

**Cover**



# COVER

By Peter Mendelsund

Published by



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Cover

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Introduction © 2014 Tom McCarthy

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# A cover designer, first and foremost, is a reader.

He or she may not be the *first* reader (that role falls, officially, to the editor and, unofficially, to the writer’s partner); better to say, the most radical. His or hers is a fundamental act of reading, in an almost literal sense: a reading that looks through a book’s carapace to pinpoint its foundations—that discerns, like Eliot’s Webster, the skull beneath the skin. Cover designers read books in the way that soothsayers read leaves or entrails; in the way cryptographers read documents that to the layperson may look quite innocent. To phrase it in more formal philosophical terms: they are Phenomenologists, engaged in lyrical and penetrative acts of drawing-out, of making-manifest.

*What* are they making manifest, though? Only bad books have a “message”; we have (thankfully) jettisoned our belief in authorial intent, alongside any notion that a text might have an underlying, base “meaning.” And yet *something* is being drawn out and made manifest by a good cover designer. This something, I’d suggest, is neither truth-kernel nor any other kind of *deus-ex-machina*; rather, it is the matrix, the grid, the schemata of the book’s very legibility—if you like, a codex that allows reading itself to begin. Far from being a codex that “explains” the book, reduces it or fixes it semantically, it is one that sets off the whole, complex set of mechanisms through which meaning is produced—or, rather, *meanings*: escalating, contradictory, vertiginous—that sets off, in other words, the grand adventure that lies at the heart of literary experience.

Watching a good designer at work (and, seeing Peter Mendelsund in action, I’ve been privileged to observe perhaps the best one of his generation) is fascinating. They read not just in fundamental ways but in ones that I can only describe as eccentric. They read against the grain, counter-intuitively: the last thing they want is to be distracted by the road-signs that supposedly instruct you how to read a book, but actually (like that road-closed barrier beside the bush in the

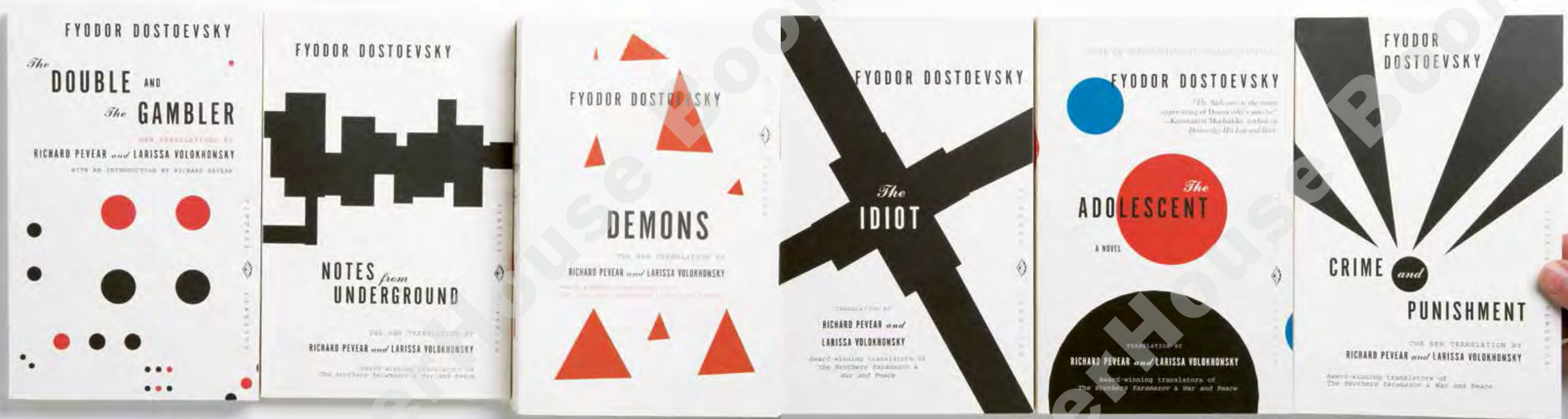
old *Batman* TV series, that diverted other drivers from the bat-cave’s entrance) cover up the lines of association, short-cuts, and relays around which the text is really structured. My British cover designer reads her novels backwards, so as to free their images from the camouflage of plot. This is a good idea. Mendelsund reads backwards, forwards, and askew—most of all, *across* and *through*. He is extraordinarily well-read; in an increasingly illiterate culture—and (it must, sadly, be stated) an increasingly illiterate publishing industry—he’s immediately able to hear echoes and cadences of all the other texts burrowing and worming their way through the body of the one in front of him. It seems no coincidence that he’s also a virtuoso pianist: he has a fine-tuned ear that picks up the cross-frequencies, detects the melody within the noise—or, rather, the cacophony within the melody. He knows his Shakespeare, Ovid, Joyce, and Kafka; also his Freud, his Lacan, Marx, and Foucault and so on. To put it really simply: he *gets* it—gets what writing is about, and what’s at play, or stake, within it.

But then it’s not just a case of getting it; nor is it one of mapping, indexing, or “illustrating” a series of references or coordinates. When Mendelsund is sound-ing a book’s Unconscious for his cover image, something else comes into play. The only way that I can begin to understand this something-else is through recourse, once more, to the mystic, to those tea-leaf entrails. Mendelsund’s covers don’t show you what’s *there*, even a hidden what’s-there; they show you what *isn’t* there—and conspicuously so: the kind of not-there that, as soon as it’s shown to you, you instantly recognize, darkly familiar as a murder weapon. Thus Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* is rendered not by insects but by eyes; and from Joyce’s *Ulysses*, from the very letters of its title, is extracted (then set back in place again) the climactic word that is the book’s (and literature’s) own affirmation—the loudest word of all precisely because it *isn’t* spoken: Yes.









“There is no subject so old that...

something new cannot be said about it.” —F. Dostoevsky



# Choosing Colors

“Erin, Green Gem Of The Silver Sea.” Green for Parnell. *Portrait* is red. Red: the rising of youthful blood. (Maroon for Michael Davitt.) But *Ulysses* should be the color of Greek flag (the author decreed it. Joyce brings a cloth sample to the printer in order that they should match the hue precisely. Later, at a party, he brags to his friends: The *perfect shade*.) But then again, green: “Gazing over the handkerchief, he said: ‘The bard’s noserag. A new art colour for our Irish poets: snotgreen.’” A “snotgreen sea” (not a winedark sea) is the setting for Bloom’s odyssey. “The ring of bay and skyline held a dull green mass of liquid.” “A cloud began to cover the sun slowly, wholly, shadowing the bay in deeper green.” Green books even: “Remember your epiphanies written on green oval leaves, deeply deep, copies to be sent if you died to all the great libraries...” Then there’s the “green” flashing eyes. (Not once, but *twice*. And one green fairy fang.) Sandymount Green...“green sluggish bile...” I visit a rare book collection and handle a Sylvia Beach first edition; which isn’t, in fact, blue. It’s somewhere between a Persian green and a *mint*. Age? Exposure to the elements? Hard to say: But it’s clinched. *Ulysses* is *green*. *Portrait*, again, is a rustier red; a maroon. The velvet maroon of the governess’ brush. The *Wake* is black as the monstrous, logorrheic, cacophonous nightdream itself. Black of night; black



of mourning. Black as Typhon (“Keep black, keep black!”) Obviously: *black*. The *Pomes* are “Rosefrail and fair.” Maybe “the noon’s grey-golden meshes?” What is a gray gold? A golden-delicious *pomme*. *Dubliners*? The color of the evening invading the avenues while Eveline looks on—a smell of “dusty cretonne” in her nostrils. The color of fatigue, of Araby’s day becoming late; too late... What is the color of regret? The color of the cold—the cold night skies when snow is faint and morning close. “Blue o’clock the morning after the night before,” we are told. “What spectacle confronted them when they, first the host, then the guest, emerged silently, doubly dark, from obscurity...the heaventree of stars hung with humid nightblue fruit.” Nightblue.

