

CANADIAN BOOK JACKET DESIGN

Stephen Smith

FROM WHERE PAUL BERGEN STANDS, the book season is beige and gold. Surveying the shelves and displays at Greenwood's Bookshop, the Edmonton independent he manages, Bergen is ready to declare those colours the prevailing trend in book design: Michael Crummey's *River Thieves*; *Portrait in Sepia*, by Isabel Allende; *The Map That Changed The World*, by Simon Winchester; Richard Wright's *Clara Callan*. "I do see a lot of Osama bin Laden out there," Bergen reports from behind the cash register, "but otherwise the season's covers seem to be beige and gold."

That's probably not exactly the sort of front-line dispatch that the designers who give books their covers want to be hearing. People like Scott Richardson, art director for Random House, Knopf Canada and Doubleday Canada would much prefer to hear, say, that the Ozias Leduc painting he put on the cover of *River Thieves* was accosting passing consumers – actually, verifiably stopping them in their tracks – and causing them to hand over \$34.95 plus tax on the way to discovering the wonderful novel inside.

Book designers know better than to wait on such news, though. They know that the line they walk is the one that separates commerce from art, and they know that it tends to move on you. Though they might not think of what they do in terms of Greek deities, book designers more or less know what British writer Alan Powers is talking about when he says that publishing is the place where Athena, goddess of wisdom, embraces Hermes, "the mercantile trickster."

"They cannot live without each other," Powers writes in *Front Cover: Great Book Jacket and Cover Design*. "The book cover is the marriage broker, continually driven to seduce and deceive, even if in the most charming and learned ways."

Sitting in the Random House boardroom in midtown Toronto, surrounded by the fruits of his and his freelancers' labours, Richardson is quick to refer to the cliché: No, you can't judge a book by its cover. And yet, and yet – "It's a book design adage that if the book is a success it's because the writing is good; if it's a failure, it's the cover."

"When there are so many books on the shelves," says Kong Njo, the

art director at McClelland & Stewart, “you want yours to jump out and scream, buy me.”

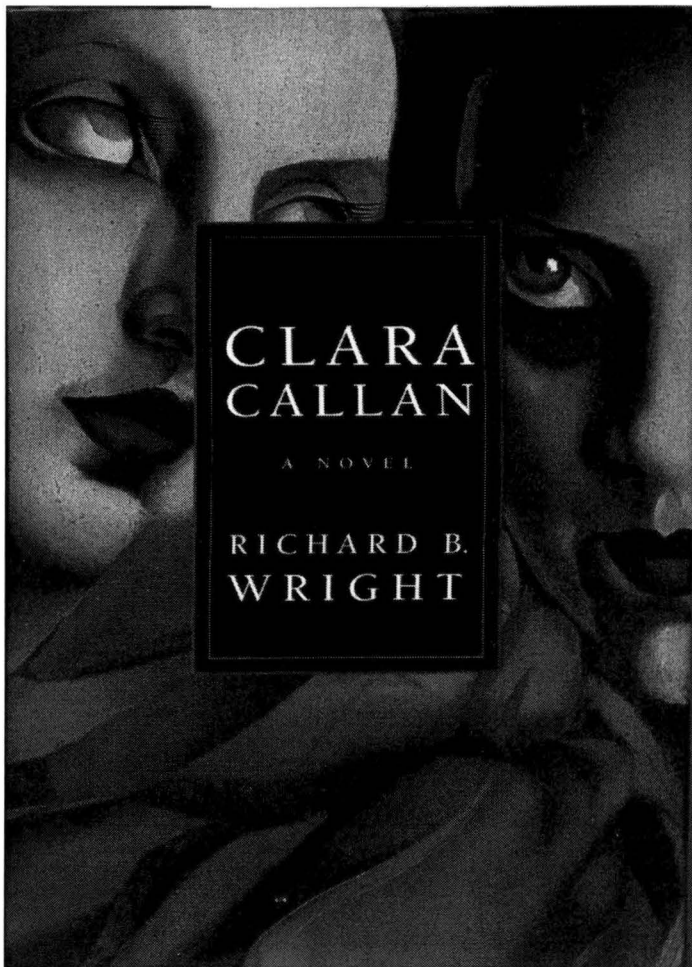
That’s the question, of course: How do you get a book to scream? That’s the whole job.

