

**Cover Me Intrigued: How Graphic Design Shapes Reader Perception and Genre
Recognition in Book Covers**

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Abstract

This thesis explored how book cover design affects first impressions and genre recognition through the use of visual elements like typography, color, image, and composition. Beginning with a historical overview, it detailed how book covers evolved from protective bindings into vital marketing tools. As publishing became more commercial, covers began to communicate genre and tone due to design consistencies and cultural shifts. Research highlighted how readers formed quick judgements based on familiar stylistic elements, such as serif fonts for historical fiction or hand lettering for contemporary romance. These patterns were revealed to serve as mental shortcuts, allowing consumers to filter through choices and identify the titles that best aligned with their needs. The thesis also examined how visual memory and perception helped readers retain and recognize certain styles. To better understand this point, two different methods were used: a qualitative approach involving a one-on-one interview with Isabelle Snyder—a designer in the field—and an eye-tracking experiment to determine consumer attention data. The interview offered an industry perspective that highlighted how design decisions are shaped not only by aesthetics but by real-world constraints such as branding systems, shelf visibility, and audience expectations. These key takeaways emphasized how creative choices must function within practical limitations in order to succeed in the marketplace.. Ultimately, it was concluded that book covers are more than decorative; they play a key role in shaping book perception and consumption.

Keywords: Book cover design, genre recognition, consumer behavior, visual communication, typography, color, marketing, book publishing

Introduction

In theory, the idiom “never judge a book by its cover” means well; it encourages one to look beyond the physical and to not decide something’s worth based solely on its outward appearance. In reality, however, this phrase ignores human nature. We evolved with a special skill for assessment and deduction, giving us the ability to recognize environmental cues and to catalog patterns. This instinct extends to nearly all aspects of our lives, influencing how we evaluate people, situations, and products like books. A striking cover has the capacity to spark a conversation with the reader even before the first page is turned. For this reason, I would argue that a book cover’s sole purpose *is* to be judged. Outside of the title of the work, it often bears the responsibility of the first impression—an important role that determines consumer interest and purchase probability (Alderson, 2004). The cover should intrigue and reassure readers, establishing the necessary ethos for a positive experience. This is accomplished through the effective integration of design elements that properly convey an intended message, a craft that has changed quite a bit over the past few centuries.

Before book covers were marketing tactics and decorative display pieces, they were plain protective bindings made of cloth or leather that improved the life expectancy of the publication. Prioritizing function over fashion, they served to shield pages from damage and wear. Though, as their accessibility grew across class and country, the purpose of the book cover shifted; it became a way for volumes to be uniquely recognizable amongst the competition (Kratz, 1994). Publishers eventually caught on to the untapped opportunity, and the rest was history. As the powers of typography, image, and color united seamlessly onto the scene, so too did we evolve to make connections between how they come together. Overtime, this visual language fostered conventions—typefaces and fonts indicative of style, hues that set the tone and mood of the

story, and the thoughtful use of imagery—making it possible for readers to form associations with the cover and its content (Lees-Maffei, 2010). In a harmonious cycle, book covers are now being designed to align with expectations while readers continue to pick up titles that feel familiar. This relationship ensures that while book design is adapting to identify with current trends, it also has a hand in shaping them.

If a book is unable to live up to readers' hopes, it runs the risk of low sales and poor reception. A crudely designed cover can mislead or disinterest readers before they even open it (see Appendix). Conversely, an effective cover is recognizable and tone-setting, able to draw the attention of the unacquainted. This thesis explores how cover design influences first impressions in relation to genre affiliation and identification. It examines how visual elements like typography, color, and composition help both consumers and designers in understanding the subtle cues that determine whether a book is perceived as romance, mystery, sci-fi, or other. It hopes to assist publishers and designers so that they may craft covers that effectively communicate genre while still allowing for innovation and artistic expression.

Literature Review

The History of Book Covers

Cover design has changed substantially in the past 500 years, both artistically and functionally. The transformation from a simple means of damage prevention to the sophisticated marketing tool it is today was driven by technological advancements, economic growth, and widespread consumer interest around the globe. Early bookmaking was a labor-intensive process, which made books expensive and rare (Baron, 2021). To reflect the status of the wealthy individuals who could afford them, these pages were often bound in embossed leather and adorned with precious stones and threads of silver or gold. As the printing revolution

