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# The Book Cover as an Artistic Statement and a Cultural Phenomenon – A Canadian Example

La couverture de livre comme déclaration artistique et phénomène culturel - un exemple canadien

**Nikola Tutek**

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## **Abstract**

This paper deals with some basic features of postmodernist book cover designs, the application of the theory of multimodality in book cover design analyses, and, most importantly, the cultural aspect of creation and interpretation of book cover designs. My research and respective results are exemplified by short analyses of cover designs of three collections of short fiction by Alice Munro, which feature the artwork of the Canadian painter Mary Pratt. The focus of analyses is on the interrelations between the artistic and cultural features of both images and texts, and how these interrelations help in establishing the notion of Canadianness.

**Keywords:** multimodality, Alice Munro, Mary Pratt, book cover, Canadianness

## **Résumé**

Cet article traite de quelques caractéristiques de base des couvertures de livres postmodernistes, de l'application de la théorie de la multimodalité dans les analyses de conception de couvertures de livres et, surtout, de l'aspect culturel de la création et de l'interprétation des couvertures. Mes recherches et résultats respectifs sont illustrés par de brèves analyses de couvertures de trois collections de court métrage d'Alice Munro, qui présentent l'œuvre de la peintre canadienne Mary Pratt. Les analyses portent sur les interrelations entre les caractéristiques artistiques et culturelles des images et des textes, et sur la façon dont ces interrelations aident à établir la notion de canadianté.

**Mots-clés :** multimodalité, Alice Munro, Mary Pratt, couverture de livre, canadianté



## Introduction – A short overview of the development of book cover designs

There are three basic functions of the book cover, the first of which is a practical one. The book cover's function is to bind and protect the printed paper. The second function is artistic and cultural; the book cover should represent the artistic values and the semiotic features of the text it holds in its embrace, and it should make the observer able to identify with his or her expectations of what the book might be about. The third, and the last, is the advertising function. This function uses the second function to boost the sales of the book.

The first book cover designs created to attract “the attention of potential buyers” appeared in the 1890s (Drew 2005). Book cover designs flourished from the early twentieth century on, when the cover design became one of the essential elements of the visual identity of every publication. At the beginning, the objective of the book cover design was to anticipate and introduce the content of the book and to prepare and lure the reader to consume the text. In an attempt to accomplish that, book cover designs were strongly influenced by current artistic trends (i.e. artistic movements like Art Nouveau or Cubism had a strong influence on the choice of typography, the usage of colors, shapes and layouts, the usage of ready-made visual elements like photographs, and other creative choices made by book cover designers).

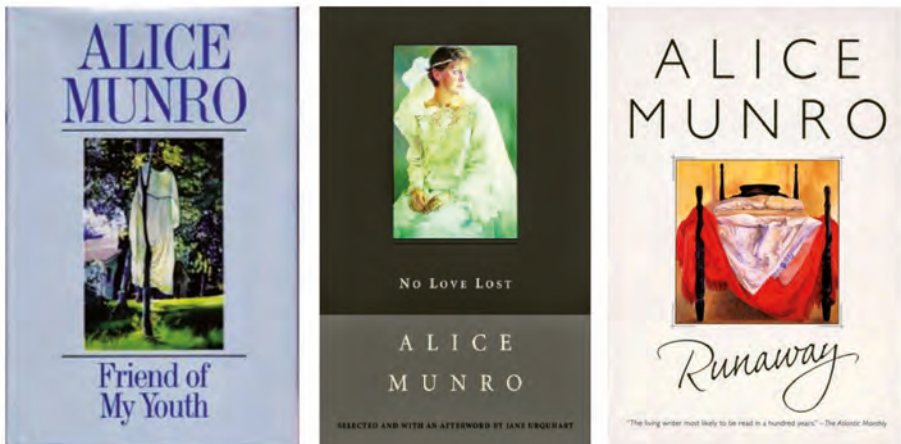
Book cover designs very much changed in the postmodernist period due to two main reasons: firstly, postmodernism as an artistic movement was no longer even closely monolithic and homogeneous, and, secondly, the sway of the needs of the market and the rules of the sales practices have pushed most of the artistic effort into the background. Book cover designs became semantically and structurally more loose, but they also suffered from uniformity which came as a result of the publishers' desire to please as many potential readers as possible.

