



The Clothing of Books

Jhumpa Lahiri

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How do you clothe a book?

In this deeply personal reflection, Pulitzer Prize–winning author Jhumpa Lahiri explores the art of the book jacket from the perspectives of both reader and writer. Probing the complex relationships between text and image, author and designer, and art and commerce, Lahiri delves into the role of the uniform; explains what book jackets and design have come to mean to her; and how, sometimes, “the covers become a part of me.”

The Clothing of Books Details

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From Reader Review *The Clothing of Books* for online ebook

Heather K (dentist in my spare time) says

When I saw the blurb for this book, I was really intrigued. As a former art history major in college and a voracious reader, I was immediately interested in the relationship between a book cover and the content inside. Understanding and interpreting art has been a passion of mine, so I figured that this book would delve into the intersection of art and reading. However, this book let me down. Big time.

The Clothing of Books is 80 pages of filler. What is written here can be summarized in a short essay detailing how Jhumpa Lahiri feels like her book covers sometimes represent her work and sometimes don't, and how the cover of a book is a more consumer-driven industry than she would like. That's basically it, folks. The rest is really purple prose rehashing the same sentiments time and time again.

I wish this book was entirely different. There were some personal stories there, but I was actually bored by this one and had a hard time finishing it. There just wasn't enough meat to the story, at least not in the way it was told.

I was really hoping for something that merged the history of book covers (that's covered a little) with some notable covers throughout time, and something more art-related. I think I just wanted something more compelling, and that isn't what I got.

I'll be sticking to Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction from now on.

Copy provided by the publisher in exchange for an honest review

Ilana says

I am one of those people who are very often the cover of a book. Once in a while, I am mentioned in my book reviews, if necessary, aspects related to the cover, because I still think that the cover should be the perfect expression of the book content. Unfortunately, it doesn't happen too often to notice many spectacular book covers, in many cases recognizing the same patterns used for various titles - the most frequent one being the different colour mix used initially for the *Big Magic*, by Elizabeth Gilbert, for instance. Not too much imagination around, it seems.

The Clothing of Books by Jhumpa Lahiri develops this topic and creates the author's perspective on the choice and meaning of the book covers. It is an essay offering more insights into the subject outlined by Lahiri on the occasion of the discourse made on June 10, 2015, in Florence, upon the awarding of Premio Gregor von Rezzori.

Similarly with clothes, the cover of a book is a sign of identity, which singles the literary work apart and confers its specific meaning. For the writer, 'a cover appears only when the book is finished, when it is about to come into the world. It marks the birth of the book and, therefore, the end of my creative endeavor. It confers on the book a mark of independence, a life of its own. It tells me that my work is done. So, while for

the publishing house it signals the arrival of the book, for me it is a farewell'. 'I know when the cover makes its appearance, the book will be read, it will be criticized, analysed, forgotten'. For marketing and publishing purposes, '(...) the book jacket is not only the text's first clothing, but also its first interpretation - both visual and for sales promotion'.

Interestingly, Lahiri succeeds to explore all the sides involved in the elaboration and evaluation of the 'clothing of books', from the sentimental to the intellectual and practical-technical stages. Step-by-step, she covers with a lot of attention paid to the smallest details. If you want to have a full overview of the process of creating and understanding book covers, this essay offers an extensive overview.

She confesses that in most cases, she isn't happy with her book covers, a feeling I personally share. As for the the current one, that imitates a hand-made cover, made by the needle, it might look a bit unusual, moderately likeable, but much better than most of the other covers I've seen in the last months.

This is a book recommended to book lovers that still hope that the fine art of book covers is still alive, especially in the era of e-books and speed reading (which is not necessarily a bad thing).

Disclaimer: Book offered by the publisher in exchange of an honest review

Jola says

Believe me, it's such a glorious feeling to find out that one of your favourite authors has written a book on the topic you feel passionate about. And as far as Jhumpa Lahiri is concerned, it has happened to me twice. In 2015 she published 'In Altre Parole' ('In Other words'), a book about her love for the Italian language, which I share in 100% or even more, and in 2016 an essay on book covers, 'The Clothing of Books'.

