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The Paratexts of Audience Engagement: Cover Matter That Draws in and Keeps Readers

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Thesis of Athena L. Edwards

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts Composition, Rhetoric, and Digital Media

Nova Southeastern University
Halmos College of Arts and Sciences

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THE PARATEXTS OF AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT: COVER MATTER THAT DRAWS IN
AND KEEPS READERS

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

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Athena Edwards

Halmos College of Arts and Sciences

Department of Communication, Media, and the Arts

Nova Southeastern University

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ABSTRACT

Within the book publishing industry, purchase statistics often determine a book's success. This metric neglects crucial factors of reader engagement (i.e., reception and anticipation of current and future work) such as level of interest and appreciation. By blending key concepts from work on assemblage, ecology, reader-response, audience invoked, and media studies, this thesis attempts to (re)invigorate the discourse of book paratexts' role in inspiring reader engagement. As a manifestation of various voices performing and contextualizing a core text for readers, paratexts are a key component to the discursive uptake of books by readers and their publics. Book covers, specifically, are the most front-facing paratexts and have considerable potential to inspire lasting engagement in audiences. Specifically, this project uses a stylistic analysis of 3 prominent books from the independent press imprint Algonquin to examine the choices made in the composing, production, and initial uptake of these texts as they attempt to move into spheres of discourse. In this manner, this thesis investigates the potential for cover matter to inspire engagement in theory, in intent, and in practice. By asking what potential functions book paratexts can perform, scholars and industry professionals can better gauge what paratextual choices correspond to quality instances of public and reader engagement.

Keywords: Paratext; Book Covers; Book Publishing; Circulation; Uptake; Engagement; Assemblage

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Introduction

When walking into a bookstore or browsing a digital catalog of books, the very first thing one is likely to see is a book cover. As the most front-facing paratextual element of a book, this text has an incredible amount of significance and impact as it is what will likely influence potential readers to pick up to investigate, read, and/or purchase the work. Constructing this text requires publishers to have intimate knowledge of how paratexts work in relation to the parent/core text (the central story the book is telling) and as an assemblage, the readership they are attempting to invoke/entice, and the ecological system surrounding the construction, marketing, consumption, and engagement of the work. This thesis project analyzes various cover elements on published works from publishing presses in order to explore how these elements may function to inspire lasting engagement in audiences. Specifically, I focus on the decisions involved in the composing, production, and initial uptake of book covers by readers as they attempt to move *into* spheres of discourse as opposed to *through* them as explored in traditional circulation studies.

To investigate this subject, I analyze scholarship addressing paratext, assemblage, reader-response, ecology, and reader engagement theories and contextualize them within the scope of the book publishing industry. I include insights provided from conversations with a small-press book publisher, a small-press managing editorial assistant, a small-press and self-published author, a freelance cover designer, and a freelance illustrator to provide a holistic view of the publishing and design process from start to finish at small publishing presses. Finally, in exploring how these practices are put into action through a stylistic analysis of three successful dual-format published books (published in print and digitally) from independent press imprint

Algonquin,¹ I posit the potential for cover matter to inspire engagement in theory, in intent, and in practice.

Since Gerard Genette's seminal work on paratexts (1997), paratextual research has proliferated.² Koenrad Claes's research on periodicals' paratexts posits their delayed cultural value; Jonathan Gray (2010), Matt Hills, and Donna Hancox explore paratexts as transmedial phenomena in which books operate as one part of a larger collaborative compilation; Melissa Gross and Don Latham investigate the pedagogical potential of peritextual analysis in the teaching of literacy and critical thinking; and Cynthia Malone and Paul Piatkowski investigate paratextual design within digital texts. Meanwhile, scholars like Anis Bawarshi, studying genre, Adam Crawley, studying back matter, and Laura Micciche, studying acknowledgements, focus on specific paratexts as they relate to discourse, meaning-making, and representation. Paratextual theory is an increasingly expansive field that has proven its diverse applicability and relevance in media studies, but has started to overlook key developing components of storytelling.

Currently, within many publishing houses, the success of a book is determined by the overall sales of the book (Sonzogni, 2011). However, such metrics neglect crucial factors that indicate quality and lasting engagement among readers. Purchase data does not directly correlate to consumption data, and also neglects factors like level of interest, anticipation, and appreciation which would help determine the reception of the current work and the anticipation for potential future works (Napoli, 2011). And considering the hyper-attentive mediated culture in which we are situated, one in which audiences have access to an increasing array of diverse media and

¹ All analyses were done on books published by Workman's imprint Algonquin prior to the acquisition of Workman by large publisher Hachette Book Group in September 2021.

² This is not an exhaustive list of applications for paratextual theory, as research on its application reaches beyond composition, media studies, and pedagogy to include fields such as literature, history, information technology and data design, performing and visual arts, hospitality studies, communication, etc.

ways to consume it, raw purchase data may not be the best indication of success (Napoli, 2011; Piatkowski, 2019). Televised media production companies have already started incorporating virtual chatter analysis into their success/engagement metrics, much as audiences themselves often do (Napoli, 2011). In this way, publishers may have better and more immediate access to the public feedback influencing the reception of their work. Latham and Gross (2020) have noted that paratextual analysis can help determine how a publisher views its audience. They also suggest that this content may also serve as an indication of how well the reader is represented within the core text. Priske & Amato (2020) take this notion a step further by suggesting that paratexts reveal the popular notions that the publisher views as prominent in their readership, resulting in several cases of stereotyping and gatekeeping that ultimately push away potential readers.

Despite the plethora of research being done, it does appear that scholars may be unintentionally overlooking the application of such theories and frameworks to books and fandom uptake. As a significant part of the roots of fandom engagement, book-based narrative circulation warrants the same level of attention and consideration as digital, televisual, and peripheral narrative/fandom texts. By asking what functions paratexts have the potential to perform, we can better gage what paratextual choices correspond to quality instances of public engagement. Similarly, by asking how publishing houses and authors are approaching the inclusion of paratextual content, we can better inspect the call-and-response attributes of narrative construction and make prompt adjustments to cultural influences. This is especially relevant in the context of independent presses which are known to prioritize cross-cultural and international understanding through the publishing of marginalized voices, translations, and experimental literary works (Sinykin & Roland, 2021). It is for this reason that the primary

research and cited personal correspondences presented through this document are centered around independent presses. However, due to the absence of this line of inquiry in scholarship, the literature review is investigating the concepts of paratexts, ecology, assemblage, audience, readership, and engagement to create the framework for my later analysis.

Literature Review

Book publishing is a complicated industry, one that requires near constant awareness of trends, genre expectations, cultural pressures, how and why readers read, and how readers and publics keep a book alive and circulating after consumption. As a commodity, a book is judged by its ability to fulfill needs (use value) as well as its ability to produce profits for the production and distribution parties (exchange value). These two criteria are not completely separate, however, as a lack of perceived use value will result in the inability to produce profits (Trimbur, 2000). A deeper understanding of how these different components of book production, circulatory uptake, and engagement exist in an ecological relationship can help scholars and publishers make decisions for and conclusions about readers. This awareness facilitates preemptively, or responsively, addressing elements of the text that time and culture reveals as problematic, as well as adds subsequent information to which certain reader groups may not be privy (Jenkins, 2001; Gray, 2010). This applies to books, as is the subject of this thesis, as well as storytelling media more broadly, as media scholars illustrate through work on writer/creator, publisher/producer, and reader/audience. As Evans (2020) notes, “Those behind the screen play as much a part in ‘engagement’ as those watching it. It is therefore also necessary to consider how audience engagement becomes useful to both practitioners and the wider industry in which they work.” (p. 126). As such, a thorough analysis of the reception and uptake

of media into circulatory discourse needs a more ecological view of storytelling artifacts from both production and reception angles.

Paratexts: The Primary Context Maker

Paratexts are all the various manifestations of the various voices talking about a larger, original parent/core text—whether that be the author or editor telling us about the work through story descriptions or interviews, the publisher telling us why we should read it via endorsements and blurbs, or the designer telling us what we should expect from it via cover art (Latham & Gross, 2020). These elements are performances directed directly towards audiences by the various parties involved in the production—for the purposes of informing, persuading, advising and/or commanding consumption and interpretation of the core text (Maclean, 1991). In his seminal work on the subject, Genette (1997) defines paratexts as the texts that surround and extend an original/core text—making it present, and to present the work. In other words, to portray and contextualize the core text for consumption. It may even be said that it is the paratexts that are responsible for establishing the context—as they set up expectations for the consumption and provide information that affects the reception of the work (Gray, 2010).

Genette (1997) claimed there were 3 components/types of paratexts—iconic/illustrative, material/constructive, and factual/informative. Since then, paratextual theory has expanded rapidly in order to identify all of the possible functions of paratexts, and the application of those functions into various disciplines of study. For instance, some paratexts may serve to convey an additional message beside the core text, to commercialize or market the work to audiences, or to aid in navigation and understanding of the core text they frame (Gray, 2010; Gross & Latham, 2017). Within these functions, we can break it down even further. For instance, some of the paratexts that may function to aid navigation and understanding may be the title and author

(identification/production), the table of contents or index (navigation), or glossaries and maps (supplemental). Intratextual paratexts, like the foreword and dedication, may be where readers receive additional information or additional messages to consider just as medallions and endorsements are promotional paratexts designed to market the work (Gross & Latham, 2017; Latham & Gross, 2020).

The aforementioned paratexts are specifically referred to as peritexts,³ a subcategory in which they are intrinsically, and usually physically, bound with the core text such as the cover and its elements, front and back matter, material construction, and author identity (Genette, 1997). They are central to the attraction of audiences by making a book seem interesting, credible, familiar, and/or connective (Jenkins, 2001; Gross et al., 2016).

Connectivity in Books: Ecology and Assemblage Theory

Every day, we live a life that is almost entirely composed of a network of interrelationships between language, symbols, and experiences. We use language to create, perceive, maintain, and navigate society—both our physically-lived realities and the hypothetical/fictional realities we may engage with regularly. As such, the relationship between reality, language, and stories is an important one to understand. One that a literacy/composition ecology perspective is well-suited to investigate (Ortoleva, 2013). This perspective takes into account all of the historical and cultural forces, rhetorics, and experiences that emerge within the interactions between humans and our environment (Edbauer, 2005; Gries, 2015). It acknowledges that as individuals move between and through their various different communities, they bring with them the various ideas, norms, perceptions, and influences of those communities with them. This interplay of social identities and activities creates an ever-changing complex of

³ Due to the complicated nature of peritext and epitext distinctions in the face of digital books, all of this type of content will be referred to more broadly as paratext for the remaining duration of this thesis.

ways that individuals may interact with the texts around them. This why no two people are going to have the exact same reception to a story or story element. This applies to writers, designers, and publishers, just as much as it does to readers—writing is an activity that requires a writer to be continually engaged with the social systems surrounding them. Without acknowledgement of these facts, we run the risk of oversimplifying human nature, which is inherently social (Cooper, 1986).

The application of ecology theory acknowledges that while an ecological system is constructed by its participants (in this case, the writers, editors, designers, publishers, sellers, and readers of a book), so too are the participants shaped by the demands of their ecological system. Similarly, a sphere of textual discourse is shaped by the creative and receptive participants and their works—while the participants and their works are simultaneously influenced and subjected to the demands, expectations, and context of the discourse sphere (Cooper, 1986; Rivers, 2012). In other words, writing is an ecological phenomenon that demands specialized study on the interconnectedness of living and nonliving literary communities, and how these relationships between material content and discursive influence are created, maintained, and altered through language (Ortoleva, 2013). Writing, as an ecology, is spatial, relational, and complex (Dobrin, 2012). And a book, as an ecology, is a system in which multiple separate portions of text interact with one another (Piatkowski, 2019).

Viewing a book, and its paratexts, as an assemblage also has scholastic value, due to the everchanging interplay of content and time in the creation of a systematic whole (Cooper, 1986; Dobrin, 2012; Morey, 2012). An assemblage is a collection of distinct elements that are connected together abstractly or symbolically (Yancey & McElroy, 2017). It can be viewed as a collection only related by external connections, rather than assumed inherent and internal

qualities (Reid, 2017). It may also be viewed as a connection through time to other people, as a performance, or as an ongoing construction of an object—put together and taken apart in continuous cycles. The very act of assembling is to choose, distribute, and reshape everyday materials into contextual conversations with each other (Yancey & McElroy, 2017). Every component of an assemblage, every paratext of a book, is narratively equal in the construction of the whole, even while being individual and distinct in voice and function (Piatkowski, 2019). They can be recombined infinitely without destroying themselves and are, in fact, known for their flexible relations to each other (Nail, 2017). To be counted as an assemblage, the reception of a collective must be reliant on the forces external and separate to the collection itself. This can be seen with books when analyzing the demands and perceptions of audiences, the influence of time on reception, etc. The collective must also have a set of local conditions of relations that supports conjunction, combination, and continuum. Such is the case when readers can, and often, decide to interact with the paratexts and core text of a book in an order that deviates from the physical/bound order that they occupy with each other. These paratexts are also individually defined by their function in relation to each other, and the abstract connections/agents that readers bring to them. A table of contents, book cover, summary, preface, or map would have little to no meaning without the functional interplay of each paratext to each other, as well as the abstract contexts that readers are connecting to their consumption of the work (Nail, 2017).

Public Uptake of Books: The Path from Audience to Readership

The ultimate goal in book publishing is arguably to get books in front of readers and into spheres of discourse called publics. These readers come into existence as readers along with the text and are the flesh-and-blood individuals in the act of consumption and engagement with the text (Warner, 2002). As such, a readership is an end-product totality of people consuming and

engaging with a text and treating said text as a part of discourse. While publics are also end-product totalities made of real people, they are less centered around consumption and engagement with the text, and more on the networked discourse that is surrounding the text. This discourse is composed of past, present, and future encounters between texts, artifacts, and readers (Edbauer, 2005; Rice, 2018). As such, a public is not spontaneously called into existence upon the creation of a text, but rather shaped around the text through the rhetoric within and around it (Warner, 2002). With this in mind, to a public, the text is the framework from which discourse comes but is not inherently a contributor of the discourse itself—unlike how a readership may treat the text (Warner, 2002). Essentially, a readership would be those who have consumed the story, and who reference the story’s canon on equal footing with other elements of their discourse as they determine meaning from the text, perhaps even definitively so. A focus on readership by scholars and/or analysts, while insightful in its own right, would be less networked than that of a focus on publics. This is because publics are defined as spheres of discourse, in which meaning-making is more dialogic than it is for readership and fed by multiple streams of interpretation and affiliation that are constantly coming and going in relation to each other. Whereas with readership, meaning-making is more independently constructed by what each individual reader decides to accept and reject during their engagement with the work.

However, when the writers, designers, editors, and publishers are constructing the text and its paratexts, neither the readership nor public exist. Instead, it is abstractly presumed based on expectations, assumptions, and values in order to aid in the production of the text and paratexts.⁴ To do this, a writer must first acknowledge that their audience is a fiction. That is to say, they must “cast” an imagined audience into a certain role during some stage of the

⁴ In this statement, sentiments from Cooper (1986), Ede & Lunsford (2011), Ong (1975), and Warner (2002) are being applied to a design framework that is more directly connected to the topic being discussed.

production in order to construct a proper and consistent narration and set in place the right language cues for their audience (Ong, 1975; Ede & Lunsford, 2011). The audience must then be able to detect and adhere to the role they are casted in in order to obtain the intended effect. For example, an inhabitant of a fantasy realm, as the readers of Tolkien's *Hobbit* stories were casted (Ong, 1975). These cues tell the audience, and ideally the end-product readership, what they already "know," what elements require a suspension of belief, and how empathically close they are supposed to affiliate with the characters. It is perhaps also part of the reason that texts take on another role—a display of identity, and a call out to others of similar identity or affiliation (Brummett, 2008).

A text is a central component of meaning-making, for both the creators and the reader, as they communicate their needs, expectations, and perspectives other directly and indirectly to each other (Ede & Lunsford, 2011). This act of meaning-making is a continual and endless one, fueled by the social influences of both parties through time. It is why aesthetic appeal is never inherently found in a text or artifact, but rather perceived by the reader based on their established emotive and cognitive preferences and connections (Brummett, 2008). As such, many strategies have been proposed in order for publishers to more efficiently narrow down and identify the ideal readership for a work, and how to market their books to them (Sonzogni, 2011; Phillips, 2016). But besides being able to identify and target a potential readership, publishers must also be able to gauge and properly advertise the trade-off value for engagement. In order to receive positive engagement, that which not only calls a public into being but also maintains it, the effort, time, and monetary costs of consumption must be perceived as less than the experiential value or payoff of the consumption.

Beyond Consumptive Metrics: The Value of Engagement

Engagement covers a wide range of different activities and meanings: consumption and reconsumption of the primary text, consumption of related works, sharing, discussion, fan-production, tuning in for behind-the-scenes details and appearances, participation on social media, lobbying for adaptations or transmediation, and more (Williams, 2015). It's such a broad concept, in fact, that scholars must often focus on just one aspect. And many media production companies have historically focused on the initial signifier of engagement—purchase and exposure (Napoli, 2011; Evans, 2020). Businesses also used to judge customer engagement in terms of brand loyalty and attachment (Libai, 2011). But such metrics (number of movie tickets, number of tuned in televisions, number of copies sold, etc.) only contribute to the confusion around what engagement is and how readers and publics partake in it. These metrics do not always reflect the actual consumption of the work, nor do they show how the work was received after consumption, or the desire for readers to continue to return.

Whether an audience, or a readership as it is referred to in textual media studies,⁵ is an inherently passive or active phenomenon is a debate that has raged between scholars for a while, with most scholars choosing one perspective or the other (Evans, 2020). But some scholars are re-examining how we are viewing readers and their engagement types. Grauland (2006; as cited by Piatkowski, 2019) establishes and supports a distinction between an informed reader and an average reader. According to this distinction, an average reader would pay little heed to paratexts, especially since they're usually designed to be as unobtrusive and undistracting as possible so as to keep the reader's focus on the core text (Piatkowski, 2019). As such, an average reader is likely to skip non-core material, much like they were taught in classrooms (Piatkowski,

⁵ In visual media studies, 'audience' and 'readership' are often used interchangeably to refer to the physical group of consumers at the end of production.

2019). By contrast, an informed reader often seeks to expand their reading experience by consuming more paratextual information.

Evans (2020) also analyzes engagement by non-purchase metrics in her field of televisual media studies: conversation and captivation. Engagement as conversation entails a relatively two-way and interactive stream of engagement, covering the consumption and/or purchase of the core text, but also the contribution of reader input and discussion via reviews, commentary, discussion boards, and fan works. In Evans's surveys, she found that most media practitioners (such as publishers and creators), defined engagement in this manner, while 64% of readers defined engagement largely in terms of captivation. Engagement as captivation is relatively one-way and/or receptive, entailing the reading and rereading of a text, and the consuming of social media content, reviews, fan creations, etc. surrounding the core text. This category typically includes acts and qualities of reconsumption, binging, anticipation, and curiosity. It's not uncommon either for readers exhibiting captivated engagement to schedule their day around the content, continuously seeking near-encyclopedic knowledge of the text, or even exhibiting a compulsive drive or craving for the work (Evans, 2020). These consumers often reference the desire to experience the text as much as possible, to be fully and totally immersed in the content, storyworld, or fandom. Both of these perspectives are equally important to consider, as they create the feedback loop required for reader-text interaction. This interactive discourse is key to generating the production insights needed to keep creating immersive experiences (Evans, 2020). These perspectives are therefore a portrayal of the call-and-response component of storytelling and rhetoric.

Non-purchase engagement has been rising as a key indicator of success in televisual industries, after market research company Gallop started a 'customer engagement' metric of

measurement in 2001, due to its contribution to understanding their viewers (Appelbaum, 2011, as cited by Evans, 2020). Using engagement as a metric of success ultimately asks how and why a media product is consumed, and the long-term effects of that act of consumption. It deals directly with six components: attentiveness, loyalty, appreciation, emotion, recall, and attitude (Napoli, 2010). And it operates on two levels: a “macro-industrial” level that relates to the financial and commercial success, comprised primarily of sales, subscriptions, merchandise, and advertising; and a “micro-personal” level that relates to a sense of professional and artistic fulfillment, brand image/reputation, and cultural/societal impact (Evans, 2020).

“I believe the big difference is that your engaged viewer is an evangelist. The engaged viewers not only watch the show, they want everyone they know to watch it. They blog about it, tweet about it, post fan videos on YouTube about it. The engaged viewers are an acquisition tool, and should be treated as such. ... [T]hese engaged viewers do have more value in the long run than your average, run-of-the-mill, TV-just-happens-to-be-switched-on viewers.” (Tavernier, 2013, as cited Evans, 2020, pp. 2-3).

While Tavernier (2013, as cited by Evans, 2020) is referring to a television audience, the logic still stands in book publishing that an engaged, whether captivated and/or interactive, readership can add significant value to a production and serve to promote the work to other present and future publics. And to a greater extent, fans are known to form strong attachments and relationships with fans and with fan-facing objects (both the core text and related paratexts). In fact, numerous scholars associate fandom participation and other leisure activities as being central to a fan’s sense of identity and ontological security in the real world (Brummett, 2008; Gray, 2010; Williams, 2015). In the past, this identity and security was usually rooted in a

person's job or personal background. With this change in individual perception of self, we also see a different level of investment in paratextual content associated with one's fandom(s).

Book Covers: The Most Visible of Paratexts

Of all the book paratexts, the most front-facing and synonymous paratext is the book cover. In his seminal work on paratexts, Genette (1997) called the cover a threshold paratext. It provides a peek into the text being presented and offers “the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back” (Sonzogni, 2011, p. 15). It does so by conveying a message about the contents inlaid within, thus influencing the actions of potential readers, as well as the retailers acting as the middleman between publisher and reader (Sonzogni, 2011). But viewing a cover as solely a marketing text would be a mistake, one that has even resulted in audience outrage at covers that misrepresented a work or mislead audiences in the name of inspiring sales (Mossop, 2018). Justine Larbalestier's *Liar*, for example, features a black woman with dark curly hair as the main character but the cover originally portrayed a white woman with



*Figure 1: As documented by Publishers Weekly in 2009, this image presents both the old, contested cover for *Liar* by Justine Larbalestier, and the new, narratively correct one—both utilizing the same pose.*

light-colored straight hair. After much protest and criticism, the publishing house released a cover that more accurately portrayed the narrative within. It utilized the same pose that evokes a sense of crossing the model's mouth out with an ‘x,’ as if to prevent her from telling further lies, but replaced the contested model with a model of the correct race and description for the main character (Springen, 2009; Sonzogni, 2011; see **Error! Reference source not found.**).

ot found.).

A cover is meant to entice readership (Gross et al., 2016). To arouse in a potential audience feelings of anticipation, curiosity, and enjoyment for the content it frames—and it only

has a few seconds to do so for the average/browsing potential reader (Sonzogni, 2011). After all, it is said that once a potential consumer/reader picks up a book, they are 5 times more likely to purchase it (Clymer, 2005, as cited by Phillips, 2016). While the cover may have been originally designed for sales, after evolving from the mute bindings of the early 19th century and prior, this paratext now represents the book—and by extension, the experience (Genette, 1997; McCracken, 2013). Ideally, a book cover would draw upon the unique aspects of the story in order to present an aura that differentiates the work from other works (Sonzogni, 2011). It does so by translating aspects of the text through the imagery or layout of the cover design, which tends to get interpreted on its own before the cover text is even read. The cover of *I'm Alive*, a women's account of the Iran-Iraq war, by Ma'Sumah Abad, for instance, used the Iranian national flag colors to convey nationalism—a choice that holds significance within the military/war memoir genre. It also used images to not only refer to the subject matter of the tale, but also to who the writer was and her gender—which made the book stand out amongst the primarily male-authored genre (Ghandeharion & Tekiyeh, 2019). In a more symbolic take, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* used cover addendums, like twine ties, to add symbolism in reference to the narrator's bondage in slavery (Bernier & Newman, 2005).

In fact, sometimes the book cover is the only thing that may be consulted before a purchase. Only a few in-person book-buyers will consult the interior core text to check that it fulfills the interpreted promises; and online book-buyers may not even have the chance to consult the text at all prior to purchase (Mossop, 2018). As such, there are a lot of complexities that go into book cover design: the intentions of the author, the expectations of the reader, the strategies of the publisher, the creativity of the designer, relevance of cultural traditions, and market trends (Sonzogni, 2011). It must not only inspire curiosity in a reader through visuals, or lack thereof,

but also inform the reader using identifying features—such as the title, author name, series name, publishing house, genre indication, an author picture, edition information, price, screen adaptation reminders, endorsements, other contributors, and/or the core text’s description (Genette, 1997; Sonzogni, 2011). Perhaps another consideration is the social image of the audience themselves—such as when Clymer (2005, as cited by Phillips, 2016) noted that some readers were averse to reading Agatha Christie novels due to concerns about what the covers said about them, as readers, to their surrounding public. A similar concern exists across gender lines as well, with men being reluctant to read books with covers they perceive to be targeted to women (Phillips, 2016).

