

PARATEXTS ON THE BOOK COVER OF ANDREY KURKOV'S *DIARY OF AN INVASION*: ORDINARY OR EXTRAORDINARY?

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Summary

The primary question of the present paper is how cultural and political context impact the ways that the cultural value of books is constructed through the publisher's paratexts. The present paper examines the textual periphery that surrounds and contextualizes the text and mediates the relations between the text, the author, the publisher and potential readers. The paper examines paratextual elements on the book cover of *Diary of an Invasion* by Andrey Kurkov, the peculiarities of the cover structure and layout of the English-language editions, their functions in communicating the constituent elements of Ukrainian identity to an English-speaking reader. The detailed description of the structural elements of the cover of the book about Russian invasion of Ukraine, written in a time of war and published for English-language readers adds novelty to the research. Moreover, the aim of the paper is to prove that the textual periphery expresses explicitly and implicitly the publisher's promoting strategy of establishing emotional connection with readers and building credibility to the author and his narrative, that effectively contribute to the reader's initial interaction with the text. The present paper analyses the structure of the front cover, the back cover and the spine and describes the following paratextual elements: the name of the author, the title, blurbs, logo of the publisher, illustrative material, and a photo.

Key words: structure, layout, blurbs, iconic image, photo, Ukrainian literature, Ukrainian identity, credibility.

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1. Introduction

Facing the existential threat, Ukrainians tried to understand a lot about themselves and their homeland. As Andrey Kurkov stated in the preface to *Diary of an Invasion*, "...Russia's attempt to destroy Ukraine as an independent state – have contributed to the strengthening of Ukrainian national identity" (Kurkov, 2022). Kurkov, who is an ethnic Russian and a Ukrainian fiction writer who has lived in Kyiv and written books in Russian for most of his life, offers to the readership an English-language diary that contains his notes and essays made between December 2021 and mid-July 2022. This immediate, first-hand account on the first months of the war "...packed with surprising details about the human effects of the Russian assault" (Morrison, 2022) is made of political and historical commentaries, intertwined with personal reflections from his personal journal, in which "Kurkov explores the fraught interrelation of Russian and Ukrainian history, the complicated coexistence of their languages, and in describing how a peaceful society defies occupation, he builds an image of an image of culture which is unique and democratic, liberal and diverse, one that will "resist to the end" (Kurkov, 2022).

Diary of an Invasion was released in September, 2022 and it is his second most popular book among European readers after his *Grey Bees* (2021). The *Diary of an Invasion* was such

a success that a year after, in 2023, Mountain Leopard Press published the second paperback edition of it with a slightly different book cover design in Great Britain. The writer points out that “[t]he war has made Ukraine more understandable to the world – more understandable and more acceptable as one of the states of Europe” (Kurkov, 2022). Understanding and acceptance are becoming key concepts when the cultures clash and when the cultural and political contexts change dramatically.

The structural and compositional elements of the novel that “...may communicate pure information...” (Genette, 1997, p.11), as well as “...impart an authorial and/or editorial intention or interpretation...” (Genette, 1997, p.11) are commonly referred to as paratexts or paratextual elements. Gerard Genette stressed the importance of paratexts to the text as, in his opinion, the function of paratexts was not only “...to present it [the text], in the usual sense of this verb, but also in its strongest meaning: to make it present, to assure its presence in the world, its "reception" and its consumption, in the form, nowadays at least, of a book” (Genette, 1997, p.1). Paratext seems to be an essential mediator between the text and the reader since it is “... what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers, and more generally, to the public” (Genette, 1997, p.1). Jonathan Gray paid attention to the ability of paratexts not only improve the reception of the work, but also predetermine the reader’s understanding of the text codes (Gray, 2010). In other words, paratextual elements connect the author’s text with its published version, and serve as mediators between author, text, publisher and reader.

Since Gerard Genette developed the concept of paratextuality in the 1980s, “paratext” has become a widely used concept in literary studies (Pellatt, 2013; Allen, 2000; Skare, 2018) as well as in other disciplines like linguistics and translatology (Sokol, 2011; Pellatt, 2013; Kraemer, 2020), film studies (Gray, 2010; Cuthbert, 2023), digital narratives and media studies (Piatkowski, 2019; Edwards, 2022).

