To Lure 'Twilight' Teenagers, Classic Books Get Bold Looks

Teenagers are still reading the classics. They just don't want them to look so, well, classic.

That is the theory of publishers who are wrapping books like "Emma" and "Jane Eyre" in new covers: provocative, modern jackets in bold shades of scarlet and lime green that are explicitly aimed at teenagers raised on "Twilight" and "The Hunger Games."

The new versions are cutting edge replacements for the traditional (read: stuffy, boring) covers that have been a trademark of the classics for decades, those familiar, dour depictions of women wearing frilly clothing. In their place are images like the one of Romeo in stubble and a tight white tank top on a new Penguin edition of "Romeo and Juliet."

The covers are intended to tap into the soaring popularity of the young-adult genre, the most robustly growing category in publishing. In the last decade, publishers have poured energy and resources into books for teenagers, releasing more titles each year. Bookstores have followed suit, creating and expanding special sections devoted to them.

After the "Twilight" books by Stephenie Meyer became a sensation, paranormal romances boomed. In the last several years, the "Hunger Games" trilogy has inspired dozens of dystopian novels.

Some of the redesigned jackets are clearly inspired by the "Twilight" series. HarperCollins released a cover for "Wuthering Heights" with a stark black background, a close-up of a red rose and an inscription that reads, "Bella & Edward's favorite book." (Critics sneered that it was a "Twilight" rip-off.)

In a new series published by Puffin Books, an imprint of Penguin Group USA, a cover of the Gothic vampire novel "Dracula" by Bram Stoker features a ghostly woman floating in the center, her platinum hair flying in the air. The title and author are scrawled in cursive over a large pool of blood, rivulets of red dripping down the page.

"We didn't want to go with a muted approach," said Eileen Kreit, the president and publisher of Puffin. "We had that Urban Outfitters customer in mind. We wanted to appeal to that teenager and give a fresh look to these stories that have been around a very long time."

Sales of some young-adult versions have been strong. The HarperCollins edition of "Wuthering Heights" has sold 125,000 copies since it was released in 2009, an extraordinary number that sent the book back to the best-seller lists.

Because titles like "Pride and Prejudice" and "Persuasion" are in the public domain, any publisher can release a version, leaving the text inside the books untouched while redesigning the cover. And for the young-adult reader, publishers are scooping up all the material they can find.

Now the new versions of the classics are fighting for space on the young-adult shelves of bookstores. In a Barnes & Noble in Manhattan last week, a display featured four new editions of novels by Jane Austen and the Bronte sisters alongside more contemporary offerings of paranormal romances. (Upstairs in the adult-fiction section, more traditional versions of the classics were lined up on the shelves.)

At the Book Revue bookstore in Huntington, N.Y., new versions of the classics have sold briskly, surprising the store's owner, Julie Klein.

"I wasn't sure they would sell at all, to be honest," she said. "As a bookseller, I appreciate the classics and I love when I can sell them to a new generation. Anything that gets kids to look at them."

In March, Splinter, an imprint of Sterling Publishing, began releasing its Classic Lines series, paperback editions of classic novels with French flaps and delicate illustrations on the jackets that have the appearance of watercolors. For the artwork, the publisher hired Sara Singh, a Manhattan-based fashion illustrator.
"My challenge was to make something that's classic look appealing to tweens," she said. Referring to the covers, she added, "We wanted to make them fashionable and beautiful, with bright colors and handwritten text."

Alli Brydon, the editor of the series, dismissed more traditional covers as too "Victorian" and "old-fashioned" for teenagers. On the jacket of a classic edition of "Jane Eyre" in Barnes & Noble, for instance, a woman is staring mournfully into the distance, her skin nearly the same yellowish hue as the wall behind her, a black coat hiding her neck.

"It doesn't show her brazen qualities, and it doesn't show her bravery," said Ms. Brydon, who oversaw a Classic Lines cover for the novel featuring a bright purple sketch of the book's heroine with her chin held up jauntily. "A lot of the old covers don't convey some of the feminist ideas that the books hold."

The traditional covers also make young protagonists look much older than their true age, while the newer ones portray characters like Elizabeth Bennet in "Pride and Prejudice" as the young adults they actually are, making them more appealing to young readers.

Nevertheless, some teenagers have rejected the new editions. At Book Passage, a store with two outlets in the San Francisco Bay Area, a display of repackaged classics did not sell well, said the store's owner, Elaine Petrocelli.

"If kids want to read 'Emma,' they want to buy it in the adult section, not the teen section," she said. "Kids don't want to feel like they're being manipulated."

Tess Jagger-Wells, a 15-year-old high school sophomore from San Rafael, Calif., said she counted "Jane Eyre" among her favorite books, a story she loved for its old-fashioned, "charming" moments that "you had to wait for — they weren't just handed to you."

For classics like that and "Pride and Prejudice," Tess said she preferred her hardcover editions with their flowery covers to the more modern versions.

