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Make the Old New Again; or, How I Learned
to Stop Worrying and Love Penguin's Classic Redesigns

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Sophie Aschwanden

May 2017

A recent search of the Penguin¹ Classics website shows seven distinct editions of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* currently available for purchase. Some of these books are clearly meant for specific audiences—young readers, high school students, price-conscious shoppers—while others have been produced with a focus on aesthetics to appeal to book lovers and design aficionados alike. The Austen redesigns are not an isolated occurrence. For the past decade and a half, Penguin has been systematically repackaging its Classics series, rebranding public domain works as Penguin products and reselling them to readers as collectible items. The public, meanwhile, has been buying them. Of course, every book cover is an advertisement for its contents and many publishers put out public domain works, but Penguin, with its established reputation for quality design and seventy-year history with the Classics line, is especially well positioned for the task. The success of Penguin's formula lies in its understanding that the relationships readers form with their books are not limited to the words written inside. The new Penguin Classics appeal to readers on three extratextual levels: they satisfy a human impulse to collect and to categorize, they speak to the position that the book as an object occupies in our society, and they function as an extension of the reader's sense of self by allowing him or her to appropriate the physical appearance of the book as a representation of his or her personality. By engaging with readers in ways that are unmoored from the book's content, Penguin has hit upon a method of ascribing value to the package of the book itself and, in doing so, has found a way to resell our old favorites to us again and again.

¹ The former Penguin Books is now, of course, Penguin Random House but, as this paper is specifically focused on the ongoing design aesthetics of the Penguin part of the company and specifically on the Penguin Classics collection, I will refer to the publisher as "Penguin" here.

The idea of using a book cover as a method of promotion as well as protection is hardly a new one, but it is also more modern than we might think. In *By Its Cover: Modern American Book Cover Design* authors Ned Drew and Paul Sternberger describe how book jackets have moved from the utilitarian to the aesthetic over the past century or so.

While the first book jackets date to the 1820s, until late in the century they had been used as protective packaging and tended to be nonpictorial, labeled wrappers with little focus on design. Book jackets began to gain importance in the 1890s with the recognition that they could be a way to attract the attention of potential buyers. . . . By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century the book jacket began to take root as a promotional tool, and its design received more attention. By mid-century in America, what had begun as prosaic illustration and straightforward lettering grew, through the adaptation of European modernism, into a sophisticated integration of type and image.”²

This development of the book cover as a marketing tool gave publishers a new language with which to appeal to readers, and that appeal has only gotten more specific as time marches on. The core purpose of a book cover is, of course, to communicate the story inside, to act, as Alan Powers writes in *Front Cover: Great Book Jackets and Cover Design*, “as a communicative bridge between the richness of a text, which works its way into public consciousness, and the physical world.”³ But cover design is also an opportunity to shape the work itself. The look and feel of a book’s cover is a reflection of the time and place in which it was made (Drew and

² Drew 20

³ Powers 11

Sternberger write that a book's cover is "a graphic representation not simply of its content, but its point in history—in the history of American design, in the history of American literature, in the history of American culture"⁴) but also of the targeted audience and marketing plan of that particular edition. In choosing to produce a cover that is avant-garde or typographic or highly designed or cookie-cutter, publishers reveal what kind of person they hope will buy the book. And Penguin is as aware of that power as anyone else. From its inception in 1935, Penguin has positioned itself as a purveyor of quality. The first paperback books they produced were meant to be affordable but also high-class, and the design work that went into them was emblematic of that principle. In *Front Cover*, Alan Powers described how a 1956 Penguin director saw the company's avoidance of "lurid" American pictorial covers as a sign of Penguin "standing out for good taste."⁵ Sixty years later, in her 2016 foreword to *Classic Penguin: Cover to Cover*, Audrey Niffenegger expressed much the same thought, writing, "From the very beginning, innovative design was used to attract and reassure readers: Here is quality; you'll like this."⁶ That idea of *quality* and its accompanying sense of design has stayed with the company—and its customers—throughout the intervening years of designs and redesigns, and it is perhaps nowhere more obvious than in the Classics series. In *Penguin By Design: A Cover Story*, Phil Baines writes that the idea behind the original Classics lineup "was as straightforward as that behind Penguin itself: to make available to everybody something which had previously been the preserve of those with money. The first ten books were titles that were out of copyright; the money saved on royalties

