Though people are admonished not to judge a book by its cover, they often do. In order to better understand the communication between a person and a dust jacket, fifteen library science students were interviewed to elicit their opinions about twenty-two fiction books based on information gleaned from front covers. Additionally, the students were asked various questions regarding their attitudes about dust jackets as information providers and about books as objects in order to gain insight into their ideas about the artifactual value of dust jackets and books. The guiding questions were: What is it in a novel’s front cover design that first attracts a reader to a book, and does the cover affect the reading of the text? Do library science students, future custodians of books, view fiction books and their dust jackets as merely the carriers of the text, part of the text, or as something else entirely?
SHELF APPEAL: LIBRARY SCIENCE STUDENTS’ ATTRACTION TO FICTION
DUST JACKET COVERS AND THEIR OPINIONS ABOUT BOOKS AS OBJECTS

by

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Chapter I: Introduction

Problem Statement

The dialogue between a person and a painting is accepted and respected, as is the dialogue between a person and a text. But the dialogue between a person and a book’s exterior is not allowed much legitimacy, and we are admonished, “Never judge a book by its cover.” But even without proper acknowledgment, book exteriors—be they dust jackets, plain cloth, paperback covers, or leather bindings—still appeal and communicate. Both academic and non-fiction literature agree that book covers play a role in attracting individuals to books. In bookstores and libraries every day browsers look over hundreds of books on numerous shelves, and often the books they choose are the ones with shelf appeal, the ones whose covers “speak” to them.

Book publishers are well aware of this and marketing experts maintain cover art’s “main purpose is to sell … the design should inform as well as attract, be true to the contents, and be tuned to the market” (Clark, 2001, p.106). So, publishers are attending to the dialogue between reader and book when they produce the book, but how does that cover information manifest itself to the viewers? In other words, what are viewers hearing?

This study examines that question in regard to one audience (library science students) and one type of book (fiction), with an emphasis on understanding how these attitudes affect the idea of the book as an object. The research questions are: What is it in a novel’s front cover design that first attracts a reader to a book, and does the cover affect the reading of
the text? Do library science students, future custodians of books, view fiction books as merely the carriers of the text, part of the text, or as something else entirely?

**Humans and Art**

While much research has been compiled in recent years regarding human-information interaction, a seminal article from 1972 shows how little we knew then and underscores why we know so little now about humans and art. “It is easier to understand a computer than it is to understand art or the weather because the man who built the computer wanted to build something that would work. In order to build something that would work he had to build something he could understand (Pierce, 1972, p. 31).” The author seems to be saying that what makes art so difficult to understand is that artists do not always know why they create what they create. Many writers and artists refer to themselves as channels of a sort, producing art or literature at the behest of an unknown power – their characters, God, or something else.

To further complicate the situation each viewer interacts with art individually and creates a unique experience. This dialogue is thought by many people to be a creative process of its own. Other people cannot replicate the individual experience or even fully understand another’s reaction; in truth the person who experiences a reaction to art, even dust jacket art, may not understand it themselves just the same as the artist may not understand exactly why he created what he created. Art is perhaps even more difficult to understand on a mass level.

There is not (and cannot be) a definitive catchall dictionary for book covers that accurately defines the collective, agreed-upon meanings of objects; and there isn’t an agreed upon scientific method that explains the meaning of a cover’s composition. Individual
viewers must extract meaning in artwork based on their unique information horizons (Sonnenwald, 1999, p. 185). So, based on individual life experience, a work of art may be a spider web of meaning for one viewer, while another viewer sees barely a thread.

**This Study**

If each viewer interacts with art individually and the interaction creates a unique experience, one could argue that if a person responds positively to something on a book’s cover he or she is more likely to pick up that book. It may also be true that even if a person does individually connect with a book, she may gain information from the book cover that, no matter the strength of the personal connection, will not appeal to her because of other overriding information. For example, will a person who loves horses not connect with a western’s cover simply because she recognizes this book as a western and does not read them? Also, will people not buy or borrow books if they simply don’t like the cover? What if the person knows that another cover is available elsewhere? This study should prove helpful in answering, or providing a foundation to answer, these questions.

Additionally, while people cannot replicate the individual experience of another or even fully understand it, some commonalities probably do exist based on society’s shared knowledge that unite people in their understanding of certain pieces of cover art. Genre covers are often recognizable because of the objects, the setting, and the tone of a book cover. For example a gun in a hand pointed threateningly at a man denotes a mystery, a gun in the hand of a cowboy on a horse indicates a western, while a high tech gun with a space ship in the background points toward science fiction. This study will address these genre issues as well.
Dust jackets can present intriguing stimuli that encourage one to think about the text inside; some scholars wonder if the cover messages may also affect how one reads the text. This is a growing area of interest for literary scholars and should also be important to many librarians and bibliographers. The burgeoning field of reader’s advisory would certainly be able to use the results of this study to better understand readers’ attractions to books.

**Front Cover Limitations**

It should be noted that the art on a book’s cover does not exist in isolation, like a painting on a gallery wall. “The painting, the typography, and the blurb all combine to make a whole that is greater than the sum of the parts. Even the publisher’s logo is a design feature which adds to the charm of the package (Lupoff, 2001, p. 309).” These items are part of the dust jacket and are part of the experience that a person is embraced by when they look at and pick up a book. Though the primary focus of this study is specifically the front cover, all aspects of the visual book combine to communicate the intended message.
Chapter 2: Literature

Introduction

Though the first known publisher dust jacket\(^1\) dates from 1832\(^2\), they were not widely used until the late 19\(^{th}\) century and were not considered part of a book by many until well over one hundred years after their creation. Collectors would throw them away, seeing them perhaps as we see a plastic bag – something to protect the purchase until we get it home. Eventually in the 1920s bibliophiles interested in collecting modern first editions helped highlight the question of whether dust jackets were part of the books they covered. *Publisher’s Weekly* printed several pieces on the topic as did other journals, and important bibliographies of major authors’ works were completed in thorough detail without any mention of dust jackets, though their absence spoke volumes (Tanselle, 1971, p.91-92).

Modern paperback books as we think of them, whose bright covers were widely and often misleadingly used to attract public notice, weren’t published until the late 1930s and even then were published on cheap paper and seen as ephemera until years later (Schick, 1958, p.119).

So it is hardly surprising that an examination of the scholarly literature of cover art research shows that few studies have been conducted on a topic which has so often been viewed as worthless.

Of the research that has been done, the majority focuses on children’s relationship with books. This includes a few studies that look specifically at cover art-human
communication. Adults do receive some attention – several studies have been conducted that look at the portrayal of women in cover art. Still, much of the work on adult fiction cover art is limited to what is tantamount to historical works for popular audiences. So, in light of the paucity of specific research on human-cover art interaction, several theories pulled from various disciplines will be used to help understand adults’ dialogue with cover art and affects it.

**Literature**

Any research study looking at the dialogue between book exteriors and individuals must take into account that there are many fields that touch on this topic. Librarianship, education, publishing, popular culture, communication, psychology, history, art, English literature, and sociology are some of the most obvious ones; though other areas, such as women’s studies, and even medicine (Clark, 1999), could also be interested in this type of communication. Any field with publications will have some type of design or art on the covers, and scholars of the field would reasonably be interested in what those designs say. Clark says that art “makes statements that are often social, cultural, and political in nature” and because of this thinks “cover art demands a critical gaze” (Clark, 1999, p.1603). In order to learn who had gazed at cover art with just such a critical eye, a wide net was cast among many disciplines.

Publishing marketers seem to view book design as more of an art than a science and feel cover choices are “subjective” and “trendy” (Cole, 1999, p. 22). One top cover artist and book designer was asked about marketing studies. He said those are not really done and that what happens is that “most publishing house[s] have what they call jacket meetings. These are by all accounts these little Nuremberg trials for the jacket. Where we all sit in a circle and
put them up one by one and we all talk about how we feel about it. Somebody from marketing, somebody from editorial, etc., etc. (Birnbaum).”

Much of a publisher’s interest involves making sure the book cover is “heard” regardless of the context it is viewed in and making sure the cover sells. The marketing literature agrees that covers play an important role in selling a book, and thus much attention is paid to cover art (Cole, 1999; Clark, 2001). The marketing literature also discusses both the power cover art is generally believed to have, as well as the difficulty in studying something as nebulous as art.

Of the scholarly studies that exist, several tend to focus on a certain aspect of cover art – the portrayal of women (Clark, 1999; Stowe, 1999; Florence, 2002). These studies involve such diverse material as the covers of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (*JAMA*), the Nancy Drew Mysteries, and comic books. All used content analysis methods to formulate their data. The *JAMA* article (Clark, 1999) looked at the incidence of women in cover art over a one-year period and examined if the women were in sexual and/or stereotypical roles. The Nancy Drew work (Stowe, 1999) used criteria such as non-verbal communication, facial expressions, and picture composition cues to trace changes in the cover art portrayal of Nancy’s character from the first edition to modern times. The comic book study (Florence, 2002) used similar methods to the Nancy Drew study, though more attention was paid to certain issues such as type of clothing and unrealistic body proportions.

Scholarly works about book illustration have been primarily interested in juvenile works, especially children’s picture books (Nodelman, 1988; Schwarcz, 1975). Picture books by definition contain numerous illustrations, so it is not surprising that most of the work on book illustrations have been focused where book art is most prominent. Also, research on children and reading seems to be more common because of its link to learning and
education. Still, much of this information can still be used for books targeted toward adults. Nodelman, in her work on children’s picture books, asserts: “we can and do tell books by their covers; we use the visual information we find there as the foundation for our response to the rest of a book” (Nodelman, 1988, p. 49). This idea translates clearly enough. Schwarcz (1975) looks at art as “a means of symbolic communication” which also makes the leap from childhood to adulthood quite easily (Schwarcz, 1975, p. 4). General information based on children’s picture books can be used as a base for research into adult fiction cover art.

One book summarizes interviews with artists and designers of early paperback covers (Schreuders, 1981). Schreuders provides some of the most comprehensive research in the area of early mass-market paperback books. His interviews with illustrators and art designers capture a valuable voice in the communication chain. However, he is not interested in reader reaction and therefore does not interview readers or discuss readers’ communication with cover art. In another work, tremendous historical research is used to also provide historical context to the early years of paperback publishing (Davis, 1984).

Over the past decade there have been no less than seven books published that focus on adult fiction cover art, be it dust jacket or paperback covers (e.g. Heller & Chast, 1995; Heller & Fink, 1994; Lupoff, 2001; McKnight-Trontz, 2002; O’Brien, 1997; Powers, 2001; Server 1994). Even so, almost all of the cover art examined are older works. While these books focus on the history of cover art rather than its impact on potential readers, the trend in publication indicates a growing interest in cover art that may soon spill over into the academic research regarding communication. Until then, these popular books are the only works available regarding adult fiction cover art and as such are useful for background and insight into what types of covers were produced and are now collected. Often too, as in the
case of Heller and Chast (1995), there is commentary from the authors regarding their opinions of a book’s art.

In these more recent works dust jackets are focused on more than paperbacks, though the emphasis here is still on early examples. This literature is once again based on historical information, but these combine text with glossy images of cover reproductions (Heller and Chast, 1995; Lupoff, 2001; Powers, 2001). The images, even though they are old and dated, still have the power to appeal. Glossy page after glossy page proves to be reminiscent of fine art books and shows the growing respectability of book dust jacket and cover art.

In the literary world there is “a new school” that “analyzes the book as material object” (Cushman, 1999, p. 31). Cushman says, “How the book looks – its dustjacket, its format, its typeface, its paper – figures in a reader’s response” (Cushman, 1999, p. 31). Cushman, a professor of English and associate editor of the *D. H. Lawrence Review*, speaks to the importance of the dust jacket and provides a summary description and individual analysis of 13 dust jackets of D. H. Lawrence’s works. Cushman finds that various influences, such as artist and potential controversy, impact cover design. While his research utilizes the cover artists’ and book author’s reactions as tools, again little attention is focused on audience reaction, other than the individual visual analysis of Cushman himself as a viewer.

There are a few studies that do examine the book cover art-human dialogue, but, as discussed, it is not surprising that the studies are based on children. Vacek (1982) looks specifically at how fourth-graders selected books based on book jackets with particular attention paid to the reading levels of the children. She found that children most liked covers with cartoon figures. This idea is in line with the idea of a personal connection effect
since many children do watch cartoons; however, this question was beyond the scope of the Vacek study and there is no definitive proof.

Another study used a sample of twenty-one young adult readers and fourteen book covers (Sullivan, 1988). Readers were asked to rate the covers on a scale of 1-5 and provide a brief explanation of what they found appealing or unappealing. Results were varied, and while no attempt was made to characterize elements of an appealing book jacket, most respondents preferred books that were not abstract, again reinforcing the idea that connection is a key part of book cover appeal. A follow-up study compared the same titles in hardback and paperback formats with different illustrations (Sullivan, 2000). He found that young adults thought the cover should provide an indication of what the book is about and that realistic covers were important. He also found depictions of action and emotion were appealing. Color was also mentioned as a factor.

Popular and quasi-academic works about books and book collecting are abundant. There are even books that exist purely because they contain quotes about books (Kaplan & Rabinowitz, 2001). All these books typically laud the book as object and speak of the book as if the physical object and the text are one and the same. Still, even though these works address people’s (sometimes fanatical) attraction to books, there has been less interest shown in the academic world regarding the serious study of the appeal of books as objects, especially in regard to the sample population used here, library students.

**Theoretical Works**

While no research studies were found that look at cover art in relation to the dialogue between the adult viewer and the book cover, other tools are available to guide this study and provide a foundation for looking at cover art communication in adults in relation
to book cover appeal. To that end, grounded theory will also be used to help analyze data and form themes (Glaser & Strauss 1967).

**Conclusion**

While cover art pertains to several academic areas, no one in any area seems to have paid much research attention to its impact on potential readers other than those educators and librarians interested in children. Evidence supports the current recognition of the importance of dust jackets because a lot of attention (8 recent books) has been paid to its history, still very little attention has been paid to adults and their dialogues with cover art. Though the covers virtually scream for attention, they have failed to attract the attention of academic researchers.
Chapter 3: Methodology

To best understand the complexities of human-cover art communication, data was gathered using in-depth interviews. This method allowed an intensive look at the particular covers and people’s reactions to them. The primary data collection instrument was a sample of twenty-two fiction books representing various types of dust jacket design and content.

Actual books, rather than just images of covers, were used in order to retain the characteristics of the physical object and make the browsing scenario as realistic as possible. All of the books were library books, protected with Mylar and showing call numbers on the spine. Books were selected from the McNaughton browsing collection of an academic library and the new fiction collection of a medium-sized public library, with the exception of one book. *Plays well with Others* was specifically chosen from the public library’s older collection (though the condition of the Mylar and dust-jacket was equivalent to the newer books) for several reasons. First, it represents a style, a cartoon graphic, which is not as common as photography, painting, and other types of graphics. Second, Chip Kidd, who is considered one of the greatest book jacket designers of our time, designed it. Finally, there is an article containing another person’s view of this book jacket that provides an interesting comparison to the interviewees (Plagens, 1999). (See Appendix I for a complete listing of the sample books along with cover images and synopses of interviewee statements.)

