
The History of the Book Jacket in the 19th and Early 20th Century

Magdaleen Snyman

Abstract

The book in the 21st century can be read digitally, purchased from the comfort of one's home and stored in "bookshelves" that only exist online. When considering the book as an object, and not merely concerning oneself with its content, an interesting design history emerges. This article examines a part of book design that was essential in the late 19th and early 20th century: the book jacket. This specific part of the book was used for protection, communication and later marketing and reveals the thoughts and practises of publishers in England at specific moments in history. By examining some book jackets that have survived as well as consulting studies done by other scholars this article is an attempt at constructing the history of the book jacket from a publishing point of view. A history that reveals the interconnectedness of the publishing industry to the world around it and the fact that books evolve and will continue to evolve as technology and society evolves.

Key Words

Book Jackets, Dust Jackets, Book Design, 19th Century Publishing

Introduction

The history of the book jacket highlights various factors that are important when studying the history of the book. Publishing is a business that is inextricably connected to the world around it and therefore the effects of world history can be seen in every aspect of books, not only their content but also their physical form. When considering the design of books the audience is usually the primary concern. In the history of book jackets, the audience played a significant role but the choices made by publishers were also largely determined by money, availability of resources and later the necessity of marketing. This article will examine the development of the book jacket from (mainly) the late 19th century to the early 20th century, finding the reasons why publishers used book jackets, how they were designed and how these designs changed as the world changed. It will also prove the publishing industry's willingness to adapt to its market and show the fast pace at which change in design took place in the industry long before the advent of the internet.

Factors that contributed to the birth of the book jacket

The Elementary Education Act of the late 19th century meant that children in England and Wales between the ages of five and thirteen would be attending school regardless of their social class. This legislation improved literacy, creating a new reading public [Carey, 2002]. There was a new demand for reading material and this coupled with the technological advances of the Industrial Revolution was changing the way books were made and slowly but surely allowing the working class to become book buyers. Previously the book had been an expensive collectors' item but as the physical manufacturing of books was changed, by metal printing presses and steam power, large editions could finally be printed cheaply. The number of people who could buy books grew but it is important to note that the majority could not afford to (and were often not interested in) binding the books privately. Therefore, temporary bindings were discarded and publishers started binding books in large quantities with permanent covers. These books were then wrapped in a book jacket to protect them as they travelled from the press to the book buyer [Jennet, 1973].

The basic anatomy of the book jacket

The jacket was made of paper that can “hold a fold easily” but was thick enough to be protective. [Jennet. 1973: 492] The paper could not be too smooth or slippery— it had to stay on the book, which may be part of the reason why jackets only had print on the outside. The flaps of the jacket needed to “extend at least to half the width of the board [cover]” [Jennet. 1973: 493]. The front board usually had the title, author and name of the publisher on it as well as an illustration in some cases. The spine carried the same information but also the price, if the book was not from “the better class of publishers” who would have printed it on the front flap [Jennet. 1973: 493]. Advertisements were usually printed on the back of the book. Most were for other books by the same publisher, usually in the same genre or by the same author but occasionally there would even be an advertisement for “soap or soda water” [Jennet. 1973: 494]. According to Sean Jennet [1973] a blurb that was short appeared on the back of the book but if it was longer it would be found on the front flap with the price printed at the bottom. The back flap was usually left empty or used to continue the blurb and occasionally it would carry an advertisement. This design was, however, not standard and its development can be traced as far back as the 1830s.

The oldest book jacket

The book jacket started its life as a brown wrapper that was used to protect books as they travelled from the printing press to the reader. During the 19th and early 20th centuries publishers would have “windows” cut out on these brown paper wrappers to show the author, title and publisher’s name — usually on the spine of the book as they would be stacked and not displayed with the cover facing forward. Even though the history of printing in England can be traced back to the 15th century, books were still very expensively produced items by the beginning of the 19th century and therefore needed protection as they made their way to the personal libraries across the country. Before the 1900s readers often had their books bound in leather or silk or they would order folios and have them bound privately. There is quite a lot of speculation about what the oldest surviving book

jacket in the UK is. One example is the 1833 edition of *Keepsake* by Charles Heath published by Longmans. This book has a pale red, buff paper wrapper with the title, description and publisher's name in a frame on the front. According to Crispin Goodall, in *A Short History of the Book Jacket: Design, Function and Production*, this jacket was designed to capture the buyer's attention, an idea that the publisher may have gotten after seeing how children were drawn to books that were colourful. Interestingly the spine is left blank [not at all helpful when the book is shelved] and the back of the jacket has advertisements for other Longmans publications. Why Longmans decided to leave the spine blank is a mystery but it could have been because most books were ordered and not bought on a whim while browsing through the shelves of a bookseller.