I must make a confession here: I've been obsessed with book covers since I can remember. I love staring at them, comparing them, deciding which one is the best, finding the relations between them and the contents of the book, which is a challenge at times. If you are at the bookshop next time and notice a woman gaping at covers, with dreamy eyes and an ecstatic smile, murmuring something in delight, it might be me. Needless to say, I felt euphoric when it turned out that Jhumpa Lahiri shares my hobby.

I adore Jhumpa Lahiri's books and I have a feeling that if we ever met in person, we would get on well. According to her, 'Like every true love, that of the reader is blind'. So is probably mine, but I suspect a less enthusiastic reader might not find 'The Clothing of Books' perfect. Let me draw your attention to the fact that it has got only 74 pages (!). This scarce number and the feeling that I'm not getting enough was one of the issues I had with this essay. The lack of illustrations bothered me even more. What a weird idea to publish a book about covers without even one picture! A book? Well, it's actually an altered version of a lecture Lahiri gave at a literary festival. Please, bear all these things in mind, so you won't feel disappointed eventually.

For me it was utterly fascinating to look at book jackets from a writer's point of view. Such a pity the process of creating a cover is so impersonal nowadays, the example of cooperation between Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell sounds like a fairy tale. Lahiri observes that in our time the function of a cover is '*much more commercial than aesthetic*' alas.

It turned out that the covers of the books she's written awake strong emotions in Jhumpa Lahiri. I'm so curious which one she means here: '*There is a certain awful cover for one of my books that elicits in me an almost violent response. Every time I am asked to autograph that edition, I feel the impulse to rip the cover off the book.*'

Jhumpa Lahiri's opinion on book covers is summarized nicely in this passage:

'The right cover is like a beautiful coat, elegant and warm, wrapping my words as they travel through the world, on their way to keep an appointment with my readers.

The wrong cover is cumbersome, suffocating. Or it is like a too-light sweater: inadequate.

A good cover is flattering. I feel myself listened to, understood.

A bad cover is like an enemy; I find it hateful.'

The covers Lahiri likes are simple, minimalistic, ascetic. She hates aggressive colours, blurbs, quotes, additional photos, biographic details. I think she would like the lovely one I saw yesterday, especially given the fact that she is a fan of Einaudi series and Italian designs in general.

Einaudi, 2008.

In 'The Clothing of Books' you will find not only Lahiri's opinions on covers but also on series of books, the differences between books published in Italy and the United States, the gap between publishing house's expectations and writer's ambitions, paintings by Richard Baker, her Italian friends, image stereotypes, being bullied, clothes, and many more.

One of the things which astonish Jhumpa Lahiri, is the variety of covers and artists' interpretations. *'How is it possible that one book, the same book, can generate this panorama of images?'*, she wonders. This morning I had very similar thoughts when I saw a few editions of 'The Blithedale Romance' by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Just have a look. Spotting the difference won't be hard.

Modern Library, 2001.

Penguin Classics, 1983.

If all the words were deleted, would you believe they are both the covers of the same book?

'The Clothing of Books' is really tiny so I'd better stop here, as I would like your encounter with this essay to be as personal and satisfactory as possible.

My 'telepathic' connection with Jhumpa Lahiri amuses me, though I'm fully aware of the fact that it's just a funny coincidence. Nevertheless, I wouldn't be much surprised if new books by this author were about dachshunds or wild strawberries or the dusk in the mountains or baking bread or the colour lilac. These are a few of my favourite things.

Anne ? says

Quick read (74 pages/1 hr audio) - insightful

In this short personal reflection, Jhumpa Lahiri writes about the complexities of the relationship between books and their covers, author and designer, art and commerce.

It was eye-opening for me to realize just how little input the author is given towards their book covers, and what it must feel like for an author to see their books covered with so many different designs that they may love or not!

Jhumpa writes a very personal story here. There's some commentary on the role of the book cover and the evolving trends in the industry, but it's mostly a reflection of her own personal experiences, both as a reader and as an author. Like her feelings of immense dislike for one particular cover on one of her books (she doesn't name it, of course), and how each time she is asked to autograph that particular book edition, she has an overwhelming impulse to rip the cover off!

A thoughtful reflection like this serves nicely as a springboard for your own reflections on how covers have played into your own book choices and reading experiences.