Due mostly to the fact that the genre of the short story in Canada had become iconic by the end of the twentieth century, Canadian short stories analyzed in this article display cover designs (in Canadian editions) which both follow and defy the rules of post-postmodernist design. While the postmodernist book cover design typically features loose connections between fragments of design and the content of texts, and the design focuses on “subjective interpretation of signs” (Bruinsma 1997), the cover designs for Canadian short story collections remain either very much anchored in the Canadian cultural backgrounds, as in the case of Munro, or they reflect directly the content or the cognitive world of the texts by repetition of the visual artwork from the text on the book cover, as in the case of Margaret Atwood, Diane Schoemperlen, and Frances Itani, or they provide not so loose connections between the visual representation and the fragments of content, as in Bowering's case. However, all



of these book cover styles, in their miming or mocking reality, communicate their undeniable Canadianness to the readers, and in that way they play along with the rules of marketing.

Regarding the unquestionable Canadianness of the three analyzed book cover designs for Munro's short fiction, it is interesting to compare these Canadian book cover designs with their overseas counterparts. Canadian editions feature paintings by Mary Pratt, while the large majority of overseas Munro editions feature visualizations of everyday household objects, for example, cutlery. Although the imagery of overseas book cover designs is semantically similar to their Canadian counterparts, Pratt's paintings strongly communicate 'a very Canadian content,' which might not work that well outside of Canada. Overseas editions of Munro's books, in a way, play it safe by rendering book cover designs which communicate 'something to do with home, and domestic relations from a woman's perspective,' which is one of the main features of Munro's work. This overall homogeneity in creating book cover designs forced upon designers by the rules of a specific market is something that Kreider describes as "inbred design" (Kreider 2013), and neither the overseas nor Canadian book cover designs are immune to that. However, there is one important difference in the cultural function of the described design homogeneity: while the book cover designs of the overseas editions communicate writing usually assigned to Munro, Canadian editions do the same but from a very Canadian point of view, using essentially Canadian imagery.



**Figure 1:** McClelland and Stewart book covers for Alice Munro's collections of short stories featured in this short overview.



Figure 2: Overseas book cover designs for Alice Munro's collections of short prose: Czech, Spanish, Italian and Japanese.

## Multimodality and book cover designs

The theory of multimodality is focused on all types of human communication and all the meanings that these types of communication can carry. The theory of multimodality does not revolve around the dichotomy of verbal–visual, but considers forms of human behavior that, in a certain context, communicate meanings with other people. As such, this theory is highly applicable in analyses and interpretation of book cover designs.

In his article “A Multimodal Perspective on Composition” Van Leeuwen proposes three crucial aspects of composition in multimodal analysis, and these are *information value* (which coincides with the placement, or *mise-en-page* in intermediality), *salience* (which in the multimodal theory covers a wide range of terms, ranging from gesture of demonstration to the subjective cognitive process of every reader, which is predetermined by the reader's personal and cultural background), and *framing* (which more or less coincides with framing in multimodal theory) (Van Leeuwen 2003).

Considering the information value, Van Leeuwen states that the layout of a page is firstly divided spatially between the left and the right side; left being the *given*, associated with negative connotations, and the *right* being the new (information), associated with more positive connotations. The second division of the space on the page is vertical; the upper part of the page being the *ideal*, representing positive connotations (position of power, idealism, abstraction and contemplation), and the lower part of the page being the *real* which, in contrast, represents negative connotations (position of low or no power) or notions which are regarded to be based on more realistic attitudes (Van Leeuwen 36). The third, and the last division is that between center and margin. According to Van Leeuwen, those verbal and visual elements which are placed centrally carry more cognitive, semiotic, and



cultural importance; the more central the placing, the more significant is the image. Naturally, if the placing is more peripheral, also the significance of the image is less emphatic, and less disclosed (Van Leeuwen 41). However, this does not mean that the peripherally placed images lose their importance (that would go against the very idea of design) but they rather form a cognitive context for the ideas which are communicated as being the most important. The idea of salience, on the other hand, includes the reader's mind process, a complicated combination of cognitive experiences such as conscious and subconscious knowledge, adopted attitudes, intuition, cultural and personal background, etc., and it basically determines which visual elements of a book cover design are more likely to attract the reader's attention.

