

# Cover Stories

How do you design a cover for a novel that must, to recoup the publisher's investment, sell hundreds of thousands of copies — and sometimes more than a million? Very carefully, of course: books do get judged by their covers. "With fiction you only have a split second for the customer to decide whether a book looks interesting," said Zan Farr, a buyer for Borders.

Over the last 30 years, for blockbuster authors from Dean Koontz and Danielle Steel to Joan Didion and John Cheever, a whole design style has

sprung up called "the big book look." Its chief elements are a large author name, a large title and, often, a smallish iconic image. The goal is to make the book "pop" on the shelf, to make it more "punched out and vibrant," in the words of Jonathan Burnham, the publisher of HarperCollins.

"A best seller can look like anything," said Chip Kidd, a cover designer for Alfred A. Knopf. "You can design a big book and make it look incredibly elegant or make it look like a Camaro — all tricked out." Below, the thinking behind some recent best-seller jackets.

## THE AHA! MOMENT

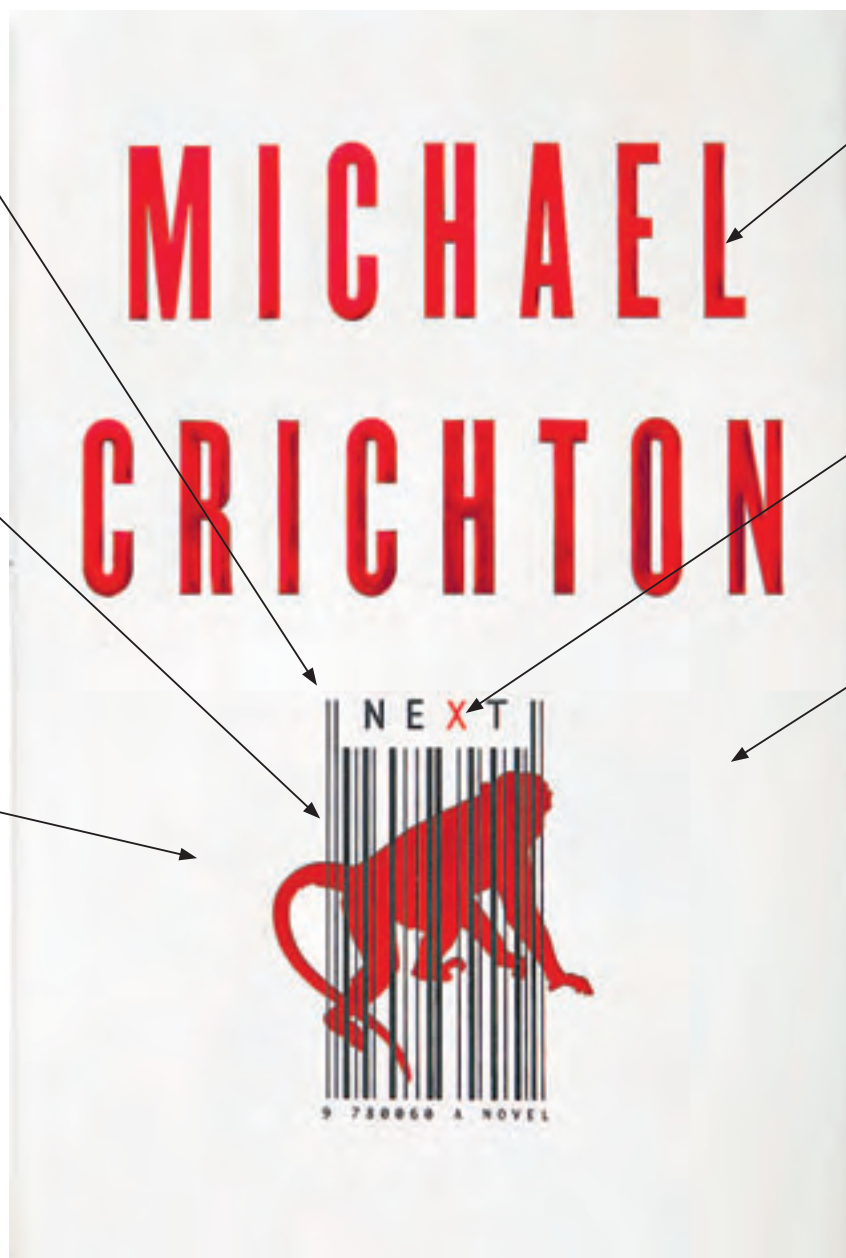
Jonathan Burnham of HarperCollins: "I gave our designer Will Staehle the book to read for the weekend. He came in on Monday morning with this image: a monkey encased in a cage that was actually a bar code. The dominant theme of the book is the sale of genetic material — science for sale. This resolved the whole thing in one strong image."

