



One Great Book: Volume 4, Episode 5 *The Clothing of Books* by Jhumpa Lahiri

[Show Notes](#)

[00:00]

One Great Book Volume IV, Book 5: *The Clothing of Books*

[UPBEAT INTRO MUSIC]

Hey readers, I'm Anne Bogel, and you're listening to *One Great Book*, the short-form podcast from the team behind *What Should I Read Next?*, where each week I pull one stand-out selection off my personal bookshelves and tell you all about it in ten minutes or less.

[MUSIC]

My interactions with avid readers have taught me that they're not only passionate about the contents of their books. They're also passionate about the physical books themselves. Bookworms often ponder: How to arrange books on their shelves, whether to purchase a book in paperback or hardcover, how to use book darts, whether or not to write in their books, and dust jackets—do you use them as bookmarks or ditch for an easier reading experience? I have a longstanding love–hate relationship with that last item—when I was a kid I actually took the jackets off and threw them away! (I know some of you are cringing right now). But now I've grown to love a beautifully designed cover and can appreciate dust jackets, just not on my books while I'm actively reading.

Stripping my books of their dust jackets actually led me to today's great book, and for that alone dust jackets hold a special place in my heart. A few years ago, I was experimenting with my books as decor. I had arranged my books rainbow-style, organized by color, and I really love that look. In the past I'd also tried alphabetical order, for easy-to-grab recommendations when a friend stops by. One day, on a whim, I decided to ditch the dust jackets and organize my books



by color and shape. I was going for pure aesthetics and wanted my library to be as pretty as possible. I LOVED the way it turned out, so of course I snapped a picture for Instagram. Fellow bibliophiles were quick to comment, “Um, your books are NAKED, and by the way have you read *The Clothing of Books* by Jhumpa Lahiri?”

[01:54]

Lahiri is one of my favorite authors, but I wasn’t yet familiar with this work. Of course I remedied that situation immediately. This beautiful, perfectly portable book is all about the art of the cover, and how book jackets are so much more than a marketing piece or protective covering. This book is fascinating, insightful, and for this admittedly nerdy bookworm, it is One. Great. Book.

[MUSIC]

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[03:43]

I have to admit that while I loved the look of my "naked" books, once I removed the dust jackets I had difficulty finding specific titles on my shelves, unless I shelved them in strict alphabetical order. I didn't realize how accustomed I'd become to identifying my books by their covers, but when I mean their covers I really mean their jackets. Jhumpa Lahiri can relate. Her father was a librarian, so as she grew up, most of her books were borrowed from the library, and they'd been stripped of their jackets for easy circulation. Rather than encountering the cover of a book first, she was met with merely the author's words. I think this sounds rather romantic - opening a book without any clues to its plot or characters. And yet, Lahiri says that a naked book is "incomplete, in some ways inaccessible. It lacks a door through which to enter the text. It lacks a face."

Lahiri's experiences as an author further complicate her relationship with book covers. She says that "the right cover is like a beautiful coat, elegant and warm." But the wrong cover is uncomfortable and ill-fitting, like hand-me down clothes or the unfashionable outfits her Bengali immigrant parents dressed her in as a child.

Lahiri's insightful words on the messages carried by book covers have changed the way I think about the design process: what message is the publisher wanting to convey to the reader, and how are they choosing to do it? Lahiri fills the text with the examples she knows best: those from her own work. As the child of immigrants, Lahiri views her own identity as complex—and laments that this is often not the message communicated on her own book covers. She laments that designers often lean into her Bengali Indian identity with stereotypes and references to



India: religious symbols, elephants, or henna patterns. Her books are often set in the United States, she says, so why does the cover depict the River Ganges? When she brings up her concerns to the marketing team, they swing the other way, stripping the book of all Indian cultural symbols and adding an American flag. This back and forth, tug-of-war between cultural imagery is not merely about the book cover. For Lahiri, it is about her identity, who she is and how her books represent the questions she's asked herself since childhood: who am I, and how do others see me? Once you read Lahiri's words here, your bookstore browsing experience will never be the same—you'll see there's so much to notice on these covers that slipped right past you before.

[MUSIC]

[06:02]

Jhumpa Lahiri's work has been published around the world, and with each new translation comes a new book cover. The same book, with the same plot, themes, and tone might have a dark and moody cover in one country, and a bright and sunny cover in another. Lahiri remarks that when grouped on a shelf, all together, the worldwide editions are quite stunning. The various shapes, colors, and textures create a remarkable effect. However, these variations also beg the question, how does the same book merit so many different interpretations? Thanks to a recent experience, I have fresh insight into this question: my essay collection *I'd Rather Be Reading: The Delights and Dilemmas of the Reading Life*, was recently translated into Chinese, and given an entirely different cover. I'm unable to read this book, but Chinese readers tell me the title has been changed as well: literally, it now reads "confessions of a reading addict." I think that title still applies, but it is definitely different.

Lahiri knows a thing or two about the art of translation. *The Clothing of Books* was originally delivered as a speech at a 2015 Italian literary festival—Lahiri wrote and delivered the speech in Italian. In 2012, she moved with her family to Rome, and she threw herself into learning Italian, determined to become fluent. She even committed to writing in Italian, penning an article to explain her passion for the language. This was later developed into her 2016 book, *In Other Words*, another of my favorites. Lahiri's love of language, and her relationship with translation,



adds layers to her own work. She is constantly navigating language, identity, and how the relationship between form and content shapes our experiences.

[07:33]

Speaking of form: this book is short, only about 70 pages. It fits perfectly in a stocking and makes a lovely gift for bibliophiles. The cover is, fittingly, gorgeous: it's vivid blue, with textile-like lettering and an embroidered design around the border; the cover flaps resemble a double-breasted jacket, with buttons on the sides. Even if you haven't seen *The Clothing of Books* yet, the style may look familiar: Joan Wong, the cover designer, also worked on *We Should All Be Feminists* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, another beautiful, totally giftable little book.

Not only would this little volume fit perfectly in any bookworm's stocking, it would also make for a great book club conversation—sparking discussion around how we choose books, what covers mean to us, and how appearances connect—or disconnect—with our identities and the identities of the books we read. I found this to be an excellent read during this time of year when the culture at large is occupied by thoughts of packaging and first impressions. Plus, it's great on audio—Jhumpa Lahiri narrates, and it makes for a quick listen.

In short, if you need the perfect gift for your beloved bookworm, if you love books about books, or if you enjoy nonfiction that changes the way you see the world—or, at the very least, the bookstore—*The Clothing of Books* may be the next great book you're looking for.

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Thanks to Kellen Pechacek for his sound design on today's episode.

Readers, that's it for today, thanks so much for listening.

And as Rainer Maria Rilke said, "ah, how good it is to be among people who are reading."

Happy reading, everyone.