

A Reader's Worst Fear: A Genre Analysis of Those Pesky Book Stickers

Laurel Staniszewski

Laurel Staniszewski investigates the genre of book stickers, which have a powerful influence on customers and book publishers. Staniszewski discusses why book stickers are placed on book covers, how the genre works, and how people perceive the small round bits of information.

If you have ever been on BookTok (the side of TikTok for those book-obsessed people) you have probably seen the controversy around book stickers. How can a small sticker leave a whole community of book lovers so enraged? As someone who has been on BookTok and loves to read, I am quite familiar with these opinions and all this talk around book stickers. It got me thinking: What's the point of these stickers if they have gotten so much negative attention and people don't like them on book covers? I had assumed that they were there for marketing, but I wanted to dive deeper into the topic. I wanted to find out not only if my assumption was correct but also how they help with marketing, if they are successful, and if it's really worth ruining a perfect book cover. Do they really help sell more books?

The Sticky History

Today, stickers are stuck all over the place. They're on water bottles, binders, cars, laptops, windows, and of course, books. They have evolved as a way to express individualism, communicate information, and act as powerful



Figure 1: A postage stamp from the 1800s (“A Timeline of the History of Stickers”).

and influential marketing tools. It’s easy to purchase stickers from a store or make your own with a kit and then simply do with them as you please: highlight your favorite sports team, band, or TV show quote, or let the world know you love your pets. But the original use for stickers was quite simple: identifying food and consumables. Historians believe that the earliest stickers were created by shopkeepers in ancient Egypt, who would plaster sheets of paper to the walls of their ancient market stalls to advertise their wares (Millard).

Adhesive paper was invented by Sir Rowland Hill in 1839 (“Who Invented Stickers?”), and his innovation led to postage stamps—another form of sticker (Figure 1). With this new sticky-paper technology, people began using stickers for marketing purposes in order to differentiate crates when they were being shipped to grocery stores and businesses (WebSticker):

[In the mid-1800s] the paper label format grew from the practice of painting directly on crates and tying tags to packages. A faster and more uniform method for marking products was becoming necessary because of a growing economy that demanded consistency and identification. The new adhesive labels were popular on things like pill bottles and fruit crates. (Vinyl Bandits)



Figure 2: Food labels from the late 1800s and early 1900s (“A Timeline of the History of Stickers”).

Much like stickers today, these labels were usually brightly colored and eye-catching to grab the attention of the customer but also to be clear to the supplier what was included in each crate (Figure 2).

In the 1930s, stickers for food categorization expanded to include ingredients and nutrition facts (“A Brief History of Labels and Stickers”). This change was driven by the Great Depression because people wanted to get the most value for money, and new government regulations required these facts to be included on packaging materials (“A Brief History of Labels and Stickers”). As stickers with nutritional information on food and medication became more in demand, so did the need for more convenient stickers. In 1935, R. Stanton Avery, the founder of Avery Labels, created

the first self-adhesive stickers that allowed people to peel off the back for it to stick (“A Timeline of the History of Stickers”). The innovation suddenly made stickers portable and cheaper to switch out when information about the product was modified.

The sticky substance used on stickers today is vastly different from the original adhesive created by Hill. Up until the 1950s, the substance was a gum paste very similar to what was used on early postage stamps, and what is still used today on envelopes that need to be wetted to activate the adhesive (“History of the ‘Sticker’”). The method used to print these stickers was called lithography, and it was the first type of commercial art (“A Brief History of Labels and Stickers”), a “process of printing from a flat surface treated so as to repel the ink except where it is required for printing” (“A Brief History of Labels and Stickers”).

