



(Don't) judge a book by its cover

AUTORIA:

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Abstract

The article deals with the role of the cover in the economy of the book. During this period, when book sales moved exclusively online, the cover had an even more important role. Is the cover a business card of the book? Does it focus on the message of the book, like the title of the book? Can the cover sell the book or not? The phrase „Don't judge a book by its cover” is wellknown. And yet we must not underestimate the importance of design even in the case of a book. Sometimes it is the cover that can determine us to purchase a book or on the contrary, not to give importance to a particular publication.

Romanian artists Viorel Simulov and Luminița Penișoară, members of the Union of Fine Artists in Romania, signed hundreds of covers and illustrations for books, they try to clarify how important the design of the cover is in the success of a book.

Font, size of the letter, styling, all these elements attract us and influence the buyer's decision. They come with atmosphere and colour, just as the voice in the spoken language or in ads. In fact, the book cover acts like a commercial, and all the rules of an ad can be applied to the book cover too. So, beyond words, commercials use images, page settings, colours. These additional elements carry out signification that can strengthen or contradict the meaning of words. We can also use the principles of advertising when creating the book cover.

The paper presents some important elements to take into account when it comes to the cover of a book. My work is based on the experience of several cover designers, who present their point of view on the subject. With two of them, Viorel Simulov, and Luminița Penișoară, I discussed at length, face to face, in a series of interviews. I have synthesized their opinion in this work. Then, because I see the cover as a well-made advertisement, I analyzed this iconic level of the cover, following the theoretical principles of the iconic level in the advertisements. At the end I presented the results of the 2021 contest initiated in Romania, by Dreamstime agency, regarding the best cover of the year.

Kew words: book cover, design, rules of colours in book design

The cover is the first impression a book creates for potential readers. Design is one of the most important aspects of marketing a book. If the cover is unprofessional, you will definitely lose sales, so it is important to turn to a professional designer and use quality paper and finishes. Creating a good cover, as well as a good advertisement, is the prerogative of professionals, graphic designers or plastic artists. Writers do not write books, they write manuscripts, and the design of the cover is the process of “putting” that manuscript in the hands of readers materializing it, giving it a proper shape.

“Without a doubt, the content of a book is what matters, the story between the covers gives us intense feelings and makes us love it forever. But that doesn't mean that the aesthetic part should be completely neglected. Many times, it happens that a well-made cover is extremely expressive and successfully prefaces what comes next. Books whose presentation is thought out to the smallest details, with wonderful covers or illustrations, are a delight not only for the minds of literature lovers, but also for their aesthetic sense“. (Pîrvu, 2015)

The theme of the book cover is an interdisciplinary one, at the intersection of journalism, design, advertising creation. As I did not find Romanian theoretical works strictly related to this subject, my work presents the experience of Romanian graphic designers, creators of covers, at important publishing houses in the country. Their experience may be important for cover creators, but also for future studies on this vast topic.

A successful cover is able to fascinate and introduce the reader in the story of the book, just as a good advertisement seduces you to buy a product or a service. On a visual level, the cover is an important marketing tool for the book. In the interview he gave me, the visual artist, Viorel Simulov, highlighted three important elements that must be taken into account in the book design: the font or type of letter chosen, the images on the cover and the selected colors. (Neamțu, 2009: 385-388)

According to Romanian graphic designer Viorel Simulov, the font must support what the title of the book and the thread of the story communicate. Thus, the font can be neutral or playful, but the Romanian artist does not recommend using more than two types of letters on the cover. The cover image will tell, in a condensed way, the story of the book, functioning as a well-thought-out press commercial. Rising curiosity, like a teaser on TV. The chosen colors also transmit energy (see warm colors) or calm (cold colors).

Colours that stir emotion in ads as in the book cover

A successful cover is able to fascinate and introduce the reader in the story of the book, just as a good advertisement seduces in determine you to buy a product or a service. We can say that the iconic principles in ads are also applied in cover design.

