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Judging Books by Their Covers: How Cover Design Influences Our Perception of Books and Their Audience

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Let's talk about books!
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Abstract: Readers judge books by their covers no matter how many times they are told not to. Though it may seem to go against the age-old saying, publishers want consumers to judge books based on their design. However, covers sometimes fail to accurately represent the content and themes of their books, especially when they aim at attracting women. Critics in recent years are concerned that covers appealing to females alienate males before they've even considered the content. This issue of cover design leads people to believe that books have gender as they attract one sex and not the other. When put into the context of gender studies, the issue relates to gender stereotypes and societal perceptions about what topics a particular sex should or should not be interested in. In addition, design elements such as titles, blurbs, trends, and color schemes make statements about the audience and content of books. Bringing author and book examples into conversation illustrates how cover design is a book's strongest communication tool as it influences the way people classify books. Gendered book covers limit the opportunities for readers and writers to connect with each other. Ultimately, publishers need to design covers that successfully appeal to both sexes in order to avoid the negative consequences of gendered books.

What influences our decision to read a book?

❖ **Form** – Books are found as hardcovers, paperbacks, and e-books. Paperbacks and e-books surpass hardcovers in sales because most people prefer them for being more portable and less expensive.

❖ **Title** – In order to appeal to consumers, a title must (1) identify the work, (2) allude to the work's subject matter, and (3) call attention the work.

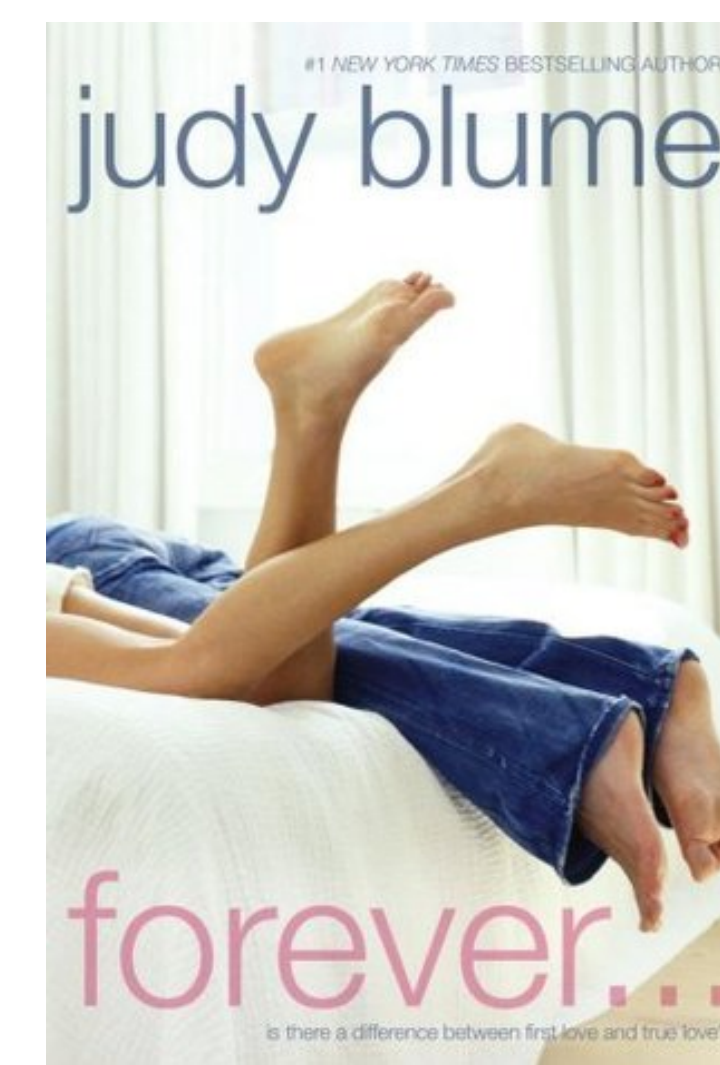
❖ **Blurbs** – Blurbs are brief content summaries or promotional pieces that serve to hook the readers' interest. Often appearing as quotes from the work, plot summaries, author biographies, and reviews, these can be written by any combination of the publisher, authors, credible magazines, journals, newspapers, and fans. After appealing to the cover art and title, readers look to the blurbs in order to see for sure if the book will be worth their time.