⁴ Drew 10

⁵ Powers 90

⁶ Niffenegger 15

could be put instead towards commissioning the illustrations.”⁷ The lack of copyright claims on the majority of the books in the Classic range (though not all of them, as the idea of a “classic” has itself been continually redefined) must still be a financial consideration for Penguin, but it also frees designers to explore new ways of interpreting the books, unencumbered by the mercurial demand of first-time authors. In *Classic Penguin*, Art Director Paul Buckley writes, “To me the beauty of packaging the Classics is often what others see as the curse—these books, these covers have each been done over a million times, and that is exactly what frees us up to go a bit out of left field with this very well-known material.”⁸ Niffenegger makes a similar observation, writing that Classics covers “don’t have to define the book or sell the book using only design: The book’s reputation is a design element.”⁹ Indeed, the ubiquity of the texts included in the Classics line allows designers not just a sense of freedom in the design (for most people will immediately recognize the title, even with a highly experimental cover treatment) but also the ability to redesign them again and again to fine tune their appeal to specific readers.

Let’s again consider those *Pride and Prejudice* covers. The seven versions of the book currently on offer through the Penguin Classics website are as follows: 1. The 1995 Puffin Classics edition for younger readers, in soft pastels with a painting of two ringleted girls reading a letter; 2. The 2002 redesign of the familiar black-spined Penguin Classic, featuring an appropriately classical painting of a Regency woman on the top two-thirds of the cover and the title information on black ground at the bottom; 3. The 2008 green Signet paperback, which

⁷ Baines 24

⁸ Buckley, *Classic Penguin* 22

⁹ Niffenegger 13

carries a sketchy illustration of a birdcage and a low price point; 4. The 2009 clothbound Hardcover Classics edition, which has a repeating motif of swans on a yellow ground designed by Coralie Bickford-Smith; 5. The 2009 Couture Deluxe edition with a chic black-and-white cover drawn by fashion illustrator Ruben Toledo; 6. The 2011 attempt to appeal to Teen and Young Adult reader, which features lacy ornamentation and a CGI Elizabeth Bennett in an approximation of Regency dress; and, 7. The 2012 red-bound Drop Cap edition, part of a series of twenty-six works of literature, each with a heavily-designed initial on the front cover, which form a full color spectrum when lined up in order on one's bookshelf.

Each of these books has been designed to appeal to a certain kind of reader. Or, perhaps more precisely, they have been designed to appeal to certain facets of the reader. *Pride and Prejudice*, long beloved by many, doesn't need an eye-catching cover to convince people to read the story. For many, that's already accomplished by its literary reputation and its comfortable place in freshman English curriculum, but what these redesigns do is convince people to *buy the book*—and then buy it again. As longtime Penguin designer David Pearson said in a 2010 article for *Eye Magazine*, "It's a great leveller. If it's a copyright-free text and anyone can publish it then it comes down to how well you can produce it."¹⁰ In choosing the cover that appeals most, the reader can immediately—and visually—communicate something about him or herself, a feat that can't be accomplished by a battered library copy or a PDF downloaded from Project Gutenberg. A black-spined Classic edition on the shelf communicates an affinity for the traditional and understated, while a Couture Deluxe communicates that one is a little wilder, a little more experimental, and, yes, probably interested in fashion. Meanwhile, the general abundance of

¹⁰ Walters

beautifully designed book covers made available by Penguin within their Classics line means that some readers with especially strong attachments to certain titles will keep coming back for more—buying multiple copies of the same book because each appeals, in its own way, to his or her self-perception, and because the internet has made it easy for all of us to recast the objects we own as indicators of how we want to be seen. Thus, what is functionally the same interior of *Pride and Prejudice* has the potential to blossom from one sale into five.