“Word and image are like chair and table: if you want to sit at the table, you need both”, says Jean-Luc Godart (1993), referring to the relation word-image, where the word and image complete one another and interact in a remarkable way. Studies on media (Neamțu 2002, 2012, 2021; Adam, Bonhomme 1997, 2005) show that few readers of a newspaper or magazine go through the entire text of an advertisement. As a result, we encounter a series of characteristics of ads construction, preparing a *visual path of reading* (see Bonhomme 1997). This approach emphasizes a special visual construction of the statement. Thus, what is shown to us becomes credible, as “*I believe only what I see with my own eyes*”. Or “Visualize, visualize, so that something remains!” (Brune 1996: 151).

The major concern for ads creators is to make their commercials *quickly noticed* and *easily apprehended*. The use of the image becomes a viable solution (Pedler 2001: 157). Our mind can easily analyze images in comparison to written words. Therefore, images have been called “*balls targeting the brain*” and, just like words, “they can argue, rise questions or create fictions” (Scott 1994: 260). That is why, I dare to say the book cover functions like advertisements.

The global significance of a visual message is built through the interaction of different types of signs: iconic and linguistic. In the written press “bigger advertisements have a bigger effect on consumers than ads of smaller dimensions; coloured ads are more easily noticed than ads in black and white; ads with images or a short text have an advantage over ads without illustration and a huge message. (Michael Schudson 1993: 84)

An image translates consumers’ needs and desires. Freedom, adventure, sensuality, security, harmony, fulfillment, youth, luxury, social status, etc. Ads often rely not on what is said but on what is seen. Instead of developing an argument by explicit assertion, the image magnifies it in secret, relying on the complicity of the buyer. In commercials we encounter a rhetoric of indirect approach, therefore the image provides maximum information in the shortest possible time and with minimal effort to decode. (Neamțu: 2021)

We may identify *chromatic codes*, *typographical codes* (with emphasis on rhetorical effects of the object, dimensions, volumes), and *morphologic codes*. Christians *et al.* (2001: 174) emphasize the importance of *memorable images*, beautiful, exotic landscapes, muscular men and graceful, perfect women. So all that one wishes is to be like them. There are preferred colours that stir emotion. Regarding the *mood*, ads can choose between exuberant, provocative, or sad, dull conditions (at least until one buys the product).

So, beyond words, commercials use images, page settings, colours. These additional elements *carry out signification* that can strengthen or contradict the meaning of words. In this way, connected with the rhetoric of the image is also the *image of the words* or the way words are presented in ads. Font, size of the letter, styling, all these elements attract us and

influence the buyer's decision. They come with atmosphere and colour, just as the voice in the spoken language. If we start from the idea that a book cover works like an advertisement in the reader's mind, then all these elements matter in the case of the book cover too. Without a trace of doubt, a professional designer will take them into account.

The rules of colours in ads and cover of the book

The colours game in advertisements has been analysed extensively. I will present some rules developed in two important analyses by Walter Margulies (1970) and Michèle Jouve (1992). For didactic reasons, the tables help us apply the rules of appropriate colors not only to ads, but also to the book cover.

Walter Margulies talks about consumers' reaction to different colours. Warm colours (*red, yellow, orange*) "stimulate and excite, creating active answers among consumers who live in geographical zones with a hot climate" (Bovée, Arens 1986: 339). *Purple and raw green* are found at the border between warm and cold. *Red* is the symbol of blood and fire. It is the "warmest" colour, and Walter Margulies (1970) draws attention that it is a favourite colour of men. *Brown* is a male colour too, associated with earth, wood, comfort, a colour that "sells anything to men". *Yellow* is a colour which captivates especially in combination with *black*. *Green* is the symbol of health, freshness, "a colour very frequently used to promote advertising campaigns for menthol cigarettes". *Blue* is a cold colour, perfect for the frosty products, because "it gives the impression of ice". *Light blue* becomes a predominant colour in foods with fewer calories. *Black* is the favourite colour in the case of advertisements for expensive products, representing sophistication, whereas *orange* "calls up autumn" and "good eating products". Orange is, according to Margulies, "the most edible colour".

Michèle Jouve (1992: 189-190) discusses the meaning of the main colours used in advertisements, emphasizing the positive and negative connotations of each of them. (For an easier understanding, I have drawn the table below). Alongside the colours, Michèle Jouve analyzes the *type of line*, which plays an important role in ads. (On this subject, see also: Courtland L. Bovée and William F. Arens (1986: 339), Neamțu 2021.)