Books were gathered selectively to ensure that a representative variety of styles were available to the interviewees. Books were first chosen based on the apparent format of the
original art: photograph, fine art, original book art, graphic, and cartoon. The books were then looked at to ensure a diversity of genres and content were included.

The interviewees for this study are not just pleasure readers; they are library science students, future custodians of books and other information formats. Thus their opinions about books will shape future policies and trends in libraries. In order to ‘see’ the future of books in libraries, this population was examined and questions were asked to obtain a snapshot of today. The results of this inquiry are likely different than would be the case with a group of readers who are not training for a book-related profession.

In order to obtain as diverse a subject sample as possible, participants were recruited based on their field of professional interest. Professional interests range from working in areas such as children’s librarianship and school media to archives and rare books, with technical services, reference and instruction also being represented among student career interests.

**The Interview**

At the beginning of each interview a few minutes were taken to gather demographic and preference type information from the interviewee in order to better understand what context they were viewing the covers from.

The sample portion of the interview was next. Books were arranged in alphabetical order by author’s last name in a long row. Interviewees were then asked to look at the books as if they were browsing in a bookstore or library and to choose five books they would like to pick up and study closer and five books they had no interest in picking up.

An in-depth, qualitative interview was then conducted to glimpse what the selected books “said” to the interviewee in order to be picked up or not picked up, and if there were
things about the cover that the viewer felt a personal connection with. After this, interviewees were allowed to comment on any of the books, including ones that were not chosen for their five selections or five discards. More questions were then posited regarding the role book covers may have played in past reading experiences and about books as objects (See Appendix III for the interview protocol).

At the end of the interview people were given a choice of bookmarks in appreciation of their time.

**Afterward**

Interviews were audio recorded and/or notes were taken. One interviewee requested not to be recorded and extensive notes were taken in that instance. The interviews and notes were later transcribed.

The transcription of the 15 interviews resulted in almost 200 pages of raw data. The information was sifted through and organized by title for the book sample comments and by topic for the other portions. Both methods retained the provenance of all comments.

Grounded theory methods were used to assist in data analysis and interviews were analyzed for themes. In order to see trends and provide a manageable set of data, the book sample comments were compiled into detailed synopses for each title along with a graphic of the front cover (see Appendix I). These synopses provide insight into why books were chosen or not chosen by interviewees and several themes emerged within individual titles that illuminate what attracts people to or repels them from a book at first sight. Charts indicating chosen and discarded books were also created (see Appendices IIa and IIb).
Chapter 4: Library Students’ Opinions about Dust Jackets and Books

Participants

Fifteen people participated in these in-depth interviews. Interviewees ranged in age from early twenties to early forties, with the average age being approximately thirty. There were eleven females and four males.

The interviewees each own an estimated thirty to five hundred books, with the average number being one hundred and ninety-eight books per person. Eleven of the fifteen reread books, four do not. When asked to rate the role a dust jacket plays in selection decisions using a scale of 1-10 with 10 being the most important, the average score was 7.8 with scores ranging from 4-10.

Part I: Book Selection Themes

Several factors emerged as important in the interviewees’ decision-making process when selecting their five favorites and five discards. Using grounded theory these choices were divided into categories: the individual reader, the author, the title, the cover design, and other. Within these categories other themes are also discussed.

The Individual Reader

The browsing reader doesn’t come to the shelf without numerous experiences and feelings. When scanning books on a shelf or table something on a book’s cover makes the
person hesitate and sets into motion a more intensive viewing. This “something” is what the first part of this study examines and, based on the evidence, is closely linked to the context of an individual’s life. Of the twenty-two books all except two were chosen for someone’s ‘yes’ stack and all but three were chosen for someone’s ‘no’ stack, showing a great diversity in a book’s attractiveness to different individuals.

**Personal Preferences and Associations**

Several of the interviewees have specific preferences and seem to know exactly what they like. One person’s choice clearly related to her interpretations of a book’s content based on information gathered from the cover. She said of her top five choices:

They all look like novels—except for the John Irving, although there is ‘widow’ in the title; they all look like novels aimed at women. Which is probably a little bit why I picked them because I think they’re going to have things I am interested in from women’s life experiences and women’s history and that kind of thing. Not to say that men aren’t interesting but I like being able to somewhat identify with the character...those are the kind of things I’m interested in: women, relationships and family, and love, and that kind of thing.

Another person said things like, “I am very much a simple kind of girl, I don’t like busy old-fashioned covers” and others also commented in ways that provided insight into their personal preferences. For instance, one constantly discussed titles, another talked about the “mysterious” or teasing aspects of covers as being appealing, and another gained an awareness of her affection for faces on the covers during the interview process. Someone else simply noted that: “When I don’t recognize someone’s name I’ll look at how the book was presented aesthetically, but I think aesthetics are pretty important to me.” Another person, the only one who chose *Up in the Air* for the discard stack, did so “because it looks like something that is geared toward business people, and I’m not a business person and
don’t really have any interest in that sort of thing.” So there is a certain amount of conscious self-knowledge and self-awareness involved when people look at book covers.

Of course there is the opposite of attraction; books also provided signals to the interviewees that said, “Don’t pick me up, I’m not for you.” Sometimes this was conscious too as in the case with many genre works: “Well, I used to work in a ... book store and we used to see a lot of like Belva Plains and Scott Turows and stuff like that and I just got sick of them partly, so partly it's just a personal gut reaction.”

Certain colors, particularly yellow, also turned people off but the color didn’t seem to matter if other information proved interesting to the viewer. One person who doesn’t generally like yellow, and who did not like the yellow cover of Her Father’s House, chose Basket Case anyway. Another who likes blue did not like the Death in Paradise cover, so while color is important it is only one part of the message a viewer receives.

**Genres**

People were very aware of their opinions regarding genre fiction. By far the largest selection of books not chosen was genre materials. For instance one person who reads science fiction said about The Gates of Alamo: “looks like a western and I’m not into westerns.” Other people said similar things about the different genres that did not appeal to them personally: “Looks kind of like adventure or mystery, detective kind of novel and I don’t typically like those,” “it looks like science fiction and that doesn’t mean much to me;” “I’m not a ‘lawyer fiction’ fan so [I] just probably wouldn’t pause;” and “from the cover with the pink roses in a vase I would say either traditional romance or gentle-ish kind of read, again two genres that don’t appeal to me.”
It is interesting that almost all of the comments in this arena included the idea that though other people are interested in this type of book, the interviewee is not one of them. This shows a tendency that is seen elsewhere of the interviewees to not just blankly interpret what a book says in general, but what a book says to them specifically.

Genres are of course very popular so often when a fan of a certain genre matched up with one of the books, it was often their prime choice. One mystery fan says of her number one choice “Death in Paradise, that one would interest me. It looks like a mystery even though I’m not really familiar with that author.”

But sometimes people were fooled by a book’s genre message or lack thereof. In particular The Gates of the Alamo was often labeled a Western. While the book does have western elements and did win a Spur award for ‘Best Novel of the West’ in 2001, it is usually termed ‘historical’ in reviews. Also, Basket Case was often not judged to be a mystery and, interestingly, the only people who did mention “mystery” for this book both have bookstore experience and are probably aware of the author’s previous works. One said emphatically, “Basket Case screams mystery to me.” This leads one to believe that in this instance it isn’t so much the cover art saying something generally, but the individual browser’s information horizon reflecting onto the book.

**Unexplainable Attraction**

Through many of the interviews it seemed there was often a connection to a book that the person could not really understand themselves. For most it wasn’t so extraordinary of a connection that they examined it for long, if at all, but it was for several people who were surprised at some of their own choices. One person, when asked why she chose Basket Case, said, “I am a little curious why I would select this.” She later says in general about why
she made certain picks, “Actually I have no idea.” Others felt this way too, and people often seemed to have trouble expressing why they picked certain books.

**The Author**

The informant who just said she had “no idea” why she selected some things went on to say, “a lot of this is either a familiar name or a cover that arouses my curiosity or associations that I make.” Associations are important, but so is the author. Clearly the author, the “familiar name” just mentioned, is an integral part of a book and so it isn’t surprising that interviewees consistently mentioned the author of a book as a reason why they selected a book and sometimes why they did not.

**Known Authors**

Based on these interviews if a person has heard of an author that would cause them to look a bit further in most cases. As one interviewee says, “Up in the Air... interesting art, in fact I almost choose it over Irving but that [Irving] would be a name I would recognize. Had it not, this would have been [selected].” The John Irving book, *A Widow for One Year*, was one of the most popular books of the 22 in the sample with 10 of 15 people, 67% of all interviewees, choosing to look at his book and not one person singling it out as a discard. Of the 10 people who choose to look at this book, over half specifically mentioned the author. This was the case with other authors too, but not nearly to the level of recognition of John Irving with the possible exception of Allan Gurganus. Other recognized authors included Amy Bloom, Mary McGarry Morris, Marion Zimmer Bradley, Orson Scott Card, Scott Turow, Richard Paul Evans, Carl Hiaasen, Robert Parker, Belva Plain and Anita Shreve. So
just over half of the books were by authors that at least one of the interviewees mentioned knowing.

It is also worth noting that if the author were well known, the interviewees would often call the books by the author’s name. This is likely because these authors are better known but also because these authors’ names were as large or larger than the title on the book cover. One interviewee even commented on this phenomenon: “The Scott Turow book, I notice I keep on calling it that too. I don’t even say the title. And I wouldn’t remember the title two seconds from now, which maybe says something.” This very rarely happened with the other books where the author’s name was in a smaller font.

But not all name recognition leads to positive feelings about a book. In several cases the factor of a known author worked to a book’s disadvantage. One person says, “I almost choose this one, the Fiona Range, because of the painting on the cover, but I know about Mary McGarry Morris and so I left her behind.” Another person felt the same way about Allan Gurganus: “I picked up the Confederate Widow book and I couldn’t get past the first ten pages so I’ve never been interested in anything else he’s ever written.” She later added, “Gurganus is a turn-off.”

**Appealingly Named Authors**

It isn’t surprising that people pick up books based on the author, but it is interesting that without any prior knowledge the author’s name itself still may elicit a response in browsers. In this sample several interviewees seemed to deconstruct an unknown author’s name for clues about the book’s contents. One thought Dancer looked Eastern or Turkish but then physically pointed to the author’s name, Colum McCann, and said maybe the book was about Scotland, while another person who had stated a preference for British literature
but had shown little interest in this book, brightened a bit when she saw the author’s name and said “the author’s name, it sounds like Scottish or Irish or British.”

Sometimes when the author is unknown it seems people reflect ideas onto the author just as they do with art. Another person was so intrigued by the Carl Hiaasen book that she selected it third. At the end of the interview, she asked about the author and was disappointed to learn he was from Florida – she had thought he would be a European. Another person mentioned she thought she had read Amy Bloom before because she remembers thinking Bloom was a “nice, kind of fanciful name” and Tatyana Tolstoya, author of *The Slynx*, intrigued several others. One wondered if she was related to Leo Tolstoy and said that she would want to look on the jacket to find out. Others noticed her name was Russian then commented that below it said “a translation” which verified their idea and intrigued them more.

**Author’s Sex**

The author’s sex was mentioned as being important to two people, both women, if the topic being written about was a woman’s life. One person talked about making a decision for her fifth book between *Your Mouth is Lovely* and *Man Eater*. “I’d probably go with either of these two. That one’s [*Your Mouth is Lovely*] a woman author and usually if they’re going to write about women I kind of want–, I don’t like to discriminate against men, like they can’t write a female point [of-view], but because the title *Man Eater* could be sort of negative against women and I see it’s a male author, I’m kind of like, umm–, (laughs) What is he going to say?” She then easily chose *Your Mouth is Lovely*. Another interviewee also mentioned that she tends to read female authors.
In a similar vein, another informant commented that, even though it is shallow, she will sometimes look at an author’s picture to judge the authoritativeness of the person.

“Author of ______”

The “author of” indications played a role in some interviewees’ selections. *Up in the Air, Plays Well With Others, The Carousel, Secondhand Smoke, Fiona Range, and Fortune’s Rocks* all had “author of” notices with other titles listed. Particularly in the case of *Fiona Range* people commented on the author’s previous work *Songs in Ordinary Time*. While only one person knew the author’s name, several indicated they were familiar with the previous title with two people correctly indicating that they thought it had been an Oprah book selection. One person said: “It’s funny because the author doesn’t ring a bell but the *Songs in Ordinary Time* does.” So the “author of” can have the effect of suddenly making an unknown author essentially a known one.

The “author of” notice also contributed to people’s information about the books in hand much in the same way the book’s own title did as we will see below. One interviewee noted he liked the cover art of *Up in the Air* then added, “plus there it says ‘author of Thumbsucker’ [and] that sounds mildly amusing.” Here it seems the title confirmed the ideas he had developed about the book. The same thing happened to several people in relation to *The Carousel*. They said things like: “I just got the feeling from the other, *The Christmas Box* and *The Locket*, that that might be a bit of a sappy story. I don’t know anything about it, but somebody who has other books called those things—.”
The Title

Title recognition was not mentioned very often by interviewees and as such doesn’t prove as much a factor in this study as one might think. Most likely this is because the majority of these books are very new releases, thus reviews and word of mouth have not had time to reach the interviewees. Supporting this idea is the fact that, though a few titles were recognized, the most often mentioned was *Plays Well With Others*, the oldest book in the sample. Two others were *A Blind Man Can See How Much I Love You* and *The Gates of the Alamo*.

Still, the titles themselves did attract people whether they had heard of them before or not. People seemed to particularly like thinking about the title of *Secondhand Smoke*. When asked why they had chosen this book people said things like: “I think because of the title;” “It’s such an intriguing title to me and I wonder what it could possibly be about;” and “the title would capture my interest.” It is also noteworthy that, similar to the way people brought their own knowledge and opinions to bear on an unknown author’s name, they did the same thing with titles. For example, with *A Blind Man Can See How Much I Love You* one interviewee said, “I like the title...because it’s kind of literary and it makes you think of what that means ... the title makes it sound like there’s a relationship or something involved.”

Another trend was that people seemed to not always take the titles at face value and to use the title to delve into the content of the book. For *Dancer* someone said, “Um, it could be about a dancer [or] it could be about someone who dances through life avoiding things.” For *Secondhand Smoke* interviewees said: “[it’s] about a woman getting burned maybe;” “I don’t know if it would be about the tobacco industry or someone kind of retelling their story about that;” and “I don’t know if it’s a smoker’s tale or residual effects of someone’s life and they’re going around telling other people’s perspectives on some big happening.”
Plays Well with Others was another book that’s title was commented on quite often. One person’s comment shows that, at least in her case, if the title and cover image don’t mesh, the cover art sends the loudest message when making a decision about content. She says, “I mean if the title says Plays Well with Others you think it’s about family or something like that, but just because of psycho boy I want to say it’s like a murder mystery.” Another agreed about the discrepancy in this cover art and the title in this book: “I think the title and the picture, even though...they do kind of connect, they kind of go off in different directions too and you’re not exactly sure where it goes.” Chip Kidd, the designer of this book, has said in an interview: “That’s the visual personality of the character who totally dominates the book (Plagens, 1999, p.46).” The person who interviewed him felt at the time that the “jacket seems too noisy, even a little confused. But when I see it later, on display in a chain bookstore, it kicks the butt of every book jacket near it (Plagens, 1999, p.46).” Unfortunately for Kidd, many of this study’s informants didn’t feel this reversal of opinion.

