

**Decoding Paratextual Boundaries of Interpretation:
A Study of Paratext in Contemporary Literary Production**

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Abstract

This research paper proposes a model of study to discern the impact of publisher-created paratext on a text's reception in the media. It showcases how publisher-created paratext activates processes of speculative consumption, delineating audience, and providing a guide on how to consume the text. It also demonstrates how a publisher's brand identity is implicated in this process. Through the analysis of the paratext surrounding three titles published by Riverhead Books—*The Female Persuasion* by Meg Wolitzer, *The Ensemble* by Aja Gabel, and *The Friend* by Sigrid Nunez—this research reveals how brand-mediated paratext creates boundaries of interpretation around a text that primarily positions the titles as sources of cultural capital. This paper also situates its analysis within the context of a cultural climate where the need for diversity is seen as increasingly urgent. This research ultimately makes the argument that not only does publisher-created paratext influence how a text creates meaning, it also contributes to how the topic of diversity is discussed in the media

Keywords: paratext, US book publishing, diversity, Riverhead Books

Decoding Paratextual Boundaries of Interpretation: A Study of Paratext in Contemporary Literary Production

Between the years 2011 and 2015, the Italian writer Elena Ferrante took the American literary world by a storm. Ferrante's "Neapolitan Quartet" (Figure. 1) was first published in Italy by Edizioni E/O, and then in English translation by the publisher's American half, Europa Editions. The narrative spans over a series of four books and across a lifetime—following the friendship between two women from their infancy to old age. It's a tale about two ordinary Italian women, published in translation, by an author who has stubbornly remained out of the limelight, and released without the support of a major marketing campaign (Hartigan, 2016). Despite the above, the series has sold millions of copies around the world and is widely recognized as a modern classic (Prokop, 2015). Editor-in-Chief of Europa Editions Michael Reynolds has commented upon the unusual nature of Ferrante's success: "The level of her success is extremely unusual even for a book not in translation... For a book in translation, it is rather phenomenal" (Hartigan, 2016). Rare as its success might be, the reasons for which are many, the "Neapolitan Quartet" immediately comes to mind as perhaps the most effective example of the power of paratext. A term coined by French literary theorist Gérard Genette, paratext refers to the extra-textual elements that introduce the reader to a book. These include but are not limited to, the name of the author, titles, epigraphs, preface, interviews, and reviews—elements that have been sanctioned by the author or the publisher (Genette, 2001). Jonathan Gray (2010) a scholar who has played an influential role in updating the theory to reflect contemporary production culture, has expanded Genette's paratextual taxonomy to include anything and everything that bears the mark of a text such as fan-fiction, internet discussion

about the text, merchandising, etc. Gray (2010) writes that, “if we care about social meanings and uses—what place a text has in society—close reading [of the text] does not suffice” (p. 24). This is because paratexts are “not simply add-ons...they create texts, they manage them, and they fill them with many of the meanings we associate with them” (Gray, 2010, p. 6).



Figure 1. The “Neapolitan Quartet” by Elena Ferrante (Adler, 2015).

The place that Ferrante and her body of work occupies within popular culture is in part because of the eruption of paratext around her novels. This includes many essays that have dissected every theme in the novel, praise from critics and media personalities who have raved over the books, word-of-mouth recommendations, the mystery behind the author’s identity, and even the famously tacky cover art. The meaning that has come to be associated with her work doesn’t simply stem from an individualized experience of reading the novels, but is the result of the aura of paratext that exists around these novels that positions them as essential works on the subjects of lived female experience and female friendship. This project takes up the topic of the paratext in contemporary literary production.

Since Genette’s introduction of the concept in his 1987 work *Seuils*, paratextual theory has been applied to a variety of media from film and television to gaming cultures. This paper returns once again to Genette’s original subject: print editions of books. It looks at three titles—Meg Wolitzer’s *The Female Persuasion*, Aja Gabel’s *The Ensemble*, and Sigrid Nunez’s *The*

Friend— published by Riverhead Books, an imprint of Penguin Random House. Riverhead Books has been chosen as the case study because it distinguishes itself from other publishing houses in the approach it takes to constructing paratext around its titles. This research paper proposes a model of study to discern the impact of publisher-created paratext on a text’s reception in media. It showcases how publisher-created paratext activates processes of speculative consumption, delineating audience, and provides a guide on how to consume the text. It also demonstrates how a publisher’s brand identity is implicated in this process. In the case of the three titles discussed in the following sections, this essay observes how brand-mediated paratext creates boundaries of interpretation around a text—complicating the idea of paratext as a terrain where a text’s meaning can be continuously expanded (Aronczyk, 2017, p. 112).

Given the primary function of paratext—introducing a reader to the text—it is a category that can encompass a large volume of research materials, from information available on the physical object of the book to a discussion about the book on the Internet. As Gray (2010) writes, “paratexts...are a central part of media production and consumption processes...because of their centrality, no single book can do more than scratch the surface” (p. 16). This paper acknowledges this, and selects a small sample of paratexts that represent the first points of contact between a reader and a text. These include publisher-created paratexts—cover design, jacket copy, plot summary, and press release—and reader-created paratexts—reviews, author profiles and interviews in national newspapers and popular media outlets. The publisher’s promotional activity on its social media platforms is a particular area of interest, given that it has been relatively unexplored in research related to book publishing.

The analysis in the following sections is conducted with an awareness of the current state of the US book publishing industry and takes note of the contemporary challenges faced by

publishers. Indeed, a close reading of a text is not sufficient to measure its impact upon its time. The case studies reveal that paratextual study not only shows how a text is engaging with its social, cultural, and political context, but that it may also offer insight into understanding the role a publisher plays as a cultural institution. In the case of Riverhead Books, this paper finds that the publisher-created paratext inspires a feeling of cultural prestige around its titles, positioning their publisher as a producer/source of cultural capital. Given the precarious status of the book publishing industry—in decline, but not quite dying—it is crucial to understand how existing publishers perceive and project their value to consumers. Using paratextual analysis, this paper aims to create a space of awareness from which intervention might become a possibility, and where consumers may develop a deeper understanding of how a text arrives into the world, and how it stays in it.

Literature Review

G rard Genette introduced the concept of ‘paratext’ to refer to the textual and non-textual elements that introduce a reader to a text, including the book cover, title, epigraph, preface, etc. He defined paratext as a “privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy...at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it” (Genette, 2001, Kindle Locations 495-496). In other words, paratext is a liminal space, or a threshold of interpretation.¹ Over time it also functions as an “instrument of adaptation” (Genette, 2001, Kindle Location 483) that works to ensure the text’s continued relevance and presence in the world. Writing in the foreword to *Paratexts*, the English translation of *Seuils*, Richard Macksey observes that Genette’s project was groundbreaking because it was “the first [work] to present a global view of

¹ I take this from the subtitle of the 1997 Cambridge University Press translation of *Seuils*. Translator Jane E. Lewin changed the original title *Seuils*, which means “threshold” in English to *Paratexts*, adding the subtitle “Thresholds of Interpretation” to the title, as a means to retain the sense of the original French title.

liminal mediations and the logic of their relation to the reading public” (qtd in Genette, 2001, Kindle Locations 342-344). In drawing attention to these extra-textual elements, Genette’s work can be understood as an “invitation to push beyond the poetics of liminal structures toward a consideration of the way these discursive functions interact with the more general question of literature as a cultural institution” (Macksey qtd in, Genette, 2001, Kindle Locations 360-362). That is to say, the study of paratext is not simply a means to gain a more nuanced understanding of a text, but a lens through which we may see each text as a living, breathing entity that bears the marks of its time. As Jonathan Gray (2010) writes, the promise of paratextual study includes the revelation of how a text creates meaning for its consumers and, more generally, how it creates meaning in popular culture and society (p. 26).

In approaching Genette’s writings on paratext, it is worth keeping in mind that he was addressing the existing conventions of French print culture in the 1980s. Some aspects of the theory are dated by current standards of publishing practices. For example, paratext, as per Genette (2001), must always be “subordinate to the text” and as an extension of this, the “implicit creed and ideology” of the paratext is the “correctness of the authorial (and secondarily, of the publisher’s) point of view” (Kindle Locations 8968-8970). In formulating the role played by paratext, Genette (2001) privileges the intention and narrative goals of the author. Therein lies the tension in the more contemporary uses of paratext—while these extra-textual elements can work to support the text, they can also undermine, challenge, or even supersede it. Contemporary scholars have expanded upon and troubled the text/paratext relationship. Moving beyond the print book, these scholars have applied paratextual study to a wide area of interests that range from identity politics to modding in video games.² This paper intends to build upon the insight

² In the *Critical Studies in Media Communication* journal’s special issue on “Paratexts, Promos, and Publicity,” Jonathan Gray and Robert Brookey curate the latest scholarship on paratextual studies, which includes research on

offered by the various disparate examinations of paratext and its functions, to present a cohesive analysis of the ways in which a publisher constructs paratext around its titles, as embodied by the case study, Riverhead Books.