Besides the book cover’s aesthetic design, the title presented on the cover is also crucial for potential readers. It helps to identify the work from others, hint at the subject matter or tone, “play up the work” for readers, and/or nod to the work’s form (e.g., with terms like novella, sonnet, and poetry collection; Genette, 1997). Titles are often chosen on the bases of theme, similarities/differences to other works, subculture relevance, or broad appeal (Maclean, 1991). That said, absolutely no title is without some sort of influence or affect (Maclean, 1991). For instance, Ghandeharion and Tekiyeh (2019) believe that Ma’Sumah Abad’s *I’m Alive* holds a lot of significance in just its title alone. As an autobiography, *I’m Alive* echoes the phrase that the author wrote in her letters during captivity. It also echoes the call of an entire nation, an entire generation, which is still alive despite those documented events. The title may even serve as an indicator the genre—as it is a popular title among war literature. Similarly, it may draw in readers of Persian poetry (Ghandeharion & Tekiyeh, 2019).

Readers may also infer genre based on the author’s name on the cover—as is notably the case with books written under pseudonyms. For instance, adult mystery writer Jennifer Rowe

writes children's books under the name Emily Rodda (Emily Rodda, 2020). Sherrilyn Kenyon writes urban fantasies and paranormal romances but delves into historical fiction with the pseudonym Kinley MacGregor. And even J.K. Rowling delves into this with the name Robert Galbraith, Agatha Christie with Mary Westmacott, and Anne Rice with A.N. Roquelaure and Anne Rampling (Mental Floss UK, 2017). This shows that an author's name not only serves to identify ownership and aid in work recognition, but also to advertise a work and its subject matter. These author brands serve to advertise a certain level of narrative consistency that may be familiar and comforting to a reader, even with differing plot points (Ray, 2005). The use of other authors' names and book titles in blurbs is also a pretty standard marketing device, with a history dating back to 1910 when it is believed to have first appeared on dust jackets (Sonzogni, 2011).

This use of others' names on book covers can be seen when a book receives a notable review from a famous author, or from a critic comparing it to a famous work. Sometimes, a book may even be reprinted to reference these endorsements as they are made available. The same thing may also happen when a book receives a major prize or is green-lit for a screen adaptation. The idea behind these reprints is to reflect and signal to readers the success the book is receiving (Sonzogni, 2011). In 2011, following the release of the screen adaptation by the same name, *Water for Elephants* by Sara Gruen had several reprints from Algonquin and HarperCollins that either used the movie poster as the front cover art, or utilized a digitized sticker stating, "Now A Major Motion Picture." Another sticker can be seen on the 2008 UK edition published by Two Roads which announced the work as a "Number One Bestseller" and an "International Word of Mouth Phenomenon." Most of these and other reprints were paperback copies—which comes as no surprise. Paperbacks were quite revolutionizing when it came to reprintings. The price, format, and portability have an appeal for publishers and readers alike. It also really took off

after it proved to be a convenient way to advertise a film adaptation, by reduplicating images from the film on the cover to draw in fans who were introduced from the film adaptation (as previously noted with *Water for Elephants*; Sonzogni, 2011). But this revolution comes with its own set of controversy—as there has been considerable debate about how detailed likenesses on book covers as a result of transmedia adaptations may impact reader agency. Some scholars even wonder if the differences between book covers may alienate readers from each other due to their contradicting ideas of characters and settings (Sonzogni, 2011). These differences have been known to inspire disappointment and even hostility towards the core text, author, publisher, and/or the transmediated project as a result (Mitchell, 2016).

Paperbacks aren't the only forms that may undergo cover changes as time goes on. Sometimes, instead of a full reprint, a publisher may utilize a dust jacket to provide a new look or added information to a text's cover (Genette, 1997). These dust jackets allow for the cover to be even more dramatic than the cover it overlays (Genette, 1997). But the cover is also often tied closely to the changing ideologies of the cultures in which they take place (Ghandeharion & Tekiyeh, 2019). Abad, for instance, published an alternative cover in which her image is more modest in order to appease the cultural concerns for her security, modesty, and honor in her Muslim community (Ghandeharion & Tekiyeh, 2019). Due to the relatively inflexible textual expressions of the core text, it is the responsibility of paratexts, such as the cover, to change with or address social/political contexts—across different languages, cultures, times, and spaces—in order to bridge the gap between author and audience (Sonzogni, 2011).

The stylistic choices utilized by publishers and designers are all purposeful and meaningful. A book *must* differ from other books in the crowded marketplace enough to stand out and pique curiosity in a potential reader. A book cover, as the most front-facing paratext, is

where these differences must be conveyed. However, simultaneously, the cover must contain enough familiar elements or symbolism that meaning can be inferred (Brummett, 2008). It must whisper to a potential reader the kind of experience they are seeking and can expect from *this* work. The kind of experience that they'll want to undergo once, twice, and maybe a few times more. As such, a core question that must be asked when designing a book cover is, "what features can we incorporate onto a cover that will move potential readers enough to generate curiosity, interest, and engagement?"

Methods: A Stylistic Analysis

For this analysis on cover matter, as it is currently being applied by independent presses, I selected three books published by the independent publisher Algonquin Books with differing intended audiences—*Water for Elephants* by Sara Gruen, *Big Fish* by Daniel Wallace, and *Jackaby* by William Ritter. The first two of these books are intended for adult audiences seeking a stand-alone novel. Where they differ, however, is the fact that *Water for Elephants* is intended for seekers of a more serious, historical fiction story. Meanwhile, the audience for *Big Fish* is more receptive to the humorous magical realism elements that are littered throughout the narrative. *Jackaby* is intended for readers of the young adult (YA) age category of fiction, specifically readers looking for a supernatural historical fiction series—which requires further suspension of belief and a longer time investment.

For each of these books, I performed a stylistic analysis of one physical cover (back, front, and spine), and the various alternate edition covers displayed in digital catalogs. A stylistic analysis was chosen over other analyses, such as a rhetorical analysis, due to style's interdisciplinary reach into studies of literature, linguistics, and communication as well as rhetoric (Vanguri & Duncan, 2013). It also inherently privileges patterns (linguistic, visual, and

material)—thus keeping the focus on the text-reader experience (Ray, 2015). It does so by studying the work’s progression from element/word to element/word rather than concept/event to concept/event (Shen, 2014). It also speaks to the ontological/connective properties that paratexts naturally embody (Brummett, 2008).

The analysis looked at both the semantic (formal meaning) and pragmatic (contextual meaning) interpretations of the cover matter. Among the semantic elements I investigated were motives and stylistic devices (such as schemes, tropes, and imagery) that established the proximity between writer/text and reader. Also of interest in this inquiry were the presence and absence of straplines (bestseller titles, etc.), award stickers, loglines (the who, what, why of the core story), taglines (catchphrases/hooks), endorsements/testimonials, and blurbs/descriptions, and what they may be suggesting or explicitly telling the potential reader about the core text (see **Error! Reference source not found.** for the general locations of these elements).

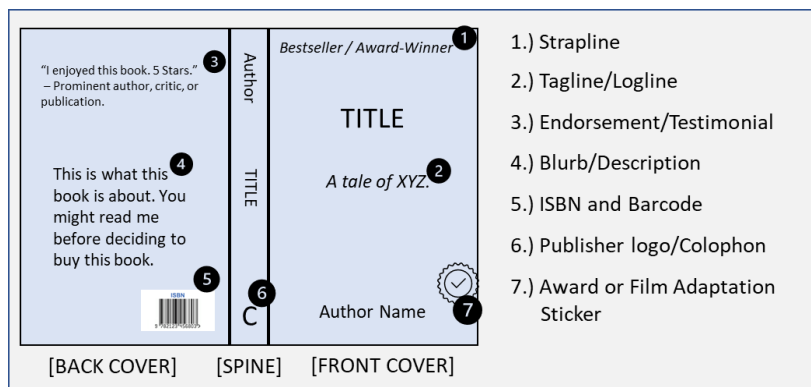


Figure 2: A diagram on cover matter as they commonly appear on the front cover, spine, and back cover. Included are the strapline, tagline/logline, endorsement/testimonial, blurb/description, ISBN and barcode, publisher logo/colophon, and the award or film adaptation sticker.

After these definitive details, I analyzed the pragmatic elements such as formatting, readability, and aesthetics. I questioned what these elements may be referencing (the genre, the audience, other texts, etc.), what specific verbiage/images were being used and for what purpose, what contextual meanings these elements may hold to a reader, and the relevance of these details

to the core text that they surround. After each cover was analyzed, I also looked at overall trends between each alternate cover of the same book, and between the three books, in order to determine what the cover is attempting to convey to the audiences they are attempting to reach. Another line of inquiry that fueled my ending analysis was what book cover practices may be being stylistically repeated across the catalog or to represent their genres (which is inherently stylistically defined⁶), and for what possible reasons.

These three books were chosen for analysis due to their apparent popularity amongst their respective audiences. *Water for Elephants* won multiple book awards; is a *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* bestseller; sold over 10,000,000 print copies worldwide; and inspired the popular movie adaptation starring Reese Witherspoon and Robert Pattinson (Workman Publishing, n.d.). *Big Fish* was also adapted into a movie adaptation by the renowned Tim Burton, as well as a Broadway musical (Workman Publishing, n.d.). *Jackaby* is the first book in a 4-installment series for teens and young adult readers that won a Pacific Northwest Book Award in 2015 (Workman Publishing, n.d.). Furthermore, these books have retained enough popularity to still be present on physical bookstore shelves⁷ and have run enough print runs and editions to speak to prevalent and effective cover elements. The digital and alternative covers were pulled from the Goodreads digital database of editions, as booksellers tend to only display the most current book cover. These covers and their respective publishers, dates, and ISBNs were then cross-referenced with bookseller listings where possible. However, these resources do not tend to show the back cover—an important element in some of my

⁶ For more on how genre is stylistically defined, consult Vanguri, S.M. & Duncan, M. (2013). Introduction to the centrality of style. In S.M. Vanguri & M. Duncan (Eds.), *Centrality of style* (pp. xi-xiv). WAC Clearinghouse. <https://doi.org/10.37514/PER-B.2013.0476.1.3>

⁷ This is a particularly notable feat for independent publishers, as books are sold to bookstores on consignment—an arrangement that is often not worth the financial risk (for more information on this, refer to **Appendix G**).

analysis inquiries. As such, this information was analyzed from one edition each—the physical book currently in stock in a major book retailer.

Results: Style Analysis

Water for Elephants by Sara Gruen

After first getting published by Algonquin in 2006, *Water for Elephants* by Sara Gruen has undergone a number of cover designs. Most of which, however, maintained the same core features as the original hardback cover (**Error! Reference source not found.**). This cover, and the subsequent 2006 Hodder UK, 2007 Hodder UK, 2007 San Val, and both Algonquin bestseller-line⁸ editions, utilizes the story's primary setting of a circus by displaying a canvas circus tent dominantly on the cover (Fig. A2-A6). Entering this tent is an unidentifiable individual with his back turned to the reader, wearing a sparkly ringmaster coat. An illusion of going into the tent is further brought to fruition, by the 2007 Algonquin paperback, by setting the back cover content on top of a canvas tent wall—as if the act of opening the book brings the reader into the tent, and the back cover is the back of the tent (Fig. A7). Other covers, such as the 2007 Algonquin copies-sold, 2008 Allen & Unwin Australia, and 2015 HarperCollins editions, also utilize tent imagery, but do so in a more scenic manner that gave more cover space to a picturesque sky than to the tent (Fig. A8-A10). Besides the

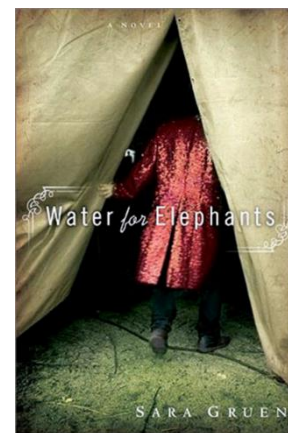


Figure 3: The 2006 Algonquin original hardback cover of *Water for Elephants*. ISBN: 9781565124998.

⁸ As a way to differentiate between the two 2007 Algonquin covers, the edition with the “#1 *New York Times* bestseller” strapline will be referred to as the 2007 Algonquin bestseller-line edition. Meanwhile, the edition that utilizes the strapline “Over 10 million copies sold!” will be referred to as the 2007 Algonquin copies-sold edition.

obvious ease of which these covers display the front cover text, perhaps these design choices were meant to provide a more refined, sophisticated image to their potential readers.⁹

The 2007 HarperCollins Canada, 2007 Thorndike large-print, and 2007 Allen & Unwin Australia editions utilize a different element to allude to the circus setting as well as a reoccurring character: Rosie the elephant (Fig. A11-A13). The HarperCollins Canada cover is relatively serious, with a vintage style photograph featuring a man sitting on the side of the road taking up the majority of the cover. It would've been perfectly befitting for a biographical style narrative, if not for the red and black circus striped curtain placed in the bottom margin's foreground, set behind only a singular elephant. Meanwhile, the Thorndike and Allen & Unwin covers present a more playful aura, with the former portraying the elephant balancing on a bright blue ball, and the latter, the elephant lifting a female performer on its front leg into a classic pose. A performer can also be observed, alone, on the cover of the 2008 Two Roads UK edition (Fig. A14). However, much like some of the other covers, featuring a scene of circus tents and a picturesque sky, this particular cover appears to be geared towards a more refined, sophisticated tone. The model is presented on the cover with a partial view of a bright green outfit, which could be mistaken as a strapless gown upon first look, exquisitely done hair and makeup, and a serious expression. She looks like she would be just as likely to be performing on a musical stage or attending a dinner party, as she would be performing in a circus. Combined with the cursive typeface utilized for the title and picture-esque border, the components of this cover seem to be leaning into the romance components of the core story.

This sophisticated, romantic tone is in stark contrast to the original and referential covers featuring the canvas tent, which hint at the more sinister, murder plotline (Fig. 3 and A1-A7). On

⁹ This conclusion also nods back to Genette's (1997) own observation that more blank, muted, or simpler covers are often a sign of distinction or nobility for the work or author the cover belongs to.

these covers, within the darkened tent that the ringmaster is entering, readers can make out, in the distance, a small dark shadow. While this could initially be dismissed or accidentally overlooked, when paried with the front cover endorsement “Gritty, sensual and charged with dark secrets involving love, murder and a majestic mute heroine” by *Parade*, this distant shadow seems to represent a suspicious person involved in the murder being referenced. To the reader community, *Parade* may not be the most recognizable of the endorsements that this book possesses, but it may appeal to the casual reader who follows the magazine for entertainment and/or home coverage. It may also get preferential treatment on the front cover due to its ability to simultaneously act as a sort of logline—providing information on the *who* (a mute heroine) and *what* (love and murder) of the plot’s details.

HarperCollins, in all three of their editions, utilize a different endorsement on the front cover—that of *Chicago Tribune* who praises the work as being “so compelling, so detailed and vivid that I couldn’t bear to be torn away from it for a single minute” (Fig. A10-A11 and A16). The 2008 Two Roads UK edition also opts for a different front cover endorsement, choosing that of the UK newspaper *Sunday Express* who states that the novel is “Every bit the fabulous escapist entertainment that the big top once was” (Fig. A12). Allen & Unwin’s Australian editions forego the endorsements all-together, instead using the tagline “An utterly transporting novel richly full of the stuff of life” to hook potential readers, as the previously stated endorsements may not carry as much cultural significance in Australia (Appendix A Fig. A9 and A13). Another difference exists within the 2007 Algonquin copies-sold cover, perhaps stemming from the desire for the book to be marketed towards a more refined reader pallet. The front cover endorsement on this edition instead states that “the colorful headlong tale of a depression-era

circus simply can't be beat" (Fig. A8). This Stephen King review is kept in other editions, as well, but is moved to the back cover.

The back cover of the 2007 Algonquin bestseller-line edition of *Water for Elephants* actually doesn't possess a description blurb for the novel. Instead, readers are greeted with a dense collection of awards/bestseller titles, endorsement snippets, and reviews. This layout runs the risk of being overwhelming; the design attempts to counteract this by using alternating red and black font, a nod to the red and black circus stripes that are discussed later. Underneath seven endorsing snippets limited to purposeful adjectives—such as “riveting,” “rich... emotional,” “endlessly surprising,” etc.—the Stephen King review is the first complete statement present, as well as the only complete statement before the color and capitalization schemes switch up. It also seems to be strategically located in the middle of the cover, followed by the lengthier comments from notable publications. What they all have in common, however, is that they seek to describe the type of tone and experience that readers can expect, in the form of praise—relying on popularity and social regard/prestige to entice readers. Perhaps it also relies on the front cover clues and the logline-like endorsement to communicate/hint to readers what the book is about. I can't help but wonder if this is too much work for the casual, browsing reader. Nonetheless, I believe that this back cover may inspire curiosity, as there is a statement, separated from the other cover matter by a red border, advertising the presence of a discussion guide—serving as an invite to open the book, an indicator of a deeper meaning to the story, and a nod to being a popular pick for discussion groups (Fig. A7).

One such discussion group is identified on both of Algonquin's bestseller-line editions with an award sticker (Fig. A5-A6). On the bottom left of the front cover, a black, circular printed sticker identifies the novel as an Algonquin Readers Round Table pick. Similarly, to the

New York Times bestseller strapline that it accompanies, the feature serves as an indicator of success. But the focus is definitely on that bestseller line, as it has a large and prominent role at the top-most margin of the front cover, perpendicularly set against a backdrop of red and black circus stripes (Fig. A4-A7). Alternate covers feature different straplines, such as the “Over 10 Million Copies Sold!” strapline in the top margin on Algonquin’s 2007 copies-sold edition, or the “International Bestseller” line present on the 2007 HarperCollins Canada edition (Fig. A8 and A11). The 2008 Two Roads edition also brags an international bestseller status with a significantly large “International Word of Mouth Phenomenon: The Number One Bestseller” award sticker (Fig. A14).

Another notable feature this novel hosts that speaks to the popularity and appeal of the story is the printed sticker telling readers that the story is “Now a Major Motion Picture” (Fig. A6). It serves to advertise, and appeal to fans of, the 2011 movie adaptation starring Reese Witherspoon and Robert Pattinson. That year also saw several media tie-in covers that utilized the film’s poster on the cover to portray the story (Fig. A15-A17). Instead of the previously noted sticker, a strapline with the same verbiage was added in the top margin underneath, and larger than, the now standard “#1 *New York Times* Bestseller” and “Over Five Million Copies Sold Worldwide” straplines.

These movie tie-in editions also utilize the movie poster design as the cover images, further pulling fans of the film and setting a very firm visual for the reoccurring characters, through the film’s actors, as well as several plot and setting-relevant features in the background. For instance, just behind the two main characters in the foreground, Rosie the elephant can be seen opposite the train that the circus uses to travel. In the two US editions of the movie tie-in editions, we can also see a well-lit circus tent display behind Rosie. Meanwhile, in the UK cover,

this is swapped out for a smaller acrobat's silhouette. In this edition, Rosie is also placed further into the background—seeming to imply a lower importance to the plot. The tone of the US and UK covers also differ between each other, with the US editions being darker and more shadowy, and the UK edition being well-lit with what appears to be firework embers. The two main characters, standing in a loose embrace at the foreground of the image aren't immune to this shift in tone either. In the US editions, the female love interest is looking down in a seemingly sensual manner while, in the UK edition, she looks up at the male main character with an adoring gaze (Fig. A15-A17).

To accommodate and highlight this more complex cover image, the title and author were shifted further to the bottom than in most of the other editions. It still keeps a sense of familiarity, however, by maintaining the frequently seen large, yellow, multi-line, serif-style font for the title (Fig. A15-A17). This information also stays center-aligned on the cover, as observed on every cover I analyzed for this project. Below the title, in the US media tie-in editions, there can also be seen a small line identifying the story as a novel—a genre convention for such stand-alone contemporary novels. This identifier, or similar, is present on the front covers of eleven of the sixteen covers pulled—the exceptions being the four UK covers and one Canadian cover. Perhaps this distinction on the front cover is deemed unnecessary in some international markets or is located elsewhere, such as title page or on the back cover.

The 2007 Algonquin bestseller-line edition has a significantly busy back cover, text-wise, but does a noteworthy job of creating a cohesive cover experience (Fig. A7). In addition to the canvas tent fabric being carried over as the background for the text, the circus stripes from underneath the strapline makes a mirrored appearance on the back, as well as being present as the background to the book's spine. While there are a number of different circus color patterns

for the stripes, the red and black is easier on the eyes, and establishes contrast for the text that they sit behind—the front cover strapline and the spine details. The title is written along the small spine, perpendicularly to the stripes, but maintains its visibility with an off-white font that appears reminiscent of the canvas tent color on the cover. The author’s name is written in the same direction as the stripes, in smaller font in order to occupy a singular stripe. The same also applies to the publisher’s colophon located at the very bottom. These choices put the focus on the title of the book. And while the circus stripes do nod to the circus setting of the core text, the aesthetic choices present on the spine seem more geared towards making identification of the novel easier—either through the identifying details of title, author, and publisher or through the consistent/cohesive aesthetic that may aid people already familiar with the cover.

***Big Fish* by Daniel Wallace**

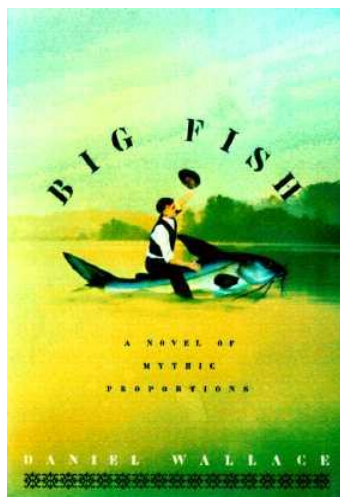


Figure 4: The 1998 Algonquin original printing of Big Fish. ISBN: 9781565122178.

Among the various covers used to present Daniel Wallace’s novel *Big Fish*, readers can consistently expect at least one of two features: a comically large-sized fish and/or a man in a suit. These features have been present since the original 1998 Algonquin cover—carried over in the near identical 1998 Penguin edition and then redrawn in the 2012 Algonquin covers—in which an illustrated man in a suit can be seen literally riding a mythically-sized catfish (Fig. 4 and B1-B5). A few editions have replaced the catfish with other species—such as the large-mouth bass on the 1999 Penguin cover, the ambiguous forked tail of the 2003 Pocket cover, the beaked fish on the 2003 Italian cover, the human-headed fish-like creature on the 2007 Persian cover, the generic cartoon fish of the 2011 Czech cover, and the unknown silhouette on the 2014 Bulgarian cover (Fig. B6-B11).

As catfish are considerably common worldwide, such changes are presumably to speak to the fantastical theme of the narration, rather than regional differences in fish life.

The 2003 Penguin movie tie-in cover, and the corresponding translated editions, appears to be the first edition to forgo the fish, through the use of the film's poster (Fig. B12-B15). This change in cover image shifts completely away from the covers which literally and humorously portray the title of the novel, in favor of a more philosophical/reflective tone. These movie tie-in covers present to readers a largely scenic set-up, with a distant but presumably well-dressed man walking on a path alone. On either side of his path are barren trees, making up the title's lettering, which he must pass through in his apparent route to the bright horizon ahead of him, placed strategically in the middle of the cover. Clearly inspired, the 2017 Simon and Schuster edition also shows a well-dressed man on a path alone on his way towards the bright horizon in the distance (Fig. B16). However, on each side of him are bright yellow flowers, as opposed to the shadows and barren trees of the movie poster—positing a more joyful narrative than the cover's predecessor. This component also appears to be a nod to the field of yellow flowers that has become synonymous with the story to musical-goers—further indicated by the “Now A West-End Musical” sticker—as also seen on the 2012 Algonquin Broadway musical tie-in edition (Fig. B17). The Simon & Schuster cover also differs by showing the journeying figure as being more in the foreground than that of the distant figure in the movie tie-in editions. This appears to be a metaphoric choice denoting the main character's point in his journey of acceptance within the core text—with the Simon and Schuster cover suggesting that the journey is just beginning, and the media tie-in covers suggesting a journey that is about to reach its destination.

Where these aforementioned covers do not differ from each other, however, is the presence of the tagline/subtitle¹⁰ “A Novel of Mythic Proportions” on the front cover of all English-language editions, often directly below the title. This is significant because one function that this particular tagline serves is that it reinforces/explains the title’s allusion to the most common myth/tall tale, that of the big fish that every fisherman claims to have seen. As such, it immediately and explicitly informs readers that the core text within has prominent myth/tall tale components to the narrative. It also informs the readers that the core text is a stand-alone novel—a genre convention that was similarly executed by *Water for Elephants* with the tagline “An utterly transporting novel...” And also, much like what was observed among the *Water for Elephants* covers, this feature was absent from the majority of the international covers, suggesting a cultural component to the inclusion and/or placement of this categorization detail. Another significant cultural difference to cover matter can be seen by the absence of straplines announcing the motion picture and musical adaptations on many of the international covers—suggesting a lack of relevance and/or accessibility to the potential readers in those countries.¹¹

Also making a frequent appearance on the front cover is the endorsement “Comic and poignant... a nice encapsulation of the complexity with which many sons view their fathers” from *The New York Times Book Review*—making its first appearance on the 1999 Penguin cover, before being immediately shortened to “Comic and poignant” in all subsequent editions from Algonquin and Penguin (with the exception of the 2012 Algonquin musical tie-in edition; Fig. B3-B6 and B12). While the full quote partially serves as a sort of logline describing the novel, the shortened version on the more recent covers keeps the focus on the tone of the novel. Among

¹⁰ Some editions treat this phrase as a subtitle, while others treat it as a tagline. For the sake of consistency in my analysis, I will be treating the phrase as a tagline for the remaining duration of the analysis.