"It's fun to have the originals in your house to look at and show people," she said. "It kind of goes with the feeling of the classic as something that's treasured, something that you want to keep. The new covers make the books look like cheap romance novels."
Hoping to capitalize on the frenzy over Y.A. book sensations like *The Hunger Games* and *Twilight*, publishers are returning to their design departments and asking for new teen-friendly looks for classic high school staples like *Emma*, *Jane Eyre*, and even Shakespeare, according to *The New York Times*’ Julie Bosman. This only makes sense knowing what we do of the publishing business: When there’s a big hit, others flock to follow it, whether that means writers rushing to create similarly themed works, agents hoping to snag their own dystopian success stories, or houses publishing more books of a particular genre or category. (Note the surging popularity in Y.A. and its crossover appeal, as well as the upswing in erotic, BDSM-themed fiction due to *Fifty Shades*). Of these classics with new covers, Bosman explains: “The new versions are cutting edge replacements for the traditional (read: stuffy, boring) covers that have been a trademark of the classics for decades, those familiar, dour depictions of women wearing frilly clothing. In their place are images like the one of Romeo in stubble and a tight white tank top on a new Penguin edition of *Romeo and Juliet*.” She also cites, somewhat horrifyingly (to this writer), HarperCollins’ *Twilight*-inspired *Wuthering Heights* covers (see above, next to the “original”) as well as a new *Dracula* cover from Penguin.
imprint Puffin featuring a "ghostly woman" and lots of blood, made for "that Urban Outfitters customer," according to Puffin's Eileen Kreit.

There is a key benefit with redesigning the classics: Those books are frequently in the public domain, so any publisher can try its luck with an "Urban Outfitters-esque" cover, and see how sales go. Some have been successful, which means we can probably expect more. But do they actually work at what they're intended to do—get teens to pick them up and read? Or might this be just another case of adults presuming what kids want, and attempting to market those ideas?

Sarah Gerard, who runs the children's section at McNally Jackson, told The Atlantic Wire that she doesn't think kids judge a book by its cover, at least not in this way: "My experience with jazzed-up covers, with teens at least, is that they make no difference at all. There are plenty of classic books that kids still read -- The Wizard of Oz, Wind in the Willows, etc. -- and when the cover is jazzed-up or gify, it's the grandparents or the family friend who buys it as a birthday present. The kids don't care. If they don't want to read Pride and Prejudice, they won't read it, regardless of what the cover looks like."

Tracy van Straaten of Scholastic added that this "trend" isn't really anything new, necessarily; it's just business. "Since the beginning of publishing time there have been repackages to look like popular books of the day," she said. "It's probably most successful when the content is truly similar. I think readers do appreciate help in finding other books like the ones they like, but it's less successful when you try to make something look like a genre/type of book it isn't." Colleen Mondor, who writes the monthly Y.A. column for Bookslut, told us, "There will always be a market for a sexier books for teens just as there are for adults. When I was a kid it was Judy Blume's Forever that we passed around, with the appropriate pages dog-eared. But the idea that Twilight readers will suddenly notice and then purchase classics just because of the covers seems a bit silly to me. They might pick them up, but trust me, after reading two pages they will know these aren't the same kind of romances as Bella & Edward. And honestly, that is a GOOD thing in my opinion."

There's also something nice about a classic that's not trying too hard, a book comfortably clad in its old sweats (or pantaloons), hanging around the house, or whatever. As 15-year-old Tess Jagger-Wells told Bosman, "It's fun to have the originals in your house to look at and show people. It kind of goes with the feeling of the classic as something that's treasured, something that you want to keep. The new covers make the books look like cheap romance novels."

Here is the most worrisome thought of all, however: If this trend crosses over into adult lit, in the future, will all of our "grownup" classics look like Fifty Shades of Grey?
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By Dennis Abrams

A recent New York Times article examined the trend among some publishers to repackage classic books like Emma and Jane Eyre with provocatively modern jackets designed to grab the attention of teenage readers devoted to Twilight's Edward and Bella, or The Hunger Games' Katniss and Peeta.

"In the end, we want teen readers to read good books. We want them, as well, to trust books. I think many of the new covers are lovely and appealing, and I think the goal of these publishing houses is commendable. I will hope with them, that this strategy works. That teens are led toward the classics — and that they fall in love."

The question, of course, is: if they fall in love with what the cover promises but perhaps fail to deliver — is it like falling in love with someone on a dating site and then, when finally meeting them in person, realizing that they're not the person you thought they were going to be? Can that disappointment be overcome by the reality of the reading experience?

Does pimping out Emma or Jane Eyre by dressing them up in contemporary attitudes and putting them out on the street to lure in new audiences diminish the stature of the books being sold? Does marketing them as if they were contemporary teen versions of paranormal or dystopian novels make it seem to teen readers as if the reading experiences are somehow equivalent? And even more importantly, do the covers misrepresent the books to teens, and if so, what might the reaction be? Will readers take the covers too literally and then be disappointed when the book doesn't live up to its promise?

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But at least one noted YA novelist has her own experience with cover art that raised concerns on the matter: