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## **The Look of Fiction: A Visual Analysis of the Front Covers of The New York Times Fiction Bestsellers**

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Rochester Institute of Technology

School of Communication

College of Liberal Arts

The Look of Fiction: A Visual Analysis of the Front Covers of *The New York Times* Fiction  
Bestsellers

by

Daniel Patrick Gallagher

*A Thesis* presented

in partial fulfillment of the Master of Science Degree

in Communication & Media Technologies

Degree Awarded: Fall Semester, 2015

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THE LOOK OF FICTION: A VISUAL ANALYSIS OF THE FRONT COVERS OF  
THE NEW YORK TIMES FICTION BESTSELLERS

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Master of Science in Communication & Media Technologies

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Abstract

In spite of the common saying "don't judge a book by its cover," studies show that actual books are overwhelmingly judged on the appearances of their covers. While studies have been conducted on what style or form of cover art is most attractive, most interesting, or most likely to sell, the current research conducts a visual analysis of the conventions contained in the covers of the best selling fiction books in the US, using the methods and ideas found in the theories of semiotics and visual culture, to offer a new perspective on the visual imagery of the covers. This study finds that the predominant trend among successful book covers is to forgo narrative in favor of recreating "experiences" tied to the content.

*Keywords:* visual culture, semiotics, fiction, book covers, visual rhetoric

The Look of Fiction: A Visual Analysis of the Front Covers of *The New York Times* Fiction  
Bestsellers

It is a quite common phrase in English: "Don't judge a book by its cover."

Metaphorically, it means "don't judge the value of the thing by its appearance" (don't judge , 2014), but the phrase can also be used quite literally, to not judge a book by its binding, or as is more common in modern printing, its dust jacket. As Judith Graham (2013) notes,

indeed 'don't judge a book by its cover' is sound advice in a metaphorical sense. Where actual books are concerned, however, we are all powerfully influenced by book covers and children particularly so. A book's cover illustration is critical in children's choosing of a book and remains significant during their reading and subsequent reflection and recall. (p. 28)

In the introduction to their book on modern American cover design, Ned Drew and Paul Sternberger (2005) claim "The cover is a book's first communication to its reader, a graphic representation not simply of its content, but of its point in history" (p. 8). It is quite interesting, then, that for a manuscript composed entirely of text, a visual image should be its first representation.

Of course, as visual communication scholars Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) point out in their book on the grammar of visual images, writing itself is an inherently visual form of communication; the words on the page themselves can be said to comprise an image. In fact, an individual's literacy is judged on the extent to which that individual can treat reading as a purely visual form of communication, such as the reader's ability to avoid "subvocalizing" when reading (p. 17). And yet, a clear distinction is drawn in society between the visual form of text and the visual form of images. In the case of literature, however, the book's front covers are primarily

adorned with images which are intended to represent its content, and on which the book heavily relies to generate sales. Books, be they novels, reference books, or biographies, are the most text heavy of any contemporary communication media. What then are these images, which are intended to convey so much about the text, and how are they understood in contemporary society?

Multiple studies have shown that readers are strongly drawn to covers that are visually appealing, intriguing, or "eye-catching." The cover art of a book can significantly affect the book's sales and readership, whether in a bookstore or a library (Hinze, McKay, Vanderschantz, Timpany, & Cunningham, 2012; Ruetzel & Gali, 1997). However, it is important to note that these effects are not limited to children. In a 1991 study on adult book purchasing, Kamphuis identified three attributes that had the most impact on the buying decision of the customer: (a) the author, (b) the publisher, and (c) the cover. Of these, his study found that the cover's appearance had the greatest effect. A study conducted in the United Kingdom by Hinze, McKay, Vanderschantz, Timpany, and Cunningham (2012) showed that 78% of those interviewed actively engaged in "scanning shelves" for books (p. 309). The study goes on to claim that "the large number of readers considering the covers of books in the physical library suggests that information and metadata contained on this artifact is germane to the book selection process" (p. 311). As a result of this, significant research has been done by major publishers into designing and crafting the most appealing covers for their published works (Graham, 2013).

There are many things which the cover images can convey to would-be readers, beyond merely information about the story contained within. As Hinze and her colleagues (2012) found, "several studies observed the use of non-conventional cues such as book age, size and dustiness, cover image, and popular cultural associations in book decision-making. Our study corroborates



these findings, as participants used age, cover, and images for decision making" (p. 311-312).

Kamphuis' (1991) study looked at two separate aspects of cover design: the attractiveness of the book cover image and the representativeness of the book cover image. This study revealed unusual results: While attractiveness had the greatest influence on purchasing decision, representativeness had no impact whatsoever. These findings seem rather paradoxical for a number of reasons. As Drew and Sternberger (2005) pointed out, the cover is the image which is supposed to represent the content. This is further reinforced by the work of d'Astous, Colbert, and Mbarek (2006), who claim that

studies conducted in different domains have shown that consumer evaluations of related objects are generally more positive when the objects fit well together. This has been observed in the case of sponsors and sponsored events, promotion tools and products, and brand alliance partners. Therefore, it seems logical that the representativeness of the book cover should impact positively on readers' evaluation of a new book. (p. 136)

And yet, representativeness was clearly linked in the manner anticipated. What might explain this anomaly?

To understand the functionality of book cover images, it is necessary to approach the topic from a different perspective. Previous studies have looked at covers in terms of their ability to stand out, or their perceived "attractiveness." However, in the view of this study, an aspect of critical importance to understanding these images is our understanding of their place in our culture. The images do not exist in a void; their meaning is not a fixed, intended, mystical form to be unraveled. As Drew and Sternberger (2005) claim, "when a text is published and the book is designed and printed, it becomes a physical manifestation not just of the ideas of the author, but of the cultural ideals and aesthetics of a distinct historical moment" (p. 8). In accordance with

this, it is necessary to examine and understand the covers of novels within the context of visual culture, as products of the society which are inherently influenced by the methods through which they are produced and the intentions of their producers. This paper, then, intends to examine the best selling books of the past two years from the genres of adult fiction and young adult/teen fiction from the intellectual and methodological traditions of semiotics and visual culture, recognizing them as being a product of our culture and understanding them as objects of meaning in our daily lives.

Book publishing remains a major industry not only in the United States, but also in much of the rest of the world. However, the book is not a normal product. As d'Astous et al. (2006) so excellently phrase it, "a book is a special type of product and reading books is a special type of consumption activity" (p. 134). Books, like other forms of entertainment media, are experiential. But even within the realm of experiential products, books are unique, and as such even the normal techniques of marketing experiential products may not be effective. This paper aims to provide new insights into how book covers function and what trends are most prominent in design by examining the covers that are most widely viewed and purchased. By looking at book covers of best selling books, this study will examine the conventions that are most commonly observed in book cover design demonstrating how and to what extent visual imagery is not merely a product of publisher intent, but is a relationship between the creator and the consumer. Indeed, this study furthers our understanding of how, as specific conventions are created and repeated, they may become established in the minds and understandings of the consumers, thereby actively transforming the established conventions of the images' places in our culture. These conventions often become so widespread and so well known that they are hardly even recognized as such. For example, one convention which has become so firmly entrenched in our

conception of books is the inclusion of the title on the book's cover. While this may seem to be an obvious choice on the surface, it is not necessarily a requirement. The cover itself does not *have* to contain the title which could, instead, simply be placed on the "title page." In modern times, however, it is unthinkable to not include the title on the cover, much as it would be very difficult to find a recently published work which does not name the author or the publisher somewhere on the jacket.

By subjecting these conventions to a visual analysis, this study will explain the role of the book cover within book selection, the ways in which the image interacts with the viewer, and the goals of the image itself. This study finds that book covers are *not* designed to be narrative representations of the content of the book itself, as they have been in the past. Rather, modern book cover design has been refocused to be a more abstract representation of the experience of reading the book. These covers intentionally do not contain information about the characters or plot, but instead are focused on recreating a sense or feeling of the content. Whereas in the past, book cover artists were seen as representing the work of the authors, similar to illustrators; modern cover artists are now seen as artists in their own right, and as such are given more freedom to choose their own methods of representation, without necessarily being tied to the author's plot.

The evidence of this non-narrative nature can be found in the data gathered. Previous studies have concluded that the goals of book cover imagery are two-fold: they wish to draw attention to themselves, and they wish to provide a representation of what the reader will experience in their consumption. How they do this, based on the data gathered, is through the use of several visual techniques—by merging techniques of the symbolic attributive and symbolic suggestive processes. In this way, the images draw readers in, while at the same time, providing

symbols whose meaning cannot be directly inferred from the contents of the images. Applying these findings to previous research, this study will conclude that the images have two primary goals: to persuade the reader to purchase the book and to recreate the experience of reading the book. Further, this study finds that these goals are accomplished through a combination of the symbolic attributive and symbolic suggestive processes.

### **Literature Review**

Previous studies have explored a number of aspects of book cover design, which are essential to establish as the basis for this paper. There are several key points about the book publishing industry itself which explain certain conventions and functions and are necessary for understanding how and why covers are created in certain ways, how books are marketed, and other factors, beyond the cover design, which influence the book's sales. In the same vein, there are several areas of research which focus on the book's cover design from an artistic perspective, and the book cover's technical functions as a product. This section will begin with an overview of these studies to establish these points as a foundation for and to further justify the approach taken in this study. This section will conclude with an overview of select literature on visual culture, semiotics, and visual well being to further clarify the theoretical and methodological approaches that inform this study.

This segment will establish several key points. First, the primary purpose of book covers is to sell the books. The second point is that book cover images are analogous to product packaging, and that books, although highly experiential in nature, nevertheless share a number of elements as conventional consumer products. A third point is that the book publishing industry is aware of the importance of book covers in the sales of books, and as such it takes many steps to research and craft the images to the ideal standards.

### **Book Cover Design**

As mentioned previously, book cover design today is a key part of a company's marketing strategy for book sales. However, the imagery used in the book covers did not always garner as much attention. It is only within the last few decades that cover design itself has been considered a key factor in book sales. In their work on book cover design, Drew and Sternberger (2005) describe how the publishing industry began to recognize the importance not only of the cover, but also of the designers themselves, much in the same way as designers became more prominent in the advertising world during the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As they claim, designers are now seen as "creative individuals rather than anonymous image makers who simply give form to the ideas of others" (p. 136). As a result of this, book cover design, again, much like conventional advertising, has changed significantly. There are three major shifts that Drew and Sternberger observe in the publishing industry that have impacted book cover design. First, publishers are more aware now not only of the significance of the cover, but of its place in society. The images used are now thoroughly recognized as being highly representative of the book itself, and as such, contemporary book designs are not free to engage in overt sociopolitical commentary. They are subjected to greater scrutiny, and if they wish to do so, they must use subtler symbolism.

Another major shift in book design has been the rise of digital imaging technology, which brought with it new techniques and ease of use. Drew and Sternberger (2005) place this shift as occurring in the 1990s. Digital imaging, at its core, made cover design easier, and allowed firms to both create more modern graphical styles and to recreate or imitate previously established styles. This shift coincides with the movement towards design that features "fragments of content" as opposed to complete images or representational pieces of the content. Previously,

when the designers were seen as purely representing the ideas of the author, the purpose of the cover was thus to most accurately reflect the content of the book itself, without necessarily as much emphasis on attracting customers to purchase the book. With this shift to the digital age, however, the designers were given the freedom to work as artists in their own right, and so produce designs not necessarily representative of the literal content of the work for which they were designing. Book covers, much like modern art, have therefore become a "subjective interpretation of signs," with aspects of the story being rearranged to create new meanings. Additionally, due to the conveniences afforded by digital image crafting, plays on type and image have become significantly easier and more common overall.

The final shift that Drew and Sternberger (2005) trace is the movement of cover artists and designers away from merely being freelance or contract artists to full, salaried, professional positions. Designers, therefore, are working continuously to design a number of different covers, and are working as paid employees of a publishing firm. This movement is also tied to another major trend in the publishing industry as a whole, detailed below.

### **The Shift Towards Mega-Publishing**

As with many other industries, the publishing industry has, over the course of the last few decades, moved to being an industry dominated by mega-publishers, large corporations which publish thousands of books a year. However, it is not only the publishers who have grown in size, but also retailers such as Barnes and Noble. With this double rise in production and distribution, more books are being produced than ever. And as such, the industry has become much more standardized, just as most other product industries. Thus, even more so than in the past, trends can be observed in publishing that are directly connected to certain organizations and preferences.

Books, in this configuration, are products. They are produced at regular intervals, and in large quantities and standard varieties. There are standardized conventions for how books are released, and in what formats. In her study on the publishing strategies of corporations, Clerides (2002) examines the methodology for book releases. Books are released with intertemporal pricing; that is, different versions of the books which are priced differently are released over time. As most people are aware, books are generally released in two different versions: paperback and hardcover. This is probably the most obvious example of standardization of industry practices.