Though the designer of this cover is something of a wunderkind in the cover art field, the confusion is not a good sign for this book because the people in this study, as in others (Sullivan 1998, 2000), seemed disinclined to pick books that sent mixed signals or they didn’t understand. Using another book as an example, an informant liked the title of Basket Case but felt the image was almost offensive. She said: “Well, I thought the title was amusing, but the imagery— it made me think it wasn’t going to be something that ... would really interest me, with the woman and the snake.” She then picked this book as her number one book to discard. Here again, mixed messages were received but the cover art carried the stronger message.

Another person preferred titles that could have more than one meaning. She said:
I’d be sort of interested in this one [Up in the Air] judging by title because I like the play on words. “Why did they choose this title? What is real theme of novel? Detached from reality maybe? – Up in the air?; living in intellectual ivory tower maybe?; [and also] if something is not certain too, you don’t know how it is going to turn out. I would be interested in this because of the title, actually combination of title and illustration and whether it connects to real meaning of phrase or different.

But while the title is there to give an indication of what the book is about, just as the cover art is, sometimes the appeal is pretty basic. One person who has visited Texas said: “I think I would pick it up just because it says Alamo on the front.”

The Subtitle
The subtitle also proved important. Books having subtitles were: Rebekah: Women of Genesis, Fall of Naskaya: Book One of the Clingfire Trilogy, and Death in Paradise: A Jesse Stone Novel. Two of these three are genre works that were almost immediately dismissed for additional reasons with the subtitle further verifying to most subjects that they were not interested in these books. However, the Women of Genesis subtitle on Rebekab proved very effective in drawing in two people who professed an interest in the Bible. The subtitle also provided more information about this book to others who, while they didn’t have a particular interest in the religious aspect, found that book more appealing since the subtitle informed them this was likely to be historic fiction and they do have an interest in that. The Women of Genesis subtitle also provides a special notice to Orson Scott Card’s science fiction and fantasy fans that this book may be different than what they are used to.

Cover Design, Art, and Creativity
Here people looked at a cover and were able to make a decision about what this book is about in much the same way a person looks at a painting in a museum and decides
what it is saying. Still, just as the labels in the museum can change your mind, so does the text of the book.

This study found that the art on a cover seems to carry weight with browsers and provides a clue to the viewer not only about content, but about mood and tone. It almost seems that, absent a familiar author, an unappealing cover will keep someone from reading a book. One person even says “I just I always wonder about the good books that I’d never pick up because I don’t like the cover.” Sometimes though, even with a familiar author, this can still happen. One person said: “I wasn’t really interested in *Plays Well with Others* until I saw it was by Allan Gurganus, but I didn’t like the cover and I probably wouldn’t pick it up even though I’m interested in reading some of his stuff just because I don’t really like the cover.”

There seems to exist the idea that if the cover art doesn’t appeal to a person, the inside text won’t either. For instance with the Belva Plain book, *Her Father’s House*, one interviewee discussed why she choose to discard it and looking at it again, her face showing physical repulsion, she said: “It’s more the cover purely. I think it’s ugly. I’ve never heard of her before [but] the cover is turning me off, there is nothing I see there that would make me look further.” Someone else said: “If it has a dull or boring cover or something you know you aren’t going to be interested in, then you’re definitely not going to pick it up.”

The reverse seems to be true also. If a cover appeals to a person, the person will want to pick the book up and find out more. Sometimes the person doesn’t even care if they want to read the book or not, they just want to know more about the book and the picture. *Up in the Air’s* cover art especially appealed to two people in this way: “I picked [this] entirely on the cover. I don’t know if I would want to read it or not, but it was interesting enough I want to know what it’s about now;” and “I find it amusing compared to most. I
have no idea what it’s about from the cover. But it makes me want to look at it and see, ‘what is this about?’.”

Also, if the illustration on the cover is too abstract as to present no information that the interviewee could interpret, the book was seen as completely uninteresting at worst and not worth picking up at best. Dancer and Snow provide interesting samples to examine this issue. Both books have somewhat abstract designs with one-word titles with possibly ambiguous meanings. Four people picked each book for their yes stack but they were the ones who perceived something in the covers. The people who chose Snow felt it piqued their curiosity. Someone who didn’t choose it said, “For Snow there’s just nothing on the cover at all except Snow and it’s sort of a watercolor type image or along those lines. There just wasn’t anything there. I didn’t pay any attention to it to tell you the truth.”

The people who picked Dancer liked its brightness and the foreign look of the tapestry. In the case of the people who didn’t choose it, they seemed to mostly like the cover design aesthetically, but didn’t like what they perceived to be an absence of information. This was commented on to a much greater extent than with Snow. For Dancer people said: “I think this is a beautiful book but because it tells you nothing about what’s going on inside;” “I thought the cover was bright, was interesting, but overall it wasn’t enough to make me pick it up. It didn’t tell me much about it;” and “It’s almost too abstract. It’s just a pattern, it doesn’t tell you anything like the kind of people that might be in it.” Another person brought this issue back up later when asked what value dust jackets bring to a book. She said, “I like to think that it has some kind of indication of what the story is about to help me decide, unlike that one [Dancer].”
Often interviewees wondered aloud about a book’s story. This seemed to be a slow motion, verbal communication of a normally quick, internal, and nonverbal process that usually takes place in seconds as a person browses a shelf of books.

**Genre recognition**

Genres were talked about in the previous section regarding people’s personal preferences. This segment will look at genres based on cover art and what aspects of a cover told the interviewees that this is science fiction and that is western. People were quick to dismiss these covers as soon as they made a decision that it wasn’t something they were interested in but, by questioning a bit further, some points came out that shows that most of us share an idea of what genre fiction covers look like – generally.

For instance, many people called *Fall of Naskaya* science fiction or science fiction and fantasy. The person who selected this book as his first choice termed it fantasy which is actually the more correct term. He even commented why, by saying, “this one is obviously going to be fantasy because it looks like there’s some sort of magic going on here.” For fans of this genre the distinction is clear; simply put, if it involves magic it is more likely fantasy, if it involves technology, it is probably science fiction.

*The Gates of the Alamo* was declared by many to be a western but it is probably more properly termed historical fiction and the classification of western may have deterred some readers who may have ultimately been interested in the book. One interviewee commented on this: “looks like it’s probably a western but aesthetically it’s not really, it doesn’t really turn me off … because it has sort of an old scene. It’s not like a horseman galloping across the desert or you know … shooting Indians or anything. It looks like something that is more quiet and understated and might actually be interesting to read, but—.”
Other Themes

A few other themes emerged that, while only mentioned by one or two interviewees, are worth mentioning here because even though the other interviewees did not comment on these issues, they were not directly asked about them and so these themes may be pertinent in their lives as well.

Familial Ties

Two interviewees picked books in the sample that they felt their spouses would like. So it seems that while browsing some people not only stop for their own interests but for others as well. They carry with them not only their own information horizon but the perceived information horizon of others.

Reviews

One person mentioned that he does research before buying or reading a book. He gave the dust jacket the lowest score given, 4, when asked to rank its importance to him. But while others didn’t discuss actively seeking out reviews, side comments such as indicating they had “heard” or read something about a book indicates that reviews find them – either word of mouth from friends or hearing an author or NPR or recognizing an Oprah book. These books have the benefit of being somewhat familiar to the selector and, if the review was good, having a positive feeling about the book.

The Reader’s Mood

Another theme that wasn’t mentioned very often, perhaps because of the general nature of the questions and the artificial setting, was what type of book the reader was in the mood to read. A few people commented on this but not very many. When people did so, it
was vague and the word mood was not mentioned. For instance one person said: “John Irving. I’ve never read any of his books and I feel like I should and I probably will one day, but not today.”

**Conclusion of Part I**

Earlier I wondered if a person would be more likely to purchase or borrow a book when he or she personally connects with something on the cover and if commonalities exist based on society’s shared knowledge that unites people in their understanding of certain pieces of cover art. I also pondered that if people do choose books they individually connect with, will overriding information trump their personal connection?

The results here indicate that some people do make conscious personal connections with book covers resulting in them wanting to pick a book up. This connection can come in different forms. Some books, for example, indicate they are about women, or are for someone who likes this type of book. One person liked the *A Widow for One Year* cover because it looks like a worn surface and she is drawn to those. Two informants liked *Your Mouth is Lovely* for different reasons. The cover reminded one of styles of art she likes: art deco and art nouveau. For another, the cloth reminded her of an African batik style cloth her mother had owned. Other connections were mentioned and there are most likely other subconscious connections that the interviewees are not aware of and thus couldn’t share.

Commonalities exist among this group of informants that allow them to identify genre books and literary books as well as to make judgments about many books’ subject matters. This is to be expected, since what cover artists try to do is communicate something about a book to a mass audience. Cover art must use widely known communication conventions to send the appropriate message to as many people as possible.
The interviews also showed that a person’s personal connection with a book may or may not be affected by this conventional knowledge or other messages. For instance the one person who picked *The Gates of the Alamo* because of a personal connection to the area did not listen to or chose to ignore the message other interviewees received from that book, that it looks like a western. Another was drawn to the cover of *Fiona Range* but dismissed the book when she saw the author’s name and knew she didn’t like the author. The personal appeal of the painting was not enough to overcome the lack of interest in the author.

Various words and images radiate from dust jackets that viewers either ignore or attend to or give different levels of interest to. For these interviewees the choice of what to attend to is primarily based on combinations of self-knowledge, past experiences, and associations. For instance, as just discussed, if they like fine art covers of literary fiction by female authors they are attracted to *Fiona Range*. But if they have read Mary McGarry Morris before and didn’t enjoy the experience, they probably won’t pick up the book. For another interviewee who likes literary fiction but who is unfamiliar with Nancy Richler, *Your Mouth is Lovely* appeals more than a similar literary book because she likes the fabric pictured on the cover, it reminds her of material her mother had when she was growing up.

Here are people who look at a cover and, if it appeals to them and makes them curious, they use their own experiences to make a decision about what a book is about. This process seems to be much the same as a person looking at a painting in a museum. Interestingly too, as the person gathers more information about the item, the attraction will either lessen or grow. In the case of a book, the summary on the inside dust jacket flap may dispel or reinforce a person’s interpretation of the cover much as a closer examination or the descriptive labels in a museum can do.
Part II: Opinions about Books as Objects

The first part of the study provides knowledge about how library students view the fronts of dust jacket when selecting books for pleasure reading. This second part looks at their past experiences with books and how they view books as objects with an emphasis placed on the role of dust jackets and book covers.

Dust jackets and book covers are an interesting tool to use for observation since, as previously mentioned, until recently they weren’t even considered part of the book. Even now academic libraries routinely discard dust jackets for practical and economic reasons. But if a dust jacket, now commonly recognized as part of a book, is so easily discarded, how easy will it be to discard books themselves when another carrier for the text is found that is more practical and more economical?

So hand in hand with the examination of what information book jackets and book covers are communicating to these library science students is the question of what these students think of the book as an object and the role of dust jackets and book covers in their thoughts. Categories were formed using interview questions and responses: the book sample interview as evidence, the value of dust jackets, favorite book memories, the cover as a foundation to the text, purchasing decisions based on covers, and the text’s format.

The Book Sample Interview as Evidence

The library science students selected books that spoke loudest to them individually. These chosen books were heard for the many reasons we have already discussed, but the most relevant part for this discussion is that the books “spoke” at all. It is also interesting that the books “spoke” immediately; the students would enter the room where the books were displayed and were immediately drawn to them. Also, several times during interviews
people would forget about the study and start to open books or pick them up. This is
something that can be only be done literally with objects, but it is such a physical desire that
online booksellers such as Amazon.com now have features that electronically replicate the
experience of picking up a volume and examining it.

So, even though the books that the library science students picked were attractive to
them as individuals, there isn’t much question about the appeal of books to these informants
as objects in general.

**Value of Dust Jackets and Covers**

When looking at dust jackets as a unit and not just the front cover, information fell
into three different levels of engagement.

**Simple Attraction**

Everyone interviewed seemed to agree with the previous literature: dust jackets and
covers are primarily there to attract; they are the metaphorical hawkers who yell and try to
draw people inside. As the interviewees said: “They’re eye-catching in terms of the colors
and the imagery because you only have like that split second to attract your attention when
you’re scanning the shelves;” and they are a “preliminary glimpse into what a book may be
about, what genre.” Another person says, “it’s sort of a way, for me at least, to scan a
number of books to see if any of them might be interesting to me without having to sit
down and actually kind of look through the book and read some of it ... I can go through
more books if they have jackets than if they don’t.”

Another interviewee makes the point that:
With just a plain book on the shelf...you might not pick up some books because if there weren’t book jackets you might just go to your favorite author or stick in the same series ... so I think it also helps ... to expand your reading. If you just happen to look at something you could ... through serendipity pick up something that you wouldn’t necessarily read and love it. And then you have a whole new vista to explore.

The Next Level

Everyone in the study agreed dust jackets provide information even beyond attraction. Once someone has noticed a book and likes what they see, the next step in the process is to pick the book up to examine it for verification of the ideas the cover has generated in the mind of the viewer. So not only do dust jackets attract, they also provide information such as reviews, blurbs, and author biographies and photos, that reinforce or negate the viewer’s assumptions. One interviewee said: “most fiction doesn’t even have like a ‘here’s a summery of what the book’s about’. Whereas a book jacket you can look at a cover and maybe get something from that, but also what they have on the inside is sort of like a short synopsis of a book that you can read that says ‘this is sort of what this book is about’.”

But not everyone agreed that the purpose stopped at attraction or information gathering for him or her. While many felt that the eye-catching and informative purpose of dust jackets was the majority of the dust jackets’ role, for a few the covers do much more than just capture their attention and give them a review and a synopsis.

A Deeper Relationship

For some the dialogue with a book’s jacket seems to add value to the entire reading experience. One interviewee says:

For me personally it’s really important [to have illustrated covers]. I used to work in a bookstore and so we would get the ... like the advance copies and they have no book cover. And I mean it’s like a — it’s just plain, sort of a thick paperback ... there
would be books in there that I would look at and I would even start reading and I
would be like ‘ehh, they’re sort of okay,’ but then I would see them later once we got
them, once they’d been published, and I was really interested in them. It just
completely affects my perception of the book.