reverberated throughout Europe during the 15th and 16th centuries, many of these embellishments were removed when books became far more accessible and were no longer a symbol of affluence. Book jackets appeared around the dawn of the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century, developed to protect manuscripts during transit from small publishing houses (Baron, 2021). As books started becoming mass produced and serialized fiction rose in popularity, publishers turned to paper jackets to economize—since printing on fabric was quite costly in comparison—and thus spawned the modern paperback. Yellowbacks, their predecessors, originated in England as short and inexpensive entertainment outlets for the growing number of literate in the middle class. Featuring bright and alluring covers with intricate illustrations, typographic treatments, and spines, these editions stood out on store shelves. Allen Lane took this inexpensive printing model to new heights in 1935 when he co-founded Penguin Books, a publishing house dedicated to the affordability of classic literature. Their high-quality collections challenged the assumption that alternative methods were inferior, paving the way for modern paperbacks to sit alongside hardcovers on library shelves.

The Importance of a Good Cover

Because of mass production, book covers are now intricate and expressive with no unreasonable burden on artists, scribes, or lower-class consumers. As such, there is a great deal of importance placed on their design to market the content they accommodate. AIDA (attention, interest, desire, and action) is a marketing model that describes the steps a customer takes when buying a product or service (Pascu, 2021). In modern times, the purpose of a book cover is to sell the book—and a successful one can entice a reader to investigate further, which may then lead to them purchasing the volume. Contrary to its importance, the final design is often decided near the end of the publishing process (Alderson, 2004). It is an interdisciplinary task completed

through the collaboration of graphic designers, marketers, and publishers. The author of the book does not usually have much say in the final product in spite of their knowledge, demonstrating the importance of market research and experience when crafting a cover that will sell. Despite this, a cover's relationship with its material is still vital. While it is not possible to encompass an entire narrative within the confined dimensions of a small rectangle of cardstock, the cover should encapsulate the most important and defining aspects of the narrative (Sonzongi, 2011). This ensures that it will be unique to itself and likely align with pre-existing visual trends within its definitive genre.

The cover is typically the first touchpoint a consumer has with a book outside of its title, be that physically in store or online. It provides visual information enabling the reader to rationalize their interest in a matter of seconds and reminds them of what they already know. Processing and storing visual information involves multiple parts of the human brain, including the hippocampus, temporal lobe, and the thalamus—but actual memories are stored in the cerebral cortex (Roland, 1995). This allows humans to observe repetitive elements within their environment and make compounding associations between said patterns. Similarities in book cover components such as font selection, image, and color depicted by books within the same genre over time have the potential to elicit specific assumptions within the informed consumer. They create a relationship between familiar and unfamiliar books as being the same, and may generate an inherent sense of credibility and satisfaction for the title if previous experiences were positive. It is because of this that many book covers within the same genre look alike and share similar qualities.

The German Research Center for Artificial Intelligence conducted an experiment using a Convolutional Neural Network (CNN) AI program to test the predictability of visual clues on

book covers. A CNN is a form of deep learning algorithm effective in processing and recognizing images. It analyzes and learns features in data very similarly to the way the human mind catalogs information to identify meaningful patterns. Their study concluded that while book covers can be ambiguous and overarching, there are in many cases recognizable design techniques that will key a reader in on classification (Lees-Maffei, 2010). For example, books containing images of food were correctly assigned the “Cookbooks, Food & Wine” category with a high probability. However, food-related books that lacked this identifier resulted in low confidence misclassifications. This supports that while book covers can be original to themselves, the most eminent play into pre-established cues set by books before them.

The Role of Design

To create a successful book cover that satisfies and reaffirms audience expectations, a designer must build a strong composition. The composition of the cover is the sum of and relationship between the components within the design; the typography, image, color, hierarchy, scale, and balance must all work together intentionally to mold a unified outcome (Pascu, 2021). Graphic designers are visual communicators, and one of their most important considerations is that of the typeface. At times, intentional ambiguity can enrich a design’s meaning; however—in this case—the textual information on a book cover is responsible for cardinal details such as the author’s name, publisher, title, and any accolades the book has received. The clarity of this content is heavily pushed by the publishing and marketing teams and is a non-negotiable aspect (Evans, 2001). Book covers are not the medium to test out typographic experiments since these intense distortions may hinder an audience’s ability to comprehend the central message—and most books within a genre will use homogenous typefaces for congruity. For instance, using a corresponding font that invokes the particular period of time within which the setting takes place

will immediately key the viewer in on an important piece of context. A typeface like Helvetica may come across as being more straightforward and masculine, while a serif face like Palatino might appear more delicate and refined (Evans, 2001). Fantasy and Young Adult books typically feature grand display fonts or serifs that stand out and relate to the sometimes fictitious and eccentric narratives. Mystery, thriller, and suspense books have reasonable overlap in design with romance, science fiction, and fantasy, but one common thread that differentiates them is that they're often accompanied by sans serif fonts (Lees-Maffei, 2010). By understanding the personality of a typeface, a designer can make it easier for audiences to find novels that align with their tastes and interests. By utilizing expected typography, they are relating to the built conventions of the genre of the book they're designing for.

