

Generic Thoughts on book covers

The Whorl list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 08 Dec 2000

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/whorl/1056>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 08 Dec 2000, 10:24

Thank you Rev Corbin.

I thought the covers for LAKE OF THE LONG SUN and EXODUS FROM THE LONG SUN were both attractive and skillfully executed -- they had an air of old-fashioned futurity, like the kind of paintings people living in the Whorl might have actually made, as opposed to the stiffly-posed, airbrushed techno-fetishism of, say, a David Weber cover.

Mind you, I actually like Weber (though not the covers), at least the HH books. (True confessions, anyone?) That being the case, I agree; these are excellent.

NIGHTSIDE and CALDE were ehhhh, but not embarrassing.

I thought NIGHTSIDE was one of the best portrayals of the inside of a big spinning cylinder world-ship I've ever seen. (They actually did it very well on BABYLON-5, also, but only used it a couple of times.)

The new TPBs of FREE LIVE FREE and DOCTOR DEATH are both attractive and classily understated.

Bought the ISLAND... edition, because my nasty little dayglo orange pb had vanished somewhere along the line; I agree, it's nice, but if I were going to buy a book and didn't know about Gene Wolfe I think I would guess, looking at it, that it was a popular science book on sociobiology or maybe AI. Haven't seen the FLF, I still have my ugly silver pb. (That's another one I don't much like, cometathinkabouddit, mostly because of the garish silver.)

The Short Sun jackets have good layouts and nice printing quality -- it's the pictures themselves, or more accurately what they depict, that bug me. Call me crazy, but I don't like walking around with naked women or badly-rendered aliens on my book covers...they drag the books back into the mire of generic adolescent sf/fantasy.

Literal representation is the telltale mark of genre muck -- how many abstract fantasy novel covers have you seen lately, for instance? (The only ones I can think of belong to Terry Pratchett books.)

... which certainly aren't genre muck.

Observation: I don't think they're the telltale mark of "genre muck"; I think they're the telltale mark of genre, period.

The following is partially-informed speculation, but I think it has validity. To the extent I am wrong about what goes on in publishers' heads, it at least represents what someone with a bit of knowledge about marketing in general "gets" from perusing the covers of many books over many years.

Publishers, contrary to popular belief, actually do hope to make money by publishing and selling

books, and they seem to have worked out a rather elaborate collection, not of appeals in the traditional sales sense, but of marketing codes that tell customers what kind of book this is. Not just "this is an SF novel," but -- taking Weber as an example -- "this is a military adventure SF novel with a great deal of attention paid to hardware and a tough female protagonist:" you can look at any Honor Harrington novel and know that without reading the blurb. (Someday I shall figure out how publishers' marketing departments design blurbs; I imagine they have some kind of technique, but I can't make heads nor tails of it.)

There are basically three kinds of fiction books, from a marketing point of view: the stand-alone blockbuster, the genre book, and the book whose author is the primary selling point (the Brand Name writer).

Now, the Brand Name Writer gets his or her name in great big letters; furthermore, if the author has a long-standing relationship with a single publisher, his or her books tend to have a unified "look." The Terry Pratchett paperbacks you mentioned are a beautiful example of this, and I'm rather sorry they seem to have broken the design rules with the pb cover for CARPE JUGULUM. When I first saw it, in a drug store, I didn't realize at first that it was a Discworld book -- I don't buy them in h/c.

Unfortunately, Gene Wolfe is not quite enough of a Brand Name to qualify for this -- though his individual series, at least, seem to qualify for unified look-and-feel treatment (not all series do).

For the stand-alone blockbuster (which includes books that the publisher thinks/hopes may be a breakthrough for an existing writer; first novels by a writer the publisher thinks/hopes is at the beginning of a groovy faboo career as the next Brand Name; books that Hollywood has evinced big-money interest in; and books that just seem likely to capture the attention of the public this month), there are a fairly limited variety of layouts. They generally involve great big letters for the title, smaller letters for the author's name, and limited or no illustration, but there are a couple that don't; the main thing is they're incredibly eyegrabbing and intended to sit in very public spaces like B.Waldencrown windows or dumps by the front counter of Borne&Nodlers.

That leaves the genre book. Genre as a marketplace phenomenon exists for the mutual convenience of publishers (who want to sell books), booksellers (who want not only to sell them but to shelve them in a coherent manner), and readers/bookbuyers, in precisely that order: because publishers, by their position in the supply chain, define genre (as a marketplace phenomenon).

From the publisher's point of view, the genre book must appeal to the genre buyer -- in fact, to the sub-genre buyer; a book may have "SF" on the cover, but the actual marketing approach is, as suggested in my comment on David Weber covers above, much more focused than that.

