

**Reading a Book Through Its Cover: The Importance of Preserving Visual
and Tactile Information in Children's and Young Adult Literature in the
Academic Library**

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Reading a Book Through Its Paratext: The Importance of Preserving Visual and Tactile Information In Children's and Young Adult Literature in an Academic Library

Abstract: Children's and Young Adult books are an anomaly in many academic libraries and their presence is often overlooked or ignored. In particular, the dust jackets and other paratextual elements are often considered to be ephemeral and not worth preserving for the long term. However, a growing body of research based in the work of Gerard Genette's theories about paratext show that these elements are vitally important in literacy development to the readers of these books. This paper points to the importance of retaining and preserving all parts of the paratext, in particular the dust jackets and book covers, and advocates for changes in many current library policies that would encourage the preservation of paratext in these books.

Introduction

Are you guilty of judging books by their covers? Think about the last time that you looked at a book and pulled it from the shelves (or quickly returned it) simply because of how it looked. Was it the colors that appealed to you, or the pictures and design on the cover? Take comfort - you are not alone. It might be fair to say that readers in general are attracted to books because of their covers. This may be an even more important factor when considering the dust jackets and book covers of Children's and Young Adult (YA) books where the text and the pictures work in a synchronous manner. Books that are part of the Children's and YA genres have been added to the growing roster of materials that are collected and housed in academic libraries where they have become a vital part of providing gateways to greater understanding of literacy pedagogy through colleges of education and other child development programs.

What happens when the covers are removed or treated in a more cavalier manner? What does a reader think of the book when it is bare and monotone? Does

that affect the way a book is read? Can covers be removed while still preserving the integrity of the text inside? The French philosopher Gerard Genette wrote a series of books in which he introduced the concept of paratext and the importance of taking in the book as an entire object: dust jacket, illustrations, type size, font styles, etc. This article traces the history of research on maintaining the integrity of the entire book, such as dust jackets and book covers, and outlines how academic libraries can adjust processing procedures to preserve these dust jackets on Children's and YA books.

Literature Review

The component of most concern is the processing stage when Children's and YA literature are often treated exactly like all other academic books in the general academic collections. When the dust jackets are removed from the books and discarded, vital information is lost. Research has established that paratext is needed to develop the literacy skills of interpretation, inference, and sequencing. The most important reason for the loss of paratext could be ignorance of its importance in the reading process:

“In a picture book, both the text and the illustration sequence would be incomplete without the other. They have a synergistic relationship in which the total effect depends not only on the union of the text and illustrations but also on the perceived interactions or transactions between these two parts.” (Sipe 1998, 98-99)

Paratext has become part of the literacy lexicon due to the work of the French structural philosopher Gerard Genette. Structuralism is the philosophical foundation Genette used for a series of books in which he developed his literary theories. The most important of Genette's studies was published in a 1997 book titled *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. It was in this book Genette defined paratext as

“...what enables a text to become a book and be offered as such to its readers, and, more generally, to the public.” (Genette 1997, 1)

In other words, paratext is everything around the book that adds to the story within. He believed that nothing is read out of the context, or structure, in which it is presented and states in the introduction to the book *Paratexts*

“A literary work consists, entirely or essentially, of a text, defined ... as a more or less long sequence of verbal statements that are more or less endowed with significance. But this text is rarely presented in an unadorned state, unreinforced and unaccompanied by a certain number of verbal or other productions, such as an author’s name, a title, a preface, illustrations. And although we do not always know whether these productions are to be regarded as belonging to the text, in any case they surround it and extend it, precisely in order to present it ... For us, accordingly, the paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers ... More than a boundary or a sealed border, the *paratext* is, rather, a *threshold*, ...” (Genette 1997, 1)

The genius of what Genette did was to name and define an idea that opened the floodgates for a plethora of research on and around the subjects of paratext, peritext, and epitext. Since Genette coined the term, paratext has come to be defined as all parts of a book, including the physical size of the book, dust jacket or book cover design, spine design, cover design (embossed, plain, colored), endpapers (colored, printed, plain, designed, textured, not textured), frontispiece, type size/style, epigraphs, chapter headings, deckling or other treatment of edges, predominant colors used, maps, charts, and family trees yet excluding the actual story. It also includes the tactile sensations that result from the type, weight, and finish of paper used throughout the book and covers.

