The Evolution of Book Cover Design

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by Katie Lucas

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Introduction

The Choices I Made in Designing This Project

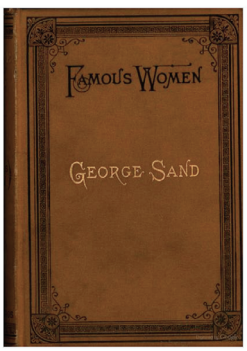
For this project, I chose to set my paper as if it were the first chapter of a book on cover design. Therefore, I chose a trim size that was rather large to reflect the sizes typical of design books–seven inches by ten inches. I also set my margins fairly generously to accomodate color pictures in the interior (1.75 inch/10p6 top margins, 1.5833 inch/9p6 bottom margins, 1.5 inch/9p0 inside margins, and 1.25 inch/7p6 outside margins). Ideally, the book would be printed with a four color interior. I chose a fairly simple layout with columns set up to use as guides when placing the pictures.

For typefaces, I chose Futura for the cover because I think it has a modern look appropriate to a book about cover design, and because it was designed early in the history of book cover design. I also used Futura for the table of contents and the full and half title pages. For the headers I used Optima, mainly because I liked how it looked with my body text. I chose Electra for the body text because it seemed to work well for setting extended blocks of type, and because it was designed by W. A. Dwiggens, one of the first serious book cover designers.

Chapter One

From Disposable to Indispensable

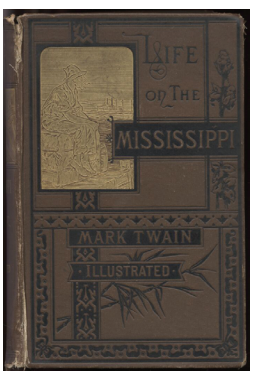
At the dawn of the book publishing industry as we know it today, book covers were simple, utilitarian devices whose only purpose was to protect the book from damage (Mathews, xii). As can be seen from the 1883 cover of George Sand's *Famous Women*, covers rarely offered the reader anything more illuminating than the title and the name of the author. Today such an unobtrusive cover would be rejected by any serious publisher's marketing team, and likely would be deemed overly simple, if not outright sloppy. The cover has since come to serve another purpose—to provide a kind of introduction or visual representation of the text inside the book's cover, and, ultimately, to sell the book to potential readers. Modern book covers are also highly specialized, providing the reader with a plethora of information at first glance, the most important being genre and the intended market.



George Sand.
Famous Women, 1883.



Jane Austen. *Pride and Prejudice*, 2009



Mark Twain. *Life on the Mississippi*, 1883.

Though they were sometimes used for advertising, prior to the 1890s book covers were considered superfluous and disposable objects, worthy of neither the concentrated effort of the designer, nor the capital of the publisher. Cloth binding had allowed covers to be decorated more cheaply and easily than leather since the 1820s, but it would take until about 1920 for the book cover design to become an essential part of the book publishing process. In these early years of book publishing, designers were still reluctant to put much effort into a design that was doomed to be considered a mere artifact of commercialism. Many artists got around this by creating the cover simultaneously with the interior illustrations, which is likely the origin of today's custom of embossing high-end clothbound hard covers with simple old-fashioned illustrations (Drew and Sternberger, 24). (Compare the 1883 leather bound edition of Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*, an early example of an illustrated cover, with a 2009 illustrated cover of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* in the same style, both shown here on the left.) By 1940, book covers would be adorned with the images of movie stars in a simulacrum of today's now-familiar movie tie-in covers (Mathews, xii).

Book Covers Get Serious

According to *By Its Cover* by Ned Drew and Paul Sternberger, the development of the book cover from the simple slipcover to the highly specialized cultural artifact that it is today directly parallels the development of graphic design as a profession and the coining of the term "graphic design" (Drew and Sternberger, 20). In fact, the term "graphic design" is commonly attributed to a comment made by W. A. Dwiggens in a 1922 article in the *Boston Transcript* (Rand, xi). Dwiggens, a type designer as well as a graphic designer[i], was one of the first to dedicate himself to a more holistic view of book design, considering both the interior and the cover as part of the book as a whole rather than as two separate pieces (Drew and Sternberger, 26). Dwiggens was also one of the first designers (along with George Salter, Ernst Reichl, Arthur Hawkins, and E. McKnight Kauffer) to regard book design as a profession worthy of serious consideration (Drew and Sternberger, 24).

Interestingly, in embracing a holistic approach to book cover design, Dwiggens departed from what at that time was a predominantly modernist approach, preferring to incorporate more traditional typographic elements into his design along with the modernist elements preferred by other designers. Dwiggens' modernist contemporaries took their cue from artistic movements imported from Europe, such as Cubism, Futurism, Dadaism, Constructivism, and the Bauhaus movement of the 1920s. Many of these designers (Lazlo Moholy-Nagy and Gyorgy Kepes, among others) were themselves immigrants from Europe who entered the realm of American graphic design and influenced the American designers who would follow them (Drew and Sternberger, 20-22).

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i Electra, the typeface this book is set in, was designed by Dwiggens and issued in Linotype form in 1935.

Literature Versus Pulp

With the publication of the first ten Pocket Books in 1939, paperbacks exploded into the publishing industry and quickly became a permanent part of the publishing industry. This date also marks a distinct split in the types of covers produced by designers. In the years between about 1890 and 1939, covers were, if not always well done or rooted in design theory, at least discreet and thoughtful, and never embarrassing or crude. After 1939, covers were divided between those designed for consumers of serious literature, and those that embraced the essentially disposable nature of paperbacks and used garish images and bright colors to sell the book to consumers—the serious literature versus the pulp.