When referring to ‘paratext,’ I use Jonathan Gray’s conception of the term. Gray’s work on paratext differs from Genette’s in that he does not view paratext as merely *para* or subservient to the text (Brookey and Gray, 2017, p. 102). He builds upon Roland Barthes’s distinction between work and text, “where the text is the entity in society and culture, not ‘just’ the aesthetic entity” i.e. “when you put the work and paratexts together, you get the text” (Gray, 2010, p. 102). Unlike Genette, who views text and paratext as two separate but co-dependent entities, Gray demonstrates in his research that paratexts are an “intrinsic part of the text as a social and cultural unit” (qtd. in Brookey and Gray, 2017, p. 102). Another crucial point of difference is what Genette includes within the category of paratext. He writes, it “is not paratext unless the author or one of his associates accepts responsibility for it”(Genette, 2011, Kindle Locations 628-629). Gray (2010) expands Genette’s taxonomy to include anything and everything that is related to or bears the mark of a particular work. Through a detailed analysis of extra-textual elements relating to popular television series and films, ranging from the opening credits, trailers, and press reviews to fan-fiction and toys, Gray demonstrates how a variety of extra-textual elements, produced by the author, producer, and consumer can operate as paratext. Although Gray is writing specifically about moving image texts, this expansive view of paratext is easily adaptable to a variety of mediums. In the case of this paper’s chosen medium—the printed book—this view of paratext allows for the inclusion of reader-created paratexts such as posts

areas including, “cultural memory (Hills and Garde-Hansen), activism (Scott, Johnson), identity politics and representation (Nishime, Draper, Scott), game culture (Consalvo), production studies (Grainge), global media travels (Bernabo), branding (Aronczyk), celebrity culture (Draper), constructions of the nation (Hills and Garde-Hansen, Aronczyk), social media “filter bubbles” (Johnson), translation (Bernabo), textual recoding and/or modding (Nishime, Consalvo, Scott)” (Gray, 2017, p. 101).

about a book on Instagram, Facebook etc. that may or may not be sanctioned by the publisher, but are still used as marketing tools in a publisher's promotional strategy for a book. In its analysis of the various publisher and reader-created paratexts, this research reflects upon the questions posed by Gray (2010) within the context of the book publishing industry, which include: "what is the paratext in relationship to the text? How does it contribute to the process of making meaning?" (p. 23).

Gray's contribution to paratextual study is invaluable. However, in expanding the range of paratextual elements, he does not differentiate between paratext and brand, which as Melissa Aronczyk (2017) notes, function similarly: "Both are technologies of identification and devices of legitimation...both have a vital economic function, managing potential risk; and a heavily symbolic function, assigning reputational qualities to their objects" (pp. 111-112). She clarifies that the difference between the two lies in the aim of the brand versus the aim of the paratext. Aronczyk explains, "current uses of brand management and marketing complicate the paratextual parallel; however, Genette (1997) and Gray (2010) treat paratexts as 'thresholds of interpretation'... Branding is not ultimately about expanding the terrain on which meanings can be made; it is about closing off interpretive agency" (Aronczyk, 2017, p. 112). While a brand operates by erecting boundaries of interpretation around a text, the paratext, functioning as an instrument of adaptation, seeks to continuously explode these boundaries (Aronczyk, 2017, p. 112). Considering the omnipresence of branding activity in our day-to-day lives, Aronczyk's (2017) research urges us to reflect upon how brand-regulated paratext permeates our lives, creating social templates for everyday action (p. 117). Her insight provides a particularly crucial perspective in parsing through the ways in which Riverhead Books regulates the paratext

surrounding its titles, how this process is molded by the constraints of its brand identity, and how this practice ultimately influences the ways in which a title is positioned to the popular media.

This is especially relevant when it comes to analyzing the paratext of books by authors of color. Lori Ween's (2003) research on the subject demonstrates that analyzing a book's paratext allows one to comprehend how "publishers, reviewers, and marketers, have understood American identities, ethnic and mainstream, and sold them to people" (p. 91). Her work cautions that while issues of race and ethnicity have always existed within literary texts, the paratext of a book, in the form of blurbs, jacket art, reviews, might play an even larger role in influencing public opinion about ethnic identity than has been understood (Ween, 2003, p. 101). Ween (2003) uses the example of African-American author Stephen L. Carter's books to showcase how publishers use a book's paratext to sell an "authentic" racial identity. Whether or not publishers are continuing to sell "racial authenticity" is a question that merits a wider quantitative research, which is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the analysis conducted in the succeeding sections takes into account the current social context that is marked by the increasingly urgent demand for more diversity in the book publishing industry—a topic that has been hotly debated in the recent years. There is undeniably a heightened awareness, as will be discussed below, for the need of more diverse representation in contemporary literature. The case studies for this paper include three books, all by women, two of whom are people of color. By studying the paratext surrounding these three titles, this project examines the role the authors' identities play in the promotion of their books. It questions whether or not the publisher-created paratext allows for a thoughtful discourse on diversity. It demonstrates that the paratext in this instance does not operate as a potential terrain of resistance and creation of oppositional narratives, as has been previously discussed by Beth McCoy (2006) and LeiLani Nishime (2017). Instead, the publisher-

and reader-created paratext discussed in the paper, positions Riverhead titles as valuable sources of “objectified cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1986). In doing so, they implicate the fact of diversity within a larger narrative of cultural prestige.

The U.S. Book Publishing Industry at a Glance

In order to understand the impact of paratextual elements on the reception of texts, it is valuable to situate the context in which they are being produced. This section provides a brief overview of the current status of the U.S. book publishing industry and outlines the challenges faced by publishers.

The book business is declining. IBISWorld, a data-driven company that provides annual industry and market reports, determines the lifecycle of an industry based on its rate of growth, the amount of change in its products, rate of technological developments and level of customer acceptance of industry products and services (McGinley, 2018). David McGinley’s 2018 report on US book publishing qualified the industry to be in the declining stage of its growth cycle. The industry, currently valued at \$29.1 billion dollars, is struggling with the shift in technology and a sluggish annual growth rate of 0.2% (McGinley, 2018). While the education sector of the industry is growing at a healthy rate, the trade market consisting of fiction and nonfiction books meant for general distribution has experienced stagnation due to the declining bookstore sales over the past five years (McGinley 2018).

Articles in popular media outlets usually written in the defense of the industry, betray an anxiety about the unstable future of book publishing in the United States. A few examples include: “Stop Saying Books Are Dead. They’re More Alive Than Ever” (Lucas, 2019); “Print books are far from dead. But they’re definitely on the decline” (Nusca, 2015); “Books Are Not

Dead. They're Not Even Dying” (Estes, 2010); “The End: The book business as we know it will not be living happily ever after” (Kachka, 2008). The anxiety about decline, however, isn’t entirely misplaced. The last two decades have brought great changes within the industry. The early 2000s saw a rise in the popularity of e-books. Fans of the medium may recall the Simon and Schuster experiment when the publisher released best-selling author Stephen King’s novella *Riding the Bullet*—the first mass market e-book—on the Internet, leading to an estimated half a million sales within the first twenty-four hours (Striphas, 2009, p. 19). Simon and Schuster’s then-President Jack Romanos celebrated the impact of e-books, comparing it to a “revolution” similar to the paperback revolution of the 60s (Striphas, 2009, p. 19). The format has enjoyed a steady rise in popularity as recently as 2013 (McKinney, 2014). In 2018, the tables have turned: e-book sales are stagnating as physical books experience a welcome resurgence in popularity, with over one billion units sold in 2017, the most out of any format (McGinley, 2018; Rowe, 2018). Despite the above, the industry is projected to remain in decline until 2023 (McGinley, 2018).

Book publishers are also threatened by Amazon’s growing influence within the industry. As revenues from bookstores steadily decreased, publishers struggled with distributing their products. While Amazon was initially embraced as a solution to the publishers’ distribution problem, the on-line retail giant’s increasing popularity and size has given it the ability to exert control over a book’s price, which has become a point of contention in the industry. Now dubbed as “Literary Enemy No. 1” (Gessen, 2014) Amazon has clashed with book publishers over its problematic e-book pricing negotiation with Hachette (Kellogg, 2014),³ its third-party re-seller

³ In 2014, Amazon and Hachette Inc. got into a highly publicized dispute where Amazon was accused of bullying Hachette in negotiations over e-book prices. Amazon subjected Hachette titles to artificial purchase delays caused by delaying shipment of certain titles, removing the pre-order option for a number of titles including, J.K.

program that endangers publisher revenue (Shephard, 2017),⁴ and its expansion into the brick and mortar realm adding to the already intense competition faced by existing independent and corporate bookstores. What has been speculated as a response to the threat of Amazon or at the very least to the changing digital marketplace (Davidson, 2012; Osnos, 2012) two of the largest publishing houses in the United States, Penguin Books and Random House, merged in 2013. The biggest of the Big Five publishers⁵, Penguin Random House is estimated to control 25-30% of the literary market (Johnson, 2013). In an industry where companies compete based on pricing, brand recognition, and the rights to publish content by known authors and public personalities (McGinley, 2018), the consolidation of large publishing houses has made the internal landscape of the industry especially precarious for the smaller, independent publishers. Dennis Johnson (2013), publisher of Melville House, notes that the merger of Penguin Random House gives them the ability to control the trade market. He asks the question, “how much harder is it going to be for a company like Melville House to get its novels into a store where one company controls half the fiction section? It’s a safe bet it will get the lion’s share of media coverage, too” (Johnson, 2013). While the fight for publishers to distinguish themselves against one another remains intense, they must also compete for the consumer’s time with other video, leisure, and recreation industries (McGinley, 2018). According to the latest data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, “the average time per day spent reading by American adults plunged 18.2% overall during the decade preceding 2017; over the same time period, total leisure time rose 2.5%, indicating that consumers have generally gravitated toward other leisure activities” (as cited in McGinley,

Rowling/Robert Galbraith mystery "The Silkworm" etc. (Kellogg, 2014). This negatively affected Hachette’s revenue during that period.

⁴ “This Amazon program allows third-party re-sellers to “win” the buy button on book pages. . . This is problematic as third-party sellers have not always purchased books from publishers—they sometimes are selling remainders or advance copies” (Shepard, 2017). This program also negatively affected publishers’ revenue.

⁵ The Big Five publishers include: Penguin Random House, Hachette, Simon & Schuster, Macmillan and HarperCollins.

2018). People are reading less and when they are consuming content, they are doing so digitally. As it stands now, the book publishing industry faces the increasingly difficult challenge of developing a means to market their product in a way that can attract the consumer's already fragmented attention.

