Book Jackets

Several children’s publishers are tempted to tack freebies to their book covers to promote sales among children, or even publish two complementary covers to encourage publishing houses to place the books face out. A recent British children’s book, *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*, boasted two covers in contrasting colors to promote the book (Bookseller, 5/14/2000). Some recent books in the science fiction genre use incredibly expensive hologram material to provide a shimmery, attention-grabbing surface. Or publishers include little toys inside books, such as the paper dolls included in a recent nostalgic book titled *Growing Up with Dick and Jane* (Kismaric, 1996). In this sense, the Newbery button itself can be understood as a marketing device. When publisher Frederick Melcher dreamed up the Newbery award in the 1920s, part of his goal was to boost interest in children’ literature in general and consumer awareness about fantastic children’s books. Some academics argue that educators and parents aren’t the only people who get excited about awards; kids do too. “Children are naturally drawn to award-winning books…the appeal of these books often comes from the shiny gold, silver, or bronze seals affixed to the covers of the special books,” (Hill, 1). This bleeds into another tricky choice of cover art: defining a target audience.

Defining the Target Audience Through Cover Choices

A serious adolescent or middle-grade book has a tricky task of appealing to parents, kids, educators and book buyers. While working at a small publishing house in Colorado Springs, I looked over our teen line. The books were written by a forty-five year old mother and bought by another adult editor. They did not pass through the hands of any focus groups, and the advertising budget was small. The covers of the books were,
in my opinion, unattractive. I asked an editorial assistant about who made the cover art choices and she replied, “Oh it doesn’t matter what we [as young people] think. The covers are designed to attract parents.” This mindset, backward as it may seem, might actually be the best crack that the small publishing house has at selling these books. And sometimes the bottom line is what counts most.

But certainly an ideal cover would attract not just children or parents, but both. How can that be achieved, particularly when the target groups have vastly different marketing “styles”? Middle-grade readers, those most often targeted by the Newbery Awards, are “satisfied with covers that represent a scene from the book” (Stevenson, 140). But what scene to choose? And how to ingratiate the character to both parents and kids?

This relates to some fundamental questions about who buys books, and what are they looking for. Common sense might say that adolescents don’t often go to the bookstore and buy a serious novel, and that perhaps many adolescent’s exposure to Newbery books might first be in the classroom. On the other hand, do many Newbery sales come from parents buying that book for their child? Hoping to obtain this kind of information, I contacted The Book Industry Survey Groups. A representative reported that those kinds of statistics are available, but are not public knowledge and are expensive. She mentioned that she often receives calls for that kind of information, and her typical response is, “What kind of budget are we looking at?” I replied none. One might deduce that publishing houses conduct research around these kinds of questions on their own (or hire someone else to do it) and the results influence cover art choices.
A Case Study: *Julie of the Wolves*

Even a brief perusal through past covers of one book reveals trends. Let’s look at these covers dealing with popular Newbery winner, *Julie of the Wolves*. Below is the original cover, designed by illustrator Johann Shoenfeld (who also illustrated the Caldecott classic *Owl Moon*).

![Original Cover Image](image)

Hard cover, June 1972

The cover shows Julie clearly interacting with the wolf pack. Julie actually takes “second stage” to the large male wolf in the lower corner. His red eyes may signify aggression, but Julie is confident, smiling. The book has an upbeat quality, and links Julie to the wolves in a friendly, non-confrontational way. Author Jean Craighead George reports that this cover is her absolute favorite. “Loved it!” she crowed enthusiastically (George, 12/3/2004). Illustrator Johann Shohenherr had really gotten the sense of the story, the comradeship between the wolves and the girl. However marketers didn’t like the cover because “it didn’t emphasize Julie enough” (George, 12/3/2004) Two years later the following edition was produced by Wendell Minor:

![Following Edition Image](image)

Hardcover, 1974
Julie’s mouth is slightly open, here eyes sparkling. The wolf is slinking away, not engaged with the reader at all. Julie’s triumphant and innocent look seems particularly hopeful and the colors are bright, reminiscent of a sunset. However Julie is no longer physically with the wolves, but rather is underneath a wolf that is slinking away. One might assume that Julie and the wolf were adversaries and Julie won. Although the differences are not glaring, there are major contrasts with the below paperback version released two years later.

Paperback, 1976

The colors are dull, and Julie and the wolf are set up as adversaries, separated by the boxy title. The design of the title further emphasizes the adversarial roles of Julie and the wolves by enlarging the text of those two words. Julie’s face is entirely serious, her mouth closed. Also, the wolf is above Julie, which might insinuate that the wolf has more power than Julie, further exaggerated by his front facing aggressive stance. According to Dupont, author of *Images that Sell*, wolves in our culture are powerful symbols of deviance and evil. The pictured wolf is not clearly good or bad, but at the very least somewhat menacing.
The above cover, published over twenty years later, has a distinctly different style. It was designed for airport audiences, according to Jean Craighead George, and employs an entirely different design, less artistic than before and “targeting an older audience.” The adult wolf covers this “gorgeous Eskimo girl.” The Newberry medal is more clearly exposed, having an almost tactile feel. Julie takes second stage in this cover; her image is washed out behind the image of the full-grown wolf. Although the wolf is not looking at the reader, it is still clear that the wolf has much more power than Julie.

Several common issues are revealed by this examination:

- How to use color
- How to display the title; What type of font to use
- Where to place the Newbery Award
- How to portray the character-- age, body, position, lighting on the face
- How to portray the struggles the character will face

The next chapter provides a framework for discussing these design choices and their possible effects on the way people visually read the book jacket.

Book Jacket Analysis

If these book covers are certainly designed to attract positive attention from potential consumers, can they be analyzed to reveal cultural trends? Many academics think so. Fairy-tale expert Roderick McGillis lays a foundation to interpret cover art from
a cultural studies point of view through his work with various covers of *A Little Princess*. He analyzes publishing houses attitudes towards the former English empire through their covers and illustrations, concluding that cover art reveals significant assumptions about the interpretations of the story (McGillis, 1996). In his analysis, McGillis used semiotics to unpack the symbolic meaning of objects in the image and the way those objects filled up the space.

