

Art, Design and Communicating the Story: The Cover of *Coach Fitz*

Abstract

This chapter tells a story about the image used on the cover of my novel *Coach Fitz* (2018). It describes the dynamic relationship between this image and the textual dimension of the narrative and discusses what implications this relationship might have for the nature of the visionary aspect of the creative imagination more broadly. Firstly, the chapter distinguishes its approach from other scholarship that investigates book covers from different disciplinary perspectives, including those of semioticians, book design practitioners and visual communications academics. The specific visual content and style of the image used on the book cover and how it relates to the plot of the novel is then analysed. This is followed by an account of an exchange between the author of the novel, the publishers (also book editors) and the illustrator of the image used on the cover. To conclude, the chapter explores some of the ways in which different aspects of images become explicit according to the perspectives and concerns of different contributors to the production of a book.

Scholarship analysing book covers has most commonly been the purview of semioticians of different stripes (Gennet 1997; Salami and Eghtesad 2015; Sonzogni 2011), book designers (Boom 2013; Birdsall 2004; Mendelsund 2014; Mendelsund & Alworth 2020; Baines & Pearson 2005), and design academics (Sadokierski 2016 and 2019; Haslam 2006; Drew and Sternberge 2005), all of which bring distinctive and valuable perspectives to their objects of analysis. What is typically missing from such perspectives, however, is a felt account of how the constructed text and cover relate from the perspective of the author. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Clothing of Books* (2017), which reflects on the author's feelings and thoughts about the covers for her books, is perhaps the exception in this regard. Lahiri's account does not, however, focus on the role of the author in

designing a cover and the related interactions between author, designer, illustrator and publishers in transforming an image. This to some extent ought to be expected, as the responsibilities of creative writers with regard to the making of their work are often—though not always—limited to the textual dimension, particularly concerning commercially crucial elements such as book covers. The account that follows, by contrast, provides a multidimensional insight into the power of an image in shaping a literary work across both textual dimensions of the narrative and the paratextual dimension of the cover. In addition to interpreting how images contribute to systems of meaning, as is typical in semiotic approaches, this chapter aims to tell the story of how a certain strand of visionary thinking is produced and transformed in the process of publishing a work of narrative fiction.

The image in this instance exists in multiple interconnected instances, each with different levels of force and vivacity concerning explicit visual information: as the book cover of the novel, *Coach Fitz*; as the painting used in the design of the cover; as the brief given to the painter for the purpose of the book cover; as a photograph that in part inspired both the brief for the painter and the fictional character whose name is also the title of the novel; as the fictional character, Coach Fitz, within the narrative; as a memory of 'the friend', a real life character, also the subject of the original photograph, who also inspired Coach Fitz the character; and as a memory of the persona adopted by 'the friend', or rather, the dialogue between the friend and one of the present authors that emerged as a consequence of the personas adopted by each—which also inspired the fictional character, Coach Fitz.

The image, of course, exists beyond these specific iterations too, not as an essence or point of origin, but as a source of potential, contingent on future imaginings and realisations. In describing the content of and relationships between multiple iterations of the image, this chapter aims to give equal weight both to the stable details of the specific image and its capacity to be realised differently—its capability to be transformed.

As is evident based on the sequence of different image instances described above, the relationship between real and fictionalised image, whether visual or textual, is poorly understood if pronounced distinctions between the two are emphasised: the photograph of 'the friend' might in some sense have more documentary or evidential freight than a written description in a work of fiction, however, the personal significance of this photograph is in part contingent on a fictional persona, evoked in the comic relationship between two friends and performed in the photographic image. Without this fictional persona, realised in informal modes of spoken dialogue, the specific importance of the photograph is significantly altered. In this sense, there are not fictional entities on one side of a great divide and non-fictional entities on the other. Rather, there are different visual and rhetorical gestures each given richness by the diversity of performative contexts they enlist for the purpose of expression.

The story told in this chapter comes from a relatively unique perspective when considered alongside other scholarly approaches to the analysis of book covers in particular and of literary texts in general. The most obvious aspect of this uniqueness relates to the fact that I'm also the author of the work of fiction being analysed. Furthermore, I played an important role in conceiving and commissioning the book cover, arguably the most conspicuous and memorable context for the specific image that is analysed in this chapter. While authors are typically consulted and may play a role in the design of the book cover, it is less common for them to have such an active role, as evidenced in the account below. The value of such a perspective is has more to do with expanding the scope for what is included in the analysis of texts, rather than an argument for the importance of authorial intent.