Edition	Year	Price	Binding	RTD Sales	YTD Sales
Puffin	1995	\$4.99	Paperback	26,561	68
Classics (black-spine)	2002	\$8.00	Paperback	217,284	8,163
Signet	2008	\$4.95	Paperback	68,347	1,571
Hardcover Classics	2009	\$24.00	Hardcover	54,532	1,842
Couture Deluxe	2009	\$17.00	Paperback	27,996	587
Teen & Young Adult	2011	\$7.99	Paperback	3,908	22
Drop Cap	2012	\$25.00	Hardcover	6,153	132

(Table 1) Sales figures for Penguin’s seven editions of *Pride and Prejudice*. Source: Nielsen Bookscan, 2017.

Data from Nielsen BookScan (see table 1) suggests that this strategy is a winning one—the books are selling. The 2002 redesign of the famous black-spined Classics cover is not only by far the best-selling Penguin edition, it also, as of May 2017, has the highest year-to-date (YTD) sales and the fifth-highest release-to-date (RTD) sales for any edition of *Pride and Prejudice* from any publisher. Affordability is probably a factor here (suggested retail price for a Penguin Classics paperback is \$8.00) but the collectibility of the brand itself may well play a part as well. The Classics editions are well-known and iconic in their own right. Interestingly, the

cheapest option of the seven (the \$4.95 Signet edition) has sales figures relatively similar to one of the most expensive—the 2009 clothbound Hardcover Classic, which boasts a high production value, a \$24.00 price tag, and a spine carefully designed to look beautiful on a bookshelf (especially when surrounded by other Penguin Hardbound Classics). Signet editions, on the other hand, are both cheap and popular with educators, which makes it especially interesting that this edition’s sales figures have been nearly matched by what is essentially a luxury good catering to book lovers and enthusiasts. Penguin’s other two highly designed editions also appear to be holding their own. The Couture Deluxe, which is an example of Penguin’s ongoing project of dividing the 1,400 titles in their Classics backlist into smaller and more niche sub-collections (fashion illustrations here, but also tattoo art in the Penguin Ink collection, embroidery in the Penguin Threads books, and so on) seems to ask readers to find value in a new edition of an old book by connecting their outside interests with the design of the book. The Couture Deluxe collection includes titles that have been traditionally considered “women’s books” (such as *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and, of course, *Pride and Prejudice*) and this is certainly no accident. In *Penguin 75: Designers, Authors, Commentary (the Good, the Bad . . .)*, Art Director Roseanne Serra recalls specifically wanting “to explore a more feminine look. Maybe fashion. What a way to get young women inspired to read the classics!”¹¹ The fashion element is certainly a huge part of the collection’s marketing. “READ ICONIC NOVELS DRESSED IN A FIERCE DESIGN” blares the ad copy on Penguin’s website. “COLLECT ALL SIX TITLES IN THE COUTURE-INSPIRED COLLECTION.”¹² If you consider yourself a fashionista, this is the edition for

¹¹ Serra 52

¹² *Penguin Classics* website, “Couture Deluxe Editions”

you. The Drop Caps series, on the other hand, is a collection that is, like the Hardbound Classics, designed to be displayed as a decorative object as much as to be read. The series is comprised of twenty-six books by twenty-six alphabetical authors (A is for Austen, of course), each decorated with a lushly illustrated initial on the cover. In this case, though, the highly collectable nature of the set (not only are readers encouraged to complete the alphabet, but the covers are colored so the spines forms a rainbow when all twenty-six are placed in order) may actually help explain the Austen edition's lesser sales. At \$25.00 a pop, the full collection is a big investment. The last two Penguin versions of *Pride and Prejudice* also have the two most generic cover designs. The Puffin editions for younger readers and for teens and young adults have the two lowest YTD figures on this list (the teen edition also has the lowest RTD sales; the Puffin boasts a fairly respectable RTD figure, but it has also been available to buy for nearly a decade longer than any other edition of *Pride and Prejudice* currently listed on Penguin's website), which suggests that the Penguin strategy of investing in design and packaging to appeal to readers on an aesthetic level as well as a literary one is a wise move.