This standardization brings books closer to other consumer products in terms of their creation and dissemination. But in all comparisons between books and other consumer products, there is a key difference which must be understood. Books are not normal consumer products. As mentioned previously, books are experiential by nature, and as such require different marketing techniques.

### **Books as Experiential Products**

Products created by the various entertainment industries, such as movies, television shows, video games, and other media, can be said to be experiential products. That is, they are products whose value lies in the act of consuming them. It is therefore incredibly difficult to ascertain the value of the product before the consumer actually pays for it. Certainly, consumers will try to obtain as much information as they can before making a decision to purchase such products. Commercials, trailers, reviews, and so on are all tools that are used to attempt to evaluate the quality of the product. However, because at some level all experiential products are different for each individual, it is impossible to know with absolute certainty that one will enjoy them.

Of all experiential products, books are perhaps the most difficult to evaluate in relation to a decision to purchase. There are two reasons for this. First, out of all of the possible categories, movies, television shows, video games, comic books, and so on, books require some of the greatest time investment. Second, books are the most difficult to "preview." It is possible to watch single episodes of a television show, or a clip from a film, to play a demo of a video game or flip through a comic book. For fiction novels in particular, however, such actions are unlikely to be as effective. Reading single passages out of context is unlikely to give the reader an accurate representation of the entire book, as most books rely on a much greater amount of in depth information than entertainment forms such as films or video games. Books generally have more characters and information. Further, most books are hundreds of pages long, and even the fastest readers take hours to finish a single one. And within the realm of adult fiction in particular, visual elements, beyond the cover design and the type face itself, are generally kept to a minimum.

In their article, Schmidt-Stoling, Blomeke, and Clement (2011) describe what they refer to as the "asymmetrical nature" of information about books between the publishers and authors and the potential consumers (p. 29). Even within this model, in which the publishers and authors know far more about the books than the consumers, there is still a gap between knowing the contents and knowing whether or not a consumer will enjoy, or find satisfaction with, the contents. In addition to this, or perhaps as a result of this, studies have shown that consumers place little trust in book critic reviews, much less even than other entertainment forms.

Another factor which separates entertainment products from other types of products is the inability of the publishers to control the distribution intensity of new books. Even when there is an upswing in book sales, new books cannot simply be produced to match the market. The



publishers could not simply "produce" the seventh Harry Potter book because the market demanded it; they had to wait until the author had finished writing it. Unlike other industries, such as computers, where new features can be created faster by increasing the staff working on them, in most cases books cannot be produced faster by hiring more writers or editors.

Nevertheless, in the case of books in the aggregate as compared to other entertainment products many more books are produced each year than films or video games, largely due to books requiring fewer staff and less production expenses than these other forms.

### **Branding Influences**

D'Astous et al. (2006) draw an analogy between book publishing and other consumed products. Although they acknowledge that books are a special kind of product and reading is a special kind of activity, they nevertheless draw connections between the ideas of authors as "brands" and book covers as "packaging." The comparison was first made by Kamphuis in his 1991 article, but has since been expanded as both the role of the brand in society and scholarship on this role have grown. The cover is described as both "container and protection" (d'Astous et al., p. 136), delivering both direct and indirect information about the contents. And, of course, the cover would then be equivalent to the product's packaging in terms of its importance in influencing buying decisions.

D'Astous et al. (2006) point out:

In general, a product's package conveys explicit information about the product that it contains (e.g., packages of frozen pizzas). However, this is not always the case with book covers. Sometimes book covers directly reflect the content of the book (e.g., two persons interlacing for a romance novel), at other times there may be a more or less relevant

allusion (e.g., a dollar sign on the cover of a book about the stock market), or the cover may have no relationship at all with the book content. (p. 136)

However, d'Astous et al.'s research further indicates:

Studies conducted in different domains have shown that consumer evaluations of related objects are generally more positive when the objects fit well together. This has been observed in the case of sponsors and sponsored events (McDonald, 1991; Meenaghan, 1983), promotion tools and products (Chandon et al., 2000), and brand alliance partners (Simonin & Ruth, 1998). Therefore, the representativeness of the book cover should impact positively on readers' evaluation of a new book. (p. 136)

So, there are two points which may be gained from this. First, the book's cover is not necessarily a complete representation of its contents (this is not an inherent quality of the book market itself, however). Drew and Sternberger (2005) trace the shift away from the initial form of the cover, that of direct representation, to its more modern incarnation, as observed by d'Astous et al.

The second point is that the book cover must, in order to be successful, have at least some relationship with the book's contents in order to be accepted by customers. It must, in some way, however abstract, be an actual, effective representation of some aspect of its contents. It has already been established that book publishers actively research designs in order to create the most effective covers for selling their products. And contemporary marketing research, as presented by d'Astous et al. (2006) indicate quite clearly that the more accurately the packaging represents the product contained within, the better the product sells.

But again, this representation, particularly when it comes to fiction novels, may be far more abstract than it may be for other types of products. Books are experiential, and therefore, it may be assumed that the covers which best represent the contents of the books are themselves

experiential, or that they provide a sense of that experience in some way. In other words, the covers which best represent the content of books are not necessarily the covers which literally represent the facts about the book, such as plot points or depictions of characters, but rather images which most accurately recreate the "feeling" of the story. This understanding of the cover images as themselves being experiential is essential in our understanding of the covers' place in our culture. The covers are assumed to be not merely a representation of the contents of the books on which they are placed, but as being a preview of the experience the book promises to provide. In this sense, the modern book cover is less about attempting to represent the facts, characters, or locations of the stories, but rather an abstract attempt to convey the overall experience of reading the book itself.

With this, we have established the three primary points about the nature of book cover imagery, as well as detailed previous work on books and book covers themselves which will be used in this study. In this next section, we will examine the primary concepts which will be used in conducting the visual analysis of the images used. Previously mentioned studies focused entirely on the books themselves, without providing complex visual analysis of the images used for the covers. In order to undertake the task of analyzing these images, this study will draw on three concepts of visual communication: first, the concept of visual culture as established by Campbell and Schroeder; second, the concept of semiotics, as defined by Kress and van Leeuwen; and third, the concept of visual wellbeing, as defined by Gallagher, Ma, and Martin. These concepts will provide the foundation of this paper's understanding of how visual elements communicate and how they interact with and affect their viewers.

### **Visual Culture**

Visual culture is defined by Campbell and Schroeder (2011) as a "philosophical and epistemological stance that acknowledges visibility as central to the constitution of the world" (p. 1508). Visual culture, as a term itself, refers to both the analysis of the role of the visual in culture, as well as the academic discipline of Visual Culture. It follows the hypothesis proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), that "in a literate culture, the visual means of communication are rational expressions of cultural meanings, amenable to rational accounts and analysis" (p. 23). This task is more easily carried out in regard to devices that are clearly intended as some form of signage, as they have a distinct purpose apart from aesthetic pleasure. As Buchanan and McKay (2011) claim:

historic understandings of culture and observations of living cultures demonstrate that the use of objects reveals much about their roles in people's lives. Books are standardized objects: they are described in library catalogs using metadata (such as title and author) which are, by convention, located in specific places on the book (e.g., title and author on the front cover and the spine). (p. 270)

Due to their nature as standardized objects, as intended signage, Buchanan and McKay argue that books lend themselves better to visual and cultural analysis. Unlike many art and design forms which are used in our day-to-day lives, such as architectural structures, furniture designs, and more, book covers have a clearer and more universal commercial intention, and, while strongly focusing on traditional art and design principles, are nevertheless clear in their intention to be sold.

The concept of visual culture, as proposed by Campbell and Schroeder (2011), holds four primary methodological tenets in its approach to analyzing an image: First, to problematize an image, as opposed to "solutionizing" it; second, to historicize and contextualize the image; third,

to demystify the image; and fourth, to "visibilize" the image. This approach to analyzing the images and artifacts of visual culture serves as the primary basis for this study. "From this perspective, meaning was not just something that was *found* or *discovered*, but it was *produced* through the objects people bought, sold, made, used and preserved, collected, discarded, and of course *saw*" (Campbell & Schroeder, 2011, p. 1508-1510). Book covers clearly have their meaning produced as a part of their existence; the art work on a book cover is not merely art, but it is intrinsically associated with the words contained within the book, or to rephrase, it is not merely a picture that we see on a cover, but a picture *as related* to the content within. It is not the same as evaluating a painting hung in a gallery, which has a much more subjective purpose. Certain ideological parallels are automatically drawn between the cover image and the content. By whom are these parallels drawn? Possibly the author, possibly the editor, but certainly in the end they are endorsed by the publisher who chose to print them (and the people who choose to buy the book?).

Much work has already been done towards uncovering what is the "best" or "most appealing" way to present the cover of a novel to an audience (Drew & Sternberger, 2005). This study, however, is not an evaluative study of book covers themselves. It does not seek to make claims about the effectiveness of certain semiotics, but rather to provide an understanding of the semiotics being most widely distributed to society as a whole. Therefore, my study does not aim to provide a definitive evaluation of how appealing the covers are, or how the covers may have affected the sales of the novels. I acknowledge that the covers are designed and based upon research with the objective of being as appealing or intriguing as possible, but my study does not aim to make any sort of evaluations on the success of these intentions. Instead, this study seeks to explicate, interpret, and demonstrate the trends in images and designs, and to connect them to

our human interests and motivations in a manner productive of future invention. By understanding how book covers communicate, and how we perceive them in our society, we gain insights both into the nature of book cover design, as well as the ways in which visual artifacts and expectations of such artifacts are constructed.

### **Semiotics**

In addition to adopting the visual culture approach to analysis as previously described, this study proposes to apply the concept of semiotics to analyze and understand the visual imagery of the book covers. Semiotics is defined, according to Schroeder (2014), as the "general study of signs and whatever conveys meaning." Schroeder traces the root of the word back to the Greek word for sign or symbol. To put it simply, semiotics is the study of how things "mean," how things, be they words, sounds, or images, create meaning through their perception by an audience.

The study of semiotics holds two primary assumptions: first, that signs are omnipresent, and second, that humans acquire the skills to interpret a complex array of sensory clues, and thereby to understand the signs with which they are presented. At a basic level, a sign exists to communicate something. Semiotics holds that meaning is not "contained" within signs, but rather is created through interpretation of the signs. As Daniel Chandler (Schroeder, 2014) claims "meaning is not 'transmitted' to us - we actively create it according to a complex interplay of codes or conventions of which we are normally unaware." These codes have their own established forms and structures. There are three types of signs that have been identified in the semiotics literature: the icon, the index, and the symbol. An icon is defined as "a mode in which the signifier is perceived as resembling or imitating the signified (recognizably looking, sounding, feeling, tasting or smelling like it) - being similar in possessing some of its qualities."

An index is defined as "a mode in which the signifier is *not arbitrary* but is directly connected in some way (physically or causally) to the signified - this link can be observed or inferred. Finally, a symbol is defined as being "assigned arbitrarily or... accepted as social convention. Therefore, the relationship between the signifier and what it stands for - the signified - must be learned."

(Schroeder, 2014)

The understanding of semiotics in this study is primarily based on the work of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) in their book, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Images*. According to Kress and van Leeuwen, theories of semiotics were first developed in Europe in the 1930s and 40s, as an application of linguistic models to non-linguistic forms of communication. This basis, of applying grammar to the visual, forms the core of Kress and van Leeuwen's work, which examines *how* signs are used to communicate. By structuring this view in terms of visual grammar, certain conventions and commonalities can be observed. This, then, provides the basis of a formal visual analysis: by treating the portions of the images as observable conventions, which elements to focus on become clear. Further, Kress and van Leeuwen provide a number of insights into how symbols function, and the ways in which they interact with their viewers (p. 6-7).

First of all, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), in the same line as Campbell and Schroeder's (2011) work on visual culture, highlight the importance of the act of sign-making. The sign maker, that is, the actor that wishes to express meaning through a sign, first takes a meaning, something they wish to convey, and assigns it through a semiotic mode to a signifier (p. 8-9). In this view, signs are not a pre-made conjunction. At the same time, in order to be expressed properly, signs need to have a recognizable meaning for those viewing them. So, while it is inaccurate to say that there are pre-existing meanings of symbols, icons, and indexes, there are

nevertheless *conventions*, which, as Campbell and Schroeder point out, are culturally created. Kress and van Leeuwen strongly point out that in their view, signs are never arbitrary, and thus, they cannot be said to fall into the categories of icons, symbols, and indexes. But under the view of visual culture, signs are not following arbitrary meanings, but are instead following conventions and standards which are familiar to members of a culture. Similar to how grammar has conventions which are established by the culture that uses the language, so too do images have conventions that are formed by the culture that views them.