By the 1950s, stickers for advertisement were mainstream across many types of goods, and a new method of label printing emerged. This new method was called flexography, and it involved flexible and fluid inks (“A Brief History of Labels and Stickers”). It was better than lithography because you could now print on flexible materials such as cardboard, paper, vinyl, rubber, and plastic, which also made peeling stickers off their backing much easier. Around the same time, label design also saw a change. Stickers no longer had to have small font, faded images, or grainy background colors. Labels could have big, bold text, more intricate designs, and a plain, clear background. And eventually, starting in the 1970s, they even carried scents when scratched (Figure 3). Throughout the 1950s to the 1980s, stickers became a major advertisement tool for more than just food. They were used for political campaigns (Figure 4), personal mantras, and musical artists. Additionally, they were



Figure 3: 1970s scratch and sniff stickers (“A Timeline of the History of Stickers”).



Figure 4: A popular political sticker from the 1950s (“A Timeline of the History of Stickers”).

used by teachers to incentivize students, particularly the scratch and sniff varieties.

Interestingly, as stickers gradually became more popular to put on products such as car bumpers, windows, bottles, and posters, sticking labels on book covers was not as trendy. The need for stickers for literary marketing purposes did not seem to become mainstream until the late 1990s when bookstores and libraries slowly saw a decrease in business compared to digital and multimedia entertainment and educational outlets. At the same time, the need to put stickers on literary texts became more in demand as popular books were being made into blockbuster films, adapted into TV shows or miniseries, or became a part of celebrity book clubs, which I will talk about in more detail in the next section.

Sticking to What's Conventional

Now that we've talked a bit about the history of this genre and stickers themselves, let's talk about what makes a book sticker a book sticker, which could also be described as genre conventions. **Genre conventions** are characteristics that are considered typical or conventional for a genre. According to the ISU Writing Program, "Genre conventions refer to the characteristics of any kind of text that make it recognizable as participating in a particular genre" ("Genre Research Terms").

Since we're on the topic of genres, I want to discuss something very important. When people hear the word genre, it's common to think about kinds of books, music, or movies, such as horror, romance, or mystery. However, the concept of a genre is far more complex and interesting than that. Those genres I just listed are actually categories of the larger genres of books, music, and movies. That is because **genres** are "so many different kinds of written texts ... [that are] recognizable responses to recurring situations (making a website, teaching a class, communicating with friends and family, wanting to attend college or get a job)" ("Genre Research Terms"). When we identify a genre by its conventions, "we include genre features that might be visible (length, structure, formatting, ... tone, content included) ... and social goals that we more likely have to infer" ("Genre Research Terms"). So, a book is a type of genre because it has specific features that make it recognizable, and it responds to a recurring situation. There's a clear difference between music and movies because each comes with conventions that set them apart and cause people to interact with them in different ways. Road signs? That's a genre! Math equations written on a classroom whiteboard—genre! Menus, iPhones, billboard advertisements,

winter hats, price tags, the list goes on and on! Look on your desk or in your backpack right now: if you're looking at something that has specific characteristics, features, or conventions that set it apart from other things, you've got a genre on your hands!

Now back to the genre conventions of book stickers. The book sticker is normally small and round and goes on the cover of a book. It can either be a permanent sticker printed onto the book's cover or a temporary sticker that can be removed (though not very easily). The purpose of these stickers is to help with marketing and to influence customers to buy the book. The dimensions vary depending on the kind of sticker. On the cover of the book, "Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry," the dimensions of the Newbery Medal sticker are about 4.5 x 4.5 centimeters (Figure 5). Smaller stickers, like Reese's Book Club stickers, for example, are about 3 x 3 centimeters. Things like color, text size, font, and images all vary depending on the kind of book sticker. These stickers normally have something to try to pull readers in, like bright or eye-catching colors and bold text. Some common examples of this genre are Netflix, Hulu, or Amazon Prime Video original series/movie stickers (Figure 6), discount stickers, sneak peek stickers, award stickers, and book club stickers such as those for Reese's Book Club and Oprah's Book Club (Figure 7). Stickers like the book club and original series stickers aren't actual stickers, they're just printed on the cover. Other stickers, like discount stickers and Barnes & Noble exclusive edition stickers, are literal stickers,