Two observations emerge from this brief glance at the book publishing industry. The first is the potential of paratextual study to provide an understanding of not only the ways in which a book's paratext influences its reception, but also how it anchors a work to its socio-cultural context. Paratext has the ability to create and continue a text by introducing it to the reader, influencing its reception through the process of speculative consumption, and establishing its place in culture after its release (Gray, 2010, p. 21). The following case studies demonstrate how Riverhead Books introduces its titles to readers, and how it positions them within the culture. This research acknowledges that "taking the eye off the paratext, as media studies has often done impoverishes our understanding of production and regulation cultures and hence our ability to intervene in these cultures" (Gray, 2010, p. 16). The analysis in the following sections is presented as a first step towards creating a space of awareness where intervention can become a possibility.

The second, much larger question that emerges from the industry profile relates to the role book publishers currently occupy within the cultural landscape. Faced with increasing precarity, how are publishers maintaining their relevance as contributors to culture? Further, within this landscape, how do they perceive the social responsibilities they have towards their consumers? Laura J. Miller has rightfully stated that books have long been viewed as "sacred products" because they are "storehouses of ideas and perceived as a means to human betterment" (Qtd. in Striphos, 2009, p. 6). As producers of this 'sacred product,' book publishers have been

held accountable by the public for a number of issues including the whitewashing of book covers,⁶ publishing work with allegedly racist content, using an author's bad behaviour as a marketing point, etc (Flood, 2009; Wilson, 2019). This expectation of so-called political correctness is perhaps most evident in the literary community's highly publicised backlash at Simon and Schuster's decision to pay right-wing provocateur Milo Yiannapolis a \$250,000 advance to publish his memoir *Dangerous* (Grady, 2017). As Constance Grady (2017) writes on the subject: "by giving him [Yiannapolis] a book deal, they're [Simon and Schuster] ...saying that they consider him to be legitimate. They are not just describing; they are prescribing." Her distinction between "describing" and "prescribing" is crucial, as it demonstrates that book publishers are often seen as cultural moderators because their products have the ability to influence social, cultural, and political discourse. Publishers for the most part have accepted this role. One only has to look towards the American Association of Publishers' statement on their historical role as an example—their role, as outlined on their website, is "to promote literacy, defend freedom of speech, advance scientific progress, and stimulate the intellectual and cultural discourse that is central to a healthy democratic society" (AAP, 'The Value of Publishing').

This is especially pertinent within the context of the last few years where conversation about the importance of diversity has become increasingly mainstream. While authors of color have consistently been vocal about the lack of representation in trade fiction, or the ways in which they have been forced to assume the burden of representation, the conversation came to a head in 2016 when Lee and Low, a children's publisher released the Diversity Baseline Survey, a demographic portrait of U.S. publishing. According to the survey, "just under 80 percent of publishing staff and review journal staff are white" (Low, 2016). The survey has contributed

⁶ When a book has a person-of-color as a protagonist, but it's cover depicts them as a white person, the cover is considered to be "whitewashed" (Rouner, 2018).

towards expanding the conversation for the need for diversity not only among authors but also within the infrastructure of publishing. Since then, the word ‘diversity’ has acquired a buzzword status. It is increasingly unclear exactly what is being expressed each time the term is evoked. As author Sonali Dev points out, the word diversity “clumps not just different cultures together but throws different sexualities and everything that’s not straight and white into the sidelined mix” (qtd. in Masad, 2016). In this sense, diversity simply means variety. Therefore, when a publisher declares its commitment to publishing more diverse voices, does that promise for variety also include the aim to enrich the discourse surrounding diversity? What follows looks towards Riverhead Books in an attempt to answer the question asked above.

Introducing Riverhead Books

Riverhead Books is one of the 275 imprints that make up the super conglomerate Penguin Random House. Imprints function like sub-divisions within a company. Each imprint publishes its own list of titles, curated by its team of editors. They have their own brand identity and cater to specific demographics. Having multiple imprints allows a publisher to reach different communities of readers. Founded in 1994, Riverhead Books was established with the goal of “discovering emerging authors” (Swanson, 2014). Today, Riverhead Books continues to devote a “good portion” of its list to publishing “debut or early-stage authors” (Riverhead President Geoffrey Kloske qtd in Swanson, 2014). It presents itself primarily as a “well established publisher of bestselling literary fiction and quality nonfiction” (“About Riverhead Books,” 2018). Its notable authors include, Khaled Hosseini, Marlon James, Lauren Groff, Junot Diaz, Elizabeth Gilbert and Nick Hornby—all of whom reliably produce critically and financially successful books.

Riverhead Books distinguishes itself from other publishers based on its unique approach to book design, which has included the use of different textures like silk and 3-D printed elements on the cover. While there are many publishers of high quality trade fiction and non-fiction titles, Riverhead Books' aesthetic sensibilities and its attention to the physical body of the book, sets its titles apart from others in a bookstore. This is in part because of how Riverhead Books' art department functions. Riverhead Design Labs is less like a traditional art department and more like a "research and development group" (Maher, 2016) In the words of the publisher, it is an "experimental junction where art, books, and invention intersect" ("About Riverhead Design Labs," 2018). Riverhead Design Lab is unafraid of experimenting with the form of the book—previous book cover treatments have included, "unique watercolor covers for a special edition 250-copy printing of Elizabeth Gilbert's *Big Magic* painted by Lourdes Sanchez... a special edition cover for Junot Diaz's *This Is How You Lose Her* drawn by Love and Rockets artist Jaime Hernandez" (Maher, 2016). Their willingness to play with and disrupt expectations of what a book cover should look or feel like has accorded Riverhead Books with a trendsetter status. For example, the cover for Lauren Groff's 2015 novel *Fates and Furies* arrived at the beginning of what is now an extremely popular trend of cover art featuring blocky typeface and bombastic graphic design (Temple, 2018). Additionally, Publicity Director Jynne Dilling Martin has also revealed that "all members of the publicity and marketing departments are meant to contribute 'out of box' ideas on every title," and that one of the tactics the publisher uses is to partner with companies to "push book content where it formerly didn't exist" (qtd. in Swanson, 2014). While these are not particularly unique promotional goals for a publisher, public statements of the like do indicate a desire on the part of Riverhead Books to get creative with their approach to paratext. All of the above make them a compelling case study.

Oddly enough Riverhead Books' official website is essentially an advertisement for the Riverhead tote bag and doesn't feature any of their bestselling titles. It includes small sections about Riverhead Books and Riverhead Design Labs, and links to their social media platforms indicating the publisher's preferred means of communication with its readers. Besides the above, the website primarily consists of praise for the tote—described as having been “seen in *New York Magazine*”—that satirizes the blurbs one would usually see on a book jacket. This website, although bare, is where Riverhead's brand really crystallizes. Riverhead Books positions itself as a definitive source of cool cultural capital, to the point where even something as unremarkable as a canvas tote bag is positioned as a means to show off one's cultural know-how, and a way to symbolically be a part of the exclusive world of *New York Times* bestselling authors like Marlon James, Meg Wolitzer, Lauren Groff, Khaled Hosseini, Emma Straub who are advertised as carrying the tote (“As Seen in NY Magazine,” 2018). Riverhead Books also describes itself on its Instagram as a publisher of “diverse voices from around the world” (Riverhead Books, n.d.). On this platform, Riverhead Books creates a visual landscape of cultural capital by sharing photographs of book posed in settings and next to objects that symbolize purchasing power and cultural sophistication. The use of the word “diversity” in such close proximity to the evocation of cultural capital is worth interrogating. This research argues that an unexamined sense of diversity becomes intermingled within a larger narrative of Riverhead Books as a source of cultural capital. This research also investigates whether or not Riverhead's activity on these platforms creates spaces where readers can engage in critical discourses, and how much of the above is constrained by considerations for its brand identity.

Methodology

This paper will be using a combination of textual and visual analysis on publisher- and reader-created paratexts in order to discern any patterns that emerge between the two.

Considering the sheer volume of available paratexts, the paper will be analyzing for broad patterns as opposed to conducting an in-depth analysis into each paratextual element. It will be analyzing the paratext surrounding three titles from the Riverhead Books' spring 2018 list: *The Female Persuasion* by Meg Wolitzer; *The Ensemble* by Aja Gable; *The Friend* by Sigrid Nunez. As the only three literary/women's fiction titles published in the Spring 2018 season, these titles have been chosen to minimize the chance of selection bias. Published within the first half of 2018, these titles have experienced a yearlong publicity cycle and have been reviewed by popular media sites. The paper will be focusing on the following paratexts:

- Publisher-created paratexts: book cover, blurbs on the book cover, jacket copy, plot summary and praise for the chosen title on the Penguin Random House (PRH) website and Amazon, press release sent to the media, and promotional posts about the book on Riverhead Books' Facebook and Instagram accounts.
- Reader-created paratexts: book reviews, author interviews, and author profiles in national newspapers or major online literary journals.

These paratexts have been chosen because they represent the first sites on which a reader may encounter a book. To clarify, press coverage received by the titles is defined as reader-created paratext because members of the literary media are the first set of readers and therefore act as influential tastemakers. Although book publishers and book reviewers exist in the same ecosystem and may have pre-existing interpersonal relationships, reviewers are ultimately not answerable to publishers and have relative autonomy over how they choose to interpret a text.

The case study will begin by first conducting a visual and textual analysis of the book cover, plot summary and blurbs on the physical book and on PRH website and Amazon, and social media promotion on Facebook and Instagram to understand how Riverhead Books is positioning the book and its author to the public. It will then analyze the press release and subsequent coverage received by the book to identify how the publisher is positioning the book and its author to the media. The aim of this analysis is three-fold: to understand how Riverhead uses paratext to position a title to its readers; to discern whether or not the publisher-created paratexts exert an influence on reader-created paratexts; to use paratextual study to understand how a book creates meaning within its immediate socio-cultural context, and the role the publisher plays in this process.