Similarly Jocalyn Clarke examined the covers of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. The journal uses art to affirm the humanity of the medicine and distinguish its cover from the masses of medical journals. The critique was surprisingly titled “Babes and Boobs” and asserted that the use of this art simply confirmed conventional social mores about the role of women. Women were sexualized or turned into mothers; the author recommended that the JAMA change the cover art next year!

**Summary**

Covers are chosen by a group of people who may or may not specialize in marketing but certainly have marketing in mind. The book jacket is designed to appeal to a target audience, which in the case of children’s literature is exceptionally broad, encompassing parents, educators and children. Book jackets do have a direct relationship to the sales of a book, although the degree varies from book to book. And book jackets can be analyzed as cultural texts that have changed over time. Now let’s examine the tools for systematically unpacking book jackets.
Bibliography


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Chapter Five
Making Meaning of Newbery Book Jackets

Like any set of book jackets, the jackets created for Newbery books reveal particular readings of the book that are tied to the cultural values of the time the jacket was created. But how can a viewer unpack an image to reveal its underlying approach and assumptions about the book? And what is really at stake here? These questions may be appropriately dealt with first through a story. I once took the Meyers-Briggs test with a group of five co-workers. As part of the test (to see if we were perceivers or judgers) we had to look at an image of nature and free write our immediate reaction on paper. The picture was a wave crashing over a rock. I leaned over my paper and wrote “waves, waves waves!” by the time my free write was completed, I was reminiscing about a trip to the beach a few years earlier. My fellow intern and working partner had taken a completely, comically different approach – she described in mind-numbing detail the visual composition of the paper (at least I found her description mind-numbing). Where my first line read “waves, waves, waves” her first line read something like “there is a large rock in the lower right hand corner of this photograph.” What a different approach to an image.

This anecdote reveals both the significance of cover images and the difficulty that lies in attempting to “pin down” the meaning behind an image. A cover image creates a visual paradigm to frame the textual story. It sends readers down the pathways of their
imagination, enticing them to pick up the book and explore the interesting thoughts that the cover draws to mind.

In my case study I asked adolescents to respond to four copies of Island of the Blue Dolphins. In some of the free responses from students who hadn’t read the book I read imaginative interpretations of the story behind the cover. “The girl is saving the dolphins” or “The girl is on a mission to find the island of the Blue Dolphins” or “The girl is trying to hunt the dolphins.” After providing this assessment of the plot students usually shared whether they were interested in reading the book. This perfectly illustrates the goal of a cover – to get people’s heads thinking about the book and their fingers reaching for their wallet to take it home and explore it some more.

I believe that a cover offers a particular reading of a book, a visual sample of the subject matter. For that reason, some “visual readings” may be more congruent with the book’s actual content than others. And some visual readings may lead potential readers completely off-track in terms of thinking about the book. When an adolescent is “duped” by a cover, they are more likely to “miss the point” of the text that follows. Most of the students in my case study thought that Island of the Blue Dolphins would connect the girl on the cover to the dolphins on the cover in some pivotal way. This is a logical assumption. After all the girl and the dolphins are both big characters on the cover (meaning they take up a lot of space) and the title of the book has “dolphins” in it. But as logical as the assumption might be, this is not the case at all. In the text Kira does not try to save the dolphins, she does not make friends with them and she does not hunt them. Basically she does not interact with them at all. If a “duped” student read the book psychologically anticipating this meeting or relationship to develop between Kira and the
dolphins, they might not be reading the actual text as closely and may miss the main human/animal relationship: Kira and the dogs. The dolphins, which were focused on in a pretty marketing tactic (what adolescent girl isn’t crazy about dolphins) may actually complicate an adolescent’s reading of the text.

However it’s difficult to analyze precisely where and how these kind of cover to content “misses” are taking place. It’s difficult because people analyze images so differently that publishers trying to create cover art (or students trying to write a project about cover art) cannot really say with any certainty the particular message that an image will convey. But we can attempt to “unpack” an image to analyze what the creator was trying to say. Various fields have offered frameworks for analyzing the connotative message of images. Two examples are semiotics and semantic meaning (as developed by Charles Osgood). The following paragraphs will unpack these image-analysis tools.

Semiotics

The interdisciplinary field of semiotics provides useful methods for unpacking the elements of an image so that a viewer can construct an informed “reading” of that image. There is not a necessarily “wrong” way to read an image just as there is not a clearly wrong way to read a fictional text. However a reading of image can be strengthened through a systematic semiotic approach.

The following paragraphs lay a foundation of visual social semiotic theory, paying particular attention to three metafunctions this theory employs to analyze images: representational, interpersonal and compositional. Selected Newbery cover art will be used to provide examples of the theory.
Semiotic theory developed from linguistics, a discipline founded by Ferdinand de Saussure in 1914. It became recognized in Britain through Stuart Hall’s work at the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies. Semiotics postulates that images, and perhaps even daily life, can be read as a “text” through the analysis of particular signs (Chandler, 1). Therefore semiotics is the study of signs and symbols, and the way that those symbols convey a certain meaning.

Semiotic theory is multi-faceted. According to scholar Donald Chandler, the author of *Semiotics for Beginners*, the field really needs a scholar to set up a hard and firm framework: “Clearly there is a need to establish a firm theoretical foundation for a subject which is currently characterized by a host of competing theoretical assumptions” (Chandler, 8). As it is, different scholars have created multiple frameworks based on the concepts of semiotic theory. One such concept is visual social semiotics, which developed out of the work of Chandler, as well as Jewitt and Oyama (Harrison, 3). Visual social semiotics can be explained through the combination of two definitions. Visual semiotics attempts to connect the connotative meaning of images across several disciplines, such as art history, fashion, advertising etc (Chandler, 10). Social semiotics goes on to ask how people use signs to construct the life of a community (Harrison, 3). Therefore visual social semiotics involves “the description of semiotic resources, what can be said and done with images (and other visual means of communication) and how the things people say and do with images can be interpreted” (Jewitt & Oyama, 134).

