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1

Book Covers

I begin, as most readers must, with book covers. Book covers are drawn into the interstices of reading, as inattentively observed or casually overlooked as a pub such as the Leaky Cauldron might be in London. The images and words on book covers convey a fleeting first impression of what may be in the book, arouse expectations; book covers draw certain readers in, select them as they select the book; book covers tacitly mould readers' expectations and influence reading by the fulfilment or failure of those initial expectations. Every time a book is opened yet again the reader's gaze passes thoughtlessly over the covers and something of their first influence is rekindled. Yet the part of book covers in making a (quite possibly lasting) formative impression on the reader may be forgotten under the weight of their all too tangible and constant material usefulness as the recognizable surfaces, protective coverings, of particular editions. The materiality and material usefulness of book covers often obscure their role in the process of reading. Yet book covers are implicated in the process of reading even before the reader engages with the text that is 'contained' between them. On book covers the covert machinations of the industry that mediates the passage of books between authors and readers are obviously and yet disarmingly casually presented to view. The point is hardly worth labouring: so I begin, as most readers inevitably do (but perhaps more attentively than is usual), with book covers.

I have two Bloomsbury copies of each of the following¹ before me as I write this: J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (*Stone* hereafter), *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (*Chamber* hereafter), *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (*Prisoner* hereafter) and *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (*Goblet* hereafter). One of the two copies of each is directed at children and the other at adults. I know this because

the covers of children's copies of *Stone*, *Chamber*, *Prisoner* and *Goblet* have quite different images from the adults' copies of the same titles. This is especially intriguing because that is the only significant difference between the children's copies and the adults' copies. In every other respect the differences are minor: there is a slight price difference (the adults' copies cost a jot more), the print of the adults' copies is marginally smaller, the reviews quoted on the back covers are not the same (but similar). The texts within – from bibliographical details and dedications to conclusions – are identical in the children's copies and their adults' counterparts. The images on the covers mainly identify the children's copies as being for children and the adults' copies of exactly the same texts as being for adults. Images, in brief, distinguish the ostensible readerships of these particular editions.

The texts are the same but the images tell different stories, and therefore may lie at the interstices of reading and mould the process of reading, in unobtrusively different ways. The children's copies have sharply defined and cheerfully coloured paintings, cartoon-strip in effect, crowded, action-packed images presented with self-conscious artifice. Images spill over from the front cover onto the back, colours clash with each other vividly in the letters of the title and their backdrops. The flashy images appear to move towards the reader in unexpectedly engaging ways: the Hogwarts Express of the children's *Stone* seems to rush headlong towards the reader and a somewhat exaggeratedly myopic Harry; Mr. Weasley's flying car charges straight through the clouds at the reader on the children's *Chamber*; the Hippogriff of the children's *Prisoner* flies just over the reader's nose (sharply focused before a gigantic moon like the ET bicycle of Spielberg's film); the Hungarian Horntail dragon looms threateningly over Harry and the reader on the children's *Goblet*. Harry is easily recognized by the lightning scar on his forehead. The action places Harry and the reader in close proximity: the reader is not a voyeur who participates in the desirable action from a titillating distance, but someone who is visually and immediately so close to Harry that they could well merge. This reader can vicariously become Harry. This is presumably the child reader, innocently captured by the flash of colours, the whirl of action and naively drawn into empathizing with the hero who is in the midst of it all. Some of the same motifs appear on the adults' book covers, but the images are dark and subdued. These are black-and-white photographs or photo-collages, confined within a geometrically defined space on the front cover. There is a quaint steam train puffing along on the cover of the adult *Stone*; a 1950s-looking car emptily wading through clouds on the adult *Chamber*; a lonely and

somewhat awkwardly assembled half-eagle half-horse suspended over some cotton-wool clouds on the adult *Prisoner*; and a photograph of what is distinctly a Chinese dragon (stuff of myths) on the adult *Goblet*. The motifs are the same as on the children's book covers, but dislocated from the action of the story for there is no Harry and friends in their midst: no Harry looking astonished, or Harry being matey with Ron, or Harry with an alarmed Hermione clutching on to him, or Harry dodging dragons. The motifs are dislocated from their instrumental roles within the novels and stand out stark and lonely on the adult covers, held at a distance by their quaintness, made remote by the nostalgic tint of black-and-white photographs. Revealed thus in all their strangeness they appear to acquire mysteriously symbolic meanings, connotations that are reminiscent of something that cannot be remembered. The reader is held at a distance, invited to retreat into a past, black-and-white world, left alone with some faintly intrigued feeling and some mildly questioning sensations. This is presumably the adult reader, a wistful, self-possessed, thoughtful person with a black-and-white past.