Jean Pierre Lehnisch (1989: 72-76) stops at only four colours that he considers fundamental in structuring the advertising image, dealing then separately with five other colours (orange, purple, brown, pink and grey) that, according to him, play a "secondary role".

Colours with a leading role in commercials	
Yellow	<p>Firstly it takes us to light.</p> <p>Black letters on a yellow background provide good readability (Lehnisch, 1989: 72).</p>
Red	<p>Symbolizes power and will.</p> <p>Red attracts the reader almost hypnotically. Therefore, the author recommends to not overuse it, as red can also annoy the consumer (Lehnisch, 1989: 73).</p>
Blue	<p>It takes us to sincerity and harmony.</p> <p>It has been associated with the sea and sends to connotations related to faith, religion (the symbol of the sky)</p> <p>For the Japanese, it symbolises immortality (l'immortalité) (Lehnisch, 1989: 73).</p>
Green	<p>It takes us to nature, peace, hope; it refers to the idea that everything is allowed (see the green traffic light).</p> <p>When overused it has the tendency of "sending you to sleep" (we are calm and relaxed outdoor in nature (Lehnisch, 1989: 74))</p>
Secondary colours in advertisements	
Orange	<p>It symbolizes energy and luxury, but also self-pride that is difficult to bear (Lehnisch, 1989: 74).</p>
Purple	<p>It symbolizes humbleness, quiet, secrecy, and is associated with the church.</p> <p>It also brings a hint of tenderness, melancholy and regret (Lehnisch, 1989: 75).</p>
Brown	<p>It is not a feminine colour and that is why it is so rarely used in the packaging of products intended for women.</p> <p>It is the opposite of fantasy (Lehnisch, 1989: 75).</p>
Pink	<p>Opposite to brown, it expresses shyness and romance.</p> <p>Needs attention from a technical point of view as the desired shade of pink cannot be easily obtained (Lehnisch, 1989: 75).</p>
Gray	<p>It conveys sadness, guilt.</p> <p>Being neither black, nor white, gray looks like a dirty white or a missed, unsuccessful black (Lehnisch, 1989: 75).</p>

The cover as a gate to the message of the book

Referring to the design of the cover, to its image, the book designer from the Publica publishing house, Alexe Popescu (2019), believes that “the design should be invisible. Like a garment that’s so comfortable that you don’t feel it anymore.” It sees the cover of a book “somewhere between the logo, the poster and the packaging”. Popescu has a graphic design degree since 2002. Angela Rotaru, the artistic director of Humanitas publishing house, speaks of an extensive process involving the graphic designer, the author of the book, the book editor and the editorial board.

“Taking elements from minimalist design or complying with the chromatic proposals launched annually by the Pantone Institute¹, the world authority in the field of colors, are not only benchmarks for those active in the field of interior design. Those who imagine the covers of books are part of this guild of designers, their role being important because nothing ennobles our interior more beautifully than reading. (Petrescu, 2020) Several steps are highlighted: the first step concerns the graphic designer, who creates several cover variants, which he sends to the editor and the author. They choose two to three of them, which are presented in the editorial board.

“The cover must reflect the content of the book and be visible in online or in bookstores. Once we have the final version, the preparation for printing begins, which involves image processing, text arrangement. Some works are given printing goods in the printing press, in the case of special colors or, in the case of covers with selective gloss or spectacular cutouts, to be sure that the final product is as the graphic designer imagined it”, explains Angela Rotaru. (Petrescu, 2020)

Of course, the author of the book has an essential role to play, in many cases the writer has a very clear idea of what the cover of his book will look like. „The cover is most of the time the first contact with a new title. It is important to attract attention, which can be achieved in several ways: through the graphic elements, through the weight that is given to the author’s name, by adapting to the specifics of the collection or series to which it belongs. But in the sale of books have an important role after publication and marketing strategies and budgets, the enthusiasm of some readers with influence that open the roads, an interest that can be more general or that can be related to a certain specificity of a period”, says the artistic director of the prestigious Romanian publishing house, Humanitas.

Thus, today the cover becomes a mirror of the book. Angela Rotaru identifies some trends in approaching the cover in Romania: minimalist approaches, more pastel tones, preference for clean lines, surprise covers that hide other covers and so there are tools that seek to attract the new generation of readers, without deceiving their expectations.