However, our interest lies in the identification of the paratextual elements and the layout of the book cover of *Diary of an Invasion* by Andrey Kurkov in order to examine peculiarities of verbal and visual paratexts and their potential to promote the Ukrainian author’s text among English-language readers. We assume that book covers play an essential role in communicating the book origin, the main message of the core text and in conveying publisher’s intention to adapt them to different readership. Thus, the analysis focuses on the composition and layout of the cover paratexts as well as the interaction between verbal and visual components of paratexts paying particular attention to what they may be suggesting or explicitly telling the potential reader about the core text.

2. Structural elements of the *Diary of an Invasion* cover

The printed cover of a book, and correspondingly of a literary work, is what a potential reader sees first in a bookstore and its paratexts are something that initiates the first reader’s acquaintance with a particular text. In Genette’s opinion, it is “the first manifestation of the book offered to the reader’s perception”, though the researcher adds that “...in the current state of development of the publisher’s presentation...more and more publishers are clothing the cover itself wholly or partially with a new paratextual support: the dust jacket or the band...” (Genette, 1997, p.27). Despite the changes that the modern covers are undergoing now, their role in interaction between an author, a publisher, a text and a reader is still crucial. The most obvious function of the cover is to attract attention.

Any book cover consists of five elements: the front cover, the inside front and back covers, the back cover, and the spine. *Diary of an Invasion* has them all, though the inside front and

back covers are blank which is considered typical of both fiction and non-fiction books. It is difficult to determine what part of the cover has more impact on readers. It seems that the front cover, the spine and the back cover are of equal strategic importance though they have different functions in building communication between readers and the text, or in a broader sense with the book.

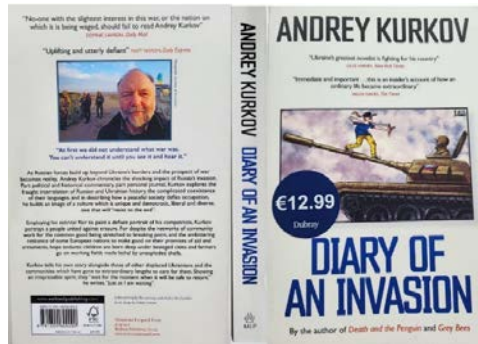


Fig. 1. Book cover of the 2023 edition of Kurkov's *Diary of an Invasion*

The front cover of *Diary of an Invasion* (see Fig. 1) contains the name of the author, two blurbs, a specific illustration, the title, a price sticker, a mention of two other works by the author. Blurbs are usually placed at the back cover, though they can occasionally be found on the front cover. In this case, it is essential to give a recommendation to the Ukrainian author right at the beginning, especially since this recommendation comes from newspapers that are well-known to English-speaking readers.

The spine of this book (see Fig. 1) bears the name of the author, the title of the work, and the logo of the publisher which are printed in a descending vertical manner. When the book is lying flat on its back, a reader can easily read its front cover and its spine.

The back cover of the 2023 edition of Kurkov's *Diary of an Invasion* (see Fig. 1) places verbal paratexts, such as two blurbs, a description blurb for the novel, the trade name of the publisher, an identification of the cover illustration, and visual paratexts such as a photo of the author with a caption, a magnetic bar code, and the price. Verbal paratexts occupy two thirds of the back cover space but the photo of the author is, undoubtedly, a central and essential element of a layout.

3. Paratexts on the front cover: structure and functions

The name of the author (*Andrey Kurkov*) is written in capital letters in black at the top of the front cover and on the spinal, and addressed three more times as “the *author*” or “Ukraine’s greatest *novelist*” throughout the paratexts on the cover. The function of this paratext is to communicate the author’s reputation. The paratext “*Andrey Kurkov*” occupies quite a lot of space on the front cover which signifies that Andrey Kurkov is a famous writer in Ukraine.

The title “*Diary of an Invasion*” is written in capital letters in dark blue at the bottom of the front cover. The title of Kurkov’s work makes a complex statement that consists of two lexemes, i.e. “*diary*” which is a rhematic element, and “*invasion*” which is a thematic element. The rhematic elements of a title, according to Genette, constitute the information that either

indicates the genre or distinguishes the typology of a narrative within this genre. “*Diary*”, as a rhematic element of the title, has two functions: informative and persuasive. First of all, it serves as the work’s genre indication. On the other hand, taking into account that “...the literary diary as a genre imposes on the writer a certain obligation of truthfulness...” (Merry, 1979, p.14), this title implies that Kurkov describes the real events that he witnessed or knows well about. Moreover, the original layout of this paratextual element, whose elements are arranged one above the other, amplifies the meanings and the functions of each constituent element.