¹¹ For the international foreign language covers of *Big Fish* that were consulted in this analysis, see Fig. B8-B11, B13-B15, and B18-B25

these covers with the shortened endorsement is the 2012 Algonquin border-version cover, which I analyzed in physical form (Fig. B5). Perhaps to make up for the lost context from the shortened endorsement, there are four endorsements on the back cover. Alternatively, it is also possible that the existence of these other culturally significant endorsements—from *San Diego Union Tribune*, *Publishers Weekly*, *USA Today*, and *Kirkus Reviews*—allowed for the shortening to take place. These endorsements are all centered on the novel’s contents, themes, and messages, in an act of support to the book blurb that they frame. In fact, *San Diego Union Tribune*’s endorsement “A charming whopper of a tale” makes nods to the fish metaphor present in the title and front cover through the use of the word ‘whopper’—which is often used in fishing tales, as well as the word’s literal meaning of “unusual size.” The word also means “a blatant and extravagant lie”—which nods to the narrative style of the core text (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). The other back cover endorsements make more explicit references to the “fable and fairytale” nature of the narrative, its centeredness on “death... the mysteries of parents” and “a son’s love for a charming, unknowable father.” These quotes actually mirror and summarize the phrases used in the blurb: “William re-creates Edward’s life in a series of legends and myths” and “now Edward Bloom is dying, and William wants desperately to know the truth about his elusive father.”

Perhaps it’s because of the multiple references to the novel as a work of myth and fable, framing the life of the narrator’s father, that inspired the almost literal frame-like border that is present around the front and back covers of this particular edition. The orange and red border with brown zigzags doesn’t coordinate with the cover illustration in any way. Even the colors are distinctly different, with the frame’s inside red color only repeated in the font of the author’s name and as the colored block announcing the “Reader’s Guide and Other Special Features Inside.” However, the frame’s orange color does run over onto the spine and onto the opposite

cover where the frame's design repeats around the back cover content—making the cover feel like a seamless collective, rather than individual panels. Perhaps even metaphorically framing the core text bound by the cover as a piece of sentimental value and commemorating a tale of personal significance.

Jackaby by William Ritter

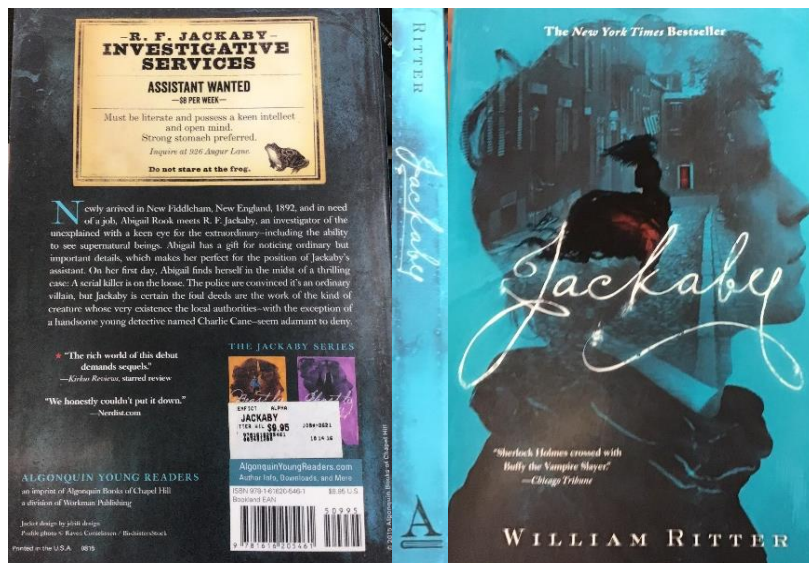


Figure 5: Full front cover, back cover, and spine of *Jackaby* as photographed on February 22, 2022 at a bookstore in North Carolina.

While the physical cover of *Water for Elephants* imitated the front and back of a circus tent, as if the reader is entering the tent by opening the book, and *Big Fish*'s physical cover suggests a sentimental tale bound in a frame—*Jackaby* by William Ritter presents its print cover as a piece of art, which appears to be setting the reader up for the psychological separation and suspension of belief needed for such a work of fantasy. The blue background of the front cover travels over the spine, creating a gradient that transitions into the imperfect dark gray on which the back matter sits on the back cover. The dark gray that resembles a fog with inconsistent transparencies nods back to the color and haze present within the double-exposed Jackaby figure on the front cover. The historical 1982 setting (as identified in the back cover description) is shown on the cover through the second exposure image inlaid on the Jackaby figure—showing a

mysterious woman clad in a black and red antique-style dress walking down an empty New England street. This is also shown by the illustrated newspaper clipping on the back cover showing titular character Jackaby's help wanted ad for his investigative services (Appendix CFig. 5 and C1-C2).

This same cover was used on all English-language covers and the majority of foreign-language covers, with minor additions made from 2015 onwards. Such changes include the *New York Times* Bestseller strapline at the top, as well as a front-cover *Chicago Tribune* endorsement lauding the books as a "Sherlock Holmes crossed with Buffy the Vampire Slayer" (Fig. 5, C1, and C3). The endorsement befits the fantasy mystery genre the book sits in by making nods to famous cross-generational franchises that also situate within these genres. The back cover includes two other endorsements—"We honestly couldn't put it down" and "The rich world of this debut demands sequels." Right beside these endorsements are the strategically placed book covers of the series' sequels. This move seems to tell potential readers that sequels were demanded, actualized, and are ready to be read as soon as they finish this book. Essentially, it tells readers that the book will be engaging enough to not only get through this one but also spur them into the sequels—lengthening their immersion into the storyworld.

The 2017 Chinese edition of the book takes a different approach to portraying the story. This edition turns Jackaby into a cartoon silhouette seen walking across the cover towards the spine through a scattered array of cartoon illustrations that could be interpreted as symbols of clues. Perhaps this change markets to a slightly younger portion of the YA demographic, or hints at the cultural perceptions of audience expectations. This was the only instance of significant cover design change that I was able to find—which could be a result of its more recent

publication or could suggest the perceived relevance of the design to the story and genre across country/culture expectations (Fig. C4).

Discussion

From my private correspondence with several industry professionals, it can be confidently concluded that the publishing industry does consider book covers to be important to bringing a story in and out of relevance across time, borders, and publics (see Appendices F-H).¹² The covers will get changed or adjusted with the addition of new straplines, endorsements, and award stickers; with the release of special and anniversary editions; and when editions get released by different publishers and/or in different countries (see Appendices G and I).¹³ They may also be changed as time goes on to better relate to current audiences, reduce mental fatigue and habituation to the old covers, or to make up for an unsuccessful initial launch (see Appendix G). With this degree of sales importance in mind, publishing companies—especially independent publishers—tend to put a lot of thought and manpower into the cover design process.

Included in the design process are the design briefs, provided due to the fact that there is rarely enough time to sufficiently read the core text before the cover deadline, where the author and editor provide the designer/illustrator with a brief synopsis, major themes and characters, intended message, strong images from the core text, the mood and tone of the core text, and notable covers from other books in the genre (see Appendix F-Appendix I). But even before a designer gets a project to work on, they are often keeping an eye on what is popping up in the field and talking to others in the industry in order to find/collect inspiration and observe what

¹² Specifically, I am referring to my correspondences with Anonymous Managing Editorial Assistant (personal communication, January 17, 2022), Anonymous Publisher (personal communication, January 19, 2022), and Anonymous Illustrator (personal communication, February 21, 2022).

¹³ Specifically, I am referring to my correspondences with Anonymous Publisher (personal communication, January 19, 2022) and Anonymous Designer (personal communication, February 17, 2022).

new techniques are being used (see Appendix F, Appendix G, and Appendix I). Some publishers even emphasize making a habit of checking the *New York Times* bestseller list, lauding it as an indicator of the market and the stability of certain covers and texts (see Appendix F). Ultimately, the goal of these practices is to keep up with the social demands and preferences of the audiences they are seeking to appeal to, with the hope of matching as close as possible the audience they are casting during the design process to the actual physical readership that will eventually engage with the text.

In addition to seeing what elements are currently doing well, designers must also pay attention to what guidelines have promised success throughout history. For instance, renowned bestseller and award-winning illustrator and designer Wendell Minor (1995, as cited by Sonzogni, 2011) attests to four core tenets: 1.) The cover must utilize stylistic choices that do not distract or deviate from the core content they are meant to represent; 2.) cover elements must be kept to a minimum; 3.) the cover must be ambiguous enough to leave gaps for the readers to fill with their own experiences and ideas; and 4.) a designer/illustrator must respect and honor the story and author that it frames and represents. This is much the same as discussed by the various scholars referenced in the literature review. Deviation from the core material may inspire feelings of betrayal in a reader. Providing too much detail can retract some of the agency that readers are accustomed to holding in their reading experiences. Even if the cover contains elements that do not over- or under-represent the core text, one risks overwhelming or confusing a potential reader if there are too many design elements. Furthermore, a cover must seem to acknowledge that while fully functional in its own right, it is a part of a larger assemblage of other paratexts and texts that will also influence a reader's desire and enthusiasm for engagement

activities such as consumption, reconsumption, sharing, and anticipation for similar or related works.

Similarly, the design must also respect/nod to the genre that the core text is operating in or otherwise seeking to appeal to (see Appendix G). For instance, fantasy novels tend to have a lot of color as well as fantasy-elements that take center stage of the illustration (see Appendix J).¹⁴ This can be observed in the cover analysis of *Jackaby* by William Ritter, in contrast to the contemporary fiction covers of *Water for Elephants* and *Big Fish* which were more muted and neutral. Mystery novel covers tend to display or hint at the mystery being solved (see Appendix J). For instance, the mysterious shadowy figure in the circus tent on the main covers of *Water for Elephants*. Additionally, only recently have designers started experimenting with more elaborate covers for poetry publications, which historically contained little more than basic identifying information. Literary classics often use revered/historical paintings on the front cover to imply a cultural significance and make a nod to the time period that the story takes place in. Likewise, historical fiction may also denote the narrative's time period through the use of paintings or images of artifacts (Weedon, 2016). Certain cover elements may even get heightened emphasis due to the genre or the popularity, such as the series or main character name (see Appendix J). An example of this can be seen with *Harry Potter* where the character's name is written larger and with a different font than the rest of the book title that the name belongs to. This makes the books easily identifiable, and with a standard/predictable appearance across the series. Likewise with the *Nancy Drew Mystery Stories*, where the series name is distinctly written across the top, above the individual book titles, and where certain editions further enlarge and differentiate

¹⁴ Specifically, I am referring to my correspondence with Anonymous Author (personal communication, January 18, 2022).

“Nancy Drew” from the rest of the series name. These choices were purposeful; they put the emphasis on the most recognizable and/or most sellable component of the cover matter.

A book generally has less than 5 seconds to grab a reader enough to be picked up. From there, it has maybe around 20 seconds to convince a reader to buy it (see Appendix G). As such, publishers tend to focus more time on the cover art design than other cover matter, with the goal of making a casual passerby pause to investigate, but without being so jarringly different that it narrows the audience (see Appendix F-Appendix G). Take for instance, the circus allusions on the cover of *Water for Elephants* and the double-exposure character-likeness on the cover of *Jackaby*. Both of these features seem befitting to their respective genres but stand out amongst their fellow peers on the bookshelf or digital catalog. Perhaps the sometimes childlike illustrations on *Big Fish* also serve this purpose when situated amongst all the other books of the contemporary adult fiction genre. On the back of these covers, all of the content is broken up vertically via line breaks and spacing in order to be easier on reader eyes (see Appendix G). But when the amount of info on the cover becomes too crowded, and thus overwhelming, these blurbs and endorsements will tend to be shortened or even exempted. Some publishers may even experiment with dust jackets (for hardcover books) and French flaps (for paperback books) in order to add space and/or more cover matter (see Appendix I-Appendix J).

Some publishers are also playing with the careful incorporation of Search Engine Optimization (SEO) keywords into book blurbs in order to appeal to computer algorithms for online sales and navigation in an increasingly crowded marketplace (see Appendix F). This move to better optimize cover matter for the digital sphere, along with already present considerations for text size and contrast in thumbnail images, will better get the right books in front of the right readers. This is especially the case for books from independent publishers which tend to have a

difficult time making substantial profit within bookstores who operate on consignment deals (see Appendix G). If a book gets in front of the wrong readers on digital platforms, and accordingly receives negative reviews from those readers, digital platforms will treat the work as a bad book. The algorithms will stop promoting the book to browsers, so the book will be less likely to be seen and clicked on. But if the cover matter gets in front of the right readers for the core text, their engagement will feed into the algorithm to keep promoting it to other readers. The algorithm would also promote similar books, perhaps from the same author or publisher, to those initial readers—keeping them engaged even past the initial consumption.

However, regardless of what the algorithm may push to potential readers, when faced with a choice between two equally compelling books, often regardless of an existing fanbase, a reader will usually choose the book with the better cover (see Appendix G). Perhaps this is because the cover has already started to create an experience for the reader, a more compelling experience than the cover of its competitor. It is with this in mind that publishers do not just rely on cover illustrations, but also on overall layout, texture, award stickers, bestseller straplines, and noteworthy endorsements to make a promise to the potential reader that the book will provide the enjoyment they are seeking (see Appendix F and Appendix J). Promises are also made to existing fans, through consistent covers throughout a series, that the experience they enjoyed in previous installments is continuing with the sequels. The consistency also serves as a reminder to previous readers that they read the previous book, and the new one is ready for them (see Appendix F-Appendix G). This can be seen in the Jackaby series by looking at the cover previews on the back cover of *Jackaby*. All of the book covers, despite different color schemes, utilize very similar styling—with a double exposure image creating a distinct foreground and background imagery as well as the same cursive-style font portraying the book title on top of and

at chin-height to the cover image. Such cover elements and consistency have been known to become synonymous with the author/publisher's branding, merchandise, and events that readers/fans have been receptive to (see Appendix J).

As the most front-facing of book paratexts, especially in digital contexts where the internal text might not be easily referenced, book covers require a design that is knowledgeable of their audiences. Not only do the choices involved directly influence pick-up/click rates, which play into purchase numbers, but they also represent the experience that the readers will/are undertaking. They create an imprint and readers' memories that allow them to come back to the book time and time again, even years afterwards. When scrolling on the internet, book reviews and conversations are usually directly accompanied by the book's cover. Even a brief moment in which the title may not be decipherable has been enough for readers to instantly recognize the work—causing them to pause their scrolling, answer title inquiries by other netizens, or rewind their television program for confirmation. Book covers will also make appearances on fan and official merchandise, take an honored seat in a fan's collection, or find their way into other aspects of a fan's daily life. Book covers represent an experience, a community, and an aspect of identity that cannot be easily overlooked, and which has a profound influence not only on purchase, but also on social/circulatory uptake and maintenance of engagement.

Conclusion

Every element on a book cover, physical and digital, is the result of an ecological system of artistic and marketing choices that have significant impact on the potential of a book to get picked up, purchased, read, remembered, and otherwise continually engaged with by readers and publics. Traditionally, titles, author names, and publisher colophons are known for their identification functions, while cover aesthetics, blurbs, and straplines/stickers are known to

entice, inform, and promote, respectively. In practice though, all of these cover features may overlap in function. As such, none of these cover elements should be overlooked or prioritized when seeking to inspire reader engagement and public uptake of a text. This is also true due the fact that each of these elements are highly subjective and contextual. Their meanings may get lost or altered with changes in public/reader expectations, especially in cases of rapid overproduction of signs/images (Brummett, 2008; see Appendix I). Perhaps this change may come in the form of different symbols or techniques being used to portray story elements. Or perhaps we will see the evolution of a new strapline highlighting different bestseller lists or using alternative metrics of success (such as number of copies sold or number of countries it's published in; see Appendix F). Afterall, we are already observing contention about these components due to how bulk sales may create misleading bestseller figures (see Appendix F). Some book awards, as well, have garnered a reputation for dismissing reader appeal when making their judgements on books and deciding award winners (Squires, 2016). Much like scholars and industry professionals in televisual media have already started doing, analyzing social chatter along with consumptive metrics is important to understanding the engagement of readers and publics surrounding a book-based narrative and its paratexts.

Furthermore, reader perceptions of paratextual matter, and the cultural associations that they collectively reflect, are an important aspect of studying the public uptake of books into circulatory discourse. By studying these perceptions and associations against the presumptions and practices currently in place among publishing houses, we can better understand the nature of the social feedback loop that plays into the creation, reception, and engagement of these texts. It also creates a clear discursive arena to study the performance/delivery of the text as it exists for potential readers in their moments of social uptake (Trimbur, 2000). Some other arenas of

research that may be fruitful to this venture are reader perceptions on individual paratext components,¹⁵ public agency¹⁶ and receptibility,¹⁷ intersemiotic translation of the core text,¹⁸ the disconnect between circulatory practices in engaged and mainstream market spheres,¹⁹ and factors that influence the potential for circulatory exhaustion.²⁰ As Brummett (2008) discusses, consumption and engagement do not end at the moment of purchase, but rather begins there. It is with this perspective that the fields of fandom and media studies, composition, and circulation may gain a more networked view of book-based narrative discourse and circulatory uptake.

¹⁵ This is complicated, in practice, due to the general absence of reader feedback on paratexts and covers in published/posted reviews (Anonymous Managing Editorial Assistant, personal communication, January 17, 2022; Appendix F).

¹⁶ For more information on public agency to visual texts, consult Gries, L.E. (2015). *Still life with rhetoric: A new materialist approach for visual rhetorics*. Utah State University Press.

¹⁷ For more information on audience receptibility to their casted roles, consult Ede, L. & Lunsford, A. (2011). Audience addressed/audience invoked: The role of audience in composition theory and pedagogy. In V. Villanueva & K.L. Arola (Eds.), *Cross-talk in comp theory* (pp. 77-95). National Council of Teachers of English.

¹⁸ For more information on intersemiotic translation, consult Aktulum, K. (2017). What is intersemiotics? A short definition and some examples. *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*, 7(1), 33-36. <https://doi.org/10.18178/ijssh.2017.7.1.791>

¹⁹ For more information on different consumer market spheres, consult Libai, B. (2011). The perils of focusing on highly engaged customers. *Journal of Service Research*, 14(3), 275-276. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1094670511414583>

²⁰ For more information on circulatory exhaustion, consult Gries, L.E. & Brooke, C.G., (Eds.), *Circulation, writing, and rhetoric*. Utah State University Press.

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Appendix A

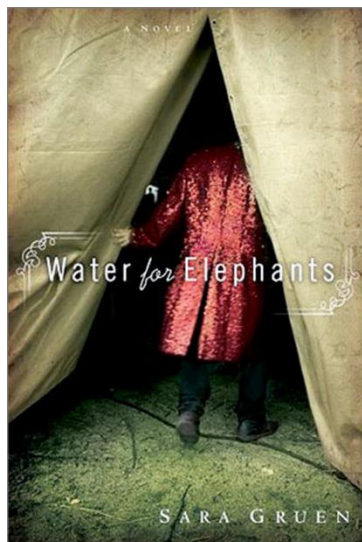
Covers for *Water for Elephants* by Sara Gruen

Figure A1: The 2006 Algonquin original hardback cover of *Water for Elephants*. ISBN: 9781565124998

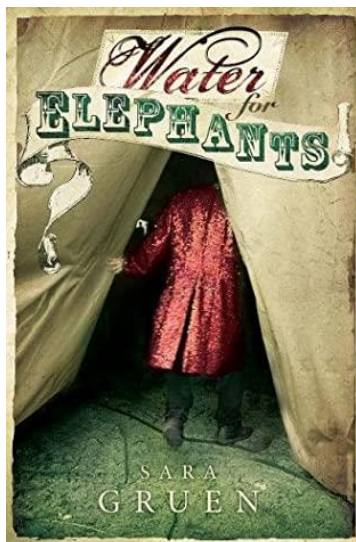


Figure A2: The 2006 Hodder UK reprint of *Water for Elephants*. ISBN: 9780340938058

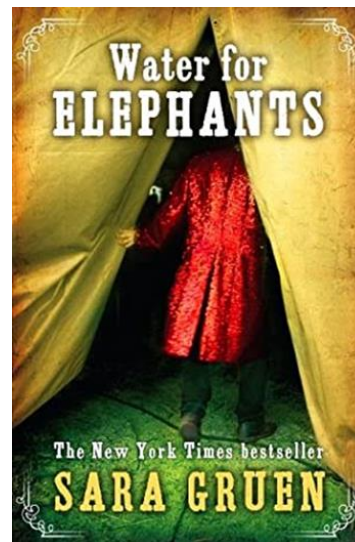


Figure A3: The 2007 Hodder UK reprint of *Water for Elephants*. ISBN: 9780340935460

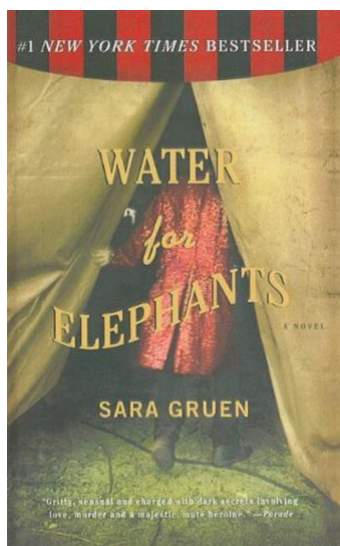


Figure A4: The 2007 San Val Bestseller reprint of *Water for Elephants*. ISBN: 9781606860960

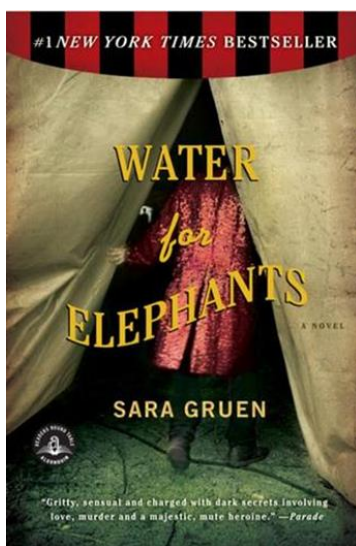


Figure A5: The 2007 Algonquin bestseller reprint of *Water for Elephants* with award sticker. ISBN: 9781565125605

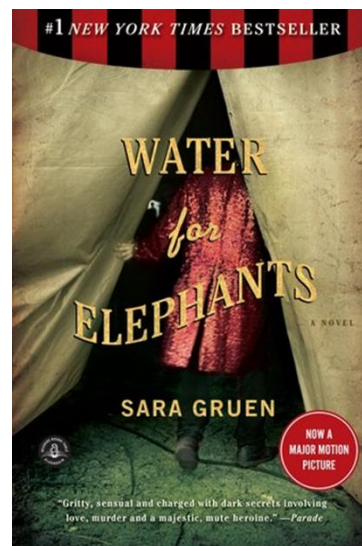


Figure A6: The 2011 Algonquin bestseller reprint of *Water for Elephants* with award and motion picture stickers. ISBN: 9781565125858

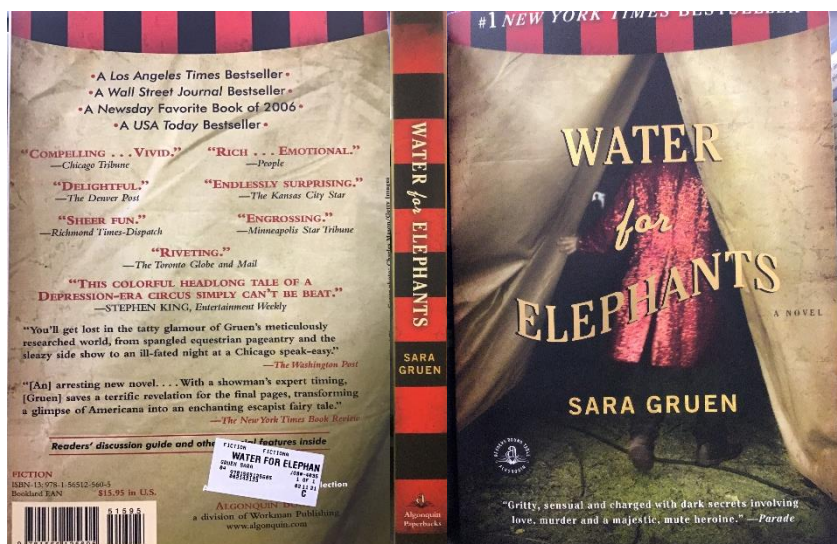


Figure A7: Full front cover, back cover, and spine of *Water for Elephants* as photographed on February 22, 2022 at a bookstore in North Carolina.