What this relatively unique perspective affords is an expanded terrain for considering the life of an image as: 1) something that exists as a source of potency, or visionary potential, before a work of fiction is written; 2) something that exists in a dialogue of transformation with the author while writing and editing the work; 3) something that exists afterwards when further

collaborators are engaged in the creation of the book and in particular the design of the cover; 4) and lastly in the present context, as it is examined once again, on this occasion in a critical reflection on the creation of the book. The analysis of how images exist in the perceptual life and creative practice of fiction writers is given expanded scope in such an approach to analysis, though it is not an analysis that is unique in kind, inaccessible to literary critics who are not the authors of the work they analyse.

It is difficult to pinpoint when, exactly, I first had the idea for an image to use on the book cover of *Coach Fitz*. But occur the idea did, so forcefully, in fact, that when the editor asked “*think about what the cover might look like*” I responded immediately with a description “*I was thinking of that flapping yellow legionnaire’s cap and the partial view of an Australian bush landscape, perhaps in watercolour*”. The specification of the medium of watercolour, in addition to the content of the image, should not be overlooked in this instance. This suggests that, in addition to the medium independent visual information in my mind, the image already in some sense existed in a proto-illustrative-proto-design. The specification of watercolour was intended to complement the naïve, deliberately unironic, yet highly self-aware tone of the writing and central protagonist.

The cap had been one of those evocative details that seemed to bring the character to life in the writing process; something that, in the words of Ford Madox Ford, enabled the author to “get a character in” (cited in Wood, 2008). Close to the beginning of the novel, the narrator is waiting in a park for his new coach, whom he is yet to meet:

In the distance, about seventy or so metres off, I saw a figure running towards me. She was about five foot nine or ten, with short, very slightly bowed legs, a strikingly long torso and a compact, relaxed running style. I bent down to do up a lace and when I next stood the figure was almost upon me. She wore a floppy yellow légionnaire’s cap, dark-blue

lightweight shorts covered in pilling and a yellow t-shirt also covered in pilling. Tom, she extended a hand, top spot, scanning the surrounds with approval. Her unevenly cut, red-tinged hair was flecked with globules of unrubbed-in sunscreen, particularly around the ears, and bits of leaf matter and sand clinging to her forehead. (2018, 5)

The hat is referred to in the narrative on four other occasions and it indexes the changing relationships between the narrator and his coach, which are the defining dramatic element of the narrative: "We set off at a relaxed pace down the steps, the cape of Coach Fitz's hat flapping lightly as she ran" (18); "The sand was noticeably softer than Manly or Freshwater and we ploughed on up the beach with a light tailwind and Coach's hat flapping" (38); "I knew as soon as I saw Coach Fitz waiting with Morgan and Graham in her yellow legionnaire's cap, blue shorts and cotton shearer's singlet, that today might not go as smoothly as I'd imagined" (205). "We started at the stairs and took the route down, across the grassy field into the cool damp of the lower park. My first run through the park with Coach Fitz was on my mind, the memory of her yellow cap, now a tattered flag, flapping in the breeze" (212). The hat has metaphorical and characterological relationships with multiple different levels of the narrative: like flags, the cap is an identification marker for the coach and announces her presence in a manner that is more expressive than standard baseball caps; relatedly, the cap, particularly its rear flap, catches the breeze and thereby expresses movement, particularly the movement of a body through a landscape, which is also central to the narrative; the cap is also suggestive of a cape, which evokes the notion of a superhero, and the coach is for the narrator, initially at least, a sort of superhuman figure—albeit of a comic variety. Lastly, the cap is also a crucial part of the comic dimension of Coach's character. As opposed to their original military purposes, in everyday contexts and popular culture legionnaires' caps have a ready propensity to evoke both gaucheness, wackiness and naïve irreverence (see, for example, ABC Triple J cohost and comedians Matt and Alex's satirical

music video "Je Suis Legionnaire"). This attitudinal and tonal mixing was certainly the case concerning Coach Fitz. In a sense her character was built around the cap.