Another paratextual element is a blurb or promotional statement which Genette describes as “press quotations or other laudatory comments about earlier works by the same author or, indeed, about this work itself...” (Genette, 1997, p.25). There are two blurbs on the front cover of *Diary of Invasion* written by influential journalists from *The New York Times* and *The Times*. These written statements of approval of an author lend credibility to his work.

Another paratextual element of the cover supports the idea that the author and his text are trustworthy and worth attention. At the bottom of the front cover there is a mention of two other works by the same author, namely *Death and the Penguin* and *Grey Bees*. Notably, the titles of other Kurkov’s works as well as the names of the journalists and newspapers in blurbs are printed in red. There is no doubt that colour has an expressive potential. The colour red definitely stands out and attracts attention to the elements in red. Apart from this, the same colour on the cover is used as a tool for compositional segmentation of the information within the paratextual element.

Genette believed that apart from the verbal paratexts “we must bear in mind the paratextual value that may be vested in other types of manifestation...” (Genette, 1997, p.7) and illustrations are one of them.

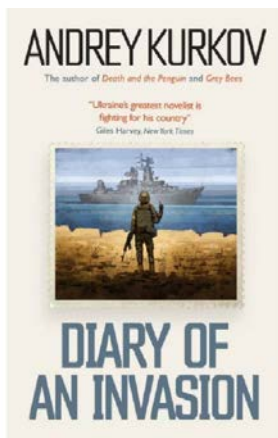


Fig. 2. Front cover of the 2022 edition of *Diary of an Invasion*

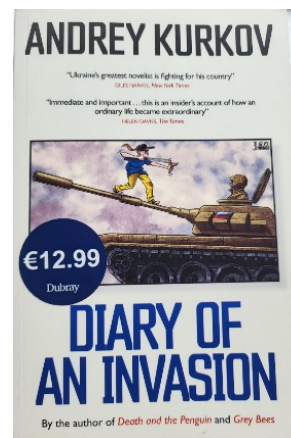


Fig. 3. Front cover of the 2023 edition of *Diary of an Invasion*

The 2022 edition of the *Diary of an Invasion* front cover (see Fig. 2) contains an illustration that shows the postage stamp that “commemorates the refusal of Ukrainian border officers to surrender Zmiinyi (Snake) Island to the Russian warship Moskva within hours of Russia’s invasion in February 2022” (Royal Museums Greenwich). The image symbolizes Ukrainian bravery and legendary resistance of the Ukrainians fighting in the war against Russia.

The 2023 edition of the book takes a similar approach to portraying the core text. This edition cover (see Fig. 3) uses an illustration “On the defence of Ukraine” made by Ben Jennings. The cartoon portrays a teenage girl, standing defiantly on the barrel of a tank. The girl, dressed in a blue shirt, and yellow pants, is aiming a slingshot directly at a soldier inside the tank. The soldier who appears to be Russian given the Russian flag insignia on the tank, looks up at the teenager with a somewhat bewildered expression.

The book cover itself functions as a frame, with the edges setting the boundaries for the layout and the composition of the different paratexts that make the meaningful whole. Both front covers of *Diary of an Invasion* place such paratexts as the name of the author, a few blurbs, the title and the illustration. The name of the author, the title and the illustration (the image of a stamp or a cartoon) are the most salient, the most eye-catching elements in the composition, not only because they are placed on the plain white background, but also because they are the largest elements on the cover.

4. Paratexts on the back cover: structure and functions

Gerard Genette calls the back cover a “strategically important sport” (Genette, 1997, p. 25). The back cover of the 2023 edition of Kurkov’s *Diary of an Invasion* (see Fig. 4) places verbal paratexts, such as two blurbs/promotional statements, a description blurb for the novel, the trade name of the publisher, an identification of the cover illustration, and visual paratexts such as a photo of the author with a caption, a bar code, and the price. Verbal paratexts occupy two thirds of the back cover space. This layout runs the risk of being overwhelming but the aim of the blurbs on the back cover is to give more insights about the core texts. Moreover, the photo of the author draws readers’ attention and becomes a central and essential element of the layout.