“Snotgreen, bluesilver, rust: coloured signs.”







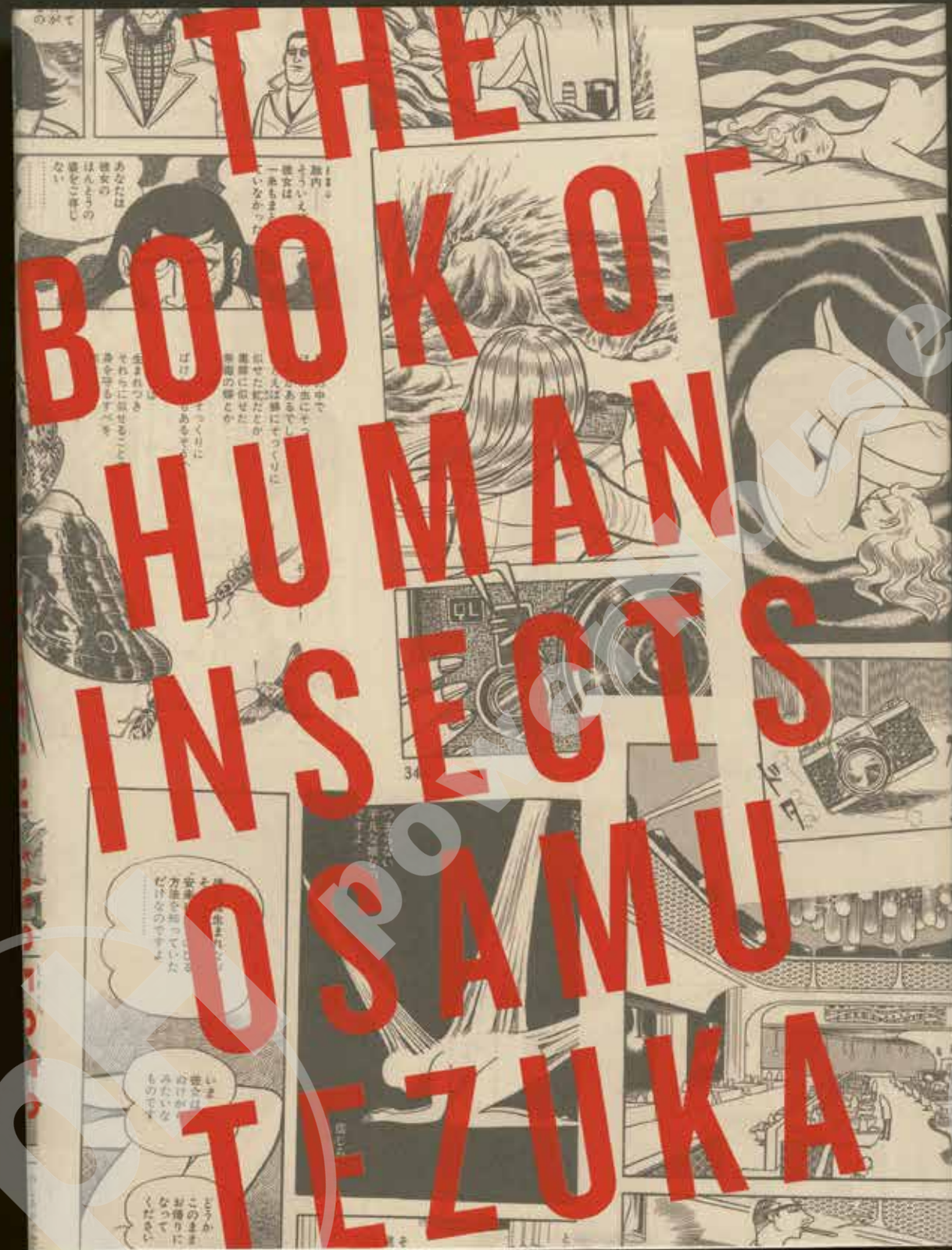
**“The mystery of Kafka is so difficult to capture—he’s both so exact/exacting and so difficult to pin down. I love the move to turn the gaze back at the reader, subjecting her to the same anxiety-producing scrutiny that dogs so many of Kafka’s own characters.”**

**—Susan Bernofsky**



The idea for this cover sprang from reading a single line in *THE TRIAL*: “‘You’ve got lovely dark eyes,’ she said after they had sat down, looking up into K.’s face...” I was reminded, reading this, of an idea presented by Roberto Calasso, who suggests that Kafka’s project in *THE CASTLE* and *THE TRIAL* hinges upon notions of (s)election and recognition. He points out that the land surveyor K desperately wants to be recognized by the castle (he seeks election) whereas *Joseph K* is, sadly for him, *selected* (for punishment). It was my inference that both these forms of recognition depend, in some crucial way, upon *difference*.







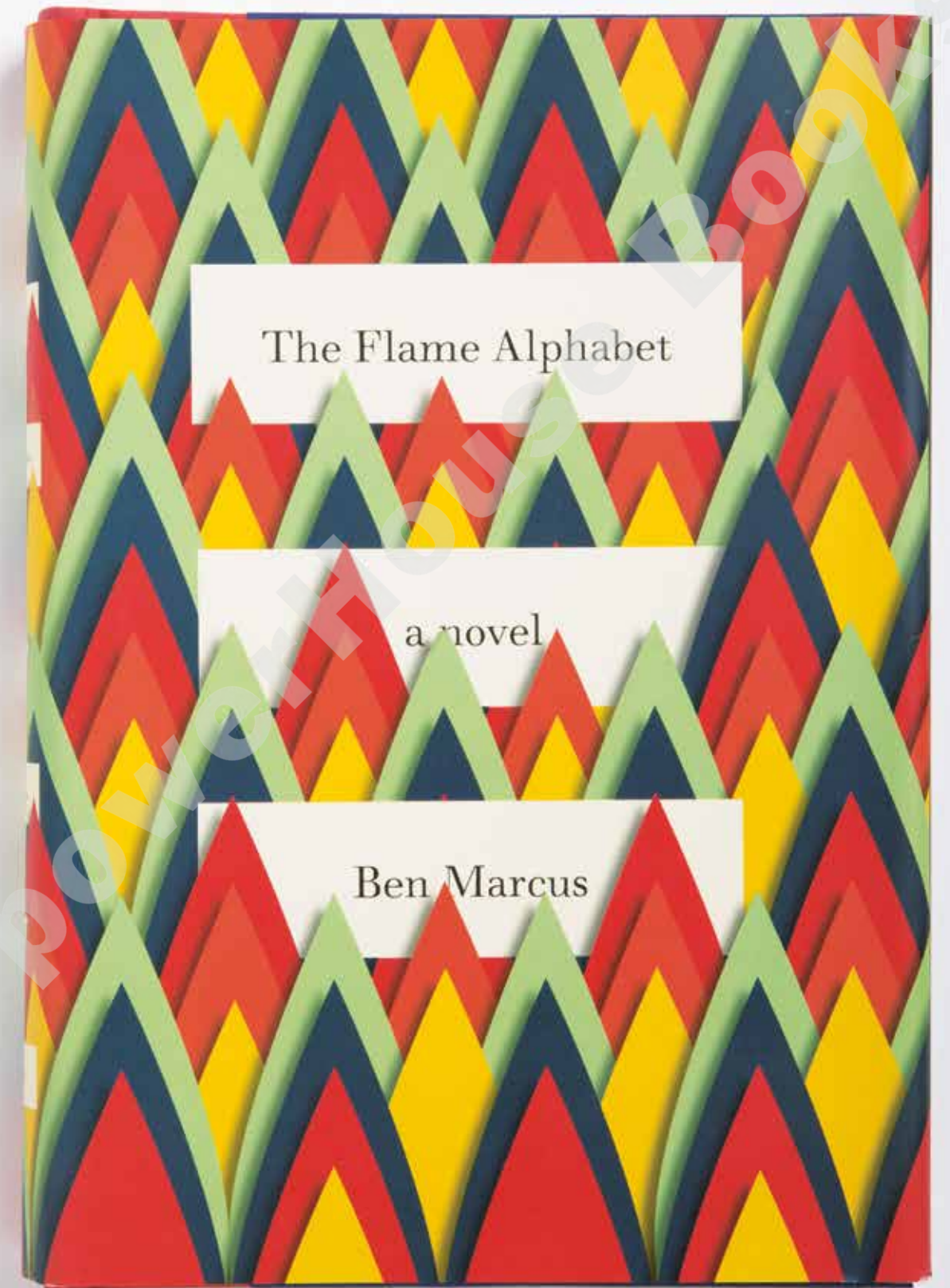
# It took me too long to realize that writers should not be allowed to interfere when it comes to the design of their book jackets.