### **Visual Rhetoric**

The final theoretical approach that informs this study stems from the work of Gallagher et al. (2011) on visual rhetoric. Like Schroeder (2014), Gallagher et al. also point to the emergence of the visual as a part of culture, a shift from previous views on the place of the visual in the world. Gallagher et al. take this concept one step further, acknowledging not only the previously established increase in visibility, but also acknowledging what they describe as an increase in anxiety about the visual.

Gallagher et al. (2011) identify two key pieces of visual rhetoric, two aspects through which visual images function rhetorically. Although Gallagher et al. do not claim that these elements can function as measures or metrics, doing so is an appropriate extension of their work. As mentioned, there are two elements which they claim comprise visual wellbeing: the first is the extent of the image's *Enargia*, a Greek rhetorical term which Gallagher et al. define as "vividness;" and the second is the extent of the image's *Eudaimonia*, again, a Greek rhetorical term, which Gallagher et al. define as "flourishment," or the creation of a feeling of satisfaction or healthiness. Of course it is key to understand that these two concepts, because they can be described via degrees or amounts may be considered possible measurements, encompassing a



number of different degrees or forms of each. Images may intentionally possess or intentionally *not* possess certain amounts of each of these aspects, in such a way as best conveys their intended message (p. 30-31).

Together, these two aspects form what Gallagher et al. (2011) refer to as "visual wellbeing," defined as "the state of feeling healthy, happy, and content, of sensing vitality and prosperity, recognized precisely in one's experience of objects through the visual sense" (p. 32). This, they feel, is the general objective of normal artworks. However, such a goal is not necessarily shared with commercial art, which has the ultimate goal of persuading its viewer to purchase the product it represents. Of course, it is quite possible that inducing visual wellbeing may very well cause the viewer to purchase the intended product. However, to reiterate, this is not *necessarily* true. Whether or not such a state is achieved, or is even intended to be achieved remains to be seen.

These three sources provide the primary direction for the methodology of the study, and the theoretical background of the literary analysis. By understanding the images as actively engaging with the viewers, it can be seen that there are conventions and standards in the ways in which they interact. Furthermore, these conventions and standards are actively produced by the culture in which the images exist. As Campbell and Schroeder (2011) claimed, images do not exist in a static void. They are produced by individuals who are aware of their (the images') purpose, and are affected by knowledge of images which perform similar functions. This study proposes to examine these images from these three perspectives, to examine the content of each image, categorize the data, and analyze the data to understand how these images communicate, what they communicate, and how this affects their viewers.

### **Scope of the Study**

As indicated in the introduction, the intention of this study is to analyze the semiotic and visual conventions most prevalent in modern cover design. To accomplish this within the timeframe allowed, this study uses reports on book sales as a representative of the most prevalent covers, that is, the covers most widely distributed. Specifically, this study uses *The New York Times'* list of the best selling books, which shows the statistics of how many books are being sold each week. Using this as a basis for identifying which books are the most prominent and most widely distributed, this study will take a survey of these books from the categories of "Young Adult Fiction" and "Adult Fiction." For this study, all of the books which appeared on the weekly list for two years prior to the start of the data collection were considered.

There are several benefits to using the works from *The New York Times* bestseller list. For starters, this list includes the cover designs, which are the most "prominent" in their respective fields. The covers represented on *The New York Times* bestseller list are not merely the most successful, but are also the most widely observed. They are the ones that the greatest number of people purchase, and as a result, are likely the most viewed overall. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) observed in their analogy of visual images to a kind of grammar, there is an extent to which grammar is what we make of it; that is, there is an extent to which the rules of grammar are subjected to change due to shifts in popular usage. So too, it can be assumed, do the conventions of images change based on popular usage. Our conceptions of what an image ought to be is therefore equally likely to be based, in part, on a preconceived notion of what we think it should look like. As certain trends, then, are repeatedly observed and reproduced and become increasingly widespread, so too do the conventions, effective or not, in which they engage.

Because this study only examines covers of books which appeared within the top ten on *The New York Times Bestseller* list from every week for two years (December 2012 to December 2014), there are several limitations which are imposed. The largest and most obvious is that the study is limited to book sales within the United States. Book sales in other nations are not taken into consideration. Further, this study does not look at all covers, merely the best selling book covers. Further still, this study does not take into account the actual success of the book. The only requirement to appear in the study was that the book, in some week, appeared within the top ten books on *The New York Times'* list. It does not take into consideration how many copies were actually sold, or for how many weeks the book remained within the top ten. Thus, it is plausible that some books sold more copies overall, but did not sell enough in a single week to reach the top ten.

No connection is drawn in this study between the success of book cover imagery and the sale of books. Other studies have drawn some correlations, but there may be any number of other factors that influence the potential sales of books. This study also does not posit that the fulfillment of the symbolic processes correlates with book sale success.

The purpose of this study is to examine the trends within visual images in the publishing industry, and to analyze the covers of the books which are successful and to theorize these trends, not to prove how and to what extent such trends influence readers. As such, a number of potential questions are left to be explored, including: What effects do the trends identified here have on success of books (e.g., sales, reach, long term impact, satisfaction, etc.)? How well do the cover images actually recreate the experience of reading the book(s)? These questions remain to be explored in future studies. This study, rather, will continue to examine the images using the following methodology.

### Methodology

This study uses the insights of visual culture, semiotics, and visual rhetoric, specifically, Kress and van Leeuwen's work on analyzing the grammar of visual images to analyze and interpret book cover images from *The New York Times* best seller lists under the categories "Young Adult Fiction" and "Adult Fiction." The data was collected in two parts. The first part examined Young Adult Fiction from December 12th, 2012, to December 16th, 2014. This yielded a total of 81 works (see Table 1), that were distributed among 17 publishers, and included one self-published title. The second part examined Adult Fiction from July 12th, 2015, to July 8th, 2014. This data set contained significantly more results than the previous measure, with a total of 397 covers spread out over 65 publishers, and included a separate category for self-published titles. For the purposes of this study, only the images on the fronts of the covers were considered. The spines and back covers were not taken into account. For both data sets, the names of publishers are based on the names as listed on *The New York Times* bestseller list. Due to the nature of the publishing industry, many publishing houses may be subsidiaries of other publishers on the list, or there may be different names for the same publishing house.

Nearly a quarter ( $n = 20$ ) of the works were published by the Penguin Group. The next highest was HarperCollins at 11 works, followed by Simon & Schuster, Random House, and Little, Brown, and Company, all of which had 8. Several books on the list were produced by the same author, however, no more than two books in the same series have appeared on the list in the past two years. Several times exactly two books appeared on the list, such as *Divergent* and *Insurgent*, both by Veronica Roth, and *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* and *Hollow City*, both by Ransom Riggs, but never more than two. More details of the sample can be observed in Table 1.

Each of the book covers included in the sample were under the criteria of their "most common" cover. That is, the cover that would first be shown if one attempted to purchase the book online, such as via the Barnes and Noble website, or Amazon.com. This represents the cover most likely to be represented to the customer in the largest bookstore chain in the nation and one of the largest online shopping networks (<http://www.nytimes.com/best-sellers-books/young-adult/list.html>, <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/>).

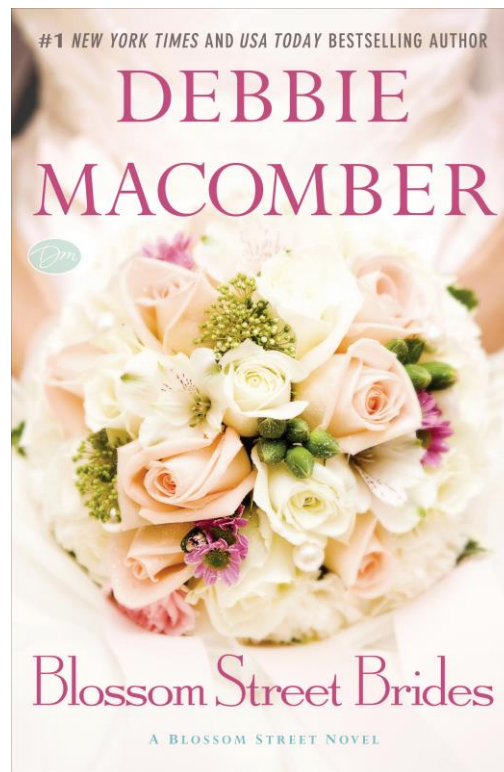
Table 1

*Young Adult Fiction Books by Publisher*

Publisher	Number of Books
Penguin Group	20
Delacorte	1
St. Martins	2
Knopf Doubleday	3
Simon & Schuster	8
Quirk Books	2
Tom Dougherty Associates	3
HarperCollins Publishing	11
Little, Brown, and Company	8
Simon Pulse	1
Harlequin	1
Disney	2
Scholastic	4
Bloomsbury	1
Fiewel and Friends	1
Zondervan	1
Self-Published	1

For the first data set, corresponding to young adult fiction covers, the images were categorized according to several metrics which measured different pieces of the images'

composition. The first metric was whether or not any human figures were present. This was further subdivided into categories to effectively describe the ways in which human figures appeared in the images. Images were described as either containing "full body" portrayals, in which the majority of the person's figure was shown, and "one part" portrayals, in which only a single part of the body was shown, such as a hand, a foot, a close up of an eyeball or head, and so on. For the purposes of this study any "part" of a human was considered to comprise an image containing a human, but this is not necessarily an example of synecdoche. Rather, the image is considered to "contain" a human, because it is suggested that even if a full person is not shown, that there is a person "attached to" whatever part is shown. In other words, an image such as the one featured in the cover of *Blossom Street Brides* by Debbie Macomber, shown in Figure 1, is assumed to contain a "human figure" because the image implies that the arms and waist shown in the background do belong to an actual person, and that the rest of their body is simply out of frame. There is nothing in the image to suggest that the arms shown belong to a mannequin, or some other non-human object, and so the reasonable assumption is that another figure is present. Special attention was paid to whether or not the face was shown, and if the subject was clearly shown to be looking towards or away from the viewer.



*Figure 1. Blossom Street Brides by Debbie Macomber.*

If no human subject was present, the image was further considered to see if it only contained symbols, as opposed to locations or objects. The second point to be considered was whether or not the image contained any photographs or drawings. Due to the fact that drawn images could have heavily stylized portrayals of humans and objects, which in some situations could be misinterpreted by audiences, this distinction was made for clarity, to demonstrate how many images were merely representations and how many were actual photographs. It is important to note that, for the purpose of this study, "drawings" only encompassed images which had been created by hand or through digital painting and illustration techniques, or at the very least had been intended to look as if they had. Some images did not fit into either category, being neither photographs nor drawings. Finally, the background on which the image appeared was categorized into three categories: backgrounds which contained only a single color, backgrounds which contained any sort of pattern, texture, or gradient; and finally, backgrounds which

contained locations. For the metric of locations it was important that the locations be "recognizable" or "distinct" in some way, as opposed to be merely part of the pattern of the background.

The second part of the data collection, as mentioned above, focused on the covers that had appeared under adult fiction for the past two years. There were significantly more titles in this second set, nearly five times as many, for a total of 397, divided up among 66 publishers. This means that there were also significantly fewer publishers for adult fiction books, with their being approximately six books to every one publisher, as opposed to young adult fiction having a ratio of 4.7 books to every one publisher.

The metrics used to measure the second data set were modified slightly from the first data set. Several additional factors were considered. First, covers containing humans were divided into those containing multiple people and others containing only a single person. Second, an additional metric was added between images containing "one part" of a human body and images containing a "full body," of "waist up or more," which described images which contained half or more of a person's entire figure. "Full body" was changed to only refer to images which contained a full image of a person from feet to head. These additions were made to enhance the detail of the information gathering. The table of publishers can be seen in Table 2.



