

The Young Adult (YA) Book as Art

by April Pavis

Anyone who says that books are not art has never read *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro¹ or *Anna Karenina* by Tolstoy². Nor have they read *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green³ or *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak⁴. These novels evoke emotion in those who read them, not just from the plot, but from the perfect word choice and phrasing. Hundreds of authors have created literary masterpieces for us, and those titles are found in school curricula and public libraries, on bedside tables and underneath pillows. But sometimes books are more than gently woven words and carefully crafted paragraphs. Sometimes there are images to correspond with the words, giving the reader the ultimate experience: text and images sewn together so as to enhance the reader's imagination ("I wonder how that would look in real life?") and curiosity ("That's how!"). Books are art, and just like when critiquing a da Vinci or Matisse painting, there is no incorrect interpretation or opinion. Therefore, allow me to give you my interpretation of young adult novels as art, in terms of illustrations outside as well as inside the cover.

Illustrations in YA novels

The transition every child makes from reading picture books to chapter books, learning from words instead of images, is a major developmental achievement. Sadly, many children never return to illustrated texts for pleasure reading because they are told that they are "too old for that." Yet age and

reading level should not be factors in allowing a reader to return to their origin of reading via pictures. "Language and images are inextricably linked—in how we generate them, how we make meaning from them, how we use them, and how we remember them."⁵ An example of literature using an effective combination of words and images is seen in manga and graphic novels. These formats are extremely

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popular among young adult readers, and for good reason. The combination of words and images allows them to use their still-developing adult skill (reading increasingly advanced words and phrases) with their original skill (learning through pictures). Many teens have expressed defeat at reading such classics as *The Odyssey* and the works of Shakespeare, but feel empowered when they read the graphic novel version because the images help them understand the advanced language and complex storylines. This is especially true of classic British literature—much of which was intended to be performed, not read silently.

The quality of the artwork is critical when including illustrations in young adult novels, be they graphic novels, manga, or books with a few accompanying pictures. Just as with high-quality

writing, a teen reader can tell when an illustrator did not put much effort into crafting the book, instead throwing together the rudimentary skills they acquired from a *How to Draw Manga* book. A few examples of high-quality artistry in manga are *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, and *A Bride's Story* by Kaoru Mori. The artists put so much detail into each frame that readers fear missing critical story components if they skip a page. "One criterion used to determine if a literary piece is considered to be an artistic work is whether it succeeds in evoking in the mind of the reader vivid, lasting images that contribute to a feeling of possibility, even of believability."⁶ Many manga books are fantasy themed and showcase magical exploits and non-human characters. The better the artistry, the more believable the story. Manga are not the throw-away comic books that some adults tend to see them as. Instead, they should be seen as two art forms working together to create an interactive reading experience. And if it happens to appeal to reluctant teen readers, then that is another advantage.

Illustration in young adult novels is a growing trend, as seen in the 2012 Printz Award honor book *Why We Broke Up* by Daniel Handler. Illustrated by Maira Kalman, each chapter begins with the drawing of a memento that Min

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collected during her short relationship with Ed. Min recalled how the souvenir was collected, and what it meant to her at the time it was given. Any teen reader can conjure a mental image of a toy truck, bottle cap, or movie ticket, but having the exact token shown to them at the beginning of the chapter pulls the reader into the story on a personal level. The reader is intimately involved in the story at that point, knowing more than just the narrator's story, and actually seeing a piece of them. Another example of this is the ever-popular 2007 young adult novel *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak. Max, the Jewish boy hiding in Leisle's basement, writes and illustrates stories of his life to break up the monotony of hiding out in a lonely, dark room. Some of the illustrations in *The Book Thief* are Max's drawings, and those hand-drawn pages stir the reader. Images are sometimes more powerful than words, especially when the reader considers where the artist is while drawing. In this case Max is holed up in a basement in an effort to stay hidden from men who want him dead. His drawings are his only outlet, and they are more descriptive than words.

Don't judge a book by its cover, unless it's hideous or boring

The old adage *don't judge a book by its cover* made sense in a time when all books were leather bound with inlaid titles and no distinguishing features (or when all covers were equally cheesy *a la* 1980s science fiction novels). But in a time of fierce book-buying competition,

when thousands of novels are being published each year, there is no better time to put a lot of thought, effort, and money into developing the perfect eye-catching cover. Teen readers are especially discerning of covers, as the wrong color (so ugly!) or graphic (too childish!) can instantly turn them away, even if the plot is just what they are interested in.

Take a poll of teen readers in your library and you will find that covers with pictures of feet on them are repellent, as are tacky covers from the 1990s and covers that depict romantic embraces or overly emotional faces. Teen readers are not attracted to outdated covers, and librarians should keep this in mind when creating thematic displays. That is, unless the theme is *Ugly Covers, Great Stories* (which is actually a really fun display). Teen readers are also very smart and do not appreciate being misled by publishing companies who use Caucasian models on covers of novels that feature diverse characters. This is a ploy used by publishing companies to appeal to the largest demographic, when they could attract a more diverse audience if they were honest in their portrayal of the book's characters. The integrity of the novel should not be compromised because the publisher does not want to take a risk with using a non-white model. (The matter of diversity on YA novel covers is an ongoing discussion on such blogs as *Diversity in YA* (.com) and *Reading in Color* (<http://blackteensread2.blogspot.com/>.) In addition, appropriate cover art not only attracts readers

of diverse backgrounds, but can also draw the reader's attention to the book's genre, time period, or intended audience.

Young adult books are more than sentences and images bound in a hard cover. When fashioned correctly, they are art. A publisher who takes care to create an attractive cover that pays homage to the characters, genre, and story creates a masterpiece. An artist who renders illustrations that capture scenes better than words ever could is evoking our sense of sight during the reading experience. The overall quality of a book is determined by the reader, but if all of the hands that create a book lend their highest level of creativity, integrity, and beauty, then no book can be considered less than a masterpiece.

Notes

1 "Memories, even your most precious ones, fade surprisingly quickly. But I don't go along with that. The memories I value most, I don't ever see them fading."

2 "He stepped down, trying not to look long at her, as if she were the sun, yet he saw her, like the sun, even without looking."

3 "Sometimes, you read a book and it fills you with this weird evangelical zeal, and you become convinced that the shattered world will never be put back together unless and until all living humans read the book."

4 "A DEFINITION NOT FOUND IN THE DICTIONARY. Not leaving: an act of trust and love, often deciphered by children."

5 Fox, R.F., ed. *Images in Language, Media, and Mind*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1994.

6 Zitlow, C.S. (2000). Sounds and Pictures in Words: Images in Literature for Young Adults. *The Alan Review*, 27(2). <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/winter00/zitlow.html>. VI