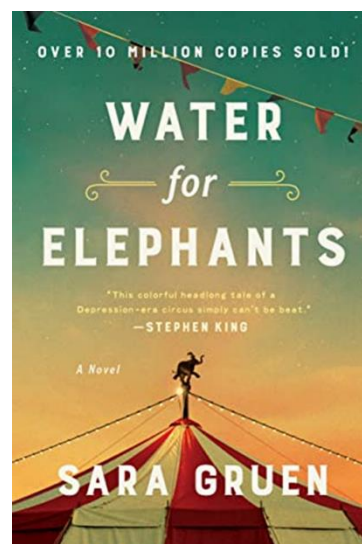


Figure A8: The 2007 Algonquin reprint of *Water for Elephants* with copies sold strapline. ISBN: 9781565125605

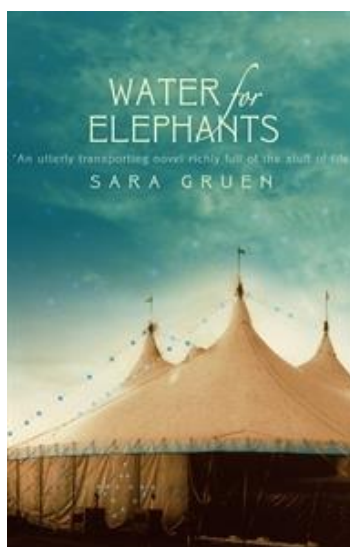


Figure A9: The 2008 Allen & Unwin Australia reprint of *Water for Elephants*. ISBN: 9781741149814

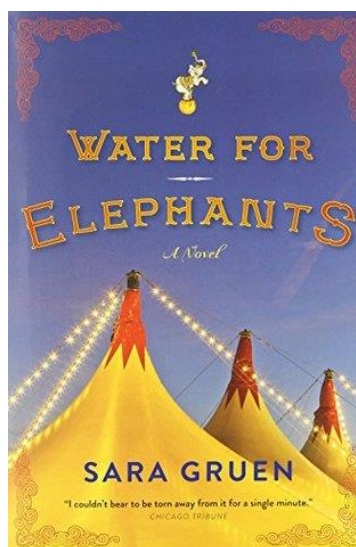


Figure A10: The 2015 HarperCollins reprint of *Water for Elephants*. ISBN: 9781443444897

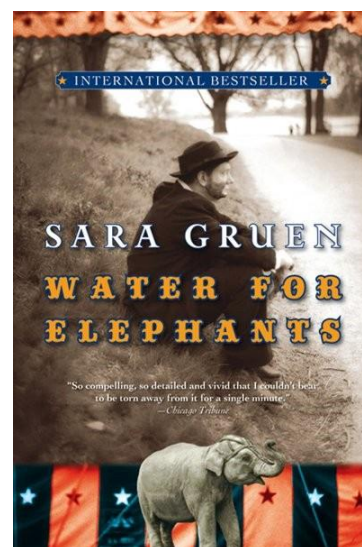


Figure A11: The 2007 HarperCollins Canada reprint of *Water for Elephants*. ISBN: 9780006391555

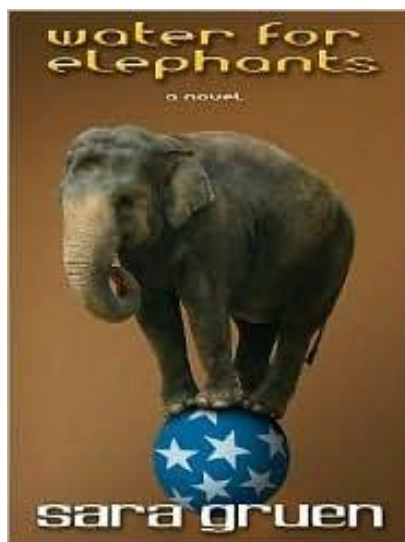


Figure A12: The 2007 Thorndike large-print reprint of *Water for Elephants*. ISBN: 9780786290277

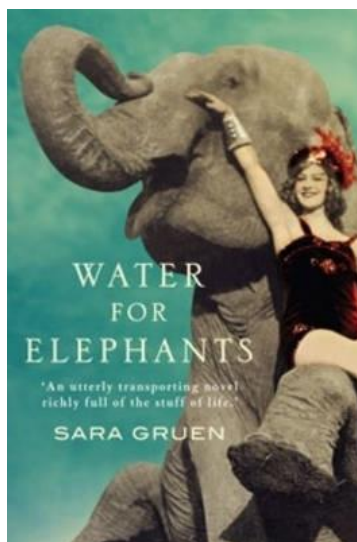


Figure A13: The 2007 Allen & Unwin Australia reprint of *Water for Elephants*. ISBN: 9781741752953

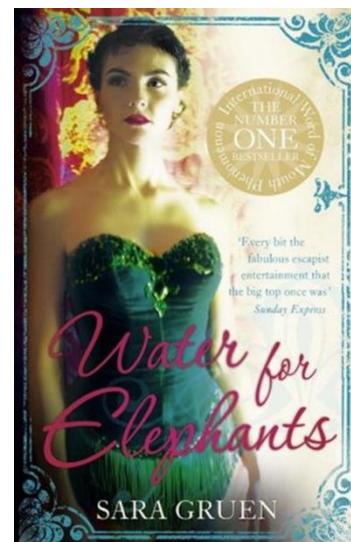


Figure A14: The 2008 Two Roads UK award winner reprint of *Water for Elephants*. ISBN: 9780340962725



Figure A15: The 2011 Algonquin movie tie-in paperback reprint of *Water for Elephants*. ISBN: 9781616200701

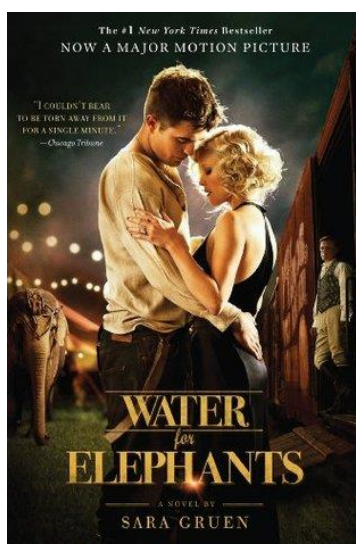


Figure A16: The 2011 HarperCollins movie tie-in mass paperback reprint of *Water for Elephants*. ISBN: 9781443406291



Figure A17: The 2011 Two Roads UK movie tie-in paperback reprint of *Water for Elephants*. ISBN: 9781444716009

Appendix B

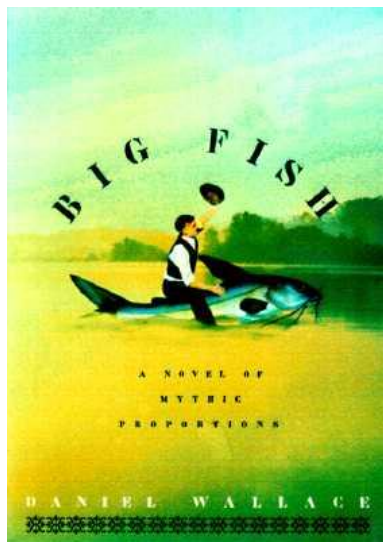
Covers for *Big Fish* by Daniel Wallace

Figure B1: The 1998 Algonquin original printing of *Big Fish*. ISBN: 9781565122178

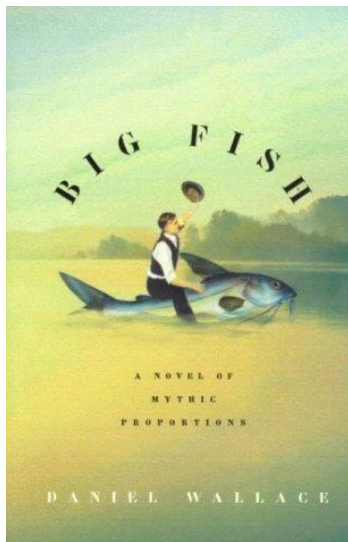


Figure B2: The 1998 Penguin reprint of *Big Fish*. ISBN: 9780733610288

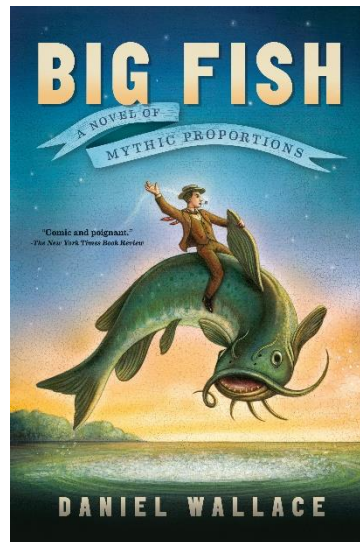


Figure B3: The 2012 Algonquin reprint of *Big Fish*. ISBN: 9781616201654

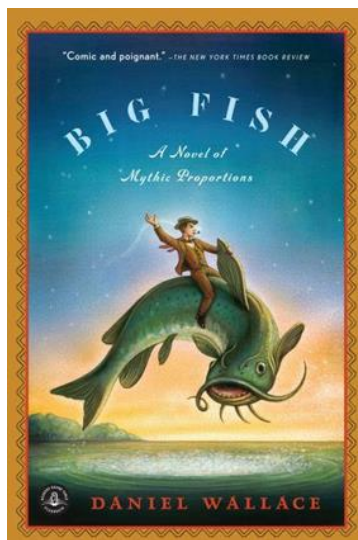


Figure B4: The 2012 Algonquin reprint of *Big Fish* with decorative border. ISBN: 9781616201647

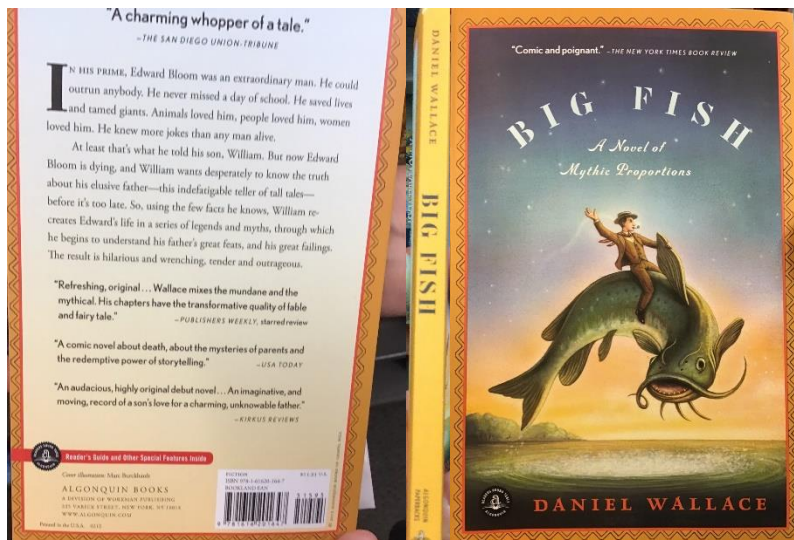


Figure B5: Full front cover, back cover, and spine of *Big Fish* as photographed on February 22, 2022 at a bookstore in North Carolina.

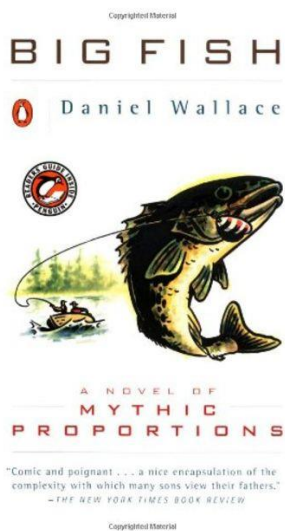


Figure B6: The 1999 Penguin reprint of *Big Fish*. ISBN: 9780140282771

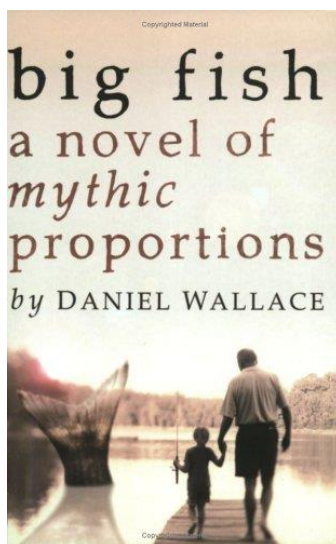


Figure B7: The 2003 Pocket reprint of *Big Fish*. ISBN: 9780743478434

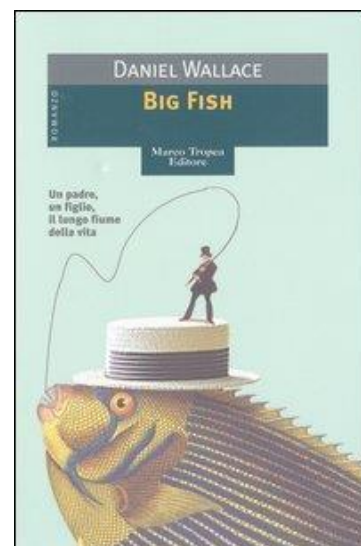


Figure B8: Italian translation of *Big Fish* from publisher Marco Tropea Editore (2003). ISBN: 9788843802296

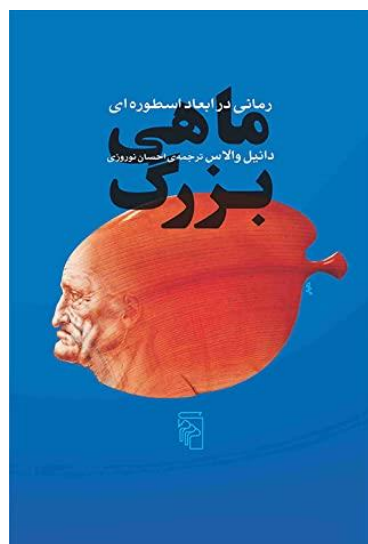


Figure B9: Persian translation of *Big Fish* (2007). ISBN: 9789643059569

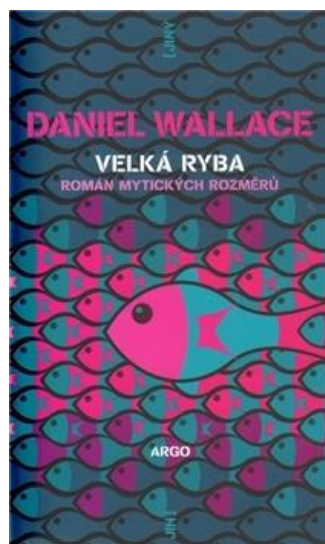


Figure B10: Czech translation of *Big Fish* from publisher Argo (2011). ISBN: 9788025704295

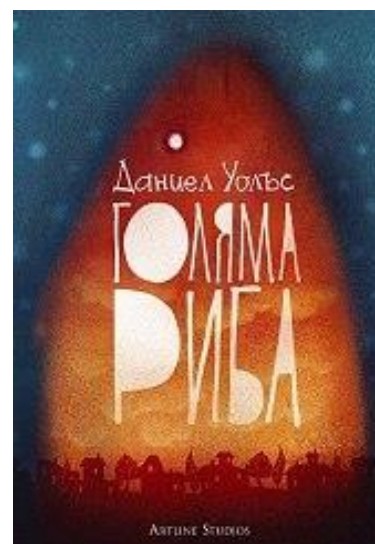


Figure B11: Bulgarian translation of *Big Fish* from publisher Artline Studios (2014). ISBN: 9786191930128

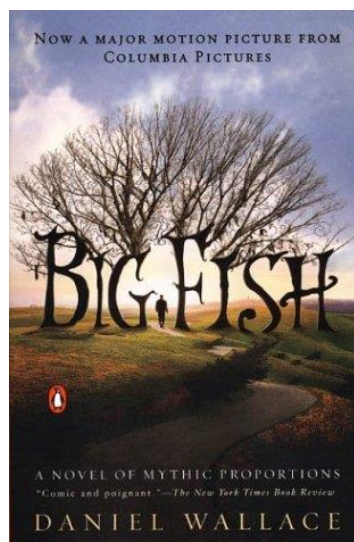


Figure B12: The 2003 Penguin movie tie-in reprint of Big Fish. ISBN: 9780142004272

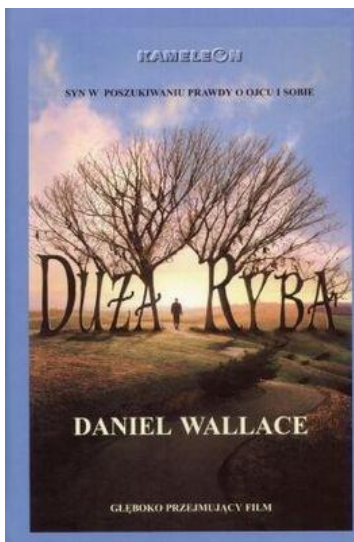


Figure B13: Polish translation of Big Fish from publisher Zysk i S-ka (2004). ISBN: 9788372985569



Figure B14: Portuguese translation of Big Fish from publisher Temas e Debates (2004). ISBN: 9789727596256

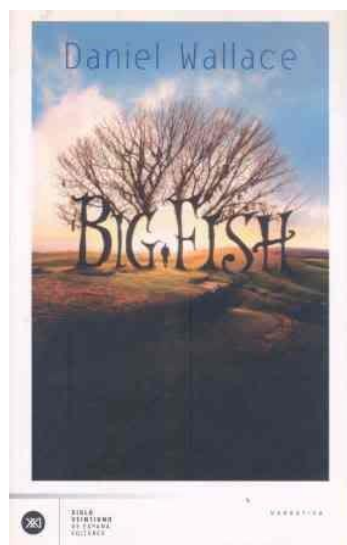


Figure B15: Spanish translation of Big Fish from publisher Siglo XXI (2004). ISBN: 9788432311512

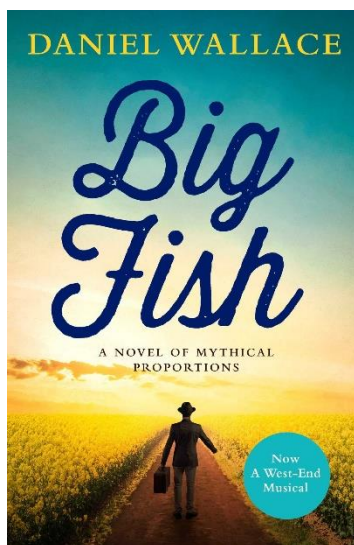


Figure B16: The 2017 Simon & Schuster reprint of Big Fish with West-End musical sticker. ISBN: 9781471173028

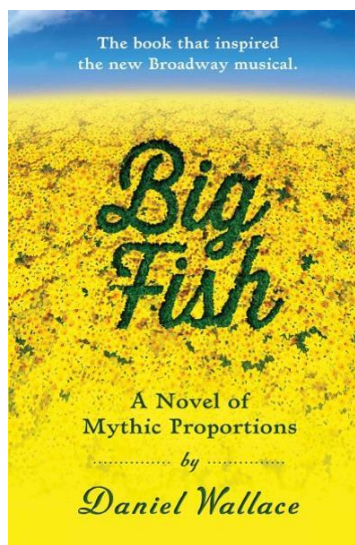


Figure B17: The 2012 Algonquin Broadway musical tie-in reprint of Big Fish. ISBN: 9781616201647

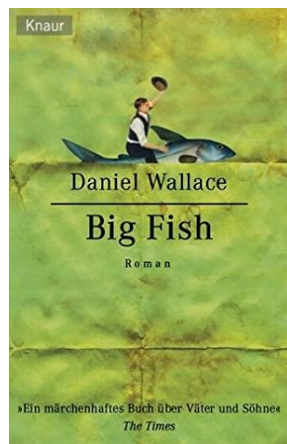


Figure B18: German translation of *Big Fish* from publisher Droemer Knaur (2001). ISBN: 9783426617304

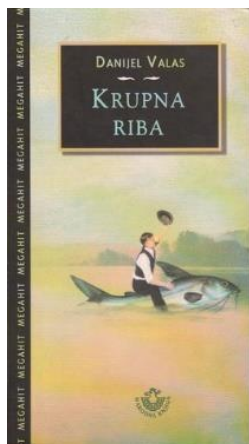


Figure B19: Serbian translation of *Big Fish* from publisher Narodna knjiga (2004). ISBN: 8633113309



Figure B20: Spanish translation of *Big Fish* from publisher Biblioteca Teide (2006). ISBN: 9788430760206

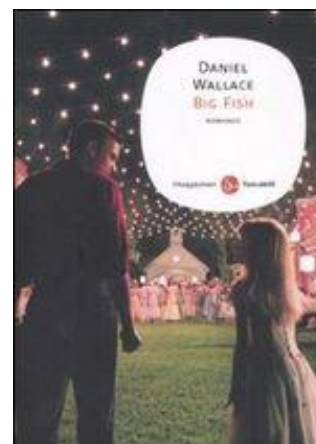


Figure B21: Italian translation of *Big Fish* from publisher Il Saggiatore (2008). ISBN: 9788856500547



Figure B22: Russian translation of *Big Fish* from publisher Азбука-классика (2008).

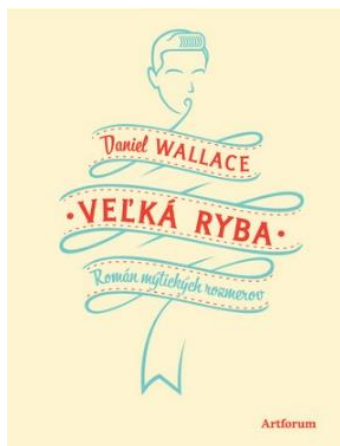


Figure B23: Slovak translation of *Big Fish* from publisher Artforum (2011). ISBN: 9788089445257



Figure B24: Turkish translation of *Big Fish* from publisher Yapı Kredi Yayınları (2011). ISBN: 9789750819063

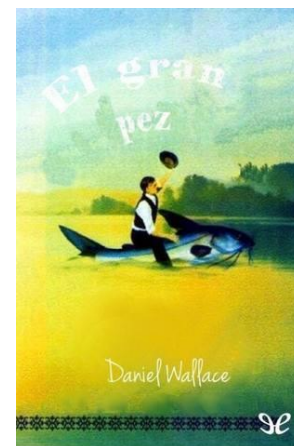


Figure B25: Spanish translation of *Big Fish* from publisher Epublibre (2016).

Appendix C

Covers for *Jackaby* by William Ritter

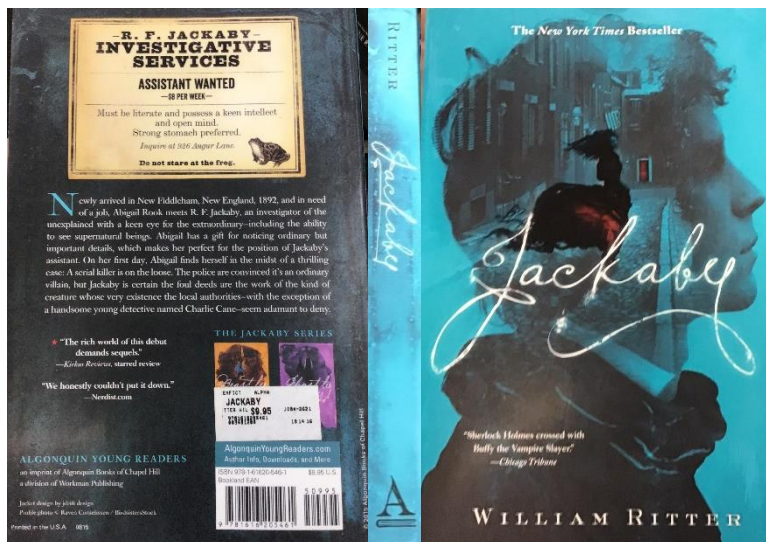


Figure C1: Full front cover, back cover, and spine of *Jackaby* as photographed on February 22, 2022 at a bookstore in North Carolina.

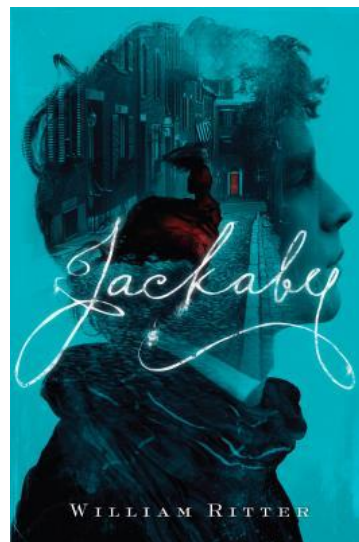


Figure C2: The 2014 Algonquin original printing of *Jackaby*. ISBN: 9781616203535

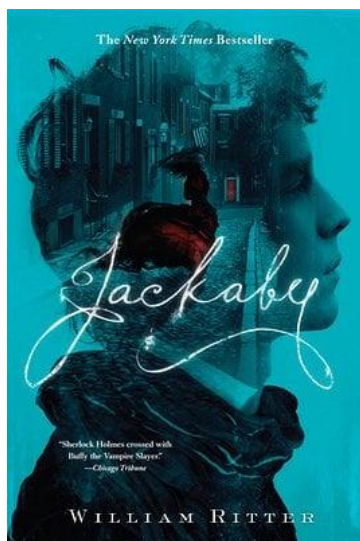


Figure C3: The 2015 Algonquin reprint of *Jackaby* with bestseller strapline and endorsement. ISBN: 9781616205461

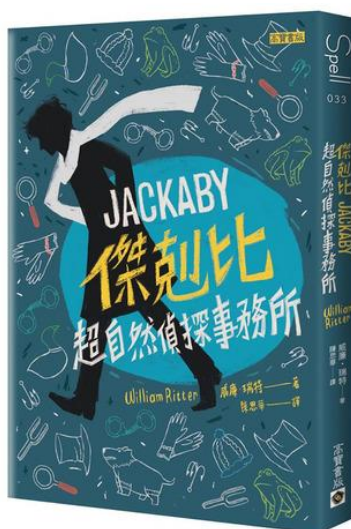


Figure C4: The 2017 高寶國際有限公司台灣分公司 China reprint of *Jackaby*. ISBN: 9789863614357

Appendix D

Personal Communication Script/Questions

Hi! I'm Athena Edwards, it's nice to meet you. And thank you so much for joining me today. Before we start, I wanted to ask if you had any questions about the consent form you had filled out earlier?