Table 2

*Adult Fiction Books by Publisher*

Publisher	Number of Books
Vintage	7
Riverhead	2
Little, Brown	23
Putnam	46
Delacorte	13
Grand Central	23
Crown	2
Scribner	8
Knopf	10
Berkley	21
HarperCollins	35
Simon and Schuster	12
St. Martins	14
Mira	2
Harlequin	18
Doubleday	5
Viking	7
Jove	6
Atria	12
HQN	1
Dutton	10
Dell	3
New American Library	2
Minotaur	3
Speigel and Grau	1
Ballantine	12
Touchstone	3
Ace	5
Pocket Books	1
Random House	7
JMC Productions	1

Broadway	2
Bantam	13
Del Rey	2
Metal Blonde	1
Zebra Kensington	3
Silhouette	1
DAW	1
Pantheon	1
Dial	1
Ellora's Cave	1
Gallery	4
Roc	1
Anchor	1
Carina Press	1
JKB	1
Mariner	1
Laree Bailey	3
Forever	2
Lauren's Publishing	1
Pocket Star	1
Sprigleaf	1
Tor/Tom Dougherty	1
Gossamer	2
Center Street	1
Hyperion	1
Indie Six	1
Penguin	1
Bloomsbury	1
Soho	1
Birch Paper Press	1
Holt	1
Novelty	1
Hard Case Crime	1
Self-Published	25
Various Publishers	1

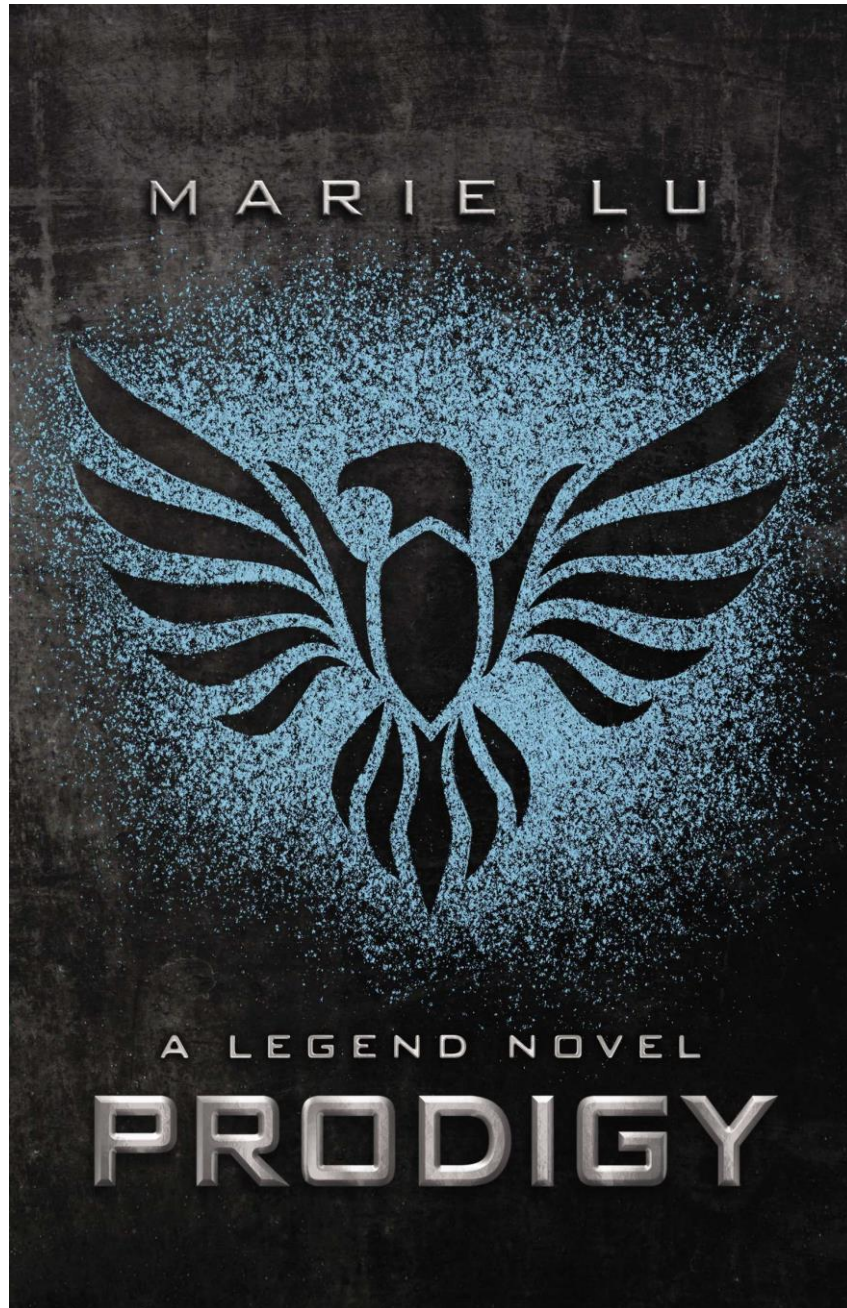
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## Results

The results of the initial coding of the two sets of data indicated some interesting shared similarities between the two samples. For starters, the ratios between images containing human figures and images not containing human figures were very close for both lists. The coding was done by a single researcher. For the purposes of this study, all representations of "human" figures were considered to be any figure that shared any aspect of common human anatomy -- that is, five fingered hands, bipedal posture, and so on. Fortunately, in none of the covers were there any figures presented that could be misinterpreted. There were not any primates, for example, or fantastical/alien figures. As such, even though in other situations there would be a potential for reliability concerns, within the course of this study, there were no images that presented shapes that would be of concern.

For adult fiction, 186 images were gathered that did not contain human figures, comprising 46.85% of the sample, and 211 images were gathered that did, comprising 53.15% of the sample. For young adult fiction, 32 images were gathered that did not contain human figures, comprising 39.51% of the sample, and 49 images were gathered that did, comprising 60.49% of the sample. So, young adult fiction novels have a slightly higher tendency to include human figures. This may be somewhat explained by a much larger trend among adult fiction titles to use images which only contain images of locations, images without humans, or significant symbols. Although the two data sets have a similar number of locations featured overall, there is a great discrepancy between adult fiction titles which contain only locations, a total of 75, accounting for 18.89% of the data set. Young adult fiction titles, on the other hand, only had four images which only contain locations, accounting for a mere 4.94%. Drawings, interestingly, were slightly higher for adult fiction than for young adult fiction, with adult fiction having 60 --

15.11% -- and young adult fiction having only eight, for 9.88%. Covers which featured photographs also were much higher for adult fiction than young adult fiction, with adult fiction resulting in 288 photographic images, accounting for 72.54%, whereas young adult fiction had only 41, for 50.62%. This discrepancy indicates that among young adult fiction covers there is a much greater trend for the use of digitally created images such as those featured in Figures 2 and 3.



*Figure 2. Prodigy by Marie Lu.*

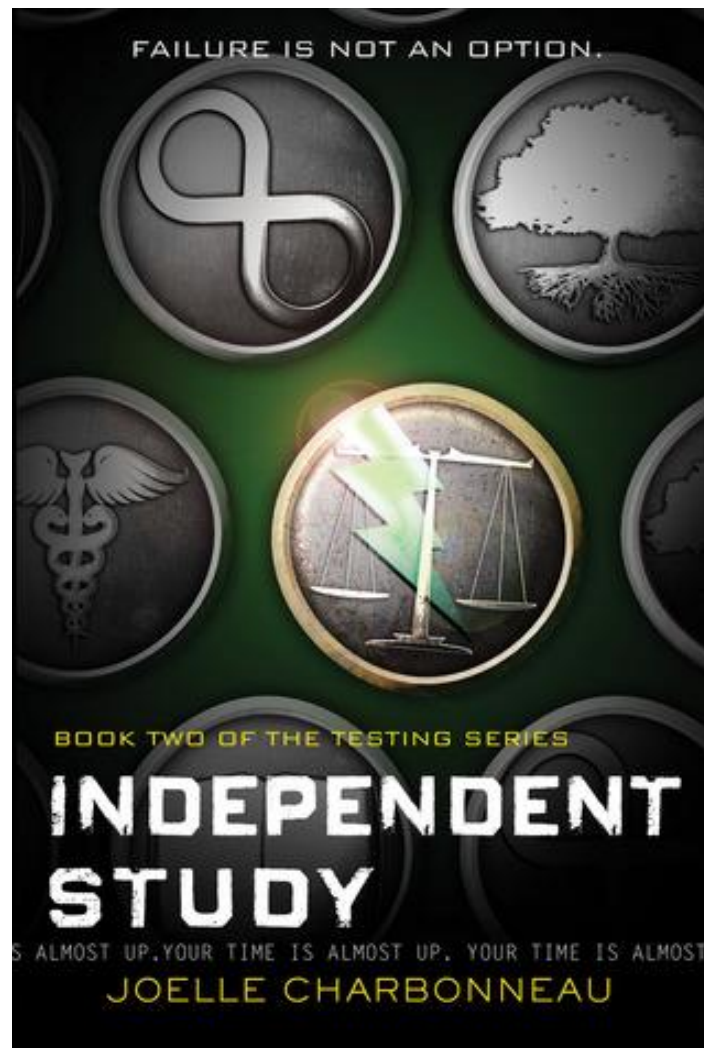


Figure 3. *Independent Study* by Joelle Charbonneau.

As can be clearly seen, the images pictured are not intended to look like a drawing, or even a conventional digital painting. It is intended for a sort of photographic realism, but it has quite clearly been digitally manipulated. Thus, this sort of image neither falls into the category of "photograph" nor the category of "drawing." These images, which are far more abstract, are also much more common among teen fiction, whereas adult fiction is heavily slanted towards photographs and realism. In several ways, this makes logical sense, as children's fiction would tend more towards the fantastical. On the other hand, however, this indicates that children's fiction is also more heavily slanted towards abstract images. When taken in conjunction with the

descriptions by Drew and Sternberger (2005) of the evolution of book covers, this also demonstrates that adult fiction covers are maintaining many of the trends that they had when their intended audience was growing up, that is, cover images *not* digitally manipulated. Of course, it is very likely that such covers are, in fact, manipulated, but they are not intended to seem as such. Young adult fiction, however, seems to be moving in an entirely different, far more digital, aesthetic direction. In this way, it is plausible that young adult fiction images are constructing a somewhat different form of visual literacy among their readers.

Other observed differences were, for the most part, relatively minor. There was a significant difference between the two data sets in the area of how much of the body was shown: young adult fiction images tended to much more heavily feature only a single part of the body, with a total of 19.75% of the images containing only a single hand, or eye, or other feature. For adult covers, this number was less than half, with only 9.57% of covers containing a single body part. Adult covers, on the other hand, favored far more the portrayal of just the upper torso, often times without clearly showing the face. The percentage of faces shown, however, was about even between the two, with young adult fiction covers showing slightly more faces, 28.4%, to adult fiction covers, 25.19%.

Other metrics taken purely from the adult fiction covers show that the images which contained people were largely of single individuals; 62.56% of the images of people were of single individuals. Another trend that was largely present in adult fiction was the images of people "facing away" from the viewer, which was much more prevalent in adult fiction than in young adult fiction, rising sharply from a mere 9.88% to a full 25.19%.

A full list of the data obtained can be found in Table 3 and Table 4. Calculations were made both for the overall percentage represented, and the percentage within certain categories.

Table 3

*Young Adult Fiction Statistics*

Category	Total Number of Images	Percentage of Entire Sample	Other Percentage
No Human Figures	32	39.51%	
Human Figures (Any part)	49	60.49%	
Full Body Visible	33	40.74%	67.35% of Human Figures
One Part Visible	16	19.75%	32.65% of Human Figures
Face Visible	23	28.40%	46.94% of Human Figures
Photograph	41	50.62%	
Drawing	8	9.88%	
Human Facing Away	8	9.88%	16.32% of Human Figures
Only Symbols	12	14.82%	7.50% of No Human Figures
One Color Background	19	23.50%	
Pattern Background	23	28.40%	
Location	30	37.04%	
Location Only	4	4.94%	

Table 4

*Adult Fiction Statistics*

Category	Total Number of Images	Percentage of Entire Sample	Other Percentage
No Human Figures	186	46.85%	
Human Figures (Any part)	211	53.51%	
Multiple People	79	19.90%	37.44% of Human Figures
One Person	132	33.25%	62.56% of Human Figures
Full Body Visible	99	24.94%	46.92% of Human Figures
More than Half Visible	71	17.88%	33.00% of Human Figures
One Part Visible	38	9.57%	18.00% of Human Figures
Face Visible	100	25.19%	47.93% of Human Figures
Photograph	288	72.54%	
Drawing	60	15.11%	
Human Facing Away	86	21.66%	40.76% of Human Figures
Only Symbols	103	25.95%	54.50% of No Human Figures
One Color Background	112	28.21%	
Pattern Background	104	26.20%	
Location	180	45.34%	
Location Only	75	18.89%	40.32% of No Human Figures



## Discussion

### Modality

A first, universal attribute of book covers, is that they are multimodal. In other words, they are never just an image; they have both a textual and visual component. In addition to, or in many cases, as a part of the central image, all of the covers surveyed display the author and the title of the book. This is a fairly standardized element of modern book covers and book binding.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), in their chapter on composition, describe the multimodality of texts, as texts can incorporate illustrations or examples. Kress and van Leeuwen claim that these multimodal texts must be considered as "integrated" (p. 177). This study proposes to regard the covers of books as multimodal *images*. That is, the text on the cover, the author's name, the title, these are not part of a text, but rather part of an image. The viewer does not take time apart from the image presented to stop and read what the text says, as they might do in the case of an illustration or example in a passage in a book. Rather, the text is directly laid on, and in most cases, incorporated into the image.

Thus, for the purposes of this paper, the entire cover image, including any and all text, is treated as one whole image. The text on the cover is as much a part of the image as any other, and is intentionally designed in such a way as to complement the rest of the imagery featured. It is, as Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) posit, "integrated."