Selva Subramanian says

Before getting into what the book is all about, I wonder why this should have been a book. I mean it is a slightly lengthy essay. At 72 pages - 40 pages if a regular font face and all the space is used - it is the size of a short story. So I felt, at 200 bucks, it was just a money making exercise cashing in on the tremendous popularity of the author. But thinking abt it another way, Jhumpa could have bloated it to say 100+ pages easily if she had so desired. So I guess she had written something and they just put it as a book. Anyway, it is just a meditation on every aspect of book covers - whether they are good or bad for a book, whether the authors always like it, if the ppl who design the covers actually read it, do they capture the author's vision etc along with how she, as a child, read books that had naked covers, with no blurbs, no recommendations and you form your opinion only after having read the book, and finally what she would like as book cover for her books. You don't need me to tell that Jhumpa writes well. she does. I liked it enough to complete reading it at the bookstore itself :) I was actually amazed at her ability to think so much on something we give little importance to. We either like a cover or don't. Giving it 4 stars just for that. I liked the cover :)

Sue says

This interesting short work from Lahiri is from a speech given fairly recently. It is very specifically on book covers as the outer presentation of the words they represent. It is not about the art of book covers but more about the theoretical presence, existence of book covers themselves. It is a very thoughtful presentation and really made me think back to various times in my life, how I approached books, what use I made of the information on covers, what I might be gaining or losing from the information I encountered there.

In the chapter "The Naked Book", Lahiri discusses having read hundreds of books without covers over the years, books that were naked, without a summary or information on the author, plot, etc. on the cover. As she states so simply: "To understand them, you had to read them. The authors I loved at the time were embodied only by their words. The naked cover doesn't interfere." I recall that experience too, especially from childhood when I read books primarily from the library and most didn't have covers as far as I can recall. What I knew about a book was word of mouth--from a teacher from friends, from family, or perhaps, when I was a little older, from reading a review. Otherwise, I discovered a book purely through the author's words.

I'm wondering now when I have done that recently. I suppose that reading an ebook may approximate the experience but, even there, there are summaries easily available (and it's impossible to download without seeing descriptive information). I also wonder how many wonderful books have been hidden from me by deceptive clothing. I probably should take some wild chances more often...walk through the library and choose more randomly every once in a while..just see what happens. Make my own "naked book"

experience. Of course there is much more in the book but this is what struck me most deeply.

This is an interesting look at the outer appearance of the books we read and what it means to the author, herself, and its influences in the book world. It's a more theoretical look at these collections of words we enjoy so much.

As always with Lahiri, I enjoy the way she writes. She did not disappoint here and I look forward to whatever comes next.

A copy of this book was provided by the publisher through NetGalley in return for an honest review.

Shawn Mooney says

There are probably only a very few insightful things anyone could say about book cover design. Lahiri has said them here, and also said several other things. I do judge books by their cover, sometimes wisely, sometimes not. In this case, neither the cover nor what was inside proved to be all that terribly interesting. Still, one or two things I took away to think about.

K.D. Winchester says

A perfect gift for any book lover, this little essay delves into how a book's cover changes our perception of the book's contents. Pulitzer Prize-winning author Jhumpa Lahiri perfectly describes the transformation that comes over a book by the simple act of changing its clothes. I adored this essay and can already think of half a dozen people I'd love to give this adorable book.

Brina says

Jhumpa Lahiri is fast becoming one of my favorite go-to contemporary authors. She writes luscious prose about timely issues in both English and Italian, and her short stories contain such depth that she practically tells an entire novel in each one. I am always on alert to see if one of my preferred authors has written a new book, and, while I was not met with euphoria that she had written a new full length novel, I did discover an essay penned by Lahiri in Italian last year entitled *The Clothing of Books*. In this short length talk that has since been translated into dozens of languages including English, Lahiri discusses her feelings about book jackets and how they create an entirely new language for each individual book.

Lahiri commences her talk with an anecdote about school uniforms. I can relate. My children started wearing uniforms this year. The students are dressed the same yet each is a unique individual. This is Lahiri's feeling about books and their jackets. Each book as well as each edition of a book has its own jacket which clothes it. Without the jacket, a book is considered unfinished, naked. Lahiri can identify her own books in a variety of languages based on the jackets. She is allowed to consult with her publisher in order to put her unique flair into a book which she has spent years revising. How many times have people been drawn to books based on their covers? Lahiri points out that the cover itself comprises a distinct language, separate depending on the translation. Each country puts its own stamp onto a book, contributing to it becoming a classic, best seller, or, in some cases, a bust.