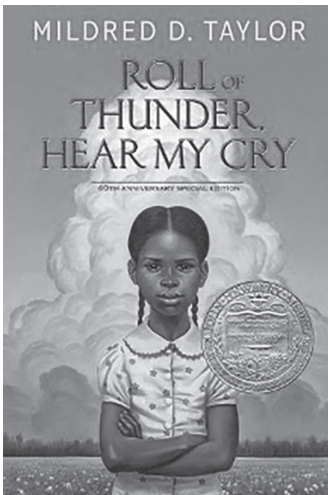


Figure 5: A version of the cover of "Roll of Thunder, Hear my Cry" with the Newbery Medal sticker ("Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry (Puffin Modern Classics)").



Figure 6: An example of a popular book with an Amazon Prime Video sticker ("The Eye of the World").

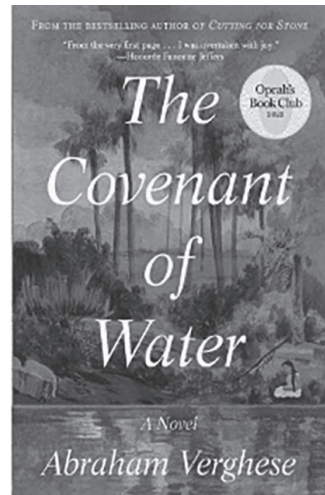


Figure 7: A version of a book jacket with an Oprah's Book Club sticker ("The Covenant of Water (Oprah's Book Club)").

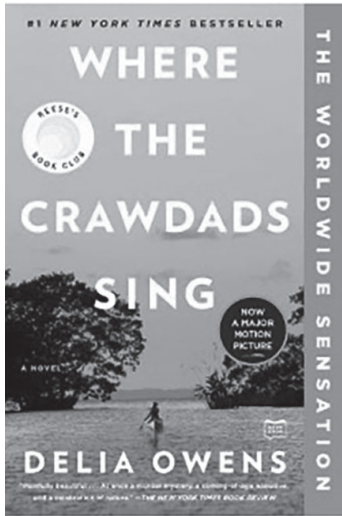


Figure 8: A version of the cover of “Where the Crawdads Sing” with a Reese’s Book Club sticker (“Where the Crawdads Sing: Reese’s Book Club (A Novel)”).

probably placed there by employees. All of these stickers serve different purposes in the marketing of books.

Stickers like those for Oprah’s Book Club and Reese’s Book Club signify an in-group identity. These stickers are meant to give people a sense of affiliation or closeness to celebrities and members of their book clubs. They are really great marketing tools and can make a book incredibly popular. One example of this is “Where the Crawdads Sing” by Delilah Owens (Figure 8). This book was the September 2018 pick for Reese’s Book Club, and it gained a huge amount of popularity. The covers were adorned with Reese’s signature sticker, and the book has now sold more than 12 million copies. While the book probably could have gained fame on its own, Reese’s Book Club helped. I can admit that I bought this book because I had heard of it on the internet and knew that it was a Reese’s Book Club pick, so I assumed it was good.

I recently bought “Normal People” by Sally Rooney and thought this book was a great example because it has not one, not two, but three stickers on the cover (Figure 9)! It has a Hulu original series sticker, discount sticker, and The New York Times’ “100 Notable Books 2019” sticker. Because this one book has so much sticky business on the cover, I want to talk a bit

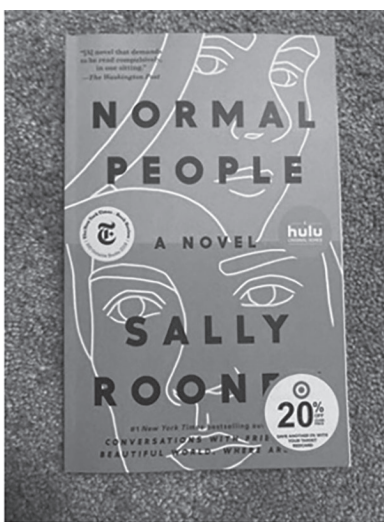


Figure 9: My copy of “Normal People” by Sally Rooney.