Every year the trends change. For example, the Pantone company proposes a color palette

1 The color of this year, 2022, is very peri, a dynamic shade of blue with a purple red undertone that combines the fidelity and constancy associated with blue with the energy and enthusiasm of red. Pantone describes it as „the warmest and most cheerful of all shades of blue, introducing a mixture of novelty, encourages inventiveness and creativity (...) The color of 2022 aims to foreshadow the future in a new light: it displays a carefree confidence, a bold curiosity that animates our creative and curious spirit. PANTONE 17-3938 Very Peri helps us embrace this altered landscape of possibilities, opening us up to a new vision as we rewrite our lives.” <https://www.pantone.com/color-of-the-year-2022>, accessed at 14.02.2021.

for the year or designates a color of the year. In 2020 the color of the year is a shade of blue. It's a benchmark for graphic designers who care about trends. Lately, minimalist covers are worn, with the author and title visible, so that they are easily visible in bookstores and online. The book cover has evolved from an illustrative one to a concept cover. But each book is unique and so should the cover." (Petrescu, 2020). Angela Rotaru proposes a cover that anticipates a possible optimistic ending for the sci-fi „novel” that we are all living now with the Covid 19 pandemic: “It is a cover with the light at the end of the tunnel.”

“The man looks at what strikes the eye. In the case of readers, the cover of the book is the first thing they see in a book, and although it is said that we should not judge a book by its cover, sometimes, perhaps without realizing it, the cover contributes decisively to our decision to get our hands on a book, to open it, to browse it or not.” (Bică, 2021)

Graphic artist Dragoș Gârea believes „there are occasions when you judge a book by its cover, but also situations when you do the opposite. For example, when you want to give a gift card but do not have enough information about it, wanting first of all that gift to look good, it can happen that you judge the book by its cover. The cover is then an important factor in the decision to buy it or not. On the other hand, the situation may arise in which you really want a book because it has been recommended to you or it is a bestseller and you decide to buy it without taking into account the appearance of the cover. (...) The cover can illustrate the basic idea of a book, just an episode of it, or a narrow idea. The cover can only be an expression of how the graphic designer understood the book, or it can be a visual sensation that the author, editor or graphic designer wanted to convey. Personally, I believe that a book can be judged as a product or object by its cover as well, without this assessment always being identical to that of the content.” (Bică, 2021)

During this time when everything, including the book market, is oversaturated, graphic designer Dragoș Gârea sees in the cover a gate to the message of the book and recommends channeling the attention to decent compositions, with clear and uncluttered chromatic combinations, which can be composed of graphic elements or good quality illustrations. The combination of fonts should be as narrow as possible, so as not to disturb the eye with too many different accents. The composition of the cover must convey information, ideas and sensations, but at the same time it must breathe. Asked by Bică how a good cover should be, it should be „simple, airy, with an uncluttered chromatic combination, and the fonts it contains are simple and of as few types as possible”.

A poor quality cover will be a cluttered one and without well-defined graphic themes. He also makes a brief history of the evolution of the covers in the interview: „Historically speaking, the covers, a few centuries ago, were quite similar. They were dressed in leather and were added different ornaments, depending on who purchased the book and how much he could afford to pay for it. If we turn our attention to the current times, industry and new technologies have brought to the stage different materials and production methods. However, today we can print a lot of graphic proposals. Thus, depending on the composition of the cover, you can integrate it into an artistic style manifested in all the arts – for example, Art Nouveau, modern or classical. Or there may be very simple covers that can be categorized as minimalistic. Anyone with a decent general culture can associate a certain cover with a

certain artistic style or create their own classification of styles (...) We see all kinds of covers in bookstores... Some look like a pajamas, and others, like a gala coat.”

Regarding the steps of developing a cover, Dragoș Gârea reminds us of the importance of documentation.

“I’m looking for and seeing what approaches already exist in that direction of the book’s theme. This way I can find out what I don’t want to do or what I need to avoid and, at the same time, what I can use as inspiration. Then I start laying out the main elements, such as title and author, and then I add different necessary elements, such as illustrations, images, or other graphic details. I sculpt a temporary composition, broadly speaking, and then move away from it and analyze it. I put aside what is not good, I add what is missing, and then I start to finish the product according to the suggestions received from the editor, editor-in-chief or sometimes from the author.”

