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New ways to judge books by their covers

By Alice Rawsthorn: First published International Herald Tribune June 18, 2006

Between fighting fires after bomb raids as a member of the Home Guard, the "Dad's Army" of civilian volunteers charged with protecting Britain during World War II, the classicist E.V. Rieu worked on the translation of Homer's "The Odyssey" that he had begun before the war. Rieu's translation was published by Penguin in 1946 as the first paperback Penguin Classic. Selling more than three million copies, "The Odyssey" became Penguin's best-seller, until it was usurped first by D.H. Lawrence's "Lady Chatterley's Lover" and then George Orwell's "Animal Farm."

To celebrate the 60th anniversary of Penguin Classics, another version of "The Odyssey," an extract beginning with Odysseus's return home from the Trojan War, has been published in the new Penguin Epics series. Featuring the most dramatic passages of 20 classic texts, including "Beowulf" and Dante's "Inferno," each Epic is designed in a glamorous neo-Gothic style by EstuaryEnglish. "These are stories of the brutality, drama and tragedy that people love in computer games," said Jim Stoddart, art director of Penguin Press. "By drawing on the visual language of computer games, we wanted to persuade games fans to read about the same themes in these books."

Penguin does not know how many Oblivion addicts are now reading Ovid, but early sales of Epics are so strong that it is struggling to meet demand. Epics is the latest in a succession of beautifully designed new editions of Penguin Classics, which are as likely to be bought for their covers as for their content. It now makes commercial sense for Penguin to invest in design, as the company is facing fierce price competition from online retailers and the threat of digital publishing. Design is part of Penguin's heritage, although its original design ethos was inspired by its founder Allen Lane's philanthropic zest to enlighten the masses, not by profitability. For the first 10 Penguins published in 1935, Lane adopted a do-it-yourself design formula of simple, color-coded covers - orange for fiction, blue for biography and green for crime. Amateurish though it was, Penguin's design looked modern beside other garishly illustrated books.

The arrival of Jan Tschichold, the German graphic designer, in 1947 transformed Penguin. He wrote a strict set of rules governing every element of design and ensured that they were enforced by editors and printers. In three years, he established Penguin as an exemplar of modern book design. Standards then slipped until the Italian art director Germano Facetti arrived in 1961. He commissioned gifted designers to develop distinctive styles for different series, notably Romek Marber for crime and Derek Birdsall for education, and redesigned the Classics by featuring a painting that reflected the text on each cover. Facetti's choices were so apt that his covers offered an informal artistic education to book lovers for decades.

After his departure in 1972, standards slipped again. Penguin, which had been acquired by the Pearson media group in 1970, the year of Lane's death, adopted a similar approach to design as other publishers. Decisions were made by committee, rather than visionaries, and the results became blander. Design was marginalized in book publishing during the 1980s and 1990s, as the balance of corporate power shifted towards finance and marketing. The exceptions were mostly small independent publishing houses. One was Zone Books in New York, which worked with the Canadian designer Bruce Mau from 1986 to 2004. Current standouts are McSweeney's, founded by the author Dave Eggers in San Francisco, and Melville House in New Jersey. "Thoughtfully designed books make nearly as important a statement to the reader as thoughtfully written books," notes Dennis Loy Johnson, co-founder of Melville House. "It shows greater purpose than simply making money."

The only mainstream publisher to have remained committed to design is Knopf, a New York imprint of Bertelsmann, the German media group. Sonny Mehta, its president, has freed Knopf's designers from the usual corporate constraints, like "jacket meetings," where executives discuss possible covers. "It's not that we're not pressured by our sales force to change things," says the art director Chip Kidd.



"That does happen, but it's the exception not the rule." Typical of Knopf's approach is Kidd's cover of Peter Carey's new novel "Theft: A Love Story": a photograph of a woman staring at the blank space on a wall from where a painting has been stolen. By contrast, the jacket of the British edition of "Theft," published by Faber, features an appealing but forgettable abstracted image, which lacks the punch of Kidd's design.

Other publishers have continued to treat design as a cost, not an investment, although Penguin's experience suggests that this may be changing. For years, the classics have been among the most profitable areas of publishing, not least as the texts are free from copyright. But the market has declined with the popularity of used book sales by Amazon and other online retailers. Unable to compete against them on price, Penguin looked for new ways of persuading readers to buy the same texts. It began in 2004 with Great Ideas, a collection of political and philosophical polemics. The project had a small budget and its design was entrusted to a recent graduate, David Pearson. His brief was to produce a coherent series of paperbacks selling for £3.99 each. Dressing each cover with a typographic style typical of the time and spirit of the text, Pearson limited printing to two colors - black and burgundy - on uncoated paper, leaving him with enough money for a few decorative details. Great Ideas won numerous design awards, and Penguin sold two million books. "Some were bought by people who wanted accessible versions of the text, and some by people who liked the packaging," says Stoddart.

Great Ideas proved that readers would buy alluringly designed new editions of old texts. Pearson designed a second series, which has already sold 600,000 copies. And Penguin celebrated its 70th birthday last year by publishing 70 essays and novellas as £1.50 Pocket Penguins, each with a cover created by a different artist or designer. Among them was Robert Graves's "Caligula," designed by EstuaryEnglish in the seductively macabre style that Stoddart wanted for the new Penguin Epics series.

After Epics, Penguin is introducing a new series of Georges Simenon's crime classics designed by David Pearson and a limited edition of hardbacks with covers commissioned from designers and artists including Paul Smith, Manolo Blahnik and Sam Taylor-Wood. The price pressure from online retailers is intensifying, and Penguin, like the rest of the industry, also faces the long-term threat of competition from digital books. Past prophecies of the death of the traditional book have proved to be greatly exaggerated, but digital publishing is gaining momentum as more authors post their books online to be downloaded for free. Older readers may agree with the novelist John Updike, who decried this as "a grisly scenario." Yet younger readers, who already consume most of their information and entertainment on screen, may well prefer reading digital books.

The likeliest outcome is that the market will fragment into different formats, with authors publishing their work digitally and in print. The more visually seductive those traditional books are the more sellable they will be, which is why more publishers may, like Penguin and Knopf, become convinced that it is worth investing in design.....**THE END**

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