about the conventions of each sticker. First, the Target 20% off sticker. This is a kind of store sticker, placed on the book by Target employees, that people tend to peel off after they purchase the book. You might be thinking, “Why is it there if people are just going to peel it off?” The answer is pretty simple: it’s there for marketing. They are trying to get customers to buy the book. Although one sticker isn’t going to decide what book you buy, it can definitely help influence you. This sticker is the biggest on the cover, the dimensions being about 4 x 4 centimeters. The 20% is larger than the rest of the text on the sticker. It’s meant to catch your attention. This is something commonly seen with book stickers. They will almost always have something that is bolded and made to pull in possible buyers.

The next sticker is the Hulu original series sticker. This sticker is about 2.5 x 2.5 centimeters, so it is a bit smaller than the Target one. However, it is a bold green with thick white lettering which sticks out on the book cover. This platform, along with other streaming services, have logos that customers often see on their digital devices. They are in competition with each other for viewership, and now also for readership, so each streaming platform uses their font and color scheme for their stickers to make them noticeable on books shelves and display tables. Hulu stickers are a bold green. Netflix has the iconic red text on a black background, and Amazon Prime Video stickers are a vivid blue. As a person who loves to read, I can admit that I have seen these “Now a Major Motion Picture!” or “Coming soon to Netflix!” (Figure 10) stickers and have thought to myself, “Oh! I want to buy that book so I can read it and then watch the show/movie!” So, at least in my case, these stickers do their job.

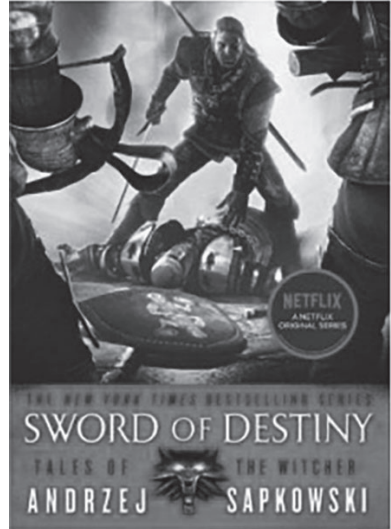


Figure 10: An example of a Netflix promotion sticker on a book cover (“Sword of Destiny (The Witcher, 2”).

Now let’s consider The New York Times’ “100 Notable Books 2019” sticker. This sticker is the same size as the Hulu original series sticker, about 2.5 x 2.5 centimeters. Before getting this book, I had never seen this sticker, but I was able to infer that this book must be highly rated and pretty good to have earned this sticker.

Book stickers are an intricate type of genre that comes with specific conventions that set them apart from other sticker genres such as bumper stickers or sports logos. Even streaming giants such as Netflix and Hulu have to adhere to recognizable genre conventions to sell their merchandise. Even though the book sticker genre is structurally small, it is a very influential and successful marketing tool.

Sticking Research Together

For my primary research in the genre of book stickers, I decided to conduct an interview. I wanted to interview someone familiar with the genre, so I decided to interview a major bookstore retailer employee. I had the questions I was going to ask planned out when I went into the interview. After arriving at the store, I approached some employees at the customer service desk and explained my research topic. A manager volunteered to help. I recorded the

interview on my phone and typed it out later. The interview ended up being a lot less intimidating than I anticipated and lasted about 5 minutes. Here is the interview:

Me: Are the stickers placed there for marketing?

Employee: Most of the book stickers are. Which ones are you looking at?

Me: Things like the Netflix original series stickers and the Reese’s Book Club stickers.

Employee: Yeah. They are there for marketing purposes. A lot of them are printed on like that, but some we do add. Especially if they’re like the Barnes & Noble special editions and things, so yeah, it’s definitely a marketing thing to try and get people to pay attention.