Regarding the importance of book cover, I interviewed Romanian artist Viorel Simulov. Painter, photographer, graphic designer, Viorel Simulov (born on 25.01.1959) is the author of hundreds of covers, from scientific books, to literature, poetry, novel etc. According to the Romanian graphic artist, “a good cover, in the current economic situation, does not sell your book“:

“ The book itself has and does not need an economic perception. Let me explain myself. The object built, hand-painted, enclosed in covers in a historical period, had a unique character without many people having access to the cover. Then the interest in the book increased, see the notion of a bestseller, on which occasion the image and promotion of the text depended on the cover of the book. Here’s the economic part. What we are doing at the moment has nothing to do with either one or the other”. Regarding the interdependence between book design and the content of the book an, the graphic designer said: „We should make a distinction between what I call the book and what the general public does. My belief is that a book with an old content / text (we can talk here about Plato, Descartes, Tolstoi) needs an attractive cover, to attract the readers. Given the fact that we know what those books are all about, we could try to build a different kind of covers. Which, from an economic point of view, could hurt”.

Answering the question: Did you happen to read a very good book, but which was disadvantaged by an uninspired cover, the designer said: „Countless times. If I have to name some books that I’ve only seen, there would be too many. If I had to name books that I’ve read, it would be indecent and I would offend, so I avoid this question. I can say that those characters are among us. And there are not few“ . (Neamțu, 2009: 385-386)

According to Viorel Simulov, in the process of choosing a cover, the subject of the book plays an important role:

“It all depends on what book it’s all about. If it is a text of a living author, whom I know, the approach depends on the relationship between us. If the author died, then the problem is mine and possibly the editor’s who always has comments to make. A good cover, in the current economic situation, does not sell your book. At least in the pro-

vince where we feel good. Maybe in the capital the feeling is different. Details matter. About the whole we can talk long and well. Illustration also involves text and letter and many other things. Most of the time those who come to ask me to solve them with a cover know in advance what the cover looks like. That obviously annoys me a little bit, but I'm trying to communicate, which is pretty hard. If the overall details matter? I say yes. My decision is easy to make. It depends on several factors that I don't feel the need to list here. All in all, I talk to the author, we set up a meeting, I read the text, if necessary (sometimes you don't have time to read 800 pages in two days) and we do the work. With the hand, with the technique, with a lot of nervous tension, but we do it as well as possible. Some opinions are contrary. We talk about colors, we can refer to many elements that depend on even more others. More than 500 covers of mine speak for myself". (Neamțu, 2009: 385-386)

I asked Viorel Simulov to present briefly, in a mathematical formula, what a good cover is equal to. His answer was: "Cover = a good book or a bad book. No plus no minus".

For the Romanian illustrator Luminita Penișoară, the process of establishing the cover and illustrations in a book is like a game in which you have to like to draw. You have the white sheet of paper in front of you and you give freedom to your hand by drawing and applying the color.

"It's a game where the text gives you the reply, and you, the artist, create. Book illustration requires talent, creativity, originality. I always start from reading the book. It gives you a theme. the text of the book poses a problem to you. Then follows a process by which the artist transphorms the text into the image. Obviously, not all the text, there is a selection on my part. A word, a phrase, a fact in the content of the story. But yes, I think it's important to constantly follow the beauty of drawing and color. Being an artistic act, we could discuss more on the subject of beauty. There is an infinity of manners of illustrating the text for children, but it still requires talent, artistic grace. I am convinced that in the case of children's books, a bad cover will not be successful, will not sell the book". (Neamțu, 2018: 338-340)

Because in the interview with the painter Luminița Penișoara, she often spoke to me about creativity, imagination in the cover-art design of the book for children, I asked her to do an imaginative exercise. If you were to graphically imagine a condition, how would you describe childhood and in what colors?

