Judge a Book by Its Cover
(Michelle Coghlan)

Tagline
A “please touch” exercise that works well as a first-day-of-class icebreaker.

Keys
1) Genre: fiction
2) Course Level: any
3) Student Difficulty: easy
4) Teacher Preparation: medium
5) Class Size: any
6) Student Audience: majors and non-majors
7) Semester Time: first day
8) Language: any
9) Writing Component: none

Exercise
Choose a book with a long, diverse, or controversial publication history and cart into class as many different editions as you can. (A suitcase to carry them all makes a nice stage prop.) Divide the class into small groups, distribute different editions of the book to each group, and ask the students to do what they have always been told not to do: judge a book by its cover.

It is helpful to provide students with a list of guiding questions: What kind of image, typeface, or layout has the publisher chosen for the cover? What does the cover seem to tell you about the kind of story this book tells? Does the edition dive right into the tale or does it include a scholarly introduction or preface? What kind of audience does this book seem designed for, and how do you know? (For inspiration in designing your questions, check out Cathy Davidson’s “The Life and Times of Charlotte Temple: The Biography of a Book,” which examines dozens of editions of Susanna Rowson’s bestselling seduction novel.)

Be sure to leave students enough time to reconvene as a group and share their findings, and yourself enough time to make a few salient general comments at the end. I particularly like to do this exercise on the first day of the semester, introducing as many books on the syllabus as possible. Not only is it a nice icebreaker for students to get to know each other, but it also gets them excited about all the texts they will soon be reading.

Reflections
This exercise encourages students to consider the ways that literary texts change over time, shaped by forces of reception and canonization. The history of book covers can reveal much about shifting literary contexts; trends in scholarship or the marketplace can even give old texts new life. When I tried this exercise in a course on American Best Sellers, some students noted that Raymond Chandler’s Farewell My Lovely takes on a different aura when we encounter it wrapped in the signature colors of “chick lit,” while others marveled at the highbrow 1913 edition of Tarzan alongside the beefcake Avon edition they had been assigned. Still others
dissected the scholarly apparatus included in the Penguin edition of *Little Women*, an apparatus conspicuously absent from the other paperbacks on our syllabus. It turns out that sometimes you really can judge a book by its cover.