



**RIGHT TO READ**

Angel Daniel **Matos**



## The Undercover Life of Young Adult Novels

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**A**s teachers of and experts on young adult literature, many of us believe that books written for adolescent readers possess the ability to change lives. Young adult literature offers narratives in which teenagers are able to learn from, if not overcome, the harsh realities of everyday life. Even more so, it provides readers with the potential to explore different ways of existing in the world that depart from normative thinking and values. But what if the very elements of a young adult book prevent readers from detecting this potential? In this issue of *The ALAN Review*, we are concerned with examining the moral and ethical dynamics that surface when readers engage with young adult narratives. In this column, I am interested in taking a step outside of the narrative and focusing on the ethical interactions prompted by the very element that binds a literary work's narrative together: a book's cover.

Broadly speaking, the act of censorship entails the use of a particular ideological or moral framework to justify and enact the repression or deletion of knowledge that is considered objectionable to a certain audience. Among potential acts of censorship, we can identify “micro” types of repression and deletion that may not be intentional or grand in scale but that nonetheless lead to the withholding of information that is crucial to understanding a novel's stance toward particular notions of identity, democracy, and social

justice. But why are book covers so important when it comes to the expression (or concealment) of certain types of knowledge? The intuitive answer would be that book covers are often the first component of a literary work with which we interact. As Genette (1997) argues, paratext<sup>1</sup> functions as an *invitation* for a reader to engage with the conversation depicted in a book's pages:

More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a *threshold*, [. . .] a “vestibule” that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back. It is an “undefined zone” between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world's discourse about the text). (p. 2, emphasis in original)

Whether perusing books in a store or browsing for books online, a book's cover is often the main element that captures potential readers' attention and compels them to engage with a book's content. Given the status of a book cover as an interpretative threshold, it is important for us to question which audiences are invited to “step inside” a book's pages through the implementation of certain paratextual features and the extent to which these thresholds are deliberately designed to reach out to, or withdraw from, a particular readership or purchaser by omitting crucial information.

Phillips (2007) points out that book publishers are able to identify “types of segmentation” that are important for the marketing and distribution of a book, and covers are thus designed with these segments in mind: “This then influences the marketing mix chosen for their books—what combination of product,

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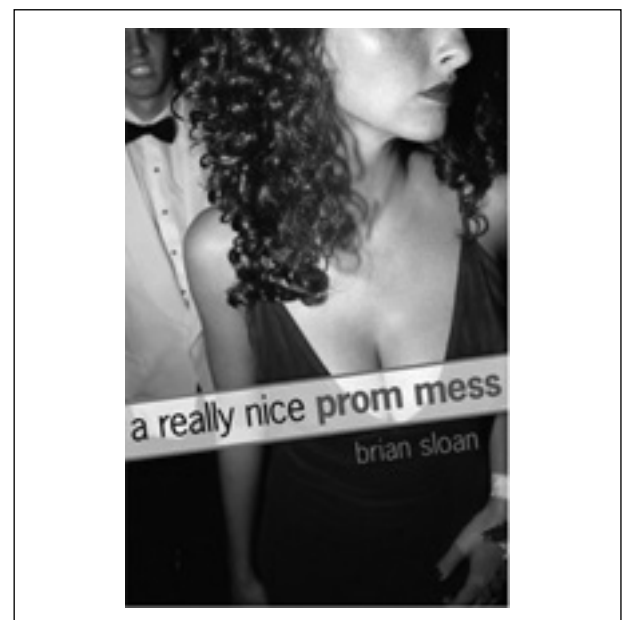
price, place (distribution) and promotion. Publishers that aim to sell to a mass market, for example through supermarkets, will decide to play it safe with their cover design” (p. 22). Publishers therefore create book covers that are very deliberate in terms of their appearance—and although young adult novels provide readers with a source of entertainment, inspiration, and/or education, they first and foremost must *sell*. In the remainder of this discussion, I briefly examine the ways in which book covers problematically suppress, conceal, contradict, or delete the knowledge contained in a young adult novel’s pages—either because the content is considered contentious and controversial or because it has been determined that the novel’s content could affect its distribution and sales.

