

Backstory

Judging a Book by Its Cover

Alistair O'Neill

The British writer Rachel Cusk's celebrated *Outline* trilogy, published between 2014 and 2018, concerns a series of journeys a writer named Faye takes in Europe. In one, Faye encounters a woman who is obsessed with the work of a painter. "What she was trying to say was that she wasn't interested in them objectively, as art," Cusk writes. "They were more like thoughts, thoughts in someone else's head that she could see."

A recent spate of well-regarded novels has taken the use of photographs in book-jacket design into new territory for structuring a relationship between word and image. The U.K. Faber edition of Cusk's trilogy (and also the U.S. Picador edition), designed by Rodrigo Corral, makes use of still lifes by the fashion photographer Charlie Engman. The thick, white border and the bold, black all caps frame an image that offers a way into thinking about what the title of the novel might refer to. But after reading it, you realize how provisional its illustrative nature is. Corral's design was in reaction to reading Cusk's prose: "It isn't super linear. It's more about being part of the journey," he says.

The U.S. edition of American writer and *T Magazine* editor Hanya Yanagihara's novel *A Little Life* (2015) and the U.K. edition of British writer Olivia Laing's first novel *Crudo* (2018) turn this observation concrete. Both novelists were inspired to use a photograph for their book jacket after seeing it in a gallery. Yanagihara saw Peter Hujar's *Orgasmic Man* (1969); Laing saw Wolfgang Tillmans's *astro crusto* (2012). Laing has noted that Tillmans's image of a postprandial crustacean shell connects to a scene in the book where her lead character, Kathy, smashes a crab open with a hammer.

But the principle of using someone else's work to frame your own rises above the evident linkage. Laing's use of American writer Kathy Acker as her protagonist—partly quoting Acker's work, largely fictionalizing her life—is a feature of her style of autofiction, but it is also bound up with how writing is described in the novel: "She wrote fiction, sure, but she populated it with the already extant, the pre-packaged and

readymade.” Laing’s Kathy is described as “Warhol’s daughter,” someone who is “happy to snatch what she needed but also morally invested in the cause.”

It’s a description that is as much about image use in publishing as it is about writing. The cover of *A Little Life* reproduces Hujar’s photograph of a close-up of a man’s face at the point of orgasm; although shorn of its title, the ambivalence about whether it’s a face in agony or ecstasy is ramped-up. Yanagihara has described the cover as a “sensation—of witness and also of trespass—that I wanted the reader to feel as well.” *A Little Life* opens in New York in the early 1980s, a time when Hujar was still working, and chronicles the lives of four young men with a tight focus on private and inner worlds as represented by the cover. One of the four, JB, is an artist and the photographs he takes of his friends—depicting them in his artworks without their consent—is what begins his distance from them. “*Tonight, I am a camera, he told himself, and tomorrow I will be JB again.*”

The novel’s Instagram account, set up by Yanagihara and her social-media manager, has spawned similar reactions in readers—not through posting portraits of their friends as the book’s character does, but by posting portraits of themselves with the book itself. As one reader’s body extends out of from the jacket, it’s as if a novel can be slipped on and off like an alternate, temporary identity or a thing worn. It’s a performance that resonates with something feminist art historian Linda Nochlin wrote: “That the self is a condition of disguise and that we can move back and forth in terms of sexualities, in terms of social being, in terms of all kinds of sense of who we are.”

What these book jackets illuminate is the way the contemporary novel, both in content and cover, performs the idea of the self continually collapsing back onto other ideas, other images; as if somehow, the prose operates as a written form of interconnectedness between visual ideas; a kind of longform resort to the pictorial. It’s a queer way of defining things, a privileging of final looks before how things might first be written down. It seems somehow reminiscent of record covers and not book jackets: of the photographs Steven Patrick Morrissey once chose for the singles and albums The Smiths released; or the covers Peter Saville once designed for Joy Division and New

Order that made use of sourced photographs. Perhaps it is the realization that novels are now the sleeve notes of our time.

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