Genette subdivided paratext into peritext and epitext. Peritext is “... that part of the paratext which is included in the book-as-object, ...” (Genette 1997,

5). These are things that are inside of the covers of the book but not part of the actual text. Examples of peritext include, but are not limited to, items such as maps, family trees, indexes, glossaries, forewords, tables of contents and epilogues. Epitext is considered to be the things that are "... communications outside the text that can also influence whether and how the text is read." (Gross 2016, 116) Examples of epitext include items added onto the book in the cataloging process such as labels and stickers but can also include items that are printed on the dust jackets such as blurbs, award, critiques, and author endorsements. Genette denotes that the relationship of paratext with epitext and peritext can be described with the formula "paratext = peritext + epitext." (Genette 1997, 5)

Dust jackets and book covers contain illustrations and information that are vital to the sequence and message of the story because the text may not be the sole purveyor of information. In Children's books especially, the illustrations and the text work in tandem. If one part is missing, valuable components of the information are also incomplete. This interferes with the ability of the reader to understand the text as a whole.

"Reading a picture book to a young child requires some mindfulness with regard to the potential of the reading and how the text and illustrations might shape meaning of people and circumstances." (Chen and Browne 2015, 16)

This paper explores the philosophical foundations of why preservation of paratext is important; it also provides information concerning best practices in preserving the paratext so that the entire book can be enjoyed, studied, and used as intended by the author, designer, and publisher.

The threshold through which the reader enters the world of the book starts at the beginning -- with the cover. The outside of a book is the first contact that the potential reader has with the paratext. This outside can be the boards of the book covered in paper or buckram cloth, or it can be the more colorful and attention grabbing paper dust jacket added to the book by the publisher.

Canadian academic and author Ted Bishop dealt at length with the subject of book covers as the window through which all readers come to a book. He summed up Genette's main idea about the importance of paratext:

"I was beginning to get a sense of how the physical book would change your reading of the text. ... I was reading the 'paratext,' the elements surrounding the text - cover art, blurbs, prefaces, introductions - all of those 'thresholds,' as the French critic Gerard Genette calls them, that we must cross before encountering the text itself. There is no such thing as pure text; we always reach it through the paratext, and though we may try to ignore it, it shapes our reading. Who said, 'Don't judge a book by its cover?' We always do." (Bishop 2005, 119)

Bishop was looking at a copy of James Joyce's *Ulysses* when he wrote that passage, but he could have been talking about a child's picture book.

Children start to make meanings and connections as soon as they encounter the book. This starts with the initial analyses and inferences they make when they see the book cover and continues as they sequence through the interior illustrations. Karchorsky et al. (2017) studied the specific features using book covers and inside illustrations that children use to make inferences. These included: typographical features, paralinguistic features, design, illustrations, and background knowledge. One of the findings from this research is that children are

making judgements based on what they see on the cover, thus, literally judging the book by its cover.

References to what can be described as paratext were generally described under other names or literary terms prior to 1997. Bibliography has been the most commonly used all-purpose word, prior to the invention of the word paratext by Genette. A definition of bibliography given in the 1975 book *Essays on Bibliography* by Brenni could almost be the modern definition of paratext. Brenni extended the definition of bibliography to include the paper used, board coverings, binding, embossing and illustrations saying "... the study of books as tangible objects.. the materials of which they are made and the manner in which those materials are put together..." (Brenni 1975, 3) are part of the bibliography. Paratext for both Brenni in 1975 and then Genette in 1998 included the touch, feel, and look of the book. Therefore, the terminology of paratext, peritext, and epitext is approximately thirty years old, but the essence, the idea of paratext, is actually much older.

Sipe (1998), Higgenot (1990), and Moebius (1986) all did important work in the use of paratext in the field of literacy education. In these articles they laid the foundations for later work in the area of paratext in literacy studies, concentrating on the use of inference, sequencing, and interpretive skills.