### **Blowing Their Cover**

One of the first times I noticed a discrepancy between a book’s cover and its content occurred over a decade ago when I read Brian Sloan’s *A Really Nice Prom Mess* (2005). The novel itself, which can be categorized as a comedy of errors of sorts, is narrated by a gay teen named Cameron, who is convinced by his boyfriend to bring a fake date to the prom in order to conceal their queerness and their relationship. Virginia, Cameron’s decoy date who possesses distinctive flaming-red hair, soon determines that Cameron is gay, which leads her to drown her sorrows in alcohol. As Virginia wallows at the prom, Cameron attempts to deal with the tensions of having a boyfriend who expresses no desire to come out of the closet. After Cameron escapes the prom with a drug dealer, the narra-

tive focuses mostly on Cameron’s comedic coming-out tale, whereas characters such as Cameron’s boyfriend and Virginia are largely dismissed throughout most of the plot.

Given Virginia’s peripheral role in the narrative, it is baffling to notice that her character is put front and center on the cover of the hardcover version of Sloan’s novel (see Fig. 1). The cover spotlights Virginia, along with her scarlet dress and signature red hair, while the character representing Cameron is found in the background donning a white and black tuxedo. Although Virginia is one of the most memorable characters in the novel, she only appears in a couple of the chapters and is peripheral to many of the novel’s main events. However, the novel’s cover focuses significantly on this secondary character, giving readers the impression that she plays a much larger role in the narrative. The aesthetic choices made on the cover become even more problematic when taking into account Virginia’s cleavage. Although her chest is loosely covered by the novel’s title, it is clearly the focus of the cover’s image—an emphasis that does not quite sync with the gay coming-of-age narrative depicted in the novel’s pages. As a matter of fact, the blatant presence of cleavage on the novel’s cover was initially so prominent that sellers such as Barnes & Noble



**Figure 1.** Front cover of the hardback version of Sloan’s *A Really Nice Prom Mess*, originally published in 2005

refused to promote the novel in their stores, leading the book's designers to make some adjustments to the cover, which consisted of moving the title of the novel upwards to partially obscure Virginia's chest (Walker, 2009).

Sloan himself has noted the somewhat deceptive nature of the original front cover of his novel, going so far as to claim that the cover is "subversive in that the racy image might catch the attention of those notoriously reluctant boy readers, even though the narrator is a gay teen" (Walker, 2009). While the redesigned version of the hardcover novel partially (and somewhat ineffectively) shields Virginia's cleavage, the image nonetheless remains quite suggestive. It is here that we notice that the book's design is caught in a double-bind. The cover's concealment of the narrative's gay themes could potentially help boost the novel's readership, making it attractive to teens who are apprehensive about reading queer narratives. However, this repression harkens back to a major issue in queer representation in the parallels created between the concealment present in the book's cover and the issue of the closet that permeates lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) communities. Even if the novel's cover was not *deliberately* designed to conceal the narrative's queer content, this camouflaging aligns with examples of censorship present in the young adult publishing industry and the hesitation that often arises when branding a young adult novel as a queer narrative. If a young adult novel possesses queer content, should book designers, authors, and publishers be held accountable for making sure that this queerness emanates from the book's paratextual features? Intuitively, the answer would seem to be a resounding "yes," but the truth of the matter is that queerness is often approached by publishers as a contentious issue that complicates the creation and distribution of young adult literature with LGBTQ themes.

It is no secret that the publication of young adult fiction with LGBTQ themes has gone through a turbulent history. Cart and Jenkins (2006) have pointed out that the first young adult novel with gay content, John Donovan's *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip* (1969), was published apprehensively on behalf of HarperCollins, as the company was skeptical that a novel with queer content could be successful in the market. Decades after the publication of Donovan's novel, many agents and publishers are still wary about

publishing young adult novels with queer themes and characters. One of the most recent and well-documented cases of this issue arose when Rachel Manija Brown and Sherwood Smith first attempted to find a publishing firm that would be willing to sell and distribute their novel *Stranger*, which was eventually published in late 2014. *Stranger* is a post-apocalyptic novel told from multiple viewpoints, including that of a queer character known as Yuki Nakamura. While seeking representation for their novel in 2011, an agent from a major publishing firm agreed to sign on Brown and Smith as long as they removed all references to Yuki's sexual orientation from the book. The authors refused this caveat because by eliminating reference's to Yuki's sexuality, they would be sending teenagers a message that homosexuality is "so utterly horrible that people like them can't even be allowed to exist

in fiction" (Flood, 2011, n.p.). This encounter with censorship pushed Brown and Smith to question the extent to which other authors have been coerced to suppress or eliminate minority characters in young adult fiction in an effort to make a book more marketable: "This isn't about one agent's personal feelings about gay people. We don't know their feelings; they may well be sympathetic in their private life, but regard the removal of gay characters as a marketing issue. The conversation made it clear that the agent thought our book would be an easy sale if we just made that change" (Flood, 2011, n.p.).