The theory of multimodality provides grounds for the interpretation of salience from the point of view of cultural and social studies. In my analyses, I vaguely apply Sarah Pink's (Pink 2008) conclusions drawn from her research into visual ethnography and her view of *place-making*. For example, salience of book covers of Alice Munro's short story collections which feature Pratt's artwork might almost function as postcards for Canadians: Canadian readers might perceive Pratt's image as highly salient because of the cognitive process which tells them 'this is Canadian'. On the other hand, if the same book cover is observed by a reader from a cultural background other than Canadian, he or she might perceive the salience in only one element of Pratt's painting, the one which he or she finds the most familiar, and in that way connect the space of the book cover with the space of their personal experience. To conclude this section, my analysis is based on the literary theory and the theory of multimodality applied in interpreting book cover designs, but it is simultaneously draws from the research practices of cultural and social studies.

## Pratt and Munro: United States of the Canadian mind

Three of Pratt's paintings were used as elements of book cover designs for Munro's short story collections:

1. *Wedding Dress* (1986) on the cover of the short story collection *Friend of my Youth* (1990)
2. *Barby in the Dress She Made Herself* (1986) on the cover of the short story collection *No Love Lost* (2003)
3. *The Bed* (1968) on the cover of the short story collection *Runaway* (2004)



**Figure 3:** Mary Pratt's paintings used as elements of design for book covers of Alice Munro's collections of short prose.

*Wedding Dress* and *Barby in the dress she made herself*, both created in 1986, and *The Bed*, one of her first renowned paintings, all feature some of Pratt's central themes: dresses, gowns, bedclothes, and clothes in general (all of which coincide with Munro's themes of female lives). Reproductions of Pratt's paintings are the most salient visual elements in all three of Munro's book cover designs (due to the shortness of this article, I will not go into details of multimodal analysis of each book cover design). All three book cover designs communicate the following: this is an intrinsically Canadian text, a typical Munrovia text, a text emblematic of Canada.

First I will shed some light on the features of Mary Pratt's artwork and its position in modern Canadian cultural experience. According to Sheila Perry, Mary Pratt has become one of Canada's leading artists, and she "is considered Canada's most illustrious female painter" (Perry 2013). Pratt's work is characterized by several main features. The first is the emblematic status of her work within Canadian culture; each and every painting features realistic scenes from the life in semi-rural Canada, and can easily be recognized by observers as being 'very Canadian'. The second important feature of Pratt's work is her adherence to the artistic style of realism while simultaneously escaping most historical and theoretical classification. The third important feature is the fact that Pratt's photorealism mocks reality by overexploiting 'the perception of the real,' and hence provides an ironic account of many aspects of Canadian life. This is a statement which could easily be applied in describing Munro's literary credo.

Munro's stories display the following important features that make her texts semantically, cognitively, and stylistically compatible with Pratt's paintings:



1. Thematic homogeneity: Munro's stories revolve around several dominant and recurring themes.
2. Pre-production recurrence: I have borrowed the term from the theory of film to explain recurrence in Munro's choice of her characters and locations. Characters recur physically, which is especially apparent in the cycle stories, but they also recur spiritually: many of the characters seem to wander through Munro's stories under different names and facing different existential situations but staying mentally and emotionally consistent with a typically Munroian character. As far as locations are concerned, most of Munro's stories are firmly set in Canada, as confirmed by Löschnigg (Löschnigg 21). Furthermore, the majority of Munro's stories are set in one particular part of Canada, namely, in Southern and Southwestern Ontario, and, more precisely, primarily around her native town of Wingham. Her writing is so deeply rooted in the fate of this part of Canada that it is often referred to as 'Munro country.' However, other parts of Canada are featured in her writing as well (especially Victoria, Vancouver Island), and those stories whose narration partially takes place abroad are always told from a Canadian point of view and are presented through the relation to the Canadian narration.
3. Pen-photographs: I found this term in Löschnigg's seminal work on the Canadian short story, where Löschnigg adopts the term from Nischik in her quotation: "From the beginning, Alice Munro has presented snapshots or 'pen-photographs' which constitute fragments of experience and refer to inherent possibilities rather than offering continuities from which truths can be elicited" (Löschnigg 19). Munro's writing style is very visual, and the mental images are presented like photographs whose meaning is not entirely explained. All this is connected to Munro's peculiar type of literary realism.
4. Deceitful surfaces: The Munroian narrative technique of 'constructing false impressions of reality' is well described by Löschnigg: "A hallmark of these long stories are extended introductions to places, which create an enhanced impression of 'surface' solidity [...]" (Löschnigg 23).

