

***The Art of Judging Books by Their Cover**

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When I was a child, I loved climbing trees and playing with race cars that would compete in a strategically planned racetrack. Luckily, I always won. I would spend hours and hours yelling at my right hand for making the competitor's car run past my favourite car, which was under my left hand's control. Problems arose, however, when I hit puberty. I did not get a high-pitched tone in my voice, I did not grow 10 centimetres taller in one summer, I did not grow hair in places I didn't even know could be hairy. I did, however, get a menstrual cycle and my first wired bra. While every girl in my class was being interrogated by their parents about boyfriends and educated in sexual protection, my parents would kiss me goodnight, saying, "Whatever you choose for your life, we will support you *no matter what or who it is*". Because of that stereotype, I got my first kiss during a game of spin the bottle as strategically planned as my racetracks, and my first boyfriend was someone I met after finishing high school. He was welcomed with relieved breaths from my grandparents, a friendly handshake from my father, who was now concerned about my future, and my over-the-moon mother, who was now worried about how many grandchildren she would have. That box I was put in at such a young age still haunts me. Receipts in old Facebook posts about my tomboy inclinations make every boy tempted enough to stalk me get the wrong idea of the kind of woman I will be in the bedroom. In this new age, you can never escape the person others have decided you are.

Children are like sponges, soaking up every bit of information given to them by parents or the media. Now, this information can vary from learning to ask for water or food when in need to placing oneself in gender roles imposed by an outdated society. If you give a boy a doll of a tall blonde woman who loves pink, society will collapse, and the entire fabric of the world will be disrupted. The only solution is to change the doll for a toy truck, preparing the kid for his realistic future as a lorry driver who is only focused on the road and getting from point A to point B, no matter the means. Meanwhile, a girl's first toy usually revolves around household chores, maternity and emotional labour. Society-imposed gender norms are passed on to children not only through words and repetition, in the case of those households where 40-something-year-old parents decide to enlarge the family tree, but also through observation and imitation of the most ordinary routines. Kids observe how their mum buys groceries, attends teacher-parent meetings, makes dinner, and in these modern days, all of the above while fulfilling a demanding 9 to 5 position at work. As for their dad, they see him briefly before he goes to work in the most silent manner and at the dinner table either complaining about work, or celebrating a post work football match that was won. These early life images are what make children at such a young age already express stereotypical beliefs. Boys want their clothes to be red, blue, black and orange, girls want their rooms to be pink, purple, white and yellow. They daydream about their future careers and the place they will hold in society as adults, and 9 out of 10 times, a boy imagines being a president, a CEO or a lawyer and a girl, if she dares to speak her mind, will assure every one who wonders that she will be a mother to a president, a secretary to a CEO or a loyal wife to an unloyal lawyer.

Unfortunately, stereotypes about gender roles are just the tip of the iceberg. Deep down, these set norms are translated into opinions we hold about others. As dramatic as it sounds, personality profiles are a reflection of the stereotypes engraved in our minds. It turns out, the boy with the skateboard and the backwards baseball cap is not at all bad news, he is the nicest one in school, and the girl who wears glasses and has braces is not

at all smart but is actually falling behind in her classes. As we grow older, we start diverging from our parents' unintentional education on stereotypes. So, how are these teenage stereotypes making their way into our subconscious? Gossip. Gossip relies on shared assumptions. These are rooted stereotypes which come from different families and are shared between the younger generations. Stereotypes on ethnic groups and traditions reserved for them, body types and the health associations with each, even the neighbourhood where somebody lives, can quickly become a source of rumours. This unending list of typecasts normalises prejudice and marginalisation without an ounce of critical thinking. We become friends with those who think alike, solidifying the idea that it is us against them, which has been breaking society into thousands of pieces for as long as time itself. The company we choose to keep is stereotypes disguised as love and connection. This mental connection you share with friends is nothing more than hidden stereotypes you happen to share with them. It is not a coincidence that a group of loud, extroverted friends thinks that the reserved kid is antisocial and probably has some sort of mental condition. It is a clear case of the blind leading the blind.

The lifespan of stereotypes has never been longer. *Online haters* are random people who bully others through social media based on the stereotypes they are devoted to. Funny enough, online haters have their own stereotype as well. Social media is the blood, stereotypes are the viruses, and the media is the heart that pumps the former two to our brain. Movies and TV shows use stereotypes as their fuel to make good plots. There is no need to explain that the blonde girl is the dumbest. There is no need to explain that the black woman has an attitude. There is a hundred per cent no need to explain why the nerdy girl is actually beautiful when she takes out her glasses, lets her hair down and magically finds an emergency dentist appointment to take out her braces. These stereotypes are more than just a topic of conversation between friends or a tradition in a family. Nowadays, those painfully obvious stereotypes are regarded as other social injustices, like racism or marginalisation of lower social classes. Social media, however, is not as responsible for the message sent via their apps, a privilege reserved for both the influencer and the influenced. Celebrities spread stereotypes like gospel disguised as healthy lifestyles, unpopular opinions, or listen-but-don't-judge clickbaits on 30-second videos, meanwhile, these videos reach their target audience because of an algorithm that prioritises similar content to what the user tends to see. By consuming the same limited variety of content, there's no guarantee that, for example, if someone tends to like memes about Jewish people being good with deals, they will at some point come across a post reflecting on the consequences of Nazi Germany.

Stereotypes are not casual beliefs or traditions held by families. The long-term consequences of them affect not only individuals but also society as a whole. Fitting a stereotype conditions us to be the person we are supposed to be according to society and the stupidity of its rules. Development outside that box is prohibited and even seen as irresponsible and rude. How many times do we find ourselves gasping with surprise when we hear that the son of a long line of doctors decides to become a florist? Stereotypes give many people the impression that discrimination is acceptable, because everyone thinks the same. There is no space for considering the other's psychological well-being, because nobody does it, so why would I? That is, until the situation reaches us, which inevitably always does. A white, cis-gendered, heterosexual, European woman with a distinguished degree may not worry about stereotypes until she is offered a job position in an international company, where her salary is half of the salary of her male peer, who is underqualified and difficult to work with. Cases like that are hand-counted, not because of salary equality, but because these stereotypes are so deeply rooted that a woman would

never dare to dream of a life like that to begin with. It is very common for people to underperform because they internalise negative stereotypes.

We continue living in a world where we are judged by the colour of our childhood bedrooms, the tone of our voices, the people we follow online, and the shoes we wear on a first date. The art of judging books by their cover has become so refined that we now print the stereotypes right onto the dust jackets, just to save time. What was once a lazy shortcut to understanding people has become an actual map for how to treat them, before they even open their mouths. It is funny, in a deeply tragic way, how the image we project can become our entire personality in the eyes of others. And while some stereotypes might come with privilege and power, most of them come with chains disguised as labels. To be seen as someone you are not is already difficult; to be expected to *stay* that way is quite a quiet violence we have learned to live with. In the end, maybe life is a racetrack, and we must guide ourselves to the finish line to discover the most important part of human life: finding our unique identities.