Given the tendency for publishers to demand the "straightening" of queer characters, we as readers must be sensitive to instances in which a novel's queer content is potentially sidelined or overshadowed through its paratextual features. Novels such as Sloan's *A Really Nice Prom Mess* may have covers that can be approached as "subversive," but this subversion can potentially prevent a novel from reaching the very audience that could receive nourishment from

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its narrative. Scholars such as Jiménez (2015) have pointed out the dismal number of young adult novels with LGBTQ protagonists that are available to readers, especially when considering the number of young adult novels that are published annually, which she estimates to be around 4,000 books (p. 408). The ability for queer teens to identify the very small number of queer narratives published every year only becomes more difficult when a novel's cover conceals or contradicts its non-normative bent.

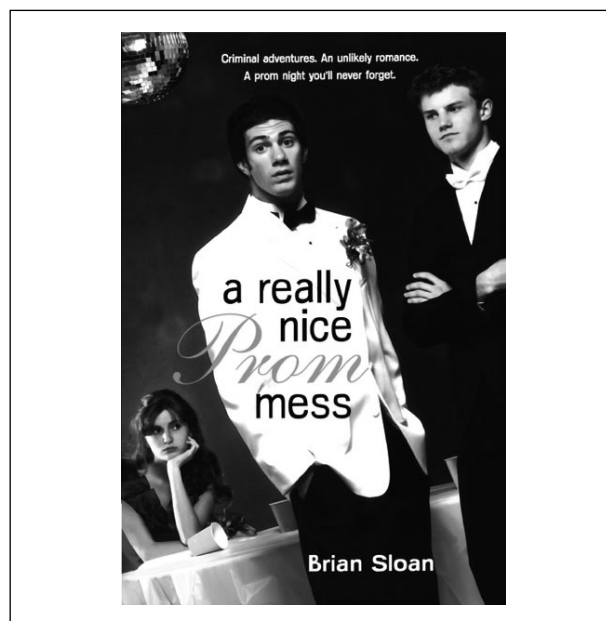
The young adult publishing industry has been well aware of the ethical and moral issues that are encountered when designing a cover for a young adult novel that represents the experiences of minority communities. On one hand, publishers face pressure to comply with trends and fashions prominent in the industry. Yampbell (2005) encapsulates this pressure succinctly, claiming that the covers of contemporary young adult novels have had to depict extravagant and highly visual designs in order to make books more salient and purchasable. Publishers of young adult books must identify ways of making their titles stand out in a postmodern book market, and the book covers must always “reflect the times and connect with consumers” (p. 368). On the other hand, book designers and publishers have to be conscious of the important sociocultural and political themes present in a text and deliberate about the extent to which they want to highlight a novel's treatment of gender identity, sexual orientation, race, and class.

Burnett (2012) has provided an in-depth overview of the ideas discussed in a panel on the topic of diversity in children's book covers organized by the Children's Book Council's Diversity Committee. Burnett points out that publishers must make a choice—follow recent trends in cover design or veer away from these trends to highlight the significance of the book's message. Laurent Linn, an art director at Simon & Schuster and presenter on the aforementioned panel, discusses the rationale behind the covers of three texts that focus on the lives of racial minorities and LGBTQ teens.

One of the texts on which Linn focuses is Bill Wright's *Putting Makeup on the Fat Boy* (2011), a young adult novel about an overweight, gay, Latino character. When Linn conceptualized the cover for Wright's novel, he originally wanted to represent the protagonist with overt markers of queerness and

Latino identity. However, the book was eventually published with a cover that depicts an “illustrated profile of a teen” standing with his hands on his hips, thus preventing the novel from being pigeonholed as LGBTQ literature. The use of an illustrated profile, says Linn, would facilitate the depiction of “a sassy character without getting too specific” (Burnett, 2012). Here, it is clear that the cover of Wright's novel was deliberately designed to avoid conveying the protagonist's queerness and potentially his Latino heritage. The use of coded and vague terms such as “sassy” harken back to the aforementioned apprehension that publishers have when it comes to the dissemination of young adult works with non-normative content. Once again, we observe a tendency to use a book's cover to deliberately conceal or repress the knowledge disseminated through a novel's narrative; this emphasizes a problematic, market-driven desire to avoid embracing or highlighting a novel's treatment of non-normative identities through its paratexts.