Claire Harrison, a professional writer, summarized visual social semiotics, points out three important principles that are the foundation for analyzing “the language of imagery” (Harrison, 48):
1. Semioticians believe all people see the world through signs.
2. The meaning of signs is created by people and does not exist separately from them and the life of their social/cultural community.
3. Semiotic system provide people with a variety of sources for meaning making.

Kress and van Leeuwen created a trio of metafunctions in recognition that meaning is oft created through the simultaneous completion of three meta-semiotic tasks. These tasks are called representational metafunction, the interpersonal metafunction and the compositional metafunction.

**Representational Metafunction**

Representational metafunction unpacks the people, places and objects in an image. One way to do this is through identifying “vectors” within the image. A vector is a line across the image created through some action in the image. For example, in the current cover of *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen (below) a vector is created through the line between the plane, the hatchet, the boy and the wolf, all of which are examples of represented participants (RPs) in the image. A viewer might assume that these objects are connected; that the boy will use the hatchet to fight the wolf. The placement of the hatchet over the boys head implies that violence and survival will be a key issue in this story. This vector guides the viewer through a narrative image and encourages viewers to create a story from their parts. Less important vectors, “eyeline vectors” are created through the woods, the mountains and the skylines.
This same logic of connecting Represented Participants with narrative vectors explains why so many of the middle school students in my case study were quick to connect Kira to the dolphins. You see, in many other images they would be “right” to do so (such as *Hatchet* above). Therefore what looked like the mistake of the students really is visually misleading – marketers purposefully didn’t follow visual logic of RPs and vectors to convey the actual plot of *Island of the Blue Dolphins* to potential consumers.

After highlighting the narrative vectors, one could compare them across different books and thus compare different covers “versions” of the story. Consider the vector offered by recent cover of *Island of the Blue Dolphins*:

Two vectors are evident in the cover, one flowing from the bottom left to the top right created by the lines of the boat, the girl, the small dog. The other is created through the paddle and the turn of the girl’s head to the top right corner. The tilt of the girl’s head
implies that there is something outside of the image that we can’t see. The boat flowing towards the cove implies that the girl is on a journey. These narrative vectors contain much less power than the ones in *Hatchet*. Harrison reports that useful questions for the analysis of the representational metafunction include:

1. Who are the represented participants? Include both human and non-human objects.
2. Are there vectors? What kind of story do they tell?
3. What types of conventional thinking do different objects included create in me?

**Interpersonal Metafunction**

The interpersonal metafunction is organized around different issues: “image act and gaze,” “social distance and intimacy,” “perspective – the horizontal angle and involvement,” and “perspective – the vertical angle and power.” These issues are all related to how the viewer interacts with the represented person or object in the image.

Over time, different covers of *Hatchet* have portrayed Brian (the character) looking in different directions. Interpersonal metafunction analysis provides a framework to explore what these tilts of the heads could mean for potential viewers, and how much power they give Brian.

In the below cover of *Islands of the Blue Dolphins*, it is highly significant that Kira is not facing the audience; this disables the viewer from forming any kind of personal relationship with Kira, a factor that is turned around in the following paperback copy:
This cover offers no narrative vectors, but measures high on the interpersonality of the 
main character.

**Compositional Metafunction**

The compositional metafunction explores the layout of the image and how that 
may affect how much power that offers the subject pictured. It also examines the 
“salience” of RPs – how much an RP can capture the viewer’s attention. Basic rules lead 
to this analysis such as “the larger the figure, the greater the salience” (Harrison, 57); 
therefore the above cover of *Island of the Blue Dolphins* features a highly salient Kira. 
Compositional metafunction also explores the way that color, background complexity, 
light and shade and perspective may affect the power given to the main RPs. If the 
subject is facing the viewer, power balance is equal. If the subject’s eyes are averted, they 
are less powerful. If they are “higher up” or pictured from an ant’s perspective they have 
more power than the viewer. This sort of information is highly relevant in the covers such 
as *Julie of the Wolves*, examined in the last chapter. Julie’s eyes change in their focus, 
and there is significant change in the color of the cover. This sort of common sense about 
the varying levels of dominance and power based on the perspective given to a RP is 
highly relevant. I think this is something that every designer knows and should bring to
the table when designing a cover. Keep the role of perspective in mind when reading the case study of *Island of the Blue Dolphins* in the next chapter.

**Semiotics Summary**

Semiotics concerns itself with analyzing the meaning our society places behind signs and symbols, the connotative meaning that images can hold for us (Chandler, 1). Perry Nodelman, author of *Words About Pictures*, is a widely cited expert in illustration analysis. His book is based on principles of semiotics, and Nodelman writes that most experts concerned with analyzing images are using semiotics (formally or informally) to do it (Nodelman, ix). I absolutely agree with Nodelman’s observation. Even the middle school students who responded to the free answer questions about the covers overtly employed a sort of “semiotic logic” occasionally to reach their interpretations: “The girl must be the protagonist because of the light on her face” or “She’s on top of the mountain so she looks like she rules the island.”

**A Second Framework: Semantic Connotative Meaning**

Connotative meaning refers to the shades of meaning attached to something. Its counter part, denotative meaning, refers to the objective definition attached to a word. For example, the denotative meaning of the word “beautiful” is “Having qualities that delight the senses, especially the eyes” (dictionary.com). However this denotative definition does not tap the host of images, feelings and cultural understandings for the word beautiful.

RM Weaver writes:

> Denotation and connotation... represent two vocabularies using the same set of words. The denotative usage presents the thing in its essential and objective meaning. The connotative usage presents it enriched by associations and feelings which, though not susceptible of being pinned down, are nonetheless real. (Weaver, 1974)
Connotative meaning is everywhere, in all kinds of rhetoric and propaganda, in advertising and in all kinds of writing. Connotative meaning affects the shaping of attitudes toward a particular subject; in order to address people’s attitude toward something you must understand the connotative meaning they assign to it. Essentially semiotics and semantic meaning are methods of divining the connotative meaning assigned to images by viewers.