Similar to typography, any images used within the design will heavily impact the book's perceived genre. While making identities for brands and products, some designers will say not to make the logo too obvious and straightforward. But with book covers—which could be considered a book's branding—this theory is not applicable. A sword on the cover will signal to readers that said book involves swords since the picture should never deviate substantially from its source (Kratz, 1994). They may not entirely understand if it is about the history of medieval weaponry, a fantasy heist, or a backstabbing romance, but the context becomes clearer when the image works in conjunction with other components. By then, it has already captured its intended audience. With autobiographies, the author and subject are the same. Including a headshot of the subject as the primary element is the most simple way to engage audiences that may be interested and help them easily assume its purpose. Textbooks in linguistics, philosophy, and mathematics may feature abstract, type-based illustrative designs with geometric forms (Kratz, 1994). Others, like history textbooks, use minimal color and sizable photographs with their subjects written in

bigger sizes. These tomes are meant to educate rather than entertain, with their facile designs being an indication of their function and classification. As mentioned in the German Research Center experiment, correlating images are one of the best ways to aid the audience. Using photographs of pies for a pie recipe cookbook might feel overdone, but this is the most successful strategy for reeling in new readers. Using this method of guaranteed success in a way that supersedes others in the genre is the real test of the cover.

Not all book covers use images though, as is the case with many old hardcovers and academic publishings. In the absence of other features, the viewer has to rely primarily on color and composition. The German experiment explored when book genres were classified through color: white for “Self-Help”, yellow for “Religion & Spirituality”, green for “Science & Math”, blue for “Computers & Technology”, red for “Medical Books”, and black for “Biographies & Memoirs” (Lees-Maffei, 2010). Many misclassifications occurred when using this sorting method alone. This suggests that color is oftentimes not the main indicator of genre identification, though with how significant it is in design comprehensively, it’s important to consider the way it influences the viewer. Other countries and cultures interpret colors differently, and variations in anthropological data can be explored by analyzing titles with alternative covers dependent on their publishing location. Generally, from an American perspective, bright colors are eye-catching, playful, and impactful. They adorn lovely children's books to attract their creativity, or spread the positive messages of self-help titles (Lees-Maffei, 2010). Black is mysterious, dark, and neutral: white is minimalistic, refined, and open; organic colors like brown are rich and earthy, and may appear ancient. For this reason, mature novels may more often feature darker hues and sensual palettes. A scientific text could lean into greens and blues due to their association with nature. Thoughtful color choices enhance a cover’s

impact, guiding readers' expectations and reinforcing the book's identity, but it usually isn't enough to denote genre independently.

Book covers provide visual cues that help readers quickly identify genre, making them a powerful tool for attracting the right audience. To create a successful cover, designers should first establish genre through familiar elements before incorporating unique details that reflect a book's specific content, characters, and setting. This is the most effective way to attract uncertain readers, as it pulls from a far broader set of preconceptions. A strong composition ensures that all of the elements work cohesively to make it eye-catching and informative. While creativity is important, the most successful covers strike a balance between originality and marketability, standing out while still engaging with reader conjecture. By thoughtfully incorporating genre conventions, designers can craft covers that not only seize recognition but also drive sales.

Methodology

This research explored how book cover design influenced reader perception, engagement, and purchasing behavior through a mixed-methods approach. Cover design is often the first impression a reader absorbs for a book and plays a major role in purchase probability and therefore is a vital aspect of its success (Sonzongi, 2011). Combining qualitative interviews and a quantitative eye-tracking experiment, the study examined how typography, color, and imagery impacted genre recognition and marketability in order to observe what aspects are viewed as more important so that designers may amplify their practice. This research identified key design strategies to enhance book sales and provided insights for optimizing book covers to balance aesthetic appeal with commercial success.

The qualitative process involved a one-on-one interview with Isabelle Snyder, a Junior Designer at Penguin Random House with experience in publishing and book cover design; they

were selected to provide professional insight into the decision-making process and give context on the state of cover design. In a 45-minute online interaction, she was posed a mix of open and closed-ended questions (see Appendix).