The question, then, is why has this strategy been so successful for Penguin? If public domain texts inside are freely available elsewhere, then what impulses drive readers to buy and re-buy copies of these particular editions? One answer lies in their extreme collectibility. Over the past decade or so, Penguin has been dividing their full Classics lineup (which includes approximately 1,400 titles) into smaller groups and collections. In addition to the Drop Caps, Hardbound Classics, Couture, Ink, and Threads collections mentioned above, there are also Horror Classics, Christmas Classics, Arthur Miller Classics, F. Scott Fitzgerald Classics, Civil War Classics, Graphic Deluxe Editions (illustrated by comic book artists), Penguin Galaxy (sci-fi

books), and more. These collections can include anywhere from five to twenty or more books, but all the books in a set will usually be tied together by a specific theme or aesthetic, and they're often designed by a single artist or illustrator to lend the collection visual coherence. By splitting the books up in this way, the curation of a Penguin collection is made accessible. Penguin is well aware the the extensiveness of their backlist makes the prospect of collecting the entire Classics series daunting, but readers who find themselves attracted to a particular Threads cover can much more easily imagine buying the remaining five book necessary to complete the set. That notion of the *possibility* of completion is an important one. As Philipp Blom writes in *To Have and to Hold: An Intimate History of Collectors and Collecting*:

Only with mass production came the idea of the complete set, the full series, the vocabulary of a mentality that until then could not express itself through accumulating things according to arbitrary principles. Before this moment, collectors of art, of natural objects, of shells or coins or scientific instruments or portraits, of antiquities and of books had no way of hoping to achieve completeness . . . Collecting was by its very nature open-ended and there were always other pieces, other examples, that could be found and added. Mass production changed all this. Even if infinitely varying Barbie dolls seem to have been produced, even if the little coloured tin tops that sit on champagne corks seems to proliferate without control, we know that their number must be finite . . . Even if one or more of them should prove elusive for an entire collecting life, in principle the collection can be completed, can achieve its logical destiny . . .”¹³

¹³ Blom 159-60

In curating the collections for their readers, Penguin has made it possible for readers to find a way in to starting their own. And in encouraging collecting behavior, they likewise encourage readers to value the books in new ways. In their study, *Collectors and Collecting*, Russell W. Belk and his colleagues found that the process of collecting an object led the collector to ascribe additional meaning to it, both internally and externally. Not only does the act of collecting “remove an item from the secular, profane, undifferentiated realm of the commodity, and ritually transform it into a personally and socially significant object”¹⁴ but the group of items it produces is “especially implicated in the extended self because it is often visible and undeniably represents the collector's judgments and taste”¹⁵ Jean Baudrillard similarly observed how the process of collecting an object imbues it with new meaning. In his essay, “The System of Collecting,” he writes that truly possessing an object means stripping it of any function it previously had. Once the function has been removed from an object, he explains, “its meaning is entirely up to the subject. The result is that all objects in a collection become equivalent, thanks to that process of passionate abstraction we call possession. Further, a single object can never be enough: invariably there will be a whole succession of objects . . .”¹⁶ These collected objects—these books—no longer exist to be used but, rather, to be owned. As Blom puts it, “Their value can lie only, if not in their usefulness, then in their significance; they mean something, stand for something, carry associations that make them valuable in the eye of the collector. . . . It is not

¹⁴ Belk 550

¹⁵ Belk 551

¹⁶ Baudrillard, “The System of Collecting” 8

what they are but what they stand for, the promise they contain.”¹⁷ The book collection may stand as a testament to its owner’s perseverance or aesthetic tastes, but it does not, necessarily, reflect his or her literary interests. Baudrillard observed that certain book collectors “get so carried away that they continue to acquire titles which hold no interest for them. A book’s distinctive position within the series is sufficient to create a formal interest where no intrinsic interest exists. What motivates the purchase is the pure imperative of association.”¹⁸ In this way, bookbuying becomes about the need to complete the collection, rather than the need to read the contents. The book, divested of its original meaning, is reinvested with a new identity—that of an object to be owned and displayed.