**Semantic Differentials**

The semantic differential is a research tool developed by Charles Osgood at University of Illinois in the 1950s. Osgood was concerned with analyzing the role that connotations play in language and wanted to assign a numeric score to the meaning given to objects, events or ideas. A semantic differential “measures people’s reaction to stimulus words and concepts in terms of ratings on bipolar scales defined with contrasting adjectives on each end” (Heise, 235). Below is an example of a semantic differential scale:

**Teddy Bear**

Good __ __ __ __ __ __ __ Bad

Participants express opinions by marking the space that best represents their judgment. Semantic differentials have been used to analyze connotations about political candidates, manufactured products, occupations, racial groups and several other subjects (Heise, 236). A review of the literature failed to identify any studies using semantic differentials to study connotations of Newbery award winning books.

Osgood’s extensive studies identified three factors that account for most of the variants in connotations about objects, events and ideas. The three factors are evaluation,
activity and potency. Osgood interpreted the results to signify that the scores on these three factors can represent the meaning people attach to objects, events and ideas. In my own case study Osgood’s hypothesis held true. Three factors emerged through analysis performed on the data, and these three factors basically fall along the lines that Osgood predicted.

Osgood’s methods of analyzing images according to factors of evaluation, activity and potency could be read along lines of gender. Consider for a moment the stereotype of an adolescent boy: powerful, fast and bad. This essentially is a thumbnail sketch of the *mook* character employed by Rushkov to explain the advertising role model in our society for boys. Consider the stereotype of an adolescent girl: weak, slow and good. This doesn’t precisely line up with the *midriff* (she might be fast, bad and weak), but it does line up with a lot of stereotypes of middle school girls in the classroom. They have the right answers, but they don’t raise their hand. They are more scared than boys to take risks. They are good in school, but work hard whereas boys are “bad” in school but naturally intelligent. The fact that these stereotypes are divided along gender lines was illustrated by Osgood himself who used the antonym pair “female, male” as a differential to gauge potency with the male being the epitome of power and the female the epitome of weakness. Of course in this age of political correctness when supposedly females and males are equal, that particular differential is no longer in the book. The following paragraphs will unpack a few particularly “salient” examples of biased cover art.

I open with my absolute favorite: *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*. The book, a Newbery Honor book written by AVI in 1992, takes place on a ship crossing from Liverpool to Maryland in 1832. Its heroine, a young girl named Charlotte, begins
the voyage as a lady-passenger and ends it as an unofficial member of the crew. She chops her hair, climbs monkey-like up the ramp and learns to relish her newfound freedom. But when she arrives in America to meet her family her parents are absolutely horrified. Her father burns her diary and calls it a disgustingly unlady-like pack of lies and her mother cannot even talk to Charlotte without grimacing at her tanned face and arms. Charlotte’s lost her desire to be a lady – both in terms of class (she can no longer restrain herself from talking to the servants) and in terms of gender. So she sneaks back to the shipyard at midnight and presumably resumes life as a sailor shuttling back and forth to England on ships. This book presents readers with major gender problems, problems that have been brushed off by critic Charlotte Huck who maintains that Charlotte Doyle is “simply a boy running around with girl’s clothing” (Lehr, ix). I never saw her that way and my own copy of this book is nearly rented in half from use. Clearly the cover for this book could convey any number of messages. Below are the three covers that have been plastered on this book since 1990:

I love these covers. They showcase the importance of cover art in creating a visual framework for a story. Covers B and C give viewers some idea of the gender conflict
inherent in the plot. Notice that although all books have the same RPs and none of them offer significant narrative vectors, they still share a version of the story. I believe that cover B presents the weakest Charlotte. Because she is not facing the viewer and there is a lack of narrative vectors, the cover is quite confusing. Charlotte is physically small compared to the room and seems much less powerful than A or C. However at least the viewer understands that Charlotte is experiencing an identity-struggle that is connected to her viewing herself as a sailor. Cover C offers the most powerful Charlotte. She is huge, taking up the whole space. Her body language is confident. She is clearly high up, and looking straight at us. So we are her equal, but because it is clear that visually there would be people below her, we might also infer that Charlotte is powerful. But cover A? Cover A reveals a slow, large and very good Charlotte. Cover A reveals a Charlotte that simply confirms all the gender stereotypes placed on girls without an ironic twist. The pictured moment also never really exists in the story – unless you judge the book by the first moments that Charlotte is on the ship. Cover A completely undercuts the message of Charlotte by portraying her more like a middle-school model than a sailor. It’s infuriating. A book that AVI wrote partially to criticize limiting gender roles and class roles is sold with the picture of a modelish girl in an expensive dress.

Consider the covers for *Julie of the Wolves* examined in chapter four. This cover became increasingly more focused on creating an aggressive gap between Julie and the Wolves, setting them up as adversaries and opening the door for the story to be interpreted violently. Or consider the below cover of a teacher’s edition of *Julie of the Wolves*:
This cover portrays both Julie and the wolf as being incredibly young, a portrayal that may surprise Julie’s creator, author Jean Craighead George, who wrote Julie to be about thirteen – the very age of the adolescents she’s chosen for her audience. I submit that this young portrayal of Julie serves a very particular purpose: it avoids the uncomfortable rape scene in the novel that caused Julie to be censored for years and doesn’t bring it to the teacher’s mind when she/he picks up the book. Essentially it suggests a neutered, censored or uncomplicated version of the story. The same result is accomplished with the model-like cover (A) of *True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*. And because students make meaning from the book cover images, the marketers who design the covers might well be undercutting the work of the author and librarian team who chose this book because of its distinguished and unusual nature.