❖ **Author accomplishments** – Prize winnings and award nominations are prominently displayed on the cover to communicate importance to buyers. Tags like "Oprah's Book Club" or "Editor Choice Award" broadcast popularity and positive conversation surrounding the book as if to say, "Others are raving about this book, so you should too." As a result, consumers are more likely to pick up the book for what the majority of people are saying about it.

❖ **Position in a store** – A store manager can decide to sort books based on occasion (holiday reading), special interest (tear-jerker), benefits offered (how-to), or how they compare to competition (the week's bestsellers). Larger shops create special collections like these and also divide their inventory by genre or subject. Readers browse these collections based on their specific needs and interests.

Comparing Covers

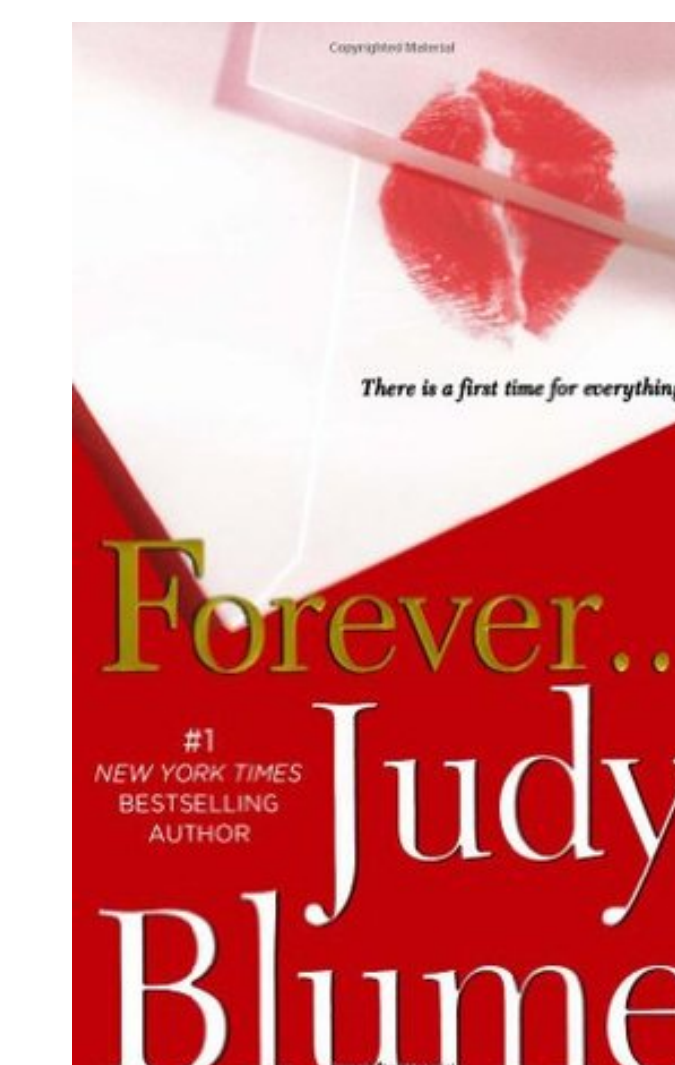
To illustrate the expectations brought on by cover design, I compared three different editions of Judy Blume's *Forever*, a young adult novel originally published in 1975. This coming-of-age story explores teenage sexuality through the intense and exclusive relationship between two high school seniors. On her website, Blume describes the book's intended audience: "There are sexually explicit scenes in this book and it shouldn't be shelved in the children's section of the library or bookstore. At the time it was written there was no formal category of 'Young Adult,' but surely that's how it would be published today."



Cover 1: Simon Pulse, 2007
The grown-up bodies snuggled on a bed indicate a romantically friendly scene that seems to target teenagers. While still eye-catching, the cover art is soft and hints at a romantic plot line. The light colors and airy atmosphere imply that the content is neither heavy nor emotionally-straining.



