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Pamela Pear, *Front Cover Iconography and Algerian Women's Writing*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2015. x + 177 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$80.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-7391-9837-7.

Review by Alison Rice, University of Notre Dame.

Front Cover Iconography and Algerian Women's Writing provides unprecedented insights into the ways in which the paratext participates in the process of making meaning when it comes to reading and interpreting works of literature by women writers with a connection to Algeria. Pamela Pears compels us in this fascinating study to consider these literary creations as a whole, taking into account the complex factors that contribute to the presentation of works by Nina Bouraoui, Assia Djebar, and Malika Mokkeddem. While these three writers are at the center of the book's analyses, a range of other authors are included as well, adding to the breadth of the perspectives in chapters focusing on four aptly chosen iconographies: the Orientalist painting, the desert, the veil, and the author photograph. Pears demonstrates throughout this work not only how well she knows the oeuvres of these writers, but also how familiar she is with secondary sources whose conceptions of francophone Algerian writing, as well as its presentations, interpretations, and receptions, are beautifully integrated into her analyses.

The introductory chapter provides indispensable explanations of the paratext, drawing from the seminal work of renowned French theoretician Gérard Genette to make precisions about the various functions of this material that surrounds the literary work, that provides its packaging, that *is* and *isn't* part of the text.^[1] Pamela Pears specifies that the cover is essential to the book product in several ways: "Publishers capitalize on the marketing potential of cover art, which can draw in a new audience, brand an author, or guide a reader" (p. 3). Indeed, the cover "tell[s] us what to expect," she affirms, taking up Genette's term "entryway paratext," and calling attention to critic Jonathan Gray's explanation of this concept as that which "...shape[s] the reading strategies that we will take with us 'into' the text, and...provide[s] the all-important early frames through which to examine, react to, and evaluate textual consumption."^[2]

It is no accident that Gray's insights into the importance of "media paratexts" in the realms of television and film should figure in this study, for Pears engages in astute interpretations of "books as forms of media," an understanding that adds a crucial dimension to this work. In well-argued passages, she brings awareness to the implications of the online acts of readers who express their opinions on books by providing comments on websites: "fans themselves can directly participate in creating the paratext" (p. 4). Pears refers to this supplemental layer of paratextual creation as belonging to what Philippe Lejeune refers to as the *jeu social* and mentions Wolfgang Iser's comments on how what we read tells others something about us; she deduces that "if one chooses to read any given text, that choice says something significant about that person, and by extension, something significant about the larger cultural landscape in which that person participates" (p. 4).^[3]

The author carefully addresses such loaded terms as "postcolonial" and "francophone," explaining her understanding of their histories and complexities and indicating what her use of them implies in the

context of this book. She also explains that she is conscious of the fact that the adjective “Algerian” can be considered to be equally problematic, and that she is not unaware of the ambiguities of such a designation when it comes to writers who are French-born, but whose relationship to the Maghreb warrants their inclusion in this study. Pamela Pears is especially clear in her articulation of her desire to avoid the “nationalistic perspective” (p. 6) that could be perceived as inseparable from this descriptor that figures in her work’s title. She exhibits sensitivity to the implications of such headings as “Maghrebian literature” and identifies the limitations inherent in classifications like this one, as they exert an inevitable influence on “authors’ self-perception and understanding of their own writing and its reception in the marketplace” (p. 6). This study demonstrates sensitivity throughout to the fact that books circulate precisely in this space, that of the “global, consumer marketplace” (p. 152).

Front Cover Iconography and Algerian Women’s Writing is profoundly engaged in questioning assumptions about gender. Chapter two examines the “literary transvestism” (p. 52) inherent in the work of Yasmina Khadra, devoting special attention to the cover image and the pseudonym in a well-conceived analysis of the complicated elements at work in the case of this author with a feminine pen name who revealed to the public that he was a man only after he had established his literary reputation, and moved from Algeria to France. A compelling focus on novels containing narratives that feature male principal protagonists can be found in chapter five, where analyses of Assia Djebar’s 2003 *La disparition de la langue française*, Malika Mokeddem’s 2005 *Mes hommes*, and Nina Bouraoui’s 2014 *Standard* combine to support Pear’s conviction that these literary works “step away from preconceived notions of what Algerian women’s writing should be and put into question the identitarianism (whether it be based on gender, nationality, or language) that often limits the reading of their works” (p. 126).