It is not difficult to identify numerous similarities between Alice Munro's and Mary Pratt's artistic creation on the level of content, style, and artistic approach. To further explain the interrelationship between the two artists and their work, I have created the following typology:

- a) Personal relation – Pratt and Munro are good friends in real life
- b) Geographical relation – they both emerged from one country and culture (even though they originally came from different parts of Canada – Pratt was born in Fredericton, New Brunswick)





- c) Ideological relation – they both in their own way talk primarily about the lives of women, and as such could be regarded as feminist
- d) Relation on the level of cultural representation – they are both emblematic representatives of Canadian art, culture, and mentality, and their work in more than one way symbolizes Canada
- e) Artistic relation – which can be observed directly: they share many artistic features, just in different media, for example, Pratt's 'faking reality' formally and semantically coincides with Munro's narrative technique often referred to as the pseudo-realistic style (shaken realism or reality deconstructed mainly by means of the 'Munrovia Switch'<sup>1</sup>), and indirectly (because the connection was established by the choice made by others): three of Pratt's paintings have been chosen by the third party to appear on the book covers for short stories by Munro.

The relation on the level of cultural representation is especially important for this short analysis. To exemplify this point, I will use a painting by yet another Canadian contemporary visual artist, Alvin Richard.



**Figure 4:** Alvin Richard's *Made in Canada* (2014).

From a first glance at his work we can see that he was heavily influenced by Pratt's art. One of his paintings I find especially indicative; it is titled *Made in*

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1) Maria Löschnigg in her 2014 seminal work on Canadian short prose *The Contemporary Canadian Short Story in English. Continuity and Change*; Trier: WVT, writes about the 'Munrovia Pattern' (pp. 257–262) to describe the narrative technique of constructing false "impression of 'surface' solidity [...]" (p. 21). By 'Munrovia Switch' I am alluding to changes in narration typical of Munro's writing, which disrupt the impression of surface solidity and deceitful realism.



*Canada* (2014), and, using the an artistic style almost identical to Pratt's, it depicts the first edition of Munro's *Runaway*, the one analyzed in the text above, and on it and behind it, glass jars<sup>2</sup> similar to those that appear in so many of Pratt's paintings. Here we have an interesting combination of meta-referential meaning: the painting refers to Pratt's style, and to Munro's writing. The book depicted again carries one of Pratt's images. If we consider the title *Made in Canada*, everything becomes clear – Pratt and Munro, and the unity of their artistic production, become an emblematic projection of Canadian art, culture, and society. And this is the very essence of the interrelations between the art of Alice Munro and Mary Pratt.

In the final section of this short overview, I will write a few words about how Mary Pratt's paintings found their way to Alice Munro book covers. During my research I was extremely lucky to be able to make contact with the man who actually stood behind the two book cover designs analyzed in this article, namely, Douglas Gibson, the former president and publisher of the McClelland and Stuart Publishing House, a prolific author, and one of the central figures in the history of Canadian publishing. Gibson was the editor who first artistically merged the work of Munro and Pratt by choosing Mary Pratt's paintings for cover designs of the first Canadian editions of *Friend of My Youth* and *Runaway*. Gibson was not in charge of the selection of Pratt's *Barby In The Dress She Made Herself* for the cover design of the New Canadian Library edition of Munro's *No Love Lost*, but he wholeheartedly approved this choice.