Me: If they have the Netflix original series or some sort of award sticker, are they more likely to be placed on one of your tables?

Employee: It depends on what the sticker is, but yeah, it does actually influence us. Especially if we’re doing a display on books that are being made into movies, we look for that sticker, and we put them on there. Or the Reese’s Book Club, we always have a Reese’s Book Club table, so if it has that sticker, it’s more likely to go there.

Me: Do you think they are successful?

Employee: It depends on what the sticker is, and it does depend on the book itself. It’s not going to sell just because of that sticker, but if you have somebody, for instance, who follows the Reese’s Book Club, yeah, they’re a lot more likely to pick that book up and look at it. And it still has to catch their attention, but it does get it in their hands more often.

When asking the question “Are the stickers placed there for marketing?” I had a pretty good idea of what the answer would be. I knew from my research and also my antecedent knowledge that these stickers were used for marketing purposes, so the employee’s answer wasn’t a surprise to me. **Antecedent knowledge**, which “refers to the facts, information, and skills that we each bring with us into familiar and new-to-us writing situations” (“Uptake Terms”), played a significant role in the research and writing of this article. In my case, when I started my journey into creating this article, I already had some prior knowledge of the book sticker genre and its conventions and purpose. I was already on BookTok and a part of the debate about book stickers. As an avid reader with friends who also love to read, I had been exposed to these kinds of marketing stickers before. I had even

purchased books based on the advertisement before I started researching the genre and writing about it. Additionally, I already had opinions and feelings about book stickers that helped guide my research and set the tone I wanted for this article. Finally, as someone who buys books, I knew Barnes & Noble would be a great place to ask for an interview regarding the topic.

One answer that I found interesting and was very helpful in my research was the employee's answer to the question "If they have the Netflix original series or some sort of award sticker, are they more likely to be placed on one of your tables?" Unlike the first question I asked, I didn't know what the answer to this question would be. The manager said book stickers actually do help books get placed on Barnes & Noble display tables, which is a huge deal to authors in regard to name recognition and book sales. Customers are much more likely to pick up your book when it's on a display table, and if you have a sticker on the cover, it could also help boost sales.

BookCHAT

When researching and writing this article, I realized how much book stickers rely on how buyers interpret the value of the information, meaning how much readers truly care if a book cover has a Reese's Book Club or Netflix sticker on the cover. I'm usually drawn to these stickers, like when I purchased "Where the Crawdads Sing." I get excited over seeing book stickers that say "soon to be a Netflix original movie." However, somebody else browsing shelves or doing online shopping might not care if a book is being made into a movie or has a sticker about the book being a part of a club. Finding out a book is being turned into a Hulu miniseries might actually dissuade some readers from purchasing a book.

As I considered this idea further, I thought about the research tool P-CHAT and the term reception and how it is a vital aspect of book stickers and researching the genre. P-CHAT is an important tool for me because it allows me to think about book stickers, their history, and how they function in society today. I was introduced to the idea of **P-CHAT** by Dr. Joyce Walker of the ISU Writing Program, and it stands for **pedagogical cultural-historical activity theory**. Yes, this may seem like a mouthful, but it's simply a fancy term for a research method that allows us to study the genres we encounter daily and see all over the world. P-CHAT is a theory that includes seven concepts: production, representation, distribution, reception, activity, ecology, and socialization. The tool allows us to zoom in and focus on different aspects of a particular genre to better understand how complex it is and helps us make good and educated choices when interacting with

the genre (Walker 71). I'm only going to focus on reception in regard to the genre of book stickers.