### Brand Identity

Within the covers surveyed, there was no clear evidence of brand identity of the publishers in any of the images. Within the teen fiction study, the names of the publishers were only featured on two of the covers, and on none of them were any identifying company logos. Possibly such logos could have been applied to the spine or back covers, but none of them

appeared on the front. Far more relevant to this study, however, is the notable absence of brand identity in the covers. There are no common aesthetics within major brands which transcend genres or series. Series may be presented with a reoccurring aesthetic, usually the same visual set-up, but with a different color scheme. This can be observed in the images taken from the *Divergent* series and the *Confessions* series, as seen in Figures 4 and 5 respectively.



*Figure 4.* Divergent Series by Veronica Roth. Note that only *Divergent* and *Insurgent* were contained in this study.

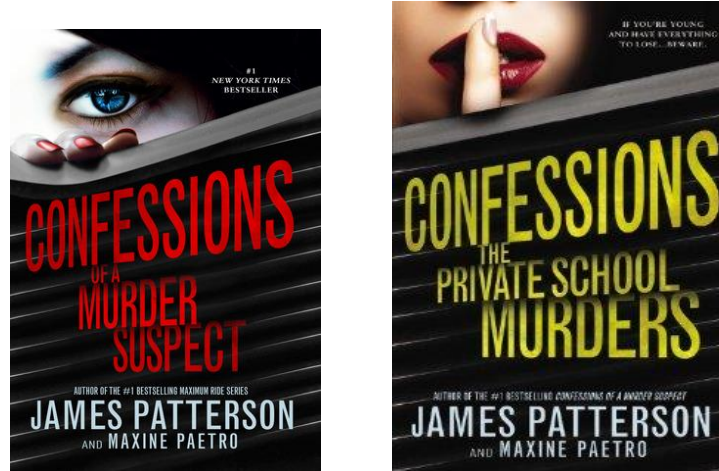


Figure 5. Confessions series by James Patterson and Maxine Paetro.

Previously, d'Astous et al.'s (2006) comparison of the relationship between books and normal products was discussed, with the analogy being made of the cover to a product's packaging. Within this analogy, however, we are left wondering what aspect of the book represents the brand of the product. In *A Parsimonious Model*, by Sawhney and Eliashberg (1996), the comparison was made between books and feature films. Within this model, the publishing company was related to the film studio, and the authors were related to the actors. The phrase explicitly used was the "star power" of the authors. This model seems to be fairly accurate from a media standpoint, particularly in terms of how the book is produced. However, the evidence in this study suggests a stronger analogy to the author as a brand of product within a larger corporate network. Examining the cover designs, there was no clear evidence of publishing companies attempting to establish their own brand imagery within the images themselves. And the analysis of the sample found no consistent themes between covers by different authors within the same publisher.

There are, however, very strong connections between images of covers by the same author, especially if the books are part of a series. With specific series, most of the images use the same basic composition, while altering the color of each image, such as the *Divergent* series

in Figure 4. Each cover is compositionally identical: an elemental, circular symbol the same size in each is displayed above a background of a colored sky and a vague cityscape. The most observable difference between each image is the coloration of the picture. The cloudy background in each image varies in color, to match the theme of the symbol. As mentioned previously, each symbol is roughly the same size and shape, and portrays some elemental form. If silhouetted against the background, the shapes would be indistinguishable. Thus, there is a direct connection between each of the images, which shows them to be part of the same series.

However, this connection does not have to be nearly as explicit. Consider the images presented from the Thunderpoint series by Robyn Carr, pictured in Figures 6, 7, and 8. Although there are some direct compositional similarities, such as the position of the title, author's name, and the featuring of a single individual, there is not nearly as much conformity as with the Divergent series. The individuals portrayed in the images are in a variety of positions, sitting, standing, facing forward, facing away, and so forth. The backgrounds behind the author's name are mostly gradients, but there are exceptions.

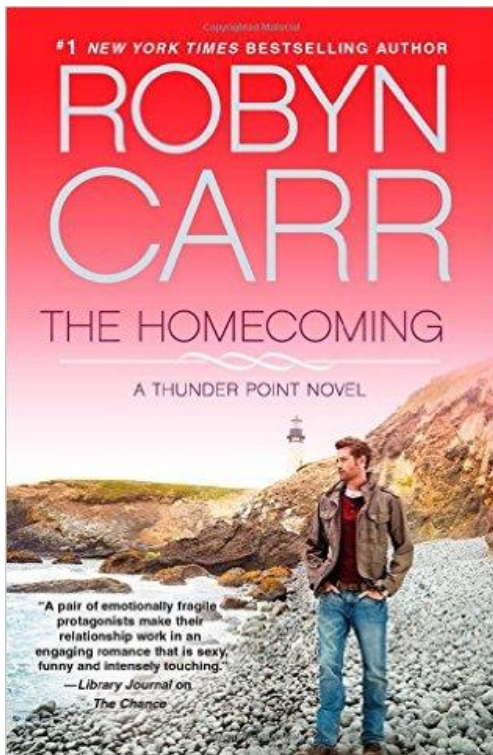


Figure 6. *The Homecoming* by Robyn Carr.

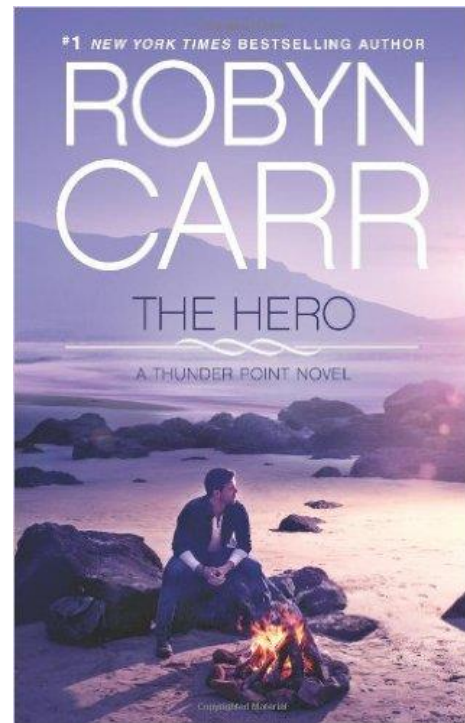


Figure 7. *The Hero* by Robyn Carr.

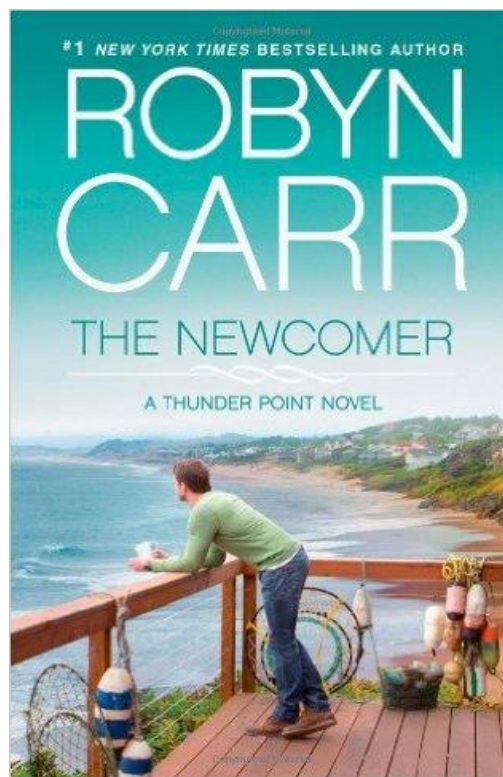


Figure 8. *The Newcomer* by Robyn Carr.

An even greater amount of contrast can be seen in Nora Roberts' Cousins O'Dwyer Trilogy. The images for these covers have much more technical diversity. Some are shot straight on, others at angles. The positioning of the elements in each image varies greatly. However, there is still a unifying aesthetic to the images. All of them contain buildings. All of them contain a single animal. Additionally, there is a distinct discrepancy in the photorealism of each image. In Figure 9, for example, the angle of the house is clearly misaligned with the lighting of the image. The angles of the shadows on the bushes and the road are dramatically different from the angles on the house. The dog, which should be illuminated, is not. Similar discrepancies can be observed in another cover from the series, in Figure 10. The horse's back leg is shown to be in shadow, when it should actually be illuminated. Further, the shadows on the horse's body are much darker than the shadows the horse casts on the ground, which are again, at the wrong angle. Likely all of the images were created by the same artist, and this particular aesthetic connects them all.

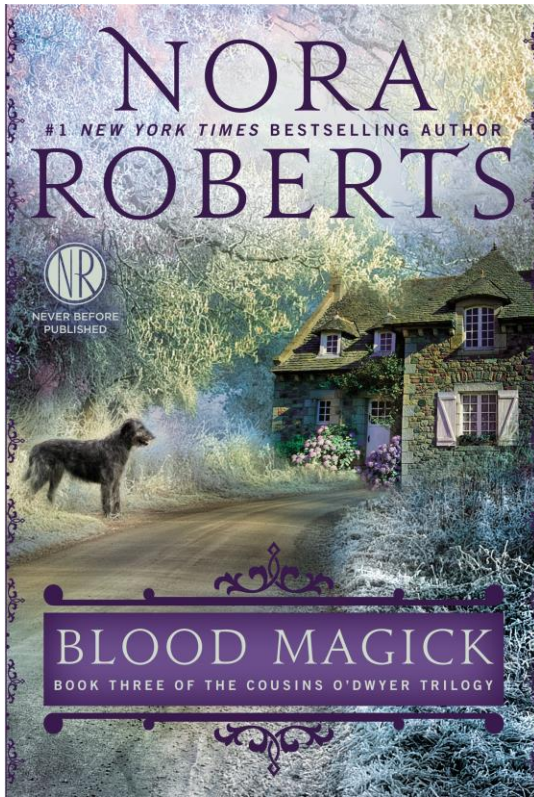


Figure 9. *Blood Magick* by Nora Roberts.

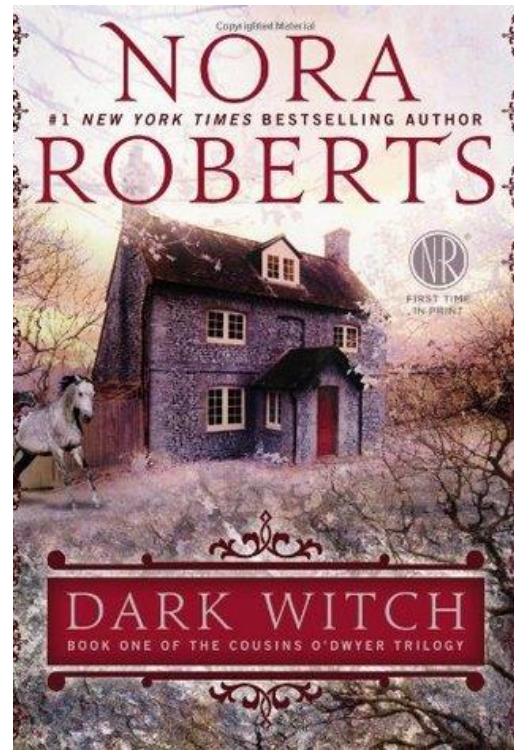


Figure 10: *Dark Witch* by Nora Roberts.

In this sense, each series is given its own aesthetic, a brand within a brand, much in the same way that Cheetos are a sub-brand of the Frito-lay company. If the author is the brand, and the series is the sub-brand, the publisher is then somewhat removed from the brand identity. However, much like with films, in certain instances, the publisher itself may be the "star" of the advertising. Much in the same way that certain studios, such as Disney or Pixar, are widely recognized as having "star power," so it is plausible that certain publishers may also be substitutes for the authors. However, in terms of aesthetics, the cover designs observed in this study are more heavily slanted towards representing the authors and the series, than representing the publishers.

### **The Symbolic Processes**

Of the book covers surveyed, in the young adult fiction category, slightly more than 1/8th, (12) contained only symbols, and nothing else, not a location or a person or an object, merely a symbol. Within the adult fiction category, 25.19% of covers contained only symbols (see Tables 1 and 2). However, the symbolic nature of the covers is not restricted to merely the forms contained within the images. "Symbolic processes are about what a participant *means* or *is*" (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 105). Kress and van Leeuwen establish two main forms of symbolic processes: the symbolic attributive process and the symbolic suggestive process. Of the two, all of the book covers would fall into the symbolic attributive perspective. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) claim that symbolic attributes are objects which possess one or more of the following characteristics: that they are made salient in the representation in one way or another, that they are pointed at by means of a gesture which cannot be interpreted as an action other than the action of "pointing out the symbolic attribute to the viewer," that they look out of place in the whole in some way, and that they are conventionally associated with symbolic values (p. 105). Additionally,

human participants in Symbolic Attributive processes usually pose for the viewer, rather than being shown as involved in some action. This does not mean that they are necessarily portrayed front-on and at eye level, or that they necessarily look at the viewer, even though all of these will often be the case. It means that they take up a posture which cannot be interpreted as narrative: they just sit or stand there, for no reason other than to display themselves to the viewer. (p. 105)

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) expand on this by further separating how these "posed" shots cannot be misinterpreted for "action" shots; within the context of the image, the figure's position cannot rationally be interpreted as solely performing an action. Even in instances in



which the figure is engaged in some action, their attention is somehow turned back towards the observer. Such a trend can be seen in the images of books, such as the cover of *Take a Chance* by Abby Glines, seen in Figure 11. In this cover, the two figures are clearly shown as embracing, which is technically an action. However, their bodies are not turned towards each other, but rather towards the viewer. And, most importantly, their position and interaction cannot be interpreted as narrative. They are presenting themselves and their actions for the viewer, but provide no context for either. There is no distinct background, but rather a grey-white gradient. The figures' clothing says nothing specific about themselves; indeed the man is dressed simply in a black shirt. It is impossible to glean their profession, standard of living, hobbies, or activities from the image. They are merely two people presenting themselves towards the viewer.