“Somebody, somewhere, somehow did a study that said the average glance-time is a quarter of a second,” Richardson says. “That’s what I’m working with. If it’s a novel, I’ve got 6 x 9 inches and a quarter of a second amid thousands of other titles. How do I get someone to stop and pick up my book?”

For most of the history of printed books, publishers didn’t worry about designing or decorating their covers. In Britain, some began in the late 19th century by blocking designs directly onto the binding cloth, or by gluing printed paper sheets to the front and back boards.

When, after 1900, book jackets began to become more common, their role was more protective than aesthetic. “Keeping the jacket on a book,” Powers writes, “would be like storing clothes in the carrier bag from the shop where they had been bought. The aim of many jackets was no more than to keep the binding cloth underneath in good condition while the book was in the shop and during transit to the purchaser’s home.”

After the First World War, economic acceleration in the United States was the primary force powering the development of cover design. From packagers of foods and medicines, publishers learned about the possibilities of branding their products; as advertising and the rise of motion-



pictures enriched the visual culture, they began to think more and more about how to use colours and images to help them sell books.

Today the design of a book cover begins in earnest when the publisher or the editor briefs the art director about a new book. The whole design process is by committee, Richardson notes: The author may have some suggestions, and members of the company's sales force will certainly weigh in. "There is a balancing act, certainly, between the commercial and what the author, what the editor, what I envision as being a cover. The bottom line is I'm trying to be as respectful as I can of the content and get somebody to pick the book up. You can't be all things to all people. You can't tell everything that's inside the book on the front cover."

Reading the entire book is not necessarily a part of the process. "We work on so many books, there's no way I could read them all," M & S's Kong Njo says.

"The editor gives me a sense of what the book's about — the tone, the feel, time period," Richardson says. "I go away with that information and try to read some of the book. I start building from there. There's no science to this. There's nowhere I can go and find out that if I use this colour or this image or this type I will sell X number of books. It's not like the advertising business, where they focus-group to death. In the book business, it's guesswork."

With all the imprints that live under the Random House and Doubleday Canada roof, Richardson has to produce covers for about 100 books a year. Between 50 and 60 of those he'll do in-house, while the rest will be sent to freelancers like Paul Hodgson (the man behind the distinctive smoking cigar gracing *Barney's Version*, by Mordecai Richler) or Bill Douglas.

"It's a matter of trying to capture the mood of the book," says Douglas, who, through his Toronto design company, The Bang, works on 40 to 50 books a year. One of his favourites last year was Michael Winter's debut novel, *This All Happened*, published by Anansi.

"There have been a lot of very successful books from Newfoundland recently," Douglas says, "and a lot of them feed out of the province's

history. This is a Newfoundland book, but it's not history. I wanted to give it a very contemporary look, almost anti-Newfoundland."

The photograph he ended up using shows the author himself at extreme close quarters, staring out through binoculars. The background is lam-bent blue. Tiny, shiny embossed

numbers — one for each day of the year — reflect the book's diary-like form. "I think it has a very modern, very tactile feel to it," Douglas says.

Name-recognition — Richler, Atwood, Ondaatje — plays a significant role in cover decisions. "With some authors," Richardson says, "you could just wrap their book in burlap and it would still sell. I mean, if you look at an original Hemingway, they didn't even put his first name on the cover."

Njo concurs. He points to Alice Munro's new collection of stories, *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*. Apart from a small central image — a colour etching called *Eve's Delight*, by Sheila Laidlaw-Radford, who just happens to be Munro's sister — the cover is given over to white space, the title and, most prominently, the author's name. "That's what we're selling," Njo says. "That's all you need sometimes."

If there's no sure-fire science to cover design, there are guidelines to follow. One of Njo's is simple enough: Find the perfect image. "When you've got a perfect picture, you cannot go wrong," he says, going to his

A L I C E M U N R O



H a t e s h i p,
F r i e n d s h i p,
C o u r t s h i p,
L o v e s h i p,
M a r r i a g e

computer to pull up the cover for *Well of Lies*, a non-fiction book by Colin Perkel about the tainted water scandal in Walkerton, Ont., that is due out next spring.

It's a photo taken in Walkerton that came from CP Photo Assignment Services, one of the stock agencies upon which publishers rely heavily for the images they use. In the foreground is a faucet, from which a drop-let of water is about to fall. In the background, out of focus, is a single gravestone.

