

THOSE FABULOUS ROMANCE COVERS

By Stephanie Bond

Clenches, flowers, castles, embossing, foil, holograms, step-back covers, cut-outs—how do the publishers come up with all those great covers, and do the authors have any input?

Developing cover art for a book is a complicated process. Publishers know that readers are most likely to pick up a book if they're attracted to the cover, so many resources are devoted to the cover, from inception to production.

In most cases, the story itself will suggest a cover idea. Strong visual elements such as an exotic setting, a suspenseful plot, or unusual time period sometimes provide the art department with enough material to put together a great cover. In short, the goal is for the reader to get an idea of what the book is about simply by looking at the cover. In other cases, however, the author's reputation dictates the cover design. The books by blockbuster authors who command a sale simply on their name, for instance, might feature a cover with a "look" that readers associate with the author—the content of the story is almost secondary to the author.

Typically, the author does have input into the cover art by filling out "art forms" that cover a range of details from descriptions of the characters and their clothing, to the setting and season of the story. Authors might also be able to suggest scenes for the cover, and secondary elements, such as children, pets, a building, et cetera. The art forms are sent to the art department, whose representatives typically meet with reps from the editorial staff and/or marketing to brainstorm ideas for the cover. Each department might have a different slant on what kind of cover they'd like to see: Editorial might be most concerned with portraying attractive, likable characters, art might focus on color and composition, and marketing might zero in on elements that could trigger a good or bad response from a customer.

For instance, some color and color combinations sell better than others. It has long been thought that green is a bad-selling color, although when combined with gold foil, can be very striking. In romance series, artistic occupations are believed to be turn-offs, so you'll probably never see a musical instrument or theater setting on a cover. Sports are also thought to be a no-no. On the other hand, the colors red and pink are popular, along with flowers, candy, shirtless men, horses, and uniforms. Of course, historical romances have their own trigger elements such as costumes and castles.

After the cover art conference meeting, an art department representative will meet with an artist, typically from a stable of freelancers who work regularly for the publisher. The idea for

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the cover is translated to the artist, who returns to his/her studio and produces sketches by hand or conceptualizes the idea onto a computer. If a photo shoot is required, the characters will usually be selected from a portfolio of models that the publisher uses. From the photo shoot, the artist might paint over the original photo, changing hair color and other details. Or a portion of one photo might be merged with another into a sketch, then a painting, or on the computer screen. Photographs of models are rarely used because, frankly, the artist can make the models look even better than they do in person, and drawings provide readers with the 'fantasy' element of being able to fill in a few details in their own imaginations.

Most artists have a reference library from which to choose to guarantee authenticity of elements, such as the correct period clothing, type of weapon, flower, et cetera. Occasionally, of course, mistakes are made.

One author, for instance, was bombarded with letters from readers pointing out that the neck to waist zipper on the gown her heroine wore on the cover wasn't accurate—zippers hadn't yet been invented. Another popular example is the cover featuring a heroine with three arms. Then there was the book where the name of the author was accidentally left off!

Of course, we've all read books where the descriptions of the characters inside the book don't match the people on the cover. The discrepancy is sometimes a sore spot with readers, but art and marketing execs have good reasons to justify the changes. For instance, blond men on the cover of contemporary series novels don't always fit the 'tall, dark, and handsome' image that readers have of a hero, so the men are generally given darker hair. A character's hair color might also be changed to better contrast with the background colors. And most writers agree that they'd rather have a selling cover than an accurate cover.

Once the artist has rendered the cover (leaving space for the title and author's name), a slide or film is taken of the final piece and delivered to the publisher's art department. After the appropriate text has been added, the colors might be tweaked before the final printing. At this point, if the author has negotiated cover approval in their contract, they will give their blessing before the press starts up.

Controversy abounds about what type of romance covers sell best. Traditionally, clench covers have epitomized the romance genre, although publishers have responded to some readers' complaints that the covers are too graphic or "embarrassing" to read in public by replacing clenches with flowers, yet offering a step-back of a clench on the inside cover. However, with generic symbols such as flowers or jewels on the cover, it's sometimes difficult to tell if the book

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is a romance, or what kind of romance it is, which is not an issue with clench covers. As one bookseller said, "The bad thing about clench covers is that you can tell the book is a romance. But the good thing about clench covers is that you can tell the book is a romance."

Sometimes it's possible to assess an author's status simply by looking at their covers. If their name is larger than the title, if a recognizable model is used on the cover, or if embossing or foil is applied, you can bet the publisher has more money invested in that author and is determined to grab the reader's attention. And since the typical romance buyer devotes only a couple of seconds to a cover for that first impression, a great cover can make a book, and a nondescript cover can break one.

So when customers complain that the cover doesn't match the characters or the story, sympathize with them. Allow them to vent. Assure them the author wasn't wholly responsible. But rest in the knowledge that something about that cover worked, else the customer wouldn't have picked it up in the first place! ~**SBond**

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