Case Study no. 1

***The Female Persuasion* by Meg Wolitzer: A book about feminism for absolutely everybody**

The Female Persuasion (2018) is an impressive book, sizeable at 466 pages. While the volume of the book may be a deterrent for some readers, the cover as Wolitzer (2012) herself might describe it, gives the impression that the book is an “event” worth being a part of. This characterization comes from an essay that Wolitzer wrote against the poor treatment given to fiction written by female authors. In particular, she complains about the highly gendered cover designs used by publishers that prevent female authors from finding a gender-neutral audience:

Look at some of the jackets of novels by women. Laundry hanging on a line. A little girl in a field of wildflowers. A pair of shoes on a beach. An empty swing on the porch of an old yellow house. Compare these with the typeface-only jacket of Chad Harbach’s novel, ‘The Art of Fielding,’ or the jumbo lettering on ‘The Corrections.’ Such covers,

according to a book publicist I spoke to, tell the readers, ‘This book is an event.’...Certain images...are geared toward women...These covers might as well have a hex sign slapped on them, along with the words: ‘Stay away, men! Go read Cormac McCarthy instead!’ (Wolitzer, 2012).

The cover (see Figure. 2) of *The Female Persuasion* certainly doesn’t follow the aesthetic conventions assigned to women’s fiction, as outlined by Wolitzer. In fact, it does the opposite, co-opting a lot of visual elements that Wolitzer (2012) signals as being masculine. The cover features a bright graphic of hard-candy colored inverted triangles in red, green, orange, pink, and blue traveling down the jacket. The book title and author’s name, in jumbo lettering, take up the entire cover. This jacket design indicates an awareness on the part of the publisher of not only Wolitzer’s opinions

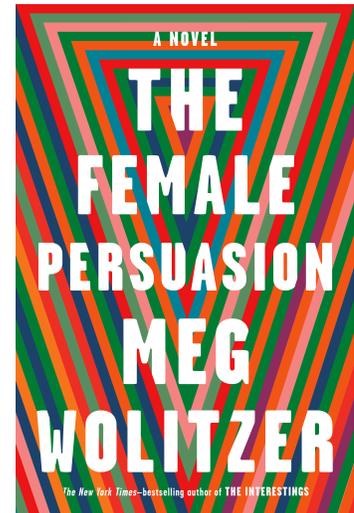


Figure 2. *The Female Persuasion* book cover (Denzer, 2018)

on what a cover *shouldn't* look like, but also on how to design a product that has popular appeal. The inverted triangles, or as some may see them as v-for-vagina, cleverly complement the “female” half of the book title without overtly gendering the book. The cover has been designed by Ben Denzer, who is also the founder of the wildly popular Instagram account Ice Cream Books that features stylized photographs of books paired with frozen desserts, posed against monochromatic backgrounds. Perrin Drumm (2017) commenting on the whimsical nature of the account writes, “Putting ice cream (and ice cream sandwiches, sundaes, popsicles, etc.) on top of books makes zero sense, even if it looks great from an art direction point of view—which is precisely the point.” The *point* here is that Denzer understands what types of images circulate best on the Internet. He brings that sensibility to the cover of *The Female Persuasion*.

The jacket copy describes *The Female Persuasion* as a story about “the select figures and experiences that shape our lives.” Introducing the themes explored by the book, the plot summary asks the following questions: “What does it mean to be powerful? How do people measure their impact upon the world, and upon one another? Does all of this look different for men then it does for women?” (jacket copy). This is in line with how Wolitzer describes her intention behind writing the book, which is to “explore female power” (qtd. in Gebremedhim, 2018). The back of the cover includes praise for Wolitzer’s previous bestselling novel, *The Interestings*, from four popular media outlets: *The New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *Entertainment Weekly*. If Wolitzer has been concerned about being relegated into the stream of women’s fiction⁷, these blurbs work towards assuaging those concerns: *Entertainment Weekly* clarifies that her work “isn’t women’s fiction. It’s everyone’s”; meanwhile *The New York Times Book Review* describes *The Interestings* as an “all-American” tale, one that is “acutely perceptive about the feelings of...its characters, male and female, young and old, gay and straight” (jacket copy).

The book’s page on the PRH website and Amazon feature the same plot summary as the jacket copy. Here again the book is positioned as a “novel not just about who we want to be with, but who we want to be” (“The Female Persuasion: A Novel” n.d. i; “The Female Persuasion: A Novel” n.d. ii). It is also highlighted as a *New York Times* bestseller and Notable Book of 2018, and among *People Magazine* and *USA Today*’s Top Ten Books of 2018 (“The Female Persuasion: A Novel” n.d. i; “The Female Persuasion: A Novel” n.d. ii). The four blurbs that precede the plot summary all emphasize the ease with which the narrative can be consumed and

⁷ In “The Second Shelf” Wolitzer (2012) writes about how being tagged with the genre of “women’s fiction”—a label assigned any female author writing fiction, will prevent “female writers from finding a coed audience, not to mention from entering the larger, more influential playing field” because “some people especially some men, see most fiction by women as one soft, undifferentiated mass that has little to do with them.”

its value as a source of entertainment. *Vogue* calls it “ultra-readable”; *People Magazine* describes it as “equal parts cotton candy and red meat”; *NPR* describes it as “droll and entertaining”; *Wall Street Journal* declares that the book is “funny” (“The Female Persuasion: A Novel” n.d. i; “The Female Persuasion: A Novel” n.d. ii). The emphasis on the novel’s readability is compounded by praise featured on the PRH website that highlights even the length of the novel as being one of its positive aspects, describing it as “wonderfully dense” (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie), “sprawling” (*The Atlantic*), “luxuriously long” (*NPR*) etc.

Since 2008, social media marketing has been a dominant pillar of marketing practice in book publishing (Nolan & Dane, 2018, p. 153). Like all publishing houses, Riverhead Books uses its social media platforms to promote its titles and communicate directly with its consumers. A book’s publicity cycle begins approximately six to eight months before the title is published. The publisher sends a copy of the book to trade journals and media outlets that feature book coverage. It then uses the subsequent press generated in the media for social media promotion, drawing attention to select reviews, author interviews, profiles, or features published on popular media outlets. On Facebook and Instagram, Riverhead Books uses a structured discourse of ‘events’ and ‘micro events’ i.e. sharing of good news, carefully composing their text for search engine optimization—“use of keyword phrases, semantic search and prominent placement of hyperlinks to rich media” (Nolan & Dane, 2018, p. 158). These types of posts include information about the release of the book, author tour information, announcement of giveaways, and links to praise received by the book from national newspapers, and popular literary journals.

On Facebook, *The Female Persuasion* is promoted as being a highly anticipated and well-reviewed title that has been included in various end of the year best-of lists (Riverhead Books, 2018A; Riverhead Books, 2018B; Riverhead Books, 2018C). Most pull-quotes from the

reviews shared on Riverhead Books’ Facebook page promote the book as a story with beautifully developed characters that is about personal growth and mentorship (Riverhead Books, 2017A; Riverhead Books, 2018D; Riverhead Books, 2018E). Similar to Facebook, Riverhead Books’ Instagram posts feature giveaways, references to other reviews or places where the book has been featured. But mostly, the book is positioned as a source of objectified cultural capital. Posed against a background of rich fabrics, next to hot beverages and delicious food, these images are symbolic of purchasing power, and evocative of a lifestyle that would allow one time for leisure activities (See Figures 3 and 4).

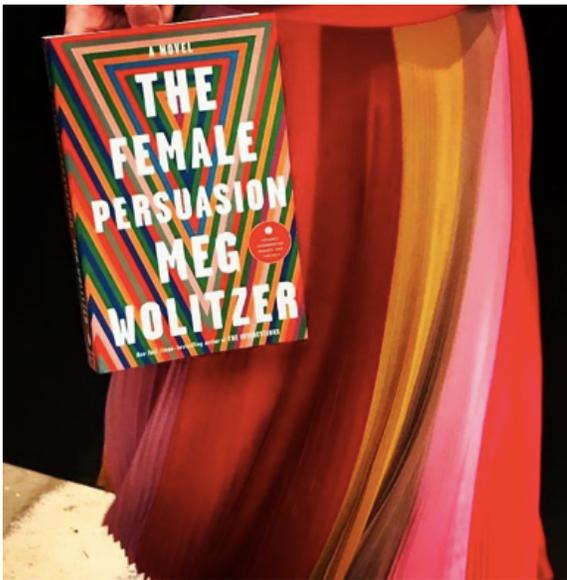


Figure 3. Riverhead Books Instagram Post from December 9, 2017 (Riverhead Books, 2017B).

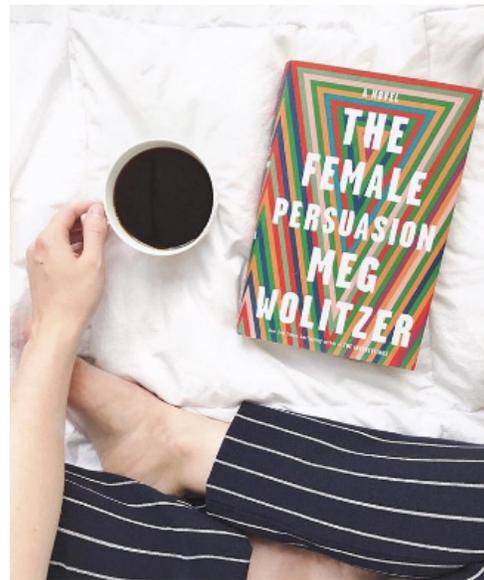


Figure 4. Riverhead Books Instagram Post from November 19, 2018 (Riverhead Books, 2018F).

