

DESIGN:

Know your audience: the secrets of great cover designs

If you want to tackle designing book covers, you must have a good understanding of the title's intended audience as well as its content.

A book cover has a specific set of tasks to achieve: it has to provide some kind of recognisable identity; it has to grab someone's attention (appeal to the right audience); and it must, in some way, tell us or at least allude to what's inside (to sell the contents). Get this right and you have an effective cover – simple, right?

To achieve this there are two things you must tackle. The first is to know the book's content, and the second is to know tits audience. So to that first thing, knowing the content. You may not have the luxury or even the opportunity to pore over the whole book, but make sure that you have some worthwhile understanding of what's inside. If you don't, never try to make a cover for it. Simple.

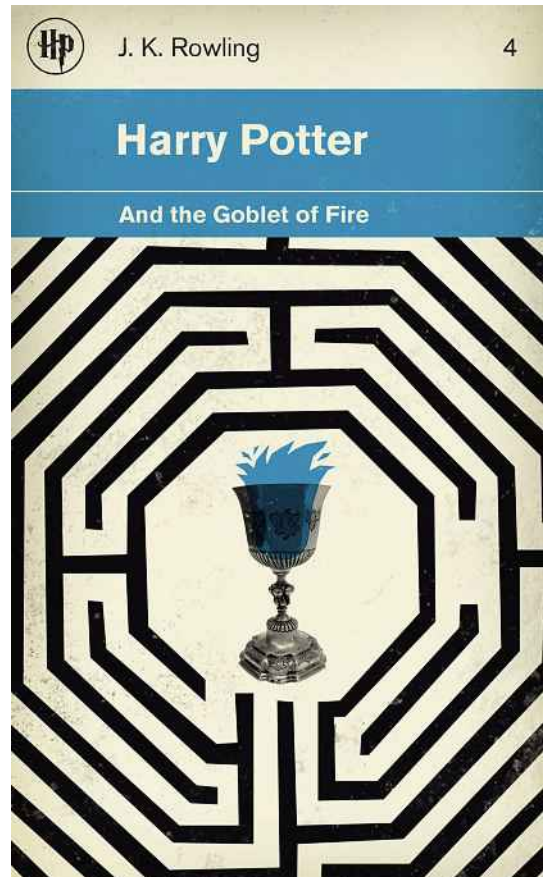
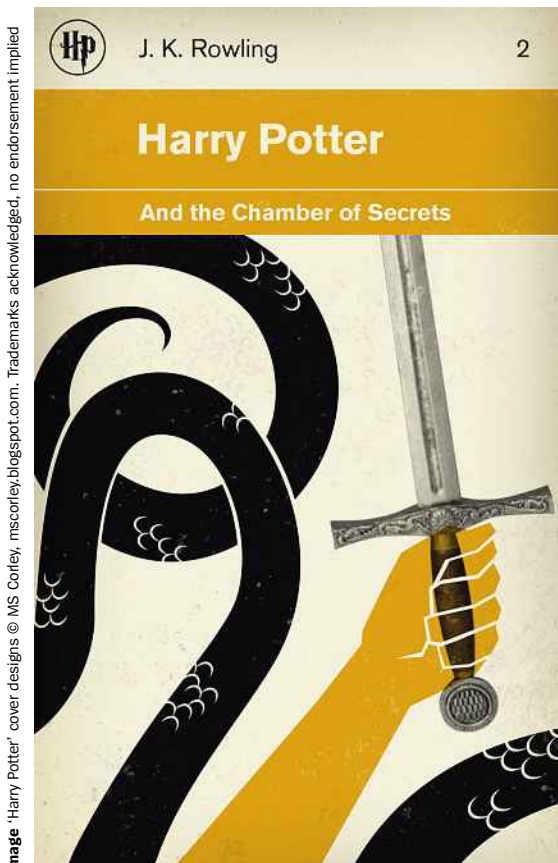
Knowing the book's audience is just as important. You may have a full understanding of the book's content, but if you guess the target audience wrongly, there's no way you can make something really effective.

Who the target reader might be isn't always as clear-cut as you might think. When *Harry Potter* first hit the real big time, around the third book into the series, the publishers decided to bring it out in two different cover styles. The reason was that the previous designs were clearly aimed at children, but there was an increasing adult readership that was, apparently, a little put off from being seen reading it in public. In response, more serious, grown-up-friendly covers were made to cater for this new demographic, this new readership segment. Not everyone is embarrassed by what a book cover looks like to others, but in marketing and sales terms, launching the grown-up's *Harry Potter* covers was a smart move.