Cover 2: Macmillan Children's Books, 2011
Because the author's name is in all caps and takes up nearly half of the cover, it seems the publisher was relying on Blume's popularity and reputation to sell the book. The flowers, bright colors, and bubblegum-like font give the impression that it is for an innocent, early teenage audience.



Cover 3: Simon Spotlight Entertainment, 2007
The deep red background and lipstick-kissed envelope insinuate a hot romance driven by passion and lust. This is a smaller-sized paperback edition reminiscent of the steamy romance novels that stereotypical older women read. The serif font is strong and especially mature when set against the red background.



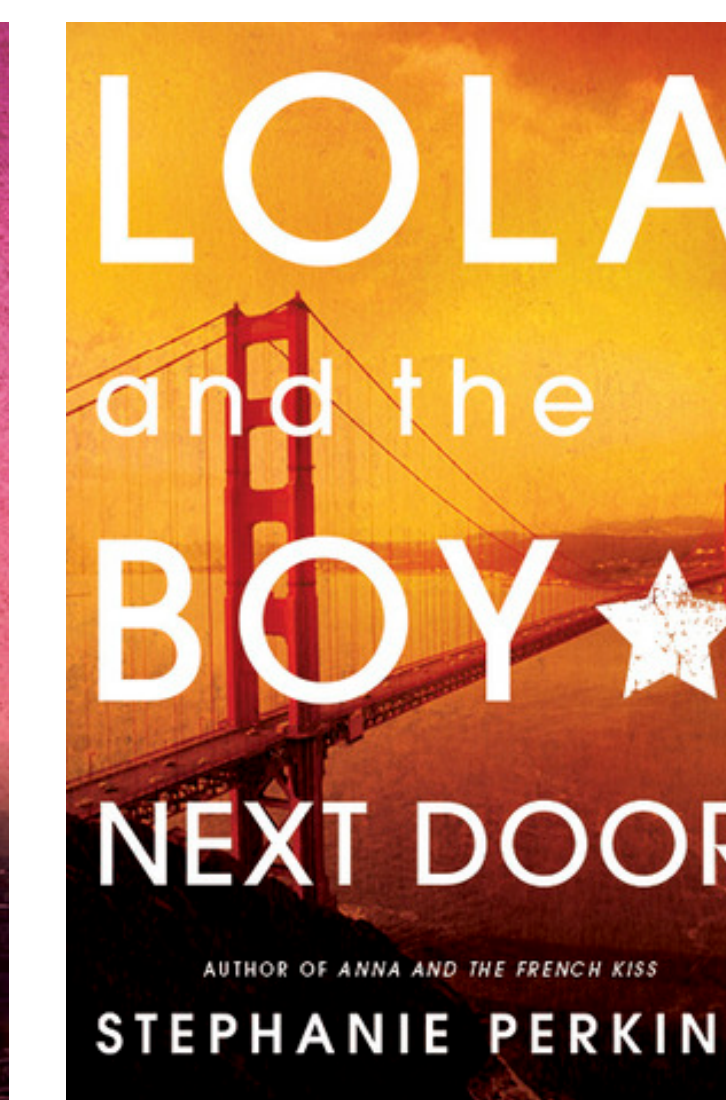
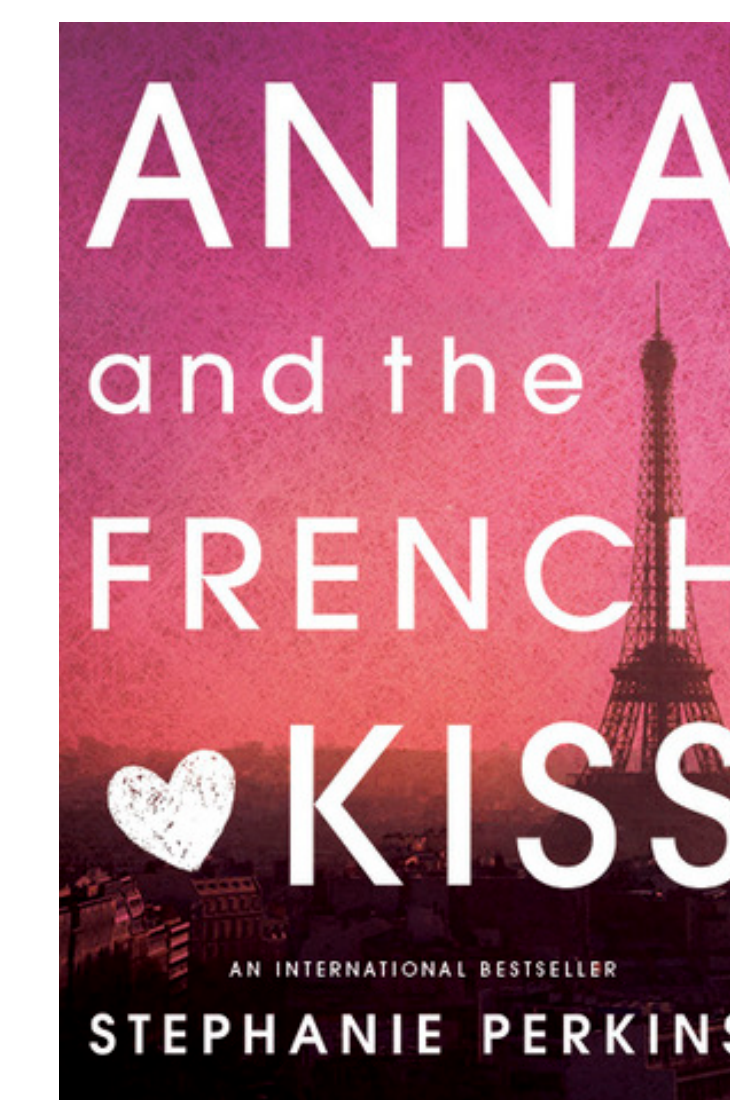
Cover Trends

