

## Covers

That old saying "Don't judge a book by its cover" is absolute nonsense.

The truth is that no-one will buy your book in a bookshop unless they've picked it up first, and they won't pick it up unless their eye is drawn to it in the first place. Books need to look good, and they also need to *feel* good; book-buying is a surprisingly tactile experience. Either way, the cover is the key factor.

Next time you stand in a bookstore, take a moment to watch what what potential customers do as they browse books. First of all, their eyes are drawn to the ones on the table – there's always a table for books which are 'promoted' either formally or otherwise – so that the first thing that catches the eye is the front cover. It has to be clear, and should draw attention to the biggest selling point of the book. If the author is well-known, then it's the author's name, because many readers will be drawn to 'the latest Jane Smith' novel or whatever. If the author is a newbie, then the title will have to be the selling point. "The 100-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out the Window and Disappeared" is a more intriguing line than "Jonas Jonasson"; on the other hand an author "Michael Connolly" or "Ian Rankin" is the best way of selling a book called "Screwdrivers For All". "Four Old Geezers And A Valkyrie" is clearly more eye-catching than "Gordon Lawrie", so it was important to make sure the title stood out. If you look at the front of T.D.Burke's "The Man From Outremer", the title is much bigger, and in white.

Once you've got the book into the browser's hand, he/she feels it and then almost certainly turns to look at the rear cover where the reader will expect to find blurb – that quick synopsis of the first part of the novel that acts as the book's 'trailer'. If the blurb isn't to the reader's taste then too bad, he/she won't buy it, but that's OK. At least you were in with a chance. But if the customer continues to look at your book, he or she is likely to flick through it to see what sort of style the book has: serious, funny, dense, whimsical. Is the print close together or widely-spaced? This is a moment when the quality of the paper becomes important; anything too bright and shiny can put readers off as well. It's just a little harder on the eyes. If it's a hardback book, you might even consider cream paper for serious writing. That's not part of the cover, of course, but all the time the customer is *holding* the book in his or her hand. You might notice that I've barely mentioned the spine; that's because it's only important when the book is standing upright on a bookshelf, spine-outwards in "library position". Then, the most important thing is for the writing to be visible easily. I quite often go for a dark semi-opaque panel and light print to make the title and author stand out; some publishers go the whole hog and have the spine in black.

Many self-publishers and small publishers dispense with the hardcover stage of and go straight to paperback, but non-fiction books are probably likely to go hardcover, especially specialist or reference books which might have to last a while. Let's deal with these first. If you envisage your book looking better with a dust-jacket, bear in mind that at some point in its life that jacket is likely to disappear. Its purpose, mainly, is to sell the book and all the cover information should obviously be on it. The inside hard-covered book itself will only need the title, author, and publisher on the spine and on the front, too. (The publisher isn't always on the front, sometimes.) You might also consider hard cover, or that soft-linen or soft-photo type of cover. These are appropriate for non-fiction books such as cookery books or coffee-table collections of art. The latter will be bigger, perhaps, even A4, but there's a lot of scope for experiment.

But for those authors looking to publish any sort of fiction, paperback will be very attractive. Pick a sensible size. A really common size is 197mm height by 128mm width – known as "B Format" in the UK or "Trade" in the US. (The dimensions can vary according to your printer.) What you'd then be creating is a cover which is twice that 128mm width plus a spine's width. You don't know what the spine width is until you know how many pages your



book has, and what paper you plan to use. Your printer will advise you on a spine width if you supply the necessary information. A four-hundred page book will be close to 28mm, in which case the total area of the front cover, spine and rear cover would be  $197\text{mm height} \times 128\text{mm} + 28\text{mm} + 128\text{mm} = 284\text{mm}$ .

In addition, printers require publishers to allow for "bleed", which is a little extra (usually 3mm) all round this  $197\text{mm} \times 284\text{mm}$  total cover,

which means that the total cover you would want here would be  $203\text{mm} \times 290\text{mm}$ .

## Design

You can spend a fortune on a book design – many hundreds of pounds – or you can try to do it yourself. Be warned if you try to do it yourself with no expertise, though; self-produced covers can look just like that. One particular problem is the lack of image quality. Make sure you print at the highest-level quality, often called "Press Quality". Use a photo as a background if you want, but use a good one, and often it's worthwhile buying top-quality images from somewhere like Shutterstock (you might only use a portion of the photo). Or, if you have skills as a graphic designer, you can mix-and-match from drawn images. Remember to pay your copyright fees (they won't be excessive), and to acknowledge the cover on the copyright page of your book.

For some reason, serif fonts (the wee extra bits on the foot of old-fashioned letters) work better in most covers. This little essay is in a serif font, Cambria. You might be all right with a sans serif font like Helvetica but it's risky. It only really works if you want to convey an impression that says "This book is cult fiction".

You'll be given the option of "matt finish" or "gloss finish". Don't even think about it for fiction: matt finish EVERY time. Finally, there's the little problem of the price and the barcode. That's an essential if you want to sell your book in a bookshop, and if you plan to do the work yourself, you'll need some software, an ISBN, and to have decided your price. Whatever you do, don't price your book so low that the more copies you sell, the more money you lose. That's easier to do than you'd believe.

So there you are. Covers can be home-produced, but they're not straightforward. Remarkably, for the first couple of books published by Comely Bank Publishing, I found good old Word gave the sharpest results, but then I lashed out on the industry standard, Adobe InDesign. It's not easy to learn, but it's good. Very, very good. Whatever you choose, and however it works out, good luck.

Gordon Lawrie,  
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