

media circus

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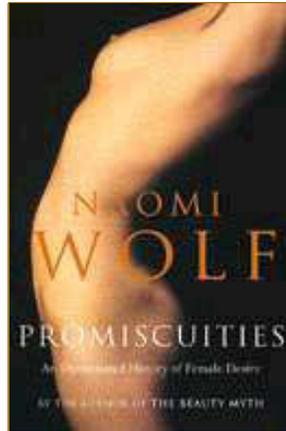
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WHEN IT COMES TO BOOKSELLING, BRITISH PUBLISHERS PROVE FAR RACIER THAN THEIR AMERICAN COUNTERPARTS.



BY SARAH COLEMAN | You can't avoid the nipple on the cover of the British edition of Naomi Wolf's "Promiscuities." It stares you down, daring you to pick the book up and crack the spine without running your fingers across its fleshy surface. Likewise the butt and hipbone of the same body, which arches back luxuriously across the cover. The image is a photograph, though it could be an Old Master, so sensuous and rosy, so delicately stippled is the flesh. Any clues to the identity of the barely pubescent model stop here, as her head and lower legs have been cropped out of frame.

Looking at this cover is an odd experience for anyone familiar with the American edition of the same book. Here, the silver jacket is adorned with a black-and-white close-up photograph of a tough-looking teen, unlit cigarette dangling from her mouth. Two of her peers smile in the background, and the impression that the book will say something weighty about female adolescence is confirmed by its subtitle: "The Secret Struggle for Womanhood." On the British jacket, the subtitle has been changed to "A Secret History of Female Desire."

This kind of repackaging is standard for books crossing the Atlantic. Perhaps surprisingly, it's the British publishers who often go for the splashier cover elements -- neon colors, in-your-face typography and, as one designer puts it, "naughty bits."

Take, for example, a first novel that was published last September in Britain, fetchingly titled "Does My Bum Look Big in This?" On

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its cover, the author (a television comedian named Arabella Weir) crouched naked against a neon pink background, grimacing from ear to ear. The book's title was spread across her front in the same neon pink as the cover -- and, in case this was all a mite too subtle, her naked form was also emblazoned on the book's spine.

Admittedly, Weir is no Doris Lessing -- but even in the literary lists, British publishers are often ready to push the boat out as far as it will go. And then some. American writer Dale Peck found this out when his 1993 debut novel was published as "Martin and John" in the U.S. and as "Fucking Martin" in the U.K.

According to Peck, U.K. editor Jonathan Burnham had been disappointed with the book's American title, which reminded him of a series of British children's readers called "Janet and John" (presumably he didn't have the same problem with "Fucking Martin"). But the title change was also canny in that it bought the book seven weeks of press coverage in the London Sunday Times -- not bad for a postmodern gay novel from an American first-time author.

"There's a funny way in which the British are more jaded, and also love to play the game more than Americans do," says Peck. "So they were willing to get all up in arms about the use of the word 'fuck' on the cover of the book."

Clearly, though, the title affected the way the book was received and reviewed in each country. While Americans tended to view the book as "the story of a young man trying to reconcile his homosexuality with his family and personal identity," says Peck, in Britain, "essentially, their use of the word 'fuck' made them think it was a book about sex."

Did that bother him? "Yes and no," he replies. "I never conceive of books as 'issue' books anyway -- for me, it was a story of this character's life." Plus, he says, he was gratified that the novel "was seen as an AIDS book by both sides."

Since foreign publishers get the chance to share original cover art and titles, changes often come down to simple cultural bias. "We think that American covers are very fussy and overdesigned," says British art director Caz Hildebrand. But for Megan Wilson, who designs for Vintage paperbacks in New York, "American covers are much more conceptual and interesting."

British editor Alison Samuel, whose team chose the "Promiscuities" cover, insists that "the American cover was too alienating for a British audience; the faces were very American." She pauses, then adds, "You can tell they're American, because of their teeth."

"We chose what we thought was a fabulous, celebratory image of a woman," continues Samuel, somewhat defensively. (As with "Fucking Martin," "Promiscuities" has generated press in the U.K. on the strength of the cover alone -- drawing criticism that

women might not want to be caught reading it on the tube.) "I know Naomi always says she'd prefer it if the woman had a head," sighs Samuel. Sure enough, when I call Wolf for comment, that's what she says -- "and I wish that she'd been a bit fatter too."

Perhaps, though, it's not quite fair to portray the British publishing industry as a den of iniquity and "naughty bits." The truth is more schizophrenic, says American designer Robbin Schiff. "When the Brits go downmarket, I think they lose the edge -- their mass market isn't as clever as ours. But when they're not trying to pander to a wide audience, I think they have more freedom than we do." Particularly with mid-list fiction titles, says Schiff, "They spend a lot of time and money creating very beautiful illustrations, where Americans use photography and typography more. We feel that commissioning illustrations is risky, because you can't be sure what it will look like until it's almost too late."

This double strand in British cover art (precious illustrations vs. brash, provocative images and titles) could be seen as an example of Britain's Old Guard meeting its New Guard -- or, to use a movie analogy, Merchant-Ivory against "Trainspotting." It's also a function of a smaller market, with good sales figures counted in the tens of thousands rather than the hundreds of thousands. Unquestionably, this allows for some calculated risks -- whereas American publishers know that provocative titles and images may not play (or be displayed) in Peoria. "You can't even show the edge of a woman's breast on a book jacket here if it's suggestive," says Wilson, "at least not at Vintage, which has a huge potential market."

And still, everything's relative. In 1992, British author Fay Weldon published a novel called "Life Force," whose title referred to the protagonist's superior male member. For U.S. designer Michael Ian Kaye, "the obvious image was to try to get a penis on the cover of the book." While Kaye and his British counterpart solved the problem in discreetly different ways -- the British edition featured a naked man with a glossy fig leaf over his private parts, and Kaye used a close-up of Michelangelo's David with a removable title band across the offending item -- the Dutch edition, according to Weldon, "had a man with an erection stretching across the spine and onto the back flap."

Can't wait till the Dutch reissue Joe Orton's "Prick Up Your Ears."

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