To go over the project, I am working on my thesis right now and I really wanted to get some insight into some of the publishing practices that go into producing a book. In particular, I'm focusing on peritexts, the various features that are tied to a text in order to market, frame, and contextualize a work. Specifically, to narrow the scope of this question, I am looking at the book cover, and the various features that are present there. I believe peritexts may be a significant force that convinces readers to pick up a book and continue engaging with the content after they've read it, and as such, warrant some more researched attention.

If at any point there is a question you feel uncomfortable answering, we can skip to the next one. And your responses will be de-identified in my transcript, notes, and final report. Did you have any questions before we start recording?

** Pause for a second. Answer any questions that get posed **

** Press the record button in Zoom and on Recorder **

Okay, we are recording now.

To start us off, do you mind telling me a little bit about your experience with book publishing?

How long have you been in this position?

How has your job changed throughout this time?

What is the production process at your company from start to finish?

In what way do you see your department approaching the inclusion and construction of cover matter?

Who all is involved in the production of the cover and cover material? Do you think this approach varies at all amongst other parties or at the publisher level?

What functions do you think cover matter may perform for audiences?

Do you have any personal experiences that support this idea?

How are authors involved in the construction/design of the cover of their books?

Do you foresee any of these approaches changing in the future?

** Follow-up questions inquiring about specific examples and/or specific forms of peritexts. **

** Clarify any points brought up by the interviewee **

Great! Well, that's all of my questions for you. Did you have any for me? Or comments on something we went over earlier?

** Pause for further comments or questions **

** If time allows, summarize findings. Ask if everything sounds right. **

Thank you so much for taking some time to talk with me. Having this insight into publishing practices will be tremendously helpful for me to put theory and practice into conversation with each other. How was this interview for you?

** Turn off Zoom recording feature and physical recorder. **

I have stopped recording. Thank you again for taking the time to participate in this interview. Did you have anything else to say before we conclude this meeting?

Appendix E

Biographical Information

Anonymous Publisher:

A co-founder and editor of a small US press which open within the past decade. Beyond the scope of this work, they also have 15 years of experience writing and editing books.

Anonymous Author:

A Canadian author and poet with over 10 years of self- and small press publishing experience. They have been very hands-on with their own book designs and teach classes on the subject.

Anonymous Managing Editorial Assistant:

A recent college graduate who works for a small US press who started as a freelance copy editor before working up to their current position. As a member of the managing editorial team, they are directly involved in the creation and approval of cover matter.

Anonymous Designer:

A recently retired and award-winning freelance Canadian graphic designer. Aside from doing book design for various clients, they worked in editorial as a publishing assistant and editorial consultant.

Anonymous Illustrator:

A Canadian freelance contract book cover and children's illustrator with over 15 years in the industry. They also have experience being an undergraduate lecturer on the topic.

Appendix F

Personal Communication: Anonymous Managing Editorial Assistant (1-17-2022)

Athena Edwards:

To start us off, do you mind telling me a little bit about your experiences with book publishing?

Anonymous Managing Editorial Assistant:

I got into the industry a couple years ago as a freelance copy editor initially, for the same company that I'm now working full time. And, in that capacity, I was sent manuscripts and had to proofread and copy edit them in a two-week turnaround to get them back to the publisher. And now I know, on the full-time side, what that entails so I'm working as a managing editorial assistant, so not in acquisitions editing—which is like working face-to-face with an author and going through the writing process, drafting, and things like that. What we do in managing editorial is once the manuscript is finished, to a degree, we take it, we run it through software, so we ensure that the formatting is all consistent so that design, later, has an easier time identifying certain headings and text boxes and images and things like that. We send it to the copy edit, we review the copy edits ourselves and make sure that everything is appropriate. And then we work closely with the designers, in the quality control phase of the project, once the book is designed to make sure none of the design elements in the text manuscript got lost in the transfer to design. So, that's pretty much where I am as a cog in the wheel.

[Redacted, for anonymity, information on the publisher and what they publish. Also redacted, for relevance, information on breaking into the publishing industry.]

I also do a lot of data entry into this program called CoreSource, which is essentially where we put in all of the metadata that has to do with the title—so author, what eventually becomes back jacket copy, review quotes, covers. In addition to covers, we also do inserts, spreads, things like that. These are all things that feed out to like Barnes and Noble, Amazon, and the sales reps. So, I deal with that. I also now assign or I request numbers for the Library of Congress. Just a bunch of assorted things here and there that are beyond yeah beyond copy editing. Which is really cool because I didn't know what to expect when I got this job. But I'm enjoying it quite a bit because it's a lot more than I expected, but it's also interesting. Keeps me on my toes.

Athena Edwards:

In what way, do you see your team approaching the inclusion and construction of cover matter or what would eventually become cover matter?

Anon. Managing EA:

Okay, so, in regard to... So, front cover and back jacket as well? Or like one at a time or both?

Athena Edwards:

So, front, back, spine: cover matter.

Anon. Managing EA:

Right okay. The spine, I will say, probably gets the least attention. It is copy edited to ensure proper grammar, and that the style matches everything, and the spacing is okay, and we have the proper imprint on this spine. But that probably gets like the least amount of attention.

The designers work very hard to craft several versions of covers that will appeal to both the author/authors and our marketing and sales representatives that are also external (not within *[Publishing House]*).

And that occasionally is like “Oh, they hit it out of the park and it's great on the first try.” And sometimes, often, it goes through several rounds of “Oh, you know what, we should alter this because readers aren't going to understand what this means on the front cover. It doesn't match the intention, or the interior of the book, in any way. We want to make sure that it reflects the text more.” Or, you know, it has to be a little more appealing. We want it to be eye catching, etc. That's more of the marketing perspective. Authors, because it's their work, can be kind of picky but, very often, because our designers are very intentional with their choices and intentional to maintain the voice of the author, I feel like they are less—I don't wanna say difficult—but they're easier on the designers than the marketing reps can be sometimes. So, that's the front cover design process. And the designer could speak to it more than me probably but it's different for every book too. They think about font choice and what images to include, if to include any images at all, to make it abstract.

I know we also have a process going... they're quite a few books, right now that are going through reprints so like initially, they had a certain cover from like the 80s and it's classic and matches the time, and that title for when it came out, but because it's trying to enlarge audience and gain a new public, [the book cover] goes through a different process with one of the head editors because those books backlist for a very long time, and we want to make sure that they don't age out. So, that's kind of like a front cover process.

The back cover copy, I actually write it sometimes, and I will draft it up, and I'll send it to whoever the editor is of the author. So, it depends on who is the author and what imprint it falls under. The editor will then approve or improve it in any way they see fit. And then I will send it to the author themselves, to make sure they approve whatever's on the back jacket—and that will typically be like a couple of paragraphs on the interior, a couple of review quotes if they're available, and maybe a couple of bullets, three or four bullets, on like key concepts or topics that are included in the book that would be interesting to readers, we would think, along with the ISBN, the price, and the imprint.

So, yeah, it's just a matter of making sure that everyone is on the same page and, more often than not, it happens, the back cover especially, happens very smoothly, because authors occasionally will be like I'm just going to send you a new back jacket—I'm like “That's great. Fine. I'm okay with that.” And we implement whatever they see fit, because, again, it is their work. So, yeah, it's just a matter of... it takes time, occasionally, but that is, I think a smoother process than the front cover.

Athena Edwards:

So, the author is pretty hands on with the cover? The cover choices?

Anon. Managing EA:

I would say so, yeah.

Athena Edwards:

Who all is involved in the production of cover and cover material? You mentioned you, as managing editor, you help with the back jacket blurbs and copy, and then you mentioned the designers and the editor—the editor of the author...

Anon. Managing EA:

The acquisitions editor, yeah.

Athena Edwards:

...kind of being the go-between to navigate what the author wants versus what marketing wants. Am I understanding that right?

Anon. Managing EA:

Right. Yeah! Basically. And I can't be certain that that is the same at like a larger press, because [*Publishing House*] is a smaller indie publisher.

So, I can't say it's what Penguin does. And that's to say like that's our process. I can't say that, like Candlewick press in Massachusetts does the same thing. You know what I mean? Every small press probably has its own set of rules—because I've even learned, in my research, when I was searching for a job in publishing in general... What I came to expect, which was a general template of an experience, has kind of skewed to adjust to what I'm doing it [*Publishing House*] and not in a bad way, just like "oh, it's a little different than what everyone expects because every place is a little different." Also, I'm an assistant. I'm not a managing editor yet. Hopefully soon.

But, yeah, myself and my immediate supervisor, who is a managing editor, we are both involved on every project like every single interior and cover that comes through the company. And she gets final say, along with the acquisitions editor that is tied to that project, along with, typically, we will work with one of the junior designers on the layout and cover process, and then an art director, which is like a head designer, will oversee and make the templates and also give final approval. And submit the files. So, that's that group. And, also, the director of operations ultimately sets the pricing and also gives the final okay. So, final okay would be managing editor, head designer, editor associated with project, and director operations.

Athena Edwards:

Something that struck me in some my readings is who all is considered when designing the cover. So, of course, we know audiences and the author, making sure that it's representative of the work and appeals to audiences/potential readers. But I also noticed, some people have referenced the influence of what booksellers are willing to put on their shelves as well, comes into the design. Can you elaborate on that?

Anon. Managing EA:

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. So, I mentioned the sales reps earlier—and we have different sales reps for different markets—so I would say... like Ingram is the I guess mainstay United States marketer that we work with. We also work with a company called Raincoast and they do a lot of our Canadian outsourcing. And we have an international team—this is a little out of my wheelhouse—who they sell to and through. But I know for sure that Raincoast and Ingram are two big partners in marketing. And so, they often want different things based on each title. I know Raincoast, because they are Canadian, love when we highlight our Canadian authors. So that's fun.

In the sales conferences that I've been a part of, strictly watching and taking notes, there's a slew of people involved. Just we have one rep that we communicate with more than, in general, with the rest of the company. But when it comes to the conference, when we present all of our books for an upcoming season, there's about—apart from like the four people of *[Publishing House]*—that would go to this, there's about like 15-20 people that are involved from the sales/outside team that come and give feedback on a number of different things, occasionally. Like all the font is unreadable. It doesn't really make sense. This age group wouldn't understand what's going on here or... There was one book, in particular, that had like too many things on the cover—so they had the title, the author, the subtitle, and a reader line—a reader line is like an additional subtitle—and they were like “neither the subtitle nor the reader line makes sense. We either mesh them together and make something new or delete one and revise the other.” Occasionally, they will talk about cover [designs]. We have quite a few children's books that we publish as well, and workbooks and things like that. And I remember one in particular, it was like a book of mazes or something. And I saw the cover and it was like a mountain with mazes on it. And one of the reps was like, “I don't understand what this is” and I'm like texting my boss. I'm like, “There's a maze on the cover. How can you not see that?” but not everybody, you know, is focusing on the same things and maybe they were seeing it from like a 6-10 year-old perspective of like a 6-10 year-old's not going to notice that detail either. Maybe put a different shape that will highlight it better. So, they focus on those kinds of things.

Occasionally we have books that reprint based on popularity, because they have sold, I don't know, however many copies, and we need to reprint to add badges to them. That's something that you want to consider as well: when the selling number gets high enough, you want to highlight that. Or if they won some sort of award you want to include that on the cover too.

Occasionally we will add a filler title here or there, and we do that a lot with journal. Something that is constantly in the front of the creative directors... like *[creative director's name]*, she oversees an imprint that is mostly journals and lifestyle books and things like that. She's always thinking of “Okay, they like to sell to Target and Anthropologie and other Paper Source stores that will have those journals” that you don't even think [of as] published. They're just a journal in a store and they want to kind of, not necessarily copy the style of the things that are popular right now in those stores, but mimic, stylistically, what is popular in those stores. So, right now, I want to say there's a couple of journals that they're playing with, like animal designs and nature designs, and they try to mimic what is popular right now in those kinds of stores (like an Urban Outfitters type). You know what I mean?

Yeah, so those are the other kinds of things... I don't know, necessarily, if an external representative is needed for that kind of design input. I think that is mostly done in-house, because we see what's being sold and we just think on it ourselves.

Athena Edwards:

What do you mean by filler title?

Anon. Managing EA:

So, a filler title would be like, for example, if we've got... Every month, we would like to, in an ideal world, have about 20 titles being published, but because people turning things in late, the supply chain issues being what they are, etc., it pushes things around. Even if we submit on time, we try to, for budgetary purposes, find a way to meet our quota. And occasionally... It doesn't happen too often, there's usually enough to go around that we can either pull things up if they're already ready in advance, or we push things out. And it tends to balance out well. But a filler essentially would mean like a blank journal where it's more design heavy, but there is no inner text at all to copy edit. So, we really just have to focus on the interior design and the cover.

Athena Edwards:

So, literally a journal. That you would write in.

Anon. Managing EA:

Yes, yeah.

Athena Edwards:

That would explain why there's so many journals in bookstores.

Anon. Managing EA:

They get published, believe it or not. A much quicker process thankfully. On my end.

Athena Edwards:

Going back to the audiences: what functions do you think the different cover matter may perform for audiences? Like of course the title and the author is used to identify. And you mentioned you make a note of awards to show that this has some level of prestige.

Anon. Managing EA:

Yeah exactly.

Athena Edwards:

So, what about the other material? What role do you think they play?

Anon. Managing EA:

I know people say to not judge books by their covers—I am guilty of it myself as a reader—so, I can't speak to that, but I also think, especially now, having worked almost a year in publishing I do think covers are very intentional. And thus, should be judged. And our designers submit for awards and everything. There's a reason covers are made to look nice or look a certain way. It's because the designer takes a lot of time, not just to make it look pretty, but to make it speak to

the interior. And I do think it makes a difference, at least in the titles that I've seen. I'm pulled to them.

Something else that I'm in charge of, I guess, would be going through and reading reviews to make sure no one lists a typo or something that we missed, so we go in, fix it, and reprint. But no one ever really speaks to covers. I don't think I ever see comments of people commenting on covers. But I know that, again, as a reader and as a person who just enjoys books, I follow a bunch of publishing accounts. And I can speak to what other houses are doing. They are also focusing equally on making covers look a certain way. There's certainly a theme, right now, I feel, where there are certainly brighter colors that are being used, certain fonts are being used for a little more minimalist design. And I think that's just the trend for right now but there is intention—so that it kind of looks like the market. You want it to stand out but not too much.

It's complicated, I guess, because there's an audience for everything. So, I feel like a book that does stand out would have a reader, but because you want to, I guess, cast a wider net, there seems to be kind of a focus on streamlining design, at least right now. So, I do think cover plays a very important part.

Back jacket copy... I read backs of books. Again, that's not something that we get comments on... Like "Oh, there's a mistake on the back of the book" or "This didn't make any sense. The blurb didn't match what was on the inside." No one ever says that. And I feel like we work on it, and we put time into it, less so than the cover. Because that matches the reader experience. Like some people read the back. Typically, not everyone does. Most people just pick up a cover and say, "Okay, this looks interesting." A casual reader will probably go about it that way. So, both [cover design and back cover copy] are taken time on, but the cover [design] more so.

And I don't know if I agree, necessarily, with how we spend more time on this than on that... It's kind of a gamble but that's what we have found to work right now.

Athena Edwards:

So, from a publisher's perspective, would it be a good idea to have more reviewers commenting on the cover matter? So you know what their input is?

Anon. Managing EA:

I would say so. I think it would be interesting to have. I'm not a designer so also, I'm like "oh yeah, I'd be cool to hear what the public has to say about this" and then someone says something mean about the design and like... I would take it personally if it was my work. So, I don't know how a designer would feel about it, but I would think it would be interesting to hear some kind of comment on that. Because the comments we get are usually before the finished product so there's like a bunch of comments from sales reps usually leading up to the final [product] or, again, if the author is very picky, the author will chime in quite a bit. But never an audience. I think that would be interesting. Potentially helpful.

Athena Edwards:

I actually hadn't thought about that, until this interview, for things to address [in reviews]. It's interesting. You mentioned that designers do a lot of work to make sure it's representative of the

inside text. Do they actually read the book themselves? Or do they just read like notes to kind of go through key points?

Anon. Managing EA:

So, that's a great question. On our managing editorial side, after we have completed the copy edit review, we also fill out like a detail sheet on the tone of the book. Apart from stylistically, things like “Look out for page numbers. This many times. This many call-outs. The images are found here. Here's the author's email.” We also kind of give a brief overview of what to expect in the book tonally, so they can kind of match that. As far as I know of, they don't read the book themselves. They might read excerpts if they so feel like it. I know that they are swamped with work so, probably not. But yeah, we give them kind of a SparkNotes, if you will, of what's inside, so that they can try as best they can to match. And, of course, when we are in the quality control phase (QC) of the editing process, once the designers and managing ed finish the initial QC, we send it to the author, so they see the inside, before we print. And they can make as many notes as they want like “Oh, hey, actually, I don't like this font for the chapter opener. Can we make this a spread, so that each chapter opens on the right side?” things like that. They have as much of an input in the interior design as well.

Athena Edwards:

Do you foresee any of these approaches changing in the future? Or maybe how they differ between print and digital editions?

Anon. Managing EA:

That's a great question. I have to imagine, yes, that things will probably change because publishing is constantly changing. It *should* anyway because some stuff doesn't change and that's not good. But... In terms of the processes themselves? Or how information is presented on a cover? Or both?

Athena Edwards:

Both. And maybe a little bit about what information gets presented on a cover, because I know throughout history, and even through different genres, the stuff that's on a cover differ pretty greatly.

Anon. Managing EA:

It all depends on what the market decides to prioritize. Because publishing as an industry is resistant to change. A lot of what you have seen, probably doesn't differ too much from what has been on the cover 50 years ago, because that is what works, right. But I have to imagine that because print is still very popular, especially within publishing—not necessarily in print media, like in magazines and things like that, unfortunately. I'm a print book person. I prefer it. There still is a market for it. But I cannot say for sure that that's how it's going to stay forever. Especially with... I'm sure you've read about the supply chain crisis and the paper crisis. Before it was a US-worldwide situation, they were talking about it like months before, because a bunch of crates of books were stuck in another country and we couldn't do anything about it. And there's a paper shortage at two of our printers. And I don't know how sustainable, unfortunately, it is. So, it just kind of depends on the way the pendulum swings.

I think front covers probably won't change too much. Because that information is like what you need, at first glance, to know whether or not you want a book. But maybe, at least for us, I think the back jacket copy could be more specific, potentially, I know that we have an analytics team as well that takes part in crafting the copy of the back jacket. They make sure that certain keywords are incorporated. I don't know that other publishing houses use that method, so I think that's something that [*Publishing House*] does differently—incorporate the analytics team. That could be something that other publishers do in the future to better harness Google SEO and things like that. Yeah, it just depends on what the market chooses to make important.

Athena Edwards:

I know, with certain lines like ‘*New York Times* bestseller’—I know in the reader community there's quite a lot of debate about whether that's significant or not anymore. And I know some publishers that I follow have said similar; that it's not necessarily the best indicator of success. So, could that be potentially something that changes on the cover?

Anon. Managing EA:

I think so, yeah. Especially within the past couple years. I've learned also, like when bestsellers are listed, there are certain symbols to indicate whether bulk purchases were involved in making it a bestseller. And with certain authors, if you can call them that, bulk sales contribute to their bestseller status, which means they likely bought most of the copies to earn their spot. Not necessarily a large readership or a warranted result. So, yeah, I do think it still carries some sort of weight, culturally even. Like we know what you're saying when it's a *New York Times* article. “It made this list, maybe I should check it out, because, like *New York Times* is good.” But there's also debate on the merit and weight of the *New York Times* label itself, I think, overall. It may shift, just personally speaking, I think it may shift to just number of copies sold, because I do think that that is an impressive thing to show. Or maybe like “sold in this many countries.” That can be something that shows like a wide readership versus “this one publication said it was good.”

Athena Edwards:

The stickers on one of my *Eragon* covers has a number of copies number.

Anon. Managing EA:

And I do think that that is something that's impressive right. Or like an award. Awards are not necessarily widely known or understood, right. Like a casual reader may not know what this award means but “Oh, it has an award that must mean something good.” As opposed to, again, just like generic *New York Times* bestseller. So, I feel like those things may be prioritized because they are more widely accepted, I guess. But I don't know that *New York Times* is gonna fade away anytime soon, because the list is still something that like... I know, when I was getting into publishing, I had a mentor who was like, “You need to study the *New York Times* bestseller list every week” and I did, and it was exhausting.

And there are still people that have that mindset: We need to check it because whatever it says on here dictates the market. But there are so many books that have just stayed on there for weeks and weeks and weeks and weeks. Yes, because they're good, but also because I think there is a sense of stability in a certain title. Like there was—I'm sure you'd know this book—*Where the*

Crawdads Sing. I have not read it myself. But it was a bestseller for a million weeks and now it's being made into a show or a film or something. Which is great. But that book was from 2018 or something, and it was still on the bestseller list and very high up. And I do think it's just because there's a sense of stability and understanding. I'm like "yep, this book is good. And people keep saying it's good. So, we're going to keep buying it. And it's in airports." and things like that. It's a matter of exposure also. So, I do think the moniker *New York Times* bestseller still means something, to someone, but I don't know how long that'll be the case.

Athena Edwards:

I see you mentioned about casual reader practices. Is there any sort of distinction made on the publishing side, between a casual reader and an avid reader?

Anon. Managing EA:

I mean, I guess that would come more into play when we think about a series. Because, I think, ultimately, you want to catch as many readers as you can. If it's like a one-off title, or a first-time author, you're just going to have the same amount of effort go into a first-time publishing just to see who is interested in this title and the subject matter. But I think when you move into an author's second work in a series, or maybe like a bundling opportunity or something like that, where you know you have two different authors in the same genre working together, that's when you would think about "Okay, a casual reader may not want to continue buying in this space" but an avid reader [may] like *this* reader [statement/endorsement] or this author had this many reviews and this many copies sold. We want to think about what worked in this title, and highlight that, and build upon that in the next one. So, I think that's kind of where the distinction would be.

Appendix G

Personal Communication: Anonymous Publisher (1-19-2022)

[Athena started off the interview by asking if the interviewee would like to go over anything prior to tackling the pre-set questions.]

Anonymous Publisher:

So, whether you're looking online or in the bookstore, so much has moved online for book sales. Even in just the last 10 years. Books are just getting pushed more and more through like Amazon and Barnes and Noble. Online shopping just in general has grown, so obviously sales too, but this will translate to the actual bookshelves too.

You know, if you walk into a bookstore and/or you go on to Amazon like “I want a new book” and you don't know what you want—your friend hasn't told you “Hey, you need to get [whatever I just read], it's awesome, go pick it up”—if you're just looking. You don't have a target in mind. If you're the publisher, or an independent author, and you're the owner of the book you're trying to sell, you have maybe five seconds to get their attention, right? And I'm being very generous here. Extremely generous here. Especially in a bookstore—now you're talking just the spine. Your eyes are just glazing over whatever—so, you need a cover that's going to jump out, somehow, *boom* I lock on to it.

And probably the five seconds is more for if you're on Amazon—because Amazon will try, if it knows how to sell your book, it will try to throw books at you that are relevant. So, you might lock onto it a little faster just because it's showing you stuff you like. You're in a category you like. So, you're going to slow down a little bit, but it's not very much.

You know there's a whole market of just eBooks. There's plenty of books out there that are just eBooks for whatever reason—either the author or the publisher either isn't producing paperback/hardback books or they're making them just as an option but they're not really pushing them just in case someone's like “ooh, I'd rather have a paperback.” “Here you can order it,” but they're not trying to really sell the paperbacks.

And there's actually genres out there that pretty much sell 95% eBooks, if not more. One of the ones I'm thinking of is Lit-RPG—it's like an offshoot of fantasy where the main characters are in a game—an actual game world. *Ready Player One* would be a more mainstream Lit-RPG. That whole genre is almost all eBooks. You can make paperbacks, and we have made paperbacks, but the number of eBooks we sell far outweighs the paperbacks. And then you have other genres where that's completely flipped.