Another example that has since been discovered is *Friendship's Offering*, a gift book published in 1830 by Smith, Elder and Co. This book jacket was discovered by the head of conservation at the Bodleian library in 2009. The book it covered [that was not found] had a silk binding which, although beautiful, would have been quite fragile. The book jacket therefore had to cover the entire book, like a parcel, something that can be deduced by looking at the jacket's folds and the remainders of the wax seal used to keep it in place. These types of gift books were only fashionable for a short time and experimentation in colour printing during the rest of the 19th century meant that they soon ceased to exist [Pauli. 2009].

Book jackets in the 19th and early 20th century

According to Goodall, using advertising on wrappers only really became practise in the second half of the 19th century. Examples of these jackets include *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* by Charles Dickens published by Chapman and Hall in 1870 and *The Hunting of the Snark* by Lewis Carroll published by Macmillan in 1876. The latter was made up of printed grey paper that had the date and two advertisements for *Alice* books on the back. The simple sans-serif font used (a bold design choice for this time) makes it clear that publishers were slowly but surely starting to experiment with typography. However, publishers were mainly experimenting on covers and not book jackets as most books printed during 1850 to

1890 were simply covered with inexpensive transparent glassine, allowing, for example, the pictorial covers of the *Victorian Yellow Backs* to capture the buyer's attention. In the 1890s printing on wrappers became more common but only a few publishers tried to create pictorial jackets.

One of the first publishers to implement pictorial covers was T. Fisher Unwin. Unwin's books had a black silhouette of an incident or character in the novel printed on its green Kraft paper wrapper. These jackets were designed by a junior member of staff who was not credited — revealing the publisher's attitude to the importance of the book jacket at this time. The lack of attention given to the book jacket was however not a global occurrence as publishers in Germany were already using well-known artists and cartoonists to illustrate their covers. Although sceptical at first, English publishers soon saw the value in using professional artists with the earliest pictorial jacket being printed by Henry & Co in 1897 for *The Pageant* by Shannon. This jacket is printed in three colours [yellow, green and red] and the design is not repeated on the cloth cover underneath [Rosner. 1954].

In 1906 the importance of jacket design for marketing purposes begins to become apparent as Fisher Unwin published John Oliver Hobbes' *The Dream and the Business* in three colours designed by Aubrey Beardsley. The design was taken from a famous poster called *The Girl in the Bookshop* which not only suited the contents of the book but was already known to the public and would therefore work as an advertisement. When examining pictorial jackets from this time it becomes clear that the images on book jackets were mostly illustrations taken from within the book. As early as 1913 publishers seem to realise the importance of book jacket design and quality to impart information to their customers as designs become specialised and the paper used becomes sturdier than that of examples from the previous century.

The early 20th century onwards

According to Rauri McClean, in *Modern Book Design: from William Morris to The Present Day*, William Morris and artist and bookbinder Thomas James Cobden-Sanderson had

established the idea that printing [and book design] could be an art. As the First World War ended book jackets were being refined and improved and publishers realised the jacket of the book could give them a competitive edge. Experimental printing techniques became popular with the arrival of the machine age. The *Everyman's Library* series is a perfect example of the fact that machine production could make good books cheap [1958]. From 1910 onwards, young artists were attracted to the field of book design but generally specialised design in commercial book production only became common practise in 1923 [McLean. 1958].

During the 1920s the book jacket is used as a miniature poster and its design follows the design and typography trends of the time. This is aided by the fact that, after many years of experimentation, machine composition has been perfected. The introduction of new kinds of machines and processes meant that new kinds of paper were being made to suit the needs of publishers and advertisers. Most of the typefaces before 1920 had been designed for hand-printing and handmade paper but, with the fast turnover rate of machines, the Monotype Corporation could now bring out new typefaces with minor additions or adjustments each year. They reproduced the most popular typefaces [Baskerville, Garamond, Plantin etc.] but also cut new ones like Centaur by Bruce Rogers and Perpetua by Eric Gill. Publishers were able to see these new typefaces in *The Monotype Recorder*, a periodical on type and design with instructions for use [Goodall. 1971].

As typeface design grew in importance, publishers decided to invest more time and money into good design. This can be seen in 1928 when Sir William Orpen was commissioned to design covers for H.G Wells' *Mr Brettworthy on Rampole Island* at a fee of one hundred guineas [approximately the same as £ 5,475.53 today] and, when the publisher Ernest Bern lost the original artwork, Orpen charged him 200 guineas to create another. [Historical Inflation Calculator, 2015]

The acceptance of the importance of book design also led to publishers appointing staff that could manage their firm's visual communications specifically. In 1928 Stanley Morison became director of Victor Gollancz where he standardised the typography [Baskerville,

Scotch Roman and Gill Sans] and created cheap but very bold [and successful] book jackets with black and purple type printed on bright yellow paper. The success of these designs can be attributed to the fact that the books would be immediately recognisable on shelves where most other books were not very colourful or used muted colours at best [Goodall. 1971]. McLean calls Stanley Morison a pioneer in the field of research on typography during the 1920s. This may have well been the case as Stanley Morison wrote essays on typography and design that were published in England, Germany and France that would have been read by “every practising designer and printer interested in his trade” [McLean. 1958: 43].