This same person doesn’t like reading hardbacks, partially she says it is the expense
but it also involves appearances: “if you take the jacket off, the book looks so boring and
you feel like if you leave it [the dust jacket] on while you are reading it your going to mess it
up.” So obviously for her a book’s exterior is very important to her experience of reading a
book and not just for selection. Additionally she cares about the book as a physical item and
makes an effort to care for it.

She isn’t the only one that mentioned caring for covers. One person collects books
and protects some of his dust jackets in Mylar. While he says he would maybe buy a reading
copy without a dust jacket, “it would have to be dirt cheap.” He goes on to say: “Book
design I think is really exciting right now and I like just going and looking at the covers in
the bookshop.” Here he acknowledges another aspect of book covers, that they are a
creative product in their own right. Another person touched on this same idea and very
thoughtfully discussed it:

Well for people that love books and love reading it’s the pleasure [that makes them
read], and this [a dust jacket] is part of that whole package. A book is a creative
product and the cover is part of that creative product. It is a piece of that ... And if I
see a really clever cover I’m inclined to think that the cover designer has worked
closely with the author or is, of course, familiar with the work and is trying to make
their own creative statement about that work. It’s been said just as writing is a
creative process, reading is a creative process and my guess is that the cover
designers are creative readers.

A top cover artist spoke to this idea too: “Sometimes it's perfectly obvious what you
should do and then you have to decide if you should do that or not. And sometimes you
should and sometimes you shouldn't. But then it's not obvious at all ... if you are working on
something you just have to be alive to every possibility, every moment, today (Birnbaum).”
If the designers are creative readers, they provide another view of the book that can also be explored. One reader comments on the way she feels about cover art in relation to the text:

I guess it’s a continuation of the story in a way. It just gives you a sense of what the story is or maybe gives you another view into the characters. Like maybe some people don’t like it when books get made into movies because they loose their own sense of imagination. Well, you know, I love stuff when it’s on the cover because then it’s one more thing you get to imagine about or it gives you a context in which to put all your other imaginings about the book or something. When I do read fantasy ... it’s like if you see that on the cover and there’s like the two main characters on the cover then that’s like kind of what I think about the characters. I mean even though Harry Potter is described so well, when you see the cover of Harry Potter that’s how you think of Harry Potter, that’s how they cast Harry Potter [in the movie], I think even more so than what her [J.K.Rowling’s] descriptions of him were in the book.

**Favorite Book Memories**

Every interviewee, when asked to think of some favorite books, could remember what at least some covers looked like. For a few the books they remembered were from childhood or adolescence, a bit surprising at first, but then seems to hold with the notion of art being more important in children’s books. The adolescent books are less easily explained though it could be the habit of paying attention to art is more likely in a teenager than an adult since the adolescent has just left the world of illustrated books and likely still retains the habit of attending to illustrations.

**Dust Jackets as a Foundation to the Text?**

**Initial Impression, Expectations, and Questions**

The idea that a person’s preconceived notions and expectations influence the reading of a text of the book is easier to see in some books than in others. One interviewee discussed covers being a foundation and said, “Definitely ... because it gives you, I mean the
whole idea of putting a picture on the front of a book was to give people the idea of what is going on in a book before they ever started looking at it.” Another person delved a bit further:

Well, in some of these for example, I think the picture’s meant to convey what the book is about. For example, someone who likes a romance can spot the flowers down there. That’s one way of saying almost, it’s become such a common way of illustrating romances that it’s kind of an identifying tag. Whereas other covers here don’t really tell you what the book is about directly and yet one has the sense that maybe they are saying something to us indirectly.

Others had similar ideas and agreed that, at least initially, the impressions a reader has plays a role in the reading of a text. The degree of this influence and the impact it has on the experience depends on the book cover itself and how well it reflects the integrity of the book. One person mentions, “there’s always that problem of it [the cover] being misleading” but even when a book’s cover is misleading it can still impact initially by setting up expectations, albeit false ones. Another person speaks to this as well:

There have also been times when I’ve picked up a book and really liked the cover art and maybe the subject matter looked interesting and you get part way through and you feel betrayed when, you know, ‘this isn’t what I was expecting’. The danger, you know, of judging a book by its cover ...[and] there’s the feeling of a gamble sometimes too.

Another person agrees with this danger: “Like I go into Man Eater thinking it’s about some serial killer...then it might turn out to be any number of things and sometimes I might be disappointed. Because...I see a book jacket and I think it’s going to be scary, I want a scary book at that point. So I might be disappointed even though it might be a good novel.”

It also seems that the quality of the cover in the eyes of a particular viewer has an impact. One person responded to the question of if a book cover forms a foundation for the reading of a text said: “I think so, I think so. It does. I think some things it does is bring out questions about the book, what the book is about, what’s its message and what’s its meaning
and stuff like that. And then some other book jackets, you’re wondering who is the idiot who thought of them.” This person brings up an interesting notion that others mention as well: questioning. A primary role for dust jackets seems to be not only attraction, but to raise questions about the stories inside and the people inside and make the browser want to read the book. Later, when a person is reading the book, these questions may surface or be forgotten but it seems the questions a book cover raises at the least plays a role in the appeal.

Still, other interviewees weren’t quite so sure that covers have any role in the reading of the text. Two people’s opinions varied from the others. One said, “I would hope not, I really would;” and another said, “I think I may have in the past, but since I’ve been here [in school] I’ve checked so many books out of [the academic library] for pleasure reading that have had their original covers removed and I haven’t noticed much of a difference. It’s kind of hard to say though.” It seems it is hard to say because if something is not there, it is difficult to know if something is missed. This issue comes up later in a clearer example regarding *Girl with a Pearl Earring*.

**The Cover’s Role While Reading**

All book covers are certainly not created equal and so not all will have an impact on browsers or readers. But some books do seem to encourage a person to revisit the cover while reading the text. As mentioned earlier with the *Harry Potter* example, several people said a book’s cover, at least initially, helped paint their picture of characters. One interviewee says:

I know sometimes I will, like if they have a picture of the character on the front or whatever I know that’s the picture I have in my mind of the character when I’m reading the book. If it gets to a scene where it describes that character sometimes you know, how they’re drawn is not necessarily how they’re described in the book and so my mind registers that and I think ‘hold on that’s, that’s not the image that I
had of the character’ and so I’ll look back at the cover and say ‘oh okay well they were drawn this way but described this way.

This person goes on to say that the setting is impacted in this same way: “I mean I definitely have a, an image of the cover in my mind as I’m reading the book and it definitely I use it to form pictures of, of the setting.” He even gives an example: “Oh, in fact one book ... it’s [a] real wintry landscape in the background and I know that definitely set the tone for me for the book because ... whenever they would talk about where it was taking place I had this picture of a real bleak wintry landscape so that I, you know, the cover I used to help create an image of the setting in my mind.”

Two people specifically brought up Tracy Chevalier’s book *The Girl with the Pearl Earring*. This book is a great example since the novel is based on a fine art painting by Vermeer, which is also featured on the book’s front cover. An interesting juxtaposition exists with the two readers in the study since one read the book with the cover and the other read it in a library binding missing the original covers. The person who read it in the library binding says that while reading the book, he found himself turning to look at the cover, but it was plain. The person who had the illustrated cover says, “And as I am reading there’s the girls voice throughout the novel and her experiences with Vermeer and I would find myself as I was reading, I would flip back to the cover. And I would kind of look at that girl because she would talk about, you know, the dress of the time and she would talk about putting on like her head wrap and that was what she was wearing on the cover. I was like, ‘oh, okay cool,’ you know, it was almost like the cover was its own character, like I could see the girl in the cover.” So here there were obviously two very different experiences, not only because of two individuals with different past experiences but because of the two different book covers.
Others can remember specific instances of reading a book and looking at the cover while reading the book: “I think I did that with *Phantom of the Opera*. They kept talking about the yellow eyes of the phantom but then on the cover it was just these yellow eyes coming out at you there was like this dark cover with yellow kind of flashes coming at ... But yeah, I did kind of find myself looking back at the eyes;” and “usually while I’m reading it depends on what the book cover is, like the more detailed it is and the more people there are on the front the more likely I am to keep looking back at the front of the book while I am reading.” So, depending on the specific cover and the textual content, people may refer to the cover while reading.

One person didn’t think she had ever looked back to the cover while reading but did agree there was one book where she had. “Yeah, actually, ...with that one [*Lord of the Rings*] yeah. But not so much with other books. The Tolkien books, you know, I read those as an adolescent and so they’re almost different books to me than other books ... They’re like watershed books so they’re different.” Another person felt that the cover might impact your reading of the text “in the very beginning of the novel or book or whatever. But I don’t know if it persists. If it’s [the cover’s] not interesting, then I think it’s more just relying on the text.”

**Purchasing Decisions based on Covers**

Interviewees were also asked if they had ever bought a book based strictly on the cover. One person actually had while in a rush at the airport, but most had not bought a book without at least looking at the rest of the dust jacket and some people said they always look at part of the text as well. People were also asked if they had not purchased a book
because of the cover and perhaps the most fascinating topic to arise from this question was the strong feelings about movie covers on books.

**Movie Covers**

When people were asked whether or not they had ever forgone purchasing a book because they didn’t like a cover many of them would first think no automatically or would be surprised when they realized they had at least considered it. When specifically asked about movie covers people almost always had an example where they had not wanted to buy a book because of the cover. The two movie covers most often cited were *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hours*. One of the most intriguing ideas from the study is there seems to be a bit of surprise when someone realized they cared about dust jackets and covers. Many interviewees made a point of saying the text was the same so it really didn’t matter, but yet the cover mattered enough for some of them to spend time visiting other stores. This held true in the case of the people who don’t reread books as well as the people who listen to audiobooks and read ebooks.

People felt strongly about this issue and they said things such as: “If I wanted to include it in my collection I would get one with a cover I liked. I care about aesthetics, I know some people don’t;” “I would prefer the original ... I think the movie is the movie and the book is the book and never the twain shall meet. You know that’s the way I think it should be, but they do it all the time...[and] it wouldn’t necessarily mean I would wait or look for the other covers;” “I probably would care especially if I was going to be reading it in public. I think my pride would stop me ... because, I think it’s silly, but I would think I would want people to look at my book cover and think I choose my book not because it’s popular in the movies but because it’s good reading.”
Others discussed the movie covers with great passion. For example two informants

said the following:

Definitely I hate the books with the movie tie-in. My mom actually lent me a copy of
White Oleander recently and she was really conscious that it had movie people on the
front. And I wish I could remember — she specifically within the last few weeks has
told me of a book she almost bought and didn’t because it had the movie-tie in on the
front.

I guess it would depend on how much I wanted the book. Like you know [for
school] we just read The Hours and I hated that Nicole Kidman won [the Academy
Award] and I hated her picture on the cover. And they had like a 15% sticker on the
book over her face and I have just kept it there. Would I have bought it if we weren’t
reading it in class? No. Um, maybe if I was really interested in the book and it had
that cover on it, but [if] I really wanted that book I probably would have looked for
it without that cover because I know it exists somewhere. But the problem I find is
like once the movie’s made they put the movie stuff all over because they want to sell
more books and they think that is the way to do it. But I hated that cover and I hate
that she [Nicole Kidman] won!

Particularly when the book is a gift people seem to invest more into finding a cover
they deem acceptable. Two people spoke to this:

I avoid the movie tie-in covers whenever I can. I got my [family member] a copy of
Hi-Fidelity for Christmas and I could only find the movie cover so I went to another
shop looking for it and another shop looking for it and I couldn’t find any without
the movie tie-in, [but] the text is more important ultimately.

If I had the choice between both of them and I wanted the book I would definitely
choose the one that wasn’t the movie tie-in or whatever, if I had a choice between
two that were sitting in front of me. But if I really wanted the book and they only
had one kind I would take it, unless I were giving it as a gift. In that case the visual of
it is as important as the book itself to me. [Why?] Because presents are supposed to
be pretty! If it were an ugly—, I choose books to give to people that I’ve read and I
know I like or that I’ve heard are good and if there were only one version of it
available, and I didn’t think it was pretty I would probably still buy the book, but if I
had the choice between two and I thought one was more attractive I would choose it
even if it were a couple dollars more expensive.
Fiction books seem to be easier for people to deal with movie covers than non-fiction. One person says: “I have some writings of Dinesen, of Isak Dinesen and they put on the cover the movie *Out of Africa*, a scene from that, and I bought the book but it was in spite of the cover. The biography was really good, but I was turned off by the cover. On a biography of Dinesen, a serious biography; that’s a turn off to me.” Another informant says:

The one that has bothered me the most recently is — . Apparently the movie *Frida* was actually based on a biography of Frida and I saw a copy of it at Barnes and Noble and it did not have a photograph of Frida; it had a photograph of Selma Hayek playing her, which is just unforgivable in my opinion. So that one yeah, that one I would just boycott. I mean other ones I won’t buy because I don’t like them but that one I would boycott ... I mean, oh God, she’s a real person and an artist, there’s so many avenues for a good cover there.

Still, a couple of people actually liked the movie covers and one person even liked books based on movies. “I’ll pick those up. I do. And sometimes I read them to just, to see if this is based on the movie ...I have two *X-Files* books that are based on the movie.”

Another person said, “I like the movie so I guess I yeah, I like that [movie covers] ... I said I sort of feel like a collector...and so I kind of look at those as collection items where I’ve got you know the [*Lord of the Rings*] cover with Legolis on it, the cover with Frodo on it.”

Still, another interviewee provided a new perspective:

I think it depends. You know, like my copy of *Gone with the Wind* has one of the movie posters on it with Scarlett O’Hara leaning back in Rhett’s arms and you know it’s Vivian Leigh and Clark Gable and so that’s the only cover I know. But I’m kind of miffed that they, that they have the pictures of the films on the *Lord of the Rings* because it’s like [I have] a history with that book with [other] different covers, but even those were just cheap paperback editions, you know they weren’t nice hardcovers. I guess it depends. It doesn’t usually irritate me. It think it’s, like the *Lord of the Rings* is more unusual that I would be kind of irritated by it. I’m not a purist that way as long as it’s selling books, right?
Formats

The interviewees were also asked which format they would prefer to read a book in, and several examples, such as a bound book, a printout in a binder, or ebook, were given. The answers were overwhelmingly in favor of bound books, though one person reads ebooks and discussed those and another is a fan of audiobooks. Most responses fell along the lines of this comment: “If a book was given to me printed out from a computer and put in a binder, that would make it you know less much attractive to me than to read a book, a bound book. I think there is definitely something about a book that has a cover;” and “It would be a hard sell for me to ever move to another platform or whatever you want to call it ... Given my choice I would always pick the physical book.” Another person talks more about the issue of the experience: “I would definitely choose the traditional book. I’m not sure though why ... empirically I don’t think there’s a substantive difference between the text of a book that’s been printed up from a computer screen and the text of a book that’s bound between covers with a picture on it and sits you know on your shelf but, um, at the same time the experience is different.”