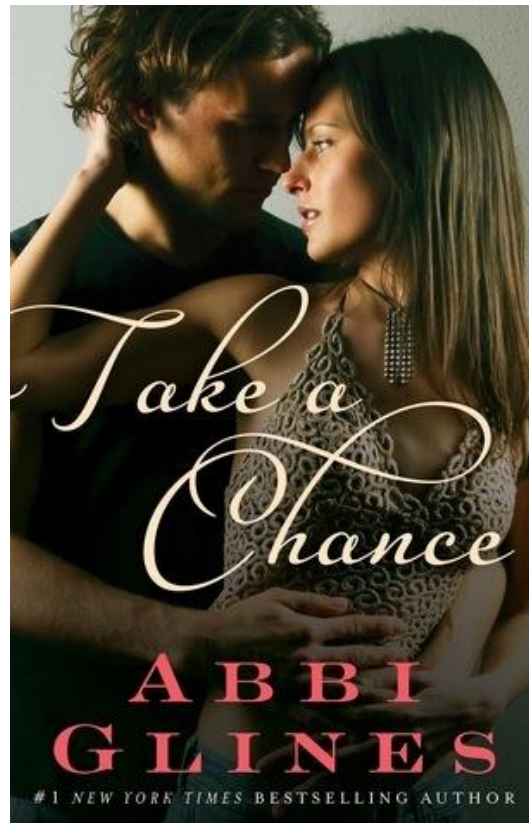


Figure 11. *Take a Chance* by Abby Glines.

In none of the book covers surveyed is a human figure portrayed as engaged in an activity or narrative action. In the case of young adult fiction covers, this lack of an engaged human figure is almost absolute. Of course, this is certainly not true in the case of all book covers in general. The cover of the original *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* is a famous example which clearly shows the character in the midst of performing a narrative action (see Figure 12). However, in the case of the 81 young adult covers examined for this study, in only one is a character engaged in an action beyond either walking forward or looking in a direction: the cover of Terry Pratchett's *Dodger* (see Figure 13), where the character is shown to be tipping his hat in the direction of the viewer. However, even here, several shadows can be seen on the ground extending outwards towards the character, and the background is heavily stylized to emphasize the character as the center of attention.

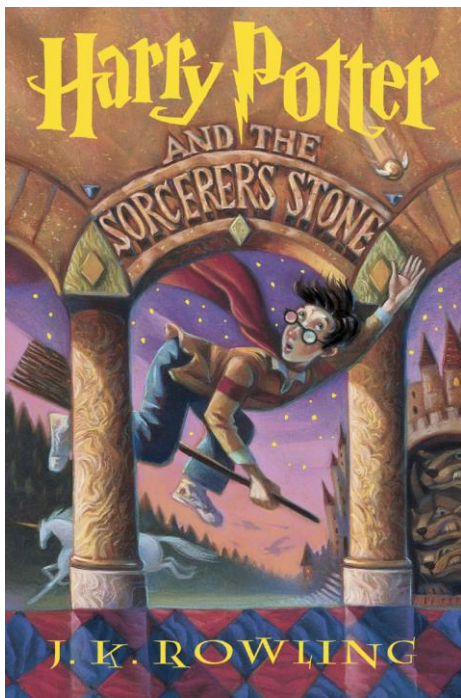


Figure 12. Original *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* cover by J. K. Rowling.

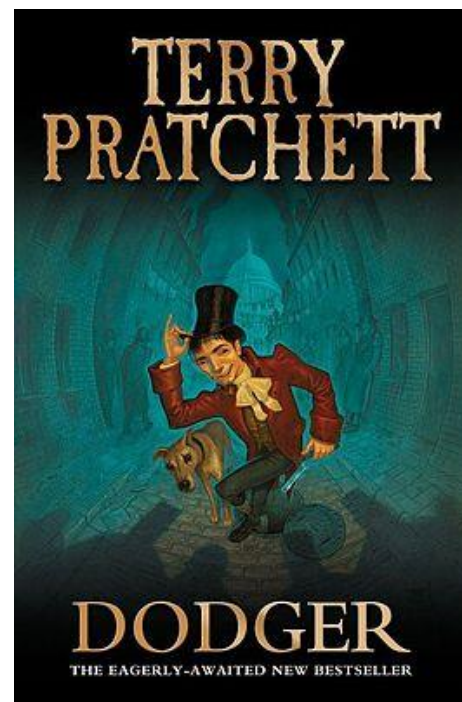


Figure 13. *Dodger* by Terry Pratchett.

This trend continues in adult fiction covers, also with one exception: the appearance of "romantic" actions. However, even these are clearly posed. The majority of them feature the characters walking towards the viewer, often holding hands. What is true about all of these images is that they are not interacting *with* anything. There is no context given. Thus, it is logical to say that all of the covers which were examined in this study are engaging in the symbolic attributive process. This is not, of course, to say that they do not engage in the symbolic suggestive process entirely. Certainly elements of such are incorporated into their background. However, the main focus of attention is always on a clearly indicated point or symbol on which the viewer focuses.

### **Drawn In Versus Interacted With**

There are two primary forms of inclusion which the covers posit. The first is the idea of being drawn in, of being there with the figure. One-tenth (8), of the young adult fiction covers feature a character turned away from the viewer, looking at something in the horizon. This strategy very intentionally is designed in such a way as to present the viewer with the idea of being drawn in, of experiencing the story with the character. The characters represented are completely unaware of the viewer's presence, and yet are, as previously mentioned, equally clearly posed in their positions. They are not engaging in tasks or going about daily routines, but are looking, and generally moving, forward, towards some unanimously unseen object or location. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) describe this as being addressed "indirectly." "Here the viewer is not the object, but subject of the look, and the represented participant is the object of the viewer's dispassionate scrutiny" (p. 119). However, in this case, there is a more subtle intention behind this portrayal. Although Kress and van Leeuwen's general assessment is true, that "no contact is made. The viewer's role is that of an invisible onlooker" (p. 119), the picture

itself neither "offers" nor "demands" anything of the viewer (p. 119-120). It is an invitation to enter into a portrayed fantasy. There is no information to be gained from the picture itself, which is often obscure. Out of the 49 young adult fiction covers which portray humans, only 23 contain recognizable human faces. As mentioned previously, eight of the covers have characters whose backs are turned to the viewer and who are moving towards the horizon. Others contain characters whose faces are mostly obscured, but who are clearly looking, or directing their attention in a direction other than that of the viewer.

These images must be considered as they are; that is, as covers of books. There is, in fact, no information about the length or content of the books being offered through the covers. There is intentionally no information to be gleaned from the images themselves. Rather, there is the suggestion of information to be gleaned from reading the book the cover rests on. As a result, these images differ greatly from what Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) suggest, that there is something being offered to the viewer. Although the subjects of the images offer themselves up to the viewer's scrutiny, there is yet nothing to be gained from such scrutiny; these covers create an atmosphere, a suggestion, but provide no content or information.

In contrast, the other major trend that of the audience being interacted with by the subjects of the cover, such as when the views of the characters are explicitly looking at the viewer. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) claim, "it creates a visual form of direct address. It acknowledges the viewers explicitly, addressing them with a visual 'you'" (p. 117). In the instance of book covers, the participants' gazes can be interpreted as demanding something from the viewer, as Kress and van Leeuwen suggest, and what exactly is being demanded varies based on the form of the covers themselves. Likely, the demands are all intended to serve the function of the cover itself: to draw attention to the book, invite interest, and ideally sell the book to the

viewer. However, the methods through which such objectives are achieved vary greatly depending on the cover itself. Take, for example, the cover of *Teardrop*, by Lauren Kate (see Figure 14). The girl on the front of the cover is directing her gaze back over her shoulder at the viewer, her gaze slightly nervous and uncertain. Compare this with the cover of *Hollow City*, in which the girl's gaze is steady, even, and decidedly unemotional (see Figure 15). Both of these covers directly address the viewer through the eyes of the characters, who occupy the exact center of the cover and dominate the background. And yet the two characters portray radically different expressions and seek very different emotions. The end objectives of the covers may be the same, to sell the book, but the methods through which such objectives are enacted are completely different.

In this instance, the covers are much more in line with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) concept of proposal; the subjects do, in fact, demand something from the viewer. Although the covers may say little about the narrative contained within, the characters are clearly represented on the front and directly address the viewer (p. 120). In this way, they are at least attempting to elicit some sort of response from the viewer. Their communication is in a two-way form, rather than in the usual one-way form of mass communication.

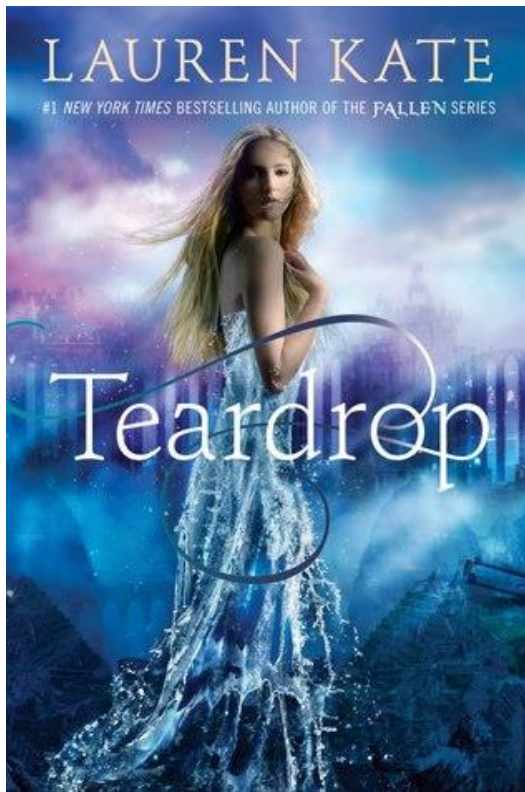


Figure 14. *Teardrop* by Lauren Kate.

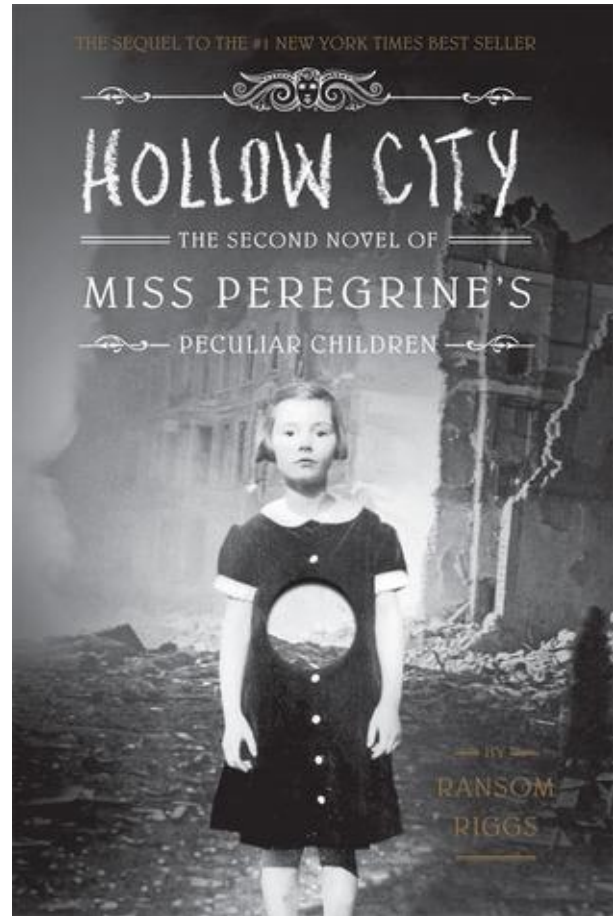


Figure 15. *Hollow City* by Ransom Riggs.