There is something horrible about that moment when one's imagination for how spectacular the jacket *might* be, is spoiled by the reality of what it finally is. When the text is done and the jacket doesn't yet exist, it is too easy to want the jacket to accomplish what the text, without yet being read, cannot—it should entice and amaze and seduce book buyers, and it should costume not just the book, but the writer, in the most spectacular textures and tones. This is just to say that I am subject to the most irrational, impossible desires when I write a book and it has not yet been jacketed. The missing jacket is the final piece by which nearly everyone will come to know the book. The writer wants the jacket to stand up for the book, serve as the most perfect flag. The jacket should celebrate the strengths of the book and conceal its flaws. It should perhaps rouse dormant chemicals in the body and cause a kind of sharp lust in the buyer, that might only be satisfied by actually eating the book. In other words, the writer wants something from the jacket, in the most desperate way, that it can never accomplish. Unless, maybe, the jacket was designed by Peter Mendelsund.

Peter's designs for *The Flame Alphabet* and

*Leaving the Sea* are striking, primal, and gorgeous. I think of them as wishful covers. As in, I wish my books were good enough to deserve these jackets. They have a feeling of inevitability. I'd followed Peter's work on and off before finishing *The Flame Alphabet*, but it wasn't until I saw his iconic Kafka jackets, for the paperback reprints published by Pantheon, that I knew how brilliant he was. These are vibrant, colorful, glee-smeared book covers for one of the bleakest writers in history. It seems so obvious now to design jackets that reflect the unsettling comedy in Kafka's dark narratives. I still laugh uneasily when I look at them, as I laugh uneasily when I read Kafka.

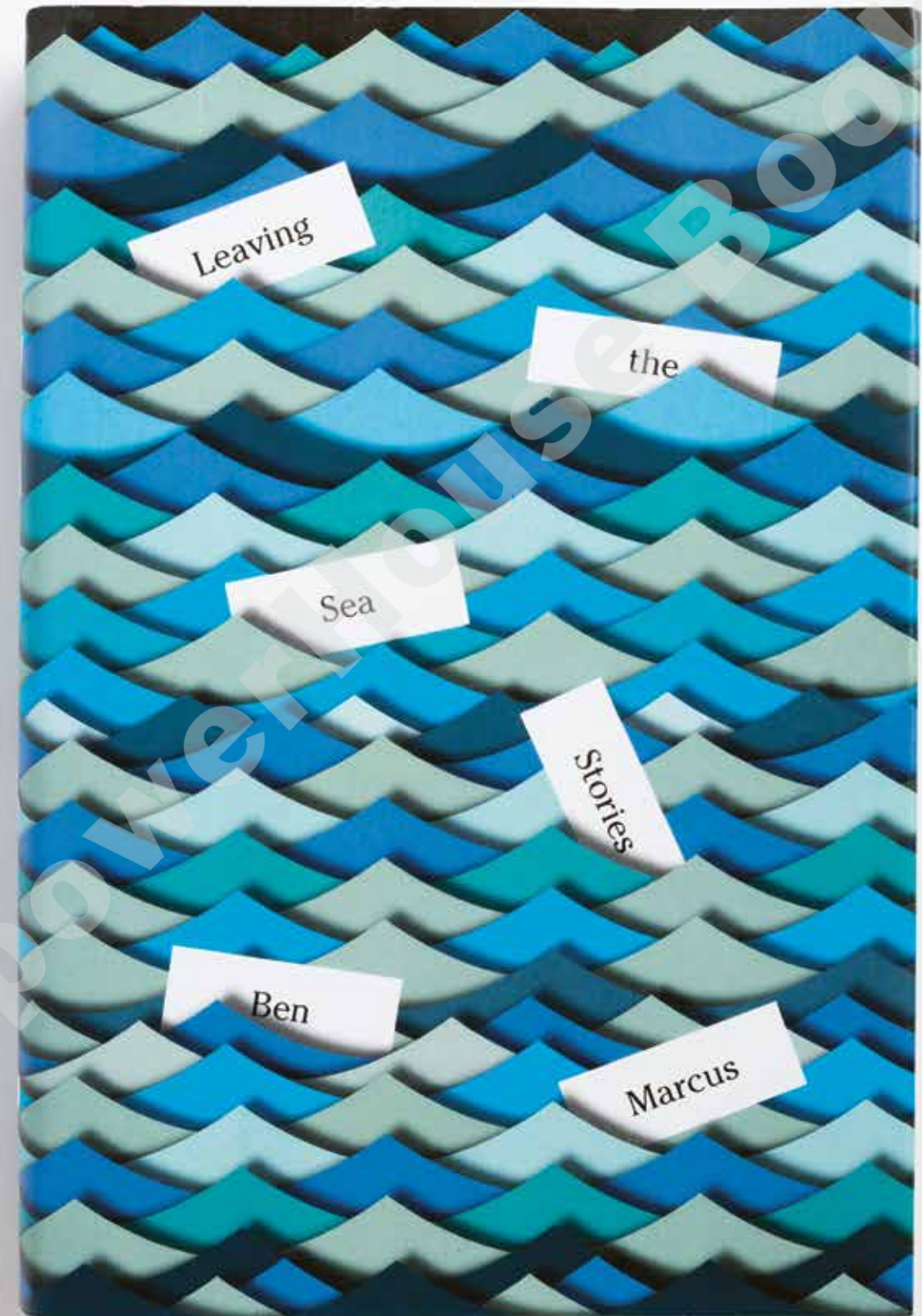
When I first spoke with Peter, after he'd begun work on the jacket for *The Flame Alphabet*, I was struck by how carefully he'd read the book. He fucking seemed to have *studied* it. This is the kind of close reading one longs for from an editor. To have it from a designer is unnerving and, of course, a piece of very good luck. When he asked me if there was anything I had in mind for the jacket, I knew by that point that I did not want to get in his way or even to put my voice in his head. I figured he'd have enough people to answer to