Getting back to my original point, when you have all these places and people and indie presses/micro-presses that are only pushing basically the eBooks, one of the places they will try and cut costs is the cover. And they just don't sell. People will see a bad cover and they'll immediately think “This is amateur. This is somebody who couldn't get published anywhere else. So, they're throwing out their book there because they're not ‘good enough.’” And this definitely harkens back to twenty/twenty-five years ago, where the only way you were legitimate is if you

went with like the big five—Tor, Penguin, Harlequin, etc.—or one of their offshoots. So, people would go to vanity presses, and they would just slap a bad cover on it and say, “you're a published author” and nobody bought them. And then technology kind of came along and said, “Hey, you can do what's called print-on-demand where, as long as you put together the book, we're basically a printer, we'll print your book, make the cover. And now we have eBooks—and so, you don't even need the printer. You just have to format it in our software, and we'll do it for you.” But you still have to have a cover. So, people just kind of slapped this together—they don't understand the process, and they don't understand how important the cover is. And sometimes they don't have the funds for a good cover, or they don't have the confidence in their own work to say, “I'm going to spend a fairly good chunk of change on a cover.” You know, they say “I'm going to skimp on the cover and spend \$50”—you spend \$50 on a cover, you're going to get a \$50 cover.

So, let's say 10 or 15 years ago, when eBooks first started getting popular and people started to make them—the market got flooded with these independent authors that just threw out books—and I'm not slamming all of them, some of them were really good—but most of them were bad books. So, it got this bad rep if you were an indie author or with a micro-press: “You couldn't make it anywhere else. Your manuscript is probably terrible. Look how bad your cover is.” So, shoppers, through experience or talking to others, or in the back of their head, they would associate bad covers with bad novels.

And honestly that's a fair assumption. If I've got two seconds to look at a book—one looks amazing, one doesn't look amazing—I'm gravitating more towards the book that looks amazing already. It's just the way it works. Our mind is built that way.

Athena Edwards:

I've actually had people suggest to me books, and these are people that know me and my tastes really well, and they would suggest to me books and then I go to look it up and the cover's bad, the description's bad and I'm like “really?”

Anon. Publisher:

Yeah. Yeah. Exactly. So, now imagine it's not your friend telling you that you should read this book. You just stumbled on the page. You're done (as an author or a publisher). That sale is gone. They've made their decision in those few seconds. It's gone.

But you know, micro-presses/independent authors, who are taking their craft seriously, they really want to sell good books. They have good stories. They believe in themselves. They believe in whoever the authors they signed are. They quickly realized, or already knew, or just by looking at big houses, that you have to grab them with a good cover. You have to. You have to get their attention.

And so, now the question is what makes a good cover?

There's style choices. There's even just color schemes. And there's artist choices. Like are we talking a photo manipulation? Where you have really good artists take different photos and crop out certain parts and merge it with others and get the lighting right, so it looks like one seamless

shot kind of thing. Are we talking about a hand-drawn cover? That's expensive, but you can get some really good artists out there that will make the cover look like your character. You can have artists who do abstract stuff or maybe very minimalist and clean design. And where you go is all really dependent on what the book is that you are selling. What I mean by that is—if you have to have a cover that is genre-specific. If I love mystery books, and I just glance at your cover, I need to know this is a mystery book. This is an epic fantasy. This is chick lit. This is historical fiction. I need to know that in half a second. If it doesn't say that to me, I might wander away. Because I'm not looking for historical fiction or whatever.

There's a lot of Facebook groups out there and boards that I kind of look around, just to get ideas and maybe bat around some ideas with the really successful people. I want to know what works. In these discussions, people will say, "This is where my cover art's at" or "This is my book, I'm not getting any sales." And every now and then, you'll get someone with a really beautiful cover but it's not at all what they're selling. So, they'll be like "Here's my young adult sweet romance." And everybody's looking at it like "I thought it was a thriller." Obviously if you direct young adult readers to this, and they see a 'thriller' cover—they're gone. Your sale is gone.

Athena Edwards:

Yea, I would definitely agree. There was a newbie author that I was talking with for a while there and they got a new cover. And it made it look like a manga. Like some sort of psycho-thriller manga and it was a romance novel.

Anon. Publisher:

Right, so, there you go—that's a great example. You know, like who are you trying to attract? Are you trying to attract those readers—if so, then great! Your cover works wonderfully. If that's not your audience, and they happen to pick it up... let's say I have a mystery book and the cover looks like sweet romance. And for some reason a bunch of sweet romance readers buy my book. And they pick it up, don't like it, leave a bunch of negative reviews because they thought it was something else, and it just didn't sell. What's gonna happen is Amazon is going to say that this is a bad sweet romance book—and will stop pushing it. The computer is thinking it's sweet romance, because a bunch of sweet romance readers bought it—but none of them liked it. So, now you are working against the algorithm. On the other hand, let's say that this mystery gets in front of mystery readers, and they all leave some good reviews—now the computer thinks it's a good mystery book and will throw that cover in front of other mystery readers. So, now you have a good cover in front of the target audience—and you don't have to spend as much money to advertise. Which is great. And that's what a good cover will do, and how a bad cover will work against you.

We don't have to worry about that so much in bookstores. But unless you're paying premium space to have the front cover out-facing, you're looking at the spine. So, now you have to have a spine that grabs the attention and looks like "ooh, that's something I want." So, how do I do that? Basically, you're looking at your font choices, and it needs to be crisp and clean. And you'll probably want a color that sticks out but not be jarring.

This is probably three or four years ago, when Lit-RPG was really starting to get moving and getting big. Serious Lit-RPGs had these really dark covers, like greys and blacks and dark navy.

So, this one guy, working on his break-out novel, when he worked with the cover designer, they went with this pretty much all white-color scheme. The book cover was white. The spine was white. And it was a really interesting design, the artwork was beautiful. But what really stood out was that it was the only white rectangle. So, when your brain is just scanning and filtering out all the blues and blacks, and then suddenly sees white, which is different, and [your brain] gravitates towards it. And you'll probably click because you're like "what's this?"

I guess this is probably the natural point to talk about the blurb, either on the back matter or, if you're talking online sales, basically the blurb for when people see what's this book about over at the top. It's one of 3 parts of the trifecta of how to sell a book.

And the three magic ingredients: one, you have to find a market that's hot—you have to find a market that has money, with readers; you have to have a cover that speaks to those readers; and then you have to have a blurb that tells the readers what's the book about and makes them want to read it. That's the flow of the sale.

There's this guy, Brian Meeks, who is a really big kind of independent author/editor, and he works with a lot of people just developing their copy for that blurb for either the back matter or sales page. At first, I didn't believe him; because I didn't know any better, until I really started to do my research and practice. A lot of the big publishers, they write really terrible blurbs. Or at least they used to. Because they have this huge powerhouse where they could get the book in front of all sorts of people. They have great advertising budgets, so they could kind of not focus on the blurb so much. Especially if they were signing big authors, because you know, if you have Stephen King with you, who cares what the blurb says. It's a Stephen King book. You've got a bajillion sales just by stamping his name on the book.

Athena Edwards:

The name sells it.

Anon. Publisher:

But when you're small fry, relatively speaking, the back matter matters. You've attracted your buyer, they picked up your book, you now have maybe 20 seconds to cinch the deal. So, what a lot of people do, a mistake, is they think that the sales page and the blurb is where you write a synopsis—you tell everything that happens in the book, the big characters and that's completely wrong. Totally wrong. All the back matter and the sales page is supposed to do is get you to buy the book. That's it. Period. What I've come up with, and I've seen a lot of other people do this as well, is story structure-wise I won't go past the first act of the book. So, it's basically "These are the major characters, the good guy and the bad guy. This is what the conflict's about." And you really want to pull on people's emotions to where they're like "ooh, that sounds really interesting! What's going to happen?" That's what we want to elicit out of them. "I have to know what happens when they reach the end of this." And you have to do that in as few words as possible. Which is really hard to do. I mean I usually aim for about 120 words, at most, so you're talking two paragraphs, maybe three. If I can sell the book idea in three to four sentences, then I feel like I'm on fire, like this is great. Because it's just where we're at attention-span wise as a society. We don't have long attention spans. So, if you write a novel for your sales page and your back matter, people are just gonna glaze over it and you lose sales.

Athena Edwards:

So, it's not a synopsis; it's going past the first act to grab those hooking points?

Anon. Publisher:

And another that you want to do, that we found that works really well, is you want to keep it flowing in a vertical fashion—so, like our first, technically, one or two paragraphs aren't more than a few words or a sentence, so you have a sentence and then you have a next sentence, and these are your hooks that you're using to hook the reader in. So, then they kind of build on this subconscious to keep reading. You could reformat that whole idea of what I wrote into just one big paragraph, and it just doesn't feel right to the eyes. It doesn't read as well. It doesn't seem to flow as well. It's not as easy. And you gotta make things easy for the reader. That's just the way it works in sales.

[Redacted references to the publishing house's website and book listings to maintain anonymity]

And kind of another thing with the back is—you know if you're talking about a web page—theoretically, I can go as long as I want. If I'm talking about the back of the book, I literally have physical space I'm limited to. I still have to have room for my bar code. Maybe one or two reviews from like *Publisher Weekly*, I want to brag about the book. Or some super popular author said, “you have to read this book” kind of thing. I have all that, so I really have to keep it short on the back and that's just the way it goes.

The other thing about having a good blurb is just, in terms of publishing process, is once you've made the book and you've got them printed, you have what's known as advanced reader copies, and those are what go out to like the trade viewers like *Circus* and *Publishers Weekly* or *San Francisco Book Review*. All that. And so, it's a little more than just sticking your book into an envelope and throwing it down and hoping they read it. You still have to write a good pitch letter you still have to say, “this is our new book, please read it blah blah blah you'll love it because...” and we use basically that blurb or that back matter, and we have to tweak it obviously. But it's the same idea—short and snappy, 120-250 words, at most, because we have to entice their editors the same way we entice the reader. We have to say, “We think you'll love this young adult book here's what it's about,” and we want the editor to get to the bottom of that letter and be like “oh my God, yes, I have to read it. Send me the book.” Same idea. Like I said it's just a variation on the back matter.

Do you have any questions so far? I'm just kind going all over the place.

Athena Edwards:

You're answering several of my laid-out questions—if you want to go on with your line of thought, we can keep doing that or I can start asking the remaining questions I have here.

I guess two questions really quick from the spiel you just gave is: Do you think those reviews that you just mentioned, like *Publishers Weekly*, do you think those on the cover are important to readers?

Anon. Publisher:

Oh yeah, yeah, for sure. And it all goes back to the idea that a good cover has a good book inside of it. I'm going to go on a tangent for a second—you can also have gorgeous covers and *Publisher Weekly*, and I know probably some other sites do it, they'll just have sections on their website or wherever that say, “here are the best covers for Summer 2022.” And then they'll just list gorgeous covers. And this is a competition of you know thousands and thousands—and people just want to check out the covers. So, if you can get your cover on there because you have one of the best—that's just free advertising. People are gonna be like “oh my God that's a great cover, I'm gonna go click on let's see what this book is about.” And everybody is wired this way—we make gut decisions, all the time. So, if an editor or *Publisher Weekly* gets your press kit and whatever and they look at the cover and they think “oh wow that's a great cover” that's a great reaction. You are more likely to get them to read your book. On the other hand, if they look at the cover and they cringe—they're probably gonna chuck it. I mean they get, I don't know, 500/1,000 submissions a month? I mean they can't review them all. You need every edge.

There is definitely a difference in return, between a bad cover and a mediocre cover. And a mediocre cover and a good cover. And a difference between a good cover and a great cover. I mean you can have a good cover you can spend, let's say, 300 bucks. 300 bucks will get you a pretty good cover. There's a lot of artists out there, that are freelance, especially if you're looking at outside the US, where cost of living isn't nearly as high. You can get a good cover for 300 bucks. Is it gonna be an amazing cover? No, but it would be a good cover. If you were to just double that—so, you say I can spend 300-600 or even maybe 900-1,000—you will have one of the top artists in the game, companies in the game, throw you a cover that is just gorgeous and you'll just attract more people because of everything I've said. You know let's say your \$300 cover (and I'm just throwing these numbers out there, I don't know what it might be) gets three out of 10 people who look at it and click on your link. With a great cover, you might get 80% of people, if you have your targeting right, to at least click on the link. It becomes a numbers game. How many people can I drive to my sales page? While an expensive cover is more money up front, because more people are clicking on your stuff faster, you're gonna recoup those losses better

That happens a lot in the comic book industry. That's why Marvel used to pay top dollar for their artists. Because a great artist was worth it. Because your target audience wanted to see cool heroes and they want to see them in great poses. And there's an art to comics. And a middle-tier artist can still draw Superman, Batman, X-Men, and Iron man, but they just won't look quite right. The scenes won't look quite as exciting. And it's the same thing with the cover.

And then the other thing I wanted to kind of touch on is there are people who have had good books with bad covers. And then they've decided to kind of basically re-launch the book. You know, they'll pull it down or do like a soft reboot and they'll basically, just change the cover. You know, maybe they'll work on the blurb too. But maybe sometimes people are like “hey, your blurb is fine. Your cover's just God awful. I would never click this link. I would never buy it because your cover's awful. It looks stupid. It looks amateur.” And they will change the cover to a good cover and then their sales will just take off. And this happens a lot. So, there's a lot of just hard data out there, showing that you can have the same book—bad cover doesn't sell, good cover sells amazing. It happens all the time.

Athena Edwards:

Well, it's good to have like actually like seen that firsthand happening. That's cool.

[Redacted, for anonymity purposes, references to books from the publishing house being eyed for a cover redesign and books that made Publisher Weekly's best cover lists. Also redacted are statements about how, for their own book, the cover art inspired the book and was bought ahead of writing the story.]

Anon. Publisher:

As long as I'm thinking about it, another kind of requirement for good covers, especially if you're talking about series, and that's what we really try to focus on, is you want your series to all easily be identifiable together. And you see this all over the place. Like all the *Lord of the Rings* usually have the same kind of cover. All the *Harry Potter's* will have the same kind of cover. And you can line them up together. And you know so that way if you're in the bookstore, you're browsing, or Amazon throws something at you, and you see something that your brain is already like "Oh, I know this" and then you go "oh wow. A new book in the series is out."

[Redacted, for anonymity, are examples from the publishing house's own catalog].

And then the same thing will happen if you—it's not gonna hurt it too much—but, if you have book A, you know, first book in the series, and it looks one way, and you have book 2, something that looks completely different, you're going to see the sales dip more than they should. Again, there's data for that. Probably not as much as like a completely off cover, because people reading book one will already be looking for book 2. But if your brain doesn't pick up who the author is, you're not gonna recognize the cover and you're just gonna kinda skim by it. That's kind of the science behind it, I guess.

Athena Edwards:

Going back to some basics (because we jumped right into the content there): Do you mind telling me a little bit about your experience with book publishing?

Anon. Publisher:

So, I got my first taste of how the publishing industry works when I was trying to land an agent [for their book]. You know, because that's what you did 20 years ago: you landed an agent. There weren't all these other options. And so, I learned all about how to, and how not to, write a query letter. I learned all about the first five pages, how to craft a story, all that kind of stuff. And I started noticing more and more people in writers' groups and whatever saying they were once published authors, traditionally, and now they wanted to break out on their own. And some people had done it successfully, and some of the independent authors were making just tons of money. And I was like "well, that's pretty impressive." So, I basically decided to go out on my own to see if I could make it work, and I made it work. Along those lines, and as that was unfolding, I was like "Oh, this is really cool I can do this on my own," one of my friends on Facebook made a funny post like "Would it be crazy if I started my own publishing company?" and it was really funny because I was like having that thought "I could publish a book," so I messaged her, I was like "Are you serious? Because I've been kind of thinking about this for a

few weeks now.” We pulled one other guy in. And so, we launched [*Publishing House*] and now we have what we have.

[Redacted, for relevance, commentary about the legality, financials, expansion, and goal/mission considerations of starting and maintaining one’s own press.]

So, I had to do a lot of homework—how does publishing work? And so, one of the first things you learn is it’s hard to get into bookstores. It’s really hard to get into bookstores. It’s really hard to get publicity in big areas without spending a lot of money.

[Redacted, for relevance, inquiries about the interviewer’s interest and prior knowledge of the publishing process. Also redacted, for relevance, information about writing, querying, agents, etc. done prior/separate from book cover creation and reception.]

As we go through the editing process, we’ll start looking for cover art. And we have a few [artists] in our stable now that we work with almost exclusively. so, we have really good cover designers. We start working on the cover and then start pitching them to trade news maybe 4 months out.

But the way compensation works is really weird. So, like the bookstores don’t actually buy your book. They don’t actually buy the book. They sell them on consignment. The vast majority of books, especially if you’re talking about books that they stock on shelves are done by consignment. Let’s say Barnes and Noble down the street is going to pick up [*Book Title*], so they order 30 copies from our distributor (who’s Ingram). Ingram ships the books and they “buy” the books in advance at a wholesale price—let’s say 55% off the cover price. And then they hold those books on their bookshelves and they sell however many. At some point in time, before the established return date, they can then say, “The rest of these books aren’t sold, we’re not gonna stock these anymore because they’re taking up space. We’re sending them back to you.” And you’ll probably have to pay for shipping on the way back, as a publisher. Or you could tell them, “Don’t worry about shipping it back to us—you just have to destroy it.” So that they can’t sell it. But nobody else can. But we’re saving shipping costs.

Athena Edwards:

But then wouldn’t you be losing manufacturing costs?

Anon. Publisher:

Yes, yeah. You’re eating the loss of the returns for sure. The question is, do I want the books back in my warehouse on a chance that maybe I could send them somewhere else? Or am I going to be like “I’ve sold all I can, realistically speaking, there’s no point in you sending them back. Let’s destroy [them].” It’s how much money you want to lose? It’s a gamble a lot of times. So, that’s where the consignment part comes in.

If you’re an author and you walk into even an independent bookstore, they’re going to run up some sort of same kind of contract: “We’ll front you \$8 for each book. You’re going to sell at \$14. So, every time a book is sold, we’ll owe you \$6. At the end of three months, if we want to, we can tell you to pick up the rest of these books and we don’t have to pay you for them.”

[This process is] kind of like the gatekeeper to make sure that only big top five publishers can operate like this. Because they can do massive print runs right, so they can print out 10,000 copies of a book and get the cost per unit down to \$1 a pop because they're doing these massive print runs. So, they spend \$10,000 they get 10,000 books, they can now offer the bookstore “hey we'll give you 55% off, which is what you're asking me to do. And you can do returns, because we know it doesn't matter if you return 25% of them.” And that's about an industry standard, you can expect about 25 to 30% of your books that are being sold like this to be returned.

If you're a print-on-demand or you're a small-press and wanna do small print runs, your individual cost is going to be anywhere from \$4 to \$5 a book—that that's a huge difference. And I can only sell the book for \$15—if I'm lucky, you know, maybe. So, you know I have \$15—I already gave a cut to the bookstore, as well as my distributor so now maybe I have \$9 to play with in my pocket but my print run is, if it's a small press you know, a small run is now \$4, so now my \$4 goes away from that. So, now I have \$5 left. I still have to recoup my initial costs, I gotta pay my author. I gotta pay my advertising. I gotta pay general expenses. So, it unravels very fast as a viable model for small presses to be in the traditional bookselling model. Until you can get a massive print run for a book, you really can't do that. But what we can do is say no returns. And you can also cut their wholesale price down to about 30%. So, what that's gonna basically do is you will not be stocked on the bookshelves because they're not going to order in advance, but you will be on the catalog.

[Redacted, for relevance, information on the ordering, printing, and distribution process.]

The other way to make this work, as a small press, and we have done this, and I tell all my authors this—I say, “If you're local, go through local bookstores and talk to the manager. Tell them, if they're willing to stock your book, I will give you the same discount that you would normally get but come through us—that way I don't have to pay our distributor their cut.” And I can make that work.

When it comes to like reviews and trade reviews. You typically, again, this goes back to the advanced reader copy, we like to have our artwork on the advanced reader copy because again it's just a just another chance for readers to go “ooh, I love this.”

[Redacted, for relevance, a hypothetical timetable of editing, sending out copies to readers, and getting reviews/endorsements ahead of printing.]

Athena Edwards:

So, obviously, you're one of the head people of *[Publishing House]*. How hands-on are you with the cover design and the cover materials that go on the cover?

Anon. Publisher:

We work very closely, all of us and the author, with the artist. So, what I do is, I talk to my author. “What covers do you like? You know, you're the author, tell me—I hope you like your genre because that's what you're writing in—and show me some covers you like, for your genre.” You know, most of the time they pick ones that I'm like “ooh I love that cover”.

And so, I put together basically an art design document and I tell our artists, I said, “This is what the book’s about.” I don’t give them a synopsis. These are the major themes, kind of major characters, these are the covers we like. This is the author. These are maybe some general ideas. And then we let our designer go at it. And they usually give us drafts, you know quick drafts. And then we just keep going back and forth until we get iterations closer and closer to what we want, then we finalize it, and then we let them run with it. And that process of getting a draft to “Yes, this is the final one with this final concept” doesn’t take long. At least, if you know what you’re asking for. By the time we approach our designers you know between everybody at *[Publishing House]* and the author, we have a pretty good idea what we want, you know. But by the same token, we respect our cover designers as being the experts in their field, so we say, “These are the elements we like but if you think of something better or if you’re like ‘no, this isn’t gonna work because X, Y, Z’ we will definitely respect [your] opinion.” Like that. “You’re the expert, make it work.”

[Redacted, for anonymity, a specific example from the publishing house and how elements of the book design were brought up, incorporated, and changed throughout the design process.]

You know when you’re willing to pay more than a few hundred dollars—when you’re going to pay 6/7/8/\$900 for a cover, you get really picky about who you work with. So, I know our books are in good hands when I hand them off to these designers. I don’t have to worry about it, I don’t have to micromanage. And I don’t *want* to micromanage.

Athena Edwards:

Micromanaging isn’t really conducive to creativity.

Anon. Publisher:

Yea, it so isn’t. It really isn’t. Oh my gosh.

You give them a general direction and let the artist do their thing—and it hasn’t failed us yet. Sometimes they’ll give us 2 or 3 drafts and we’ll just kind of go “we like this from A, this from B. We don’t like this from C. Can we kind of merge all of those ideas together and then come back with another cover? Yes, yes, yes, perfect. Just adjust this name here. And *boom*, we’re done.”

[Redacted, for relevance, a music composer analogy.]

Athena Edwards:

My final question, unless your response spurs on more, is do you foresee any of how you go about the cover matter or what stuff winds up on a cover matter changing in the future? And this includes digital listings as well.

Anon. Publisher:

I would say yes and no, because it’s always going to be important to grab your audience somehow you know. Maybe, down the line, it’s videos or whatever—but still the same idea, you

have an image that conveys your book, right? And what people are looking for, even in the same genre, changes, as time progresses. If you go back 10 years ago, 20 or 30 years for sure, you can look at the same genre and see cover progressions—that’s what people expect. A really good way to look at this if go back and dig up the old *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Forgotten Realms*, and the *Dragonlands* books from the 80s and look at their covers. And that’s when they started selling really well. Like RA Salvatore’s *Dark Elf* series—his original covers were a certain way. But as time progressed, the covers changed along with other things—because the readers were expecting different types of artwork. And they even went back to the original books and the original books have changed to keep up with the stylistic expectations of the readers. So, there’s like half a dozen variations for covers to the first book. And part of it is reader expectations, but, at least when it comes online, some of the really big hitters, even in the indie world, they’re like “yea, every now and then I have to rebrand my really old books.” Even if they’re really good books that have sold really well—they’ll re-do the covers just so that people who have seen them before but haven’t bought [them because] they’re mentally fatigued seeing that old cover. And now there’s a new cover, so now maybe they’ll click on it. So, I don’t think that’s ever going to change. You’re always going to have to redo the covers or you’re gonna have to move with standards or expectations but that changes really slow. It’s not like you buy a current cover today, and next month you’re like “Oh man, I gotta redo the cover. It’s not speaking to the audience.” But I can see 10 years from now, you know, especially for some of these series are in their 9/10/12th book, I can see us going back and be like all right [Book Title] time to redo your covers. All right, [Book Title] it worked 10 years ago we got to come up with something else. One of my all-time favorite sci-fi books, *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, there’s at least 10 cover variations.

Athena Edwards:

I know the *Dune* series recently went through another round of redesigns.

Anon. Publisher:

I haven’t looked at it personally, but it doesn’t surprise me at all.

Athena Edwards:

I actually spent extra money to get the anniversary edition just because of how gorgeous the cover was. I was just like “I’m kind of upset with this book cover, but I still want to read it, so I guess I’m stuck with it.” And then I went to the register, and he pointed out the anniversary edition. I was sold.

Anon. Publisher:

And you know anniversary editions or special editions. They tend to be a little pricier and look a little nicer. And part of that pricier niceness is having an awesome cover.

So, just to kind of reinforce how important a good cover is, with actual data that I can verify, we know this because it’s us. When the second book came out, my breakout novel—I had no fanbase, I didn’t know what I was doing marketing-wise or anything like that, but the cover was gorgeous. When I started advertising, it was 100% the cover and then the blurb. My mind could not wrap around how fast it was selling when it first came out that summer, it was like the number one wished for item in Amazon for the fantasy genre. You know for a literally a no-

name author, I was like thrilled I was like “oh my God” and that's when it really sunk into me, “you need a gorgeous cover.” I mean, if it had been a mediocre cover, a cover from some of the other artists, I was looking at “like I could get it to work” it wouldn't have seen that level of success. The other one that I can say for sure, was very cover-driven was *[Book Title]*—the author had no fanbase at the time. No newsletter. No marketing experience. No anything. But the sales are very driven online, and so we researched what readers of this genre want in a cover and we contacted one of the main artists of that genre. And as soon as we started advertising on Amazon, we got pre-orders really fast. And there was no advertising outside of it.