"...the picture in a picturebook cannot hang by themselves; ... Each works with the other in a bound sequence of images/text, inseparable in our reading experience one from the other. ... In the picturebook, we read images and text together as the mutually complementary story of a consciousness, ..." (Moebius 1986, 141)

Both Moebius and Higonnet discussed and emphasized the importance of making meaning in Children's picture books by using the entire book including illustrations, covers, frontispiece and font, or type size and style. Higonnet calls attention to the practice: "...in picture-books the verbal narrative constitutes but a portion of the whole, and what surrounds it becomes a more conspicuous part of the book."

(Higonnet 1990, 47) Because all paratextual features are planned, they are important to the final content of the book; when one takes away the paratext, crucial elements of the book are missing which presents the reader with incomplete information.

Genette theorized that the physical book was actually a frame through which the reader approached the text inside. The text was the entire sequence of words that formed the body of the work inside the covers. The paratext was that information that surrounded or accompanied the text from which the reader gathered additional meaning that helped to interpret the text. For the reader, the acts of holding and contemplating were preparatory visual and tactile experiences that came directly from involvement with the paratext and put the reader on the threshold of the book. When readers opened the cover of a book, they crossed the paratext threshold and literally entered the text. This crossing had a profound effect on the experience of reading which was essential to understanding the work as a whole. The look and feel of the book when it was first encountered gave the reader the first clue about the text and therefore could not be considered a peripheral part of the book. The paratext was as much *the book* as the text. (Genette 1997, 1)

More defining work in the area of paratext and metafictional construction of text continued after Genette and became especially important in literacy studies in education

and librarianship. The work of Sipe began in 1998, immediately following Genette, and focused on how children use pictures and other features found in the typical picture book to determine meaning.

“In a picture book, both the text and the illustration sequence would be incomplete without the other. They have a synergistic relationship in which the total effect depends not only on the union of the text and illustrations but also on the perceived interactions or transactions between these two parts.” (Sipe 1998, 98-99)

Sipe specifically studied Children’s responses to the paratext of picture books to discover how children were using the paratext. He explored why authors, illustrators, book designers, and publishers took such pains with designing books. He discovered that each element is integral to the complete understanding of the book.

“...front and back covers, dust jacket, endpapers, half-title and title pages and dedication page all work together with the text and accompanying illustrations to produce a unified effect.” (Sipe 2006, 291)

Since Genette’s groundbreaking treatise the evidence has continued to accumulate regarding the importance of paratext and how readers make meaning of the text and book. Higonet stated that features adults often find “ ... to be peripheral to the text, in Children’s literature are deliberately used to enhance the reader’s consciousness of the material ...” (Higonet 1990, 47). Thus, dust jackets become an extremely important part of the text, and are not just a merchandising tool used to induce a purchase.

Since 2000 there have been multiple papers, books, and conference presentations on the subject of paratext. Martinez (2012, 2016), Gross (2016, 2017), and Serafini (2011, 2015) have all published important work on paratext and peritext demonstrating how elementary students and other readers use paratext, peritext, and

epitext to obtain important literary skills. Gross et. al (2016) describe the six functions of peritext, each of which plays a vital role in the complete work: bibliographic, promotional, navigational, intratextual, supplemental, and documentary. The most relevant of the six elements to this paper is the promotional component, which includes the dust jacket and any awards or promotions although other important features such as maps, timelines, etc. are also delineated.

All of these authors make the connection between paratext, peritext, and epitext literacy in the books that children and young adults consume. In fact there has been so much work done on the subject that the inviolability of paratext is practically assured by this point. It is clear that the preservation of the paratext should be one of the defining credos of shelf preparation. The express purpose of picturebook collections in academic libraries is for use by college students who are using these materials with real students in actual schools to teach literacy skills; therefore, access to exemplar materials with accompanying paratext in its entirety is paramount.