One person stated strong feelings against ebooks:

I hate ebooks. I just think those should crash and burn. There’s just, there’s something wrong with taking that, that physical sensation of reading and trying to translate it to a computer screen and scrolling down. I just, aghh, whoever tried to invent those things should be shot because ... I feel like they’re missing that whole experience that tactile feeling of paper and the cover and it’s like it’s part of the expression of the book. I mean if someone printed out something and put it in a binder, I’d, I mean if it was a good book I’d read it, but the whole time I’d be sitting here thinking I feel like I’m in school reading from a binder of notes. There’s something about holding a book and having the weight and turning the page, that’s part of the relaxation ... [with ebooks] where’s the relaxation in that? I could be at work staring at a computer screen if I wanted to.

Another person commented on ebooks and said: “part of the ebook thing just is the reading on the screen it’s just not appealing to me. But part of it’s just I like getting a book ...
especially if I’ve bought several books at once, I’ve gone through and read the back so many times and looked at the front and it, for me the whole experience of getting books has this whole other level of entertainment beyond even just reading it ... definitely it’s much more about the books than just the text.” Another person agrees with this added value idea of books: “I like the presentation. I like the small manageable size pages, you know, that, um, kind of digestable chunks on each page. And I do like the cover, I like to try to get an idea of what the book’s about and be drawn in by the cover, so I would miss that terribly.”

The audiobook fan says:

I think...just because you were to read the book in a different format you’d get just as much out of it but it definitely is a different experience whether it be the book or an ebook or an audiobook or I mean whatever way you want to do it, like if somebody copied it out longhand you’re still getting the same content but different experience. I have listened to audiobooks...and if somebody asked me if I’ve read that book I would say ‘yes’. But my question is if I had told them I hadn’t read it but I had listened to it if they would think I had really read it or if they’d think I had like experienced it, you know? And like, where is that definition of boundary cause I think I’ve read it ... [but]I think there are certain books I would never read in audio format because I would never get — It would have to be something like Maeve Binchy where it’s easy and I hate to describe her as easy but she is, she’s easy reading so it’s something that you know if you miss a sentence the whole book is ruined for you.

The ebook reader says:

Yeah, I do read some books on my palm pilot, uh, and so there’s definitely a difference, I’m trying to put my finger on it. Well, like for instance for one of my classes we have to read a book and do like a book report on it or whatever and I found a copy of the book online in a format for my palm pilot so I downloaded it so I can read it. And I’m fine with reading it ... but now that I’m getting to the point where I’m supposed to write about it I actually, I had to go over to the library and check out a copy of the book ... It’s much easier to go back and kind of browse through the book when I have it in a hard copy as opposed to you know one big file on my palm pilot.

He goes on to say “I guess also because I’m a collector I would probably want, for a lot of my books, I wouldn’t want them in an electronic format, I mean I might read them in an electronic format, but I would also want like a copy that I can put on a bookshelf or
whatever.” While the book he refers to is nonfiction he also reads fiction on his palm pilot. He goes on to say:

I’ve got like all of H.P. Lovecraft’s stuff on my palm pilot so I read a bunch of his. And a lot of the things I like about the palm is that’s so compact ... I’ve got probably you know this much stuff [3 stacked books] ... in my tiny little palm and so I can just take that out on the bus or wherever I am and read it as opposed to having to carry around a big book, but I would probably still want to have the book at home, it’s just that the palm pilot is much more portable so ideally I think I would like to have both formats like one that’s really portable and then one that I can stick in my collection.

Perhaps the differences in experience of formats can be likened to that of motion pictures viewed in a theater or at home on a television. While Jack Valente, then president of the American Motion Picture Association, testified before Congress that VCR’s would be the death of the movie industry, that has not proven to be the case at all. Many people still go to the movies. If books follow this path, even with online books and electronic resources, books will still remain abundant and viable in our homes and people may read them electronically as well as in bound books and enjoy them both.

Part II Conclusion

This study seems to prove that discarding the book as a format won’t be quite so easy. The future librarians interviewed here are fond of books as objects, and while they seem to agree that the text is the ultimate reason for books, they aren’t quite willing to leave the object behind, at least on a personal level. Even the interviewees who do not or rarely reread books still retain ownership of the objects because they either consider themselves to be collectors or will occasionally reread passages. The students interviewed are all people who love books, not just for what they have inside, but for the package it comes in and the experience the physical object provides. Additionally, many of them enjoy the experience the dust jacket offers as a supplement to the text.
In many instances people seemed surprised at the importance dust jackets played in their reading selections, and they also seemed surprised at the idea that dust jackets may play a role in their reading of a text. Yet everyone thought that reading a book as opposed to a printout, an audiobook, an ebook, or the like, is a different experience and, without a single exception, including the audiobook and ebook readers, no one is ready to give up books now or anytime in the near future.
Chapter 5: Study Summary

The research carried out here used in-depth interviews and analysis to study book covers and library students’ dialogue with the covers. What people report seeing in cover art is divided into prominent themes and examined in order to study elements of this dialogue. By interviewing people and using actual book covers, this study provides insight into the initial attraction that makes a person pick up a book, as well as providing a clue about how library students view books as objects. In addition, this study provides some insight into what cover art says to adults in general.

Everyone seems to agree that book covers are important and interest in the topic seems to be growing. Still, very little research has been conducted on the topic, especially in regard to adult fiction. This study proposes to change that. While it certainly will not fill the gap entirely, it will help draw attention to the need for more research.

Also with newer technologies encroaching on the books’ territory every day, the issue of books as objects will become a key question in the future. So the information provided by this research, particularly relating to attitudes about the book as an object, will speak to a number of parties in the library science arena: from readers’ advisors to rare book librarians. The findings regarding the impact that dust jackets and book covers have on the reading of the text will also inform other fields such as publishing and literature studies.

The two different parts of this study form an interesting union. On the one side there is the initial attraction of library science students to books, then on the other is their
ideas and opinions about books as physical objects. By looking at the two aspects together they both come a bit more into focus.

Notes

1 This paper deals exclusively with the detachable dust jackets mass produced and issued by publishers. There is sometimes confusion over the terms dust jacket and dust wrapper. Dust jacket is the preferred term for the items I discuss here. See Tanselle and Carter for more information.

2 This date is somewhat fluid as earlier examples may found. See Tanselle and Carter for more history on the topic.

3 It should be noted that some did show an earlier appreciation. As early as 1948 there was an exhibition of dust jackets and other exhibits have been held at various times and places including some museums. For more information see Tanselle. For more information regarding paperback cover art exhibitions see Schreuders.

4 Interestingly, the lone person who chose this book as a “yes” is a female who isn’t really a fan of westerns. She was attracted to the book because of “having traveled to San Antonio and seeing the Alamo as a tourist. So being [set] in that region of the country, it would spark my interest.”

5 See NoveList for reviews and awards.

6 She is indeed the great grand-niece of Tolstoy.
Appendix I: Individual Book Synopses

P1 = 1st choice to pick up, P2 = 2nd choice to pick up, etc...; D1 = 1st choice to discard, D2 = 2nd choice to discard, etc...


Selections: P2, P2, P2, P4, P4 D5

One Word/Phrase Description: Erotic; young voice; sad love and life stories; teen magazine; mystery and sex; love story where woman destroys herself for a man

Synopsis: The people who selected this did so for a multiplicity of reasons: the author, the title, the cover art, or a combination of those three.

One person chose it simply “because I’ve read her before and I thought she was pretty good.” For another the title sounded familiar: “I’ve read [something about] that title before recently, and so I’d pick it up.” For two of the five selectors the image was singled out as being a factor. When asked what attracted him to the book one person said, “Kinda the faded picture a little bit.” For the other viewer the image was essential: “the photograph is interesting, it’s a little bit off, out of focus a little bit. The photography is, well it’s blurred and there’s also like a filter over the picture too so it’s sort got a tint to it ... The title doesn’t show up as much. As a matter of fact I didn’t really pay a whole lot of attention to the title. It’s a lot more the image.”

For another interviewee the book had triple appeal: “I like the title ... because it’s kind of literary and it makes you think of what that means ... the title makes it sound like there’s a relationship or something involved and so those are the kind of things I’m interested in.” She also says “the cover art’s interesting too because it looks like a real person and I’m more attracted to people, houses, objects than I am to colors or graphics.” Additionally, she says, “I think I’ve read something by her before because the name Bloom I’d decided was a nice kind of fanciful name.”
A couple of interviewees also discussed this book being a short story collection instead of a novel. But one had a positive reaction to that (“it says ‘stories’ which, every now and then I like to pick up a short story book and that’s part of the draw there”) while the other did not (“I just noticed that it said stories and I don’t typically read short stories.”).

Only one person selected it for her bottom five and she did so because the cover art “turns me off” and because the cover and title made her think that “it looks maybe like a little too much for me, a little too intense I think for recreational reading.” Others, who found this book appealing, said similar things: “it seems like a negative— like it’s not necessarily going to be a happy love story kind of book.” Another said, “I bet that’s kind of a love story with a dark twist.” In their case, however, this was appealing.

Of the 10 people who did not select this book for either category, two still commented on it. One said: “I almost picked that one to look at. I guess it would have been like number 6, it was right there.” The other person was more ambivalent: “I guess I would definitely say the Amy Bloom book, *The Carousel and Snow*, they aren’t books that definitely grab my attention as something I would read and they aren’t something that grab my attention as something I wouldn’t read.”


**Selections:** P1  D1, D1, D1, D2, D2, D3, D3, D4, D5, D5

**One Word/Phrase Description:** (Raymond) Feist; science fiction; fan-tastic; tacky; harlequin; sci fi or fantasy; science fiction/fantasy; fantasy/science fiction; lame; boring; fantasy

**Synopsis:** If the purpose of this cover is to convey that this is a fantasy/science fiction work, it succeeded. While most of the interviewees are not avid readers of fantasy or science fiction, they still know it when they see it. 10 of 15 people picked this as one of their five discard books that held the least interest for them. Only
one person picked this book in their favorite group, but that person selected it as their number one choice and said, “I’ve read other books by Marion Zimmer Bradley and I liked them so that would be why I picked that one.” That person also said fantasy is his favorite type of book to read for pleasure. Another person who did not select the book for her favorite category didn’t do so because she already knew, without even picking the book up, that she would want to read it. She already had all the information she needed to make a “to read or not to read” decision just by looking at the front cover. Again, science fiction and fantasy are her favorite types of books to read for pleasure. This was the only instance in the study where a book would have been a number one choice but wasn’t because it was an automatic selection based entirely on the cover.

For the dissenters, none of whom claimed science fiction or fantasy as their favorite type of book to read for pleasure, the genre itself was the ultimate turnoff. Typical comments were: “science fiction would be all it would take me to think and be turned off;” “the two sci fi looking characters on the cover reaching toward each other in a cloud of lightning or smoke-like substance says everything that I need to know;” and “it just screams science fiction, and I don’t read science fiction.”

There were a few dabblers who occasionally read or used to read science fiction who were turned off by this particular cover. One said, “even though I do actually like science fiction, I don’t usually like the cover art of some of them.” Another said, “I actually enjoy fantasy sometimes ... but it’s got that kind of cartoony fakey kind of cover that just disinterests me.” Another person mentions she sometimes reads fantasy but hasn’t recently. Still, none of these people put this in their “no” category.

Several people did pick up a bit more information from the cover and felt this could be a story with a strong romantic tone: “Flying man, the guy’s reaching out to the woman ... Sci Fi romance maybe?;” “it almost looks like a fantasy/romance with the two people on the front, um, you know, one reaching out to the other;” and “It actually reminds [me] kind of, of the imagery, not just full romance, but also science fiction imagery.”
A few people mentioned things that others did not. One said it “looks like a bestseller judging by the glimmery shiny letters...like [it’s] designed to catch attention at expense of content [and] looks like books at the airport for quick reading while you are waiting.” Yet another person, the only one who didn’t utter the words science fiction or fantasy, said: “I’m not usually big on adventure stories and this appears to be some sort of adventure story judging by the cover.”


**Selections:** P1, P1, P2, P4, P5, P5  
**D3**

**One Word/Phrase Description:** Biblical fiction; historical fiction; Greece; classical; attractive; ambiguous; Biblical art

**Synopsis:** This book was an especially interesting sample for this study because the author is a well-known science fiction author yet this book is a departure for him and is more historical fiction. This caused some confusion with interviewees familiar with Card because their prior knowledge seemed to be in contrast with the cover. In fact, the only person who picked this book for her no pile was the only non-science fiction fan who knew Orson Scott Card as a science fiction author. She recognized his name from her shelving days at a public library but looking at the book she started to readjust her impression. She said: “I actually thought that one sounded more interesting than I usually think his books do but basically dismissed it because of the author ... I just have a connotation with that name of being somebody I wouldn’t be interested in. Science fiction is what I used to think for Orson Scott Card, but it looks [like] historical fiction or something I guess.”

Another person who choose the book to look at related:

When I was a kid, I had kind of a weakness for fantasy fiction and so sometimes I like to read the blurbs on them just to see what the hell the story is about, what kind of things people are writing nowadays. But I almost never read them any anymore ... He’s a science
fiction writer isn’t he? Orson Scott Card? I didn’t notice the *Women of Genesis* bit when I first looked at it or the art. I would probably actually open that and see if it said what the jacket illustration was, because that looks like a classic painting of some sort. That one partly the art I find interesting too, which is why I picked the Orson Scott Card over the Marion Zimmer Bradley because it’s a similar genre but really cheesy art on that one. This one looks more respectable.

One person, a science fiction fan, not only chose this book because of the author but partially because of the biblical connection. She said, “right now I am reading the *Alvin Maker* books by Orson Scott Card and I am also reviewing my study of the Bible.”

Another person, unaware of Card’s pedigree, was interested in the book for several reasons: “It looks like it’s historical fiction. It’s about women. Um, and it’s also not western culture completely, it’s about Judaism. So, that’s kind of, kind of hits three sort of interesting things that I am interested in.” Other people saw a women’s studies angle also: “Because of the women’s focus it would be of interest ... the imagery did capture my attention because it’s sort of Victorian ... but then when it said *Women of Genesis* that was really [it], the subtitle.”

Someone else, who didn’t pick this for either category, said: “initially I might say ‘uh-oh, another romance’ because of the sort of large soft picture of a woman, but then looking closer it looks like, well it’s a painting maybe, [and says] *Women of Genesis.*” The subtitle played an important role for this book and remolded people’s opinions.

Interestingly, another person who had professed affection for fine art style covers did not pick *Rebekah* for either category. When asked why, she said: “I think so many book covers are done that way now with kind of the romanticist paintings with the gold lettering and I’ve picked so many of them up in bookstores and not liked the description that that was easy for me to make a judgement about even though it may not be at all like the ones I picked up before. I’ve been disappointed in the past.”

But still another person, when asked why they chose this book, simply said, “I just kind of like the picture.”
Selections: P1, P3, P4, P5  D4

One Word/Phrase Description: Classy; the pattern; Oriental; story of a dancer; glittery

Synopsis: This book did not encourage strong opinions in the interviewees. Ten people out of fifteen did not pick this book for either category but of those ten, five people still wanted to comment on the book. All but one of those said things like: “I thought *Dancer* was neat but it doesn’t tell you anything about what’s going on inside of it” and “it’s almost too abstract. It’s just a pattern it doesn’t tell you anything like the kind of people that might be in it.” The one who didn’t mention a lack of information simply said “Tapestry, not my taste, but it’s tapestry so it’s interesting.”