There are, in my mind at least, clear connections between the cover art chosen for a Newbery book and the values of the time. One fascinating “cover art saga” to trace is the progression of covers designed for the 1940s Newbery *Caddie Woodlawn*. Caddie Woodlawn is a very strong female character who grew up in the West with her pioneer family. She enjoyed running through the fields with her brothers rather than staying in the house, and her father overruled her mother and said that Caddie should be allowed to behave as she pleased while she was young. Of course eventually Caddie comes around
and decides that she rather likes hoops skirts, but the main thrust of the novel is Caddie’s rollicking boy-like adventures. One might even say that Caddie is a bit of a stock story much like the *Anne of Green Gables* series, *Pippi Longstocking* or even Jo in *Little Women*. Caddie’s various portrayals on covers over time would create an entirely different mental framework for readers – a framework that’s more informed by society’s opinion of girls like wild Caddie than on any changing nature of the novel itself.

The Caddie Woodlawn on the 1972 hardcover is clearly more dominant, more in control and has a ton more personality than the shy, reserved, uncertain and alone Caddie portrayed on the above cover.

In short, marketers offer a highly mediated version of the story on the cover. I believe that the version offered has may have more to do with what is being sold in other media realms than an honest attempt to visually represent the story. *Island of the Blue*
Dolphins emphasizes the dolphins simply because many adolescents like dolphins. Girls buy calendars, pens, t-shirts, posters and stuffed animals featuring dolphins, so wouldn’t they be more compelled to buy a book featuring dolphins than a book featuring wild dogs? The same visual codes that sell Seventeen Magazine are employed to sell the current cover of True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle. And that makes me really nervous.

The emphasis of cultural values in determining the type of cover that a Newbery book receives becomes evident when the covers of Newbery books are examined systematically over time. What is essentially at stake here is influencing the way that young adolescents make meaning of the story. The following chapter examines adolescent responses to various paperback covers of Island of the Blue Dolphins as a case in point.

Bibliography


Adolescent Literature Cited


Chapter Six  
Island of the Blue Dolphins Case Study

“I start from the premise that all representations tell a story, more than one in fact, and that representations can be read or interpreted the way one would interpret a written narrative.” Carla Freccero, *Introduction to Popular Culture*

One purpose of this study was to determine if the connotative meaning middle school students attribute to characters in a book is influenced by the way the character is represented on the book jacket. A semantic differential was used to measure the “meaning” attributed to the female character in the book, *Island of the Blue Dolphin*. According to Osgood, the semantic meaning attached to most objects and events can be represented by three factor scores: evaluative, activity, and potency. In other words, the meaning attached to the female character can be described in terms like, “She is good rather than bad,” “She is active rather than passive,” and “She is strong rather than weak.” If the way the female character in *Island of the Blue Dolphin* is represented on a book jacket influences the meaning attached to that character, differences should be observed on the responses to a semantic word pairs related to the representation of the character on book covers printed over the past forty years.

**Semantic Differential**

The semantic differential used in this study is presented in Figure 1. The thirteen word pairs were selected to measure Osgood’s three factors: evaluative, activity, and potency. The word pairs for each factor are shown in Figure 2. Responses to these sets of word pairs were scored on a seven-point scale with higher scores representing “more positive meanings” on the three scales.
Figure One

Semantic Differential for Assessing the Connotative Meaning Attributed to the Female Character on the Cover of Island of the Blue Dolphins

Directions: The attached page is the jacket for Island of the Blue Dolphins, a book by Scott O’Dell. Carefully examine it. Pay particular attention to the way the girl is represented. Spend at least two minutes examining this book jacket.

After examining the book jacket, place an X on the line between each word pair that best describes how the girl was represented on the book jacket. You should end up with 14 X’s on this evaluation sheet.

The Book Jacket Represented The Girl As:

| Active       | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | Passive   |
| Awful       | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | Nice      |
| Big         | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | Little    |
| Dull        | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | Sharp     |
| Good        | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | Bad       |
| Hands-Off   | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | Involved  |
| Noisy       | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | Quiet     |
| Slow        | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | Fast      |
| Spirited    | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | Listless  |
| Unhelpful   | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | Helpful   |
| Useful      | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | Useless   |
| Valuable     | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | Worthless |
| Weak        | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | Strong    |

9 The word pairs in green measure “Activity,” the red word pairs measure “Evaluative” and the blue word pairs measure “Potency.” These colors were not shown on the instruments used for the study.
The validity of semantic differentials to measure connotative meaning was initially established by Osgood, et al and this generalized approach has been used by numerous researchers over the past half century. A factor analysis of responses in the current study revealed three factors with Eigen values greater than one. The item loadings on each factor matched well with Osgood’s evaluative, activity, and potency scales. This lends credence to the construct validity of the semantic differential for use with sample in the current study.

**Connotative Meaning Data**

One hundred eleven middle grade students from a suburban school district in southwest Ohio responded to semantic differentials associated with four book covers of *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. The four covers are shown in Figure 3. Student responses were scored by assigning a value of 1 to 7 to the response to each word pair, summing these scores for the word pairs in each of the three scales, then dividing the sum by the number of items in the scale. This resulted in three scores from each student for each book cover: an evaluative score, an activity score, and a potency score. All scores ranged from 1 to 7 with higher scores indicating a more positive view than lower scores.

Tables 1 through 4 show the frequencies and descriptive statistics for the responses to individual items for the four book jackets along with summary statistics for the three factors. The summary tables include reliability estimates for the scales. The reliability estimates are alpha-coefficients which measure the internal consistency of responses. The reliability estimates ranged from .52 to .88. The average reliability of the three scales for each book cover was: evaluative, .78; activity, .68; and potency, .59. While the target reliability for each scale was .7, these are acceptable reliability measures for an exploratory study. Before the instrument is used in future studies, the activity and potency scale s should be examined and revised.
Figure 2

Word Pairs in Each Factor of Semantic Meaning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>Evaluative</strong></th>
<th><strong>Activity</strong></th>
<th><strong>Potency</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awful - Nice</td>
<td>Passive - Active</td>
<td>Little - Big</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad - Good</td>
<td>Hands Off - Involved</td>
<td>Dull - Sharp</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unhelpful - Helpful</td>
<td>Slow - Fast</td>
<td>Quiet - Noisy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useless - Useful</td>
<td>Listless - Spirited</td>
<td>Weak - Strong</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worthless - Valuable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3

