Lesson 1: The Basics of Effective Cover Designs

For almost 2000 years, book covers had one basic function. They held the pages together in a book. They were often beautifully crafted out of tooled leather. Other times the covers were plain. Many didn't even have a name on them because who had enough books to not know which one was which. As the cost of production fell and the literacy rate rose, books were no longer being sold one at a time to wealthy clients, but sold to the masses in book stores, print shops, markets and even door to door. As the retail market for books grew, so did the need to attract a potential reader's attention.

Cover Art emerged as more than simply a matter of decoration. It took it's place as part of the marketing of new books.

Today ebooks have no pages to hold together. However, the "cover" is an essential part of marketing the book. Think about how people buy ebooks. They run a search at one of the vendors and scans through the books offered for sale. They have a cover and one line with the author's name and the title of the book. That cover is the first thing people see of your book.

That cover must attract attention, communicate the subject, theme or plot of the book, and entice the reader to click through to the book sales page. That's a lot of ask of something that only shows up as a thumbnail on a computer/ereader/smartphone screen.

Pretty isn't Enough

While an attractive cover design is important, it is not all important. It may not even be the most important element of an effective cover design. My top selling book right now has a very simple cover:

My other best seller also has a simple cover:
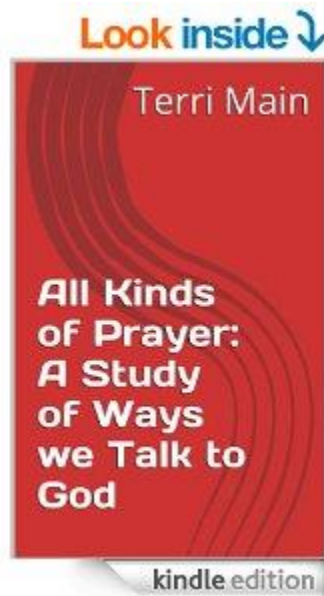
The second one is my second cover. My first cover was more complex and visually interesting, but as an experiment, I decided to see if changing book covers helped or hurt sales. So, I dropped my custom book cover and went with a generic cover from Kindle's cover creator. Not only did my sales not drop, they improved. I think in part because this design emphasizes the title more than my previous one.

One thing to remember about cover design is to not be wedded to a single idea. Be willing to experiment with multiple ideas until you find one that works best for that book. Sometimes a simple cover with no picture and minimal graphics is what will work. Other times, it takes a dramatic photo with a short title. Try different things. Unlike print. All it takes to change your cover on Kindle or Nook is to upload a new one and 12 hours later it's online.

Elements of an Effective Cover

Professionalism. A cover must look like it was done with care. That means no misspelled words, no crooked graphics (unless done for effect), no fuzzy, out of focus, low resolution pictures, nothing that looks just thrown together. You are better off using a generic cover from Kindle without any modification rather than putting together something that looks tacky.

A Compelling Title. While not a design element itself, the title is a major factor in marketing a book, and, since it is the focus of your cover, we should discuss it here. Your title is a part of marketing. Unfortunately, many writers, myself included, at times have considered it to be something to play around with or be cute. Your title should communicate the mood, genre/topic, and promise of the book. What do I mean by promise? Every bit of marketing makes a promise to the reader. I promise that the reader will get a certain type of story, information about a certain topic, a certain reading experience, something that will entice the reader to click on the "Buy Now" button.

Of course, trying to get all those into a title is hard. It is especially hard with fiction. Nonfiction is easier in some ways. You can create a highly descriptive sub-title if the title is vague.

Ask yourself these questions:

Does the title communicate the mood of the story?

Does the title communicate the genre of the story/subject of the nonfiction book?

Does the title give some hint of the content/plot of the book?

Is the title intriguing?

Is the title short enough that you can print it in large letters on the cover?

Of course, there are exceptions for each of these, however there are no exceptions for ALL of them. In other words, get as many "yes" answers as possible.

A clearly readable title. Too often I see titles that are virtually unreadable. Either the cover designer has used an overly complex script style font or they have put the title in small letters. This often happens with very long titles because there isn't enough negative space in the background graphic. This is something to consider when choosing either a title or a graphic.

An Attractive Appearance Graphically. This doesn't mean it has to be beautiful, complex or done by an award winning artist. Simplicity sells as much as complexity. Many times a very "pretty" cover is so busy that you can't read the title. Sometimes the best cover is a simple cover. It just has to be something that is not repellant visually with clashing colors, out of focus pictures, or just plain boring design.

A Stand-Out Design. If you read a certain genre long enough you notice certain cover clichés emerge over time. I can't tell you how many science fiction space opera stories have a boxy looking space cruiser colored dark grey or brown approaching the dark side of a brown or grey planet. Or what about the new trend in romance novels with a picture of a woman or a woman and a man not quite embracing on the top with a faded zone below where the title is and some pastoral scene below.

Too many cover designers think about their covers in isolation, but your cover is going to be sitting next to hundreds of other covers. What makes it stand out from the crowd? It can be beautifully designed, but if it is essentially the same as all the other covers on that screen what's going to make someone want to click through to read the book.

A promise of things to come. I made this mistake with a recent book cover. The cover is good and attractive. It stands out, but it dealt with what was only a small part of the plot of the story and one we dealt with hardly at all in the last 2/3 of the book. What's more it promised something that typical readers of cozy mysteries are not that interested in. The title did the same. The title and the cover must convey to the reader some core aspect of the theme, topic, or plot point.

The Mood of the Story. Every story has a mood. To a certain extent you want your cover to convey that mood. I always thought the covers of The Cat Who... paperback series did a good job of that. There were cat paw prints wandering across the cover with small images of objects that played a role in the story. But it was light and whimsical which matched the mood of most Cat Who stories. These were not stories with a hero with lots of angst or anger or baggage. They were not dark stories. They were small town mysteries, a few hours of blissfully mindless entertainment. And the cover told me that.

Of course, we are talking about the perfect cover here. Each cover will be stronger in one area than the other, but keep all of these in mind as you create your own cover.

We are going to get you started right off the bat on Wednesday when we create a quick cover using the Kindle Cover Creator. You can do better than that, but for quick publication, and especially nonfiction, I use it a lot. Even if you design a JPG cover, you can use that artwork and use cover creator to preview it as thumbnails.

So, if you do not already have a Kindle Direct Publishing account, set one up. Just go to http://kdp.amazon.com Log in with your Amazon account information. You don't have to set up everything with all the tax info to do the exercises we will give you here. And you won't accidentally publish something embarrassing. So don't worry about that.

So, I'll check in with you again on Wednesday.

Terri