In one instance, Lahiri noticed a different book with the jacket to *Interpreter of Maladies*, her award winning debut collection. Immediately she notified her publisher but to no avail, and the two books, while entirely different, would begin to share a history. Lahiri does not appreciate that in the United States, publishers prefer that her covers contain Indian imagery, even though her books take place on American and now Italian soil. Yet, it is Lahiri's Indian heritage that draws me to her books, and she can not separate herself from her family's immigrant experience no matter how much she tries to associate herself with the Italian language now. By all respects, Lahiri is a polyglot, an immigrant to two distinct countries, and her books and their covers tell a distinct story in each continent, country, and language.

The Clothing of Books could be a nice gift for a book lover at this holiday season. It tells a distinct story and provides many jumping off points for discussions even though it is under one hundred pages in length. This coffee table book can be read in under an hour but should not let the plain blue cover fool the reader into a sense that this is a book to be taken lightly. Although one of the shortest books I have read this year, it is written by one of my favorites, and, as Lahiri notes, it is duly important to judge a book by its cover.

4 stars

Jason says

This was a cute little essay, readable in less than an hour. An interesting dissection into the thought behind the book jacket, what it means and does for the book, and what it represents to both reader and author.

I liked it because it's sort of an awakening. Often readers don't give much thought to a book jacket, yet someone is designing them, someone is behind the decision to place this jacket on a book versus that jacket. I was interested to hear that the author has less input than I'd thought. At least, that's been Lahiri's experience.

I'd be curious to hear how much input mega-selling authors have in the jackets on their books, such as the Rowlings and Pattersons and Steels of the world.

Rincey says

I meaaaaan, it is a book about books (well, book covers) by Jhumpa Lahiri. I am literally the exact target audience for this essay collection.

PorshaJo says

74 pages on thoughts on book covers. Yup. But it was quite fascinating. I'm a huge Jhumpa Lahiri fan and have read all her books. I was recently looking at my library list of new audio books and saw this was there. I was so excited and immediately started it. In *The Clothing of Books*, Lahiri details how she feels about book covers, really feels about them. She has published 5 books and that sums up to over 100 different book covers/jackets. 100 different! Different covers for hardcover, paperback, ebooks, audio and then for different countries. If you are a lover of books this is a wonderful read. Very short, less than 1 hr to listen to via audio, which is also narrated by Lahiri.

She also talks about how sometimes authors don't have a choice on their book covers. For her books, the covers typically have Indian themes when in fact, her books take place in America and now Italy. I also found it interesting that she said books should sell the author, but many book covers have so many quotes from OTHER authors telling you why you should read the book. But does the cover sell the author, in most cases, no. I am one who is drawn to book covers. Sometimes I have picked up a book solely on being lured in by the cover. Other times, I shunned books due to horrible covers. I finally gave in on one of these horrible book covers and found such a gem (I'm looking at you *The Animators*). I'm sure as book lovers, many people 'judge' a book by it's cover. Another interesting item is that if a book does not sell very well, the cover is changed.

As I was listening to this one, I could not help think this was done as a way for Lahiri to practice writing in Italian. Her last book was about her love of the language, written in Italian. In the end, she notes that this was a talk she wrote to deliver at a festival in Italy and turned into this gem of a book.

Erin says

ARC to review - EPD November 15, 2016.

This slight volume (it was originally presented as a keynote speech given at a festival in Italy in 2015, then expanded) explores book covers and jackets - what they mean to readers and to the writers whose books they cover and it's a fascinating, very thorough explanation of the topic. Early on she notes that often she is forced to accept book covers that she doesn't like and, while does accedes, she is still resentful - it's so interesting that the work inside, the real *meat* of the thing is generally fashioned by only one writer, who has often worked for years to get the thing letter perfect, while the book cover, the face it presents to the world and often the way it will be identified is decided upon by a committee that doesn't even include the writer.

And in Lahiri's opinion, most of the book jackets for her works just don't "fit" (especially the fact that so many of them include stereotyped references to India regardless of the setting of the book). She "wants [her] covers to reflect the sense and spirit of [her] books" but the covers are designed by professionals - they want to do a good job, of course, but the book doesn't really *matter* to them, or, at least not in the way it does to Lahiri, of course. She notes that with one of her books she owns twelve different translations of the same book and notes, "how is it possible that one book, the same book, can generate this panorama of images....every sentence is the same. And yet [from the covers] they seem like twelve different books, with twelve diverging themes, written by twelve different authors."

