

An Interview with Book Designer Sue Campbell



Sue Campbell, a Colorado resident, is an experienced art director and book designer of many years; she is also the principal designer for Stephens Press titles. In this interview with Working Titlez, she shares her knowledge on what makes an effective cover design, how the process works, and what inspires her creative efforts.

How important is color in book cover design?

Color is always important in design. Color is hard-wired in our brains. It means things to us on a basic human level, but it also has cultural meaning so we must be careful with how we use it with respect to cultural connotations. Certain colors evoke emotional responses—it reminds us of events or experiences. And it also acts as a language, one that we learn and with it make associations. For example: we know that darker colors mean mystery and fearful happenings—tension. It makes sense then for thrillers to often appear cloaked in dark and mysterious images in dark colors that evokes a bit of unease.

Should color trends be followed?

By trends, if you mean what is fashionable or popular in a given year. No. I don't think so. I don't personally follow color trends because color is so significant. Particularly in book cover design. Because colors are rich in meaning—the decisions to use them need to be made in consideration with the subject matter, genre, target audience, and the feeling you want people to get when they see the cover. People may be surprised that we don't just pick blue or red or green because that's the author's (or our) favorite color. Of course, sometimes you have to do that too. That's an ill-considered way of making those kinds of design decisions though.

Do you read the entire book before you design?

Ha. That might be nice. Usually there isn't time, and many times I don't have the manuscript until after the cover is done and being used for marketing purposes. Ideally the cover is done months before the book comes out. I may get a synopsis, a brief outline, or a short statement from the publisher or editor describing what the book is about—and maybe who makes up the audience for the book. Sometimes I haven't much more to go on than the title—and those sometimes change in the edit process. But sometimes I do get an early version of the manuscript. I read enough of it to get a sense of the content and audience, and I'll glance through the rest of it. If there are photos submitted with the book I look at those. They may be used on the cover, but even if they are not, the style and era of the photos influence the design style of the imagery, typography and colors that I use on the covers.

Sometimes the final covers get redesigned after the initial marketing cover. This happens when we've gotten feedback on the early promotional cover, and when the edit reveals

more to us about the book and its market. By that time too, I have done the production on the interior and read much more of the book—so I am better informed too.

Describe your process for developing a cover concept?

I start by learning about the book as I've said, and considering the audience. I do take into account anything the editor, publisher or author has said, any direction they've expressed a desire in seeing. I may go looking for imagery—even if it doesn't get used, it can spark ideas. I might look at other books in the genre—not to reiterate a design, but to see what hasn't been done. I look at other kinds of design pieces, not books. Really everything I see influences my design—how could it not?

If the book is about a particular era in history, I research the kinds of design styles that were prevalent then. I don't necessarily want to mimic the era exactly, but just get a flavor of it.

I will usually do some very rough layouts in pencil—thumbnail sized. These are just “roadmaps” to remind me what elements I want to emphasize or downplay, what I have to include and some different arrangements. If the content has given me some specific ideas about style I make notes on these pencil roughs. Sometimes I go directly to the computer—if I have a really clear idea of what I'm going to do. But because I usually do at least 2–3 sample covers I take notes before starting. Though sometimes I just do one, because I know that's the one.

Often the words of the title themselves will give me the inspiration I need. Sometimes it's the shapes or way the lettering fits together. It's hard to put into words, but I always know it when I see it—it just clicks.

Typography is a big inspiration in cover design for me, and title fonts are VERY important in creating a cover that has the right look. Typography means so much more than just readable letters. Like color, type has cultural and emotional meanings that go way beyond what the letters say. You get a very uneasy feeling when you see a title set in a font that is totally wrong for the genre, subject, or the title itself. But sometimes that's intentional.

After I have picked images, fonts and colors I set about playing with composition. I generally do most of my cover design work in Photoshop initially, though I often use other programs in finishing them up.

What were your early creative inspirations and influences? Are they the same today?

Wow. How early? As a child I liked to draw, and in school I got positive reinforcement for that. I am sure I was influenced by children's books, cartoons, and the natural world. Today, I know I am influenced by everything I see. Movie and TV title sequences fascinate me, there is a lot more to them than lists of names. Start paying attention to them and you'll see it. Books and magazines influence me too. I am always looking at how other designers use type and color and composition. I am also influenced by fine arts of all sorts.

Studying different kinds of composition through different eras or schools of aesthetic thought teaches me a lot about effective composition in cover design.

How much input do authors have in the design process?