[Redacted, for uncertainty of the information, a sidebar about selling books in physical stores.]

You get a cover and a blurb that speaks to that audience, and it takes off.

Appendix H

Personal Communication: Anonymous Illustrator (2-21-2022)

Athena Edwards:

To start us off, do you mind telling me a little bit about your experiences with book publishing?

Anonymous Illustrator:

Sure. I started doing illustration work commercially in 2006 and have intermittently been involved with projects related to books, since then. So, sporadically with some interior illustrations and then cover illustrations for novel/paperback type of stuff. And beginning in 2018, I started to dabble in children's and youth publishing, which would be probably more commonly what most people think about when thinking about book illustration. So, I have intermittently worked in both interior illustrations and cover illustrations over the past, I guess, almost 15 years now.

Athena Edwards:

And is this freelance or through a publishing house?

Anon. Illustrator:

Freelance work. But I'm usually hired via a publishing house or a freelance designer working for a publishing house—but never directly employed by the publishing house. I'm always taken on as a freelance contractor.

Athena Edwards:

So, what all does an illustrator do? Where does your job kind of start and end when compared to, say, the designer?

Anon. Illustrator:

I would say that by the time the project gets to me, a designer probably has already spent some time determining the look and feel and they would have assigned me that job because they've already determined that my work would be a good fit for the tone that they're trying to do. I would say I'm, generally speaking, towards the end of the process and I'm often given a pretty defined brief as to what they're looking for. I would say that for my earlier projects, I would not be involved in the typography or anything like that; I would just be doing the image and the designer would be sort of taking the image and putting the whole package together.

Athena Edwards:

Do you have to take into account where the other cover matter is going (like the blurbs and stuff like that)?

Anon. Illustrator:

Of course, yes. So, usually either they'd send me a template or, if they don't have a template ready, they'll sort of give me a sense of what does need to go on there and then I might have to do my own rough mockup of a template to kind of account for that. But usually, I'm given at

least a rough template to work with, yeah. And if it's not given at the beginning, then I'll be given it after I submit my first round of sketches or something like that.

Athena Edwards:

So, this briefing that the designer gives you—how detailed is it? Do they tell you what the image is, or do they just give you keywords and themes and tone and etc.?

Anon. Illustrator:

I've had both. I've had briefs that are pretty open-ended. I did a series of covers, and in that case, it was more or less up to me how I wanted to approach it. I definitely had to submit concepts for each of those covers but went through an approval process. That would be on one end of the spectrum. But I've also had it where they've essentially come up with a concept for me and they literally just want me to produce the imagery for a concept that that they've pre-approved.

Athena Edwards:

Beyond the brief, what is your process of designing the illustration? You mentioned earlier about the sketches and making sure it's along the right path. Do you ever look at other book covers for inspiration, or do you just focus on the work at hand?

Anon. Illustrator:

In the past, when I was just doing book covers every once in a while, I wasn't looking at a lot of book covers. I was just working out of my own sense of interest, I suppose, and not super in-tune with what was going on in the book cover world. Because with those jobs, my part to play was pretty late in the process and there was a spectrum they were already looking for. So, it was really bringing my own look and feel that they were presumably looking for, based on my portfolio. But I think since I've gotten more into children's books, which means that I'm involved with the project in a much more in-depth way and for much longer, I'd say that in the past couple years, I have become a lot more interested and looking at covers in general, especially for the children's book and youth market. There is so much marketing and thinking that goes into them. And I also now have friends who work as designers in the book publishing industry, and so that's something that we talk about more. Whereas, earlier in my career, I probably just didn't know what happened behind-the-scenes as much, but I have become more generally interested in it and that's just because I have more conversations about it and have spent more time with books recently.

Athena Edwards:

You mentioned that since you started working on children's books, and you're illustrating throughout the book now, that it's gotten more in-depth. Can I take that to mean that when you were just doing a cover, it wasn't very collaborative, it was more back-and-forth?

Anon. Illustrator:

I think if you're doing a book cover for, say, a novel, your cover illustration is very much in more of a supporting role because it really is about the novel and someone's work that has been going on for probably many years. So, my role to play is definitely more supportive. But if you're working on a children's book the author is your partner and collaborator so that's much more of an intertwined relationship between word and image. And so, I think my work as an illustrator and

way that I'm telling the story shapes what that book is in a much stronger way, and so I think I have more of a stakeholder role in what the book ends up looking like as far as cover artwork goes for sure.

Athena Edwards:

I can definitely see that.

Anon. Illustrator:

And the editors and publishers, if they hand you a manuscript for a children's book, they often will give you quite an open-ended beginning to give you a chance to see what you'll do with it. They don't necessarily have a pre-conceived idea about what that book is going to look like so they are looking for the illustrator's concepts and ideas for what it actually shapes up to be. I find that's more so the case than with novel book cover jobs.

Athena Edwards:

When you're illustrating for the cover, is it just you create the sketch, send it to the designer, the designer tells you what they like and what they don't, and then send it back for revisions? How is that collaboration between you two?

Anon. Illustrator:

I'd say if I was doing just a single book cover, that's not too dissimilar than what my typical editorial process would be. I'm not sure what's expected/normal today, but certainly when I was trained in the early 2000s, it was standard practice to provide three solid concepts if they are looking for concept work from you. And then essentially, they choose one and they might have some feedback or edits that go along with that and then, occasionally, you'll do the final artwork, and they may ask for a revision. But the process is generally pretty straightforward. I suppose a couple times it may not end up getting used or something happens like the job gets cancelled or something like that. But that's typically how it goes.

Athena Edwards:

Working as an illustrator both on covers and children's books, and having friends that are also illustrators/designers, what functions do you think a cover might serve for an audience?

Anon. Illustrator:

I mean it is an advertisement for the contents of the book, I suppose, so that's pretty straightforward. For a novel, that isn't intended to be a picture book, I think it's also an opportunity to articulate to someone a feeling or idea about the book. It's maybe a third way of telling the story—one, being to actually read the book, another way would be the content of the title itself. And so, this is a third way: visual communication. And I think what's interesting, if you're thinking about novels and different editions, it's something that is variable, and I think it's an opportunity to speak to audiences in their own contemporary times. Books that get republished over and over again—the novel itself might take on a different meaning and I think that you can skew it to different audiences in different times with that image. So, I think it's a way to communicate the content to people, whatever the context is. It can also go for different markets and different countries that the book gets translated for—they might need something

different so. I think it's a pretty interesting way to translate what that material might be depending on who the audience is so it can make it appealing to a lot of different types of people.

Athena Edwards:

Do you foresee any changes to what makes a good cover in the future?

Anon. Illustrator:

It's one of those things that can be reinvented, right? So, you're not going to rewrite the novel. You're not going to change the title. But you could completely reinvent the cover to make that story appealing to a new audience, which is pretty interesting. I mean, stories can come in and out of relevance sometimes, and so certainly the cover can reflect those changes right and re-contextualize a story for a new time which is pretty cool.

I, myself, do a lot of a e-reading when I read novels and so something I've thought about a lot of is "what's the purpose if your book is in an EPUB format?" And I think that there are some interesting opportunities for working with e-paper. There could even be an opportunity for covers that are time-based or in sequences just like how a lot of editorial illustration has gone online and some of it has become time-based or animated. I suppose we could see if people are consuming books in that way. So, I'd be curious to know if that is still something that people think about or are we thinking more about people who really love printed books? And so, are we going where it's more of a tactile thing? Will design become even more and more in terms of material quality and images? Sort of handheld objects? I suppose there's space for both of these things. It doesn't seem like books are going away.

Athena Edwards:

Yeah, the pandemic has proved that.

Anon. Illustrator:

It's fun to speculate for sure. I think it seems like people are still very hungry for images. There are lots of places to put pictures, and maybe even more. Now that graphic novels and picture books have become less sort of silo-ed into the world for children and teens—I don't know if we will see more books that have interior illustrations or chapter header illustrations. Images that go beyond covers. I don't know.

Athena Edwards:

I've been seeing that with some of my works from Asia that have recently got official English translations. Even though they're novels, they've got interior illustrations and people have been going crazy for it.

Anon. Illustrator:

Yea, so I wonder if we'll be heading into more of a phase where people are just more hungry for more imagery and books that are very rich and ornate and more sumptuous. I hope. I think it'd be very cool.

If there's a demand for it.

Athena Edwards:

Just look at book boxes. Books subscription boxes. With all those extra illustrations and the bonus covers.

Anon. Illustrator:

For sure.

Athena Edwards:

So, yeah, I can definitely see that.

You mentioned a few times “time-based covers.” What do you mean by that?

Anon. Illustrator:

Just like animated things. Things that move in time. If we're delivering books in a digital format, I suppose there's room to make images time-based—moving or sound. I don't know if that's just gimmicky or if there is an appetite for that. Or maybe it would just be annoying? I don't know.

Athena Edwards:

I can see potential in that because (I read a lot of different things) my web comics actually have started incorporating impactful animation in certain scenes. So, I can see that moving forward. That'd be cool.

Anon. Illustrator:

Or if there are books that need maps, or they have special words that are made up and you have a glossary at the back—maybe there might be links or ways to interact where you can pull those things up. Embedded imagery into key places in the texts where they might be useful to reference. Nested stories. I have no idea.

Athena Edwards:

You mentioned how you've seen these approaches [to illustrating and cover design] changing in general, but what about *your* process, or that of your friends? Do you see your processes changing anytime in the future?

Anon. Illustrator:

I was taught by people who learned to do things a certain way, and I did all my major learning kind of as digital work was coming into play, but I did mostly learn to do things by hand. And I have become quite stuck in my ways, but I have had some experience teaching undergraduates fairly recently. And they are digital kids. I think a few of them might be interested in learning how to do things by hand, but it makes sense that that they all are very iPad-savvy and enjoy working with digital tools and are really mostly excited about doing their work that way. And I think there's a lot of merit to that. And the work is essentially delivered like that, so my way of doing things involves some very not clean process of analog and digital techniques. It's slower for sure. And more labor intense. But it's just the way that I do things, so I don't know if it'll change. I might just sit back and be excited to watch what the people who are working more digitally do. I don't deny that digital things are part of my process, but I've been picking up my ink pens lately and actually regressing back to working only in ink. So, that might mean that my work might be better suited for print or those types of things, but I think it's exciting that there's probably lots of opportunity for people who do all kinds of things.

Athena Edwards:

Do you see anything about the you know parent work, besides the brief from the designer? Do you ever get to actually look at the book that you're creating the cover for?

Anon. Illustrator:

Sorry, do I ever get to see the final product?

Athena Edwards:

When you're designing the book cover, do you ever get to see any of the original content or is your only lead the brief that the designer gives you?

Anon. Illustrator:

If I have the time, I always read the content. I don't know that everybody does that, but if the timeline allows for it, I will always read the book. Always, if I can. That's important to me. Part of it is because I really enjoy reading and I think, to comment effectively and do it justice, and especially if they're asking me for concepts, it would be important that I actually read the book. And so, if I can, I'll do it. But there's been a few times, where there's no time. But usually, in those cases, the brief will be pretty defined they'll be like "this is the idea that that we want" and then you'll just do it.

Athena Edwards:

More of a personal question: how have you felt about your illustrations being on book covers when you see them in stores?

Anon. Illustrator:

Mixed. I think lots of artists can be really hard on themselves. So, some [covers] hold up for me and some you're like "oh man, I wish I did this differently." I don't know that I've seen a lot of my books in stores. I'm just about always sent a few copies of anything that I do, and so I always end up with copies of things. Occasionally, the type might, in my opinion, be a poor match and I'll be like "Oh, why did they choose that" or other things like that that I don't really have control over. So, it can be mixed but it's always satisfying to see work in print. That is, I think, essentially the finished product. Always rewarding, I would say, overall.

Appendix I

Personal Communication: Anonymous Designer (2-17-2022)

Athena Edwards:

To start us off, do you mind telling me a little bit about your experiences?

Anonymous Designer:

I got into publishing stuff probably starting in my undergrad degree at *[University Name]*, where I went for my undergrad and my Masters, there's a publishing practicum two-course series that you can take and work with *[a local publisher]*.

[Redacted, for anonymity, details of the editing, design, and publishing components of the coursework as well as their assistantship doing layout and being a first reader at a literary magazine afterwards].

And so, I did some freelance work for *[local publisher]* for a while and then ended up getting hired by *[another publishing company]* full-time when I finished my graduate degree, and then I worked there for about three/three and a half years. I started off doing a bunch of different publishing stuff there, essentially as a publishing assistant. I was pretty much, off the bat, doing design work—designing covers, designing type setting in books, designing promotional materials, designing all sorts of stuff—as well as doing little bits of proofreading, advertising, stuffing envelopes. I did their bookkeeping. You know, in the world of independent presses, you kind of have to have people who can do many, many things at the same time. So, I worked with *[them]* for a while and then I went freelance and was doing book design and promotional design as a sort of side hustle for myself as a freelancer. I worked for a variety of different presses across Canada doing freelance stuff for them different genres. I worked for some nonprofits doing some freelance graphic design stuff for them as well. So, primarily in the design part of it. But I have done editorial consulting and stuff like that, as well, and then just recently, because I got overwhelmed by having a full-time job and also trying to freelance, I have retired. Retired from book design anyways. For the time being.

Athena Edwards:

Understandable.

Anon. Designer:

That's sort of my saga. I sort of fell into it through a variety of different things from school and then ended up doing it full-time and then got out of it full-time just to do it as a side thing for a while.

Athena Edwards:

Since you retired from book design are you primarily focusing on editing right now, or...?

Anon. Designer:

No. I'm doing an unrelated day job. The thing about the publishing industry, especially in indie publishing, is that it's not necessarily in terms of employment, the most stable, well-paying,

benefits-giving type of industry. Based on my family situation, I kind of had to make the decision that as much as I liked aspects of the publishing industry, it is not necessarily an industry that is, I think, sustaining of a lot of people. Just the fact that a lot of it runs on grants. And there may be some people who are getting well-paid in the publishing industry and have benefits and all those things, but I think, for myself, it was just not stable enough for me. Especially because I was a freelancer. That's not to say that I wasn't being paid fairly by my freelance clients (because I'm setting my own rates) but I think there's also something to be said about the kind of invisible work of freelance where there's a lot of juggling of you have to do your own bookkeeping, and you're doing your own billing, and doing your taxes is complicated, and you have to go out and get the jobs that you want to do and figure out how many you can do. I've had times where I've overwhelmed myself with taking on too much or not enough, and so the money is not consistent. So, unfortunately, it's just one of those things where I can do it for a little bit, but it just wasn't sustainable.

Athena Edwards:

Gotcha. When you were working as a book designer, in what ways did you approach the cover matter?

Anon. Designer:

So, it kind of depends on the client; depends on the book. Working with different clients, you get different experiences. So, as a freelancer, it was actually kind of cool because I worked with a bunch of different clients, and I would see how different publishing companies work. Sometimes, some clients would give me a manuscript and say “well, what do you think? Where do you want to go with this?” and it was very, very open. Which can be a bit of a blessing and a curse because you can come up with your own ideas and kind of pitch them on where you want to go with it and sort of run with things. But also, if you don't have ideas or if you're going in the wrong direction, then it can kind of have you spinning your wheels a little bit. And then you have other clients, where they will give you a full design brief—“this is exactly what I want.”

Some of the design briefs are, again, more useful than others because they come out of a collaboration of sometimes the author, sometimes the author with the editor, or the author with the editor and the publisher. They present you with a design brief that kind of gives you a little bit of direction. I think, generally, design briefs are helpful because, especially with something longer like a novel, especially a novel, I'm unlikely to be able to commit to be able to do a deep read of an entire novel if I have eight or nine other books that I'm doing at the same time.

So, having a design brief, if I can't go in and read the novel twice or something, is really helpful to be able to pick out themes that I might have missed if I didn't have the time to focus on it and read it as in-depth as I would like. Something like a short story collection or collection of poetry, oftentimes you can go in and read a few to try and get a sense of the tone. But the other issue there is whether the ones that you have focused your energy on are representative of the rest of the collection and if you make a cover that really reflects one or two short stories in a short story collection, it could have nothing to do with the rest of them so that's an additional challenge.

So, it's a little bit hard to say, because it's based on the different interactions you have with the different clients. You have varying resources and sometimes they have an idea of “this is exactly

what we want” and “can you please give us a couple of examples of covers that look like this.” And then you do. Sometimes it works and then sometimes they say, “I know we said, ‘this is exactly what we wanted,’ but it's really not working. Can you present something different?” And then maybe that's when you go back to the drawing table and you say okay, I'm gonna drop something completely new, it's not on their design brief at all, and maybe that's one that goes through. So, it's also a bit of a stressful industry, in that you can kind of feel like you're throwing things out there, and you might love something, but you have no idea how anybody else is going to react to it.

Athena Edwards:

So, what kind of things are in the design brief? Or maybe what kind of things do you find most helpful in the design brief?

Anon. Designer:

A lot of the time you'll have a statement of the author essentially saying “Okay, this is what my book is about. This is kind of the main themes of it.” Honestly, the most helpful for me is to get a of the mood or the tone of the book—which can be sort of amorphous to define in a lot of ways. But I come out of a creative writing background, and I also have written, and continue to write, poetry and published poetry. So, I know a lot of the time approaching a poetry book might be kind of daunting for people because there's not necessarily a narrative that's going to tell me what's going to go on the cover, but for me it's a little bit easier for me to pull out a mood or like some strong images that will be sort of representative of the mood of the book.

A lot of the time in the design brief, they'll ask you what are a few strong images that you think would translate well to a book cover that would represent the book. And so, that is one of the more helpful things.

And other times, I've had design briefs where people have given me that say “I want a picture of exactly this. I want a photograph of this on the cover. I want this to be in this case. And I want a flower tipped on its side on a blue coffee table.” And I'm thinking, “do you have this photo? Does it exist? Because if you have it, send it to me.” And sometimes, if they have it, they will. Then other times people will invent photos that don't exist and expect them to magically appear. I had one where somebody was asking for a bug to be doing something particular in a photo on a particular flower on a particular coffee table, and I was like “well I can't make a bug do that and then take a photo of it... I'm also not a photographer so...” I think sometimes it's a little bit of a miscommunication or a difference in expectation between what an author is expecting and then what the design brief is asking of them.

And sometimes it's about the experience of the author too, right. If it's the first book that they're putting out there, they might be saying “yeah, ideally, this is exactly the image that I'd like on the cover.” And maybe not. They may be expecting like “okay well, you have a book designer. Maybe this person is also a photographer.” Or I've had people ask me to draw things (and I have hand drawn covers before) but it's not my forte. It's not my main skill set. I don't draw by hand a lot. So, sometimes it is a little bit of just setting expectations.

And, as I said, it might be particular to me because I work a lot with independent presses. Maybe [it's because] they're publishing first time authors a lot. And those expectations are often very clear to the authors, and they give me, really, really strong design briefs. And then some will occasionally have me like “well, I wish I could do that for you, but I do not have the power to control the bees or anything.” So, again, it can be pretty varied. But mood and tone, for me, are really useful, as well as tangible imagery that is representative of the tone that they'd like to get across.

Athena Edwards:

Focusing back on to audiences... What function(s) do you think cover matter may perform?

Anon. Designer:

Well, I think a lot of the time it sort of gives you an idea of what kind of book you're expecting. For an audience, there are clues in a book cover that will tell you what the author's trying to say with this or, more likely, what the publisher is trying to say about this book. So, there might be an aesthetic that tells me “Okay, this is a YA book, and this is the audience that they're trying to reach with it.” And I think that sometimes people can think [those clues are] more rigid than they really are. I mean I've run into it myself—where I've had books, where I've designed covers and sent them in as examples and the author likes it, and the publisher likes it, and it's for a novel. And then they get to the marketing team at the distributor. And the distributor says, “let's not go with this cover” or “can you not go with this cover? Because this looks like a poetry book, and this is a novel.” Then it kind of comes back to me down the line and I go “Oh, I guess there are a little bit of these subtle visual clues that kind of make it seem more like a poetry book with the way that the image is used or the way that the text looks on the cover.” Sometimes, those are sort of I guess perceived to be more rigid than they are, and I think there's more cover designers taking chances with what people's expectations are these days. Kind of disrupting that a little bit. But yeah, you want to be representing the book as what it is so that the audience that you're trying to get at wants to pick it up. But I don't think we need to get locked into little boxes of this is exactly what a YA needs to look like.

Athena Edwards:

Do you ever look at what book covers are currently selling? Like on best seller lists or in bookstores. Do you ever look at what's already out there?

Anon. Designer:

I definitely look at what's out there. For me, this is probably because the book industry is very sort of segmented. You know, me, as a book designer, saying “this is what I think aesthetically looks appealing” versus somebody who's like a marketing person might say, “this is what will sell” and there might be a little bit of a disconnect there. I think also that happens with the fact that lot of books sell online now. There are massive markets online. So, there's also discussion of what makes a good thumbnail of a book cover because that's how a lot of people are going to see it. You know, maybe aesthetically I want to have little, tiny text because I think it's representative of the tone of the book. And I submit it and, while it may be lovely and beautiful, it doesn't necessarily make a great thumbnail, because you can't read it. Or there's low contrast, and I'll think that's got a nice subtlety about it. So, I think there's sometimes a bit of a battle

between cover designers [wanting to make] nice art and obviously the people selling books, who actually want to sell the books. It's a commercial art, so you can't really pull the two apart.

When I was working at [*publisher*], I was lucky enough that [when] I kind of ran out of ideas, I could walk out into the bookshop and see what kind of color palettes people are using; what kind of type faces are being used currently in a lot of book covers; is there a style? Not to copy them or anything, but just to get a little bit of inspiration.

And then, similarly, when I was freelancing/working from home, I would look at some great blogs and different Twitter accounts that put together great book designs that's coming out. So, something like the website *The Casual Optimist* or a book design archive. And I would just look at those books and say "Okay. What types of techniques are people using to convey different types of moods and messages?" And, again, not to copy what people are doing but kind of just to see if it would spark something in my brain if I was of stuck.

I definitely look at what people other people are doing. And I definitely have a lot of book designs that I really admire, and I think "oh wow, that's amazing. I would never have thought of that. That's a fabulous aesthetic." But I don't necessarily attach what I was looking at to what's the best selling at the moment. It's more about what I think is aesthetically appealing and is doing good work as a design. But, again, I do acknowledge that good work as commercial design is supposed to be selling things so.

Athena Edwards:

Have publishers ever asked you to come back for a reprint to update the design?

Anon. Designer:

I've had to update a couple of things in small ways. Most of the time when somebody asked me to update something it's something like somebody won an award and it needs a logo/their award sticker put on it for the for the next edition. I've done work on books that were reprints that were initially published by another publisher and then were picked up by a different publisher to publish in Canada, for example. Books that might already have a cover, and then you are designing a new cover for this book. But knowing what the other cover looks like is kind of an interesting challenge, because you have that to look at, but you don't want it to make it the same, but you want to acknowledge "okay, well, what were they doing and why did they make those choices?" Like when you're seeing different covers for a book that will appear in like the UK and then Canada, for example. So, I have, yeah, but I don't do a ton of work doing reprinted stuff.

Athena Edwards:

So, you just mentioned putting those award stickers and stuff on [the cover]. Are you the one responsible for also putting like the descriptions and the endorsements and all that stuff on the cover?

Anon. Designer:

Yes, so usually if [the book is] going to win an award, it'll win it after it's already come out. So, if they're going to put the award logo on it, it will be on a reprint. Say it won an award, and then

it sold out because it won an award, they're going to do a reprint and they'll put the award sticker on it to save booksellers from sticking all the copies.

But the blurbs on the front or back and the information on the back cover usually all goes on in the original design. You might see something, like if there's a reprint and there's been a really great review or really great blurb that comes in, after the book already came out, you might see that get added or switched or something like that for the reprint.

So, all of that text gets sent over by the publisher. Again, it's sometimes a bit of a battle because, at least for me, I would love to reduce the amount of text that has to go on the back cover because I think it can be crowded, and it can be overwhelming. But there's this balance of the publisher, who has these great blurbs, and they want them on the cover. And if they want it on the front cover, how do you incorporate that blurb and make it still fit in with the aesthetic of the front cover without looking like it's not fitting? But also still make it standard? So, there's a bit of a balancing act there as well. The whole, I think, book design comes down to the fact that it's art but it's commercial art. So, you have to balance the needs of the marketing with the sort of aesthetic that you're trying to achieve.

Athena Edwards:

Do you foresee any of these practices changing as we go into the future of book publishing?

Anon. Designer:

I think that, because of how much is being sold online, that push to make covers that become good thumbnails will probably continue. As I said, I don't think that that's necessarily a great thing for like the aesthetics of book covers because I think it can be really limiting. And there's some really beautiful book covers. I mean, I've seen book covers where they don't even put the title on the cover. It's just on the spine.

Or on the spine, back cover, and on the inside page. But they have a really amazing and striking book cover that they've decided maybe doesn't need the title on it, for whatever reason. Being able to take those risks and take those chances can be difficult, given the sort of move to see what can shrink down [into a small thumbnail].