What is notable is that one of the major themes of the book—feminism—is largely downplayed in its social media promotion. Both Facebook and Instagram feature only a couple posts that actually include the word “feminism” in their caption (see Riverhead Books, 2018G; Riverhead Books, 2018H; Riverhead Books, 2018I). This is in sharp contrast with the way in which the book is positioned in its press release. When a book is published, copies of the title are

sent to members of the literary media around the country with press materials that introduce the reviewers to the book, and allow the publishers to signal the major themes taken up within the text. The press release of *The Female Persuasion* establishes an explicit connection between the novel and feminism, a word that is again conspicuously absent from the jacket copy. It is described as “a novel that subtly looks at feminism in all of its dimensions through a perceptive, nuanced eye” (Riverhead Books, 2018i). The novel is situated within the context of Hilary Clinton’s defeat in the 2016 presidential election, and the #MeToo movement: “As we approach the year anniversary of the country’s first female presidential candidate’s stunning defeat, and at a time when women’s rights are in jeopardy and collective voices are rising in response, Meg Wolitzer delivers the novel that so many crave and that we as a culture so desperately need” (Riverhead Books, 2018i). In communicating with the media, Riverhead Books highlights a different aspect of the novel. *The Female Persuasion* is positioned less as a novel about mentorship and one’s personal journey, and more as a timely social commentary—“a novel that speaks to a very specific cultural moment” (Riverhead Books, 2018i). The reviewers respond in kind.

In a review of the book for *The New York Times*, director and actress Lena Dunham (2018) writes, “The conversation I’d been hearing around the book before I even received my galley was about its resonance within our current political climate, one that is so focused on issues of women’s consent, control and intersectionality. It’s all there to parse, and parsed it will be.” Dunham is noticing the book’s paratext at work, how it influences opinion before the book is even picked up by reviewers. Her observation is correct: the PRH website references praise from forty-six reviews of the book, out of which ten explicitly use the word feminism, and ten that describe the book as being timely in its engagement with the women’s movement.

I examined twenty-nine reviews of the book published in national newspapers and major literary journals that are accessible online.⁸ Common themes emerged: a majority of the reviews were positive and discussed the novel in terms of its engagement with feminism, how it explores the nature of mentorship, described it as a coming-of-age tale about discovering one's passion, and situated it within the #MeToo movement. Only a few deviated from these parameters: *Slate's* Lydia Keisling (2018) described the narrative as a "smart satire"; *Bitch Media's* Rachel Verona Cote (2018) wrote about it from the angle of anti-heroines, and *Jezebel's* Megan Reynolds (2018) was the only reviewer among the ones surveyed that gave the novel a negative review. From this survey it is evident that a majority of the reviews respond to the way the publisher positions the novel, but also contain an awareness of and engage with the existing conversation around the novel.

Case Study no. 2

***The Ensemble* by Aja Gabel: Introducing a rising literary star, who is also a trained classical musician**

Riverhead Books faces a different challenge with marketing *The Ensemble* (2018) than they did with *The Female Persuasion*. This is because Aja Gabel is a debut author and does not have an existing base of readers. Wolitzer, on the other hand, is an established author and her latest novel—her ninth work of adult fiction—is positioned as yet another bestseller from a recognized and established literary talent. In the case of *The Ensemble*, Riverhead Books has to not only sell the narrative, but also introduce Gabel to the public. This offers an opportunity to see how Riverhead Books constructs the author's identity.

⁸ Listed under Appendix A.

The Ensemble has a bright chartreuse yellow cover that features a bouquet of four red petunias, one for each protagonist, framed by the title and the author's name in boldface type (see Figure. 5). The monochromatic yellow background and the bright red of the flowers evoke passion, warmth, and the tenderness of youth. Released in the month of May, this visual aesthetic aggressively markets the book as a “summer-read.”

Accordingly, as part of its social media promotion, Riverhead shared pictures of the book against summery backgrounds like green grass, picnic tables, and flowers (see Figures 6 and 7).

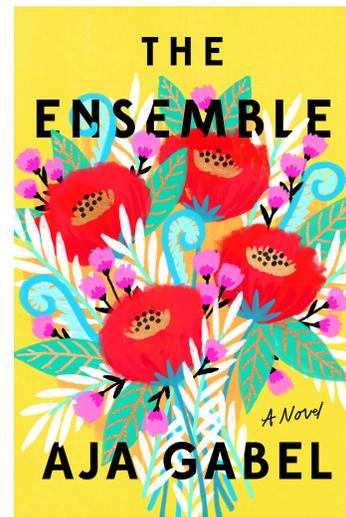


Figure 5. *The Ensemble* book cover (Han, 2018).

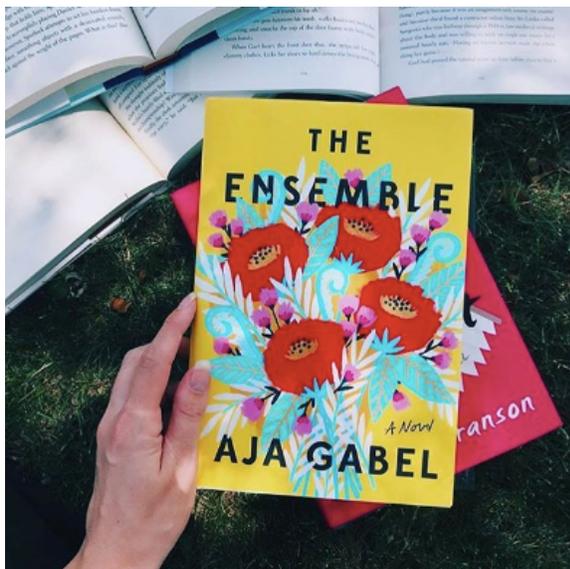


Figure 6: Riverhead Books Instagram post from June 7, 2018 (Riverhead Books, 2018J).



Figure 7: Riverhead Books Instagram post from March 23, 2018 (Riverhead Books, 2018K).

The jacket copy describes *The Ensemble* as a narrative about the “high-stakes, cutthroat world of musicians” (Gabel, 2018). Unless one reads the book description, there is no obvious connection between the cover art and the plot. In an interview, designer Grace Han explains the

reason behind putting a bouquet on the cover as follows: “We definitely wanted to capture the warmth and intensity of all these characters in the book...at one point we were thinking bouquet, why don’t we celebrate their lives and their journeys, and I think bouquets also have a visual place in concert, in musical settings, so we wanted to play with that element” (qtd. in Scott, 2018). Here Riverhead designers take a similar approach to creating the cover of *The Ensemble*, as they did with *The Female Persuasion*. Both covers introduce readers to the text by evoking a certain kind of ambience or feeling. In the case of *The Female Persuasion*, it’s the feeling of an exciting event, for *The Ensemble*, it is the full bloom of summer.

Whether or not a reader makes the connection between the bouquet of flowers and classical music ultimately becomes irrelevant. The cover succeeds in doing what all successful covers must do: attract a reader’s attention. This is most evident on Riverhead Books’ Instagram post featuring an interview Gabel did with the publisher. In the caption, Riverhead Books references author Alexander Chee’s praise for the novel, “@cheemobile calls ‘sweeping, romantic, elegiac...Aja Gabel is a phenomenon’” and asks readers to comment with their reason for picking up the book for the chance to win a free copy (Riverhead Books, 2018L). At the time of writing this paper, there were 178 comments in total. A quick scroll down the comments, one can see that a large number of readers cite the cover as their reason for wanting to purchase the book. The following are the first four comments, presented as an example:

martinalynn: I’d judge that book by it’s gorgeous cover and grab it off a shelf!

marcay55: I loved the cover too and I love debut novels.

wearenotmartha: I love books about friendships and also... the cover is swoon-worthy!

kitty.pickles.wv: I am also judging this book by it’s cover....

(Found in Riverhead Books, 2018L)

The back of the book cover features blurbs from authors Celeste Ng, Maggie Shipstead, Alexander Chee, and Mat Johnson who respectively praise the narrative as: “a sensitive portrait of four young musicians”; “wise and powerful novel about love, life, and music”; “Sweeping, romantic, elegiac”; “gripping tale of four musician’s journeys” (jacket copy). This praise reinforces the jacket copy description of the book as a “heart-skipping portrait of ambition, friendship, and the tenderness of youth.” On the novel’s PRH and Amazon pages, Riverhead precedes the plot summary with praise from *Goop* and *People* that respectively describe the novel as being “pitch perfect” and warns readers that they “will not be able to quit these characters” (The Ensemble: A Novel, n.d. i; The Ensemble: A Novel, n.d. ii). The praise section of the book’s page on the PRH website references reviews from other lifestyle and entertainment magazines and websites including *Entertainment Weekly*, *Marie Claire*, *Real Simple*, *Nylon*, *Refinery 29*, *Town and Country*, and *Buzzfeed*. Although more highbrow sources like the *Wall Street Journal* and *San Francisco Chronicle* are a part of this list, the book is definitely positioned as an entertaining, easily accessible, *commercial* read i.e. as the perfect book to take to the beach (Nicolaou, 2018; Iversen, 2018; Hart, 2018), or pick as a book club selection (Riverhead Books, 2018M).

In the previous case study, *The Female Persuasion* is seen as being positioned differently to the media (using the press release) versus to the general public (using the body of the book and social media promotion). When addressing potential reviewers, Riverhead Books not only outlines the themes explored by the book, but also signals potential points of engagement between the text and the real world. In the press release of *The Ensemble*, the publisher emphasizes Gabel’s experience as “a trained classical cellist who has performed with competitive quartets and chamber groups across the country,” (Riverhead Books, 2018ii) a piece

of information that is absent from her biography on the book jacket. Gabel is introduced to the literary community as “star on the rise” who “holds both an MFA and Ph.D. in Literature and Creative Writing” (Riverhead Books, 2018ii). *The Ensemble* represents the coming together of her two artistic passions (Riverhead Books, 2018ii). This description works to establish Gabel’s skills as a writer, as well as her expertise over the subject matter of the book. Her insider status as a classical musician lends an air of authenticity to the fictional narrative.