Reception deals with “how a text is taken up and used by others. Reception is not just who will read a text but takes into account the ways people might use or re-purpose a text (sometimes in ways the author may not have anticipated or intended)” (Walker 76). There is certainly strong reception around book stickers, which is crucial for advertisement agencies and bookstores to be mindful of. Readers could possibly be deterred from buying a book because of a sticker, which obviously isn't what the people who produce the stickers intend. At the same time, readers could possibly be drawn to buying a book because it has a particular advertisement sticker (remember the Reese and Oprah book clubs I mentioned?). The customer's opinion of the stickers, and if the stickers influence them to buy a copy of the book, all depend on the customer's reception. I have previously mentioned my excitement and curiosity about these stickers when I visit bookstores. I would say my reception is generally positive—at least for the removable stickers. But I also opened this article talking about how the culture of BookTok finds them pesky, unnecessary, and ugly. Some readers simply hate all book stickers and bond on BookTok over their feelings and opinions that this genre ruins otherwise beautiful book covers. The negative reception is strong enough to take up a percentage of BookTok discussions, as well as threads on Reddit under r/books.

During my research, I came across a quote from Jeanette Smith in a Change.org petition to make the Netflix original series stickers removable:

As a person who likes to read a lot, I also thoroughly enjoy the covers. I feel the covers are also a significant part of the reading experience. I often enjoy looking back and admiring at how gorgeous the cover is when I'm reading. The issue I see here is that once the book is adapted to some form of movie or TV show, the Netflix sticker is added to the cover. I know for a fact that many people find them gross and disgusting and want them removed because they ruin the whole illusion of the cover.

As an avid reader, I have to agree with the author of the statement. I hate the permanent stickers on books. People have even gone so far as to start Etsy shops to sell more aesthetically pleasing stickers that match the book's cover and hide the permanent stickers (Figure 11). These shops are a perfect example of what reception in P-CHAT can look like because it's not just readers feeling unhappy, but people repurposing book stickers and turning them into pretty works of art that don't advertise anything.

Books are both widespread and personal. They're used and seen all over the world while also remaining tightly squeezed in someone's arms. Regardless of anyone's personal thoughts about book stickers, they definitely have a strong reception that creates debate around their purpose and usefulness, and that is what advertising is supposed to do—create a buzz and get people talking and noticing.

Sticking Around Until the End

Throughout the course of researching and writing this article, I've realized this genre is more profound than it seems. Even though it's just a small sticker on the cover of a book, it's a powerful and influential marketing tool as well as a genre that people are emotionally invested in. My initial curiosity for this genre came from BookTok and being a lover of books, but through my research, I learned how sacred and profitable a book cover is and how stickers have always been an important advertising tool. I came to understand P-CHAT, and it has changed how I look at the world in terms of writing. I take more time to appreciate that everything with writing, from restaurant menus to billboard advertisements, are genres that somebody, somewhere, took the time to write. Genres are everywhere, no matter how big or small, and they all play important roles in our society.

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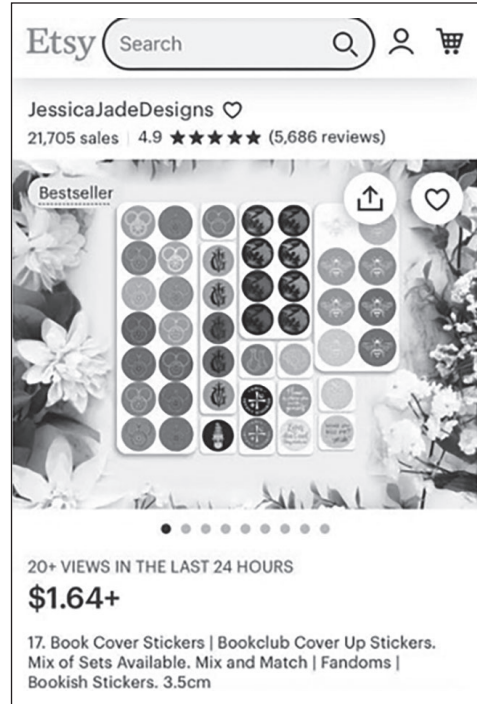


Figure 11: An Etsy store that sells book stickers (JessicaJadeDesigns).

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