### Symbolic Suggestive Versus Symbolic Attributive

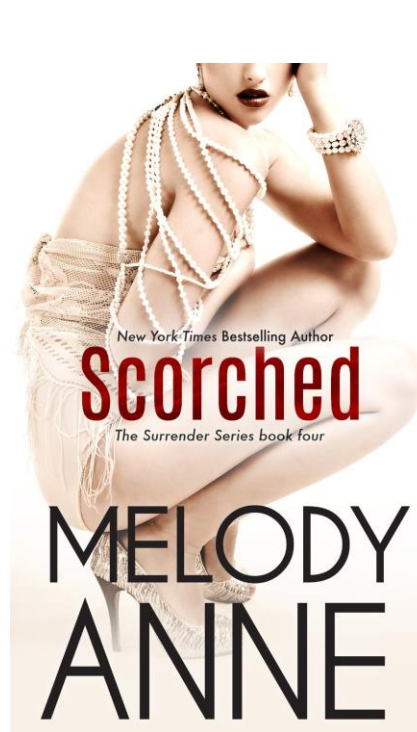
So which process do these images engage in? Are they symbolic attributive, or symbolic suggestive. I argue that the majority of these book covers are a merger of the two. They are both symbolic suggestive and symbolic attributive. The characters, themes, and images fit the categories of both processes. And so we should expect them to, if we consider what the role of the book cover image is. The book cover, as we examined earlier in this paper, serves two purposes: first, to give the readers an idea of the *experience* of the book, and second, to sell the book itself. These two dual processes are both required, if the image is to meet the necessary criteria. Unlike ordinary product packaging, which instead attempts to identify and sell the product, and as such, is not *required* to describe the experience, the book cover must do so. As

was previously explained, books are heavily experiential products. It is extremely difficult to convey to customers exactly what the book contains, or what they can expect to receive from it, or even if the book is, in fact, what they are looking for. Thus, the image is not merely tasked with identifying the book, but must also attempt to represent the experience to be had by reading it. This recreation can be accomplished through a number of functions, and these vary between different books and different writings styles: the experience of embodying, or taking on the identity of a character for a style of writing that puts the reader in that position; or the experience of observing a scene, or accompanying a character as an invisible spectator to the action for another writing style.

The second objective, of course, is to sell themselves. To accomplish this, books, like any other commercial product, need to draw attention, to make themselves known. It is not enough to merely recreate the experience contained within, but instead they must do so in a way which draws the curiosity, or desire of the viewer. This desire can culminate in a number of goals on behalf of the viewer: the desire to know more, the desire to interact with the characters, the desire to experience the represented world, and so on. This is how the books are sold. These two processes are both necessary for the book to be successful. As was mentioned previously, conventional research has determined that a product's packaging must, in some way, be representative of its contents. It cannot merely be attention getting, it must also accurately represent what it adorns, however abstract such a representation may be.

Thus, both processes are necessary for accomplishing these two goals. On their own, neither process is able to accomplish either. To merely create an atmosphere through the symbolic suggestive process is not enough. Indeed, none of the images limit themselves in such a way. There is always a dual nature to the images, two actors in each. Even an image such as the

cover of *Scorched*, by Melody Anne, featured in Figure 16, features both processes. The woman is symbolic attributive. She is clearly posed for the viewer, and even though her eyes are not visible, she is looking directly at them. The background, and, to some extent, the costume of the woman, are symbolic suggestive. They create an atmosphere, a clear sense of setting. The pure white nature of the image creates a strong sense of cleanliness, of minimalism. Without delving too much into theory regarding white space, there is a clear sense of what sort of world the image is set in, without actually explaining any part of the setting. Which brings us to the next major point, the lack of narrative.



*Figure 16. Scorched by Melody Anne.*

### **The Lack of the Narrative**

None of the covers present us, as viewers, with a true narrative. In all of the covers, at least some aspect is obscured, often multiple aspects. These are proposed to be representations of the book's contents, as stated both by Graham (2013, p. 28), and Drew and Sternberger (2005, p.



8). And yet, in the majority of these covers we see little; perhaps a place, perhaps a person, perhaps an object, yet never all three. In none of the 81 young adult fiction covers are a clear person, place, and object connected. For example, in the cover of James Dashner's *The Rule of Thoughts* (see Figure 17), while there is a person, an object, and a location depicted, the person is turned away from the viewer, and his face cannot be seen. Further, there are not words, or clear signs of where the buildings are located. The only visible thing clear in the picture is a single car, the make and model of which cannot be identified. There is almost nothing to exactly place the time, setting, or circumstances of the scene.

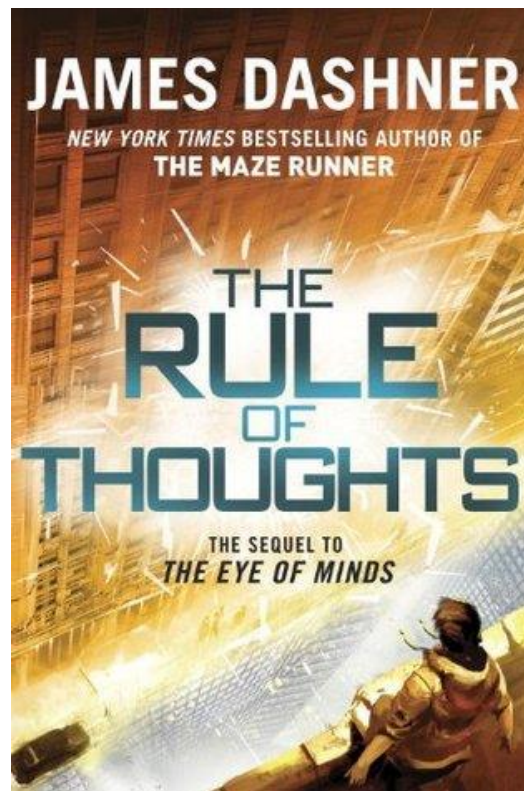


Figure 17. *The Rule of Thoughts* by James Dashner.

Often times, the faces of the subjects are obscured. Forty-nine of the covers feature some aspect of a person, ranging from simply a hand to a full body. Thirty-three of the covers featured either full body images, or from the waist up, more than half of the entire body. Sixteen featured merely a part of the body, such as a hand, arm, or legs. However, only 23 of the covers featured *recognizable* human faces. This means that in many of the covers, the faces were intentionally obscured so that no features could be made out.

Of the 81 covers, only 30 featured actual locations in their designs, and in most of these cases, the locations were vague or obscure. None of the covers displayed any significant landmarks which could be recognized, and most of the settings were more atmospheric than anything. There are no aspects of the story, such as significant places, which the viewer would understand. Nevertheless, the atmospheres are intentionally created. They are not random, but rather are associated with the elements of the particular story.

For example, the cover of *We Were Liars*, by E. Lockhart, provides us examples of both a vague location and obscured faces. As can be seen in Figure 18, there are clear human figures (perhaps teens) in the picture. One of the boys is even directly facing the viewer. However, due to the lighting and other aspects of the picture, no details can be seen. The children are clearly in a body of water, wearing only swimsuits, but it is impossible to tell if the body of water is a lake or the ocean. A coastline can be seen in the background, but like the faces of the children, the lighting prevents any details from being clearly shown. Nevertheless, the atmosphere is unmistakable. It is not a scene of winter or fall, but clearly a scene of summer, or at the very least spring. There is bright, blinding, obscuring sunshine present, as opposed to rain or clouds. It is a day scene, and a very intentional one, to fit the contents of the book.

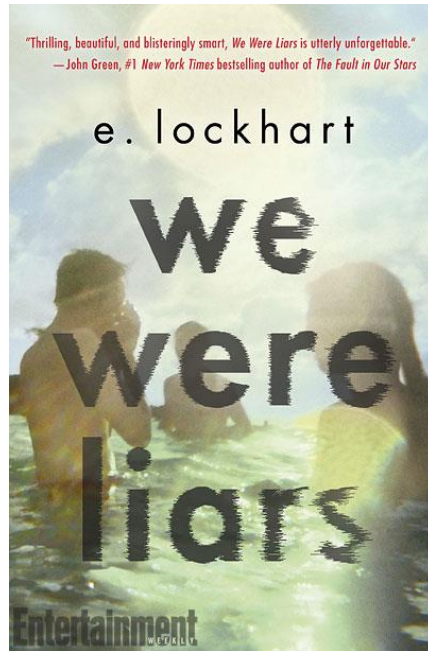


Figure 18. *We Were Liars* by E. Lockhart.

The covers were designed with the specific purpose of being commercial items. They are there to give a sense of their product, a sense of the words contained within. And they are also designed to be commercial, to attract attention from someone likely to buy them. They are not attempting to "give away" the narrative, so to speak.

The lack of narrative is also found in the adult fiction covers, which, as previously mentioned, feature different styles than their young adult fiction counterparts. The trend of merely showing empty locations can be observed in covers such as *The Slow Regard of Silent Things*, by Patrick Rothfuss, shown in Figure 19, as well as *The Bone Tree*, by Greg Isles, shown in Figure 20. Both of these images feature essentially blank locations. These locations are devoid of humans, animals, objects, and symbols. Unlike the cover of *We Are Liars*, the building pictured in the *Slow Regard of Silent Things* is distinct, and may in fact be a specific, identifiable location from the book. However, without any human figures or objects within the scene, the scene itself contains no narrative. The cover of *The Bone Tree*, on the other hand, shows an

object, a silhouetted tree. The tree however, is silhouetted over an indistinct location. A coastline is vaguely visible, but like the cover of *We Are Liars*, no details can be seen of the coastline due to the lighting.

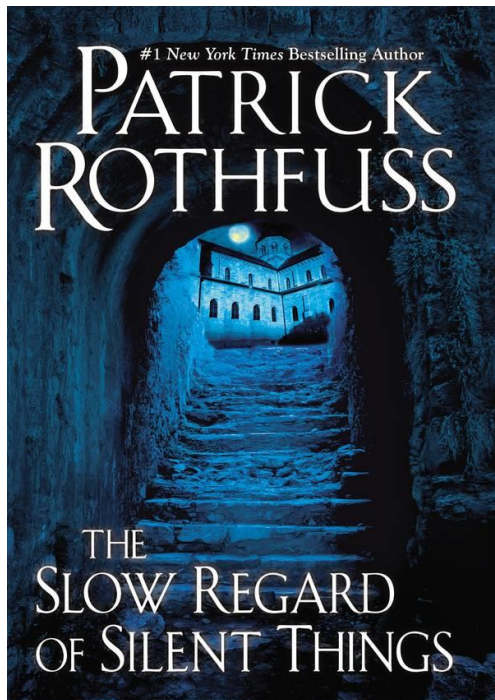


Figure 19. *The Slow Regard of Silent Things* by Patrick Rothfuss.

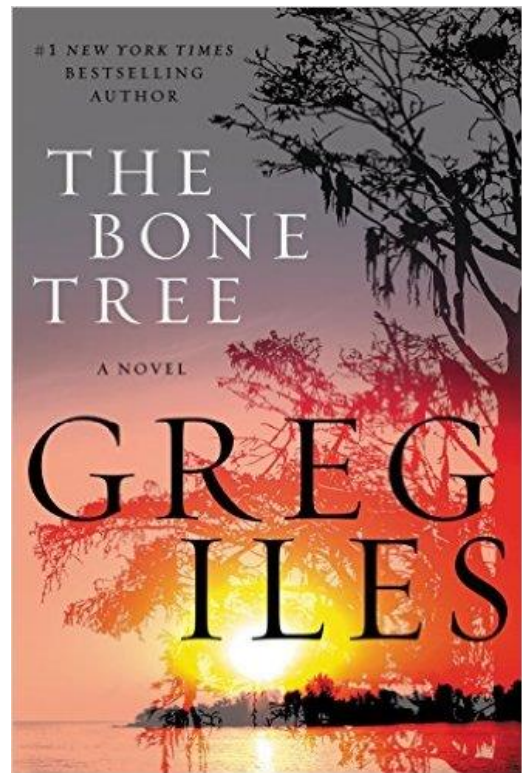


Figure 20: *The Bone Tree*, by Greg Iles.

Similarly, missing elements can be found in covers featuring only people, such as the cover of *The Witch With No Name*, by Kim Harrison, shown in figure 21, which features two humans, but no location or objects. The background is more or less a blank white canvas with a floor. Additionally, neither of the two human figures has a clearly visible face.

