

The Creative Process Behind Book Covers

By Children's Author Jennifer Phillips

I'm a hybrid author - both traditionally and self-published. For me, one of the most enjoyable aspects of self-publishing has turned out to be the involvement level in creating the book cover.

Here's a bit on how I collaborated with [book designer Roberta Morris](#) on this process for the recent second editions of my three children's biographies on Robert Wadlow, Elijah Lovejoy and Nina Kosterina.

The overall process we followed was generally the same for each:

1. **Decide whether to create an illustrated cover.** In each case, we chose to stick with using historical imagery combined with other design elements. Cost was a factor, but I also felt we had good options.
2. **Research other book covers in the genre for inspiration** (this is super fun).
3. **Zero in on the mood and heart of the story** you want conveyed at a glance (can be harder than it looks).
4. **Create several mockups**, factoring in the book's title and trim size.
5. **Resize as a thumbnail image** to ensure it will work for marketing and sales.
6. **Get beta reader feedback** if possible.

Nailing down the tone, mood and imagery most important to the story – this experience was so helpful that I have started mocking up my own rough covers for other stories I have in development, even if they will be going out on submission with traditional publishers.

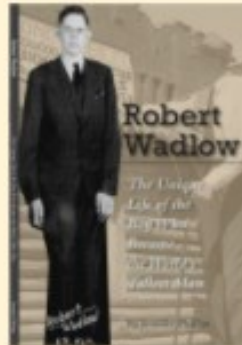
Doing cover mockups as a writer is a way to play around with titles, colors, images, what gets emphasized and why. Those insights feed back into story development. I don't pretend to be a designer, but it's a satisfying exercise in creativity and I highly recommend it.

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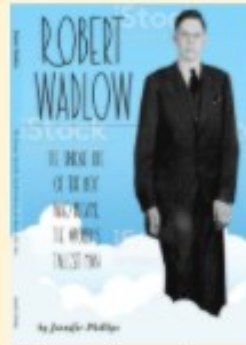
Robert Wadlow: The Unique Life of the Boy Who Became the World's Tallest Man



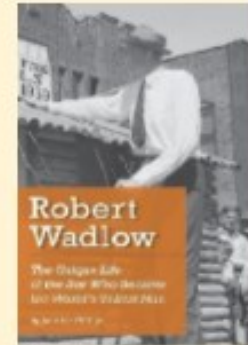
Our only illustration-based idea but we decided it didn't read immediately as a biography versus possibly a fable about a giant - wrong tone



Another strong possibility with Robert looking out at readers, but it seemed too busy



This version adds a lighter feel, but we decided the clever clouds could convey disrespect for Robert's situation - he grew weary of people asking him how the weather was up there



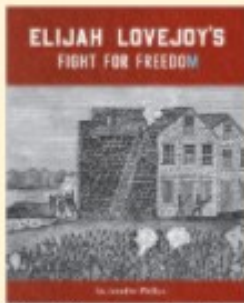
The final cover - we decided ensuring his name was readable in a thumbnail was sufficient, with the longer subtitle visible in catalog listings and enlarged versions

Here are a few of the ideas before we landed on the final cover on the far right. We wanted to immediately show the magnitude of Robert's height and a bit of his character in that he always dressed up for his public appearances.

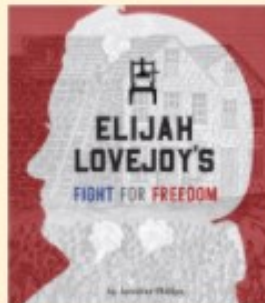
Roberta added the pop of color to the final cover to offset the black and white photo, but we wanted to remain muted with almost a sepia feel. After various attempts with different imagery on the back cover, we ended up wrapping the rest of the front cover photo onto the back and I like the way it works when you're holding the book.

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Elijah Lovejoy's Fight for Freedom



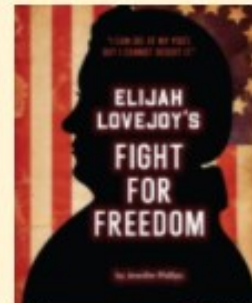
The title stands out and the final showdown image is prominent, but we decided the layout might be too boring to appeal to kids



An example of trying to work in a printing press icon without success and we didn't think this cover had the emotional appeal we wanted



Roberta also experimented with dove symbolism but we decided it distracted more than helped the design



This cover packed the emotional punch we wanted and we incorporated a famous Lovejoy quote: "I can die at my post, but I cannot desert it."

This cover gave us plenty of connotations.

We wanted to incorporate a graphic device such as a printing press icon throughout the book since this was Lovejoy's tool for speaking out and to also convey how he pressed on despite the danger and barriers. But no matter what we did on the cover and interior, it was too busy and we finally had to scrap the idea.

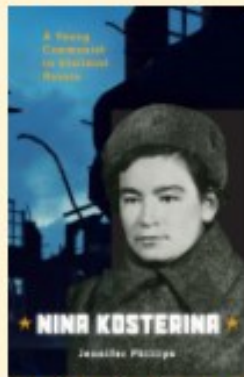
The two most striking images available are Lovejoy's silhouette and the woodcut of the mob scene where he is killed. When Roberta sent me the version on the far right with the dark silhouette juxtaposed against the flag, I knew we'd found our cover.

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Nina Kosterina: A Young Communist in Stalinist Russia



The background creates a more dynamic feel but doesn't convey enough about Nina's story



The blue background creates drama and steers away from Russian red, but we ruled it out because most of her story is not about wartime



This was our second favorite cover idea as the color wash softens Nina's soldier portrait



The title stands up well in the thumbnail and we added a Nina quote on the bottom left to convey her character: "I must go where my homeland calls me."

These are just a few of several mockups Roberta developed as we searched for the right tone. Even though this is a historical biography, I wanted a contemporary treatment to help it feel more appealing to teen readers.

Some of the covers felt too heavy handed on the Soviet colors and Russian typography. Some emphasized the wartime element, but this is only a small portion of her overall story and I thought that could mislead readers.

We choose the cover on the far right after some beta testing with young readers. They found this version most appealing.