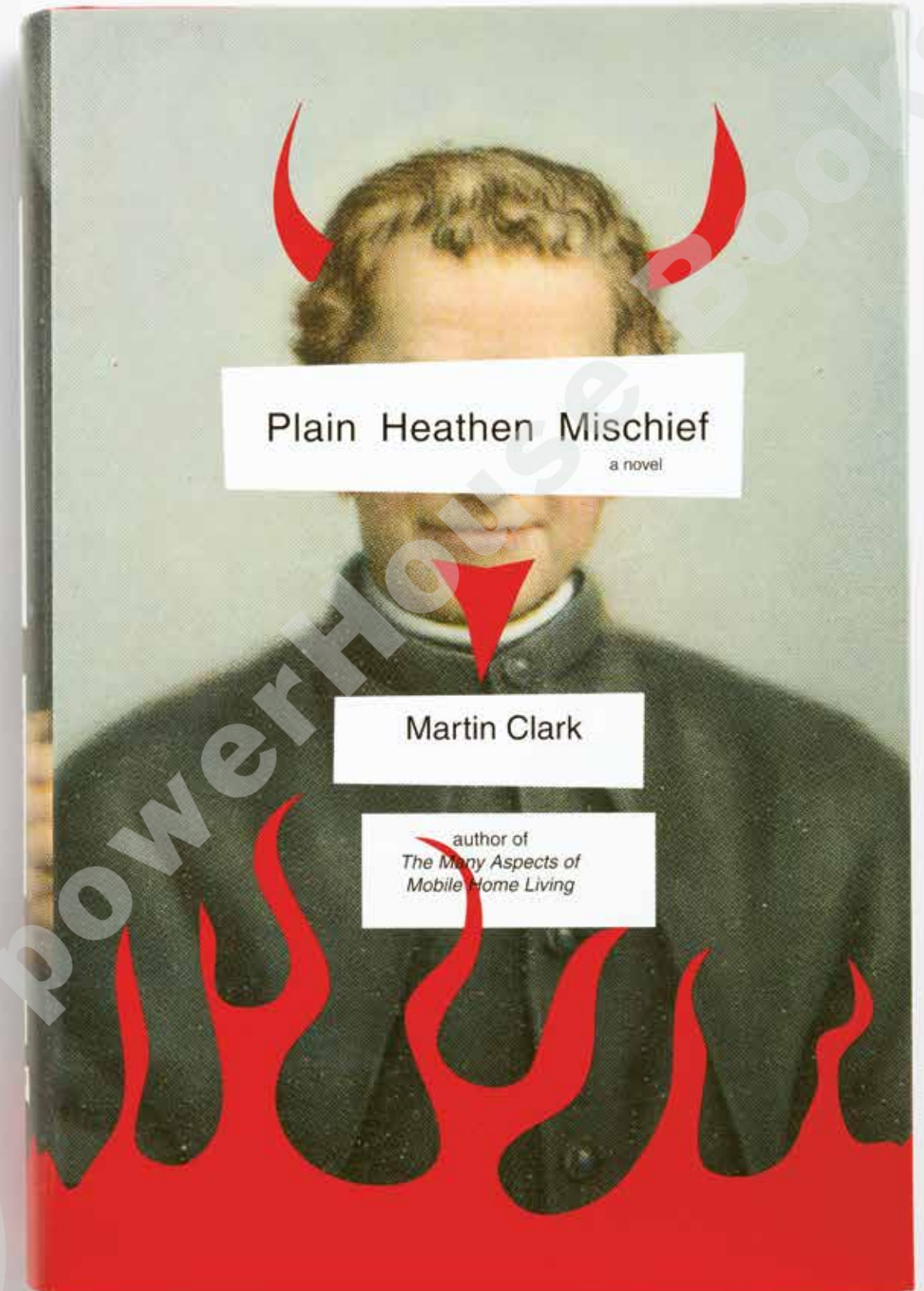
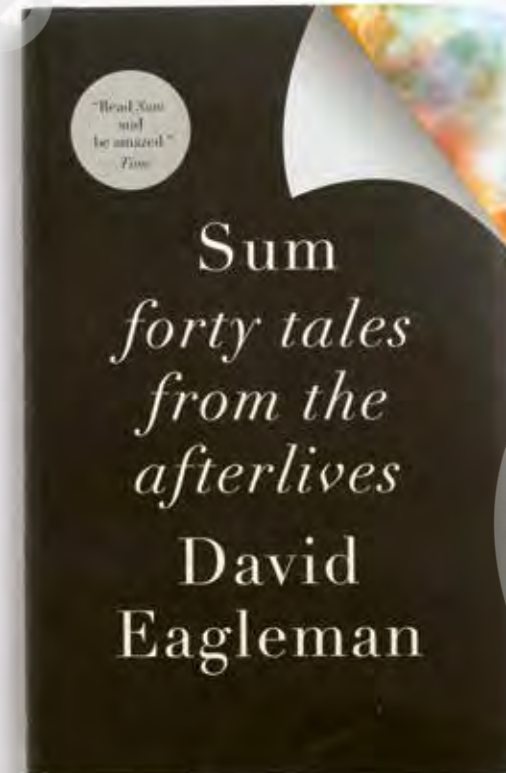
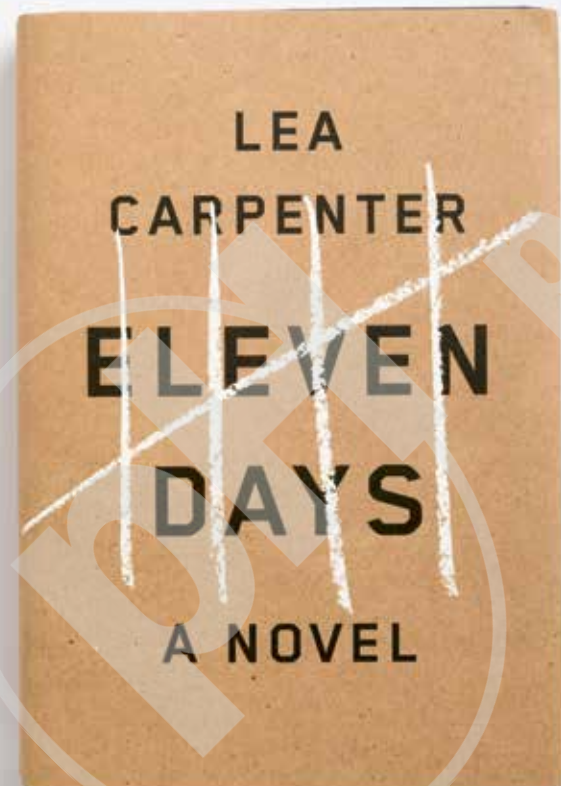
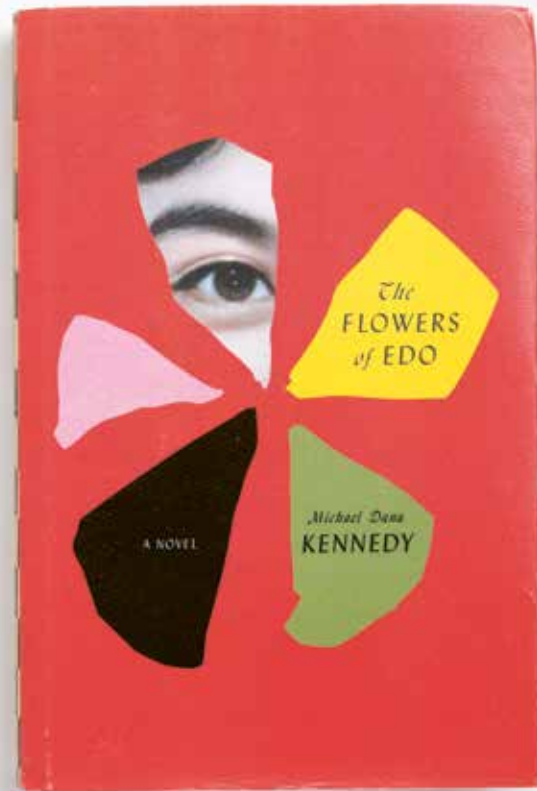


in marketing. I'm not a designer and I didn't trust my own ideas. I wanted an original Mendelsund, and I think I just said I'd prefer a cover without burning letters, which would seem to be the obvious bad design choice the title was just begging for (and would get, with one of its foreign editions). This was the extent of my directive.