I examined twenty-one articles that featured *The Ensemble*⁹. These included reviews, interviews, and profiles in national newspapers, major literary publications, and popular media outlets. Once again, the analysis revealed that the media responds to the interpretational cues set up by the publisher in the press release. Reviewers reflect upon the larger themes of the novel: friendship, loyalty, ambition, the passage of time, etc. They praise the relatability of the characters. Various reviewers applaud Gabel’s portrayal of the world of classical music. For example, *Kirkus Reviews* (2018) calls it “an accomplished rendering” of the world of classical music, and *Publishers Weekly* (2018) declares, “seldom has a novel managed to better dramatize the particular pressures that make up the life of a professional musician.” In an interview for the *Los Angeles Book Review*, writer Chloe Benjamin (2018) even begins by acknowledging that one of the reasons why she loved the book was that it “offers an insider’s perspective on a particular subculture.” She then apologizes for beginning the interview with a question about Gabel’s background as a musician, “I know it can be obnoxious when people immediately jump to the biographical similarities between a novelist and her work, so I hope you’ll forgive me.” Benjamin offers an apology because writing a work of fiction does not require the writer to share the same profession as their characters, so Gabel’s experience as a musician, although an interesting fact about the author, is ultimately irrelevant to a reading of the book. However, when

⁹ Listed under Appendix A.

Riverhead Books makes this information available, they give reviewers permission to speak about it with Gabel. Benjamin is not the only one to address it. Nine out of the twenty-one press clippings explicitly mention Gabel's experience as a musician. However, most of these are interviews, so Gabel has control over how this aspect of her self is portrayed to the public and the ways in which her experience informs her novel. In the previous case study, the paratext surrounding *The Female Persuasion* links the fictional narrative to the #MeToo movement, commenting upon how it reflects and gives voice to the concerns of women in general. In contrast, the paratext surrounding *The Ensemble* focuses on the emergence of a singular literary voice and her ability to render in "pitch-perfect" detail an equally singular world.

Case study #3

***The Friend* by Sigrid Nunez: The National Book Award winner**

The Friend (2018) is a slim, attractive book. Its cover (see Figure 8) features a two-dimensional box, each wall a different primary color, inside of which is a Great Dane. The book title and author's name are in a bold white font, hovering above the image of the dog who is depicted in a seated position towards the bottom of the cover. Art director Helen Yentus, describes the design process of the cover as following:

We [Yentus and designer Nicholas Ortega] found that imagining the dog being confined in this small space gave it this power. The primary colors went along with the simplicity of the idea: It's a completely imagined space with no detail. I think part of the strength of this jacket is its paring down to the bare minimum. I think that fits the book, which is so emotional even though it's written in a very reserved tone (qtd. in Shapiro, 2018).

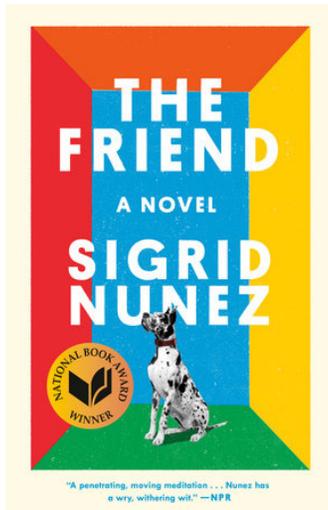


Figure 8. *The Friend* book cover (Ortega, 2018).

The cover succeeds in a few respects: although the relative simplicity of the design evokes somberness, the bright primary colors make the cover at the very least eye-catching. Most importantly, the smallness of the dog relative to size of the title and author name visually signals that while *The Friend* is a story about a dog, it's not necessarily a dog-book similar to the popular John Grogan bestseller *Marley and Me*.

The jacket copy describes *The Friend* as a “moving story of love, friendship, grief, healing, and the magical bond between a woman and dog,” deftly outlining the themes that will be taken up by the novel. The

back of the cover features a blurb from author Cathleen Schine who warns readers that “you cannot put it [The Friend] down and you will cry” (jacket copy). The certainty and tone of her praise braces the reader for a book with an emotional impact. Below Schine’s blurb, Riverhead also includes praise for Sigrid Nunez that describes her writing as, “gorgeously spare” (*Boston Globe*) and capable of “upending our expectations to powerful ends” (*The New York Review of Books*); it highlights Nunez’s “keen powers of observation” (*The New York Times Book Review*), and calls her an “master of psychological acuity” (*New Yorker*) and an “uncompromising talent” (*Vogue*). Already, one can detect in the tone of the praise and in the choice of words like “master” and “uncompromising” that *The Friend* is being positioned very differently from *The Female Persuasion* and *The Ensemble*. As seen in the previous case studies, Riverhead Books also shares highly positive reviews of both the novels that commend the authors in glowing terms. However, the use of phrases like “ultra-readable” (*The Female Persuasion: A Novel*, n.d.i) and “pitch perfect” (*The Ensemble: A Novel*, n.d.i) emphasize the accessible and easily enjoyable qualities of Wolitzer’ and Gabel’s novels. In contrast, the praise highlighted for

The Friend gives the impression that Riverhead Books is not concerned with making sure that the book appeals to as wide an audience as possible. Instead, the paratext invites a much more high-minded readership. Granted, the publisher-created paratext in this instance must do the above in order to accurately market the novel, which admittedly of a more literary bent than *The Ensemble* and *The Female Persuasion*. This also suggests that when it comes to the operations of paratext, questions of legitimacy and even credibility must be considered.

On the book's PRH and Amazon pages, *The Friend*'s plot summary is immediately preceded by mention of the fact that the book is the winner of 2018 the National Book Award, and a *New York Times* Notable Book of 2018 (The Friend: A Novel, n.d. i; The Friend: A Novel, n.d. ii). This is followed by praise from *The Wall Street Journal*, *NPR* and *The New York Times* that respectively recommend the novel as a "world of insight into death, grief, art, and love"; a "moving meditation on loss, comfort, memory" and a "dry, allusive and charming" piece of writing. The emotion put at the forefront of the experience of reading the novel is defined as being introspective and meditative. Potential audiences are signaled with each book: *The Female Persuasion*, although designed to have a mass appeal, speaks strongly to those interested in the women's movement because of its concern with female empowerment; *The Ensemble* has obvious appeal to lovers of music, and its floral, made-for-Instagram cover signals a more feminine readership. In the case of *The Friend*, the book is heavily geared towards writers. Before the novel is nominated for the National Book Award, all social media promotion on Facebook makes reference to how the novel engages with the process of writing. An example of this is a review from *Kirkus* that is shared on Facebook with the pull-quote, "Don't flinch. Life is difficult and complicated, writing is hard; you have to tell the truth" (Riverhead Books, 2018N) or a review from *The New York Times Book Review* that highlights the quote, "The writing

profession, in *THE FRIEND*, is viewed as a series of little murders of the soul...” (Riverhead Books, 2018O). This promotional activity is partly influenced by the reviews that comment upon Nunez’s depiction of the literary world and what it means to be a writer.¹⁰

Winning the 2018 National Book Award for Fiction, one of the most prestigious literary awards in the United States, brings another round of press coverage for the novel, which includes a *New York Times* profile that declares Nunez an “Overnight Literary Sensation, 23 Years and Eight Books Later” (Alter, 2018). This characterization echoes previous reviews where Nunez is described as an underrated writer (Garner, 2018; McAlpin, 2018). The book award introduces Nunez to an entirely new audience of readers, making it into an unexpected bestseller with over forty thousand copies in circulation (Alter, 2018). The editions printed after the announcement of the award feature a gold medallion embossed onto the cover indicating that the title is a National Book Award winner (see Figure 8). It is of no surprise then that after the book is nominated for the award, all social media promotion on Facebook and Instagram for the novel references the National Book Awards. This is similar to the promotional activity around *The Female Persuasion* on social media that focused on news of the novel’s inclusion in various best-of-the-year book lists. The prestige associated with the National Book Award is so great that it is no longer necessary to promote the actual content of the book. By winning a prestigious award, *The Friend* transforms into an object of great cultural capital and that becomes its most compelling selling point. It is worth noting that none of the publisher-created paratext discussed above uses the word “diversity” or refers to Nunez’s German and Panamanian-Chinese heritage. Diversity is invoked in relation to Nunez, and in this case, by certain media outlets, once she becomes part of the first all-POC cast of National Book Award winners. However, this evocation

¹⁰ I analyzed 16 articles that featured the novel, published in national newspapers, popular websites, and major literary journals. These can be found under Appendix A.

is limited to certain media outlets noting the celebration of diversity at one of the highest echelons of the book-publishing world. It does not influence the ways in which the novel is ultimately discussed within popular media.

Observations

The three case studies provide a glimpse into how Riverhead Books constructs paratext around its titles, and how this paratext influences the reception of the books in the media. The book cover is one of the first points of contact between a text and its reader. As seen in the examples in the previous section, Riverhead Books designs covers that introduce the reader to the book by evoking a feeling or an ambiance. The bright and colorful typeface only cover of *The Female Persuasion* creates the feeling of an event; the red-flowers against the sunny yellow background of *The Ensemble* evoke passion; the pared down elements of *The Friend's* cover and the Great Dane enclosed in a box inspire introspection. Most importantly, these covers are designed to circulate digitally. Unless a reader is browsing at a bookstore, they are most likely to encounter the image of a book in thumbnail form on Amazon, as part of a book review published online or in a newspaper, or on their social media feeds. This has had an obvious effect on current book design aesthetics. As Margot Boyer-Dry (2019) writes on the subject, “at a time when half of all book purchases in the U.S. are made on Amazon—and many of those on mobile—the first job of a book cover, after gesturing at the content inside, is to look great in miniature.” According to Boyer-Dry (2018) this has translated to a design era of “statement wallpaper and fatty text,” i.e. fine details have been replaced by easily decipherable jumbo lettering and bold, splashy designs. In an interview with Dry, Riverhead Books’ Art Director Helen Yentus states that her team designs titles keeping in mind the physical and digital settings

they will eventually inhabit, “We have to make sure what we make works equally well in both settings...If you miss the details, you’re still getting an interesting, captivating visual, but if you’re giving it a closer look, the details are there” (qtd. in Boyer-Dry, 2018).

