Judging a Book by its Cover

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Byline: Alec Williams on a new design award.

Just like adults, children will decide to pick up a book if the cover attracts their attention. Why then are so many children?s book covers dated, gloomy or too sophisticated? Why should good books fail because of their poor covers? Yorkshire Libraries for Children decided it was time for action. Alec Williams reports.

Here?s a question for you. What have the following books got in common?

Anne Fine?s *Flour Babies*

Sylvia Waugh?s *The Mennyms*

Virginia Euwer Wolff?s *Make Lemonade*

While you are thinking, let me ask you another one. If you take part in meetings about children?s books with colleagues, how many of these comments have you heard?:

*I thought I was going to enjoy it but it wasn?t really what I?d imagined ...?*

*Looks a bit ?worthy? ...?*

*Great story - but I don?t think it?ll issue well.?*

*It?ll probably do better in a paperback edition.?*

*What 15-year-old would want to be seen reading that??*

The answers to both these questions relate to an aspect of publishing which is often passionately discussed, but where the creators are often unknown and unsung. It is an aspect that generates strong feelings amongst adult selectors of children?s books, but where little is known about children?s views. All we do know is that it is usually the most important reason for children to choose one book rather than another.

By now perhaps you have guessed that I am referring to the design of book covers. All three titles mentioned above have covers which were, to put it mildly, ?talking points? amongst teachers and librarians. Were their publishers trying to put children off?

The combination of jacket artwork, typography and design is critically important in helping authors reach their readers. Surveys of children?s reading habits always show that cover design comes very high amongst the criteria children use to buy or borrow particular books. Knowing little of author reputations and sometimes overawed by the number of books
available, children often choose what to read solely on the basis of an intriguing or exciting cover.

As teachers and librarians have less time to intervene and introduce books to children directly and as more and more libraries have face-out display, the more important the role of cover design becomes. If librarians make the move from approval copies towards reliance on CD-ROMs for selection, where little more than the cover can be seen, cover design will be even more important.

Two years ago, *Yorkshire Libraries for Children?*, the regional group of Senior Children?s and Schools Librarians in Yorkshire, decided to do something about off-putting covers. We had been struck by how many poor ones we saw - especially for new hardback fiction. These covers were blighting the chances of some excellent stories to be taken off the shelf. We had seen covers that were too static, too dark and gloomy, too odd, too dated in style or ?too adult? to appeal to the children with whom we work. We knew that our views were shared as the subject had been aired a number of times at librarians? national meetings and conferences. Attempts to influence publishers in the past had not always been successful; we suspected that many hardback covers were designed to appeal to adult selectors with no market testing amongst children. We were determined that children should have their say, too.

What we devised, *The Big Book Cover Award?*, has just celebrated its first successful year. Supported by Morley Books, this new award for fiction and poetry covers (picture books and non-fiction are not eligible) celebrates the best in children?s book cover design, and has amongst its aims:

- to highlight the critical importance of cover design in the success of children?s books (success not just in terms of critical acclaim, but also in terms of issues, sales, and evidence of reader enjoyment)
- to introduce a stronger element of consumer opinion into cover design (children, and those who select for them - librarians, parents, teachers)
- to spotlight the importance of cover design amongst library services, and encourage them to act on this in library design and book promotion
- to encourage publishers to improve cover designs, in line with the award?s criteria (and perhaps alarm them, since the award is unique in having a ?worst? cover category, too!)
- to promote good quality books for children.

Author Pete Johnson launched the award in May 1995 and librarians sent in nominations throughout 1995 in the two age categories: books for 6-9 year-olds and books for 10-year-olds and upwards. They also sent us one or two nominations for our ?worst? cover category although we were eventually to decide that it would be invidious to award it.

In February last year Yorkshire Libraries for Children members met at Morley Books and completed a first trawl through the nominations to produce shortlists of around 12 books for each of the two age categories. We discussed what good book cover design involved. It was not simply a matter of good quality artwork; many books had that, but still missed their mark. It had a lot to do with marketing - much of the success of the ?Point Horror? series was undeniably due to its clever graphic style. Artistic merit was one obvious criterion, but also included were: an adult judgement of ?child appeal?; children?s views; marketing merit; choice of subject and style; and the overall cover design. Our shortlists, we felt, had covers with that indefinable ?something? that raised them above the rest. Now it was time to put our views to the test.

Between February and the final panel meeting in May, the two shortlists were ?road tested? by children at a Calderdale primary school and a Sheffield secondary school. The children discussed the covers at length and then voted on them. Interestingly, the children?s views coincided closely with those of the adult judging panel which I then chaired. It consisted of author Pete Johnson, illustrator Korky Paul, John Chippendale from Morley Books representing a book buyer?s view, Barbara Smith from the primary school and Ros Wilkes from the secondary school whose children had
taken part; and Vickie Plum of the local Children?s Book Group who gave an independent parent?s view.

Our 6-9 category winner was Diz Wallis?s cover for Dick King-Smith?s The Terrible Trins (Viking). ?It?s going to be about muscly mice...? and ?I like stories about naughty animals!? were some of the children?s comments.

The 10+ category winner was Ian Butterworth?s cover for Ann Halam?s The Fear Man (Orion). This cover was a controversial choice - not least because one of its nominations was for the ?worst? cover category! It does not use bright colour, there is no action-packed scene depicting a high point in the plot - but it manages to be both scary and unsettling. Is that a face, or a piece of crumpled newspaper? We concluded that some covers work because they plainly show what story to expect; others force you to take a second look. When this latter sort succeed - and not all do - they succeed triumphantly. The Fear Man is one such success, and it was therefore also the overall winner of the first Big Book Cover Award. ?Weird - catches the eye!? and ?something strange is going on - I want to find out what ...? were some of the comments from our road-testers.

The Awards were presented on the Morley Books stand at the Library Resources Exhibition on 4th June 1996. The publishers of the winning titles were there to receive our unique ?book man? sculptures on behalf of their cover illustrators, and the two winning artists have each been given the opportunity to donate a collection of children?s books to a children?s organisation of their choice.

It is our hope that this new award will encourage more people involved with young readers to judge a book by its cover - after all, this is what children do!

Alec Williams is Senior Librarian, Children?s & Education Unit, Calderdale Libraries.

The Big Book Cover Award is now into its second year for nominations. Nomination slips are available from Morley Books on 0113 2538811. If you would like more information about the award, contact Alec Williams (Tel: 01422 392618; Fax: 01422 392615; Email: ceu@argonet.co.uk [3]) or Jennifer Madden (Tel: 01484 226825).

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