Which makes it kind of funny that Peter did end up designing fire for the jacket, although he seems to have done it by accident. As he tells it, he was cutting up paper to make birds, which figure in the novel, and when he flipped his design over, he discovered fire. This seems to perfectly illustrate the complex, thoughtful routes he takes in order to achieve sublimely simple and beautiful designs. When I first saw the cover it was a revelation to realize that it could be unburdened from saying very much at all about the book—it could simply be stunning to look at, and people would want to pick it up. Which is the point. But over time I've come to see that the cover really does, to me anyway, say a lot about the book, and it shows me, the more I look at it, that Peter didn't really do anything by accident at all. The same is true for his jacket for *Leaving the Sea*. It is sumptuous, playful, and gorgeous to look at. I have yet to hold it in my hands. It is so far a color Xerox and a JPEG, but even so I feel just damn lucky to be costumed by such a tremendously gifted designer. Peter Mendelsund is a true artist.







Martin Clark's tale is a modern recasting of the Job story. I wanted to portray the main character's religious crisis in such a way as to suggest the meddling of an outside agent (in this case the devil rather than God). As a side note: the Salesians, the followers of Don Bosco, whose image is seen here, took umbrage with my depiction of their spiritual leader. In my defense, this book is, if irreverent, deeply religious.

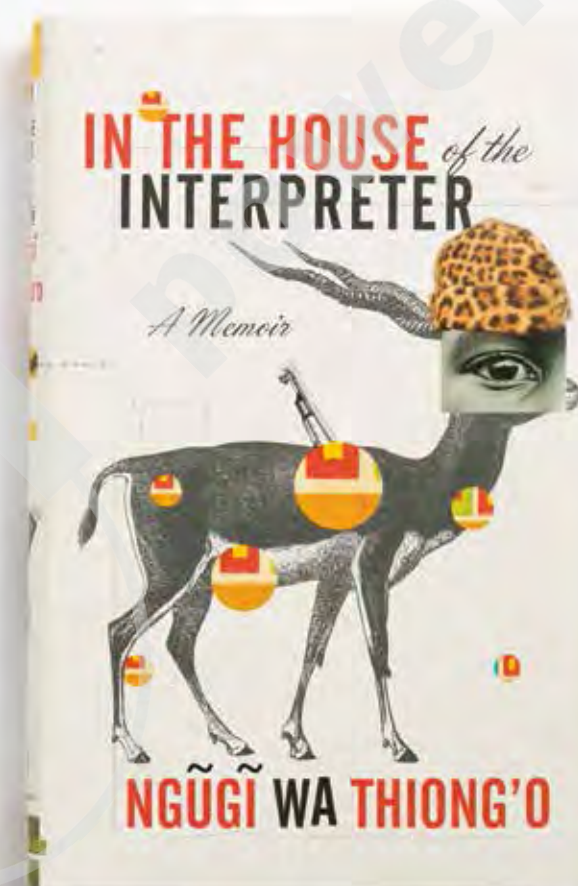
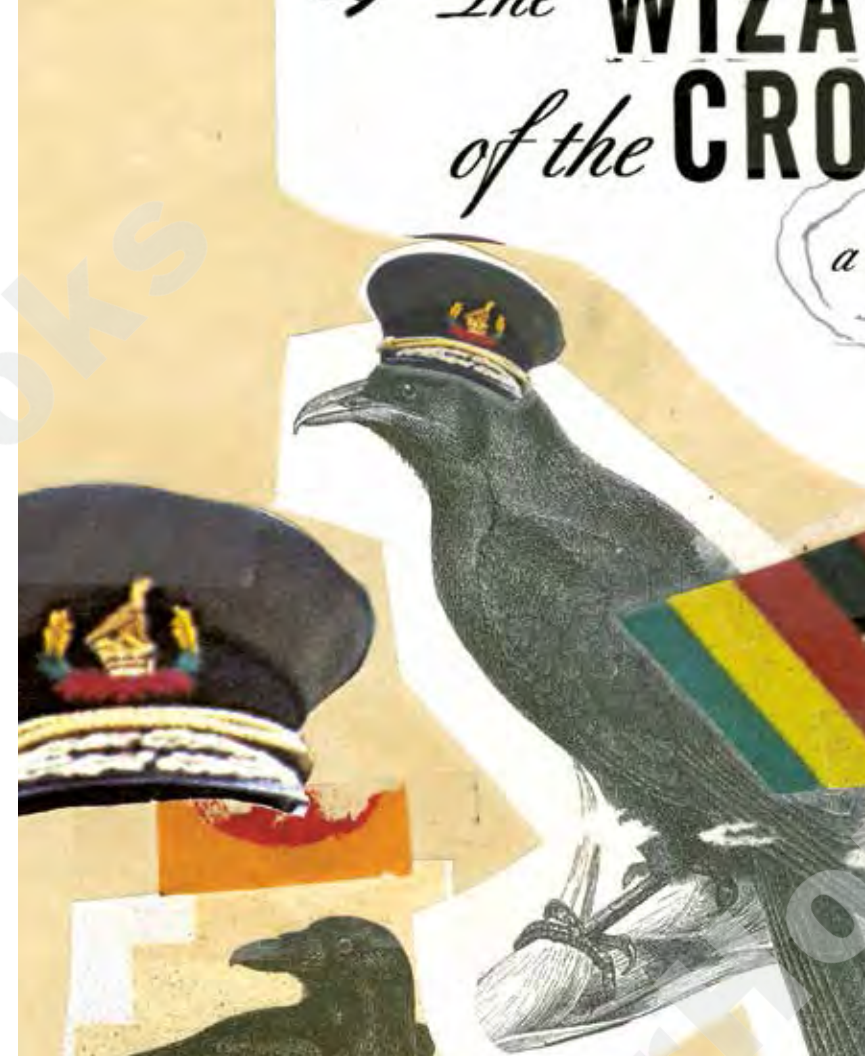






There are  
moments  
in my day  
where  
I stop and  
think,  
"I get paid...  
to make  
collages!"

