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RUNNING FOR COVER

By George Ducker

Q: What does the cover of a book tell you about the book itself?

A: Nothing / Everything.

Can an uninitiated reader know anything more about the contents of James Joyce's *Ulysses* simply from seeing that iconic, large-lettered cover? Do J.D. Salinger's white-white paperback editions offer any guidance? The little enigmatic rainbow at the top corner certainly doesn't help.

These kinds of things were on my mind as I visited the opening reception for "Cover Version," a bookishly-themed group show at Culver City's Taylor De Cordoba gallery. The premise was simple: artists had been asked to redesign the covers of their favorite books. The end result was offerings from over twenty New York and Los Angeles based artists that ranged from the literal to the oblique.

Using wood panels, TM Davy provided a literal "translation" of the cover for Jean Genet's *The Thief's Journal*, with two pages of text filled in by hand on either side. Scott Hug's *Breakfast of Champions* brought a mirror-ish metallic sheen to Kurt Vonnegut's novel. It also completely fooled me into thinking that someone had just left a real, published edition of Vonnegut's novel out as some sort of tribute. Jacob Feige took JG Ballard's *Vermillion Sands* to a Martian landscape as seen by Mondrian and MF Tichy's video installation of *Notes From Underground* promised (and delivered) every page from Dostoevsky's novel in seven seconds.

Timothy Hull, the New York-based artist who curated the show, said that he keeps several exceptionally designed books "on display" at his

apartment and told me that his own book collection included several first editions from Gertrude Stein. " 'Wars I Have Seen,' with that Cecil Beaton photograph, is probably my favorite of hers, cover-wise," he said. "And I love the no-nonsense, academic covers that Routledge puts out. Especially the ones by Jean-Francois Lyotard. They're just so precise and straightforward."

I could tell he meant it, as Hull's contribution to the show was a similarly pared-down version of W.H. Auden's *Selected Poems*: just the words themselves in bright yellow and red against a sky-blue background.

Lastly, on the subject of book covers, please check out the winners of the 2008 Penguin Design Award and what is surely the most bizarre, naturalistic cover for *On the Road* that I've ever seen. More Penguin covers through the ages are here.