Four Book Jackets Assessed Using the Semantic Differential

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cover A</th>
<th>Cover B</th>
<th>Cover C</th>
<th>Cover D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Island of the Blue Dolphins</td>
<td>Island of the Blue Dolphins</td>
<td>Island of the Blue Dolphins</td>
<td>Island of the Blue Dolphins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scott O'Dell</td>
<td>Scott O'Dell</td>
<td>Scott O'Dell</td>
<td>Scott O'Dell</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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### Table 1

**Frequencies, Means, Standard Deviations of Responses to Semantic Differential A**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequencies</th>
<th>N=111</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>25 14 24 17 12 7 12</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>1.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awful</td>
<td>3 0 1 14 12 21 60</td>
<td>Nice</td>
<td>6.02</td>
<td>1.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little</td>
<td>10 12 19 26 20 12 12</td>
<td>Big</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>1.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dull</td>
<td>6 9 13 32 12 13 26</td>
<td>Sharp</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>1.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad</td>
<td>1 0 2 5 26 15 62</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>6.14</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hands-Off</td>
<td>17 4 6 30 17 17 20</td>
<td>Involved</td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>1.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quiet</td>
<td>62 26 8 10 3 0 2</td>
<td>Noisy</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slow</td>
<td>11 5 15 45 16 11 8</td>
<td>Fast</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>1.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listless</td>
<td>5 13 12 15 17 15 34</td>
<td>Spirited</td>
<td>4.86</td>
<td>1.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unhelpful</td>
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<td>Helpful</td>
<td>4.95</td>
<td>1.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useless</td>
<td>6 1 15 22 23 19 25</td>
<td>Useful</td>
<td>4.91</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>3 3 6 34 25 18 22</td>
<td>Valuable</td>
<td>4.95</td>
<td>1.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>11 7 14 25 19 17 18</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>1.84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Scale Scores and Reliability Estimates: Semantic Differential For Book Jacket A**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Reliability (Alpha-Coefficient)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
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<td>.74</td>
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<tr>
<td>Potency</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>.52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

---

10 In this table, the less positive word is shown in the left column and the more positive word in the right column. Higher scores indicate a more positive reaction.
### Frequencies, Means, and Standard Deviations of Responses to Semantic Differential B

<table>
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<th>S.D.</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Nice</td>
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<td>1.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>38 26 22 13 7 2 3</td>
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<td>1.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dull</td>
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<td>Sharp</td>
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<td>1.30</td>
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<td>Worthless</td>
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<td>Valuable</td>
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<tr>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>12 10 19 20 20 16 14</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>1.84</td>
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### Scale Scores and Reliability Estimates: Semantic Differential For Book Jacket B

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<td>.54</td>
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11 In this table, the less positive word is shown in the left column and the more positive word in the right column. Higher scores indicate a more positive reaction.
Table 3

Frequencies, Means, and Standard Deviations of Responses to Semantic Differential C

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
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<td>Big</td>
<td>4.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dull</td>
<td>1 2 7 32 16 20 33</td>
<td>Sharp</td>
<td>5.27</td>
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<td>Involved</td>
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<td>Slow</td>
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Scale Scores and Reliability Estimates: Semantic Differential For Book Jacket C

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<td>1.05</td>
<td>.62</td>
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</table>

12 In this table, the less positive word is shown in the left column and the more positive word in the right column. Higher scores indicate a more positive reaction.
### Table 4

**Frequencies, Means, and Standard Deviations of Responses to Semantic Differential D**

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<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Frequencies N=111</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Passive</td>
<td>7 8 7 11 21 23 34</td>
<td>5.13</td>
<td>1.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awful</td>
<td>9 4 10 34 21 17 16</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>1.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little</td>
<td>14 17 22 19 21 6 12</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>1.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dull</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>4.88</td>
<td>1.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hands-Off</td>
<td>7 9 16 19 11 23 26</td>
<td>4.72</td>
<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quiet</td>
<td>40 25 12 16 6 4 8</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>1.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slow</td>
<td>13 4 5 29 19 19 22</td>
<td>4.64</td>
<td>1.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listless</td>
<td>9 6 11 12 24 16 33</td>
<td>4.95</td>
<td>1.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unhelpful</td>
<td>3 5 7 33 19 14 30</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>1.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useless</td>
<td>7 2 8 23 22 15 34</td>
<td>5.09</td>
<td>1.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worthless</td>
<td>6 8 11 28 22 12 24</td>
<td>4.66</td>
<td>1.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>10 5 4 7 20 30 35</td>
<td>5.27</td>
<td>1.88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Reliability (Alpha-Coefficient)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evaluative</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>4.86</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potency</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this table, the less positive word is shown in the left column and the more positive word in the right column. Higher scores indicate a more positive reaction.
Table 5
Summary of Mean Scores for Responses to Four Semantic Differentials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequencies</th>
<th>N=111</th>
<th>Mean A</th>
<th>Mean B</th>
<th>Mean C</th>
<th>Mean D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active - Passive</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>6.01</td>
<td>5.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awful - Nice</td>
<td></td>
<td>6.02</td>
<td>5.51</td>
<td>5.41</td>
<td>4.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little - Big</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>3.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dull - Sharp</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>5.27</td>
<td>4.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad - Good</td>
<td></td>
<td>6.14</td>
<td>5.67</td>
<td>5.64</td>
<td>4.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hands-Off - Involved</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>5.77</td>
<td>4.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quiet - Noisy</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>2.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slow - Fast</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>5.52</td>
<td>4.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listless - Spirited</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.86</td>
<td>4.77</td>
<td>6.13</td>
<td>4.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unhelpful - Helpful</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.95</td>
<td>4.70</td>
<td>5.53</td>
<td>5.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useless - Useful</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.91</td>
<td>4.74</td>
<td>5.75</td>
<td>5.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worthless - Valuable</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.95</td>
<td>4.66</td>
<td>5.41</td>
<td>4.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak - Strong</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>5.98</td>
<td>5.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale Scores</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evaluative</td>
<td>5.39</td>
<td>5.06</td>
<td>5.56</td>
<td>4.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>5.86</td>
<td>4.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potency</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>4.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Analysis

The analysis of middle school student responses to the semantic differentials addressed two questions about the connotative meaning attributed to the four covers on *Island of the Blue Dolphin*.