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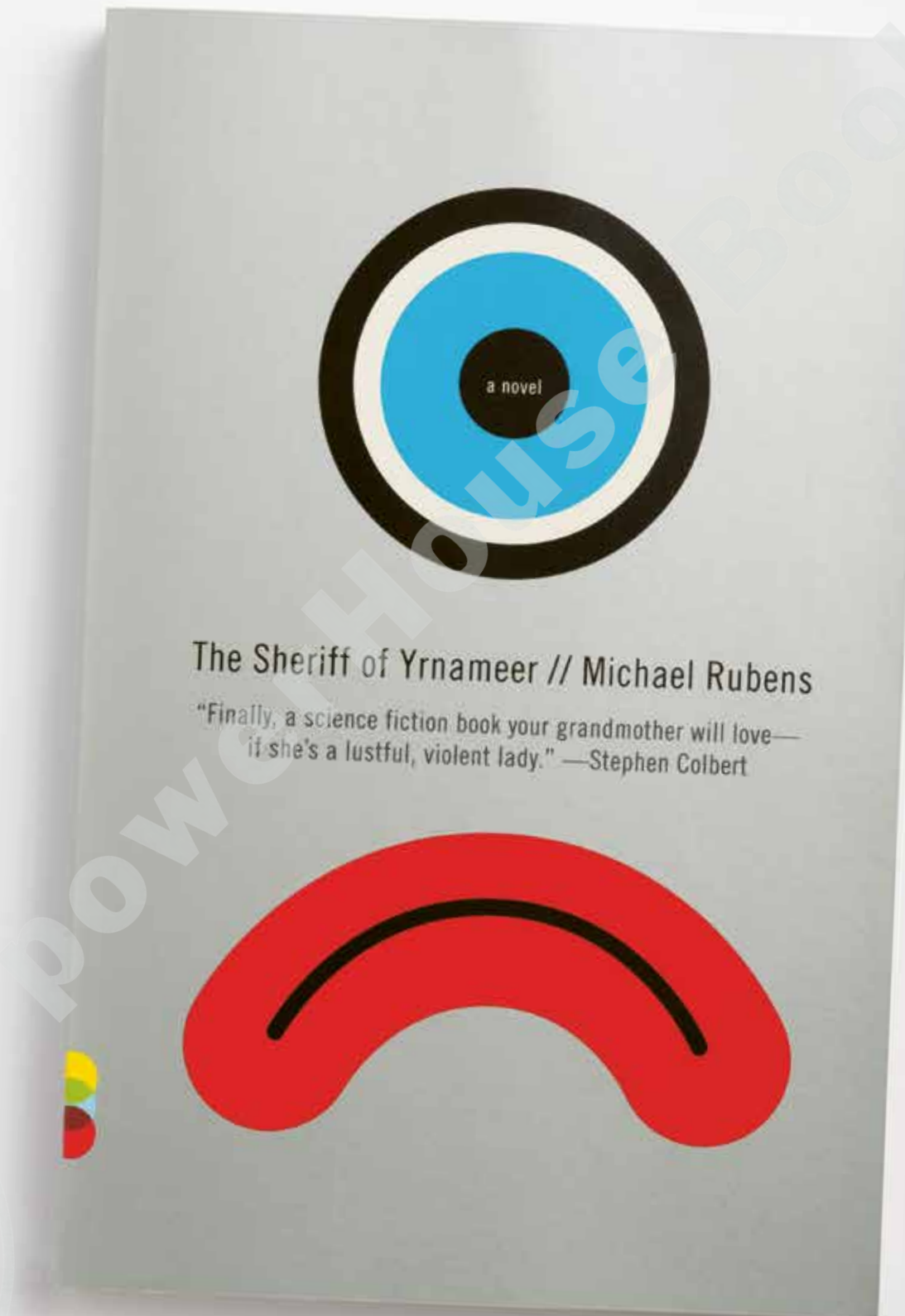


## Jackets for crime books are strange things.

I've always worked closely with my designers in Norway, both on ideas and presentation. Not because I have any idea of what covers will sell a book, but because the way I see it, my story starts with the cover. I'm lucky to be published in several countries which means several jackets. I soon discovered I should not be too involved in the making of international jackets. Each country has its own style, tradition, and inherited set of visual references that sometimes feels as different as our languages. And I must admit that more often than not I look at my international covers and I don't get it nor like it, I just hope it make sense to its audience in that country and tell myself that most people forget the jackets once they've started reading. But once in a while I'm presented with a design that crosses the barriers of cultural references and visual language, that feels universal, that feels like the perfect start to the story. A jacket that I don't want to reader to forget, but to carry with them throughout the book. Those covers are Peter Mendelsund's covers for my Harry Hole series.



In the opening pages of this book, a battered wife engaged in the act of killing her husband is beset by a tornado, which in turn: denudes her; destroys her house; and pelts her with frogs. She wanders naked into a nearby mill town, in which she is soon after appointed sheriff. Still later, she teams up with a young hobo in order to solve a horrible crime. (Pulp alert!)



# The bright yellow cover of Stieg Larsson’s *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, featuring a swirling dragon design, has become one of the most instantly recognizable and iconic book covers in contemporary fiction in the U.S.

But the path to this design—like the thriller—has been full of twists, red herrings, and wrong turns.

Sonny Mehta, chairman and editor in chief of Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, bought publishing rights to the novel at auction in 2007. The book was already a best-seller in Europe, but Knopf executives fretted about how the international covers would sell in the U.S. Mr. Mehta found the images on the British, Serbian, and Chinese covers—sexy pictures of women with dragon-shaped tattoos—distasteful, describing them as “somewhat redundant” and “cheesy.”

For three months, Peter Mendelsund, a senior designer at Knopf, prepared nearly 50 distinct designs. Mr. Mendelsund, age 42, graduated from Columbia University in 1990 with a degree in philosophy and worked as a professional musician for more than a decade before embarking on a design career. With no formal graphic design experience, he began drafting CD album covers for an indie label. Less than six months later, a family friend introduced him to Chip Kidd, Knopf’s associate art director. Mr. Mendelsund showed Mr. Kidd his portfolio; he had a full-time job at Vintage Books, a Random House label, within the week. Eight months later he was at Knopf, his home for the last eight years.

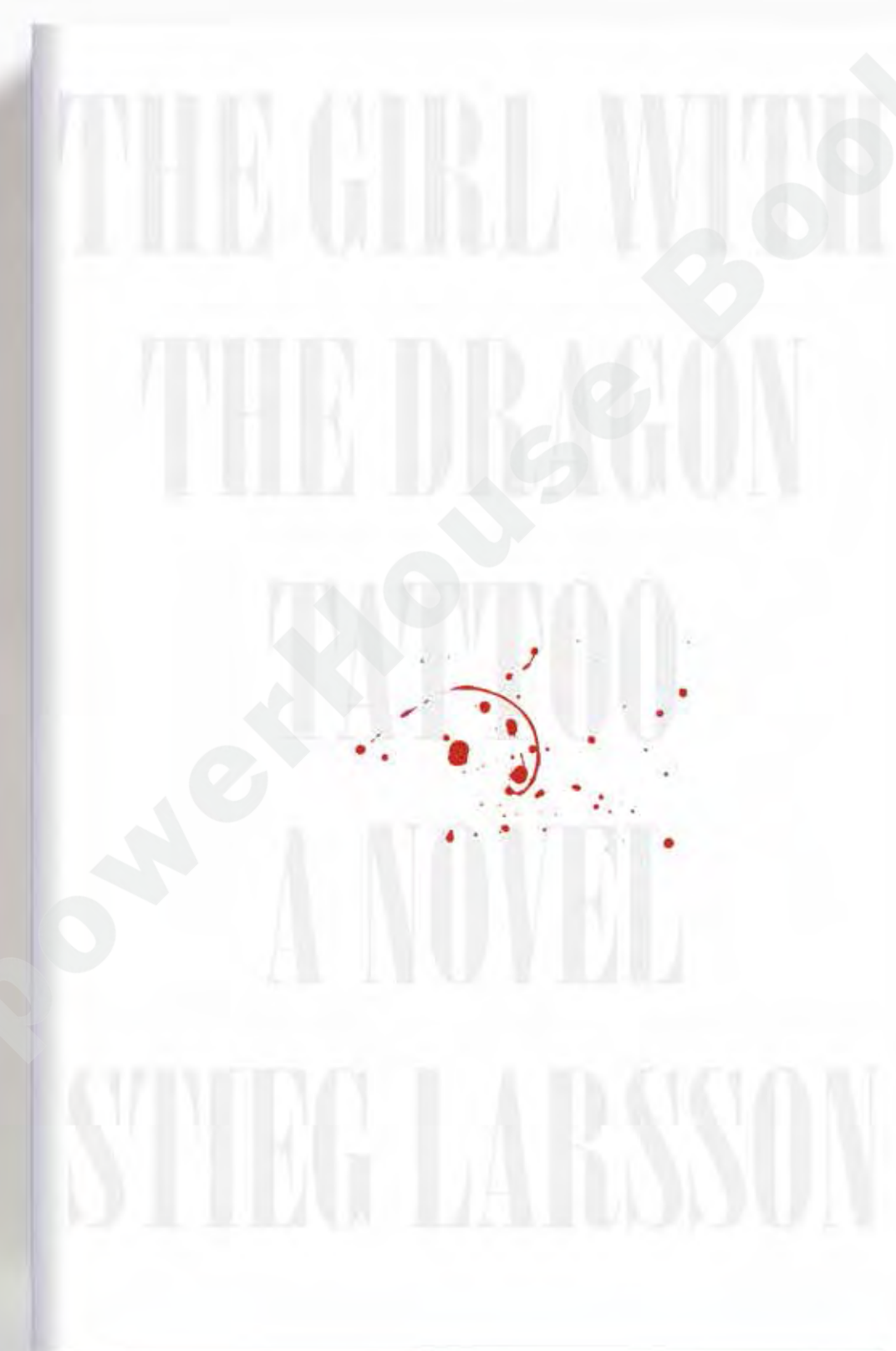
One Mendelsund design, a monochromatic white cover dotted with blood, was rejected for its lack of color. Another, a vivid fuchsia jacket emblazoned with an illuminated typeface, left executives looking for something more original.