So it is intriguing that the four people who actually did pick this book for their favorite stack did so for two reasons completely opposite than just mentioned. Two people actually liked the simplicity of the cover and said things like: “*Dancer* is a very simple but kind of bright cover so it would attract my attention right away” and “I like the plain, they’re not trying to influence me.” Two other people felt there was an eastern feel to the book that appealed to them. One said, “It’s got this very eastern or Indian sort of look or Turkish or something ... it’s something that’s not, you know, American apple pie kind of thing.”

The one person who choose this book for the no category felt, again, very differently. She didn’t like it “because of the glittery letters, it looks like a best seller ... Only thing that put me off [is the] glittery letters.” She did agree somewhat with the others, however, since she said, “it’s hard to tell anything by the cover.”

**Selections:** D1, D3, D4, D5, D5

**One Word/Phrase Description:** Fluff/Kids; Sappy; low brow; cutesy/yuck; Charles Dickensish/Victorian

**Synopsis:** No one wanted to find out more information about this book, and 5 of 15 people wouldn’t even want to pick it up. People had strong feelings about this book and one person even declared, “whoever designed this cover should be shot.” She went on to say, “that one just bothers me, it’s almost too cute. It’s got the little shiny green border and the picture of the horse and it’s in purple and seafoam green and it just, it almost looks like it’s trying to be directed at like sentimental women and that just, forget it, I’m not even going to pick it up.” Another called it “schmaltzy, kinda sappy.”

Two ideas emerged from the interviews that are interesting. One is the idea that this looks like a kids book. For instance a person who has heard of the author still felt that “if I would’ve picked this up and looked at it first I may have thought it was a kid’s book to start with probably because of the size and the picture of the horse on the front.” Another echoed this idea: “it looks like maybe kind of a kids’ book or something early teenagers would read from the name and the drawing of the horse...And it says he is the author of *The Christmas Box* and *The Locket* which also sound like kids books.”

The second idea, as illustrated in the last quote above, is the extent that an author’s previous books mentioned on a book cover can provide valuable information to browsers, much like the subtitle did previously with *Rebekah*. The listings seem to provide a context of an author’s previous works to fit this book into.

Other interviewees who did not choose the book at all also had opinions based on the other titles listed: “I just got the feeling from the other, *The Christmas Box* and *The Locket*, that that might be
a bit of a sappy story. I don’t know anything about it, but somebody who has other books called those things—.” Another person said: “Carousel was pretty close to the one I did not select and I almost did not select that one because it looks a little bit like a romance novel. It’s named The Carousel ... and it mentions to he’s the author of The Christmas Box and The Locket so it tends to make me think that it’s more of a romance.”

Two people knew the author and did not seem to be fans. One said, “I’ve never really liked Richard Paul Evans covers. I think they’re sort of bland but they definitely mark his books.” The other said, “I know the author and what he writes but the whole, I just look at the whole, the cover and think it is going to be fluff. It’s something I don’t like to read.”

One person who ultimately chose this book for his discard stack was a bit confused by this book but finally decided it was “lowbrow”. He said: “The Carousel looks like— this one’s kinda tough, cause it could be one of those cute little Algonquin artsy looking ones or it could be one of the cheesy Madison County kind of books but it doesn’t look, well it doesn’t appeal to me for whatever reason. Hard to tell ... the format kind of catches you eye.”


Selections: P3, P4, P4, P4

One Word/Phrase Description: Plain and somber; minimalist, intriguing; plain and simple and attractive; poetry

Synopsis: This one seemed to inspire the four people who picked it with it’s lack of information in a way Dancer somehow did not, since only one person who picked Snow liked Dancer. The four who choose it said: “it sparks the imagaination,” “[it] makes me curious,” “it’s so plain, it’s like I’ve got to find out what’s in there” and “it’s simple and so it sort of piques my curiosity”
It also reminded people of a poetry book and indeed the front dustjacket flap claims this is “a novel that reads like a poem.” One interviewee said “even though it says Snow: a novel, my initial reaction would be that this is a book of poetry ... but that I sort of think has more to do with the size of the book, the format...I mean the cover helps but because it’s like a small thin book, it’s something that I think you would probably find poetry in as opposed to like a novel or a book or something like that.” Someone who did not pick this book agreed, “You know what this reminds me of? Poetry. ... you see a lot of poetry books about the same size.”

But the subtlety did not attract everyone. No one disliked the book, but some were just not overwhelmed by it. People who didn’t pick it but commented on it said: “Snow is really cute. It’s so little and delicate, but somehow it doesn’t appeal to me;” “For Snow there’s just nothing on the cover at all except ‘Snow’ and it’s sort of a watercolor type image or along those lines. There just wasn’t anything there. I didn’t pay any attention to it to tell you the truth;” and, “If I could have picked seven books that might have been one I would have picked... I guess I like the cover on this [Snow] whereas this cover [The Carousel] doesn’t say yes or no but this one [Snow] says a bit more yes to me.”


**Selections:** P3, P3, P3, P6     D5

**One Word/Phrase Description:** Bold; Old South; Plain and somber; catchy title; self-absorbed characters

**Synopsis:** The interviewees’ ideas of what this book is about are interesting and more varied than with some of the other books. Some of the ideas people presented when asked what this book might be about based on what they could tell from the cover were: “about a woman getting burned maybe;” “I bet...it’s a probably a story about a family ... semi-autobiographical;” “I don’t know if it would be about the tobacco industry or someone kind of retelling
their story about that;” “I don’t know if it’s a smoker’s tale or residual effects of someone’s life and they’re going around telling other people’s perspectives on some big happening;” and finally, “it looked like a book about trashy white folks.”

Only one person thought maybe the author sounded familiar, but some particularly liked the title. When asked why they had chosen this book people said things like: “I think because of the title;” “It’s such an intriguing title to me and I wonder what it could possibly be about;” “the title would capture my interest.” And even someone who didn’t choose the book said “Secondhand Smoke is kind of a clever title.”

People also commented variously on the cover art. Positive comments were “the cover is nice and I think I liked it because it’s, it’s eyecatching without being obvious;” and “I like the colors on the cover, tan and red.” Others said: “[It’s] not pretty;” “Um, weird cover. I don’t understand the cover. The whole circle with the cigarette?... Kinda reminds me of a western a little bit, the way the author’s name is in the little thing here, in the little brackets or whatever... the cover confuses me;” and “I just don’t like the cover...look[s] like really oldish cover.”

Two people also felt the book had a non-fiction feel: “even though it says a novel, the first thing it would scream at me is non-fiction book for this;” and “Secondhand Smoke I probably wouldn’t pick up because it looks like non-fiction to me.” Even so, the two interviewees who stated they read non-fiction more than fiction did not pick this book for either category.

Selections: P2, P2, P3, P3 (tie), P4, P5    D1, D2, D4

One Word/Phrase Description: Snazzy; pop art; goofy and cartoony; intriguing title; innocuous; troublesome, mischievous and maybe some humor; Evil; Gurganus is a turn off; arrogant

Synopsis: From snazzy to evil, some people loved this cover and others hated it.

The ones who loved it said: “eyecatching” and “I’m completely captivated by that. It looks interesting. I’m just curious about the cover art.”

The ones who didn’t like it were even more vehement in their dislike, however: “I just really, really hate the cover. I don’t know what else to say ... It’s very kiddy. And bright. And the little boy on the front doesn’t look like he plays well with others at all ... I wouldn’t be like ‘Oh, I want to pick this up’, like I would walk away from it, [and say] ‘Nooo’. I mean look, he’s cartoony and has evil blue eyes. So, I don’t know, I just wouldn’t pick it up.” Another person says: “You just want to slap the kid. I think it’s way over the top with the kid and the smiling face on front. When I first pulled out the book I didn’t even notice the author’s name. But, uh, I know the author and everything, but I just think it is a bad cover.”

There were others too: “The imagery would kinda make me feel it was a bit dated...it would make me think more like the ‘70s or something like that. Well, actually it’d probably make me think of the ‘60s, but I don’t think it’s that old;” “I know Allan Gurganus is good but that cover art is awful. What is with like the little sailor boy? I don’t know about that one (laughs);” and “I wasn’t really interested in Plays Well with Others until I saw it was by Allan Gurganus, but I didn’t like the cover and I probably wouldn’t pick it up even though I’m interested in reading some of his stuff just because I don’t really like the cover.”
For many the author was an important element to their choice whether for the favorite pile or reject pile. Some of the quotes above show that for many people he is a draw. Others feel the same way. When asked why they chose this book for the favorites, they said: “The author;” “I'm familiar with Allan Gurganus;” and “I know this author and I've liked some of his stuff. Actually I've checked out this one before and didn’t like it that much but I’ve heard so many good things about him that I would give him another try to see what people like about him.”

But for two others just the opposite is true. When asked why she choose this book for her discard pile, she said: “Allan Gurganus, I picked up the confederate widow book and I couldn’t get past the first ten pages so I’ve never been interested in anything else he’s ever written.” Another person who rejected the book said: “I've never really been interested in reading his work.”

One person said, “I've read it before and I enjoyed it.”


**Selections:** P4  D1, D2, D3, D4, D4, D4, D4, D5

**One Word/Phrase Description:** western; western; western; cowboy; sky or building; old fashioned, simple; western; historic fiction

**Synopsis:** For six of the eight people who chose this book for their discard piles they did so because the book seemed like a western or westernish historical fiction and, just like with the fantasy cover, that was all the information they needed. For the people who do seem to like historic fiction, they don’t seem to like western-based ones.

For the other two people two different reasons caused their disinterest. The first said:

When you look at the picture on the *Alamo* one, it’s kind of interesting. It’s got figures in it but, you know, there are no faces. They are very far away from you. It’s not like your interacting with them. Like that one [*Fortune's Rocks*], the girl is looking at you from the cover
and this one is like ‘yeah, we’re doing our own thing.’ And you can tell they look like they are historically dressed with the hats and the long coats and stuff. But there’s not enough to do with people on this cover to draw me in.

For the second person the genre had an impact too. When asked what about this book does not appeal to him, he said: “it would probably be the genre, historic fiction.”

Interestingly, the lone person who chose this book for her to read pile was female. She was attracted to the book because of “having traveled to San Antonio and seeing the Alamo as a tourist. So being [set] in that region of the country, it would spark my interest.”


Selections: P3, P3, P5  D1, D1, D3

One Word/Phrase Description: Author’s name; danger and sex; vintage; offensive; yellow; crazy.

Synopsis: This, again, was a very interesting book for the interviewees and it generated mixed emotions. Three people chose this as the book one they would pick up though others who didn’t choose it were just as interested and were somewhat attracted to it. A female who chose this book third said:

I am a little curious why I would select this because I don’t generally like yellow but the cover— . First of all I vaguely have a sense that I know this author. I have a feeling that he’s a big name but actually I don’t think I’ve read anything. But I recognize the name and would be curious. I think that’s a lot of it. But something about it, for example this one has a snake eating a woman. If the picture were different I would have concluded it was something like Man Eater [trash], but something tells me it’s not. Again maybe because I recognize the name but I don’t think so, again, I think it’s more interesting art to me.

Two males also choose this book for their look-at pile but they too seemed vague as to why when asked: “Um, I’m not entirely sure. Maybe because it sort of reminds me of like, uh, um, what’s the word I’m looking for, like ‘50s, uh, vintage kind of stuff, which I’m into. So I have no idea if the book is actually about that, but the drawing on the cover sort of reminds of that so that’s why I
would pick that one.” The other person said: “I think the bright cover makes a big difference and the image is right in the middle so the actual artwork, the animation of the snake wrapped around the girl is somewhat interesting and the title too would kind of draw me to it.”

Three women were less enthusiastic about the graphic and put the book in their no pile. “Well, I thought the title was amusing, but the imagery—. It made me think it wasn’t going to be something that I would, really interest me with the woman and the snake ... I mean it’s kind of offensive but it’s kind of, lame I guess would be the right word.” Another felt similarly: “Um, I don’t like the bright yellow and there’s a naked woman and she’s getting eaten by a snake so right away that says strange things to me.” Another had strong opinions about the graphic and said she wouldn’t be interested “because they are using a naked woman for titillating imagery and then the danger of the snake. It’s just—. I don’t like it ... And that one the first thing I think of is honestly, yellow, because it’s so strong, it takes you a second to register that besides the color of the cover, there’s the graphic on there ... I think the graphic is offensive, well not offensive, but just not attractive to women. I can’t see a woman picking up this book and saying, “hmm, female figure wrapped in snake, I should see what this is about!” It just looks like it is totally aimed at men. You know, danger, women, basket case. That again is just not aimed at me so I’m not interested in it.”

Yet even though the last interviewee cannot imagine a woman picking this book up, one picked it for her yes pile and two other females commented positively on the graphic. One said “I had a hard time not picking Basket Case because I liked that graphic. It looks like a tattoo which I find interesting. It was sort of the runner up. [It would have been number six?] yes.” Another agrees: “I’m kind of curious about this Carl Hiaasen one because I like the uh, the kind of thing on the front, I don’t know what to call it. The little icon of the woman wrapped in the serpent looks like uh like something you’d see on the side of a car, you know it’s definitely an image from popular culture. I think that’s kind of cool.”

Others who didn’t choose the book for either category but wanted to comment on it often mentioned the author though the opinions about him and his genre seem varied. “I might actually
pick that up now because he’s written an award-winning children’s book now. And the [children’s] cover’s sort of similar. I mean like, whatever it is, I mean you look at his book I feel like and you sort of know that it’s his and there’s some element of that I think in the children’s book which I thought was interesting. I probably wouldn’t pick it up and buy it, but I might pick it up and look at it.” While another person said: “I have heard about his other books and he seemed kind of edgy, kind of a ‘guy’ author. You know, I don’t know, writing about sex from a guy’s point of view. Not too interesting to me.”

The author and his genre were again inseparable for some: “Carl Hiaasen always has kind of good cover art. They almost always are in those Caribbean, you know, colors, bright things, they’re interesting to look at. But again I know it wouldn’t necessarily appeal to me based on the genre;” and “Um, Basket Case screams mystery to me or crime fiction or something like that. Interesting little snake around the woman type thing. Um, and actually it’s not a bad cover.”

The yellow color was also commented on in addition to what has already been discussed.


Selections: P1, P1, P2, P2, P2, P3, P3, P4, P5, P5

One Word/Phrase Description: Secretive; old/history; evocative, Wyeth painting, something gone; sophisticated; simple; modern classic; picture; a widow for one year; widow, solitude, lonely; John Irving.