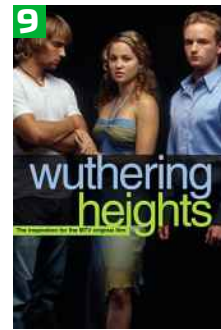
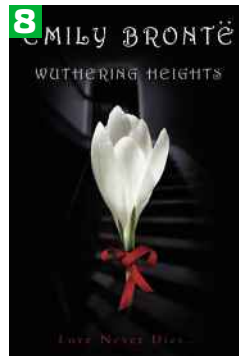
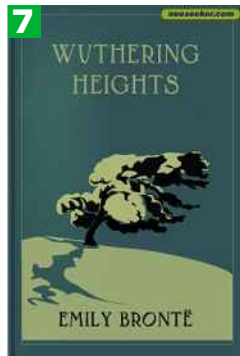
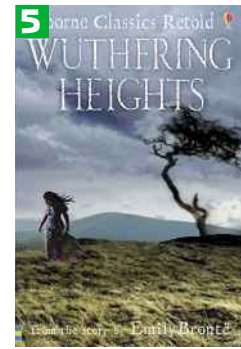
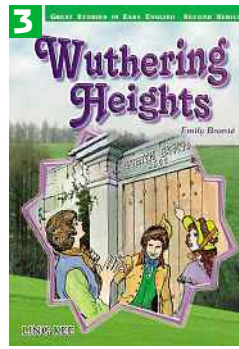
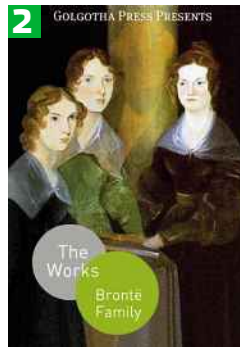
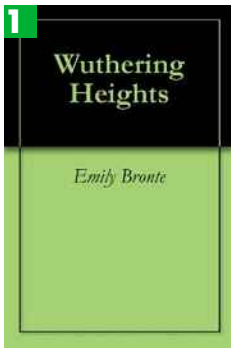
Redesigning covers is open to anyone – for their own pleasure, anyway. A great example of this is MS Corley's unofficial *Harry Potter* book cover redesigns, done in classic 1960s Penguin book style complete



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◀ *MS Corley's treatment of the Harry Potter covers harks back to the seminal Penguin cover designs of the 1960s.*



◀◀ Emily Brontë's classic, *Wuthering Heights*, has had many different cover interpretations.

with a visual treatment to make them feel decades old. The 1960s was a key era in book cover design: the development of phototypesetting and advances in offset litho print meant new techniques in graphics and type could be used. The result was a style that quickly defined Penguin paperbacks and that era. Corley's designs ape this look in an impressively convincing way. More importantly, they're clearly done by someone with a good understanding of the stories. Remember: know the content. These haven't been used as real printed book covers, but you can see them online at bit.ly/alternative-hp-covers.

We don't have room here to go into every aspect of cover design, but one of the big failure areas in book cover designs is the typography. First, choose an appropriate face or set of faces. It goes without saying (he says, with a pointed stare) that Comic Sans is never appropriate. The basics should be pretty obvious: nothing too difficult for the target audience to read, strong enough in weight and structure to stand out on whatever background you've chosen, sympathetic to the subject, genre and so on.

Placement of the book title (or whatever is the most important bit of info – perhaps the author's name) should be at the top. No arguments unless you have a stunning reason to do otherwise. The top is the key area in terms of strength and the natural direction of the eye through the layout. Most importantly, it could be stacked partly behind other titles in a typical book shop shelf.

Book title type should be more like strong poster type than regular headlines, so set things tighter than normal and think of everything in terms of visual units. Look at the words and play with the scale of each one. If any words are particularly important, see what can be done to emphasise them, but watch out for mucking up or obscuring the meaning.

Do you want the design to evoke a particular era? Those unofficial *Harry Potter* covers are a perfect example. In fact, try covering up the giveaway author name, book title and HP emblem. The illustrations might be a giveaway if you know the stories, but they could pass for 50-year-old original covers.

I do this with my publishing students after making them suffer through one of my lectures on design thinking. It isn't the most exciting thing ever, but it helps show how you can learn to read a cover to find out what sort of thing it's about and when it's from. Grab a selection of book covers from anywhere – Amazon, your local library or the nearest bookshelf. Cover up whatever text might give the game away, then see if someone else can suss them out.

'Book title type should be more like strong poster type than regular headlines, so set things tighter than normal and think of everything in terms of visual units'

The final set of designs (see top of page) shows how different interpretations have been made with the same story. Brontë's classic, *Wuthering Heights*, has been produced many times by many different publishers and with myriad different covers. Some work better than others, clearly, although it's useful to know the provenance of each one before making your final judgement.

Covers 1 and 2 are both from eBooks. They're simple and formulaic, and they're part of budget ranges of copyright-free texts packaged for cheap digital consumption. A kind of 'no expense spent' design. This is aimed straight at the digital version of the bargain basement.

Cover 3 is from an English language education imprint from Hong Kong. The academic angle helps explain the dodgy schoolbook-style appearance, but doesn't excuse it. I know some people like the Usborne design, cover 4, but to me it's more *Sleepy Hollow* than anything else.

The 'wild, windy moors' feature in many designs, which makes sense. However, notice the differences between the photo illustration of the second Usborne design, cover 5, the Penguin Classics woodcut style, cover 6, and the screenprint effect of the Neoseeker edition, cover 7.

Cover 8 is an odd one. In the popular *Twilight* series, the main character, Bella Swan, is reading *Wuthering Heights* and refers to it a number of times. So to try to catch a new market of *Twilight*-loving girls, the publishers make a cover themed to match a particular *Twilight* book design. Only, for the UK version at least, they get it somewhat wrong. The typography is weak and doesn't match, the flower is far too prissy, and the original's background

is solid black. If you're going to recreate something, do it right (though not so right as to attract a copyright infringement lawsuit).

Finally, there's cover 9. Take away the title and the author's name and you're left with something wholly alien to most people's mental image of Cathy and Heathcliff. The strapline beneath the title is fairly rich, too: 'The inspiration for the MTV original film!' However, look at it in terms of marketing. This is trying to tap into a demographic that only knows the story through MTV. With that in mind, do you think it's a good cover? You don't have to like it, but it's a strong design aimed at a specific group. In that respect, it's actually a good cover – albeit perhaps still a travesty. 🗣️