This notion of inherent value, of an object that can be coveted as a physical item rather than for the words contained within, has always been a part of the book’s existence within our society. Early books were extremely precious objects, rare and difficult to get hold of and, even as advancing technology and mass production has made it affordable for anyone to own a book, the physical form itself still carries a sense of preciousness and value on its own. In *Front Cover*, Alan Powers discusses how books function simultaneously as both consumer goods and sentimental objects, writing, “Many books have built in resistance to obsolescence, as a combined result of their physical form and content. People become attached to them and, perhaps, even after nearly two centuries of mass-production, some distant memory of their preciousness and scarcity in the pre-industrial age still clings to them.”¹⁹ To be a book-lover is to

¹⁷ Blom 166

¹⁸ Baudrillard, “The System of Collecting” 23

¹⁹ Powers 6

say something very specific about oneself. Book-lovers are not just intellectuals, they are appreciators of art. For many readers, the form the book takes is just as integral to their reading experience as the content inside. As Geoffrey Nunberg wrote in his introduction to *The Future of the Book*, “The utility and significance of the form of the book doesn’t begin and end with the printed page.”²⁰ Indeed, the book can be a decorative object, a sentimental object, a revered object. In his essay “The book as a symbolic object,” Régis Debray describes how the symbolism, even sacredness, of a book is built into its form through its design:

The primordial book is taken to be edifying because it is an edifice. Illuminated, gilded, carved, locked shut, with its clasp, its hard back, its coppered corners, its intersecting architectonic edges . . . And it is perhaps also because the text could take the the rigid form of an architectural enclosure, be closed up into an ordered and clearly demarcated rectangle, because it could be held and weighed in the hand, leafed through by thumb and forefinger, be prominently displayed in its place for all to see, become a permanent fixture, be hoarded, incorruptible, spatially delimited that the order of books was able for so long to provide so much emotional security. To serve as a pledge of legitimacy and permanence, a shelter against the flight of time, degeneration, death.²¹

In designing the book as if it were a precious object, we bestow that preciousness upon it. The text become permanent, incorruptible, legitimate. The object gains a value that is inherent to its specific physical form, regardless of what other forms it may exist in. And Penguin, which has

²⁰ Nunberg 12

²¹ Debray 143-44

not only established itself on the strength of its aesthetics (in *Classic Penguin*, Paul Buckley writes, “Penguin is one of the most iconic, most visual brands in the history of branding, and [the] tri-stripe cover is literally the most recognizable series in the history of book covers”²²) but also published multiple books devoted to its own design and visual history, understands this implicitly. The books in the Classics collections are meant to be displayed proudly, even reverently, and their covers and jackets have been made to facilitate that display. Consider the patterned cloth spines of the Deluxe Hardcover, or the color spectrum made by the Drop Caps series, the goal of which was, as Paul Buckley recalls, to “create a gorgeous, vibrant rainbow that would be a gem displayed on shelves.”²³ By treating these redesigns as precious commodities—worth spending \$25.00 on, worth collecting in their entirety, worth having multiple books written about them—Penguin is able to ascribe that value onto them, and its readers follow suit.