Fig. 4. Back cover of the 2023 edition of *Diary of an Invasion*

The first paratexts that potential readers see on the top of the back cover are blurbs written by written by journalists from *The Daily Mail* and *The Daily Express* newspapers. The intention of these blurbs is to attract readers, their arguments are different but they complement each other. The mention of the well-known newspapers and journalists’ personal names implies that a trusted source endorses the book whereas emotive vocabulary creates a positive and intriguing image of the book. So, one blurb aims to convince readers that Kurkov’s works are essential reading for anyone interested in the war or the nation in question whereas the other one promises an inspiring and bold narrative.

The description blurb for the novel outlines the content and themes of Andrey Kurkov's chronicle of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, providing a blend of historical context and personal experiences. Apart from its informative function, this blurb is designed to elicit sympathy and admiration for Ukrainians, thereby serving a persuasive purpose. It is essential to stress that the description blurb focuses on the attributes of Ukrainian nation such as uniqueness, democracy, liberalism, and diversity, and expresses a sense of pride in Ukrainian identity. It implicitly calls for solidarity and support for Ukraine by mentioning the "embittering reticence of some European nations to make good on their promises of aid and armaments," (Kurkov, 2022), thus advocating for more substantial international support. Overall, the abstract effectively conveys the dual themes of Ukrainian identity and the lived experience of the past year, blending personal and collective narratives to highlight resilience, hope, and a strong sense of cultural and national identity.

The photo depicts Kurkov, smiling slightly at the camera. In the background, we see four people dressed in military uniforms. They are standing near the camouflaged car. The blue colour of a clear sky and the yellowish shade of a dirt road can be considered as the signs of a Ukrainian flag which is also present in the photo. The presence of a Ukrainian flag adds significance to the image and helps to interpret the photo as a scene related to the broader national struggle. All elements of the photo symbolize the ongoing war in Ukraine. The overall mood of the photo shows personal experience in a broader political and historical context. The photo is accompanied by a caption in which the author directly addresses readers in the west, and expresses a hope that their governments will take his country's side. So one of the functions of this paratext is to establish closer contact with readers.

Another function of this paratext is determined by the nature of a photograph. Photography has traditionally been regarded as credible because of its capacity to directly, without human intervention, record what is in front of the camera, its capacity to reveal rather than represent the world (Kress, Van Leeuwen, 2020, p.149). As Kress and Van Leeuwen put it, "the camera itself may not lie, or not much at any rate, those who use it and its images can and do" (Kress, Van Leeuwen, 2020, p.149). The photo of Kurkov in the war zone in Ukraine serves as evidence of the authenticity and truthfulness of the events and insights described in the core text. So, it can be argued that the function of the photo on the book cover is to gain credibility to the text.

Other paratexts that are found on the back cover include a mention of authorship of the jacket illustration, a mention of authorship of a jacket design, a bar code, the price, the name of the publisher and a mention of publisher's website. These paratextual elements are obligatory considering the peculiarities of the path that modern literary works take from the author to the reader. They are written by writers, published by publishing houses and sold in bookstores so it is the sign of professional integrity and fair use of intellectual property of all participants.

5. Conclusions

Our analysis of the role of paratexts on the book cover reveals that the book cover of *Diary of an Invasion* by Andrey Kurkov uses a traditional set of paratexts with some peculiar details. The paratexts serve multiple functions such as informative, persuasive, emotive, as well as the functions of establishing connection, building credibility, that effectively contribute to the reader's initial interaction with the text. Notably, the illustrations chosen for the front cover are famous images that hold a strong association with Ukraine, grounding the book in a specific cultural and national context. This strategic use of imagery immediately connects potential readers with familiar symbols that are relevant to the core text and appeal to readers.

Furthermore, the blurbs on the cover play a crucial role in persuasion. They are given on the cover, in our case on both the front and the back covers, to build trust in the author, emphasizing their reliability and the significance of the content. The language used in the blurbs appeals to readers' sense of sympathy, focusing on the topics of resilience and courage often associated with Ukrainian identity. The blurbs help to build an emotional contact with readers as well as they can also establish a framework of trust and credibility to the author and the narrative.

The use of the author's photo is particularly impactful. It serves as tangible evidence that the author has directly witnessed the events described in the book, thereby lending significant credibility to the core text. This personal connection assures readers of the authenticity and firsthand experience underpinning the narrative, making the book not just a literary work but a credible account of real events. Overall, these paratextual elements collectively enhance the book's appeal, authenticity, and trustworthiness, ensuring a compelling initial engagement for the reader.

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