"The location is perfect and the symbolism doesn't hit you over the head," Njo says. "This is what I'm talking about, finding a perfect image. We went through a lot of images. They were either too scary or too ugly."

Richardson's governing rule is a basic one, too. "Whether it's books or anything, good designers will tell you to be invisible. Don't get in the way. Ultimately, it's the writing that's important, and if I'm doing something that hinders the reader in getting to that, I'm not doing my job."

Is there a particular Canadian accent when it comes to book design?

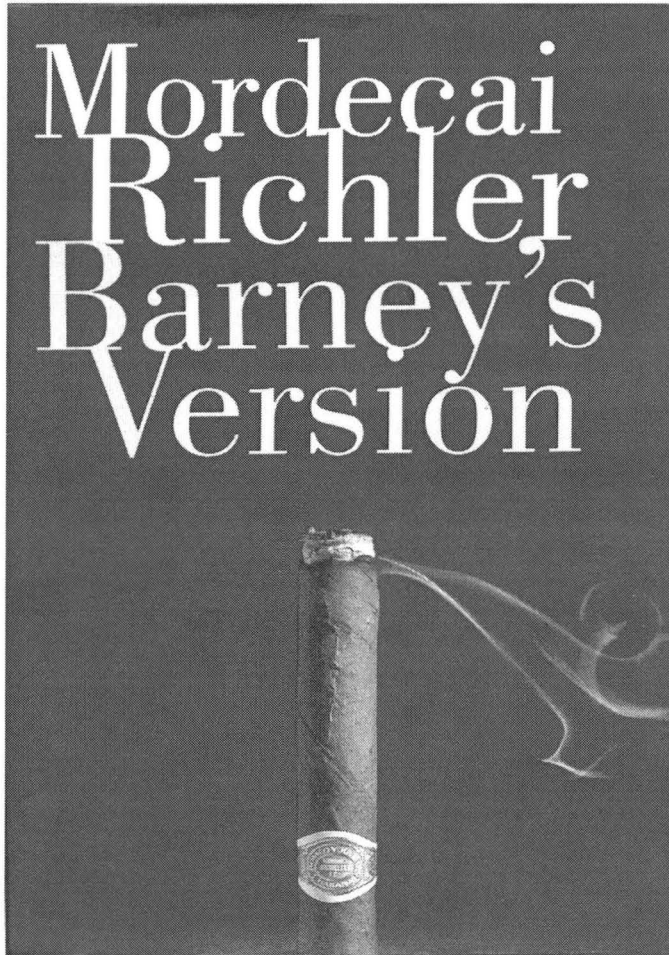
"Yeah," Scott Richardson says, "but it's a little fuzzy. If I had to classify or pick characteristics of Canadian design, I'd say good Canadian design tends to be simpler, tends to be cleaner. It tends to have a single-image focus, as opposed to collages. Not so busy. One of the nice things about working in Canadian design is that we draw from everywhere. I don't think American designers look at British designers, or vice-versa, but we're looking at everyone. So I steal the best ideas from all over the place."

Then again, simpler may be a trend all over. "When I first started, we tried to put too much information onto the cover," Njo says. "I don't think we're trying to be so literal nowadays. My feeling is, now, don't put everything in there. Less is more."

"There is a retro trend underway," Richardson says. "What worked in the 1940s — in terms, for example, of the use of type — we're beginning to bring back. I like seeing designs where we're stealing liberally from stuff that worked 50 years ago. The original Penguins, say; they've stood the test of time. They influence me as much as digital enhancement of image and type, all the modern bells and whistles."

Beige, gold or otherwise, as one book season winds down, another one rises. In January, Njo will take his spring covers to the McClelland & Stewart sales conference to get input from the reps who will take the books into stores. “You hope the only changes are going to be in subtitles,” he says, smiling. “Sometimes it’s more. There is, generally, a lot of compromising in designing books.”

Asked whether commerce doesn't sometimes stampede art, Scott Richardson raises a wry smile of his own. “On my best days,” he says in the Random House boardroom, “I’m like the chorus in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*: I’m the assistant storyteller. On my worst days, I’m like P.G. Wodehouse’s Jeeves: I serve at the pleasure of the publisher, the editor, the author, and I dutifully do what is asked of me.”



Stephen Smith is a Canadian freelance writer. His article is reprinted from the Globe and Mail with his kind permission.