The child reader and adult reader so characterized are the 'implied readers' of these book covers; these book covers predispose the reader to the books and thereby also predispose the books for the reader.

Old theoretical quarrels lurk behind the phrase 'implied reader'. It was reasonably clear to Wolfgang Iser (responsible for that phrase) that a dialectical relationship exists between the reader and the text of a literary work (and to some extent any text).² A reader brings certain necessarily unique associations, attitudes, beliefs, experiences to her reading; the literary work presents a juxtaposition of words, phrases, sentences, descriptions, narratives, etc. The two interact and readings are produced which are necessarily different for different readers. And yet readings (insofar as they relate to particular literary works and some common ground in human experience and expression) also open the possibility of discussion and exchange about what is accepted as being the same text. It is the latter that primarily interested Iser – a literary work is always that particular literary work (despite different possible readings) because the given text guides the process of reading to some extent. In other words, the text of a literary work has an 'implied reader':

He embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect – predispositions laid down, not by empirical outside reality, but by the text itself. Consequently, the implied reader as a concept has his roots firmly planted in the structure of the text; he is a construct and in no way to be identified with any real reader.³

This concept of the ‘implied reader’, which is naturally attractive and useful, gave rise to a series of disagreements. Stanley Fish argued that to derive the reader so single-mindedly from the text of a literary work is to miss the point. The process of reading is more comprehensively directed by certain assumptions about how to read and understand texts that exist among specific critics (or the ‘interpretive strategies’ that are agreed upon by an ‘interpretive community’), so much so that it is questionable whether a particular text can be said to have any discrete and determinative existence at all.⁴ A waspish exchange followed between Iser and Fish.⁵ Others felt that both Iser’s and Fish’s were rather fanciful and abstract ways of trying to come to grips with the process of reading: the thing to do is to study carefully how actual readers read – to actualize the reader.⁶ And yet others maintained that this whole business of focusing on reading alone at the expense of everything else was misguided and overstated.⁷

With the Bloomsbury covers of the *Harry Potter* books in mind it is immediately evident that though I have found it convenient to use Iser’s phrase to clarify their effect – and have made that an excuse for a brief excursion into some pedantic-sounding arguments from the 1970s and 1980s – nothing else about Iser’s thoughts are relevant here. And nor, for that matter, are those of his immediate opponents. Readers, in this instance, have not been implied by the text (as written words) but by the covers. There is no point in turning to anyone else who pondered Iser at that time to come to grips with this curious phenomenon. All of those mentioned above shared at least this with Iser: they were concerned with the status of the text in relation to the reader and vice versa, and not with covers of particular editions. Their understanding of the text of a literary work never included the book covers. Book covers were too trivial for their attention.

But book covers do matter for the *Harry Potter* series. What is clear here is that different ‘implied readers’ have been distinctly and discernibly suggested without any reference to what is conventionally regarded as the text of a literary work. This is certainly not unique to the *Harry Potter* series (think of all the different book covers for the same text that we constantly encounter as readers). But the confidence and simplistic clarity with which this is done on the *Harry Potter* books is striking. The effect of this brash confidence in the impact of book covers, in the shells of books, is one of diminishing the substance of the text – those written pages – to some extent. It makes me aware, quite against my usual habits, of the degree to which the *Harry Potter* series, and what Jack Zipes has called the *Harry Potter* ‘phenomenon’,⁸ are about something that

appears not to be confined to the text or its 'implied readers' or, for that matter, actual readers or even the 'interpretive strategies' of 'interpretive communities'. It seems to have more to do with images and the production of images and the place of images in producing, advertising and marketing books. Is that indeed the case?

For the moment I simply leave that question suspended there.

But have I revisited those somewhat rusty reader-response theories only to say they are not relevant to me? Did I need to take so circuitous a route to make my rather obvious point? Well – not entirely. I am actually primarily interested in the question of *reading texts*, and what that means for the specific matter of reading the *Harry Potter* series (the printed pages thereof). My discussion of book covers here is mainly to lead into the written words and their reception. I have ideas to ponder about reading texts, especially apropos the *Harry Potter* books, for which this brief prelude on reader-response is bound to be useful – eventually.

Much would get clarified when I get down, gradually and unhurriedly, to explaining what exactly this essay is about. I wish to say no more for the moment than that this essay is about *the political and social implications of the Harry Potter books, or the political and social effects that constitute the Harry Potter phenomenon*. I say no more for the moment (what did that mean?) and instead allow myself to be distracted by what the book covers have conveyed to me: the distinction between adult readers and child readers. I should try to clarify what this distinction between adult and child readers consists in outside/inside the book covers.

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