1. Was the connotative meaning of the four covers as measured by the semantic differentials different?
2. If they were, in what ways were they different?

The data to be analyzed consisted of three scores for each of four book covers rated by one-hundred-eleven middle school students. The design for this study is called “single group, repeated measures design.” The initial analysis was a repeated measures multivariate analysis of variance to determine if there was an overall difference in the evaluative, activity, or potency scores for the four book covers. These scores are shown at the bottom of Table 5. The Hotelling’s Trace multivariate test was used in this comparison. The results of this analysis are shown in Table 6.

**Table 6**

*Repeated Measures Multivariate Analysis of Student Responses to Four Book Jackets Used on the Island of the Blue Dolphins*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect (Semantic Score)</th>
<th>Hotelling’s Trace Value</th>
<th>F-Value</th>
<th>Hypothesis df</th>
<th>Error df</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evaluative</td>
<td>.305</td>
<td>10.984</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>1.742</td>
<td>62.727</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potency</td>
<td>0.904</td>
<td>32.546</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results of the multivariate tests show that there are statistically significant differences among the scores on each of the three scales. Paired t-tests were then done to determine which scores differed. In other words, there is clearly some difference in the activity, potency and evaluative meanings students derived from the four book covers. But between which book covers are the differences? The t-test answers this question by pointing us towards statistically significant differences noted by the students.

The results indicated significant differences on the evaluative scores for four of the six comparisons. The differences in the evaluative scores for covers A and C and for
covers B and D were not statistically significant. The differences on the activity scores were statistically significant for five of the six comparisons; the only non-significant difference was between covers A and B. Five of the six comparisons on the potency scale were significantly different; the only non-significant difference was between covers A and D. These differences are shown in the charts presented in Figure 4.

**Conclusion**

The connotative meaning attributed to the four book covers by young adolescents was different. Overall the semantic meaning attributed to book cover C was more positively than the others. The girl in this cover was viewed as “better” meaning more active, and more powerful. There was no statistical difference in the evaluative score for Cover C and Cover A, the two most recently published paper back covers. However, the representation in Cover A was not viewed as more active or more potent than the other covers. Cover D was viewed as more active Covers A and B and more powerful than Cover B. Overall, Cover B was viewed least positively (see graphs on 13-14 for further clarification of the statistical differences).
Table 7
Paired T-Test For Semantic Differential Scores: Evaluative, Potency, and Activity
(Statistically Significant Differences Shown in Bold Print)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pair</th>
<th>Paired Differences</th>
<th>Mean Difference</th>
<th>S. D.</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>99% Confidence Interval of the Difference</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lower</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Upper</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>t</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>df</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 1</td>
<td>EvalA - EvalB</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.049 - 0.628</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 2</td>
<td>EvalA - EvalC</td>
<td>-0.17</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>-0.442 - 0.110</td>
<td>-1.58</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>.118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 3</td>
<td>EvalA - EvalD</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.166 - 0.962</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 4</td>
<td>EvalB - EvalC</td>
<td>-0.50</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>-0.792 - 0.217</td>
<td>-4.61</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 5</td>
<td>EvalB - EvalD</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>-0.076 - 0.526</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>.052</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 6</td>
<td>EvalC - EvalD</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.381 - 1.078</td>
<td>5.49</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 7</td>
<td>ActivityA - ActivityB</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>-0.559 - 0.252</td>
<td>-0.99</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>.324</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 8</td>
<td>ActivityA - ActivityC</td>
<td>-1.67</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>-2.030 - 1.317</td>
<td>-12.30</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 9</td>
<td>ActivityA - ActivityD</td>
<td>-0.68</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>-1.143 - 0.208</td>
<td>-3.79</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 10</td>
<td>ActivityB - ActivityC</td>
<td>-1.52</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>-1.904 - 1.136</td>
<td>-10.38</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 11</td>
<td>ActivityB - ActivityD</td>
<td>-0.52</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>-0.961 - 0.084</td>
<td>-3.12</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 12</td>
<td>ActivityC - ActivityD</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.605 - 1.391</td>
<td>6.66</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 13</td>
<td>PotencyA - PotencyB</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.166 - 0.825</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 14</td>
<td>PotencyA - PotencyC</td>
<td>-0.96</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>-1.283 - 0.631</td>
<td>-7.69</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 15</td>
<td>PotencyA - PotencyD</td>
<td>-0.28</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>-0.680 - 0.125</td>
<td>-1.80</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>.074</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 16</td>
<td>PotencyB - PotencyC</td>
<td>-1.45</td>
<td>1.59</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>-1.849 - 1.057</td>
<td>-9.61</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 17</td>
<td>PotencyB - PotencyD</td>
<td>-0.77</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>-1.133 - 0.412</td>
<td>-5.62</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 18</td>
<td>PotencyC - PotencyD</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.299 - 1.062</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 4

Visual Representation of Differences in the Evaluative, Activity, and Potency Mean Scores on Four Book Jackets
Qualitative Data Analysis

In addition to the quantitative data generated by responses to the semantic word pairs, student open-ended responses to a question at the bottom of the survey provided qualitative data that clarified and extended the interpretation of the connotative meaning they derived from each cover. The question was: If you haven’t read the book, what do you think it’s about?

Qualitative Analysis was conducted by separating the student responses into four categories: “active,” “neutral/passive,” “in trouble (super passive)” or “unrelated.”

Active

In the “active” category, students tended to view the protagonist as solving a problem. They saw her as having the ability that “act” on a situation in a positive way. Typical responses in this category were “the girl on the island is trying to save the dolphins” or “the girl is a warrior and controls the island.” In both instances, Kira was perceived as an active character whose personality gave her a degree of power.