Characters in works of fiction, and indeed in visual artforms such as film, comics and painting, are at once the cumulative outcome of constellations of important details and something more. That 'something more' is often identified as spirit or essence, or indeed simply the word 'character' itself, meaning: something that is beyond the reductive powers of analysis. Character is everything that makes something distinctive. It would, however, be misguided to assume that some mystical notion of inner truth is masked by the secondary qualities of characters, such as yellow legionnaires' caps. All aspects of characters have a partial existence. No single impression allows readers to capture an essence in a totalising glance. There are only different perspectives, offered by different things and events, which are more or less generative with regard to the insight they offer into a character. The harder an event or thing or attribute is to vary, the more important it is with regard to the creation of a character. In this sense, one might ask: if the hat were blue, how much difference would that make? Or: if the hat were a standard baseball cap, without the flap, what difference would that make? What about no hat at all?

To some extent, these endlessly expansive questions as to the most or least important aspects of a character are determined by finite, practical considerations related to the format, genre and practice of writers, editors and book designers. For example, even though it might be the defining feature of a character, it's impossible to put the voice of a character on the cover of a book. Book covers deal in impressions and a range of practical considerations inform the selection and design of images. In this regard, one advantage of the hat, when compared to a face, is that it features relatively low levels of visual information. The hat at once remains ambiguous enough for the reader to project their fantasies onto and specific enough to conjure a personality. The hat is in this sense like a Rorschach inkblot, deliberately designed to offer suggestive, rather than

overt visual details, thereby allowing room for the imagination. The hat is an abstraction that affords an insight of increased scope and intensity into the character for whom it acts as an index. The relationship between the hat and the character is in some sense analogous to the relationship between the written narrative and cover itself, which acts as an index or what literary theorist Gerard Genette (1997) calls a “threshold of interpretation” for the inner dimension that it at once obscures and reveals.

The cap was one of the important features included in the brief given to the illustrator for the book cover. New considerations as to the particular quality of the representation of the cap emerged in the process of designing the cover. As evident in the extended email exchange between the editors (E1 + E2), the illustrator (I), the designer (D) and the author (A), consideration of the image as book cover brought into focus a range of subtleties associated with visual design and its relationship to the narrative:

*A to E1 + E2: I've also had a crack at a description below and sourced a painting that I'd like to use. I convinced my partner to paint something based on a rough brief. I really like the result and am interested to hear what you think. It's great to have something that is so intimately connected with the story and **I think the aesthetic and the mood of the book go together nicely, in addition to the content.** The image I've included is just a photo from my phone. Please don't feel uncomfortable telling me if you think it is not suited.*

E2 to A:and I like I's illustration. Let me talk with E1 and D about it and we'll think about if it will work as a cover.

A to E1 + E2: Just an update on the painting. I've attached another shot (from my iPhone) of the now complete painting.

A to E1: *This looks good! We'll put it past our designer, see what he comes up with.*

E2 to A: *Really good talking yesterday. We've been having further deliberations about the cover and I wanted to send a couple of options along. I've attached the two working options that we've come down to.*

*The first is with the full image – which requires quite a bold text treatment given the strength of the image. I like what...our designer, has come up with, but **it's been hard to get the text and image to work together, so there's perhaps a bit of a struggle between the two elements here.***

*The second is a more minimalist version, and we're coming to think it's a stronger one. Taking out the background seems to make for a stronger composition and for a **more unusual and interesting cover.** Nb. the cutting out of the image is very rough at this stage and we'd clean it up and smooth it out. We could perhaps look at possibilities with colours too.*

Could you have a look and see what you think? Feel free to call if you'd like to talk this over.

A to I: *Good news on the whole! Do you have a preference [regarding the covers] yourself?*

I to A: *Hey, looking good! **I think I actually like the first, more bold option,** but It's hard for me to say what suits the story best, what do you think?*

A to I: *I liked the first too, will mount a soft defence.*

A to E2: I looked at both covers before reading your text and settled on the first as my favourite. **Reading your rationale it makes sense in terms of a more striking and direct communication. However, the white background creates an odd void effect and it loses some of the landscape detail and the immersion of the runner within this, which communicates an essential aspect of the narrative. I like the type used in the first version too, but appreciate it is very irritating when non-book designers quibble and assert their opinions on type.** Overall my preference is for the first.

