

How Much Control Does An Author Really Have Over Their Titles and Covers?

by Linda Rohrbough
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One of the mysteries of publishing, and a phenomenon that always surprises, if not outright shocks people new to the business, is why authors have so little say over their titles and book covers. Curious about this phenomenon myself, I asked some large press editors and small press publishers. First, I'll present some background then fill you in on what I learned.

There's a glamour to this business. And most new people want to skip right to what they perceive as the prestigious part and spend hours on their title and cover design. Not that a writer shouldn't work, and work hard, on their book's title or even be prepared to describe cover ideas - they should. But I have not yet seen a standard publishing contract where the author had the last say on the title or the cover. The only exception is self-publishing or a publishing house that doesn't have a distribution network and pays no advance. Even my *New York Times* best-selling writing friends, meaning those who are getting seven figure advances for their novels, have little input on their covers or their titles.

What's confusing for new authors is the publisher will frequently allow the title chosen by the author to stand until after all revisions are made and the manuscript is in its final form. Part of the surprise an author may get when the editors review the final manuscript is the announcement of a title change. This happened to me with my latest title. My co-author, Dr. Robert Sewell, chose: *Stepping Out of the Shadow of Obesity* because it has a poetic quality that fits the experience of people with this problem. But our publisher was bought by another, bigger publisher. The bigger publisher took the manuscript to their sales people, who loved the book but hated the title. (Just FYI, my non-fiction agent told me sales people hate titles they have to spend

time explaining.) So now our book is titled *Weight Loss Surgery with the Adjustable Gastric Band*. And while Dr. Sewell was upset about the change, the publisher wouldn't budge.

Let me give you a couple more examples. Leading romance author Debbie Macomber turned in one of her many novels and her editor called her to say they were going to stay in the office that Friday until they figured out a new title. Debbie said her editor didn't call back until it was fairly late Eastern Time, which meant the publishing team spent all afternoon into the evening on this issue. When the call came, her editor said this is the title and there's no negotiation. The new title was *Susannah's Garden*. Debbie responded, "But there's no Susannah and no garden in the book." Guess what? Debbie was asked to rewrite the manuscript so the book had a Susannah and a garden.

Now, most inexperienced authors assume someone with Debbie's stature wouldn't put up with such a scenario. My contention is Debbie's flexibility and her working relationship with her editor is a big part of the reason she's practically a household name in romance fiction. But if you've seen *Susannah's Garden*, which came out in 2006, the cover is a work of art. When I saw Debbie last year, she walked me through her office to the section where she keeps her promotional material and loaded me up. I got Susannah's Garden gardening gloves, a Susannah's Garden trowel, Susannah's Garden seed packets and so on. In other words, it appeared to me the publisher chose a title and cover which allowed them to also garner related merchandise for promotion. Of course, Debbie and her publisher make use of these items. For example, if you go to Debbie's website (www.DebbieMacomber.com), you'll see she gives away each month a gift basket set that includes promotional items from her latest book.

Jodi Thomas, another *New York Times* best-selling author of historical romance, said she had another title for one of her books when it was submitted, but the publisher wanted to name it

Texas Princess. She asked the new title be changed to *The Texan's Princess* as it was more in line with her other books and with the tone of the work. Guess who won out? Yep, *Texas Princess* was released November 2007. Check it out at www.JodiThomas.com.

Further, I've found if I bring up to an editor the subject of input into the title of a book, or even titling books in general, I can feel them stiffen up. I asked several editors at conferences in the last year what goes on internally, promising them anonymity for their answers. One told me since they bought the book, they have the right, because they have a financial risk involved, to do what they see fit. That's no secret.

But that same editor opened up to say there's so much fighting internally over covers and titles that bringing the author into the fray just makes everyone more nuts. That was news to me but it makes good business sense. If the people in-house are fighting over a book, it'll erode their professional image to let authors see those conflicts.

A publisher told me titles often change because the title is too similar to another book due out in the same time window or too close to a competing title. Publishers have advance notice from the *Books in Print* people, R. R. Bowker LLC, of other titles due for release. Publishers usually don't have access to covers from other publishers in advance and have to rely on a comparison to what's already out there. But they do compare, taking into account the author's last name to look at what books it will be shelved near and make changes where necessary. One of my computer books had the same graphic on the cover as another computer book that came out at the same time. The colors were different enough and it didn't bother me but I thought my editor was going to have a fit.

Some authors told me they've made suggestions for their covers that got implemented, like asking for a beach scene on the cover. I've only been asked for input on a cover once, and

just gave them a general idea of what I thought would attract the readers we were looking for. That book did very well. But that's one out of seven books. The cover of the second edition of that same book was radically changed because the publisher acquired another book with an unusual format and figured they could save money if they did two books in that same format. Mine got picked as the second despite my objections to the contrary.

Generally, most authors rarely see the cover of their book before they receive the actual books. However, a sneaky way for an author to get a preview is to watch Amazon.com. With my last book, I saw my cover on Amazon.com before my editor did, because often the left hand (editorial) doesn't know what the right hand (marketing) is doing. And the marketing people want to get promotional material out, so they'll often provide electronic sources, such as a thumb-nail mock up, as early as possible. I also knew my publication date was being bumped back before my editor told me, thanks to Amazon.

The point of saying all this is not to say authors ought to have more input on their titles and covers. That'd be nice, but it's not realistic. In my experience an author earns the right to have their voice heard on controversial subjects with their publisher the same way they do with readers, by earning trust. As authors, the best tactic is to politely offer input, but to spend the most time and energy producing a quality manuscript and hitting deadlines – leaving the rest to God and the universe. As a savvy friend once told me, “Trust Allah, but tie your camel.”

Biography:

Linda Rohrbough has been writing professionally since 1989, and has more than 5,000 articles, seven books and numerous awards for her fiction and non-fiction. Linda's latest book is Weight Loss Surgery with the Adjustable Gastric Band (Da Capo Lifelong Books, March 2008). Visit her website: www.LindaRohrbough.com.