The second study focused on a quantitative experiment using an eye-tracking software. Twenty observers were selected between the ages of 18-24 and were briefed on the process details beforehand so they understood their assignment. The participants were individually asked to look at a book cover for five seconds and then make an educated assumption about the concept of the book and its genre. They observed 10 different covers in quick succession from unique book classifications while an eye-tracker monitored their visual movements. This method was used to gauge which areas the participants focused on when making their selection and recorded the amount of time their eyes spent at each location (title, accreditations, author, etc.) on the page in milliseconds. How often each section was revisited was also calculated with the intent to observe the areas they kept returning to for context. The short timeframe for viewing was used to restrict overthinking and simulate the realistic attention given to a cover in passing. Afterwards, the data was illustrated in heat maps to visualize frequent areas, with red being the most recurrent. One limitation to note was the limited range of ages between the chosen participants which may have led to skewed or biased results. This study intended to map which areas of a book cover gravitate attention and—in correct identifications—what features were most accurate at cueing genre affiliation.

Conclusion

With so many options available to the consumer, book covers are more than just a protective shell or decorative element; they are powerful marketing tools that shape first impressions and influence purchasing decisions. Despite the well-meaning idiom advocating

against judging a book by its cover, it is clear that visual design plays a crucial role in attracting readers. Designers and publishers take advantage of the brain's ability to observe repetitive patterns and construct likely associations. By reinforcing these patterns, book covers create a sense of familiarity and trust that reassures buyers, increasing the likelihood of engagement and purchase (Alter, 2014). It is for this reason that genre can be assumed based solely on a book's cover. By combining design principles with typography, image, and color, designers can create an immediate sense of tone and quality. Readers rely on these visual cues to guide their choices and relate to their experiences. When fantasy books consistently make use of elaborate serifs and mystical imagery, while thrillers favor bold, minimalistic typography and dark color palettes, noticeable decisions such as these are instinctually catalogued within the cerebral cortex's memory storage (Roland, 1995). These conventions are not arbitrary but rather the result of a long-standing relationship between design and presumed understanding. Insights from practicing designers further reveal how commercial realities shape these systems, showing that successful covers must function not only as aesthetic artifacts but as strategic tools that respond to audience behavior, existing brand expectations, and performance data (see Appendix).

In a world where attention spans are shrinking and there is an abundance of books for consumers to choose from, a compelling cover is more important than ever. Designers must craft covers that stand out yet still feel recognizable enough to clue readers in to their purpose and genre. Today, there is also a change in how books are being sold with the rise of online storefronts like Amazon steadily monopolizing book sales (Park et al., 2023). When the amount of readable information is being minimized to fit within the dimensions of a digital screen, there is only so much one can do with the limited space. More research should be conducted studying the ways this new terrain affects the performance of books and quantitative data should be

collected to analyze specific revenue impacts. A book cover serves as an invitation, a promise, and a brand all in one. While we may strive to look beyond appearances, the truth remains: we do judge books by their cover, and the best designs ensure that judgement is a favorable one.

Appendix

Interview Title: How the design of a book cover can be used to identify the genre of a book.

Interviewee: Isabelle Snyder, Junior Designer, Penguin Random House

Interview Start: 4/25/25 16:30

Interview End: 4/25/25 17:15 (approx. 45 minutes)

Transcript style: Edited/Intelligent verbatim

MS: Thank you for meeting with me today. To start, my thesis looks at how book covers communicate meaning at a glance. From your experience at Penguin Random House, how do you balance creative expression with a book's marketability?

IS: It's definitely a balancing act. Our environment is pretty structured, so while we get room to be creative, we also have guardrails that keep us grounded in what will actually work in the marketplace. A good example is layout. Sometimes we'll design something that looks great on-screen, but then we see a printed copy on a physical shelf and realize the placement isn't practical. If a store's shelving cuts off the bottom third of the cover, the title can disappear. So if the title or author name is a major selling point, it really needs to sit at the top. That's not something you always think about at the beginning of the process, but it becomes essential.

MS: So the physical environment can steer design decisions?

IS: Absolutely. You're designing for real-world conditions, not just for a perfect digital mockup. And that plays into creative choices for children's books especially. Color is a huge part of attracting young readers and signaling tone to parents. For those covers, we often hire illustrators or pull from existing style guide assets, and we usually start with sketches before thinking about color. The color decisions come later because you want the composition to be solid first.

MS: How much adjustment happens once you bring color in?

IS: Sometimes a lot. I worked on a cover where we really wanted one character to pop, but the background overwhelmed them. We had to pull the background back so the figure didn't get lost. It's a good example of how your creative idea might be strong, but you still have to adapt it so the book is readable and appealing on a shelf.