In our e-mail correspondence during February 2017, Gibson provided me with the relevant historical insight into the Canadian book cover design practice. Gibson writes: "After the Canadian artists known as The Group of Seven rose to prominence after 1910, until roughly 1940, their art was routinely used for the covers of books that were to be signaled as 'Canadian.' Some artists, in fact, were encouraged to illustrate and design such books." Gibson, as the publisher of McClelland & Stewart (which at the time proudly used the sub-title The Canadian Publishers) "was keen to establish that same sort of link between these two Canadian art forms – superb short stories, and excellent magic realist paintings that were reaching great heights together late in the 20th century."

For the very first book by Munro that Gibson published, *Who Do You Think You Are?*, instead of merely hiring a book-designing artist to illustrate a scene from the book, Gibson "went out and expensively purchased the right to reproduce a very popular print by the magic realist artist Ken Danby. The combination of the title and the Danby portrait of a pensive girl sitting on the grass was very effective." In the time when *The Love of A Good Woman* was in its early stages, but with the title decided, Gibson "had visited the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and came across the 19<sup>th</sup> century painting

2) Mason jars were made in Canada by Consumer Glass Co., and are no longer in production. These jars were at one time an indispensable part of almost every Canadian pantry.



of a sleeping woman, *Le Repos*, by Paul Peel.” He had decided to use that painting for *The Love of A Good Woman*, “and that set the practice of putting realist paintings on Munro’s covers.”

Later Gibson has focused on the artwork of Mary Pratt because she was a distinguished part of the group of ‘Magic Realists’ which emerged in the 1970s and thereafter in Canada. He has chosen Pratt’s paintings for Alice Munro’s covers “because these two emerging arts – magically realistic short stories, and superbly understated realistic paintings – seemed to have supported each other.”

I will conclude this short consideration of interrelations between literature, book cover design and the construction of Canadianness with an illustrating claim from Gibson’s book *Stories about Storytellers*, in which the author reveals the following:

I did the odd useful thing, like finding wonderful paintings by people like Alex Colville, Christopher and Mary Pratt, and Paul Peel, to give the books the right, elegant look. I knew that we had succeeded when other Canadian publishers started using Canadian magic realist paintings on their covers, as if waving and shouting, ‘Hey, this author’s kind of like Alice Munro!’ without the embarrassing business of having to state the claim openly, in words. (Gibson 365)

## Conclusions

A successful book cover design efficiently draws viewers’ attention and establishes communication with potential readers. This communication is typically based on two features of the book cover design: the first is the aesthetic reach of the design which attracts attention with its visual layout that might be perceived as *beautiful, unusual, shocking*, etc., and the second is exploitation of elements of cultural and semantic imagery shared by the story-world of a book and potential readers. Canadian editions of the three collections of short stories by Alice Munro which employ book cover designs that use the artwork of Mary Pratt are an exceptional example of the latter group of book cover designs. The three analyzed book cover designs unite these two emblematic Canadian artists, who, each in her own artistic medium, create images of a typically Canadian life. Furthermore, Munro’s short fiction and Pratt’s painting provide interpretations of life, that is, a world-view, which is, in its approach, form and essence, truly Canadian. Basic features of that world-view expressed artistically are, on the semantic level, the exploration of identity issues, isolation and loneliness, the need for change, but also of the irreparability of the human existential situation. On the level of style, features of this artistic approach are the deceptiveness of the interpretation of reality and a particular type of sensitivity, which, usually in few



words, discloses the deepest and the darkest features of human existence. Such a stylistic approach allows Canadian art to often reveal the complexity by (often repeatedly) stating the obvious, thus producing a very specific humorous effect.<sup>3</sup>

The plethora of cultural, artistic and semantic interrelations between the art of Pratt and Munro empower the three analyzed book cover designs to further construct and define the modern notion of Canadianness. As such, these book cover designs are certainly one of the most successful in their communication with the readers and they provide grounds for literary research and analyses.

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3) In that sense, it is interesting to mention the short film *Canada Vignettes: The Egg* (1979), produced by the National Film Board (directed by Robert Bélisle and Jean-François Pouliot); in 60 seconds the film summarizes all that has been previously stated about distinctive 'Canadianness' in art and beyond. *Canada Vignettes* is available on-line at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Czwa-PEi8Gw>



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## The Book Cover as an Artistic Statement and a Cultural Phenomenon – A Canadian Example

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