These covers indeed circulate well digitally. Especially on Instagram where Riverhead Books has an upwards of eighty thousand followers, who engage regularly with content posted by the publisher by commenting on their posts, liking pictures, and tagging the account on their own photographs of Riverhead titles. As mentioned in the case studies, the images of the books shared by Riverhead Books have an aspirational quality to them—they often feature the book in bright and beautiful settings, next to a hot beverage, or posed on luxurious fabrics. The Riverhead Instagram account, “so pristine, so archetypical of contemporary design, that you’d think its jackets were all designed explicitly to sit there and rack up likes,” (Dry, 2018) is part of the literary sphere of Instagram, popularly referred to as “bookstagram,” that is populated by similar pictures of books as described above, taken by readers around the world. In these images, the books look like “well-designed accessories” (Connolly, 2018) creating a visual aesthetic of cultural capital—evoking a level of cultural sophistication, buying power, and prestige. On their Instagram, Riverhead Books reproduces this visual trend, by reposting beautiful photographs of their titles taken by readers, encouraging others to do the same for chance to be featured on their account. This is an example of “value co-creation”—the “idea...that the symbolic and financial value of a product or brand ought to rely not only on producers’ creative efforts but also on those of consumers” (Zwick, Bonsu, & Darmody, 2008 cited in Aronczyk, 2017, pg. 114). In fact, Riverhead Books’ promotional activity on Facebook and Instagram consists almost entirely of sharing the labor of its consumers, in the form of links to written content about the titles produced by book reviewers, or images of the books created by Instagram users. Here the value

of Riverhead titles is co-created—the books’ value is derived not only from themselves, but also from the value assigned to them by other consumers, making them covetable objects. This is entwined with and reflects Riverhead Books’ brand identity as a publisher of “bestselling literary fiction, and quality nonfiction” and “extraordinary groundbreaking, unique writers” (“About Riverhead Books,” 2018).

It is crucial to parse the influence of Riverhead Books’ brand identity on the paratext it creates around its titles. Aronczyk writes, “branding is not about expanding the terrain on which meanings can be made; it is about closing off interpretive agency” (p.112). In this context, “interpretive agency” refers to the reader’s ability to transcend the interpretation of a title as offered by Riverhead Books. The publisher mediates the reception of the work by setting parameters of interpretation within its press release. It does so by outlining the general themes taken up by each book. This usually translates to a single sentence that is included in the plot summary on the press release and the jacket copy. For example, *The Female Persuasion* is “an electric, multilayered novel about female power and influence, ego and loyalty, and the romantic ideals we all follow deep into adulthood” (Riverhead Books, 2018i); *The Ensemble* is “a heart skipping portrait of ambition, friendship, and the tenderness of youth” (Riverhead Books, 2018ii) and *The Friend* is “a meditation on loss and solitude, and a celebration of the transfiguring power of human-canine devotion” (Riverhead Books, 2018iii).

Reader-created paratext, i.e. press coverage of the titles, contributes towards how the book creates meaning within its social, political, and cultural context by expanding upon the themes outlined by the publisher, and by commenting upon the ways in which the book is engaging with the zeitgeist. In the case of *The Friend*, reviewers expand the interpretation offered by the publisher by positioning the book as not only a work on grief, but also about

writing. More generally, the analysis of the press coverage received by the three books reveals that reviewers rarely transcend the interpretational boundary established by Riverhead Books in a radical way. If they do, that is, by writing a negative review or offering an entirely different reading of the title, Riverhead Books does not share these reviews with its readers on its social media platforms. Instead, they share press clippings that reinforce the interpretation of the novel that is most marketable, “creating and re-creating texts according to their paratextual needs” (Aronczyk, 2017, p. 113). Nolan and Dane (2018) in their analysis of book publishers’ social media marketing write about the formation of “digital enclosures” which are “the creation of a digital realm wherein every action and transaction generates information about itself” (p. 161). This can be seen as another way in which boundaries of interpretation are reinforced. While two out of the three titles in the case studies are shown as engaging with contemporary social issues—sexual assault on college campuses, uneven power-dynamics in creative writing programs, or the problematic nature of white feminism—the social media promotion of the titles discourages readers to have a critical discussion about these topics, despite having a “comments” section available to them on both Facebook and Instagram. Reader-engagement is limited to liking, sharing a post, or participating in a giveaway. The event-based marketing, or the sharing of good news on these platforms serves to encourage a celebratory discourse around these novels. We see that Riverhead Books ends up operating more like a tastemaker than a social commentator.

While none of the above is unusual behavior for a publisher given that their priority is to ultimately sell their products, it is crucial to recognize that publisher-created paratext plays a key role in the processes of speculative consumption. By “creating an idea of what pleasures any one text will provide, what information it will offer, what ‘effect’ it will have on us” (Gray, 2010, p.

24) this paratext aids a consumer in deciding which book to pick, or if they want to pick up a book at all. It is valuable to consider that the publisher is not creating these paratexts within a vacuum. Looking back to the “Industry at a Glance” section of this paper, we understand that Riverhead Books is operating within a context where they are competing for the consumer’s highly fragmented attention span. This context explains their approach to creating paratext that first and foremost, positions their works as sources of cultural capital. Aronczyk writes that branding is “a creation of limits as a way to exercise cultural power” (p. 112). Riverhead Books’ cultural power comes from its identity as a tastemaker and trendsetter, as well its ability to produce best-selling, critically acclaimed titles that double as beautiful, covetable objects. They exercise this power by aggressively promoting their titles as works of high cultural value, recommended by book critics addressing a variety of audiences. Within this framework, they author’s past achievements are naturally used as selling points.

Riverhead Books also needs to negotiate a climate where the call for diversity has become increasingly urgent. Stuart Hall (1995) has written about the media as being a “powerful sources of ideas about race,” and a site where these “ideas are articulated, worked on, transformed and elaborated” (p. 20). This project has shown that publisher-created paratext introduces the ideas embodied by texts into the media. It also shapes how and what we talk about a book on the topic of diversity. As seen on their Instagram account, Riverhead Books firmly places diversity at the forefront of their brand, in stating that they are “proud to publish diverse voices from around the world” (Riverhead Books, n.d.). Consider that two of the three authors discussed in the case studies are women of color: Aja Gabel is Asian American and Sigrid Nunez has a German and Panamanian-Chinese background. These aspects of their identity are not mentioned in the press materials circulated by Riverhead Books, and as a result, they are not

discussed in the press coverage received by these titles in the media. There is also no mention of Gabel's sexuality or any LGBTQ themes taken up in *The Ensemble*. However, Riverhead Books does include Gabel's novel in a pride month Instagram post that highlights Riverhead titles written by LGBTQ authors or containing LGBTQ themes (Riverhead Books, 2018P). On a similar note, Nunez's identity as a POC author only comes to light in numerous articles about the National Book Awards that take note of the fact that she is among the authors of color who were honored at the awards ceremony. In both instances, the authors are being either celebrated, or noted for the diversity they embody. What does "diversity" in this sense entail if the authors do not claim the descriptor for themselves, or if the discourse surrounding diversity is not expanded in a meaningful manner? What is evident is that *when* diversity is invoked in these two instances, whether it is by the media or by the publisher, it is a strategic decision to celebrate representation, rather than to examine it.

It is worthy to keep in mind that the call for diversity in the book publishing industry is a call for social equality within the infrastructure of the industry and as represented by the content produced by publishers. Media Studies scholar Herman Gray (2016) notes that "approaching inequality as a research matter has been "mired in if not now displaced by a cluster of terms like diversity, multiculturalism, difference, lifestyle, and niche" (p. 241). In his powerful essay on the relation between diversity and demography, Gray cautions against the idea that representational parity necessarily equals social equality, and urges scholars to re-think their approach to diversity. As he points out, in our current conjecture, "multicultural programming content is very much an element of branding and marketing deployed by content producers to reach precise sectors of their desired markets" (Gray, 2016, p. 247). Although Gray is writing about the television industry, his observation is applicable to the content being produced by book

publishers. Same as television producers, publishing diverse content allows publishers to reach diverse audiences. In fact, at the 2018 Book Expo of America, one of the biggest industry trade events of the year, diversity was highlighted as financially critical in a session titled, “Opportunity Cost: Why Diversity is Financially Critical for the Book Industry” (“Diversity, politics likely topics,” 2018). In the case of Riverhead Books, diversity is also a central aspect of their brand identity.

A more fruitful approach would then be to “look at the conditions that structure and organize some of the foundational assumptions and questions about diversity” (Gray, 2016, p. 249). In other words, it is not enough to note instances of diverse representation, we must also question the conditions within which diversity is produced, how it is expressed, and what notion of diversity is circulated. This project attempts to do exactly that. The case studies reveal that Riverhead Books’ brand positions the publisher as a source of cultural value to its consumers. The diverse nature of their list is implicated in this value system. However, as seen in the three case studies, diversity in this instance comes to mean variety. Any other notion of the word—for example, diversity as it relates to social inequality—remains unexamined, as the publisher-created paratext does not create a space that encourages a critical discourse on the topic. Given the significant contribution that publisher-created paratext makes to public discourses on diversity, this research ultimately makes the argument that we must be conscious of not only what kinds of texts publishers bring into the market, but also how they situate and express the ideas embodied by them. We must ask the question: when racial, cultural and sexual diversity is evoked in a text’s paratext, what purpose does it serve?