"When we are adults, we think of childhood as a delicious moment of our life. We always want to be protected from something or someone stronger than we do, and we understand later that this was possible once, only in childhood. In everyday life we often associate colors to factual states, everyday language uses terms that define colors. We see politics, society, market, our planet, even childhood in different colours. We can say pink or gray for childhood. We often forget that it is precisely the childhood that color us". (Neamțu, 2018:340)

Cover of the year 2021 in Romania

Between September 15 and October 15, 2021, the Dreamstime photography agency organized a contest addressed to book cover designers in Romania. Publishers were invited

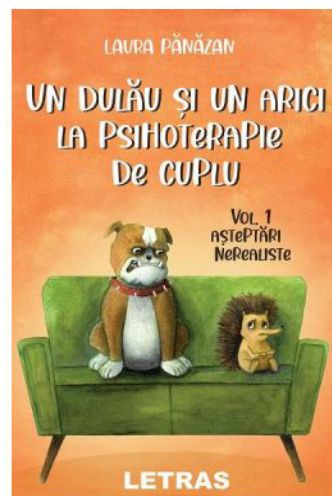
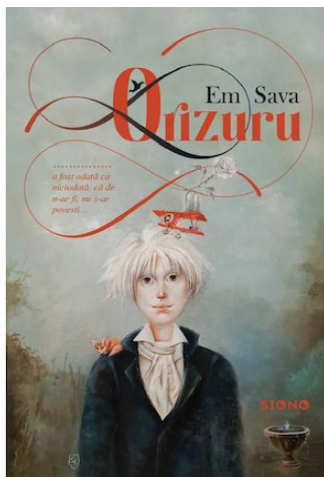
to participate, as well as freelance artists who own the rights to trade books and publish covers. Prizes worth 7,500 euros were offered to the winners and subscriptions worth 3,200 euros to all participants. The awards were given based on the votes of a specialized jury and those who have an account on the agency's online platform. The contest ended on October 27, 2021. 150 covers were entered in the contest: 89 were from publishing houses and 61 from independent designers.

After the first evaluation, 94 covers remained in the contest. The winners were: Special prize of 3000 euros: Christine (Stephen King), Nemira Publishing House; 1st place - 2000 Euro: Prietenii lui Năsuc. Vol. 2: Copacul din casă (Friends of Năsuc. Vol. 2: The Tree in the House - Cristina Elena Gheorghiu), Galaxia copiilor (Children's Galaxy); 2nd place - 1500 Euro: Orizuru (Em Sava), Siono Publishing House and 3rd Place - 1000 Euro: Un dulău și un arici la psihoterapie de cuplu (A dog and a hedgehog at couple psychotherapy - Laura Pănăzan), Letras Publishing House.

The winning covers in the contest organized in October 2021 by Dreamstime agency



The winning covers in the contest organized in October 2021 by Dreamstime agency



Conclusions

The theme of the book cover is an interdisciplinary one, at the intersection of journalism, design, advertising creation. As I did not find theoretical works strictly related to this subject, my work presents the experience of Romanian graphic designers, creators of covers, at important publishing houses in the country. Their experience may be important for cover creators, but also for future studies on this vast topic.

The cover is the first impression a book creates for potential readers. It must reflect the content of the book and be visible in online or in bookstores. We can say that the cover becomes a mirror of the book. Angela Rotaru, the artistic director of the prestigious Romanian publishing house, Humanitas, identifies some trends in approaching the cover, today: minimalist approaches, more pastel tones, preference for clean lines, surprise covers that hide other covers, strategies to attract the new generation of readers, without deceiving their expectations.

Font, size of the letter, styling all are elements that attract us and influence the buyer's decision. The book cover acts like a commercial, and all the rules of an ad can be applied to the book cover too. Beyond words, commercials use images, page settings, colours. These additional elements carry out signification that can strengthen or contradict the meaning of words. A successful cover is able to fascinate and introduce the reader in the story of the book, just as a good advertisement seduces you to buy a product or a service. We can say

that the iconic principles in ads are also applied in cover design.

From the interviews with the Romanian graphic artists and creators of book covers, they are convinced that the cover can influence the reader to purchase the book, just as a good title attracts you. And as a result, you want to discover it as soon as possible. Attractive cover, inspired title and very good content, all these ingredients go hand in hand and make the book a desirable product. The cover image will tell, in a condensed way, the story of the book, functioning as a well-thought-out press commercial. Rising curiosity, like a teaser on TV. The chosen colors also transmit energy (see warm colors) or calm (cold colors).

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