That really depends so much on the publisher. On a book that is being published traditionally, that is one in which the publisher is taking all the risk and paying all the bills to produce, distribute and market the book—no, the author doesn't get much of a say in the final design. They can certainly weigh in with suggestions, but in the end the decisions are up to the publisher. In other kinds of publishing arrangements the amount of author input and decision making in terms of the design varies. If the author has given me a direction that they are interested in seeing, by all means I try to accommodate that. But that doesn't mean it's the best solution, or the one that will get used. From what I have heard even bestselling authors don't have much, if any, pull when it comes to which cover is used. The cover is such an important marketing tool, that it's best to leave those decisions to experts that have not only the knowledge to pick a good one, but a vested interest in its success.

As a designer, I myself don't have much influence over which design is chosen either. I can offer alternate designs from which to choose, and I have been known to “stack the deck” a little to promote one cover design over the other. (Shhh, that's a secret. Don't tell my publisher.)

Of all of your book designs, do you have a favorite?

Ooh. That's a loaded question! Of course I do, but I am not going say.... Actually I have several favorites on any given day, but usually my favorite is whatever I am working on at the time.

How do you decide the size and orientation of the book?

Most of the time I don't get to decide on that. It's a very important factor, one that affects sales, costs, and position on bookstore shelves. I do get to make suggestions about different sizes or formats, binding styles, or other “packaging” elements on a special book—one that isn't going to be a standard book size. But because books are relatively expensive to produce and the profit margins on them are so very thin, cost is always an issue. Since most books are going to be standard sizes and bindings, my challenge then is to make them special some other way! Though I, like ever other designer, relish breaking the mold and doing something different whenever the budget allows. Even so I can't go hog wild. The subject matter and audience also drives decisions on size and format.

Self-published titles are frequently criticized for dreadful cover designs. Why?

Well, just look at them! Many of them ARE dreadful. (Not all of course.) As to why so many are really awful, I think it goes back to the do-it-yourself nature of self-publishing. Let's face it I'm not cheap. ;-) But you get what you pay for in graphic design, just like in every other commercial endeavor. I think what happens is that self-publishers (authors) enter into the process without much of a clue what a book/cover should cost to produce.

They may get a few estimates and when they find out—they often by necessity—go with the lowest bidder, or worse get a friend or relative to do it, or do it themselves. That's when things can go very wrong.

By far the worst covers are ones with bad illustrations. Let's say you hired your daughter to do the cover illustration of your novel. She's always been talented in that area and you've had her pictures taped to the refrigerator for years. Authors usually will try to emulate a cover of a book they like—a cover that has been professionally designed and illustrated. So she draws you a picture and it is OK you think—even if it is not, at this point can you tell your darling that you can't use it because it's not good enough? (What kind of a parent are you?) So you're stuck. Same with a friend. My advice? Never use art you get for free or from someone you love. It just complicates things. And if it's art you did yourself, unless you are really a professional artist, can you be objective about it? If you ask opinions of your family and friends, will they be honest?

Self-publishers would be far better off to stick to a cover that is all type or non-illustrative graphics. Or, to use a royalty free stock illustration *purchased* from one of myriad of online purveyors of such, even if it means it's not exclusive. But it's not just illustration. Using type and composition and color effectively is an art form, one that takes theory, practice and knowledge of marketing to carry off well. Be wary of the so-called custom covers from POD printers. The ones I've seen by and large are as bad as the homemade variety—some are worse.

A cover is a billboard for your book. Even if you've written the equivalent of a thoroughbred racehorse, you've left it in the gate if no one will pick it up. If your crappy cover is sitting next to one that looks professional, the reader may think that the writing in the book is amateurish too, and pick up the other. (And the other one may not even be as well written.) It's taken you months, perhaps years, to polish your manuscript and get it in print, at that point would you send it forth in rags? Just compare the covers of many self-published books with their professionally designed counterparts, which ones entice you to buy them?

One other thing, technology makes it ever easier for people to “design” their own books. Fine and dandy, and some templated packages offered online are nifty. But if you don't fit the template, you really need professional services to do your work justice. My favorite saying about this is, “I own a hammer. It doesn't make me a carpenter.” Alright, climbing down off my soapbox now.

What are your aesthetic and functional considerations in designing book interiors?

I could write a book on this! So many possibilities, and that's what I'm faced with every time. Aesthetics are usually influenced by the needs of the audience and subject matter. Even all-text books (without illustrations or photos) require thought and planning in the selection of fonts, line measure (width) and other more esoteric decisions about how the

text is set; size, leading, how it is arranged on the page, etc. Many things go into the design of text on a page in making it legible, attractive, unobtrusive, and a pleasure to read.

In his book, *The Pencil*, Henry Petroski says, “ This ubiquitous and deceptively simple object . . . is so familiar as to be a virtually invisible part of our general culture and experience.” This is true of text design too. If you agree that good design gets out of the way of the meaning of the words and is invisible to the reader—then the designer has done her job well. It’s not as easy as it sounds. One shouldn’t forget that fonts and the way they are used also convey meaning—beyond that of the words themselves. The best design enhances and amplifies the message of the words, without attracting undue attention. (Sometimes it’s hard to be the invisible artist—but I persevere.)

