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# **Can You Tell A Book By Its Cover?**

**Jeanne M. Gerlach  
Steven D. Rinehart**

Book fairs are great fun, and they offer students a chance to explore a world of books in a more exciting atmosphere than the school library. Today, many schools have self-selection programs and activities to suit the wide range of student reading abilities and interests. Multilevel materials are used, and students are encouraged to read as much as they can. Teacher advice and guidance is usually available as the need arises. Consequently, numerous schools have book fairs to stimulate reading through self-selection, and equally important, educators hope to promote reading interest and future reading growth. Accordingly, books for the fairs are usually carefully selected by librarians, reading and English teachers on the basis of adolescent interests and tastes.

## **Young adult reading interests**

During the last decade there have been dozens of surveys and studies investigating young adult reading interests and tastes (Conner, 1989; Fuchs, 1987; Gallo, 1983; Johnson, 1984; Mellon, 1987; Samuels, 1989; and Thomason, 1983). Their research findings indicate that: 1) adolescent interests vary with age and grade level; 2) girls read more than boys read, but boys have a wider interest range and read a greater variety of materials; 3) girls are

more interested in romantic fiction than are boys; 4) boys prefer adventure stories; 5) mystery stories are popular with both genders; 6) boys seldom show preference for “girl” books, but girls will read “boy” books.

The burgeoning of reading interest studies comes partially from the belief that interest greatly influences behavior and is capable of either increasing or reducing student motivation to read. If this is true, then research that focuses on how and why students choose reading material is important because it can help teachers include in their courses material which has a great deal of meaning to their students.

### **Book fairs and self-selection**

Educators who host book fairs and other self-selection activities hope to promote student reading. They anticipate that the right book will be matched with the right reader. Recently we overheard students make comments similar to those that follow about some of the book stock at a recent middle school book fair: *Wow, this book looks scary; Look at this title – it sounds really funny; Read the plot summary – see if you can tell what’s going to happen.*

As the young people passed through the lines with book selections tucked under their arms, the researchers in us came alive. Why had students selected certain works? Did the chosen books match their interests and tastes? Perhaps the adolescents were using cover clues such as title, cover illustration, or plot summary to make their choices. Information of this nature could help teachers help their students to determine whether a book is worth reading. To explore these questions, the present investigation was conducted in the same middle school that had hosted the book fair.

## Method

The participants involved in this study were 31 seventh and eighth graders from a large, middle-class suburban public school. Students were chosen randomly from two participating classrooms. Their reading ability ranged from fifth to ninth grade instructional levels according to placement tests and other assessment information shared by their teachers.

In order to observe the process of book selection by these students, we chose ten books of fiction for them to examine (see Figure 1) and established a protocol for data collection. Fiction was used because it makes up one of the largest categories of adolescent literature. The ten books were randomly chosen from recent publications available at an area bookstore. Only recent publications were selected with the anticipation that students would be less familiar with them. Also eliminated from our selection were recent books by more commonly recognized authors such as Judy Blume, Richard Peck, S.E. Hinton, Robert Newton Peck, M.E. Kerr, and the like.

### Figure 1: Books used in the survey

- Burns, A. (1988). *The defeat and triumph of a fugitive slave*. New York: Alfred Knopf.
- Cameron, E. (1988). *The private worlds of Julia Redfern*. New York: E.P. Dutton.
- Dyzard, T.J. (1988). *The rookie arrives*. New York: William Morrow.
- Hahn, M.D. (1988). *Following the mystery man*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Lucas, G. (1988). *Willow*. New York: Random House.
- Myers, W.D. (1988). *Fallen angels*. New York: Scholastic.
- Pfeffer, S.B. (1987). *The year without Michael*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Rinaldi, A. (1988). *The last silk dress*. New York: Holiday House.
- Ruckman, I. (1988). *No way out*. New York: Thomas Crowell.
- Shura, M.F. (1988). *The Sunday doll*. New York: Dodd & Mead.

Each of the 31 students came individually to meet with one of us in the Media Center at the school where a private work area had been prepared for the selection task. With the ten books laid out on a table, the students' task was to select books they might want to read and to think aloud while making selections. We explained to students that they could help us to learn more about how readers choose what they want to read. Having further explained that a think aloud involved talking aloud as though to one's self and sharing ideas or thoughts as they naturally occur, we emphasized that in this case we wanted to know what it was about the books that made the student want to read them. We then sat with each student and taped the protocol. Following collection of data, we listened to the recorded information to infer the mental processes of the student and thereby inductively determine the kinds of clues these students used to make selections.

## Results and discussion

Choices for reading material came more from cover clues than from interest in the topic (see Table 1). The summary inside the cover flap was the predominant cover clue, accounting for 49 percent of the references. The second and third most frequent clues mentioned were cover illustration and title, respectively. Interest in the book's topic ranked only fourth among the protocol criteria, followed by size of the print, and vocabulary difficulty.