However, as much as she doesn't always love the covers to her own books, as she looks around a library or a bookseller, she loves the "lack of visual order" which comes directly from the differing styles and types of covers. She notes "there is visual confusion, but also a sort of joyful exuberance. It reminds me of a motley crew, a party made of odd individuals who enjoy one another's company," which is the precise explanation about what us book lovers love about just being in libraries and bookstores - the jumble of possibilities. And perhaps this book about books will only appeal to book-crazed nuts like me, but the writing is lovely and it's an interesting exploration of.....yep, you guessed it.....judging (or not) a book by its cover.

Cynthia says

This tiny book (70 something pages) is about the relationship between the words in a book and its cover art. Lahiri's book is derived from a talk she gave in Italy, her adoptive home at least part time, about the import of jacket cover art plays both in the perception of what a certain book is about and how it impacts authors. This doesn't sound like the most scintillating of topics but Lahiri makes it interesting. Her main theses is a broader one about how people are conflicted because they both want to fit in but at the same time to stand out. The art work and the blurbs supplied by other authors as well as the inside flap synopses and author background information have become an expected part of promoting books. The last two but especially the cover are what makes a book stand out enough to catch a reader's attention.

Lahiri makes a lot of interesting points but one that caught my attention was her mention that Virginia Woolf's sister Vanessa Bell did the illustrations for Woolf's first edition which were consequently published by the press run by she and her husband Leonard. It was called Hogarth Press.

Here's a link to a few of those covers:

<https://goo.gl/images/E7UctC>

They're very simple, almost simplistic, yet they have emotional impact. This is in contrast to most of today's jackets which seem to scream at shoppers. I don't think I'm alone in the experience of finishing a book only to spend perplexed time gazing at the front cover wondering how it tied in to what I'd read. Lahiri shares the author's love/hate relationship with these representations attached to their words.

Karen Germain says

Thank You to Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group for providing me with a copy of Jhumpa Lahiri's, *The Clothing of Books*, in exchange for an honest review.

PLOT- In this short, non-fiction book, award-winning author, Jhumpa Lahiri, explains the process that the publishing industry uses to create book covers. She explores her own feelings on book covers, as both an avid reader and famous author.

LIKE- I'm a huge, huge fan of Lahiri, and I was thrilled for the opportunity to review, *The Clothing of Books*. As a book lover and hopeful author, I found her take on book covers to be both informative and thought provoking. Although my manuscript is far from ready to even send out in search of agents, I'm well aware of the book cover process, how the author may have very little say, with the publisher picking the cover that best fits their vision for marketing. Lahiri writes about this process, confessing that some of her own covers did not fit with her personal vision of her stories. She writes about her experience of having her books translated and how publishers in other countries, would pick covers based on what works for their culture. A popular cover in one country, could be disastrous in another, even though the book is the same.

Lahiri relates the theme of book covers, to her own cultural background. She was born in England to parents from India, but immigrated to the United States as a small child. Living in America, she attended public schools, without a dress-code. On her summer trips back to India, she envied her cousins who attended

schools with uniforms, wishing that she could wear a uniform in America, so that she wouldn't stand-out so much. Making matters more difficult, were her parents didn't quite understand her wish to fit-in, and would purchase American style clothes for her that was budget-friendly, not trendy for teens. They had her dress in traditional Indian clothing for occasions spent with other Indian immigrants. Lahiri never felt like she belonged anywhere. To layer this further, she speaks of her father, a librarian, and how her childhood experience with books was all at the library, where the covers are often removed.

Lahiri writes about the beauty of covers. On her recent move to Italy, she could not bring many of her possessions, so she used books, facing the covers forward on her shelves, like pieces of art, to breath life into her rented home with its generic furniture. She mentioned never having spent so much time admiring covers, as when they were displayed in this fashion.

DISLIKE - Only that it was too short.

RECOMMEND - YES!!! If you're a reader, writer, artist, et..., The Clothing of Books is a must-read. Really, anything by Lahiri is a must-read. She's brilliant.

Like my review? Check out my blog!