I haven't really worked for many large presses, so things might also be different working for presses that are not independents. I like to think that a lot of the time, independents will kind of let you take a few more chances—and I think those pay off a lot of the time when you see really beautiful work coming out. But again, even with some of the larger presses, there's some really sort of risk-taking book covers that take a big swing (to use a baseball metaphor) and it pays off for them.

Athena Edwards:

Well, that's all of my questions for you. Did you have any for me? Or maybe something that we went over earlier that you want to tell elaborate on?

Anon. Designer:

Not really... I think we've kind of covered it. I think the biggest thing is just the kind of weird balance between [book cover designing] being where you're trying to get an audience through

this piece of artwork that has to try to stand on its own as a piece of design art, at the same time as being representative of the book, at the same time as also bringing in an audience.

I guess the only other thing I would mention is that authors have differing levels of input on their book covers. Generally speaking, the press has the final say on what the cover looks like so, as an author, you might say, "I want X, Y and Z" and the publisher could put out a book cover... I think, generally speaking, the ones that I work with, there's a good rapport between the authors and the publishers and they will want the authors to be happy and, generally speaking, they are with what [the author wants to put out]. But I've seen with some larger presses, even discussions from authors, saying "the cover isn't the cover I would have chosen, but this is what was chosen by the publisher, and they think it's the best" or "this is what was chosen by the publisher in conversation with the distributor." So, it's not necessarily like a one-to-one thing, where the author says, "I want this" and then they get it. And I've also worked with publishers where, even if the publisher may not like one version better than the author does, if the author likes one version and they feel really strongly about it, sometimes that ends up being the cover. So, it's very dependent. It's very different from client to client. But I think the biggest thing is just making sure everybody's communicating about it and, hopefully, in the end, everybody ends up happy.

Appendix J

Personal Communication: Anonymous Author (1-18-2022)

Athena Edwards:

To start off, do you mind telling me a little bit about your experiences with book publishing?

Anonymous Author:

Sure. I am a published poet and author, so my experience has been being published by small presses. In that regard, I've had a lot of opportunity to be a part of the publishing process from submission to cover design, interior layout, font choice, blurb-ing, back cover copy, all of it. I've had the opportunity to be 100% invested and have control over a lot of the different parts of the process. I also self-published books. So, I pay attention to all of those things when I'm doing my own book publishing. And I teach book publishing and talk about self-publishing versus traditional publishing and hybrid publishing. So, I really am part of the book publishing world through those different dimensions. I'm also a voracious reader too, which is on the receiving end of publishing. So, I can absolutely tell you that whoever said, 'never judge a book by its cover' was not in the publishing industry. I think it's a better metaphor for judging humans, than it is for judging books. Because that is what we do. And it's important. That's the whole point of the cover.

Athena Edwards:

Yeah, [they] most definitely were not in publishing.

Anon. Author:

Yeah. Right.

Athena Edwards:

How long have you been involved with the production of your covers?

Anon. Author:

My first book was published in 2011 and it was a memoir collection of funny essays about *[subject matter, redacted for anonymity]*. For the second time, my husband and I designed the cover. So, typically the publisher has final say on the cover and often will come to you with a design. Unfortunately, there were no designs that the company had created that I was willing to accept, and so we just decided to take it on our own, and we did a lot of research on book covers and book design. We created a logo with the title of the book—which we knew would be used for branding and marketing product products like T-shirts, stickers, thank you notes. I'm very conscious of that when I'm designing book covers. Being very aware of branding and that a cover or a title can be something that becomes the brand or some sort of icon or some kind of design element that can be used for branding and promotions. So, yeah, we designed that book cover ourselves, and then I had two other books subsequently published by the same press.

And so, we kind of knew from the first experience with the first book that my husband and I would likely be doing the covers for the other two books and that was understood as okay. We had the opportunity to create those book covers to and then my fourth book was with a different

press but they gave us pretty much free rein on doing the cover as well, there was a designer who we had a lot of back-and-forth with, but we basically had most of the design elements done by the time that their designer gave her input so.

Athena Edwards:

Well, it's great that you got with publishers that were willing to let you do that. I hear that's not quite common.

Anon. Author:

I know a lot of writers, some of whom are bestselling like *New York Times* bestselling, and they write YA fantasy. And it's a huge market. They publish hundreds of thousands of books at a time, and even at that level the writer does have an opportunity to say, "Okay, you're missing the ball" or "Can you change that font a little bit?" One of my greatest writing friends, my writing partner, she writes middle grade ghost stories. And, again, award-winning Canadian author. While she doesn't always get to choose the illustrator, she does absolutely get sent proofs of a cover before it goes to print. So, it's not like we're completely left out of the loop on the cover. We do get to say if we like it or not. And if we despise it, we can voice that. But, I think, usually the publisher, especially one of the big three, they're very aware of the power of the cover, and illustration, and fonts, and all of those things so they pretty much know what they're doing in terms of design and what's going to catch a reader's eye, for whatever genre it is.

Athena Edwards:

From your end, what is the production process of creating that cover, from start to end?

Anon. Author:

So, we come up with a list of words that describe what's in the book, what the writing is. Based on that, we try to collect elements that would begin to communicate that. Now, the challenge with that is you got to ask yourself if you want to be overt or covert about what you're trying to communicate with this image. For me, it depends on the book. And it depends on the genre. We pull from the words for inspiration to find imagery that matches that. We also have the book title, and that is not something that can be changed. We do know that that has to be on there somewhere. So, I'm thinking about the font and how the placement of the title and also the author's name. Also, if there's a subtitle. Those are three elements that you have to have. Forget about any kind of image or color or illustrative elements. So, coupled with the sort of vibe of the interior of the book and what the book is about, we try to find images and font that match that. For poetry... I think poetry is a bit of an anomaly. Now contemporary poetry books pay a lot more attention to cover design. They're risky and just... Typically, in the past, it would be a solid background color, the title, an image (like a photograph usually), and then the name of the poet. And while the image lends itself to something that can entice the reader to pick up the book, the industry has really moved beyond that kind of name, image, book title, image, author name and has had beautiful illustrations and different elements. Natural elements—birds. There's a lot of birds. I feel like between 2017 and 2019, so many books, not even just in poetry, had birds and/or plants, flowers, buds of things. So, you can see, if you look across books that are being sold in different years what the kind of "it" image/imagery is/that happens. What was your question? Sorry, I don't know if I'm answering your question or not.

Athena Edwards:

I mean, you're providing great stuff, so I was willing to let you keep going. The process of creating the cover from start to finish.

Anon. Author:

Once you kind of handle those kind of core things you want to communicate, we just... Do you want like specific places? Like where I go to get graphics and fonts and stuff?

Athena Edwards:

Hm. No; not really needed [for the scope of this project].

Anon. Author:

Okay well that's part of it. We would go and search to try and find a font or an image that matches it. Then we go into a design and layout program, like After Effects or Photoshop, and begin to build the cover and the imagery on there. And then send that to the publisher, and their layout and design person. And have a back-and-forth until we agree on all the elements and they're good to go with that. Sometimes some of the elements from the outside reach into the inside. Like putting cool things at the bottom of the page right beside the page number—like a little icon. Or the font that is the title of each chapter or poem matches the font that's on the cover. So, sometimes there's an interplay between the two things: the interior and the exterior.

As far as the back cover goes, I can tell you that a lot of time is spent figuring out what the back cover copy *is*. And also, if you're going to put a blurb on the either the front or back cover. Not all books have blurbs on them, sometimes there's a blurb on the front. Especially if it's from a really famous author in that genre—if you can get somebody who will blurb your book—sometimes, they'll put that right on the cover, because that is hugely enticing for readers: who puts the blurb on. Especially if it's going on the cover or if there's like...

Athena Edwards:

So, you believe that has an effect?

Anon. Author:

Oh, yeah. Absolutely. If there's like a *Kirkus Star* review, or you can put 'New York Times bestseller'... anything that speaks to how many people are reading this book, including other authors in that genre, you gotta get that on the front cover, for sure. Sometimes, that stuff doesn't come in until like right before you're going to print because the timing on those things, but if you can get a famous author in that genre to quote you and it's something that's great, and will entice your reader to pick it up, it'll go on the front. Otherwise, on the back cover there's a blurb about what the book is. And often that back cover copy is what has already gone into the catalogs that the publishers are putting out to all of their distributors to try and get sales. That kind of cover copy, back cover copy, is all over the place, in terms of trying to get it sold. And that has to be a very well-written, precise description of what's inside the book.

Size. Usually they give you, ahead of time, the size, you know the length, and the height, and width of the book. Page numbers—they usually tell you that ahead of time. An ISBN number. A price. Those things often go on the back. Sometimes the price is not on there. It depends on the

publisher. But there's always an ISBN number on there. And the logo of the publishing company also has to be somewhere on the back cover. Or on the front. But usually, it's on the back.

Athena Edwards:

What about the spine? Does any of that...

Anon. Author:

I was going to say, "I wonder if she's going to ask me about the spine?"

Yeah, the spine is also a critical part. Especially if your book does not get face out real estate on the shelf. So, absolutely we pay attention to the spine, to make sure that the title is legible, and the author's name is legible. Also, you'll see the logo of the publisher on that. And some people love certain publishers, and they look for that little penguin or the SNS or whatever. They look for the logos to see who's publishing it, so the spines are absolutely as important as the rest.

Athena Edwards:

So obviously with your particular situation, it's mostly you designing your cover and then you have some interplay with the publisher and their design team and some back-and-forth. Is there anyone else you know that is particularly involved? With the production or approval of the cover matter?

Anon. Author:

Probably, at some point, the printer—just to make sure that they get the file correctly and are making the book cut properly. Usually, there's a thing called a proof, that you'll get before the book goes out to make a whole bunch of copies, and that is like a pre-printed example of what the final [product] is going to look like. The final step would be making sure that the printer has the correct files, things are laid out properly, and then printed and cut properly, for being able to sell it in a bookstore or whatever.

Athena Edwards:

I know that some people have mentioned how booksellers, themselves, are quite an important aspect of designing a cover. About what they think will sell on a shelf. Does that come into play with your particular works?

Anon. Author:

So, I can tell you a story about that. Yes. A huge part of the publishing industry is the catalogs that they send out. They come out seasonally. Usually, spring and fall. They have these big catalogs that say, "Here's all our authors. Here's all the books we're printing. Here's what they're about." You'll have the blurb, the picture of the author, a little bit about their history, a book cover (if you have one). And that's what gets sent out to distributors and booksellers. So, the booksellers can say "Oh, yeah, I want to take [author's] new poetry book, for sure. She sells really good in our store." And they'll have an opportunity to see what may be a first draft of a cover copy is, or a title. So, for my first book, we had quite a good challenge coming up with our title.

[Redacted, for anonymity, title and subtitle ideas that were went through.]

So, when that catalog went out and our publisher reached out to some of his common booksellers, they said, “We won't put a book that has ‘vagina’ in the title. We won't put it out on our bookshelves.” Now that was, mind you, 2011—so, kind of contemporary, but not really. So, that's an example of him coming back and saying, “Okay. That's not going to work. We're not going to have ‘vagina’ as a main word in the title.”

I think nowadays, booksellers are not really going to care about a word like ‘vagina;’ however, anything that is derogatory, racist, sexist, or anything like that that kind of pushes those kind of agendas, booksellers would probably have a say, at some point. But really, it's up to the publisher to decide what they're willing to stand for, for their writers. So, yes, the booksellers, at the catalog level, can, I suppose, send a message to the publisher and give some feedback. At that point, before the book actually comes out. But also, booksellers help a lot in terms of selling the book, once the book gets in the store. So, for example, April's National Poetry month. If a bookstore has a good collection of poetry, they might put all the poetry books in the front window and that's when they'll take them off the shelf and have a better display for readers. Or you know Halloween. Pretty much any kind of holiday or I don't know National Cupcake Day. There's a million kind of things that happen every day. In that regard, the booksellers can have a lot of push in terms of sales by how they're displaying the books in the store.

Athena Edwards:

So, you mentioned before how cover design, obviously, varies by genre I know you mostly deal with poetry, and you've had some experience with memoirs. Do you perhaps have any insight into where the process changes depending on genre?

Anon. Author:

So, if you just Google different genres of books [and their] book covers, you'll be able to, right away, see commonalities. For fantasy, for example—I read a lot of fantasy and I have some friends who write fantasy—those book covers often have a lot of color. There's usually whatever fantastical elements that is in there—dragons, swords, plants—that really take the center stage. It's a lot of illustration. Whereas a literature book might be—like Steinbeck and Hemingway—it was really just the title of the book and the person's name. Where fantasy has always had tons of color and some sort of illustration or image on there. Like I said, poetry is sort of shifting right now to envelop all kinds of beautiful design elements that it didn't have 20-30 years ago. Mystery too seems to have a very striking cover. A knife that's bleeding or the font of the words jumping out at you in a way that grabs you, to show the mystery that's inside. So, yeah, I think every genre has in images, on the cover, that feeling that you're going to get when you're reading it. A cover emotes and a cover provokes. That's the goal of the cover. So, if you can get your reader to draw their eyes to your book, that's the first step. Second thing you want to do, is get them to take it off the shelf and open to the first page and/or turn it to the back and read the back copy. I'm not sure what the stats are on people who read the back cover copy first, or the flap where it describes what it's about, versus people who just open and start reading the first page. I'd be very curious to see what the stats are on that, but either way...

Athena Edwards:

I would too actually.

Anon. Author:

Those are like two places outside of the cover where your readers [are] automatically going to go. The goal of the cover is to, absolutely, get your reader, who potentially already likes that genre, to want to pick it up. Because what they're seeing on the cover is attractive to them.

Athena Edwards:

So, what I'm hearing is that the parts of the cover that definitely hold appeal for audiences is, of course, the cover design being aesthetically pleasing (attracting the eye), the little blurb about reviews or other authors showing that there's a [sense of] prestige, I guess...

Anon. Author:

Yes! Exactly, yep.

Athena Edwards:

...and then the description, describing what the book is about. Any other cover elements that you think might have a play?

Anon. Author:

Sometimes, a cover is a jacket over a hardcover book, so I would say that there could be a difference in how people feel about a paperback versus a hardcover. Often, on a hardcover book, the jacket, is where all the information and images [are], so when you take that off, there's nothing on the book.

And that is a whole different ballgame. So, if that book is on the shelf, oftentimes, the spine will be really nice, especially if there's no images on the front so it'll look good on your shelf. So, I would say, probably a difference might be in a paperback versus a hardcover. And then some paperbacks have glossiness, or it's *raised* so you could feel the letters kind of bubble out. So, texture, I would say, sometimes also is something that would you know separate two different covers. I feel like some old Stephen King books and old horror novels used to have that kind of bubbly/pushed-up cover where the letters kind of pop.

And they have these kinds of new things that are out—I just happen to have this here to show you... So, this is a softcover book, but it's got a flap. So, this is *another* thing that's happening, right. It's got the cheat of a jacket. What that also does, though, is it opens up the back for all the big blurbs.

They put the description on the inside flap and all of [the blurbs/endorsements on the back cover] to entice the reader to say, “Hey, look at all these people who have read this and said it's awesome.” Which, again, people pay attention to this stuff. People may only read books that are Heather's picks or Oprah or Reese. That sticker... Ooh! that's another thing! If there is a sticker, an award sticker, an Oprah, or somebody famous's sticker on the top, that is another thing that absolutely gets attention to the reader and is going to get precedence on the bookshelf in the bookstore than a book that does not have that. I would say, right up there with design is if there's an award sticker on there. What else can I say? Oh yes, the paper is also...

[Holding up a copy of My Dark Vanessa by Kate Elizabeth Russell and showing the way the pages are not perfectly aligned with each other along the edge.]

Athena Edwards:

Beveled.

Anon. Author:

Right. So, texture does play a part. I like it when the edges are rough.

Athena Edwards:

I, personally, am a big fan of texture. A big fan of texture.

Anon. Author:

[Still holding up a copy of *My Dark Vanessa* by Kate Elizabeth Russell]

So, this one... there's a little bit of texture on the 'M'—very very slight raised letter...

Athena Edwards:

There's actually raised letters on my copy of *One of Us Is Lying*.

Anon. Author:

Oh, great! My daughter has that. That's a great one.

So, those things for sure. I love holding books, touching books. I write in my books. I fold the pages. I'm like full-on with my books. Some people want to keep it like perfectly clean and pristine—like this [holding up *My Dark Vanessa*] is my friend's book she let me read, so I know I have to be very careful with it because she likes to keep her books pristine. But absolutely, texture is something that I would say... Once the reader touches it right... So, whatever it looks like, you got to get the person to touch it and pick it up, if there is that extra fun stuff on it.

Athena Edwards:

I have the box set of *Darkest Minds*, but before that, I had the first book of *Darkest Minds*. And I still have it because the texture was so fun. So, I have two copies of the first book. I'll often read the first book outside of the box set and then go back to the box set.

Anon. Author:

And weight is another thing I would say... like this [holding up *My Dark Vanessa*] is a pretty big book but it's not that heavy. By some miracle of the paper choice that they've chosen, even though it's a tall book and it's a large page, it's not too heavy to read. So, weight probably could be something that also has a reader saying yes to buying it or not. But all of this becomes very hairy when we start talking about eBooks because...

Athena Edwards:

That's actually my next question.

Anon. Author:

Yikes. To eBooks, right. So, yeah, what's your question? I'll make sure I try and answer it.

Athena Edwards:

How does this approach differ when it comes to eBooks, and digital listings as well? Because, as far as digital listings, you would only see the front cover, not really the back cover. And then with eBooks—often it just completely skips the cover when you open it. So, there's a lot of things that get complicated with eBooks. I'd love to hear your insight into that.

Anon. Author:

So, I don't read eBooks. I think I maybe read half of one—my husband got me a Kobo way back. Or Kindle. I don't even know. I couldn't do it. It felt so foreign to me, and I didn't understand how to make the paper go. Then I kept changing the size and I was like... I couldn't tell how far I was into the book. So, my relationship with eBooks is pretty much non-existent. It's like lived in a kind of frustrated anti-eBook world. And my books have not been... I know they have eBook files because that's part of the system now, once the PDF exists for print, they put it in the e-publishing magic tool and it's ready. But I have not seen any of those files and I'm not selling them, not promoting them, or anything like that. So, I know they exist but it's not something that I go to. Especially with poetry, because of the spacing—things can get really hairy. It's come a long way, but, at the beginning for eBooks for poetry, because of how the layout of it on an eBook would be all like all messed up. Now, I think we figured out how to do it, but back then...

Athena Edwards:

One hundred percent. Especially when eBooks first came out, I did not like poetry in eBook form.

Anon. Author:

Again, I don't know the stats on that. Like who's reading what? But I have very close friends of mine who only read eBooks and they swear by them, and they love them, and they figured out which reader they like. And my husband reads books on his phone. I don't even know how that's possible. But to me, I need this sort of tactile experience of it, of holding it. Of smelling it. Oh! Smell, I would say, could potentially be something that would entice a reader too. I don't know about you, but I love smelling books. And they each have different smells. So, I would absolutely smell a book as part of my decision to buy it or not.

Athena Edwards:

When I go to go read it. I don't smell it when I'm buying it.

Anon. Author:

Sometimes you can smell a book just by holding it, which I love.

[Redacted, for relevance, sidebar about books in the background, bookshelves, and shelf organization]

Anon. Author:

I'm trying to think if there's anything else about a cover... I mean you got to have the name of the author. Oh, oftentimes it'll say what it is. Like it'll say it's a novel. Or it'll say a memoir. Or it'll say a poetry collection. With mystery, unless it's like the character's name, like you know, Athena Riley's mystery series or Detective Athena series or whatever, sometimes they'll have it on there too, but that is often something that's an indicator too. So, this [holding up *My Dark*

Vanessa] is a novel, which tells me that's what it is. It's not nonfiction—I don't know, necessarily, that I would think this is a nonfiction book—but definitely stating the genre is also something that gets put on the cover a lot. So, I guess pretty much if it's not named, you can just chalk it up to being fiction. But like memoirs often it says a memoir. Poetry often says it's poetry. Novels say they're novels.

Athena Edwards:

Self-help books say they're self-help books.

Anon. Author:

Yeah. Or the title is so clearly obvious that it's nonfiction. Or if it's a biography it'll say... Or an autobiography.

Athena Edwards:

I guess it's about 50/50 with a poetry says it's poetry, because this one doesn't say it's poetry. [Holding up a copy of *Pillow Thoughts* by Courtney Peppernell].

Anon. Author:

Oh, *Pillow Thoughts*. I just saw that on a cover list. So, just by opening then—that's how you see it? Does it say it on the back?

Athena Edwards:

Okay, there we go. It says it in the description [on the back cover] "*Pillow Thoughts* is a collection of poetry and prose about heartbreak, love, and raw emotions." So, it just doesn't say it on the front with the title.

Anon. Author:

Which is very interesting, because usually it does. So, that cover is asking a little bit more of its reader *or* it consciously didn't put that on there because of people's baggage that comes to the table with poetry. So, if they can get you.

Yeah, poetry might be something that's different—because some people don't like poetry. So, if they can get you to pick up the book, and then you go "Oh, it's poetry," you've already got it in your hands, so you might look at it more.

Athena Edwards:

The Poetic Underground doesn't specifically say it's poetry, so I guess we're supposed to guess by the name. It doesn't have a back either.

Anon. Author:

Interesting. See those are all conscious choices that that company or person made. I would chalk it up to them wanting you to just pick it up and not judge it before, because it's poetry.

Athena Edwards:

Maybe. Interesting. I never really thought about whether it said 'poetry' on the front or not. I normally go in looking specifically for poetry.

Anon. Author:

That's cool. I appreciate that, as a poet, thank you.

Athena Edwards:

Yeah, I went in for each of these specifically, so I never really thought about whether it said 'poetry' with the title or not. Most of them do, though. Like Nikita Gill especially, hers' specifically say poetry.

Anon. Author:

What does mine say...? Hold on, I want to see what's on some... Yeah, my latest book does not have it. Which I, you know what I think, maybe because it's my third book, I didn't even think about putting that on there. But it's not on the front. That's it.

Athena Edwards:

Oh, that's a pretty cover.

Anon. Author:

Yes, we spend a lot of time on this cover. We got the font pretty early but figuring out the *[cover details, redacted for anonymity]*.

Athena Edwards:

You know, if not for the font, I would have thought it was a mystery novel just because of how it looks.

Anon. Author:

Yep, for sure. Maybe on a quick look, those could be like bullets. Or the red too maybe?

Athena Edwards:

Or a clue from a murder. But the font helps sale it as poetry.

Anon. Author:

Yes! and if you look closely like this is really linen-y—like you can tell that this is material underneath it.

And then this [holding up a second book] is my second one. And this one says, “a book of poetry.” *[Redacted cover details for anonymity.]* Then, this one [holding up a third book, pointing to a blurred photograph as the front cover image], that's actually me. And it also says a book of poetry. Now, this was part of a series called *[Series Title]*, so this *[design feature]* had to be part of our design, because the publisher had like a series that had that *[feature]*.

[Redacted, for clarity and relevance, the number of blurbs/endorsements on the back cover of each book.]

On courageous whims, I asked these two if they would send quotes or blurbs for me and they both said yes, and I lost my shit! I was like “Oh my god!” And people to this day are like, “Oh

my God, how did you get this guy to write for you?!” I’m like “I asked him?!” I didn’t even beg him but anyway yeah, you got to ask. For blurbs, you gotta ask. The worst that’ll happen is they’ll say no, or they’ll say, “I can’t right now, but if you have another one, send it to me.”

Athena Edwards:

So, you took the initiative to ask for blurbs? Not your publisher?

Anon. Author:

We both did. But because I have had such great relationships with other poets in Canada, I felt comfortable asking myself—so [the publisher] was okay with it. But the publisher can do it. I can do it. But they didn’t have a bigger name than those two, so she said, “Just go ahead and get... if you can, go ahead.”

Athena Edwards:

Do you foresee any of these approaches to your cover design changing in the future? Like we just saw with your third book you didn’t even put ‘poetry.’

Anon. Author:

You know what, it’s so interesting. I didn’t even realize that I did that. That’s awesome. Well, it’s probably going to be now something that I think about, because we’re talking about it. Honestly, I think it will depend on who my publisher is and what [the book’s] about. And what the title is. I don’t know. And also, I hope that I will continue to be able to publish poetry, but I would love to get my YA published and another memoir so... it’ll probably depend on who the publishers are and what relationships we have and what I’ll be able to do in that relationship.

Athena Edwards:

How do you think audience expectations will play into the cover of this YA versus your poetry and memoir?

Anon. Author:

Well, the cover of the YA would be designed differently than the memoir or the poetry for sure. It absolutely will. I would have to do market research to see what is out there. My YA is about witches—but not like sorcerers with dresses and long flowy hair and it’s not very traditional witchy that I’m writing about—so, on the one hand, I would want to make sure that I appeal to those readers who enjoy books about magic, so I would do research on what currently is out there, and then also figure out how to communicate that with an image that also tells the story of my particular witchcraft, which is different. I think that the short answer is what I put on the cover will absolutely play into what readers expect of that genre. And I would know that, by looking at covers of books that were, you know, sold a lot or won awards, or you know are just on that theme.