Inconsistencies in Current Practice

There is debate among academic librarians about current practice regarding policies and procedures for preserving paratext; many believe that most academic libraries strip or remove books covers (paratext) from ALL books that come into their collections unless the books are destined for special collections. Stripping is defined in this paper as the practice of removing and disposing of the dust jackets and other materials that might accompany books and is done to save time and money. However, just as many believe that most academic libraries retain the book covers and dust jackets and that these circulate with the books. These books go onto the shelves of

these libraries with intact dust jackets which are retained until they are damaged, then they are removed and discarded. Nonetheless, what is clear from both of these scenarios is that there is no standard practice done by the majority of academic libraries. The end result of both practices is that dust jackets are discarded unless a book does NOT circulate. If the book is used and circulated, the chances of the dust jacket being damaged grows which increases the probability of the cover being stripped and discarded.

A brief email question was sent to the (8) statewide academic institution Curriculum Materials Center (CMC) librarians who participate in a local list-serve to determine whether academic libraries strip book covers from new acquisitions. This query asked if they retained dust jackets and if so, how did they preserve them. Five librarians replied. Three librarians stated that no book covers or dust jackets were retained in their collections and that dust jackets were removed and discarded. One library retained the dust jackets, but made no attempt to preserve them, discarding them when damaged. One library had a policy of covering all Children's and YA book covers with protective plastic covering, but this policy was stopped in 2016 and at present book covers are retained but not preserved. The number of replies was too small to make this a validated definitive study. It may be a localized idiosyncrasy that there is little to no paratextual preservation going on at the state level, but it is clear that further study on a larger scale would be useful in establishing the scope of such policies.

Dust jackets are delicate yet necessary paratext, made from a variety of papers and are unattached to the books when purchased. Regardless of the paper used, dust jackets tear easily and are regarded in general as difficult to maintain and preserve. It is

important to note that many of the dust jacket illustrations in Children's and YA books are not repeated on the inside pages, therefore it is especially important that these illustrations be retained and preserved. Higonnet states that "in picturebooks all peritextual features are especially planned and designed so that there is an aesthetic coherence to the entire book" (Higonnet 1990, 47). If part of the paratext is removed, it follows that part of the book is removed which makes it incomplete and difficult for the reader to interpret the text.

Importance of Paratext Preservation

The reasons for preserving paratext have been covered; unfortunately, the practice of preservation has not been a high priority, resulting in sporadic policies and applications. It has been long-standing practice in many libraries for book jackets to be removed and discarded. Evidence of this practice was documented as the reason for the groundbreaking O'Conner and O'Conner article from 1998 when it states

"Frequent casual observations of book jackets being removed from their books by various technical processing units in academic libraries stimulated this exploration. The book jackets may be disposed of or they may be put into give-away boxes." (O'Conner and O'Conner 1998)

Removal and discarding of book jackets is still the policy for all books at The University of Alabama Libraries, making it clear that little has changed regarding the preservation of paratext since the 1998 publication of the O'Connor article.

The only exception to this practice is the Children's and YA book collection in the CMC where the book jackets are retained but not preserved. In the effort to make processing more efficient, procedures have been standardized and standardization has taken precedence over preservation of important and relevant information. What follows are several examples of this current policy,

which is common to many academic libraries and directly interferes with understanding the paratext.

Standardization of processing requires that all books be treated the same. However, in the case of Children's and YA literature this may not be the best option. See the example pictured below where the barcode sticker totally covers the name of the author.

[Insert Figure 1 here.]

In this example not only is the author's name covered, but the script used for the title was deliberately chosen as an integral part of the design of the book jacket and is hard to decipher due to unfortunate placement. The masking of this information interferes with the ability of the reader to interpret the meaning, setting, and mood that the designer wanted to convey with this choice of script. The specific style and size of type on the cover is part of the constructed overall look, as well as containing the information that the designer wanted the reader to have when they first see the book. In this case, it would be beneficial to have a more flexible barcode-placement policy, allowing for slight adjustment that would not be an impediment to understanding.

Important paratext is often obscured when books are repaired or when very popular books are initially processed in anticipation of heavy use. The example below shows a book that has had its edges covered with cloth book repair tape in an effort to keep the edges of the cover intact. Clearly the preservation attempt has obstructed and obliterated the paratextual usefulness of the covers. Unless the reader is heavily invested in the series there is no reason to pick up this mutilated book; indeed it is tempting to judge this book by this cover. A reader new to the series would have little

clue as to the literary content of this volume when looking at the cover. Careful consideration of where to put book repair tape would make a difference in the overall look of this book, but the slapdash application totally ruins the paratext.