It is uncertain whether the cover of *A Really Nice Prom Mess* was deliberately designed to conceal the novel's queer narrative, although it is important to note that the novel was later repackaged in its paperback form and now possesses a cover that could *potentially* reflect the novel's gay content (see Fig. 2). Virginia is presented in the background casting



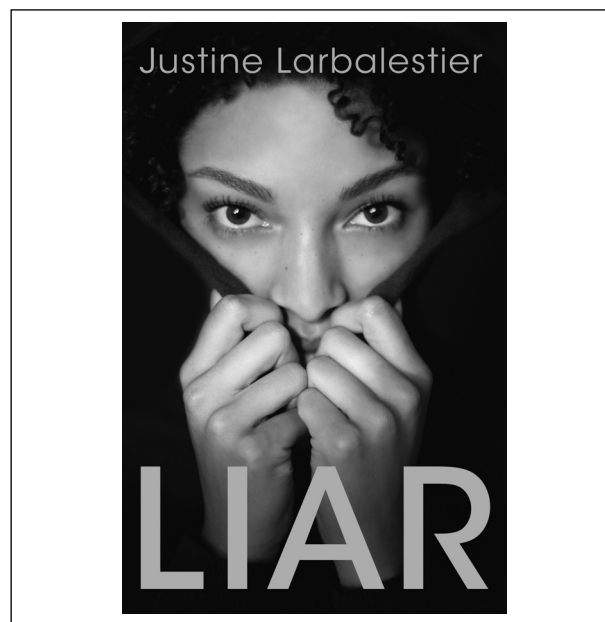
**Figure 2.** The repackaged cover of the paperback novel published and distributed in 2008

a bored and disinterested glance, and Cameron and his boyfriend take center stage. The two young men stand in close proximity, and the cover explicitly illustrates tension between these two characters. While this cover certainly meshes with the novel's narrative, there is still the potential for readers to think that the novel is focused on a love triangle between the three characters on the cover. There are many potential reasons why the publishers decided to change the cover for this novel. Perhaps they were attempting to avoid the issues that arose with the cleavage controversy of the original cover, especially since paperback novels typically have a wider distribution because they are more affordable to produce. Perhaps they were attempting to be more up front about the fact that the novel depicts a queer narrative, given that the original cover gives little to no indication of the novel's queer themes. But be aware, too, that publishers often change the cover of a book when hardcover sales are low. Repackaging can therefore be a potential consequence of an original cover's inability to reach particular target audiences.

Other covers of young adult novels seem to have more deceptive intentions when it comes to their design and the concealment of certain knowledge in that they explicitly contradict a novel's portrayal of minority characters. A handful of young adult novels possess covers that partake in the process of "Whitewashing," a practice that complies with a broad definition of censorship precisely because non-hegemonic races are erased or sidelined due to the prevalence of a normative framework that prioritizes White, heterosexual, cisgender identity. The most notorious and widely circulated incident of Whitewashing is perhaps the case of Justine Larbalestier's *Liar* (2009) in the United States (see Fig. 3 below). The US cover of the advance review copy of *Liar* portrays an obviously White, young woman with long, straight hair. Conversely, the novel's protagonist, Micah, describes herself in the following fashion: "I have nappy hair. I wear it natural and short, cut close to my scalp. That way I don't have to bother with relaxing or straightening or combing it out" (p. 7). Soon after, the protagonist *explicitly* identifies as a person of color when she claims that "Most of the white kids don't believe in God; most of us black kids do" (p. 10). The choice of the original cover is baffling considering how explicit Micah is about her race throughout the entire narrative, and

this inconsistency has led to intense debates about minority representation in young adult fiction. According to Cornwell (2009), the publisher of *Liar* eventually changed the cover after receiving immense backlash from readers and scholars. Nonetheless, Bloomsbury denied accusations of deliberate Whitewashing, claiming that the original image was intended to reflect the protagonist's "complex psychological make-up" and was not "a calculated decision to mask the character's ethnicity" (Cornwell, n.p.).