A common trend for young adult novels in recent years takes real life photos of people and crops the images so their identity is not revealed. This "headless character" trend aims at beckoning readers to take a closer look and allows them to form their own picture of what the character looks like. Posting a picture of exactly what the hero or heroine looks like is hard to shake off if readers prefer to imagine everything for themselves. Therefore mystery and filling in the blanks is necessary.



Cover Redesign

For books that were first published as hardcovers, the paperback release offers a new cover design with modified features, acting as a second shot in most cases. The new covers (on right) for Stephanie Perkins' books aim at capturing a newer and more inclusive audience.



What are gendered books?

Gendered books have covers that appeal to one sex and not the other. For example, books are often referred to as "girly" if the cover is laced in hues of pink, swirly cursive, hearts, or flowers. While many boys are turned off by these covers, some are interested in reading them but fear what being seen with a "girly" book will do to them.

Why Won't boys read them?

Most U.S. English classes discuss books written by and about males. According to Jeremy Hoffman's 2007 survey that compared core texts in western classrooms to a national survey done by Arthur Applebee in 1988, high school classrooms have been reading the same books for nearly 50 years. The only female author to make the top ten list was Harper Lee with *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Besides Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, this was also the only story on the list with a female protagonist. As a result, children grow up believing that the only narratives that matter are written by and about men. At the same time, boys get little or no exposure to books by female authors or that feature female protagonists, leaving them ill-equipped to read across gender.

Perhaps an even bigger contributor to the gender stigma is the way adults encourage gender classification and segregation. An elementary school in Kansas City created a "boys only" section in the library in an effort to get more boys to read. Under the assumption that the reading levels of young boys take a plunge in the fourth grade, the school gathered a collection of books that had a boy aspect to them (41 Action News). While this seems like a great idea on the surface – creating a "man cave" where boys can discover books written just for them – it says something more important about how we view literature: books have gender, classified as either girl books or boy books. By restricting certain books to be for one gender only, the opposite sex learns they are wrong for wanting to read books that are supposedly unrelated to their gender.

Sources used on this poster

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