[Insert Figure 2 here.]

There comes a point in the life of a book when it should be discarded and replaced, rather than preserve the inside text at the expense of the paratext.

Endpapers also present some unique issues in paratext. Endpapers are integral components of books, defined as

“sheets of paper glued to book covers in order to secure them to the text block. As a part of the technical requirements of the binding process, their main function is purely practical and they are an essential part of hardcover books.” (Duran & Bosch 2011, 122)

“Endpapers can have a merely decorative or protective function in the book, but in most cases, they are a pictorial motif related to the history,” (Coifman 2013, 22) or add some visual element of interest to the book. However, publishers have noticed that “everything counts: the jacket, the flyleaf, the title pages... Every part of the book can serve the narrative and indeed this is what often happens.” (Duran and Bosch 2011, 123) Publishers are limited in options as

“they are normally limited to thirty-two pages and this number obliges authors, illustrators and publishers to be precise with the information conveyed while also making use of all the spaces available.” (Coifman 2013, 21)

Publishers have made good use of these areas, proving their importance to the work as a whole:

“...a slow, detailed, observed analysis of endpapers may allow the children to construct the general sense of the text, formulating hypotheses and expectations...Images and colors in the endpapers attract and engage the students in the reading at the first moment: they maintain the attention

and the desire of listening and discovery because at the end no words explain endpapers” (Coifman 2013, 22-23).

[Insert Figure 3 here.]

In the example above, the endpapers are of special importance. The colors and design used are important clues to the coming story. “Images and colors in the endpapers attract and engage the students in the reading at the first moment; they maintain the attention and the desire of listening and discovery because at the end no words explain endpapers.” (Coifman 2013, 23) However, when the reader opens this book, they are confronted with the date due slip being framed by the front endpaper. The date due slip has become the focal point of the page ruining the effect of the tangled vines and lush growth. Options for working around this disruption include discontinuing the application of date due slips or possibly replacing this practice with printed receipts. The colors and repeated motifs used on the endpapers are deliberately chosen to set a mood and create anticipation in the reader. The reader is deprived of the “threshold” experience as explained by Genette. (Genette 1997, 1-2)

Embossing has been around for years in book publishing, and embossed covers and endpapers are often used in books. Brenni (1975) stated that embossing was part of the bibliography of a book and Genette (1997) agreed. It is now common to see textured and raised titles on book jackets and there is a recent trend in using embossed paper as endpapers. Shown in the example below, the endpapers of this book are made with a heavy glossed and textured paper that deliberately resembles the leather covering of a basketball.

[Insert Figure 4 here.]

When a reader picks up the book and opens the cover, there is an immediate tactile sensation of touching a basketball. This is deliberately and cleverly done to evoke a physical reaction. However, in the following example, the addition of the date due slip and other library papers and markings interfere with the moment of discovery. It seems clear that the book designer, author, and publisher intended for the reader to experience the tactile and visual sensation of a basketball; this is not possible when the page is covered by the required library stamps, stickers, and papers.

[Insert Figure 5 here.]

The biggest, most visible component of paratextual preservation is the book jacket. Several different options exist for paratext preservation, including clear polyester, vinyl, and polypropylene chemical compositions in a variety of styles, sizes, finishes and options, including wraparound solutions or possibly sticky laminate. This covering protects the book jacket from damage and stays with the book, maintaining the original intent of the publisher, designer/ illustrator, and author.

Book processing is not as important in many academic libraries as it once was. It is frequently perceived as mundane. Since Pecoskie named libraries as one of the cultural institutions that connects readers with the paratext, their policies and practices regarding preservation become another gateway. (Pecoskie 2013) Little attention is paid to book preservation on a thoughtful level; it is often targeted when it comes time to look for ways to economize, standardize and streamline. However, in the case of Children's and YA books in an academic library, this is not a good place to reduce costs. If a book is not processed in a way that attracts a reader/user then it will sit on the shelf and be underutilized. Teachers and students alike will pick up books with covers that appeal to

them and use them. Attractive books attract readers, agreeing with “ ... the illustrations seduce us into stopping to look.” (Sipe 1998, 101) Since preserving the paratext on the paper dust jackets or book covers is so important to understanding the text that is inside the book, taking the time to use a protective covering only makes sense. This maintains the dust jackets and covers intact for longer periods of time and increases the numbers of circulations possible. The cost of the materials and labor needed to preserve paratext is minimal while the return on investment is great, which should be reason enough to preserve the paratext with protective coverings.