## CLEVER TRICK, THWARTED

HarperCollins tried to make this bar code image actually scan as the book's I.S.B.N. — in other words, for the cover design to serve as the book's real bar code. Alas, Burnham said, the sales department nixed the idea. "They said the store accounts would be confused. They wouldn't know where to zap the book."

## JURASSIC BLOODLINES

Crichton's 1990 blockbuster, "Jurassic Park," had a silhouette of dinosaur bones on a white background, with Crichton's name in big red letters. The echo here isn't accidental. As Rodrigo Corral, a former art director for Doubleday, said, "Often, if you're working for a best-selling author, you're basically following a template."



## FOILED!

Jonathan Burnham: "Most jackets are combinations of ink and foil. This jacket is all foil. That was to make it really punched out and vibrant against the white. We're playing into the convention of using foil for commercial fiction, but this has an edgier, more contemporary feel. Also, using all foil gives the cover a high-tech feel."

## AUTHORIAL INTERVENTION

Burnham said that Crichton, who was very involved in designing the cover, came up with the idea of making the X in "Next" red. "It really does add something, although it's hard to explain why."

## TOO MANY COOKS?

An art director for a leading house, who agreed to speak on the topic on condition of anonymity for fear of alienating major accounts, lamented: "On every big cover there's a million opinions. ... You have the editor and the editor in chief and the publisher, and you show it to the author and he's O.K. with it. Then it's like a sales conference, with everyone chiming in. You have the marketing people. The jacket has to have the blessing of the key store accounts, especially that of Sessalee Hensley," the fiction buyer for Barnes & Noble. Jonathan Burnham said buyers didn't take part in the design process for this cover. "Publishers tend to show Sessalee covers for books where it's a new author or it's a title where Sessalee's advice is going to be useful in positioning it." (Hensley declined to be interviewed for this article.)

Photographs by Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

## BODY PARTS!

A stroll through the fiction section these days turns up a lot of jackets featuring legs and feet (in bathtubs, in beds, in high heels), hands, eyes, lips — but few fully visible human figures. The jacket for Danielle Steel's "H.R.H." shows a full face but still leaves something to the imagination: the woman's face on the white background has a blank, washed-out beauty that makes her look more generic than specific.



## THE END OF THE CLENCH?

"This jacket goes back to a look that was popular in the '70s," said Irwyn Applebaum, publisher of Delacorte, which publishes Steele. It also avoids "the clench," the kind of steamy illustrated embrace that has been gradually disappearing from romance covers for years. Some publishers, however, have started using a "step-back" cover: a big book jacket with a clench illustration on the inside flap — bodice ripping without the shame.



## MORE THAN SCARY?

This Stephen King cover, for a novel that's as much love story as horror, is a departure from his last few jackets, which said bluntly, "Be afraid!" John Fulbrook III, art director for Scribner and the designer of King's last five covers, said: "I wanted this cover to stand out. ... It's a higher-brow King per se. I wanted to merge a commercial cover with a more literary cover."

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