

BOOKS BY THEIR COVERS

Learn how to navigate the book design process from front to back—whether you're self-publishing or going the traditional route.

BY GRACE DOBUSH

This article will not tell you how to design the perfect cover for your book(s).

As you know from writing, the creative process can't be distilled into a snappy list of steps that guarantee success. The design process isn't all that different from the writing process: It involves brainstorming, drafts, feedback and revisions, with the ultimate goal of creating something that flies off the shelves.

The book cover design process, when you're being traditionally published, involves more people than you might think. When you're self-publishing, you have total control over how your cover looks, but you'd be wise to get help from an expert. By the end of this article, you'll be prepared to successfully work with a designer to create the cover you always dreamed of—or perhaps the one you never knew you wanted.

THE ROLE OF DESIGN

As much as we're warned not to, we all judge books by their covers. And how can we not? With so many books and so little time, readers have to be selective.

You want your book cover to accurately portray your book's content and spirit, especially if you're a first-time author. You've probably dreamed about what your first book will look like; how browsing readers will be compelled to snap it up off the shelf at first glance.

"Distinction is key," says Paul Buckley, vice president executive creative director at Penguin USA. "A buyer walks into a crowded bookstore and their eye is bombarded with a sea of books—does yours stand out, or does it look like every other book out there?"

"Unless you have an amazing title that speaks for itself, a great image speaks far faster to the consumer than a bunch of words," Scribner art director Tal Goretsky says. "A cover can say 'I'm clever' or 'I am a commercial book' or 'I am for hipsters' or 'Reading me will feel like watching an action movie.'"

A book cover has to convey that message and content to a reader instantly. In the case of nonfiction, a cover must convey authority. "[For fiction,] good cover design is something that sets a mood and hints at what is inside without spelling it out too fully," Buckley says. "For nonfiction, the book should look like the authoritative book on the topic, bold and secure in its tone. But

in both cases, to stand out from the pack, a book should have its own distinction, its own personality, and not take the lame road of mimicking some other successful book. If it makes you look, pick it up and read the copy, then that book cover did its job well."

BOOK DESIGN IN BIG PUBLISHING

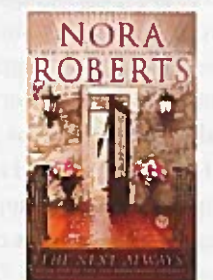
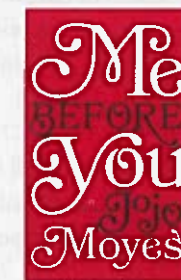
When your book is picked up by a publisher, the amount of input you'll have on the cover can vary from nearly nothing to a lot of say in its creative direction.

Traditional publishers employ a whole platoon of people who will be weighing in on your cover design: usually a designer, an art director, an editor and the publisher, as well as people in marketing, publicity and sales. Everyone is trying to make sure that your book is as salable as possible and appeals to the intended audience.

At Penguin, Buckley says, authors "are consulted and listened to, and their opinions and likes and dislikes are taken very seriously. A writer may write a book in solitude, but making a book and helping it to find its market is very much a group effort, and everyone involved, from the author to the printer, needs to respect the various skills and talents that the other team members bring to the table."

Demonstrate your respect for the expertise of your book's team from day one. "Designing your own cover or having a friend send in a cover proposal is never a good

SUCCESSFUL COVER DESIGN: ROMANCE



SUCCESSFUL COVER DESIGN: YA



idea—it sets you up right away with the perception of ‘Difficult Author,’ which is a label no author wants, as no good will come from it,” Buckley says.

Unless you happen to also be a trained graphic designer, trusting in your publisher’s professional management of your cover design should be a given. “I think that everybody at a certain point thinks they have a great idea, a common arrogance where you think, *I know what would be the perfect cover*, and it’s not,” novelist Bradley Spinelli says.

What do you do if the cover your publisher comes up with isn’t to your liking? “The trick is stay calm and collected. ... Come at your comments from a place of understanding that [the] team of professionals [involved] truly do want you and your book to succeed,” Buckley says. “Behind that one cover [are] most likely 10 to 20 other explorations that did not make the cut, many conversations, and a fair amount of money spent. If the dislike for the cover is stated with respect for the publishing house’s efforts and with a well-thought-out argument why it is wrong, and any helpful suggestions as to how you think it can better get on track, the feedback will most likely be well-received.”