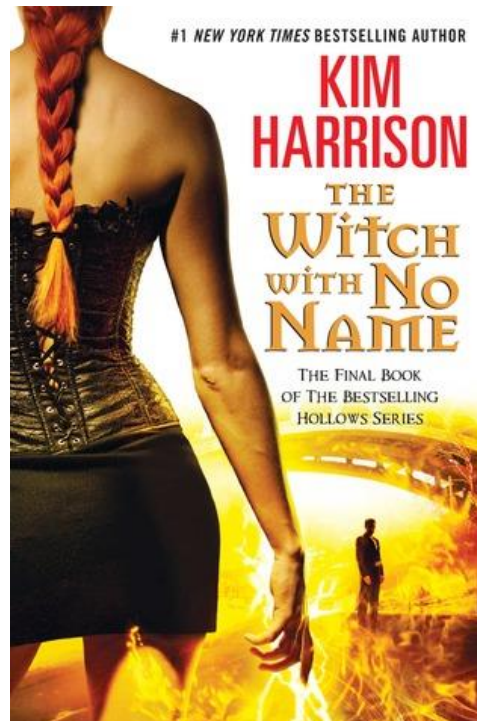


Figure 21. *The Witch With No Name* by Kim Harrison.

This finding aligns heavily with the concepts covered in Richard Lanham's book, *The Electronic Word* (1993). Lanham indicates a trend throughout literary history to move towards a level of what he terms as "unintermediated thought." Within this context, the words, chapters, fonts, and formats through which texts are constructed are seen as the mere containers of the thoughts and ideas of the author contained within. Lanham points to the decline of ornamented text with the adoption of the printing press. Prior to printed literature, texts had been heavily ornamented. Even in the immediate centuries following the invention, the adornment of text remained a convention, but one which declined over time. This also coincides with western ideals of unobtrusivity: "the best style is the style not noticed; the best manners, the most unobtrusive; convincing behavior, spontaneous and unselfconscious" (p. 4).

This study posits that this lack of narrative is intentional. This is, of course, not necessarily a claim that the publishing companies themselves are in any way attempting to

obscure the details of the books, nor that this is a universal attribute of books -- bestselling or not, nor even that they are necessarily aware that the narratives are being obscured. Rather, analysis of the images here illuminates the existing trends within the images; that is, the rhetorical and visual systems which are being used most commonly, and thus are most culturally prevalent.

### **Semiotics**

Thus far, the covers have been addressed in terms of the conceptions of the "grammar" of images, as presented by Kress and van Leeuwen (2005). How then, are the concepts of semiotics applied to our understandings of the images present in the covers?

Specifically, what are the signs present in the designs of the covers, and how do they create meaning?

To begin with, the covers feature multiple layers of signs, and multiple examples of different signs. The covers themselves, independent of the signs contained within the images that they display, are signs; specifically, under the semiotic classification mentioned previously, they are symbols. That is, they are assigned meaning based on the objects on which they rest, the books themselves. Thus, the covers are symbols of the books.

Within the images themselves, the most common usage of signs is as indexes, usually with their meanings obscured within the book's contents. However, this is not to say that there are not signs which are used as icons, and thus have a resemblance to what they are intended to signify, but rather that the images themselves would mainly feature signs classified as indexes. Schroeder (2014) defines the index as "some sensory feature (especially visual) - the signifier - that correlates with and thus implies or 'points to' the signified." The covers are indexes of the contents of the book. The covers reviewed in this study are not representations of the books'

contents; they portray no moments or points in the books themselves, they do not, in a way, resemble the contents of the books, but are sensory experiences that attempt to recreate the "feeling," if you will, of what the book is.

This study shows that culturally we do not expect covers to tell us about the narrative of the book which they adorn. The covers themselves are designed to be symbols, to represent the book. They take Graham's (2013, p. 28) statement literally, to be a lasting image in the reader's mind. The covers themselves are as much the symbols of the books as the individual portions of the images they contain. The semiotic value of Marie Lu's *Legend* (see Figure 22) is not merely in the golden symbol in the foreground, but rather it is the entire construction of the image: the golden symbol, the metallic background, all of which combine to create the cover, which is the sign for the book.



Figure 22. *Legend* by Marie Lu.

Book covers, are of course, inherently rhetorical. They have a goal, to persuade the reader to purchase them, which is shared with all product packaging. Similarly, as Gallagher et al. (2011) point out, they have both an artistic aspect, and a practical aspect. The practical aspect, of course is to sell. But beyond that, these images must construct a sense of feeling, of experience. It is significant, then, that they do not do so through narrative, as they have done for decades. But just as Drew and Sternberger (2005) noted, modern design has acknowledged the designer as an artist in their own right, and as such, they are freed from the actual content, as much as they are inherently tied to it. The image must represent the product which it identifies for the product to be successful. And while this paper does not demonstrate a clear link between cover images and sales success, it does acknowledge that the images are of products which were highly successful. And further, that these images affect the culture through their success. The more copies of a book that are sold, the more the images on the covers are propagated in society. In theory there may be exceptions to this; that is, there may be cases when high sales of a book does not mean that the cover has been viewed many times. The extent of this study, taking all of the cover images that have appeared over the last two years, ensures that such exceptions have minimal impact on the findings.

### **Implications**

The implications, therefore, are that book covers that best represent the "feel" of their content predominate in the contemporary moment. If we were going to take this finding and make it prescriptive, we might argue that fiction novels which concern fantasy should feature visual elements that, while not actual objects, create the feel of objects associated with the time period. A background of stylized bark, or chain mail, or other recognizable elements associated with a certain time period would best suit a medieval fantasy novel. Similarly, a novel which is a



cyber thriller would be best served by a cover featuring visual imagery commonly associated with the elements of the genre. Of course, books are best served by customizing the imagery to match the actual content of the book itself. A book which can be classified as a "cyber thriller," and yet replaces all computer terms with botanical ones, may best be served by an image of a tree—but not merely a tree. The ideal cover for such a novel, this study suggests, is one which would present an image of a tree within a visual landscape that suggests a distinctly unnatural setting. This might take shape as an image of a tree growing in the middle of an office building ; or, perhaps, an image of a tree visually or symbolically isolated from its surroundings.

The covers which symbolize the books examined in this study are no longer intended to symbolize their content. Indeed, we do not expect them to. As the images have shifted away to a more experiential nature, so too has our understanding of what the images ought to be and what purpose they serve both for the book and within our society. As this trend continues to dominate the best selling books, and as these images are the most prevalent, so the conception is further reinforced in our society.

This trend has emerged because of the ease now afforded to book publishers and cover artists in creating the visual elements which create this feeling. The emergence of digital imaging in the 1990s provided artists with new techniques and systems for creating images. Importantly, it also allowed them to replicate and recreate visual techniques and styles of other artists and other time periods more easily and in ways they could not have done otherwise.

### **Conclusion**

There are two goals of the images, two methods, and two processes by which these methods operate. However, to be clear, these are not exclusively linked. Each method is used to accomplish each goal, and each process is involved in each method.

As was established in the literature review, book covers have two primary goals: first, they must accurately recreate the experience of the book. Second, they must draw attention to the book, so that the book will be sold. Within this, there is a requirement which is imposed upon them which ordinary consumer products do not have to meet: the requirement of recreating the experience of reading. Ordinary consumer product packaging must merely identify the nature of the product contained within. However, books are experiential products. As such, there is a heavy discrepancy in the knowledge that consumers may obtain about them before reading them, and it is difficult, if not impossible for consumers to assess whether or not the book is what they are looking for purely based upon descriptions of the product. Facts such as page count are virtually meaningless. Thus, the cover must step up to at least provide some information to fill this void. These, then, are the goals of the book covers.

If anything, this study demonstrates one primary finding: that the book covers of the best selling fiction books in the current historical context (e.g., 2012 – 2014) are not narrative. They do not explain the plot, they do not contain scenes from the plot, and they do not provide information on the characters. Unlike other, very famous examples from the past, such as the covers of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* or *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, modern book covers are solely symbolic in nature. They uniquely engage in both forms of Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) symbolic process: they are both symbolic attributive and symbolic suggestive in nature.

The question we must ask ourselves, then, is what are these processes attempting to accomplish? We have established at great length that these processes exist. We have established their methods, and even their goals. What remains is to summarize how they are all connected.

The objectives of the processes are twofold: first, they wish to "draw in" the reader. They wish to create for the reader a sense that the reader is experiencing the story alongside the character. In this sense, they also attempt to recreate the experience of the book. Not the moments of the book, nor the scenarios, nor the narrative, but the experiential "feeling" of the book's contents, the "atmosphere," if you will. Both processes are used in accomplishing this sense of being drawn in. As I mentioned previously, the sense of being drawn in is accomplished through the creation of a "mood" or "atmosphere," the exact same terms used by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) to describe the symbolic suggestive process (p. 105-106). But the creation of the sense of being "drawn in" relies on more than the symbolic suggestive process. There is an explicit aspect of positioning in it, which transcends the existence of a mere single carrier. The figures in the images are posed in such a way as to invite the reader to embody, or accompany them.

Their second objective is to interact with the reader. In this sense, they wish to both capture the reader's attention, and cause the reader to wish to understand them. By directly interacting with the reader, they wish to rouse the reader's curiosity. As has been stated, they are not narrative. There are no answers to be found in the images themselves. Rather, they are purely symbolic. They are part of an ongoing process of establishing understanding. And again, both processes are used in accomplishing the sense of being interacted with. The vague backgrounds, the sense of atmosphere around the primary figure which is interacting with the viewer are used to create a heightened sense of placement, of realism to the interaction. This is, therefore, more than a mere image of a person, but an image with which it is possible to form a connection or a greater understanding. The details which are missing are known by the viewer to exist, not in the image itself, but in the words upon which the image rests. As such, the image is, at some level,

known to be only the start of understanding meaning; there are elements which are assumed to make more sense the further one observes the image.

Even more minimalist covers are pliable to this analysis. Brad Thor's *Hidden Order*, for example, as seen in Figure 23, contains extremely minimalist semiotics. And yet, the significance is there. With what substance is the skull symbol painted? The most basic, obvious answer is that this is a digital image and thus, no substance in the sense of a non-digital creation of which the cover is an imitation. But the experiential answer, the feeling created by the image, is that this symbol has been painted onto a surface. The lettering of the author's name and the book's title has been embossed in a unique way, a way that suggests a plastic nature. Combined with the tan coloration of the letters, it is easy to believe that the symbol is inscribed on a military grade case, such as for transporting ammo or weapons. What the substance is remains unclear, however, the reader assumes that by reading the novel, more details about it will be revealed. What does the symbol mean? What is the nature of what it represents? And what does our knowledge of such imply about what would have been used to inscribe it? All of this, and more, is implied to reside within the novel itself.

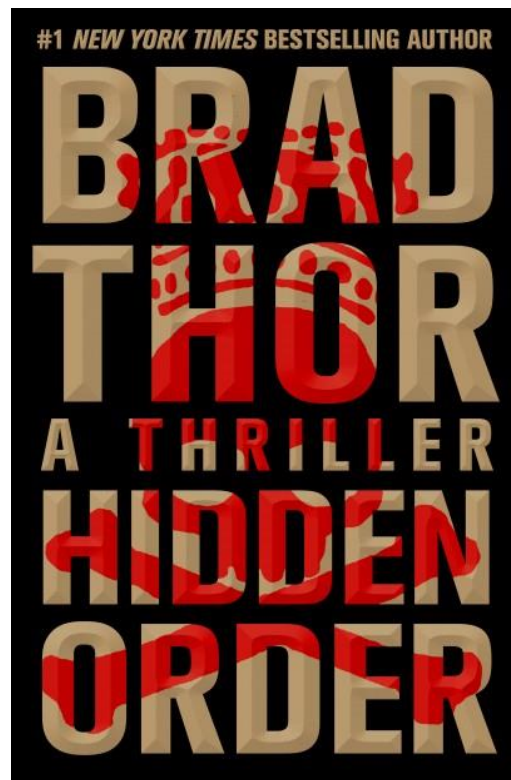


Figure 23. *Hidden Order* by Brad Thor.

This study, by combining the insights of Campbell and Schroeder, Kress and van Leeuwen, and others, helps scholars to have a better understanding not only of the basic symbolic elements of the images as well as the ways in which the images interact with their viewers. As established by the concepts of visual culture, images are actively being created and perceived by the culture in which they exist. As such, while it is clear there are not established rules which are universal to image perception, it is also equally clear that the cultures which perceive the images establish conventions or standards, shared themes and concepts of meaning which actively affect how they view the images, and which are consistent for a specific point or group. By observing and understanding not only what these standards and conventions are, but also how they are actively changing and moving through society, we gain a better understanding of how these images are viewed, and what they communicate.

By applying the concepts of Gallagher et al. (2011), we gain an understanding that while the methods of observing images may not be fixed, the results of such observations may be. As their work demonstrates, individuals are affected by images, and this affect can be observed and measured. While this study does not attempt to perform any such measurement, it instead holds open the possibility that such a measurement could later be performed by applying this framework to understand how images communicate.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that fiction book covers are an attempt to create an experience, without creating a narrative. They are complementary to the words contained within, and as such, do not, in modern times, attempt to necessarily examine the purpose or goal of the words contained within, but merely attempt to provide a visual recreation of the moments to be experienced.

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