While the displaying of a book imbues the object with a certain kind of value, it also allows the displayer to project a sense of self through ownership. The collection certainly functions as an extension of the owner’s interests and personality (just search for #bookshelfie on Instagram for examples of owners expressing themselves through carefully curated—and often color-coded—bookshelves) but so too does the individual book. The proliferation of social media and online culture has created more space than ever before for people to curate how they are perceived based on the things they own. It is the spectacle, as described by Guy Debord in *Society of the Spectacle*, a system in which “[e]verything that was directly lived has moved away

²² Buckley, *Classic Penguin* 39

²³ Ibid. 191

into a representation.”²⁴ Rather than relating to one another directly, people relate through images, which both create a representation of reality informed by idea instead of experience and determine the value of commodities purchased within that reality. What one ends up purchasing, then, is not the object itself, but the perceived notion of the object and the social relationship that it has negotiated, which has become a commodity in its own right within this representation of reality. Similarly, in *The Consumer Society*, Jean Baudrillard describes a world in which we are we are all defined not by what we make or do but by what we buy. In this framework, our purchases become imbued with an abstract and personal value (through buying we communicate something about who we are) and subsequently create more need that can only be satisfied through more buying. Because happiness and satisfaction cannot be abstract (“Happiness has to be measurable. It has to be a well-being measurable in terms of objects and signs; it has to be ‘comfort’,” says Baudrillard²⁵) we turn our buying into a metric for measuring satisfaction—affluence is, as Baudrillard puts it, “merely the accumulation of the signs of happiness.”²⁶ The more we own, the more satisfied we are, but one finds that one can always be more satisfied, so we continue to buy and to display, and in the act of displaying a book as a #shelfie tweet or a #bookstagram post, the value of the owned object is in that moment based on what the consumer feels his or her ownership will communicate to the rest of the world. In choosing to buy and display a specific edition, the consumer is says something about him or herself—*I am artsy, I am crafty, I am interested in design, I appreciate the classics, I am bohemian, I am rich*, and so on.

²⁴ Debord 1

²⁵ Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society* 49

²⁶ Ibid 31

The Penguin Classics design team knows this, and they work to provide covers that will appeal to a broad spectrum of readers—that will, as Paul Buckley says in *Penguin 75*, “make the [Classic] material look fun or fresh and relevant to a new generation of readers, while still looking classic and important and never frivolous or cheap.”²⁷ What one chooses to read is certainly a form of self-expression, but the visual nature of social media means that what one chooses to buy is equally valid. There is a sense of curatorship in this kind of buying. “Having good taste” is treated as a form of creativity as buyers claim ownership of quality design by virtue of being able to recognize it—and Penguin, as discussed earlier, has always had a reputation for quality.

When a reader picks up a copy of a well-loved title that he or she already owns under different covers and feels compelled to purchase it anyway, there’s a value in the new edition that isn’t present in the text alone. Whether it be the enjoyment found in bringing home an especially beautiful book for display, the pride in expressing one’s personality and taste through purchase, or the satisfaction of adding another piece to a collection, designers and publishers have created an impetus for purchase where there otherwise wouldn’t be one. A great strength of Penguin Classics design in all its many forms is its willingness to cater to a wide range of disparate tastes and needs. As Paul Buckley says in *Classic Penguin*, “If you are a student and just need a down-and-dirty copy of *The Illiad* for a class, there is a good chance you will buy the cheapest one you can get your hands on. For someone who is older and wants to own nice versions of things . . . well, we have many gorgeous items that just happen to be amazing pieces of literature for the

²⁷ Buckley, *Penguin 75* 190

book buyer to consider.”²⁸ Or, put more simply by fellow Penguin art director Jim Stoddart, “[W]e have to make books for different kinds of readers.”²⁹ After all, if you’re trading in public domain works, you have to give your readers something they can’t find elsewhere. Obviously, Penguin isn’t the only publisher putting out redesigns of classic titles to snare a few new customers but, with their established reputation as top designers and long history with the Classics line, they are especially well positioned for the task. To design for books is to walk a fine line between reflecting and obscuring the contents within. While every cover is theoretically a showcase for the text, sometimes truly great design can instead overshadow it, abstracting the function of the book for the sake of the art piece on the front. The contents can become an excuse for the cover—but if you find yourself missing the story, you need only open the book.

²⁸ Buckley, *Classic Penguin* 19

²⁹ Walsh

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