MS: And are there market cues you think about, like seasonal trends or genre expectations?

IS: Definitely. We talk about "signifiers" a lot. For example, if a book is tied to a holiday release, color becomes a tool for that. You might lean into palettes people subconsciously connect to a season—like warmer tones for fall or bright reds and greens around winter holidays. It's not about being cliché, but those cues help a reader quickly understand the vibe. Marketability isn't about limiting creativity; it's about making sure your creative choices communicate clearly.

MS: That's really helpful. It sounds like the balance comes from constant adjustment—holding onto the creative idea, but shaping it so it thrives in the real world.

IS: Exactly. You're always asking, "How will this live out there?" If it can stand out while still doing its job, that's the sweet spot.

MS: My next question looks at the role of publisher influence. How do you balance your own creative expression with publisher expectations?

IS: In this industry, especially when you're working on big or well-established properties, there actually isn't a ton of room for personal creativity. A lot of the direction comes from the publisher, the editors, and the brand teams. We get art notes outlining their vision, and while we can make suggestions, the expectation is that we stay within an existing system.

MS: When you say system, what do you mean?

IS: That's the branding. Like, for example, Disney. For books like *Donald Duck Little Golden Book Favorites* or the *Nickelodeon 5-Minute Easter Stories Collection*—those are projects I've worked on—there are already visual rules in place. Color palettes, character styling, the general tone. You reference those guides constantly. The challenge is finding small ways to contribute creatively while still honoring what makes the brand recognizable.

MS: So the creativity becomes more about working within boundaries?

IS: Right. You're shaping details, not reinventing the whole look. The publisher's expectations give you the framework, and your job is to work creatively inside it.

MS: From your perspective, what makes a book cover “successful”? And how is that success usually measured?

IS: A successful cover is one that communicates clearly and feels true to the book’s identity, but also performs well once it’s out in the world. A good example is a project I worked on for the Dr. Seuss Estate. We were refreshing some of the *Learning Library* books, and the older covers had really long titles with tiny subtitles that weren’t easy to read. We redesigned them so the “All About” information was much larger and more prominent.

MS: So clarity was a big part of that success?

IS: Definitely. We also experimented with typefaces that matched the [Seussian] vibe but still felt modern and clean. After those revisions, the team reported that the books were performing better. That’s the kind of outcome we look for—design that not only looks good but makes the book easier to understand and more appealing to buyers.

MS: My last question is about genre and audience. How do genre conventions or reader expectations shape your approach to cover design?

IS: They shape it a lot. You always have to think about what the audience actually wants to see. For example, when I worked on some Paw Patrol titles, the initial concept included the human

character, but we realized kids are really there for the dogs. So we shifted the focus to them. It's about understanding what feels most exciting or recognizable to that audience.

MS: How do you get that feedback and implement it?

IS: Art directors give notes early on to make sure we're aligned with the genre and tone. We also try to pull moments from the story for the cover, as long as they're iconic without being overused. I did that with the *Lion King* Little Golden Book—it needed to feel familiar to fans but still fresh.

MS: So expectations guide the framework, and your creativity works within it.

IS: Exactly. Genre cues and audience preferences give you the starting point, and then you find the best visual way to communicate that.

Close-ended questions

1. Do you think readers rely on visual conventions to identify a book's genre?

☒ Yes ☐ No

2. Have you ever been asked to intentionally subvert genre expectations in a cover design?

☐ Yes ☒ No

Notes:

- Big licensors want to be associated with their brand
- Can't do things because they didn't align with the brand or they wouldn't be approved

3. Do you use mood boards or reference covers from the same genre before beginning a design?

(X) Yes () No () Occasionally

Notes:

- Mimicking other books that have already been done
- Other publishers for other genres use moodboards and competitors to design the cover

4. Do you believe a book can be “judged by its cover”?

(X) Yes () No

Notes:

- **IS:** A good example of this is a book called *Lessons in Chemistry*. The original cover was this really cute, stylized illustration, but it didn't line up with the actual story. A lot of readers read it as a romance cover, so romance fans were buying it and then feeling disappointed when they realized the book wasn't a romance at all. The publisher eventually released a new cover in response to the criticism. The new version uses a more realistic style, and the details—a vintage TV, the dress—hint at the time period and the tone of the story in a way the illustration

didn't. It just communicates the book more honestly. It shows how important it is for the design to match what readers expect, so they're getting the experience they think they're signing up for.

- Using books within the genre to guide the design, see if they want to pull anything from how the genre looks at that moment
- A book's "packaging"
- Even if it's bold and original, it needs to call back to genre

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