A third showcased the book’s early working title, “The Man Who Hated Women,” which was closer to the original Swedish title. Mr. Mendelsund liked the image of an anonymous woman, with its “contrast between the softness of her face and the way it has been shredded.” But the title went out—for fear, Knopf says, that it would be “problematic” in a U.S. market—and the jacket did, too.

Mr. Mehta ultimately endorsed the vivid yellow jacket with the swirling dragon design: “It was striking and it was different.”

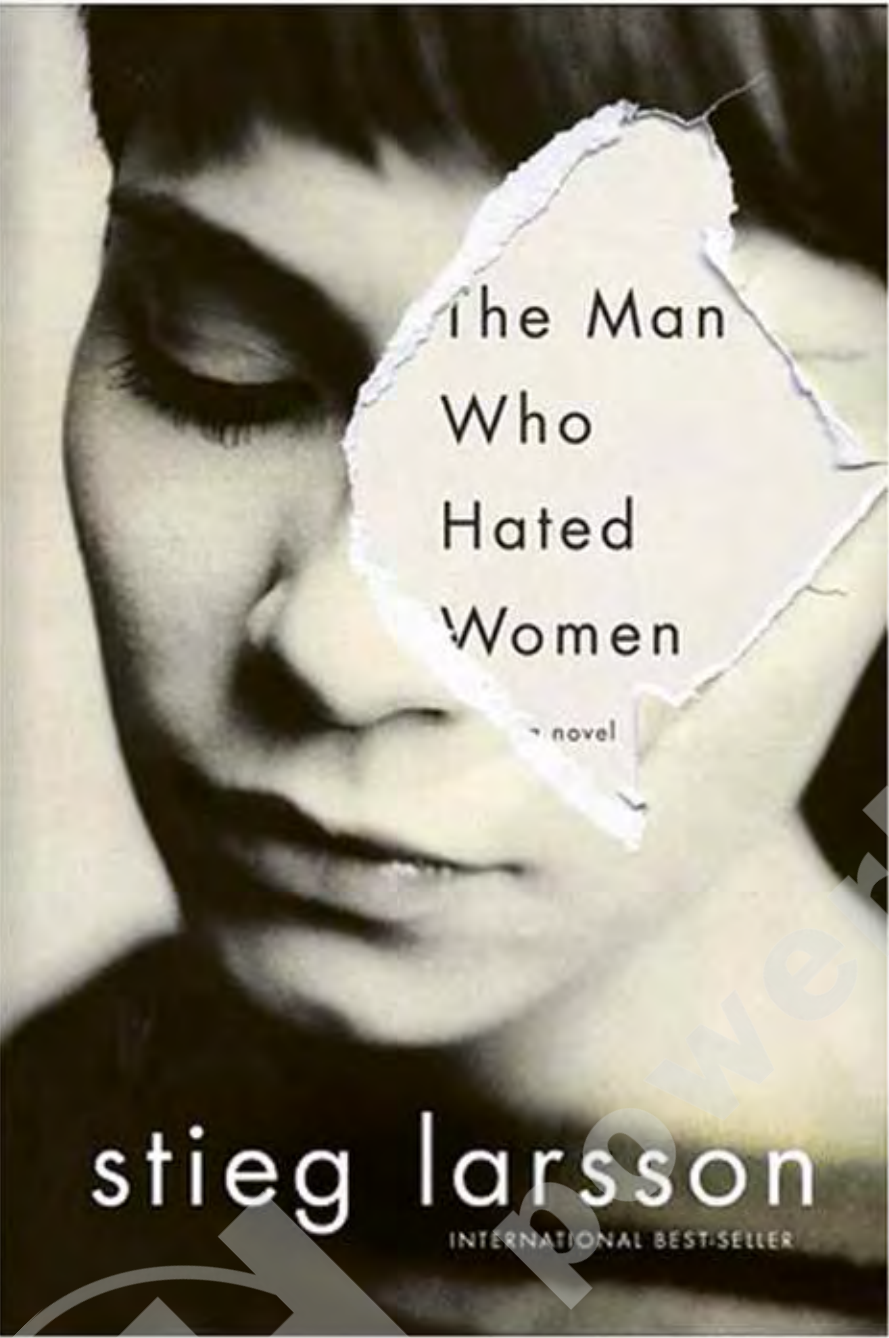
Not everyone loved the jacket. Mr. Mehta said there was “some push back” from retailers, as well as members of the publishing house’s sales team, who were looking for a more conventional depiction in lines with other thrillers—something darker, bloodier, “more Scandinavian.” Yet Mr. Mehta stood by Mr. Mendelsund’s distinctive design. Mr. Mehta said he didn’t want the books to be pigeonholed: “I was extremely worried that they would be dismissed as crime novels, Scandinavian crime novels, in translation.”

The Knopf chairman said he had, at the time, “been disappointed” by the U.S. presentation and sales of books by Swedish crime writer Henning Mankell, and did not want Mr. Larsson’s Millennium Trilogy to post similar numbers. (Since then Knopf has released its first hardcover from Mr. Mankell, *The Man From Beijing*, which made the best-seller lists this spring.) *Dragon Tattoo* has sold 3.8 million copies in the U.S. to date.



My first comp. We came very close to using this white-on-white jacket. This design did a better job of representing the narrative than the final, though, perhaps, would have done a poorer job selling the book.