Carter (2013) has pointed out some of the chief issues that arise when the content of a book's cover contradicts the content in a book's pages, especially in the case of young adult novels centered on the experience of racial minorities.<sup>2</sup> She points out that when teens read stories, they are often aware of the narrative conveyed by both the cover *and* the text, leading her to argue that we should develop greater awareness of the connection between cover and story: "Instead of being disjointed, these stories should be one and the same. Appropriate cover art is necessary because it helps to match the inside story to the story the cover portrays" (n.p.).



**Figure 3.** The repackaged version of the cover of *Liar* that was distributed in 2009. See Cornwell (2009) for a side-by-side comparison of this cover with the version that was distributed on the advance review copy earlier that year. (Danielle Delaney, designer; released by Bloomsbury Publishing, Inc.)

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on book covers (Perkins, 2009).

### **Judging a Book by (and Beyond) Its Cover**

When we approach the issue of censorship in young adult literature, it is easy for us to think about censorship on a macro level and focus our attention on acts such as book banning by institutions and governments. While these acts certainly merit our attention, it is also important for us to consider acts of censorship on a micro level—acts that are not as large in scale but that nonetheless lead to the concealment or suppression of important information. A mismatch between a young adult novel's cover and the content in the novel's pages leads to a withholding of information that can be confusing and downright harmful to readers, especially if we believe in the influence of young adult literature in the formation of ethically informed persons.

Drew and Spencer (2005) argue that the most effective book designs are those that invite the reader to participate in the construction of a novel's meaning. While they acknowledge that book covers primarily

The mismatch between cover and story, however, is not unique to young adult literature. Perkins (2009) suggests that book covers often portray the main character "as *less* foreign or 'other' than he or she is in the actual story" with the goal of increasing book sales (n.p.). Authors such as Ursula Le Guin have explicitly addressed the issue of race and book covers, claiming that the publishing industry's perspectives on marketability are vexing because they do not consider whether minorities abstain from purchasing certain genres of literature simply because they do not see themselves represented

exist as a marketing tool, they also suggest that a book cover should highlight an artist's creative voice and "engage the viewer in active interpretative exchange" (p. 171). As readers and teachers of young adult literature, we must demonstrate a willingness to engage in these acts of interpretation and examine the dialectical relationship that exists between a book's cover and text. Furthermore, we must express an openness toward exploring the ethical implications often attached to the visual images that young readers have access to, especially when said images perpetuate the very acts of concealment and suppression that literature should ideally liberate people from. Part of this exploration entails providing students and young readers with theoretical frameworks that can assist them in deconstructing the rhetoric of book covers and the alignment that the visual has (or does not have) with the textual.

Given our awareness of the potential issues that arise when judging or selecting a book solely by its cover, we have to be savvier when identifying and consuming young adult literature. We could definitely develop more critical awareness of the ideologies and marketing practices behind book cover design, but this will only get us so far in avoiding censorship, especially with the rise in popularity of abstract cover art. Carter (2013) has suggested that while abstract cover art may help a book reach a wider audience, it might also prove to be a hindrance for people who identify minority literature by examining a novel's cover art.

When purchasing or borrowing a young adult novel, we must recall the importance of being critical of covers, and we must learn how to look and research beyond a novel's paratexts. We can do this by reading the first few pages of the novel, reading the book summaries often found in a book's front matter, taking a close look at the blurbs that pepper the back cover and front matter of a text, or taking advantage of social media platforms such as *Goodreads*, which allow readers themselves to identify and categorize the content and genre of a book. Book covers are indeed interpretative thresholds—invitations that compel us to engage with a particular narrative. However, we must continue to think carefully about who these invitations are extended to and the ways in which some of these invitations might limit our right to read and, more important, our right to *know*.

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### End Notes

1. Paratexts, often referred to as paratextual features, are the verbal and visual productions that often accompany a literary text. They include, but are not limited to, a book's cover, illustrations, front matter, title, companion websites, and preface. In simpler terms, paratexts are elements that are external to a literary work's narrative, "often approached as non-diegetic elements to a story or the verses of a poem." Although it is uncertain as to whether paratexts belong to a text, "in any case they surround it and extend it, precisely in order to *present* it, in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest sense: to *make present*, to ensure the text's presence in the world" (Genette, 1997, p. 1).
2. Perkins (2009) discusses the phenomenon of Whitewashing on young adult covers in much more detail and offers deconstructions of book covers that provide more insight into the tensions that exist between authors, publishers, and book designers when it comes to visual representations of race in young adult fiction. She also reflects on the future of book covers and shares potential strategies that book creators should take into account when designing book covers.

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