Neutral

In the “neutral” category, students perceived the protagonist as simply living life. The portrayal did not indicate that Kira had any control over what was happening to her; rather she just lived on the island and perhaps watched dolphins occasionally. Typical comments in this section read, “I think it's about a girl who is nice but lives with her dog and no one else. She lives on a cliff of an island.”


**Acted Upon**

In the “acted upon” category, students perceived the protagonist as being in some kind of trouble over which she had no control. These kind of comments read “She is stranded on the island” or “She is stuck on the island alone.”

**Observatory/Unrelated Comments**

Several students responded to this question by listing the represented participants on the cover without connecting them with a plot. Typical responses included “dolphins” “an island” or “a girl, dolphins and a dog.” This holds precisely with semiotic theory, which maintains that identifying the represented participants is the first step in analyzing an image. Because the students “stopped” the analysis here, their comments tended to be less useful. The following table illustrates how many responses of each category were included per cover.

**Table 8**

**Number of Open Ended Comments Categorized As Active, Neutral, In Trouble and Observatory**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Cover A</th>
<th>Cover B</th>
<th>Cover C</th>
<th>Cover D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active</td>
<td>10 (15%)</td>
<td>15 (21%)</td>
<td>35 (50%)</td>
<td>27 (35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>28 (42%)</td>
<td>19 (27%)</td>
<td>14 (20%)</td>
<td>21 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Trouble</td>
<td>16 (24%)</td>
<td>20 (28%)</td>
<td>12 (17%)</td>
<td>11 (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observatory</td>
<td>11 (17%)</td>
<td>16 (23%)</td>
<td>14 (20%)</td>
<td>11 (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>66 (100%)</td>
<td>70 (100%)</td>
<td>75 (100%)</td>
<td>70 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Two results seem noteworthy. First, that covers C and D were clearly perceived as the more active. This is not surprising. In both of these covers Kira is portrayed with a spear on top of a cliff. Secondly that Cover B is where students perceived Kira as the most acted upon. This also makes sense because Kira is so small on the cover and aligns nicely with the semiotic and survey analysis. The observatory comments are also sensible. Under a semiotics framework the first activity when analyzing an image is to identify the represented participants. Perhaps after identifying these participants, students weren’t sure how to gauge their interaction with each other or a narrative.

Overall it is clear that students do make connotative meaning of the cover image and that this meaning can be explained using the principles outlined by visual social semiotics.
Bibliography


Chapter Seven
Conclusions and Discussion

The covers of books communicate messages, and adolescents construct meaning that can be explained using the principles of visual social semiotics. Publishers take advantage of the advertising power of cover art by designing attractive covers that provide a mediated reading of the text. The meaning that adolescents make from the text is influenced by the cover art and copy.

Publishers need to sell books. And, in the art of selling, certain visual codes provide “buzz images” that alert audiences to content. Adolescents are just beginning to learn the visual codes of marketing, just becoming socialized as consumers. The marketing of their books does not have to fall into the same limiting visual codes of the past. In short, I call for a change in the cover design of adolescent books. I call for more complex designs that educate these young readers to the subtle art of visual interpretation. Of course books must be “branded” and sold, but I look back to an earlier example in this project, a bright character in the past of US publishing, Jason Epstein.

Epstein gloried in his cover design success that reinvigorated classic hardbound books dusting the shelves of expensive bookstores. His designs relied heavily on the work of abstract artists who attractively couched these books in hip, young and new designs. Let us treat the classics of young adult fiction with the same respect.

Perhaps you think to yourself, “Well, children won’t buy it intellectually.” Sure, an adult is different. An adult may have learned to think beyond a juicy cover, while a reluctant seventh-grade reader may need a visual push, a pretty girl’s face or some
indicator that this book will be. That it will be interesting, be related to the things that they find interesting and be relevant for their lives. I agree that children need to feel that way when they pick up a book, but I do not think that enforcing the current visual rhetoric is a healthy way to do it. We want to make these book gestures of quality. Then let visual quality extend beyond the gilded edges of the Newbery button to embrace the entire cover. Let these covers support the text of the book and avoid unnecessary politicization of images. Charlotte Doyle was a politicized image, just as Julie of the Wolves was one, just as Caddie Woodlawn was one. These strong female characters should not be misrepresented in the cover art. Instead, let the cover art subtly prepare the reader to encounter the central themes of the book. The Newbery award was designed to set the “high bar” for children’s literature. A mediocre, stereotype-affirming text would (hopefully) not win a Newbery award. Therefore such a cover is not fit to encase the text.

Let me say what I am not arguing for: I am not arguing that stereotypical visual codes can be completely eradicated from the covers of adolescent/late children’s books right now, immediately, totally. That’s plainly unrealistic. What I am saying is that the Newbery books constitute the highest rank of quality, ideological quality. Ideological quality should be mirrored in their covers, because the visual codes used today to sell books are frankly unhealthy and should be abandoned. We can begin this abandonment logically, sanely and easily with our high-end literature. We would not cover Jane Eyre as though it were a Nora Roberts novel; let us not cover a Newbery as though it were Sweet Valley High. To close on a positive note, I share with you one of my favorite covers for one of my favorite books. Jacob Have I Loved is Katherine Patterson’s classic
story of Louise Bradshaw’s adolescence. Patterson has said in interviews that she had a hard time writing Louise; it was painful. It is painful to read about Louise, because Louise is unabashedly complicated and imperfect. The below cover of this classic truly opens readers to the themes of the book:

Louise struggles with the water—she longs to be a fisherman on the sea with her father but her femaleness dictates that she remains land-bound. So Louise builds a small skiff and hunts along the reeds of the shallow water alone or with her friend Call. This cover illustrates the image that haunts Louise—the water, the world she can never enter, her limitations and frustrations with life on Rass. Her face, bathed in purple light, is entirely appropriate. It’s ponderous, intense, suffering just like Louise’s character in the book. If readers of the book picture these eyes and that water while reading the text, I truly believe that their reading will be enriched. Cover art has the capacity to enrich a reading. And when we’re talking about a high-end, intellectual book for young adults, we should let it.