This narrative begins with shelving. I love to shelve books in our school library. It can serve as a quiet, meditative respite from a hectic day, but there is also an important pedagogical consideration: providing a window that opens my eyes to titles my students are not reading.

When shelving yet again Operation Yes by Sara Lewis Holmes (with a cover that displays plastic, green army men, front and center), my eyes take in Turtle in Paradise by Jennifer L. Holm, a 2012 Newbery Honor title (with a cover showing the back of a young girl in a short blue dress holding a starfish) that has never been checked out.

**EXAMINING COVER ART**

When students ask for recommendations, I often suggest titles that carry a personal interest, along with a disclaimer about the artistic cover appeal such as, “If you can get past the cover . . .” Yet it is just this—the cover art—that can make or break a student’s choice. Almost 10 years ago in School Library Journal, Leigh Ann Jones (2007) wrote an insightful article on this very topic. She explains,

> Covers are the number one factor that impact the selection of fiction books no matter if the student is a boy or girl. Covers have the same effect on sixth, seventh and eighth graders. Covers are the top choice no matter whether the student states that he loves to read, likes to read, or doesn’t like to read.

Jones’s study was part of her doctoral dissertation research, but my interest was in the attitudes of my 54 sixth-grade students—all boys—who love reading. Thus, I created a lesson plan, “Gender Bias in Cover Art,” designed to explore the topic of cover art and free-choice reading.

**COLOR AND CULTURE**

An introductory look at culture and context furnishes the background prior to the students’ title choices. Focusing on one aspect (for example, color as seen within our cultural context), we begin with a presentation: a solid pink screen, then a solid blue screen. This visual display is repeated, and students are asked to contemplate their emotions, words, and thoughts associated with each color before our discussion ensues. The hope is for students to become aware of unconscious references enough to consider, “What is the cultural message here?” A 2011 Rutgers University study (LoBue & DeLoache, 2011) highlights the importance of color and “gender-stereotype”

> By the age of 2.5, girls have developed a significant preference for pink over other colours. Furthermore, at the same time that young girls display an increasing preference for pink, boys show an increasing avoidance of pink.

Building on this, the next logical questions for my young male students are, “What does this mean?” and

“While I cannot expect to affect the publishing industry, I can affect my students’ perceptions.”

**About Boys Reading “Girl” Books**

While I cannot expect to affect the publishing industry, I can affect my students’ perceptions.
“What difference does it make if boys like blue and girls like pink?” Here is where we can see the impact of a cultural message—even at an early age—long before a student chooses a book based on cover art. Before returning to our pink and blue screens and students’ responses, it is important to note discourse that surrounds color and gender-role behavior. “Seeing Red” (Ouellette, n.d.), a most interesting paper on color psychology written by a student at Bryn Mawr College, tells students, “Pink induces feelings of calm, protection, warmth and nurture. This color can be used to lessen irritation and aggression as it is connected with feelings of love.” However, blue is not only the most “common” color but also the most popular, according to an article in Forbes magazine (Somers, 2014). I would hazard a guess that men, who dominate CEO positions in S&P 500 companies where women hold only 4.2% of the positions (“Women CEOs,” 2016), would choose blue as a favorite color for suits, shirts, ties. Further, an article from the Training Center Petaluma Instructional Systems School for the Coast Guard (Beeman, 2009) notes, “Studies show productivity increases in blue rooms and a weight lifter can lift more weight in a blue room.”

DIGGING DEEPER INTO COVER ART

So, back to books and their cover art, as I hold up popular “girl” books with titles spanning all genres from historical fiction through urban realism; they are award winners, “Best Books” from solid children literature reviews. Who among these prep-school boys will take a chance with the titles that include:

- Fire From the Rock (Sharon Draper)
- Dairy Queen (Catherine Gilbert Murdock)
- The Wish and Ella Enchanted (Gail Carson Levine)
- Camilia (Madeleine L’Engle)
- Ashes (Kathryn Lasky)
- Touch Blue (Cynthia Lord)
- Summer’s End (Audrey Coulombis)
- Love, Ruby Lavender (Deborah Wiles)
- The Ninth Ward (Jewell Parker Rhodes)
- Habibi (Naomi Shihab Nye)
- I Lived on Butterfly Hill (Marjorie Agosin)
- The Heart Is Not a Size and One Thing Stolen (Beth Kephart)
- The War That Saved My Life (Kimberly Brubaker Bradley)