Now, with an illustrated history, or a coffee table book, I get to shine a little more—have more fun in the way the material is presented. I still have to dance carefully not to tread too much on the author’s story, after all; it’s their story not mine. A good design of this sort is as interesting to look at as it is to read, but the complexity of the design mustn’t be a deterrent to the reading and understanding of the material. And still I must take into account the subject matter and expectations of the reader of said subject. Surprise them? Sure, but not shock them out of the reading/enjoyment/comprehension with something too off-the-wall crazy, (unless it’s called for in the genre).

One functional consideration is that page design has EVERYTHING to do with the navigation, flow, and pacing of a book. Don’t believe it? Look some illustrated books—does your eye flow naturally from object to text, section to section, page to page? Or does it get stopped and thrown off by unfortunate placement and badly interrupted text flow? In either case, thank the designer.

Hmm. Maybe I should write a book?

Which book covers and/or book designers do you highly admire?

It’s really hard to narrow it down, and it changes! I so admire the classical designs when it comes to text, and typography. With covers I’m all over the place. One week I’m all about thrillers, the next literary, hardly ever am I enthralled with genre fiction either the design or to read. (Undoubtedly this prejudice has an awful lot to do with the awful covers!)

I admire the work of Chip Kidd, Milton Glaser, and those crazy dudes at McSweeney’s. I love the design I see at Chronicle Books, and Gibbs Smith. And I am rather enamored of the design work coming out of Martha Stewart’s Omnimedia, but I would never admit to that publicly even if you held my feet to the fire. I will ever and always love the romance, mystery and sheer genius of Nick Bantock’s *Griffin & Sabine* series. I guess I love literary looking covers the best—but my own covers don’t reflect this—by necessity. We must always design to fit the market—not to suit ourselves.

What are you reading now? Do you like the design?

Most recently I've been reading books on writing, and YA books. The books on writing probably don't count—though the covers are not bad. Here's a short list of some recent books whose covers I admire, not one by the aforementioned designers, and all VERY different, so there ya go. (All hardcover versions.) *Chains* by Laurie Halse Anderson; *The Numerati* by Stephen Baker; *The Glass of Time* by Michael Cox; *Down Sand Mountain* by Steve Watkins; *The Green Glass Sea* by Ellen Klages; and not recent, but much admired: *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold; and *Peony in Love* by Lisa See. (Named are the authors, so you can look up the books, not the designers, which alas, often go nameless.)

What tools are in your artist's toolbox?

All the usual ones on the computer (and yes it's a Mac). The Adobe CS4 Design Suite: Photoshop, InDesign, Illustrator, Acrobat, plus web tools that I don't use much. Word, Text-edit. For my own writing projects I use Scrivener and I like it a lot (Mac only, but Wye Writer for PC is similar). I still use traditional off-the-computer tools for noodling and doodling. And I am seriously contemplating doing a children's book with illustrations comprised of Sculpey® modeling clay. In fact, I want to insinuate this method into one of Stephens Press' books someday when I'm given enough time!

The future of printed (ink on paper) books . . . ?

I wish I had a crystal ball! I hope that books on paper survive the present (and future) economic challenges facing the publishing industry. This has been a theme in my blog of late. I am of the opinion that for the present we still have a majority of the *reading* population preferring to read on paper. Though we have to admit that this group is dwindling, dying off, quite literally. (Forgive the puns.) Perhaps some genres of books will cease to exist in physical form in the future. The esoteric niceties of text design are largely lost on the general public. They won't notice when nicely set type is gone, but they will notice that pages on their e-reader of choice just doesn't read quite as effortlessly, and they won't know why. This is perhaps a shame, but I think inevitable.

However, I do see one bright spot. I think there will always be a market for a *high-quality* specialty book product. (I know there are purists out there who say coffee table books are a blight on literature, and to them I say, "Pfbbbbt!") A well designed beautiful book, one that "spares no expense" will always be a gift that many people will cherish and want to collect, enjoy, display, and pass down.

I think in the case of "standard" books all possible costs are being cut than can be cut and still have a marketable product. If we cut anymore we'll be producing the equivalent of "penny dreadfuls." (Designer pauses to consider comic books, and periodicals, and concludes that they are a different category—that too is experiencing significant declines in print products.)

So, my conclusion is that if printed books are to survive, publishers must push their books into two categories—the ones you read in another form, and the ones you cherish as object

to keep. Invest in each with different expectations for each. Either way they will still need a designer to help make it the best product possible. Or, maybe that's wishful thinking.

More about Sue and her work can be found at www.SueCampbellGraphicDesign.com.