Synopsis: John Irving played an important role in attracting many people to this book: “This one mainly because it’s John Irving but I like the art too;” “Just because I do find it enjoyable to flip through his books. I’m not a big fan but interested enough to see what this one might be about;” and “I really like John Irving, so, that’s why I picked that one... I’ve read that one.”
For others the author was less important: “John Irving. I've never read any of his books and I feel like I should and I probably will one day, but not today;” and “I'm familiar with him his stuff but only through the movies they made of his books.”

Or not important at all: “it was more the script and the font that they choose and it is, it does say, a widow for one year which makes me wonder, is it about a woman’s life? Is it about the changes in her life? That’s kind of what attracted me to that;” and “I actually like the John Irving cover, but I don’t know I haven’t heard anything good about that particular book by him so— [Why do you think you like it?] I like kind of worn surfaces for lack of a better description, I can’t explain the reasons. I also like the font they used for the title.”


**Selections:** P2, P5  D4

**One Word/Phrase Description:** Black comedic; sarcastic, funny; Wall Street.

**Synopsis:** People were unfamiliar with both this title and this author which led them to base much of their opinions strictly on the cover information. The two people who picked the cover to look at felt the cover was somewhat comedic. The male who ranked it 2nd best said: “I find it amusing compared to most. I have no idea what it’s about from the cover, but it makes me want to look at it and see what is this about. Plus there [on cover] it’s ‘author of Thumbsucker’ [and] that sounds mildly amusing.” The female who ranked this book 5th said: “*Up in the air* I picked entirely on the cover. I don’t know if I would want to read it or not, but it was interesting enough I want to know what it’s about now. Something about the cartoony- and it’s got funny things up in the air. It looks like it might be humorous. Or kind of wacky.”
The one person who choose this for the no stack did so “because it looks like something that is geared toward business people and I’m not a business person and don’t really have any interest in that sort of thing.”

Others who didn’t choose it but still made comments said things like: “too cluttered. Too many guys jumping around in business suits. Uh, even though it says a novel and the title doesn’t really give it away as being up in the air, I would say with business suit guys on there I’m thinking a business book. One of those self-help, business management you know, the *Who Moved my Cheese* type book. And looking at the cover, it doesn’t give away anything. It doesn’t tell you anything about the book in my opinion. It’s just a bunch of business guys taking off through the air, one crashing to the ground. And the picture’s just way to busy;” “that might exacerbate my fear of flying;” and “that graphic is just so busy I wouldn’t know where to look first. The men are flying, there’s some guy bursting into flames, there’s two guys talking, it’s too busy. I read books for relaxation and fun. That’ doesn’t pull me in at all”

For one the book raised specific questions:

I’d be sort of interested in this one judging by title because I like play on words. Why did they choose this title? What is real theme of novel? Detached from reality maybe – up in the air; living in intellectual ivory tower maybe; if something is not certain too, you don’t know how it is going to turn out. I would be interested in this because of the title, actually combination of title and illustration and whether it connects to real meaning of phrase or different.

One person felt this was close to her no pile “I was thinking these two if I had two more to go into the no category. [Secondhand Smoke and *Up in the Air*] they might be no’s just because, I don’t know, I just don’t like the covers. They go with our mice friends [The Slynx] over there, they look like really oldish covers.” Two others would possibly have put it into the yes category: “This one actually looks interesting, *Up in the Air*, it just didn’t, I don’t know, this looks like an interesting book that would be—. If I got to pick 10,” and “This one would have been the next up [Up in the Air]. Again, interesting art, in fact I almost choose it over Irving but that would be a name I would recognize. Had it not, this would have been [chosen].”

**Selections:** P3, P4, P5  D3

**One Word/Phrase Description:** Depression (1930s); sad

**Synopsis:** One person ranked this book third who had already expressed an appreciation for books about women living their lives, but here she particularly seemed to connect with the book. She said “because there’s a lone woman on the cover I just kind of assumed that it was about a woman’s life and what was going on in it. And you can’t really tell the time period from the cover so it could be open, it could be historic like earlier in the century kind of thing or it could be modern.” But when queried further to use one word or a short phrase to describe the book she said

> Depression, like the time period. Because if you look at the pattern of wallpaper and what she’s wearing, it reminds me of pictures from the Depression. Like the 1930s and I can imagine like that there’s like an iron bed stand [outside of the frame of the cover] because you can see there’s no side rails so it’s not like a fancy wooden bed or something. And because what she’s wearing is very plain, and of course she doesn’t look all that happy. It’s just kind of her pose and the setting, I just think 1930s Depression.

Only one person was familiar with the author’s name and for her this was a negative. Though she did not pick this one for the discard pile, she did say, “I almost choose this one, the *Fiona Range*, because of the painting on the cover but I know about Mary McGarry Morris and so I left her behind.”

Several others, while they didn’t recognize the author at all, did recognize her previous work listed on the cover and two associated the title with Oprah’s book club specifically. Comments were:

“I like the picture on the front and it made me look closer, but when I saw she had written *Songs in Ordinary Time* and that’s something I’ve heard a lot about ... And plus *Songs in Ordinary Time* is, I think, an Oprah book;” “It’s funny because the author doesn’t ring a bell but the *Songs in Ordinary Time*
does, and I think that was an Oprah book. So I know it would at least be worth looking in the flyleaf;” and “Again, that looked a bit like a romance but looking closer I saw Songs in Ordinary times and I remember something about that.”

Only one person, a male, chose this book for his discard pile. He said: “it looks a little bit like something I wouldn’t read, maybe some um domestic type issues so—.” Others were a bit ambivalent about the book: “Fiona Range that one didn’t really catch my eye;” and “this one is like ‘ehh’ I just, ‘ehh’. If I was a definite and 10 was in my no pile, this was probably like a 7.”

The title being a woman’s name also caused some confusion as a few people thought that author was named Fiona Range until a closer inspection told them it was not. One person commented on this in depth:

I think the title’s in the wrong place. I think here they are selling by the author’s name definitely, uh, just like the John Irving book [and] Belva Plain. Because when you first look at it, you’re going ‘is the title Mary Morris?’ then you see this up here in the left hand corner. In just a little white block Fiona Range, a novel. Interesting picture. The picture’s not bad. But they need to incorporate I think the title a little bit better into the cover. Uh, but here they are definitely selling by the author’s name.


Selections: P1, P2 D2, D3, D4, D4, D5, D5

One Word/Phrase Description: Mystery; mystery; mystery; spy fiction; airport lounge; non-descript, crime story; simple, hackneyed.

Synopsis: Just as with the fantasy book, people were usually able to identify this as a mystery. The two people who selected this for their yes pile like mysteries. One said: “Death in Paradise, that one would interest me. It looks like a mystery even though I’m not really familiar with that author.” Another was familiar with Parker and said, “I like his books...I’ve read him before. So I would just pick it up from author recognition.”
The ones who choose this for the no pile said: “The Robert Parker one looked kinda generic to me. Like a million other murder mysteries or one of those types of novels. It didn’t—there wasn’t anything special about it;” and “[it] looks kind of like adventure or mystery, detective kind of novel and I don’t typically like those.” Another person stated the mystery angle a bit differently: “I’m not into the kind of the spy thing.”

There were a few people who said that while they occasionally read crime or mystery books this did not appeal to them. One person said “Um, I think I might actually like him because I do actually like the cop novels but I guess for whatever reason I just have the idea that I won’t;” and another said “with the subtitle A Jesse Stone Novel it’s probably a detective novel. And the bird behind bars is kind of melodramatic. I’ve read some good detective novels but for some reason I never pick them out in the library.” So here again too we see the importance of the subtitle in providing valuable information to the viewer.

One person who didn’t pick it later almost seemed to wish she had: “I actually don’t know why that wasn’t in the no pile. It doesn’t do anything for me.”

Several people in the sample also commented on the cover design – none very positively: “I don’t like the bird behind the bars on the cover ... I think it’s used by Amnesty International and Picasso did the bird behind the bars and it doesn’t have much to do with the title;” “And the bird behind bars is kind of melodramatic ... actually it’s not a bad graphic, just a graphic. It’s sort of hackneyed. The caged bird [is] sort of an overdone image;” “It’s kinda too plain I think...there’s a dove with 3 lines through the dove. I’m thinking is there a dove in prison? Um, or are they trying to eliminate the dove or something. So that one, I’m not sure if the three lines symbolize something. And I think it is way too blue;” “the blue and green and I would walk right by it ... it’s so boring, it’s got this abstract bird with lines, maybe those are bars, I don’t know;” “the cover is very simple so you would think that definitely this is something that I would pick, and I also really like blue but I just think the cover design is one of those other ones to me that looks like something that somebody would’ve been doing like in the ‘80s.”
**Selections:** P1, P3, D1, D2, D2, D2, D2, D2, D2, D3, D4

**One Word/Phrase Description:** Formula; old fashioned or Christianish; obvious, cheesy; corny; gift; Mary Higgins Clark; boring; *Little House on the Prairie*; trash; yellow cover, glaring pink author’s name

**Synopsis:** Two people liked this book and wanted to pick it up.

When asked why, they said: “Because I know the author ... I’ve read two books by the author and am familiar with her;” and “because I’ve actually heard of Belva Plain before, [she writes] general fiction slash slight romance if I know anything about her.

Others were not so fond of this book, with 9 of the remaining 13 choosing it for their no pile. Indeed, many people had strong negative feelings about the cover. One person said about the cover: “the primary colors of it I don’t like, it’s just kind of obvious looking. The art looks, it’s like, bad, I want to compare it too—I went to the Mormon temple in L.A. once and they had this really terrible art all the way through the temple and it reminded me a little bit of that, kind of low quality, uh, realistic figurative art. Historical fiction of some sort, no he’s wearing a suit, not real sure but probably wouldn’t say much to me that I found terribly interesting.” Others felt the same way.

Several people saw a romance connection. “I wouldn’t read because it looks like a romance ... [what makes you think that’s a romance?] It was actually the title, *Her Father’s House*, but then the picture with the title, and also the author’s name being so huge because it reminds me of “Danielle Steele” taking up most of the space.” Another person agreed: “I am often, unless someone is really well known like John Irving, I am turned off by people’s names being bigger than then title of a book. I think that’s sort of, especially if I’ve never heard of them like Belva Plain here ... I don’t know why her name should be that big. Um, and you know, maybe I’m just ignorant and she’s a very well-known writer in her field, but it just seems odd that her name is huge and shiny and the title of
the book is little. Um, and it also just looks sort of, looking at the picture it looks sort of historical you know, uh, like a romance novel kind of thing that I am not fond of. It looks like a sweeping tale of the American midlands or something.” Yet another person agreed about the romance aspect and the size of the author’s name. The person said, “it screams out to me romance … I think it focuses way too much on her name. I think they should’ve put “her father’s house” in big letters and put her name in smaller letters … but sometimes I guess the books sell better when they know the author. They don’t care about the title. They just enjoy that another book by this author is out, so. But I think they went over the top with the author’s name on that one … [and there’s] too much yellow … And the little ellipse thing just screams romance … or historical fiction but still leaning toward the romance though. I really hated that one.” This person also doesn’t think much of romance novels. He says “I kind of think of romance as trash, period. That’s my opinion.”

Another simply said, there was a “definite romance character … like a romance novel.” Someone else thought “it looks like a gentle read which to me are pretty boring and not very thought provoking. Usually when I read I like to, uh, you know for the book to take me places and to inspire new ideas and gentle reads just don’t, don’t do that for me.” When asked to use one word to describe this book this same person said it looks “like a gift … the design with the ribbon and kind of wrapping paper colors and the gift card on the front.” It is noteworthy that even though this person didn’t care for this book, she still found more information in the cover than simply whether she wanted to read it or not.

Another person also reported an interesting connection to this book cover that repelled her: “I don’t know I think I’ve had experiences with a book that had a cover like this before with just a little picture and I didn’t like it so maybe I’m a little bit prejudiced.”

Two people who did not choose it for either pile had heard of the author, and she was a factor in their decisions: “I read Belva Plain when I was like a teenager (laughs) so I won’t bother with her” and “I probably wouldn’t pick up because of the author.”
Selections: P1, P1, P3, P5, P5, P6, P7 D3

One Word/Phrase Description: intriguing; romantic; sexy;
modern; sort of sexy and pretty; subtle; erotic; erotic imagery;
romance.

Synopsis: Two people couldn’t stop at five books in their yes
pile, partly because they liked this book so much; one choose
it 6th and the other 7th.

Two people selected this book as their number one
choice. One of these people explained why: “that’s because I
just love the picture on the front. And I didn’t notice it at
first, it took several passes through before I noticed it, but when I did I knew it would be one of the
ones I picked.” This person went on to say, “I don’t really have a good perception of what it’s like,
but it’s the kind of book that even if I didn’t love the description on the book I still might buy it just
because I really, really like this cover.” The other person who selected this book as their number one
choice said, “I’m curious about this one. I like the cover. I’d probably read that one, read the back of
that one first. [Why do you like the cover?] It reminds me of a style of art that I like, the art nouveau
and art deco era. And I would just be a sucker for the cover I think.”

Other people who choose this book also liked the cover and were intrigued by it: “I like the
cover art. I like the fabric, it’s very nice and it looks, again, fairly simple in terms of genre and all of
that. And it’s probably, I would guess, just from the title that it’s probably not a corny romance
novel. It would be— I would guess that it’s about a more mature love, relationship, which can be
interesting to read about;” and “I have no idea – this could be complete trash or it could be literary
fiction and I have no idea at this point. Looks kinda sexy.” Another person said, “I think [it’s] more
modern just because there’s skin exposed ... the pattern on her dress or the robe, I think is very
modern, it’s very abstract. And the text that they used, it’s not that old style. It’s like you’d see from a
typewriter ... You can’t really tell if that’s a man or a woman necessarily. It’s almost asexual. You assume it’s a woman from the title and the clothes and everything but it doesn’t have to be.”

For most everyone it took a few seconds of observation to really “see” the cover. One person picked it and then while talking about it began to second-guess her choice and to feel confused by what exactly this is about.

I didn’t realize until now it was a belly. I just saw the geometric design of what the person is wearing and thought that it looked very plain. Didn’t realize until just now I was staring at her belly button! I don’t know if that would have affected my decision if I would have paid more attention to begin with. I don’t know. I still might have picked it ... This belly button is really throwing me off now ... I don’t know, maybe mystery? ... I don’t know why I’m guessing mystery, maybe because of how she’s like is mysteriously holding up her garment to cover up her private parts. Who knows?

One person put the book in her no pile. She said she would not pick it up “just because of the cover art. The cover art looks a little sexy and I don’t tend to read those type of books.” A person who didn’t pick this book for either category later said, “this one looks like it probably way more sex in it than I am interested in reading about.”

People who didn’t choose it in their top 5 but who picked it 6th and 7th said: “[I’m] trying to figure out what’s going on in this picture” and “that one’s just intriguing. I probably would read the back of it just because of the title, and actually the imagery, is kind of intriguing I suppose. I don’t actually find that as offensive as the other one, the Basket Case.”

Others who didn’t choose it at all still spoke about it: “Your Mouth is Lovely has the ... well there’s not a mouth, there’s a belly button on there (laughs). And it just looks really interesting and I have no idea what the book is about from that;” and “This is just a little clever because this is not anyone’s mouth.”