INDEPENDENT BOOK DESIGN

When you’re self-publishing, the many options for creating your book’s look and presentation each have advantages and disadvantages as well as a wide range of price points. Cover design options for self-publishing authors fall into a few major categories:

►► **DESIGN IT YOURSELF.** If you have a tight budget this might seem like an appealing option. Resources such as bookdesigntemplates.com offer low-cost template packages, and books such as *The Indie Author Guide* by April L. Hamilton (WD Books) offer advice on formatting

and publishing your book entirely on your own, your only costs being perhaps purchasing fonts or stock photography. But if you’re not a professional graphic designer, the truth is that it’s likely to be obvious that your cover was done by an amateur.

►► **BUY A BOOK DESIGN PACKAGE.** The website Fiverr.com offers book designs for as little as \$5; you take your pick of designers offering their services. Crowdsourcing websites such as 99designs.com let you set up a competition of sorts (at a cost from \$299 to \$1,199). Other sites specialize in book cover design: You could find an off-the-rack cover for less than \$100, or buy a design package for less than \$1,000. Note that lower-cost design packages (even if cover designs are sold as one-offs) won’t include exclusivity on stock images, so it’s possible other books will pop up with the same photo as yours. Novelist Shaun Myandee tried two covers for his debut, *Ametsapolis Rising*. An off-the-rack cover design worked as a sort of place holder, or “soft launch,” while Simon Avery of idobookcovers.com was working on the final cover.

►► **HAVE YOUR SELF-PUBLISHING SERVICE DO THE COVER DESIGN.** When you publish with a service such as CreateSpace or Lulu, you can opt to add on cover design for a fee. J. Patrick Rick chose this option when he was publishing his nonfiction book *The Abbey & Me*. He hired a professional photographer to take images on location to obtain photos that were more relevant than stock images, and then selected from CreateSpace’s menu of design options (from \$399 to \$1,199).

►► **HIRE A GRAPHIC DESIGNER DIRECTLY.** Working with a freelance graphic designer will take more work than buying a package, but the results can be most rewarding. Kim Boerman hired an independent professional to design her book, *With Love ... The New Generation of Party People*, and its website, and found

SUCCESSFUL COVER DESIGN: MEMOIR/BIOGRAPHY



the results to be stunning. Hiring a designer directly is the most expensive of all the options, but what you’re paying for is expertise, attention and a totally custom cover.

If you decide to work with a graphic designer, the first step is finding one. This could be easy if you’re already connected to creative industries, or it could involve some research. A few websites that house designer portfolios include Behance.net, Coroflot.com and Dexioner.com. Look for a professional who has experience in editorial design or publishing and whose style speaks to you.

“I was immediately drawn to Simon’s visual style,” Myandee says. “My novel is not conventional sci-fi, and so I didn’t want to have a cover that was following a conventional sci-fi ‘blueprint’ in its visual style.”

As far as cost goes, what you pay a designer depends on the scope of the work and the nature of your relationship. “If you’re going to beat someone up with a lot of changes and requests, you’re going to have to pay for it,” Spinelli says. “If you went to school with a bunch of designers who went to [the Rhode Island School of Design], you can probably get it for a six-pack of beer.” All told, Boerman reports she spent about \$20,000 on the design for her book and its website.

DESIGN DIRECTION

Most designers will first chat or email with you about the project to align your expectations and set a budget and timeline. (It’s common for independent designers to ask for a deposit of half the fee upon signing the contract, with the second half due upon completion. Contracts should spell out how many revisions and changes are allowed and set specific deadlines for deliverables, such as proposal sketches, first drafts and final revisions.) Spinelli, whose novel *Killing Williamsburg* was published by a small press that let him take the lead on design, knew his designer from his career in advertising. After discussing the themes and tone of the book, “we tossed around some rough ideas, and she decided that she wanted to emulate the brilliant designer Saul Bass. I was in. She roughed out some sketches, and very quickly one design rose to the top. I learned that tone is more important than content.”

For Boerman, the first cover her designer proposed wasn’t what she wanted at all. “Sometimes you just don’t have the same vision,” she says. But by going back and forth with ideas and explaining the feeling she wanted to communicate, they arrived at a final design she was very happy with.

SUCCESSFUL COVER DESIGN: MYSTERY/THRILLER



THE LANGUAGE OF DESIGN

BACK MATTER: Content at the end of the book, such as an index, appendices and bibliographies.

BLEED: An image that extends past the usual margins to the edge of a page.

BODY: The main text of the book.

Note: If you're working with one of the interior page design templates marketed to self-publishing authors, or an e-book software program, or a designer you've hired independently, keep in mind that readability is key. Depending on the typeface (which should be a standard-looking serif font that doesn't draw attention to itself), you'll likely want the size to be in the 9- to 12-point range, and the leading (the blank horizontal space between lines of text) to be set at a comfortable 12–16 points, depending on the type size and how breathable you want the type to be.