While the covers designed for serious consumption almost always bore the mark of the individual style of the designer as an obligatory element of the design, pulp covers rarely revealed any sense of the individual style of the artist. As Geoffrey O'Brien notes in *Hardboiled America*:

> Of all the things that may be considered when looking at this art, personal style is probably the least significant. A few personal idiosyncrasies stand out, but by and large it is an anonymous medium; indeed, much of the time even the name of the artist is unknown. In those days, just as in the early days of the pulps and the comic books, everything was geared for the moment—it was unthinkable that anyone in the future might care who had executed a particular cover. (O'Brien, 47)

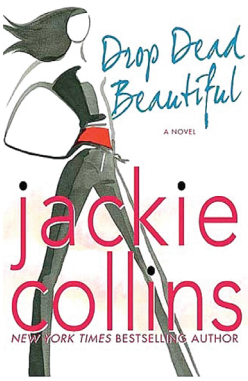
Regardless of the disposable nature of the pulps, the iconography that come to be indicative of pulp covers, and eventually, the covers of books in particular genres, is rooted in the early years of book publishing when designers were just getting serious about book cover design. The early illustrations found in works of Jules Verne and

H. G. Wells, for example, clearly exhibit elements still found in works of the science fiction and fantasy genres today, such as exotic creatures, alien invaders, and fantastic landscapes. In Nickianne Moody's article "Empirical Studies of the Bookshop: Context and Participant Observation in the Study of the Selling and Marketing of Science Fiction and Fantasy," Moody states that such images "invited the popular imagination to speculate more directly on the relationship between technology and the future," an observation that is clearly a vital element of today's science fiction book covers (Moody, 44).

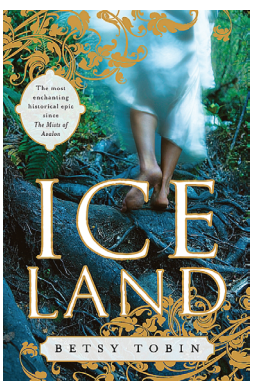
In the romance genre, the required cover elements are strikingly similar to those of 1940s pulp covers—garish colors, heaving bosoms, and minimal effort in the execution of the design itself. Interestingly, it is also quite common for romance covers to feature a man's bare chest with either his face hidden or his head disappearing off the edge of the cover, so that it would seem that romance readers prefer (or the designers assume that they prefer) their male protagonists faceless. Covers of mystery genre books also still feature elements of the pulps of the 1940s, having lost the heaving bosoms but kept the garish colors.

Genre Considerations

Color, in fact, can be convincingly argued to be one of the most important indicators of genre. Romance books tend to be cast in rich shades of red or blue, science fiction and fantasy in cool colors, usually with black dominating, while mystery covers generally tend to be designed in predominantly warm shades of red or orange. Horror and true crime covers tend to straddle the line between mystery and science fiction, with black often used as a background color and reds used as accents in the title or cover image. Westerns, on the other hand, share the soft look of the images used for romance covers while relying on muted tones of beige or brown to convey the sense of the old west.



Jackie Collins. *Drop Dead Beautiful*. 2007



Betsy Tobin. *Ice Land*. 2009.

In the realm of popular fiction/literature (i.e., not genre fiction, but not serious literature either), blues and calming landscapes are common features of fiction featuring family sagas or intended for an audience of older women (such as the works of Jodi Picoult, Nicolas Sparks, or Ian McEwan.) Chick-lit, marketed at an audience of younger women, often features cartoonish illustrations and bright pinks on a white or pastel background. In contrast to this, covers designed to appeal to an audience of men or both men and women tend to be bolder with darker colors and more graphic images.

All of these elements are indicative of not only the genre, but also the particular preferences of the audience at the point in time that the book was printed. Thus, chick-lit covers have begun to move away from girlish illustrations towards a more adult look that readers will not be embarrassed to be seen reading. As Angus Phillips notes in his article "How Books Are Positioned in the Market: Reading the Cover," contemporary television shows and movies such as *Sex and the City* and *Legally Blonde* have had a great deal to do with this change (Phillips, 21). Romance covers have begun a similar evolution, with the covers of books by authors such as Georgette Heyer becoming more similar to the more sophisticated covers created for classics such as *Pride and Prejudice* or the works of Dickens.

This trend can be seen in other genres as well. Increasingly science fiction readers have

become reluctant to be associated with the blatantly crass covers iconic of science fiction and fantasy covers of the 1970s and 1980s and mass-market publishers such as Baen. In response to this, science fiction cover designers have very recently started to move away from using illustration exclusively and begun to incorporate photographs, which previously had been virtually unheard of in the genre. An example can be seen at left in the cover of Betsy Tobin's fantasy novel *Ice Land*. Young adult novels have also exhibited this trend, with the design for the bestselling *Twilight* series leading the way towards an edgier, more adult look.

The trend toward a more sophisticated look will certainly continue and influence books of other genres as well. As popular culture evolves, so too will the desires of the audience continue to evolve, requiring publishers to continue their custom of re-releasing titles with new covers.

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Tobin, Betsy. *Ice Land*. New York: Plume, 2009.

Twain, Mark. *Life on the Mississippi*. Boston: James R. Osgood & co., 1883.

Colophon

Full Title, Half Title, and Table of Contents:
Futura Std, designed by Paul Renner

Text Header, Subheaders, and Running Footers:
Optima LT Std, designed by Hermann Zapf

Basic Text:
Electra LT Std 11/15, designed by W. A. Dwiggens