Nina Bouraoui’s *Standard* is a particularly interesting publication because it constitutes a decisive break with the prolific novelist’s autobiographical texts, turning its attention to a male character suffering in the current economic and social climate in France. Pears expertly delineates this transformation in Bouraoui’s thematic content, and then engages in an equally impressive examination of the “epitext” of this publication that “extends into the newer media paratexts such as the social media site, Facebook” (p. 144). This term, coined by Genette to refer to materials related to, but distanced from the text, such as interviews and private communication with an author, takes on new dimensions when it is paired with what Gray has called “*in medias res* paratexts,” created when a writer interacts with readers by responding to their comments and inquiries on social media platforms.[4] The fact that the reading of a text may be directly influenced by exchanges with an author is illustrated through analyses of how Bouraoui helped shape understandings of *Standard* on her Facebook page. Interactions over the internet participate in creating relationships to books that are constantly developing; in like manner, understandings of textual meanings are continually evolving.

Time will contribute to ever-new relationships to the cover iconographies that accompany Algerian women’s writing, this study reveals, on several different fronts. Our first impression of the book’s appearance may change as our relationship to the text is transformed through the act of reading. We could start to see images on the cover differently as they become more familiar to us. But, however our interpretation may evolve, it is certain that the book will remain connected to the image that comes to represent it. As Pears explains it well: “The cover image’s power to alter our perspective goes beyond the initial moment of purchase and therefore exceeds the boundaries of marketing, or even as initial entryway paratext. It remains with the book, appears on websites, in social media, and never permits a full separation between the visual representation and the written one” (p. 5).

Of course, books can come out in new editions, and their covers are sometimes completely transformed when this occurs; often a paperback version looks entirely different from the original publication, for instance. A diachronic understanding of the workings of the paratext is something Pears gleans from the work of Richard Watts, to whom she attributes the insight that “as the paratext changes, so too, does the interpretive space for the text” (p. 5).[5] Pears has also found inspiration in Watts’s critiques

of the changes that occur in the paratexts of francophone books when they appear in translation. *Front Cover Iconography and Algerian Women's Writing* features pertinent analyses of the transitions that mark the publications of English translations of francophone texts by Algerian women, identifying a changed paratextual apparatus that is intended to appeal to a different audience. When Yasmina Khadra's *Les agneaux du seigneur* was published as *In the Name of God*, for instance, Pears discerns that there was a significant "paratextual shift": "both the title of the novel and the image chosen for the cover recall Orientalism" (p. 47). As Pears suggests, the problematic stereotypes that have characterized representations of written works by Algerian women are not unique to Parisian publishing houses; the cover images on these texts in translation bear witness to the fact that clichés abound in other cultural and linguistic contexts, outside of France.

What Pears reveals so well in this study is that neither the text nor the iconography has the last word when it comes to making meaning. It is the reader's movement between the two that contributes to complex conclusions that are never final, but always ongoing. This is articulated in the introduction: "It is through the dialogue between what we see on one side (*recto*) and what we read behind it (*verso*) that we come to make meaning of a literary text" (p. 24). In other words, "It is in the interstices of paratext and text that a reader makes meaning. This liminal space that Genette calls the 'threshold' of the text requires the reader to negotiate beyond the words, but also beyond the image. Meaning comes neither exclusively from the *recto*, nor from the *verso*; instead, it is the result of the hyphenated *recto-verso* together, the space between the two" (pp. 152-153).

The final paragraph of the epilogue incites us to reconsider the cover image on this very publication, indicating that it is up to the readers to make meaning of this evocative photograph, in light of the well-developed themes on the pages within the book. This is a clever and convincing way to bring this beautifully conceived, clearly written study to a close. The examination of the intricate interconnections between text and image in *Front Cover Iconography and Algerian Women's Writing* provides us with a heightened awareness of and deeper appreciation for the complicated relationships between them, and the final invitation to look again at the image that graces the cover of this critical work prompts us to consider how this text has helped to modify the way we "see" literary products. With nuanced sensitivity to the particularities of gendered experience and postcolonial dynamics, Pamela Pears has drawn from a wealth of sources to defend the provocative proposal that it would be impossible to judge a book without its cover.

NOTES

[1] Gérard Genette, *Seuils* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987).

[2] Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), p. 26.

[3] Philippe Lejeune, *Je est un autre: L'autobiographie, de la littérature aux médias* (Paris: Seuil, 1980), p. 205; Wolfgang Iser, "Do I Write for an Audience?" *PMLA* 115/3(2000): 310-314.

[4] See Genette, *Seuils*, for the development of the concepts of "paratext" and "epitext" and see Jonathan Gray's explanation of "*in medias res* paratexts" in Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: NYU Press, 2010).

[5] Richard Watts, *Packaging Post/Coloniality: The Manufacture of Literary Identity in the Francophone World* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2005).

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