CASEBOUND: This is the technical term for a hard-cover book.

CMYK: Cyan, magenta, yellow and black; this refers to the four colors used in the printing process.

DPI: Dots Per Inch; this is a measurement of image resolution. (Low-resolution images may be suitable for Web use, but generally appear grainy or blurry in print.)

FPO: For Position Only; an initialism used to signify when an image is a place holder and not print quality.

FOLIOS: Running heads and/or footers on interior book pages that orient the reader by displaying the page numbers (typically centered or along the outside edge), the title of the book (usually on the left page) and, optionally, the chapter title or author name (on the right).

FRONT MATTER: Content at the beginning of the book, such as the copyright page, title page, dedication and table of contents.

GUTTER: The center of a spread where two pages meet. This should generally be at least 0.75 inch (2 cm) (more for books of 300+ pages) so that words aren't swallowed into the crease when the pages are bound.

LEADING: The blank horizontal space between lines of text.

MARGINS: White space around the edge of the pages, generally around 1 inch (3 cm). The bottom margin is usually slightly larger than the top. (Consider how a person holds a book.)

PERFECT BINDING: A bookbinding process in which signatures of pages are glued together to create a squared spine.

SERIF, SANS SERIF: A serif typeface (such as Times New Roman, and the text of the article below) has small lines at the end of its strokes and is usually preferred for body copy; a sans serif typeface (such as Arial, and the text of this sidebar) has none and is usually reserved for use on smaller amounts of text that should be differentiated from the body copy (headings, etc.).

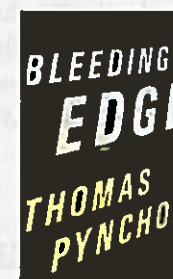
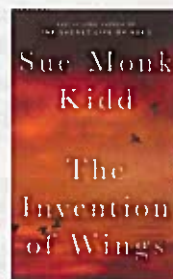
SIGNATURE: In bookbinding, pages are collected and folded in groups of four, eight or 16; each group is called a signature.

SPREAD: Two facing pages.

TRIM SIZE: The final size of a book (width and height) after it has been trimmed.

TYPEFACE: What you know as a font is a digital version of a typeface.

SUCCESSFUL COVER DESIGN: LITERARY FICTION



Myandee gave his designer a rough outline of his story and a request that the design not be traditionally sci-fi. "Which is to say, no aliens or spaceships or any other common tropes like that," he says. "I also sent through a few examples of covers of other books that I particularly liked in order to help guide his creative process."

Even with the research he'd done into his market, though, Myandee says that not knowing exactly what he wanted and requesting multiple changes "made things quite stressful for me (and presumably Simon as well), as I obviously wanted to get things perfect, but wasn't 100 percent sure of what 'perfect' actually looked like."

THE INVENTION OF WINGS BY SUE MONK KIDD (JANUARY); THE END OF LOVE BY MARCO GIBALDI (MAY); THE CIRCLE BY DAVE EGGERS (JANUARY); BLEEDING EDGE BY THOMAS PYNCHON (PENGUIN); WHERE'D YOU GO, BERNADETTE BY MARIA SEMPLE (LITTLE, BROWN)

CREATIVE COLLABORATION

"I think writers are typically not the most visual of people—we tend to be well-versed with turning mental images into words, but not with turning words into images. A book cover essentially does the latter, as it tries to turn an entire book into a single, arresting image," Myandee says. "They are pretty different skill sets, I think, and it is OK to recognize that you're terrible at it. I know that. I realize that now. So in [the] future I will be far more careful with my briefs, and seek much more advice from more visually minded people before I even create that brief."

A talented designer can create a visual representation of your story that is meaningful, powerful and even surprising.

"It is important for authors to trust good designers,"

Goretsky says. "A lot of times authors personally find and then become married to images that may look good to them, but that the designer, who lives and breathes imagery and design every day of their lives, knows will not sell a book."

The bottom line: Be open to surprise. "I had a lot of ideas [that weren't] what I ended up with. That's the whole point of hiring a designer—finding someone who doesn't think like you and is going to give you something totally different." Spinelli says. "Designers don't work like writers, and you have to give them their creative space just as you would want to create your art." **WD**

Grace Dobush has written for *Wired*, *HOW*, *Roll Call* and *Cincinnati Magazine* and authored the *Crafty Superstar Ultimate Craft Business Guide*. Follow Dobush on Twitter @gracedobushtogo, or learn more at gracedobush.com.

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