I don't want to be one of these authors who is overly stubborn about these things so go with what you and the team nut out and there will be no begrudging it from my end. Sorry to be unhelpful.

E2 to A: Thanks for your quick feedback on this – and for your very thoughtful and diplomatic approach to it! (Not at all unhelpful.) I've been discussing it more with E1 and D, as well as others here. **We're quite strongly inclined to go with the cutout version – mostly because we're not sure how clearly the idea of the immersion within the environment will come across to someone who doesn't know the work, and I worry that the whimsical nature of the landscape is rather different in tone to the very detailed and fine-grained idea of fauna and place you've written into the book.** But more importantly, I think we all feel that as a cover, **the iconic quality of the figure alone will give a more forceful and intriguing promotion of the book, in bookstores and elsewhere.** I felt when I saw that version it came into focus, where the different layers weren't quite gelling as a cover with the full image.

That said, we all like the painting – we were discussing the idea of doing something like printing the full image in the inside cover, perhaps the inside back cover. There's a publisher I like (I think it's New York Review of Books) that does thumbnail pictures of full uncropped images in a bottom corner of the back cover, and something like that could be an

option. But I like the idea of the inside a little more since it would give a bit more room.

Something to discuss further.

With the cutout version, we can play with the text colour to integrate it a little more – I agree that it's a bit stark at the moment, but some finessing will bring it together.

Anyway, that's our inclination. I hope it's okay with you – and I hope not too disappointing.

A to E2: That's great... I'm sold!

A to I: They went with the other version but persuasively argued.

I to A: Haha good try! I guess they know what they're doing.

A range of different technical, interpretive and speculative considerations transform the quality of the image in this particular context. These include: considerations of the visual style of the image in relation to the mood or tone of the narrative; the relationship between text and image on the book cover; the relationship between foreground and background, figure and field; processes and outcomes of visual abstraction (the making explicit of an outline of the image); the visual style of the different covers as autonomous, aesthetic elements (bold, minimalist, whimsical, fine grained, stark, etc.); consideration of the image as interpreted by different hypothetical audiences (those who have read and haven't read the book); consideration of the image in particular contexts (in bookstores). These considerations are largely irrelevant, or at least distantly implicit, in comparison to the life of the image as something that inspires the written narrative, something that is then expressed in writing, and, to a lesser extent, the verbal brief given to the illustrator for the cover design.

As the author of the work of fiction, in this instance I showed an instinctive fidelity to the relationship between the image and the narrative, whereas the publishers and designer are also concerned with how the image will appear to “someone who doesn't know the work” and the particular spatial environment of the bookstore where encounters between prospective readers and the book cover are likely to occur. While the image is in some sense the same image or images to which the author refers in the fictional work or the brief given to the illustrator, it is also different, on account of a range of different actors, disciplinary knowledges and hypothetical contexts that have been engaged in determining its purpose. The commercial concerns of the publishers, the disciplinary perspective of design and the genre of the book cover bring to light manifold different nuances to the image, the previous force and vivacity of which had been largely contingent on the visionary potential of the image for the author. The process of abstraction, whereby the image of the hat-covered head is isolated from the landscape elements present in the illustration, is said to increase the visual intensity of the image and its “iconic quality” to audiences who do not share the subjective history of the author. The image has become something that will be seen at scale by an audience who will judge its quality in isolation from the narrative, at least to some degree.

What does this account tell us about the relationship between written narrative and the image? Or between the paratextual elements specific to a printed book and the invariant elements of a story that persist across different formats? It tells us: that images both persist and change depending on whose hands and eyes they are in; that the visual and the textual are enfolded in each other and either can to varying degrees be made explicit in connection with the other depending on the efforts of other actors; that there are different kinds of relationships between narrative and book cover, some where the cover is relatively autonomous in relation to the narrative, others where the cover is imagined to be an expression of the tone or voice of the narrative (these relationships can exist simultaneously in response to the same work).

This is not a comprehensive or generalisable account of how images and narrative work, nor how the relation between narrative and book cover work, nor the relationship between author, editors, designer and illustrator. It is one example of what is possible. Hopefully, in this sense, it enriches the cumulative understanding of the different ways in which authors conceive and create their works, particularly with regard to the role of visionary images associated with longer narrative works, and how such images lead lives that are at once related to and autonomous from the source of potential that might be tempting to name as their origin.

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