Conclusion

On January 25, 2016 Riverhead Books unveiled its new colophon. It symbolized the publisher's decision to re-assert its brand identity for the first time since its founding, and in doing so, re-introduce itself as a publishing house that is looking ahead to the future. Riverhead Books' President Geoff Kloske stated the following on their decision to change their colophon, "The world changes, so it makes sense that brands reassert themselves at various points in their lives... We think about the digital and physical experience of our brand mark. But most important is to stay faithful to the imprint's spirit. Here, the sense of emergence, which in potamological terms—the study of rivers—is what a riverhead is all about" (qtd. in Cox, 2016). According to Art Director Helen Yentus the new colophon embodied, "what makes a Riverhead book always one to pay attention to: wide-ranging stories from around the globe that are unexpected, bold, and unforgettable" (qtd. in Cox, 2016). The change came after two exciting years of the Riverhead Books playing with the form of the book. In 2014, the publishing house became the first publisher ever to develop a 3-D printed slipcover a book, for a 200-copy limited edition run of Chang Rae-Lee's *On Such a Full Sea* (Dilworth, 2014). In 2015, the publisher collaborated with New York artist Lourdes Sanchez to produce 250-limited edition copies of Elizabeth Gilbert's *Big Magic*—each copy featuring art from Sanchez, printed on satin, stamped with gold foil, and housed in a pristine white presentation case (Biedenharn, 2015). With the unveiling of the new colophon, Riverhead Books made official what distinguishes itself from other publishers: the willingness to embrace of new technology, and the desire to adapt their work to provide unique physical and digital experiences to their customers. Although this change may have had more significance within the industry than to the average reader, it does speak volumes to the importance of brand identity and the careful consideration that goes behind its expression.

This paper demonstrated, through the analysis of three Riverhead titles, that a publisher's brand identity not only informs the work they choose to acquire, but also the decisions they take when introducing a text to the world. This paper concedes to the fact that each book and each publisher is different therefore an analysis of their paratext might yield different conclusions. It does not aim to provide a one-size-fits-all analysis of the book publishing industry. However, it does present a potential methodology that may be used to discern how a publisher positions their books to the media, and how that may influence the process of speculative consumption. In examining the press coverage received by Meg Wolitzer's *The Female Persuasion*, Aja Gabel's *The Ensemble*, and Sigrid Nunez's *The Friend*, this research revealed that a publisher's paratextual intentions must be taken into account to understand how these works create meaning in the culture. Although reviewers have the freedom over how they interpret a work, the case studies show that their reviews respond to the cues given by the publisher, and remain in conversation with the interpretation promoted by Riverhead Books. It shows how through the process of value co-creation, Riverhead Books uses the labour of literary critics and Instagram users to create digital enclosures on their Facebook and Instagram, where each post ultimately reflects back to the publisher through an affective rhetoric of celebration. Positioning each title as highly anticipated and critically beloved, Riverhead Books presents itself as the producer of work with high cultural value. Through a gallery of aspirational images on its Facebook and Instagram, Riverhead Books is able to reinforce how their titles may be viewed as accessories embodying that value. This promise of cultural capital then becomes one way through which the publisher competes for the attention of potential consumers.

However, Riverhead is not simply a vendor of books. As a part of the cultural institution of book publishers, it has social responsibilities towards its consumers. Its parent company,

Penguin Random House identifies this responsibility as a commitment to continually invest “in a myriad of voices that reflect wide ranges of viewpoints and opinions and impact our society in meaningful ways” (“Social Responsibility,” 2019). Riverhead Books fulfills this responsibility by publishing a diverse list of authors. The three writers included in the case studies in the preceding section embody this diversity of perspective and opinion that is promised by Penguin Random House to its consumers. Ultimately the purpose of paratextual study, as Gray (2010) states, is to understand production cultures in order to reveal spaces of intervention (p. 16). A look at Riverhead Books’ promotional activity on its social media platforms reveals that it’s creating a paratextual space around its titles that is primarily celebratory—one that actively discourages a critical discourse around their titles. We also see that while they facilitate diversity by publishing a variety of voices, they do not examine the state of diversity within book publishing. Instead an unexamined sense of diversity, in the sense of variety, is implicated in a narrative of cultural value. The question that arises, is that in a climate where the values of structural and representational diversity are being discussed, whose responsibility is it to encourage a meaningful dialogue on the subject? If that work belongs to actors in the media, how can book publishers facilitate their work?

The purpose of this study is to demystify the ways in which works of literature arrive into the culture, and the invisible processes at work behind this arrival. By doing so, it hopes to create a space of awareness from which publishers can be held accountable for their influence over a text’s reception in the media, and how it creates meaning in the world. However, this paper only scratches the surface. It focuses on a small set of publisher- and reader-created paratexts. Therefore, it invites other researchers to continue this type of enquiry into the ways in which texts create meaning by looking at the various bodies of paratext that surround them, their

creators, and the physical and digital spaces in which they are activated. This study is essential for it reveals what is lost and what is gained each time a work is introduced into the world.

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Appendix A: Press Coverage

The Female Persuasion

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Appendix B: Facebook and Instagram Posts

The Female Persuasion

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Riverhead Books [@riverheadbooks]. (2018F, November 19). Uh whoops were we supposed to get out of bed today? #isitThanksgivingyet #Mondays [Instagram photograph]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/BqXZfzZFWSE/>

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Riverhead Books. (2018H, February 1). We couldn't agree more, Kirkus Reviews! [Facebook status update]. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/RiverheadBooks/photos/a.169960301907/10156197640701908>

Riverhead Books [@riverheadbooks]. (2018I, March 2). FRIDAY GIVEAWAY ALERT We're just one month away from the release of @megwolitzer's "can't-put-it-down...perfect feminist blockbuster"* THE FEMALE PERSUASION. Want a gorgeous finished copy of this new novel? Tell us who your feminist heroes are in a comment below for a chance to win! [Instagram photograph]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bf1fdKdhzEg/>

The Ensemble

Riverhead Books [@riverheadbooks]. (2018J, June 7). We're one day closer to Friday, which means it's time to pick a weekend read! What book are you planning to read? (@booknerdnative) [Instagram photograph]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/BjuRFDhn-LI/>

Riverhead Books [@riverheadbooks]. (2018K, March 23). FRIDAY GIVEAWAY It snowed on the East Coast this week, which makes us even more eager for spring's most anticipated debut novel Tag a friend in a comment below and you both could win early copies of THE ENSEMBLE by @ajagabel! [Instagram photograph]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bgqkmb6hMXV/>

Riverhead Books [@riverheadbooks]. (2018L, January 26). FRIDAY GIVEAWAY. We can't wait for everyone to read THE ENSEMBLE, the highly anticipated debut novel by @ajagabel out this May that @cheemobile calls "sweeping, romantic, elegiac...Aja Gabel is a phenomenon." Want to win a *signed* galley? Tell us why you want to read THE ENSEMBLE

in a comment below for a chance to win! [Instagram photograph]. Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/Bea2a8iBN_g/

Riverhead Books. (2018M, June 27). We're so excited that Aja Gabel's THE ENSEMBLE was chosen by cupcakes and cashmere as their book club pick of the month! [Facebook status update]. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/RiverheadBooks/photos/a.10152378774576908/10156600200396908/?type=3&theater>

Riverhead Books [@riverheadbooks]. (2018P, June 1). FRIDAY GIVEAWAY. It's the beginning of #Pride Month and we love to show off our colors! Tell us your favorite book written by an LGBTQ author or with LGBTQ themes in a comment below for a chance to win some of our favorites [Instagram photograph]. Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/Bje04j_BmD4/

The Friend

Riverhead Books. (2018N, February 7). "Don't flinch. Life is difficult and complicated and writing is hard; you have to tell the truth. You have to face certain things. You should go there, wherever it is, wherever it's taking you." Sigrid Nunez speaks to Kirkus Reviews about writing, grief, and her new novel, THE FRIEND [Facebook status update]. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/RiverheadBooks/posts/10156215015316908>

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Appendix C – Figures

Figure 1: Adler, E. (2015). Previously on the Neapolitan Novels: Your Study Guide to Elena Ferrante. *Electric Literature*. Retrieved from <https://electricliterature.com/previously-on-the-neapolitan-novels-your-study-guide-to-elena-ferrante-39255bc3118a>

Figure 2: Denzer, B. (2018). The Female Persuasion. Retrieved from <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/310197/the-female-persuasion-by-meg-wolitzer/>

Figure 3: Riverhead Books [@riverheadbooks]. (2017B, December 9). "Ambitious and satisfying...This insightful and resonant novel explores what it is to both embrace womanhood and suffer because of it" -starred Publishers Weekly [Instagram photograph]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bce3NAohHZ/>

Figure 4: Riverhead Books [[@riverheadbooks](#)]. (2018F, November 19). Uh whoops were we supposed to get out of bed today? #isitThanksgivingyet #Mondays [Instagram photograph]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/BqXZfzZFWSE/>

Figure 5: Han, G. (2018). *The Ensemble*. Retrieved from <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/550847/the-ensemble-by-ajagabel/9780735214767/>

Figure 6: Riverhead Books [[@riverheadbooks](#)]. (2018J, June 7). We're one day closer to Friday, which means it's time to pick a weekend read! What book are you planning to read? (@booknerdnative) [Instagram photograph]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/BjuRFDhn-LI/>

Figure 7: Riverhead Books [[@riverheadbooks](#)]. (2018K, March 23). FRIDAY GIVEAWAY It snowed on the East Coast this week, which makes us even more eager for spring's most anticipated debut novel Tag a friend in a comment below and you both could win early copies of *THE ENSEMBLE* by @ajagabel! [Instagram photograph]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bgqkmb6hMXV/>

Figure 8: Ortega, N. (2018). *The Friend*. Retrieved from <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/558005/the-friend-by-sigrid-nunez/9780735219458/>