Recommendations and Conclusion

There is no doubt that library practices are important in the preservation of paratext. “Paratexts are access points to the text, both from an informational and from an interpretive perspective.” (Pecoskie 2013, 233) This insight suggests that the book jacket is vitally important to the interpretation of the book, yet current practice in many academic institutions requires the removal of this important paratext access point. Two studies spanning two decades point out that the complete removal of dust jackets from books has been a longstanding practice in academic libraries. In the 1998 O’Connor study it was clearly stated that the academic library removed and discarded the dust jackets of all books that came into the collection. (O’Connor 1998) Pecoskie reconfirmed that this practice was still common in 2013, and “raised issues surrounding the removal of dust jackets as a library practice.” (Pecoskie 2013, 233)

The existence and the use of paratext has been explored in every type of modern textual context throughout the past five decades in an overabundance of articles, books, and book chapters. There is no longer any doubt about the importance of paratext. The

story of each book begins before the book is opened. Bandre et al. point out that “everything is done for a reason” when creating a picture book (Bandre et al. 2011, 54). When the book jacket is discarded/removed, or when stickers are inconsiderately placed so that part of the paratext is inaccessible, the reader starts the book with incomplete information and therefore is at a disadvantage. All book coverings contain vital information that frame the text and allow the reader to step over the threshold the cover provides. “Skipping the cover and title-page is like arriving at the opera after the overture.” (Moebius 1996, 152)

CMCs house collections of both Children’s and YA books. The patrons for whom these collections are designed (preservice teachers, and ultimately, students in schools where preservice teachers are working) need the full context of all the language and art in these books for effective learning. Martinez et al. (2016) demonstrated with their research the quantity of information contained only in the paratextual features as well as how interwoven all components of each book are to the reader’s total understanding of the story. A myriad of research articles has stated that in order to have complete understanding of the work, all elements that have been added to the book including the text, pictures, dust jacket, stamps, stickers, font, etc. are of utmost importance to the work as an entirety.

Books covered in protective book jackets have now been in some academic collections for decades and still attract readers, maintaining high circulation rates. Of course, the condition of the book depends on the total number of circulations. There is no doubt that the ability to protect and preserve the paratext of the book extends the usefulness of a book and accompanying paratext beyond what it would be without

protection. Thirty years of articles exploring the value of preserved dust jackets proves that the act of stripping or discarding the paratext is the equivalent of dismembering the book. Adding incomplete books to a collection might be acceptable if the book is a fragmented rare edition, but for libraries to continue removing paratext in modern times is contrary to the prevailing research. This is especially true for Children's and YA literature in CMCs where paratext is key to understanding the text.

Evidence gathered and published in the literature proves that preservation of paratext enhances the reader's experience of interpreting and learning from written material. Best practices for preserving paratext should be written into processing policies and procedures for Children's and YA books in academic libraries sooner rather than later. The advantages of doing so far outweigh the expense in time and money to academic libraries. Preserving the paratext in collections of Children's and YA literature is important in the teaching of vital literacy functions. Current policies in academic libraries often impede these processes when they should be partners with teacher education programs by participating in literacy instruction through the preservation of paratext.

Simple preservation processes can be implemented with relative ease and minimal cost. Thousands of libraries already entice readers with thought-provoking visual and tactile paratextual prompts that provoke discussions which leads to a greater understanding of the text, promotes critical thinking skills in readers, and develops more competent literate students. Complete understanding using paratext in all its forms is necessary for young readers to learn the skills of inference, sequencing, and emotional understanding of the text that is vital for literacy. This is the very reason for having

Children's and YA literature in an academic library, making it absolutely necessary for academic libraries to retain and preserve book jackets.

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