From the bookseller's point of view, the same is true, and furthermore the genre book must be clearly labelled as such so the bookseller knows where to put it. Books like "J.D. Robb" (Nora Roberts)'s Eve Dallas series can be a nightmare for booksellers. Since most of you probably wouldn't touch them with a ten-foot pole, a bit of description: they're police-procedural murder mysteries, set in a near-to-middle future (actually the dates given, about the middle of the 21st century, don't seem very plausible given the level of space mobility involved), whose heroine is involved in an ongoing, hot, romance with a mysterious billionaire known only as "Roarke." Shelve as mystery? SF? Romance, with Roberts's other books? The publisher is semi-helpful: the spines label the books as "Romantic Suspense." I've seen them shelved in the romance section and the mystery section -- often in the same store -- but never in the SF section. (That I first encountered them in an SF bookshop is particularly indicative; they were off the main shelves,

in the shop's smallish mystery section.)

For the book buyer or reader... Well, that's another question. There are a lot of readers who buy books based on their covers. Put guns, machines, and a big-breasted woman in uniform (preferably leather or at least black) on the cover and you have a target audience who will probably buy at least one book by the author. Put dragons on the cover -- wait a minute, there's (at least) two conventions with dragons: the one where somebody's fighting them (or, in close up, the dragon is breathing fire), and the convention where the dragon is someone's friend, often with the friend on the dragon's back, flying - the McCaffrey-and-her-imitators (including, these days, McCaffrey) convention. Plus the cute/semi-abstract dragon convention, as on the (original, at least) covers of TEA WITH THE BLACK DRAGON and A BOOK DRAGON.

Those of us who buy all sorts of books are actually a very small part of the bookbuying audience. I like to shop at local stores, but I'm inclined to spend time in the larger Barnes/Borders-type stores, because there I can wander around, picking up things from all sorts of different shelves and utterly confusing the occasional semi-helpful employee who wants to help me find something else I'd enjoy.

(This is especially fun in the CD section, where they're not quite sure what to make of someone who comes up to the counter with the new King Crimson and a Copland collection, and asks for advice on pre-Castro Cuban big band/flute jazz. "Buying presents?" "No, it's all for me...")

Getting back to my point (All together now: "and I **do** have one"), given that Wolfe isn't a blockbuster or a Big enough Name to warrant a Look And Feel, he's going to get genre covers. Or, in fact, sub-genre covers. The Short Sun books are apparently being treated as planetary adventure; which is about the right subgenre, when you come right down to it. We can just bloody well like it or lump it.

I like it; I think it does maximize his sales -- youall and I are going to buy them anyway, and maybe J. Random Subgenre Buyer will too. But I also like genre covers; I grew up with them, I consider them a legitimate style of commercial-art-with-occasional-fine-art-tendencies. And if you hate the cover, buy the hardcover (you would anyway, wouldn't you?) and leave the dj at home -- which I do also, but to protect the dj.

There are plenty of approaches that would have worked equally well or better.

Not, I think, for marketing-and-sales purposes.

For instance, since both OBW and IGJ could be considered planetary romances, a well-done landscape painting or a Photoshopped photograph would have been classy while still communicating some of the exotic appeal of the novels.

Well, okay. Maybe. But I think the planetary adventure novel codes require one (1) Alien Creature on the cover...even if there's none in the book.

Another alternative would have been to depict the events of the books in metaphorical fashion, like on the British paperbacks of Iain M. Banks (USE OF WEAPONS, for instance, has a great cover illo of an empty chair lit by a solitary floodlight with a gun sitting on the floor and a battleship silhouette in the background...you'll not find those props in the novel, but they perfectly convey the tone of the book).

I'm not sure **how** they market Banks. I went and looked at that cover -- it could have come from a '60s Bantam murder mystery. But I think British publishers' marketing departments work differently anyway.

Or the publishers could have forgone an illustration entirely and grabbed the reader's attention by sheer dint of design work, like on William Gibson and Neal Stephenson's recent novels, or the gorgeous Alfred Bester and PK Dick paperbacks they've been rereleasing.

The first two are Brand Name writers; the latter two have moved into the space of "dead prestige writers," which have another whole set of rules.

Forgive the rant, but I remain convinced that half of sf's problem in connecting with the public at large can be laid at the feet of just plain bad book design -- printing processes and paper stock may have improved since the pulp era, but the underlying aesthetic is the same: "naked women and/or monsters sell books", and incidentally keep away people who might otherwise be tempted to try them.

Can you provide anecdotal evidence of anyone who might have tried GW but hasn't because of his covers?

--Dan'I

*This is WHORL, for discussion of Gene Wolfe's Book of the Long Sun.

Peter Westlake — 08 Dec 2000, 18:42 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

At 10:24 2000-12-08 -0800, you wrote:
(This is especially fun in the CD section, where they're not quite sure _what_ to make of someone who comes up to the counter with the new King Crimson and a Copland collection, and asks for advice on pre-Castro Cuban big band/flute jazz. "Buying presents?" "No, it's all for me...")

I had no idea there *was* a new King Crimson - the last one I saw was "Three of a Perfect Pair", which was held up as a great example of the new medium, Compact Discs. I really must get out more. Thanks!

Peter.

P.S. Sorry, I just meant this to go to Dan'I, but the list isn't set up that way, and I didn't notice till I'd sent it.

*This is WHORL, for discussion of Gene Wolfe's Book of the Long Sun.