

# You CAN Judge a Book by its Cover: Helping Students Select Books

Saskatchewan School Library Association

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SASKATCHEWAN SCHOOL LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

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## Introduction

As a high-school teacher librarian, I am delighted when young people ask me to recommend books for recreational reading. Fostering literacy is an important part of my role, and I want my students to develop the ability to select books for enjoyment independently. These are skills I deliberately teach as I interact with students one on one, in small groups, or in large classes.

When I am asked to help classes select books for their own pleasure, I usually begin with a role play. First, I hand one of the students a twenty-dollar bill, a fail-safe attention grabber! Then, I ask the student to imagine that his parent has given him money to take a friend to the movies. How would he choose which film to see?

Many students base their movie selections on advertisements or previews. Sometimes their choices are influenced by posters or reviews they have seen in the newspaper or online. Others rely on critic ratings in the form of stars, points, or “thumbs up”. Movies that have been nominated for or won awards, or those of a particular genre or starring a certain actor, are often appealing. A friend’s recommendation or information found on the case of a rental DVD can also pique a student’s interest.

## Movies and Books: A Comparison

Parallels between choosing a movie and selecting a book are easily drawn. Students may, for example, choose reading material based on advertisements or book reviews. Some young readers gravitate to specific genres, such as mysteries, historical fiction, or fantasy, and will look for special spine labels to help them identify these kinds of books within the fiction section. Others will seek out the works of an author whose writing they have enjoyed in the past. Perhaps the most powerful influence, however, is the recommendation of family or friends. Because these individuals know the reader’s habits and tastes, they are better able to match the student with a satisfying book.

Educators need to organize time when students can talk about books. Having students present oral book reports or book talks provides them with an opportunity to express their enthusiasm for the works they are reading. During silent reading sessions, individuals can informally “turn and share” with a partner.

Bulletin board or table top displays are another way in which books of potential interest to students can be highlighted in the school library. Greater impact can be achieved if students have input into determining which items are showcased. If, for example, a returned book has received favourable comments from its borrower, a colourful “Student Pick” pennant can be affixed to its cover, and the book can be added to a display.

## Cover Study

The cover of a book, like a movie poster or DVD case, can assist students in the book selection process. Young people *can* judge whether or not they want to read a book by studying its cover but must be cautioned that their decision cannot be made solely on the basis of the artwork. In most cases, the author and the artist never meet to discuss the cover design, and it is the editor or publisher who is responsible for the final layout.

Students should be invited to share examples they have noticed of cover illustrations that do not accurately reflect the content of the book. There may, for example, be a discrepancy between the way in which the main character is depicted on the cover and the author's written description. Students should also be made aware that trends and tastes in cover illustrations for young adult books are constantly evolving. In the past, paintings and drawings graced the covers of most juvenile fiction, but photographs are the norm on current covers. Showing students various editions of a popular modern classic like S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* is a great way to demonstrate how the same story has been repackaged over time.

Students can glean basic information from a book's title, and if they are familiar with an author's work, they may be able to predict what the story will be about. In addition, valuable insights can be gained from reading the "blurb" on the back of a paperback or on the inside flaps of a hardcover jacket. This summary usually contains enough information for the reader to make an informed choice and often has a "hook" to catch his or her interest.

A condensed biography of the author is located on the back jacket flap of most hardcover fiction. Selective details about the author's personal life, interests, and other works are often enough to entice young readers to delve into the pages of the book. In addition, the tone of the biography may reflect the tone of the story. If, for example, the biography contains humorous anecdotes about the author, the book will likely be light hearted and funny, too.

Other features, such as the author's note, dedication, acknowledgements, prologue, and afterward, can sometimes provide students with intriguing information that should not be overlooked. These features can be skimmed quickly and can help students make appropriate choices without expending too much time.

Review excerpts are often found on a book's back cover or jacket flap, but students should be advised that only favourable comments will be used. Students should also be told that reviews by reputable selection tools such as *School Library Journal*, *VOYA*, *Quill and Quire*, *Canadian Review of Materials*, *Kirkus Reviews*, or *Horn Book* hold more weight than those from obscure sources. The same is true for individuals who are quoted on the back of the book. If they are not familiar to the student or the teacher librarian, their opinions may not be trustworthy.

Novels that have been nominated for or won awards will often have this honour noted on the cover, usually in the form of a symbol or sticker. Award-winning books will not appeal to everyone but can be used to focus a student's search for appropriate reading material. In addition, student participation in initiatives such as the *Saskatchewan Young Readers' Choice Awards* should be promoted as young people need to know that their input is valued and can be a reliable indicator of whether or not a book is worthy of being read by others.

Reluctant or struggling readers do not want a long, challenging read and will often select a book because it is "thinner" or has a limited number of pages. However, these students should be encouraged to look inside any book if the cover interests them. They may discover, for example, that the book is thicker because of the quality of its paper. Or they may find that the print is not dense, there is generous use of white space, or there are wide margins. Any or all of these factors may make the book less intimidating for reluctant readers.

## Conclusion

My discussions with individuals, small groups, or whole classes of students always end with the same advice. Try reading the first few chapters of a book to see if you like it. If you aren't caught up in the story or don't connect with the characters, return the book and try something else.

Choosing books for personal enjoyment is similar to shopping for clothing. You browse, you try a few things on, and then you purchase an item or two. In the school library, however, the merchandise is free, and there is an excellent return and exchange policy! Happy shopping!