The following comments exemplify student perceptions:

*If I don't like the summary, I won't read the book.*

*Sometimes the writers tell you the most important stuff about their book on the inside of the book covers. I like that.*

*I think the writers tell you just enough on the cover to "trick" you into reading the book.*

*I like the pictures on the cover; they are the best part of the book.*

*Pictures on the covers tell me the most about the books I read.*

References to titles included:

*I like mysterious titles. I like to try to figure out what the book is about by reading the title.*

*Titles tell you everything sometimes; sometimes they don't.*

*I would like to make up titles for books.*

**Table 1**  
**How often students mentioned criteria**

Criterion	Rank	Percentage of references to criterion
Summary inside flap	1	49
Cover illustration	2	22
Title	3	18
Interest in the book's topic	4	9
Size of print	5.5	1
Vocabulary level	5.5	1

A few students mentioned vocabulary or print:

*If I don't know the words, I won't read the book.*

*I read anything with big print and lots of white spaces; it's easier.*

Other protocols indicated that many students felt they did not have enough time to read. One student put it bluntly: "I don't have time to read. I always have too much homework. I hate to read for homework. I want to read about going camping and hiking and mountain climbing." Another commented, "I never read for fun; I don't have time."

Most students said that they did not use the school library unless forced to do so. For some students, it was a

place associated with boredom or even trouble. The following student responses indicated these feelings:

*I haven't been to the library in two years. It's a boring place to go.*

*I hate the library. You just sit and try to be quiet. Sometimes I get in trouble in the library.*

At the same time, however, the total number of books read by the surveyed students during the particular school year ranged from 16 to 39 (excluding textbooks) with an average of 23.

While engaged in choosing books, several students indicated they read books suggested by their friends. Most students also said they would read books suggested by their friends. The majority of students also said they would read books suggested by their teachers but that most of their teachers did not recommend books.

## **Conclusions and implications**

Many teachers have taken advantage of interest surveys to help them select a variety of books that would promote independent student reading. Effective teachers will continue to keep informed about books students might find interesting. While it is important that teachers start with children's interests in promoting independent reading, this study suggests that teachers should go one step further and find ways to help their students determine whether a book is worth reading by examining cover clues.

Because our findings indicate that the summary on the inside flap and the cover illustrations are the most frequently used cover clues for book selection, teachers will want to use these topics for class discussion and to develop lessons that include discussions and related language activities to

help students understand what constitutes a good summary and how the cover illustration complements the text.

Many commonly known activities can be used for such purposes; it is not always necessary to develop new or novel ideas. For example, students can be encouraged to produce summaries and illustrations for their favorite books. Tasks that integrate reading and other language activities can be used for this purpose. Teachers may want to create classroom situations where students can explore these concepts by using all language skills. To illustrate, suppose a teacher wants the students to understand the concept of "summary" and how it is used by publishers on book covers. First, the students in any content class can be asked to read a self-selected young adult novel. After reading the novel, students can be asked to describe and summarize the book for their peers or other audiences.

The teacher can encourage the students to review the work orally not only to reveal what they know about the work being reviewed but to begin to gain a perspective about how much to tell or not to tell about a work in order to summarize and create interest for perspective readers. By explaining their ideas orally students can strengthen their knowledge about both the content of the book and about the elements of summary. This knowledge can be reexamined and extended during the talking and writing processes.

Once students orally present their individual book summaries and listen to peer presentations, they can be encouraged to talk with their peers about the summaries – what information was included, what was omitted. As Britton and others (Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, and Rosen, 1975) have explained, "it is by means of talking it in speech that we learn to take it in thought" (p. 14). That is, by orally



explaining their ideas to others students can strengthen their own knowledge. If this is true, then student "talk" should reveal what the students know and do not know about summaries and course content so that the teacher will know what guidance or additional instruction the students need.

Another way of helping the students understand elements of summary is to have them write summaries for their classmates, for their parents, and for the school newspaper. When students are asked to write summaries, they not only explore subject matter to connect old ideas to new ideas in order to reach an understanding of a story, they also learn to make decisions about what the audience knows, what the audience needs to know, and what they want to tell them.

By involving students in both oral and written activities, the teacher can encourage students to use their natural learning inclinations to promote an understanding of the concept of summary within the reading/responding context. Of course, teachers can use the same kinds of reading and responding activities to help the students understand what constitutes a good book title or an effective cover illustration.

While those activities already described involve analysis of book summaries and illustrations, further attention to analysis can come from other, not so commonly used activities. For instance, teachers may ask each student to read a book summary and then predict what the book will be about. After making the prediction, the student then reads the book and checks to see if the prediction was correct, and perhaps revises the book's summary to produce a more accurate description of what the book was about. In a like manner, students can try to guess what a book is about from analyzing the cover illustration. If they feel the

illustration is not representative of the book contents, they can be encouraged by the teacher to draw a more suitable illustration. By using a range of language activities like these, along with careful planning, teachers can help students to understand how book summaries, titles, and illustrations can help them decide if they want to read the book.

Findings of this study also indicate that young readers will value peer and teacher opinions about books; therefore, teachers and librarians should not hesitate to suggest good books to their students. In addition, the environment of the classroom should be conducive to reading and talking about books read. Teachers should allocate ample class time for reading, library visits, and authentic discussions of books.

Knowledge of children's literature, common sense, and professional dedication to student learning and reading successes will guide teachers in their efforts. Teachers are sometimes limited in their selection of books by the publishers, however. Not all publishers include summaries or illustrations on their books and book covers. At times, both teachers and students may need to select reading materials without the benefit of these kinds of resources. Publishers need to provide more appropriate summaries and illustrations for their books. They might consider whether or not the summary is accurate and complete, or if the illustration relates to the contents of the work. Authors, too, need to be sensitive to reader needs when choosing titles for their books. Does the title give readers any insights about the contents of the book or is it simply used to catch the attention of the reader or for sensational purposes? Well-meaning people working together can encourage students to read and reflect on many good books.

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