

Marketing, Cover Design

By Holly Lisle

Here is yet another opportunity for you to either be wonderful to work with or the dreaded Pain-in-the-Ass Artiste. If your contract calls for it, or if you're just lucky, you'll get to have some input on how your cover is designed and how your book is marketed.

Cover design first. Once again, it's best to remember that, unless you came to novel writing from a career in a publisher's art department designing covers for the sort of books you write, there are other people out there who know more about what will make your book sell than you do. Give your input, but let them do their jobs. My best recommendation on working with your editor is to stay very general with the first discussion.

I'll draw from my own experience for this. My editor called me up and said, "Have you given any thought to cover design yet?" I had. I said, "I've noticed that the books like mine that sell best have the same artist for every book in the series, that the covers are set off by a border that makes the series connection clear, and that in each instance the artist was basically an unknown who got his big break by illustrating those writers' covers.

So I would like to get an artist who will stay with me for however many Matrin books I write. I'd prefer that he or she not be someone whose work is already associated with a big-name writer. And I'd like to have the cover artwork edged by an attractive, distinctive border."

That was my big contribution to my cover design. Not, "Yes, I want this scene illustrated, and I want the primary color to be blue, and I want this particular artist to do the work, and I want the main character standing on the left holding a bowl

of fruit in one hand and a flaming sword with a gold pommel inset with cabochon rubies in the other.” You see the difference? The neat thing is, my editor liked my ideas enough that she decided to use them.

When I got the preliminary sketch for the cover, I was delighted. There was one element on the cover that didn't exist in the book, but that I liked so much that I wrote it in. I did note that the main character's hair wasn't long enough, that her sword looked too heavy for her, and that the building in the background needed to have three stories above the ground.

Again, I kept my requests simple, and made sure my editor knew they were requests. I worked briefly as a commercial artist, and I'm still pretty good, but I do not mistake what I know about art for sufficient knowledge to guarantee myself top-quality covers.

And what about marketing?

You may be asked to provide suggested cover copy for the inside flaps or back cover of your book. This is not the easiest thing in the world to do, and having done it many times now, I have tremendous respect for people who write good cover copy.

The key word here is “suggested.” You don't get a guarantee that your cover copy will be used. And if you want it to be used, keep a couple of things in mind. First, you'll do better if you write several different approaches and send them all, noting which ones you like the best. Second, you'll do better if you read cover copy from other books, and if you make notes on why that copy worked for you. (It probably worked for you, because you bought the book, right?)

Pay attention to how many words were in the effective copy, how much of the story the copy gave away, how much it said about the characters, and what sort of cliffhanger it used at

the ending. If you want to make your life a little easier, write cover copy for some books you like right now. Get the feel for doing this when you aren't under any pressure to produce.

And one final suggestion. A friend of mine who worked in marketing before he became an unbelievably successful writer of superb space opera novels (David Weber, who writes the Honor Harrington series, among other wonderful books) does a marketing package for each book.

In this package, he includes not only the finished first-draft manuscript, but a folder-bound, typeset "reader's copy" of the book that other people in the office can take home and read and get excited about, a page with his suggested back cover copy, and a page with a suggested teaser page for the paperback edition (the teaser page is the one you open to first in some paperback books, that has a cliffhanger scene from the novel itself).

Don't send a marketing package if you haven't sold the book yet, but if you have, I think this is a thoughtful way to provide some input into the marketing of your book.

Your editor may ask you for a list of conventions and bookstores you'll be visiting. Keep track of where you'll be going and keep your list current, because if she knows where you'll be a guest or signing books, she can send one of the publisher goody packages to the site.

These packages can include such cool things as bookmarks imprinted with your book cover, posters of your book, the occasional cover-imprinted T-shirts for the staff to wear (so that they can advertise for you), a couple of bound galleys for the bookstore staff so that they will have an advance chance to get excited about what you've written, balloons imprinted with your publisher's name, and other things to generate excitement about you and your book.

Your editor might ask you to participate in an autographing session with other writers she works with. Here is my advice on this.

Remember that the opportunity to sign your books for the people who want to buy them is, 1) an honor, and 2) a privilege. People who have read your work (and have paid to do so) will be taking time out of their lives to come out to meet you.

Remember that without them, you don't have a job. I have seen writers be incredibly rude to readers who wanted to meet them, say hello, maybe get an autograph, and I have seen those readers walk away hurt and determined that they would never buy another one of that writer's books. I've been treated badly by writers, too, and I no longer buy their books.

If you cannot be kind and appreciative to the people who make it possible for you to do what you do, then do yourself a major favor and become a recluse. Don't do autographings, don't go to conventions or book fairs; stay home and write your books.

If your editor discovers at one of these signings that you're a jerk, she probably won't ask you to do any more of them, and may go so far as to recommend that you don't. Some writers aren't presentable in public, and editors work around this. But if you already know you're going to end up being rude, spare yourself the embarrassment of having your editor tell you, "We would really rather not have you participate in the promotion of your books anymore."

If you can be pleasant and open, you're in for a treat. You'll discover that the people who read your work turn out to be people who have a lot in common with you.

As well they should be, if you think about it. After all, you put a lot of yourself into each book you write, and people respond to that. I always find something to talk about (not

including my books) with the people who like my stuff—we share common ground or life experiences that they have responded to when I wrote my experiences in my stories. If you remember this, you can find autographings and conventions a marvelous experience in meeting new friends.

And you editor won't ask you to stay home next time.

Conventions, Dinners, Hanging Out

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