A Tale of Two Covers: Middle Graders Respond

A Faraway Island – Swedish vs. U.S. Covers

When acquiring books with substantial text from other countries to translate into English for the U.S. market, U.S. children’s and young adult publishers routinely replace the covers of longer books with covers that they expect will have greater appeal for readers in the U.S. However, books from abroad — the cover included — can provide genuine insight into other lives precisely because they are less likely to cater to U.S. sensibilities. This pilot study uses the Swedish and U.S. covers of Annika Thor’s *A Faraway Island* (Random House, 2009), the winner of the 2010 Mildred L. Batchelder Award for the publisher of the year’s best translated children’s book (ages 0–14) to test the assumption that readers here need to have the cover Americanized. The book recounts how two Austrian Jewish sisters, 12 and 8, are evacuated by their parents to a remote Swedish island for safety from the Nazis. It is the first of four books made into a popular television mini-series in Sweden.

Theory

- Toury’s norms in translation studies: adequacy vs. accessibility (fidelity to original vs. adaptation for target audience)
- Rosenblatt — reader response
- Genette on paratext: book cover is meaningful
- Dresang — Radical Change Type Three: changing boundaries — breaking barriers.

Research Questions

1. Given the opportunity to see the artwork (stripped of text) for the covers of the original and translated books, how do middle school art students respond to the two images?
2. Do gender, ethnicity, or race have any influence on response?

Mixed Methods Design

*Units of analysis:* Grade 7/8 advanced art students  
*Pretest:* Fall 2010 - Pasadena middle school with similar students (n = 6)  
*Setting:* Fall 2010 - Los Angeles middle school  
*Sampling:* Class chosen for interest in art; school chosen for similarity to overall student population in California  
*Methodology:*
  - Part 1 Survey (n = 29): The class viewed the artwork for the two book covers stripped of text and completed the questionnaire.
  - Part 2 Follow-up focus group (n = 6): Selected students met with the researcher to discuss survey responses in more detail.

Quantitative Findings

- Data on ethnicity and race too sparse to be useful.
- Gender plays a strong role among these 12 and 13 year olds. When asked “Do you like this book cover art?” 10% of boys chose “like” for the Swedish cover, and no girls chose “dislike” for the U.S. cover. Similarly, in response to, “Does this book cover art make you want to read the book?” 10% of boys chose “yes” for the Swedish cover, and no girls chose “no” for the U.S. cover. Yet in answering “Does this book cover art look like it is from a different country?” boys and girls were equally uncertain.
- Overall the response to the U.S. cover art was much more positive than to the Swedish cover art.

Qualitative Findings

- *Is it art?* — students preferred more painterly U.S. cover to Swedish cover that was “too plain.” Art student bias towards high art?
- *Cover girls...or not.* Many found the Swedish cover “depressing” because the girls look worried. They thought that they would not enjoy the story and preferred to read about the more optimistic-looking girls on the U.S. cover. Ambivalence about having people on the cover at all! Both covers feature girls, alienating some of the boys: “too girly.”
- *Time, place, clothing, and genre.* Old-fashioned dress could be associated with U.S. history rather than with another country or culture.
- *Yes, change the cover.* Okay to change the cover art for an audience in a different country to appeal to those readers. Tension between cover as ad and cover as reflection of content.