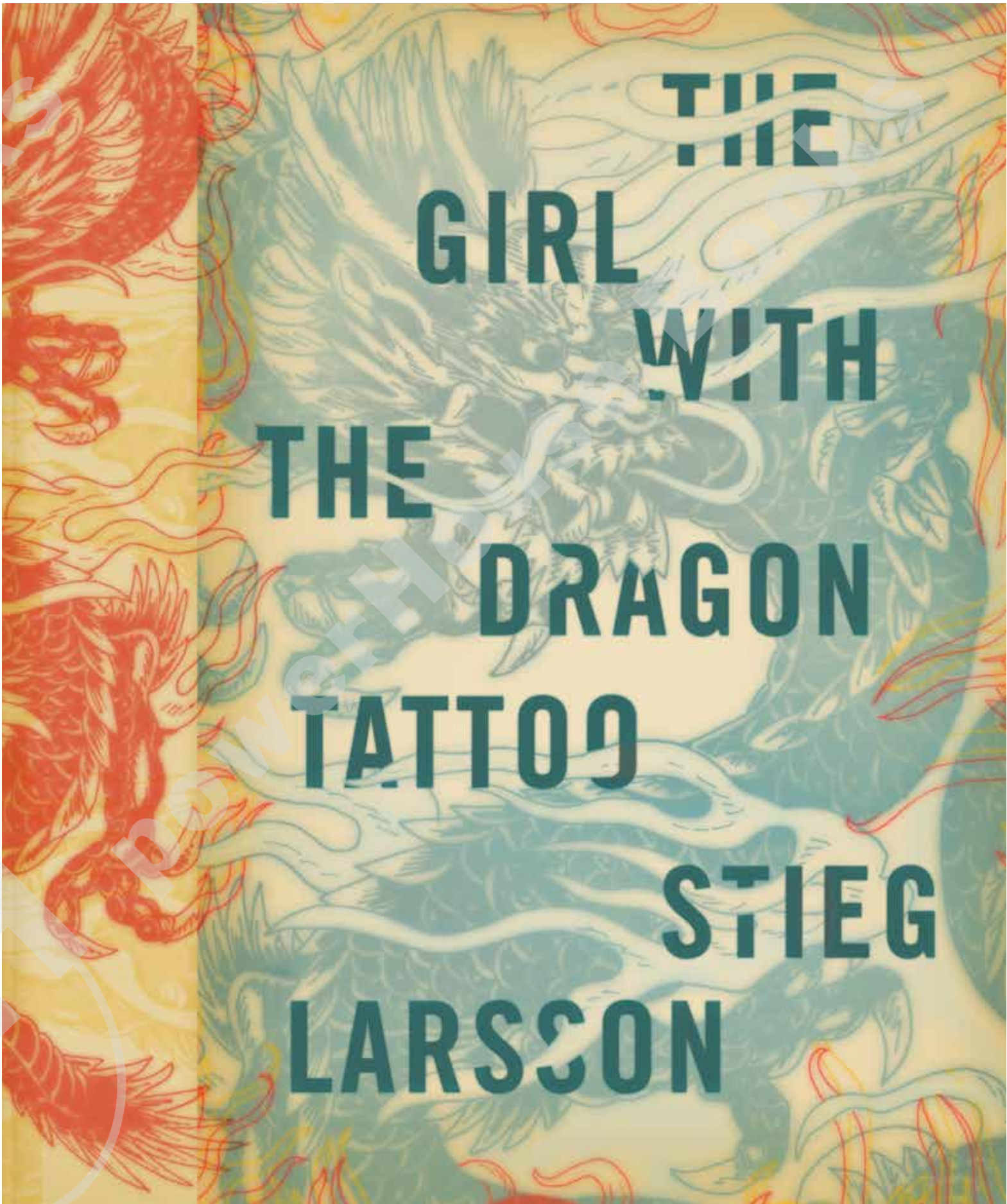




There was a moment, early on, where this was the book's title. Thank god it changed. (ABOVE)

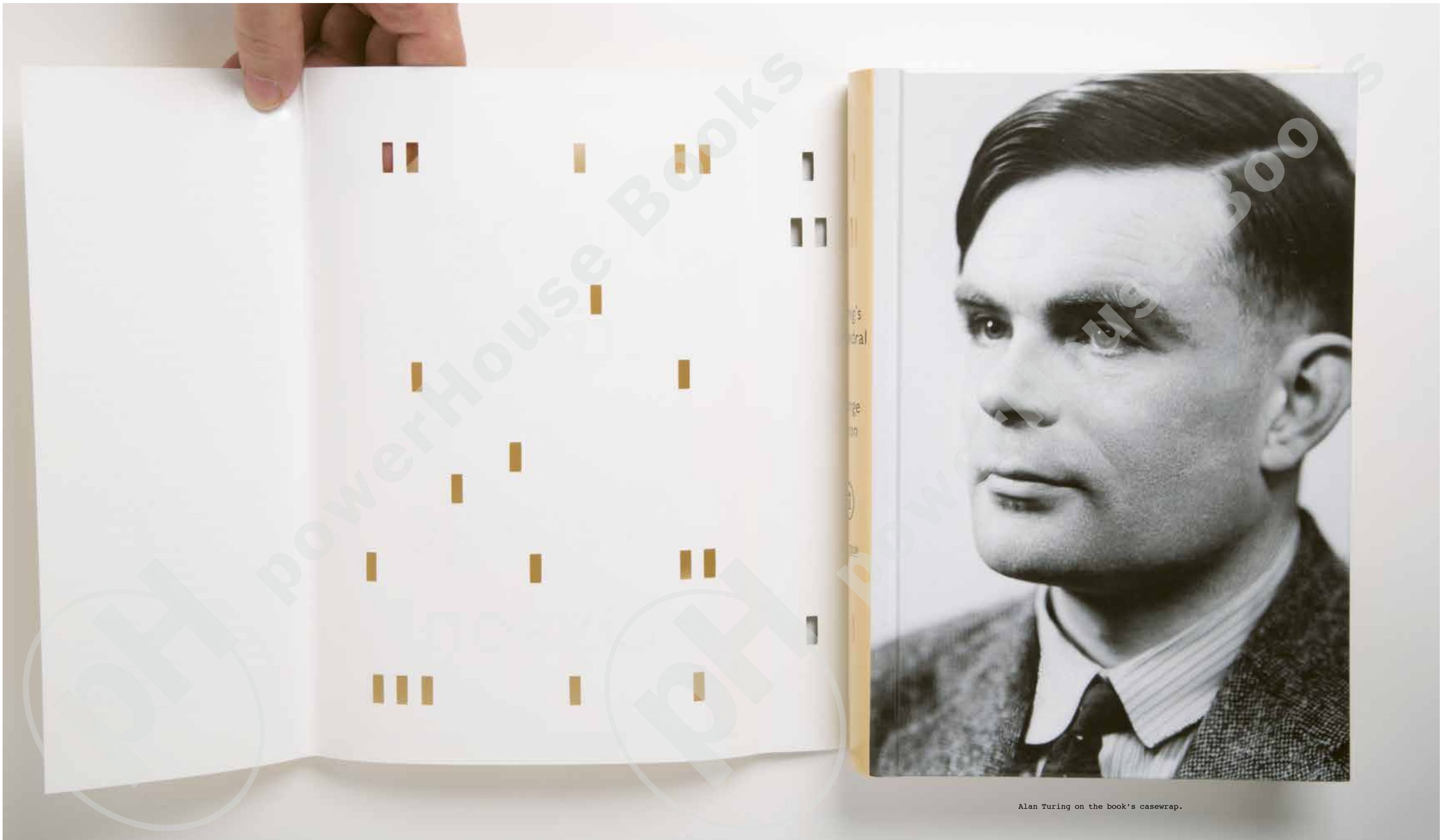


These three comps above, along with dozens of others, were responses to various suggestions from multiple interested parties.



Almost final. My first inclination was to use the colors of a tattoo...but brighter colors won the day.





Alan Turing on the book's casewrap.



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