I am swamped by the enthusiasm as my students clamor for titles. I remind them to “read with an open heart.” Throughout the course of our weekly sessions, our conversations target visual cues, such as a book cover’s background color, imagery (especially gender related), and font style, as well as font size of title versus the author’s name. A time line on the changing covers for Madeleine L’Engle’s A Wrinkle in Time (McCoola, 2012) gives more of a historical approach and demonstrates the relationship between cover art and changes in our cultural values and stereotypes. The more the students read, the more we question: Does the gender of the author and main characters affect the primary emotions elicited? Are there clues within the text—vocabulary, dialog, associations, and references—targeting one gender over another? Discussions are sincere and often boisterous. Humor easily slips into hilarity, with arguments over

UNDER MYSTERIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES

Spratt, R. A. Friday Barnes, Girl Detective. Roaring Brook, 2016. 272p. $13.99. ISBN: 9781626722972. Grades 4-7. Move over, Encyclopedia Brown. Friday Barnes has arrived at Highcrest Academy, paying tuition with a reward from finding a stolen diamond. She’s smart and logical but socially inept, which means fitting in at the elite boarding school takes time. Humorous dialogue and pictures show the young detective at work in this first entry in an entertaining series.

Egan, Catherine. Julia Vanishes. Knopf, 2016. 384p. $17.99. ISBN: 9780553524840. Grades 8-12. Julia, daughter of a drowned witch, has a talent that makes her a great thief: she can blend almost invisibly into the background. Sent by her benevolent boss on a seemingly innocuous case to learn about a mysterious household, Julia encounters a powerful magician, a possible werewolf, and more dangers that lead to a dramatic, eye-opening climax.

Podos, Rebecca. The Mystery of Hollow Places. Balzer + Bray, 2016. 304p. $17.99 ISBN: 9780062373342. Grades 8-12. Imogene’s mother left almost 16 years ago, when Imogene was a baby. Now her father, a mystery novelist, has disappeared, too. Ignoring her sensible stepmother’s advice, Imogene tries to track down both of them. Her mission takes her around New England with unexpected companions, including a boy she likes, in this well-plotted, emotionally effective story about seeking answers.

Hardinge, Frances. The Lie Tree. Amulet, 2016. 384p. $17.95. ISBN: 9781419718953. Grades 7 up. Why has Faith’s family fled to the island of Vale? What has her acclaimed naturalist father done to try to understand the mystery around her stern father and the dramatic events on Vale. A multi-layered, deftly-crafted tale, not to be missed.
shades of pink and its variant meanings. My students have taken this to heart. They are aware and engaged, so when it comes time to respond to our survey, they do not hold back. Questions included:

1. Does the title of your book appeal to you? If not, why not; if so, why?
2. Does the cover art of your book appeal to you? If not, why not; if so, why?
3. After reading your book, did you like it? Why or why not?
4. After our lesson, might you think twice about picking up a book that is considered a “girl book”?

Answers ranged widely but were thoughtful: “I felt it was cliché in the essence there was a girl who wanted to be popular and her wish was magically granted and filled with lots of girls’ sleepover secrets. I also enjoyed the book because every page I turned, there seemed to be a new twist that was enjoyable.” “No, I didn’t like my book because it did not have any action or mystery in the book which is what I like in books.” Yet the following response helped me know that this lesson was on the right track.

Responding to Kephart’s The Heart Is Not a Size, a student answers the question about the cover art with “The cover art did not appeal to me. As with the title, it made the book seem girly. It has hands making a heart shape. This is usually thought of as kind of girly.” Regarding his assessment, after reading it, he states, “I did like the book after reading it. I thought that it was interesting to see the main characters experience the poor town of Juarez. The author did not make the book girly; it could appeal to both genders.” Both statements are made by an adolescent male, who also noted, “[I] usually like books with mystery and adventure, so this book title did not appeal to me.”

In a post on The Guardian Books blog, Croggon (2013) opines, “The real question is why do we push young readers into the boy/girl binary . . . ? Every great book is about connection, empathy and understanding the other, why be so limiting?” Why, indeed? To her question, I would add this qualifier, “Why do publishers push young readers into this paradigm?” Why would they not want each gender, perhaps even both genders simultaneously, to read and appreciate the literature they publish?

While I cannot expect to affect the publishing industry, I can affect my students’ perceptions. I can present the information and ask, “After our lesson, might you think twice about picking up a book that is considered a ‘girl book’?” Upon finishing Joan Bauer’s Close to Famous, my student answered, “Yes, because of not really liking the cover, I probably would not have picked this book up. But once I actually read the story and the content of the book, it was actually pretty good.” I ask my students for an open heart regardless of a book’s cover art—a metaphor for life.

REFERENCES


Jones, L. A. (2007, June 1). The great