favorite contemporary authors—J. K. Rowling, Stephenie Meyer, and Suzanne Collins. However, it was with some hesitation that they ventured to list “alternative” choices such as speechwriters (Martin Luther King Jr.), lyricists (Kanye West), or screenwriters (Quentin Tarantino). A discussion of why the class felt more reluctant to name some band members than others not only helped students to reach conclusions about which texts are already widely canonized in the West but also encouraged them to think critically about trends in genre, style, and periodization. In examining the “album cover” that we created, students further noted the overwhelming representation of white British and American men. We were then able to discuss what factors contributed to this canonical trend as well as the need and potential for change.

Although I have had great success with this exercise in general literature surveys, it could also work well in genre courses (classes devoted to the gothic, science fiction, mystery, detective fiction, or romance) and in contemporary fiction survey courses, where canons have yet to solidify.

EXERCISE

Choose two or three books (they may be popular or canonical) and cart into class as many different editions of them as you can. (A suitcase to carry them all makes a nice stage prop.) Any book with a range of covers will do,
though books with long, diverse, or controversial publication histories work best: James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans*, Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, or Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*. Should it prove useful to you, many books have critical works dedicated to their publication history (for example, Cathy Davidson’s “The Life and Times of *Charlotte Temple*: The Biography of a Book” examines dozens of editions of Susanna Rowson’s best-selling seduction novel). The exercise itself, however, does not require such scholarly apparatus; it can be conducted simply by relying on available editions in your library.

Divide the class into small groups, distribute different editions of each book to each group, and ask the students to do what they have always been told not to do: judge a book by its cover. If you are not able to bring physical copies of the different editions themselves, you can instead bring photocopies of the individual covers, whose images can usually be found online. Color copies work best, especially for paperback editions. Place one cover on each page and then distribute to the different groups.

After you distribute the books, provide students with a list of guiding questions: What kind of image, typeface, or layout has the publisher chosen for each cover? What does the cover seem to say about the kind of story this book tells? Does the edition dive right into the tale or does it include a scholarly introduction or preface? Taken as a whole, what kind of audience does this book seem designed for, and how do you know? If you have brought physical copies of the books, encourage students to look at the back covers and tables of contents too. This group portion of the exercise takes roughly fifteen minutes.

Next, reconvene the class as a whole and allow another fifteen to twenty minutes for groups to share their findings. What was the most interesting thing they discovered? What surprised them the most? Which of the editions scream “canon” and which keep readers guessing? Be sure to leave yourself enough time at the end to make a few salient general comments—about books, readers, canons, and commerce.

**REFLECTIONS**

I like to do this exercise on the first day of the semester, introducing as many books on the syllabus as possible. Not only is it a nice icebreaker for students to get to know each other, but it also gets them excited about all the texts they will soon be reading. The purpose of the exercise is to encourage students to consider the ways that literary texts change over time, shaped by forces of reception and canonization. The history of book covers can reveal much about shifting literary contexts. Trends in scholarship or the marketplace can even give old texts new life.
When I tried this exercise in a course on American best sellers, students quickly observed that Raymond Chandler’s 1940 hard-boiled detective novel *Farewell, My Lovely* takes on a different aura when we encounter the Vintage reprint edition emblazoned with a single white manicured hand with red polished nails, and wrapped in the signature pink and purple shades of chick lit. Others marveled at the unexpected disparity between an image of a languid hunter perched atop a tree in the highbrow 1914 clothbound edition of Edgar Rice Burroughs’s *Tarzan* and the big-haired beefcake swinging from vines above a beleaguered (and barely dressed) damsel in distress from the late 1980s Ballantine version they had been assigned. Still others dissected the scholarly apparatus included in the Penguin edition of Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*, an element they noted had been conspicuously absent from the other paperbacks on our syllabus.

There were many questions generated during our discussion: Can such wildly different-looking texts even be called the same book? Could the stature or “street cred” of any given text be diminished or reinforced by the way it is packaged for its imagined readers? Does every book cover ultimately work to calibrate the demands or expectations we might have of the book inside it, whether we realize it or not? These queries set the stage for the way that we later encountered (and reconsidered) every other best seller on our syllabus. But the most tangible takeaway of this exercise was that our course was grounded from the outset in my students’ newfound insight that book covers might color the way we approach a given text and that those cultural cues have changed over the life of a novel. In other words, this exercise did not just open new avenues for approaching familiar texts: it also shed light on the wider cultural context that had shaped each book’s ever-shifting material form. It turns out that sometimes you really can judge a book by its cover.

---

**The Blank Syllabus**

*Chris Walsh*

A do-it-yourself exercise that invites students to complete your syllabus by selecting some of the course readings.

- **Genre:** *any*
- **Course Level:** *any*
- **Student Difficulty:** *moderate*
- **Teacher Preparation:** *medium*

For general queries, contact webmaster@press.princeton.edu