A person who started off seeming to dislike the cover ended up seeming to like it – but he still didn’t like the fabric that others had found appealing: “Very busy with all the black lines. When I take a look at it now, I didn’t know it was a woman, or a person or whoever it is. Uh, it’s a little bit too busy, Kinda strange with the hands ... But it’s kinda actually neat with the, the skin and you’ve got the title on the skin. Uh, I think they could’ve just done better with the whole outfit.”
Another person felt ambivalent about the book. “Your Mouth is Lovely was interesting but I didn’t select it. The cover wasn’t bad but it wasn’t enough to make me pick it up.


Selections: P1, P1, P2, P4 D1, D3, D4, D5

One Word/Phrase Description: Bones; morbid curiosity; mystery and danger; eerie and dark; horror or crime; morbid; disturbing.

Synopsis: People seemed to like the freshness and unusualness of this cover that united the graphic with the title. People who liked it said: “I think the cover for Last Things is original ... it definitely stands out;” “Honestly, I would probably pick that up first because I have a morbid streak and I would be curious, not that I necessarily think, not that I would be convinced it was good, but I would be curious— I would have to look;” “interesting just because of the bones set against the dark background. It stands out, catches my eye;” “I would read Last Things or at least be curious about it. Last Things is next because those bones are really cool. And that’s, I mean that really is a purely physical thing. Like I would see this on the shelf and think, the same with this one, The Slynx, ‘that would be interesting’ like that’s presenting itself in an interesting way.”

Others were turned off by the idea that this is a horror book: “It just looked like a horror book and I don’t do that. I just, that genre doesn’t appeal to me at all;” and another person said “I don’t want to say this cover is bad, it just doesn’t attract me. Like whoever designed this book, I mean it’s just like a gory, horror, mystery. I mean that’s a really good way to get it across, using human bones and spelling out the letters ... It’s just, that to me says it’s going to be gory and I don’t want to look at it and I don’t want to read it.”
Another person compared this to *The Slynx*, but she didn’t like either of them and chose both for the discard pile. “I guess there’s just no way around that [rats] being gross to me and the bones could be things that are old or sad. It doesn’t have to be, I think the impression that I get is that it’s sort of a gruesome murder type of thing but I don’t think it necessarily has to be. Whereas with the rats I can’t think of any connotation where I would be interested.”

People who didn’t choose the book for either pile still had opinions: “*Last Things* ... there’s bones, so that makes me think it’s a sort of murder or something like that. But it’s nice that it’s not, you know, it’s a plain image but it’s original;” “I’m thinking, looking at the bones, I would think crime or mystery. But because they use bones it wouldn’t be as attractive to me because it might be more gory than the mysteries I really like;” “that looks kind of gory. I don’t know if I would do that one or not;” and “that might be interesting. I just might want to see what it’s about but maybe not want to read it, because it looks a little gory maybe.”

Even though most people liked the cover, one person had trouble reading what the bones spelled out: “this one I couldn’t even tell what the title was.”

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**Selections:** P3, P3 D1, D1, D4, D4(tie)

**One Word/Phrase Description:** Crime; psycho; depressing; trash; offensive, ambivalent; scary.

**Synopsis:** Two people picked this book as one they would like to pick up. One thought the cover was “original” and liked the title and “the way they did the title and also the gun pointed at you with the flower coming out of the gun. “The other thought it “just sounded very sort of sadistic ... but if it sounds too crazy serial killerish I wouldn’t take it home, but it looks sort of
interesting, I ... like the whole gun with the flower.”

A few other people weren’t so taken with the cover. Two people chose it as their top discard of all 22 books. One person said this is “my least favorite,...[it is] scuzzi, cheap.” The other person who choose it as her least favorite said, “I think the title and the graphic image too ... just didn’t appeal to me and I don’t really know why, uh, maybe the starkness.”

Another person who chose it for her no pile said: “That one I probably wouldn’t read. The title’s a little off-putting. It just sounds like it’s going to be about some horrible woman. It may be a little offensive, but [I’m] also ambivalent because the title doesn’t interest me at all.”

Others said about this book: “[It] looks like a criminal sort of book to me. A mystery, which is not exactly my cup of tea;” and “I’m also not a mystery reader so maybe that’s what some of these other ones, if they’re more mysteryish then I’m more likely not [to read them].”

The author’s sex played a role here when it didn’t with other books specifically. People said: “that one looks interesting with the flower in front but Man Eater the title, I don’t know ... I don’t like to discriminate against men, like they can’t write a female point [of view], but because the title Man Eater could be sort of negative against women and I see it’s a male author, I’m kind of like, umm— (laughs) ‘What is he going to say?’,” and “It looks like it’s written by a guy. Man Eater, I am assuming is a female character. I just, yeah it’s like this guy has issues with women or something you know? I’m not too interested in hearing about it.”

For two others the cover took a bit of time to see it clearly. “I didn’t even notice the gun for a long time. I liked the flower;” and “it definitely caught my eye and I looked at it because I was trying to figure out exactly what this was a picture of ... I’m not really interested so much in the book so much as I was just trying to figure out what the picture was of. Like I was looking at it and it actually took me a second to figure out that’s actually a flower coming out of a gun.”

**Selections:** P2, P2, P4, P4, P5

**One Word/Phrase Description:** Misleading cover art; well known author; romantic; art; classic

**Synopsis:** People tended to like this book because of the author. Comments were: “because it’s by the author of *The Pilot’s Wife* and although I didn’t read the book I did actually see the miniseries;” “I haven’t read any of her other books, but I have been attracted to them and so just as an author that’s why I picked her;” “I do not think I would have picked it if it wasn’t for the author being Anita Shreve because the woman ... looks like she is in some sort of period dress or well, I don’t know, but that would normally, I would think would not appeal to me;” and “I’ve read Anita Shreve, and I know she’s easy to read and kind of like a beach read kind of thing. Actually I’ve only read *Pilot’s Wife*, but I would be willing to try her again.”

No one put this book in his or her discard pile, though one person originally had it there but changed her mind: “This one I put back as a no book but I didn’t pick it as a yes book. This book is very hard for me to categorize. It probably could have gone either way. Because it’s old fashioned and it reminds me of Rebekah and I really like the Rebekah cover\(^1\) and the Anita Shreve book kind of reminds me of the Rebekah cover so when I saw I had picked it [for the discard pile] I was kind of like ”ah-ah-ah”. I don’t know what to tell you, this is a really hard book for me to say anything about.” Another person contemplated it: “Again this [*Fortune's Rocks*] would have been a close contender for being in that [no] pile but, again, it’s a painting and that makes me wonder.”

One person didn’t pick it because she had read it already. A few others didn’t pick it for either category but felt it was a bit romantic: it “kind of screams a little bit romance again, [and] maybe because of the cover, historical fiction a little bit;” and “I may be interested in *Fortune's Rocks*. It looks

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\(^1\) *Rebekah* was her 4th pick.
like it might be a romance but the cover is not screaming for attention ... looks like it would be more sophisticated.”


**Selections:** P1, P1, P1, P2  D4, D4, D4, D5  

**One Word/Phrase Description:** Dark; funny; trouble and confusion; intelligent morbid; uncreative and disturbing; river stix and morbid; beast story; old fashioned.  

**Synopsis:** Three people chose this as their first choice, more number ones than any other cover. So what was it that made people want to pick it up? They said: “I like the cover. I think it’s really cool with the rats on it and everything. Never heard of the author and um, I really genuinely like the cover art very much. I think it’s very dramatic looking;” “I think I would go for *The Slynx* first which is weird because I’ve never heard of the author, I’d be curious whether she’s related to Tolstoy. The name is interesting because it’s a word that isn’t a word. And I like the little mice or rats or whatever they are. It’s a nice graphic, um, and it looks like, fairly modern;” and “The artwork on the front. It was interesting. And I like how the uh, how it drew me into the title the way the, I guess these are slynx or I don’t know what they are, rats, going into the title.”

One other person chose this in their yes pile as a number 2 pick, with *Last Things* being number 1. Yet even though she chose *Last Things* to look at first she says about *The Slynx*: “It’s just my favorite, this one’s my favorite cover art. I like the art, I have trouble saying why.” She also says, “the art is a little more interesting, I mean if it’s cheap and morbid as for example *Man Eater* might be, I’m not interested. It’d have to be intelligent morbid (laughs).” She also mentioned that at first. “I actually misread that, I thought it said ‘The Sphinx.’”
Even though an equal number of people picked this book for their discard pile as picked it for the favorite. They said things like: “they [the rats] look gross. I don’t know. The rats just definitely would turn me off. I think it would be as disturbing as the cover. ... I guess there’s just no way around that being gross to me;” and “there are rats on the cover and I don’t want anything to do with rats when I’m reading.” Another person who didn’t pick this for either category said, “Actually I wouldn’t have picked that one up as well because of the mice. I don’t like mice or rats and they keep advertising that movie *Willard* and it’s very disturbing to me and I find myself having to change the channel. [It’s] like a phobia.”

Some others who didn’t pick this for either category had different opinions about this book than mentioned above. Though one person above thought the cover looked modern, someone else who had already stated a preference for more modern covers said “it looks like a cover from the fifties and sixties and I don’t know what it is, because I know there are classics and I love classics but there’s something about classics’ covers that I don’t generally go for.” Also, while two people liked the title, one of the people who discarded this book did not. She said. “I first thought it was Stix like the River Stix” and the confusion was enough for her to dismiss it.


**Selections:** P5, P6      D3, D3, D3, D5, D5

**One Word/Phrase Description:** Law, thriller; suspenseful; lawyers; lawyer fiction; cheap action movie; Scott Turow; John Grisham.

**Synopsis:** One person chose this for her top five. She said, “If I’m going to read brain candy I usually read law or police books and so if I see one and I think I haven’t read it then I’m likely to pick it up like Scott Turow or John Grisham.”
Another person would have picked this book up if she could have chosen six books. When asked why, she said, “I guess because it’s darker ... that’s one of the reasons I didn’t pick the bright yellow one. I mean I just don’t like yellow ... I don’t know anything about the author I don’t think, but just this is dark ...[It’s a] psychological thriller or a mystery or like a suspense I’m guessing that because of, just the nature of the cover.”

Five people discarded this book. They said things like: “that’s another one I probably wouldn’t read. I more like British mysteries.”; “I’m not a lawyer fiction fan so just probably wouldn’t pause;” “too much like an action movie which I’m not to fond of and would put me off;” “Um. Again, not a strong negative reaction, just I know of Scott Turow and that’s something else I don’t read. I also don’t care for the cover ... somehow it looks a little soap opera like;” “because it looks like some sort of, I’m not sure why I get this from the cover, but it looks like a, uh, like a suspense lawyer type book, like a John Grisham or something which I don’t, I’m not really into.”


**Selections**: P6  D1, D1, D1, D1, D2, D2, D2, D3, D5

**One Word/Phrase Description**: Good story; Palm beach; cheesy; boring; girly; harlequin; sacchrine; obvious romance; Martha Stewart; trying too hard.

**Synopsis**: Not one person chose this book for their top five. One person would have picked it as number 6 and thought the cover was “just beautiful” and thought “it just sounds like a sappy story so I might want to read it” but picked 5 other books first. Most of the other interviewees would probably concur with the “sappy story” idea. For instance, one person who didn’t select this book for either category says, “I would be drawn to that because of the colors... I like the colors but the other things about it would make me not pick it up. [what things?] It looks sort of romance novelish
I guess which is something I don’t read.” Another person who didn’t pick this for either category said: “This one too looks like one of those sort of sappy, I don’t know, soap opera between two covers.”

Another person who didn’t pick this for either category said: “I’m not against romance. I occasionally read romance especially after I get my masters paper done I’m probably going to find a romance to read just because it will be fun and light and simple. But I would say if I was going to read a romance I don’t usually pick ones that have roses on the cover because I am a simple cover kind of girl so it’s not the kind of one I would pick up.”

Nine other people discarded this book with 7 of those picking the book for the first or second position of their no pile. Again, this is probably due to the book successfully communicating what genre it is which appealed to the person who chose it but did not appeal to the others.

The people who discarded this book said: “It’s flowery and bright and just kind of nauseating. It looks like it’s trying too hard to be like lush or something;” “looks like a cheap romance;” “looks like something that would appeal to women;” “It just screams romance ... and just the flowers are over the top;” “from the cover with the pink roses in a vase I would say either traditional romance or gentle-ish kind of read, again two genres that don’t appeal to me. And it looks like it could be the cover of Martha Stewart Living, again something that doesn’t appeal to me;” “I’m kind of torn with this one. I mean the title normally would interest me and I’d want to see what it is, but I don’t. The picture, the imagery looks so glossy ... it almost makes me think it’s more like a romance or something ...[and] the flowers with the plaid, it’s a little bit too much.”
Appendix IIa: Chosen Books

 Ranked by Total Number of “Yes” Selections
L1= 1st choice to look at, L2= 2nd choice to look at, etc...
x=female interviewee, x=male interviewee

<table>
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<th>Book Title</th>
<th>L1</th>
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<th>L4</th>
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*Note: Due to ties by individuals, the rankings do not add up to the same for each column*
Appendix IIb: Discarded Books

Ranked by Total Number of “No” Selections
D1= 1st choice to discard, D2=2nd choice to discard, etc...
x=female interviewee, x=male interviewee

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*Note: Due to ties by informants, the rankings do not add up to the same for each column
Appendix III: Interview Protocol

I. Demographic and Preference Questions
Interviewees were asked 1) What is your age?; 2) What is your year in library school?; 3) What is your favorite type of art?; 4) What is your favorite type of book to read for pleasure?; 5) How many books do you read a month or a year for pleasure?; 6) Do you ever reread books?; 7) Do you display or have books in view in your homes?; and 8) How many books do you own?

II. Book Sample
Interviewees were shown the selection of books. They were then told to pick five books they would be interested in picking up in order to find out more information and five they know they would not want to pick up. They were then asked to rank these choices. After ranking, they were asked why they picked each book, what they thought the book might be about, and to use a word or phrase to describe the book. After this was done for each of the selected books, interviewees were given the opportunity to comment further on any of the books, including those not selected. They were then asked if they felt a personal connection to any of the books in the sample.

III. Dust Jackets and Book as Object Interview
Interviewees were asked: 1) What do dust jackets brought to a book that would be missing otherwise? 2) Think of some of your favorite books. Can you remember what the covers of the books look like? 3) Some scholars feel a book lays the foundation for the reading of a book; do you agree with this? 4) Do you ever look at the cover when reading a book? 5) Have you ever bought a book because you liked the cover? Have you ever not bought a book because you disliked the cover? What about movie tie-ins? 6) Would you rather read a bound book, a book that has been printed out from a computer and put in a binder, or an ebook? Why? 7) On a scale of 1-10 with 10 being the highest, how important would you say dust jackets are as a whole (front, back, inside flaps etc...) to you when making a decision about reading a book?
References