As printing standards improved and printing facilities became more widely available, book jackets became a symbol of quality and value for money. A good example of this is Chatto & Windus' *Phoenix Library* of 1928 that contained cheap but high quality reprints with jackets and bindings by Thomas Derrick. By the 1930s publishers had accepted that the book jacket was here to stay but were still undecided as to its use. For Victor Gollancz the book jacket became the perfect vehicle for advertising.

Sir Henry McAnally writes that “a good number of people” have not decided whether they should keep producing “book wrapper[s]” because they inevitably end up being thrown away once the book is bought [Goodall. 13: 1971]. However, it can be argued that it did not matter where the book jacket ended up because by that time it would have already served its purpose of selling the book and informing the customer. But McAnally was not alone in his feelings towards the jacket. Richard de la Mare of Faber and Faber is quoted as saying, in 1937, that the book jacket is a “wretched thing” and he sometimes wishes that it did not exist [Goodall. 1971: 13]. It is this attitude of publishers and the fact that book buyers threw book jackets away that resulted in very few originals still existing today.

Even though de la Mare clearly did not think very much of the book jacket, Faber and Faber produced many book jackets and had a much bigger list than, for example, Gollancz and Chatto & Windus. De la Mare believed that each author or title was unique and that, if the book had to have a jacket, this needed to be reflected in its design.

Branding and book jackets

In the mid 1930s the publisher as a brand is linked to book design. One example of this is Jonathan Cape Publishing appointing Hans Tisdall to design their book jackets. Tisdall used hand drawn lettering and a simple but striking black on white design which became part of the publisher's brand identity. One of the main benefits of using the book jacket as a marketing tool was the fact that it reached people in their homes, and they were forced to interact with it unlike an advertisement in a shop window that they could choose to ignore [Jennet. 1973].

In 1936, Gregory Brown [a well-known poster designer] wrote in the *Penrose Annual* that there was a need for "well-lettered jackets". He was one of the first people to analyse the design of the book jacket —questioning its artistic merit and not [as publishers had previously done] whether it would survive. For Brown book jackets were a form of contemporary art and a selling aid and he argued that publishers would be ignorant not to get experienced designers and professional artists to design their covers [Brown. 1936: 30].

Brown saw the potential that good book jacket design had to sell an unknown author. Brown's argument considers the book as a three dimensional object. This is a useful way for publishers to think about their product because they do not know how their book will be displayed, whether the buyer will see the front cover or only the spine. When considering the book as a "cube" [Goodall. 1971: 15] all sides should be visually appealing —something that can easily be achieved by using a book jacket. Misha Black saw this potential and wrote in 1936 "It is a pity, I think, that all-over pattern is so seldom used...The spine is a very important feature and should get the same attention as the face" [Goodall. 1971: 15].

From 1936 onwards it becomes clear that the book jacket was an important part of the marketing strategy of many publishers, as poster illustrations are used instead of the modest typographic covers of the 20s. But design was not the only factor that publishers had to consider when producing book jackets. During the 1930s it cost the publisher at least eight pence to produce a book jacket [the value of around £5 today] which was difficult to

justify when the jacket would be thrown away as soon as the book reached the public library [Historical Inflation Calculator, 2015]. Because of this, many publishers did not put a lot of thought into the design of book jackets and were often unsure of which elements on the cover needed to be emphasised. For example, George Bernard Shaw writes to his publishers that they have committed a “horrible offence against art” by emphasising the authors name above a design by Walter Crane for *Essays* [Goodall. 1971: 16-17].

The 30s also saw more illustrated jackets being created but by the time the Second World War broke out typographical covers seemed to rise again as material costs went up, paper rationing came into play and skilled labour (like design) was cut back on to save money and allow non-essential staff to enlist.

The war did not mean the end of the book jacket and Lawrence Henshaw writes in an article in *Paper and Print* in the 1940s, “Wartime austerity has left its mark upon the book jacket; today’s designs are mostly typographical layouts and are produced at a minimum cost; but arresting effects are often obtained by good lettering and the use of two- or even one-colour printings” [Henshaw. 1944: 173]. The shortage of materials, brought on by the war, meant that publishers were forced to pay more attention to book jackets and their design without relying on colour printing, resulting in beautifully striking typography and letter arrangement. This attention to detail would carry on throughout the 20th century as book jackets returned to pictorial and later moved to photographic designs and visual communication went from strength to strength.

Conclusion

The history of the book jacket proves that book design evolved (and continues to evolve) at a very fast pace. It also highlights that the Publishing industry does not operate in isolation but is always influenced by the social and economic environment in which it finds itself. The book is more than its contents as proved by the attention paid to book design at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. The history of the book jacket also

tells book historians that we can expect the physical form (or in the case of eBooks perhaps rather the visual aspects) of the book to keep evolving with the world around it.

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