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PORTRAIT OF A COVER ARTIST: AN INTERVIEW WITH PETER MENDELSUND

By Peter Terzian

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Photograph by George Baier IV.

Peter Mendelsund is best known for his smart, witty, and visually arresting book jackets for Martin Amis, Ben Marcus, Stieg Larsson, Tom McCarthy, and James Gleick, among many others, as well as for his repackaging of classics by Simone de Beauvoir, Franz Kafka, and James Joyce. The associate art director of Alfred A. Knopf and the art director of Pantheon Books, he is now also the author of two books of his own. "Cover" is a monograph of his design work. "What We See When We Read" is an investigation of what happens in the mind's eye when we're engrossed in a book. Peter and I became friends many years ago and have lunch together once a week. We recently sat down to discuss readerly perception and his next repackaging project—the works of Italo Calvino.

What inspired you to write "What We See When We Read"?

Basically it was your idea! We were having lunch, and you were saying that you were thinking about what you imagined while you read books. And I became monomaniacally obsessed with the idea. I know we were talking about Virginia Woolf—and this worked its way into the book—about "To the Lighthouse" and where it was set. You said you had looked on the Internet and found photos of the Woolf family's seaside home and the lighthouse. We talked about this weird revulsion that we feel toward bearing witness to the reality behind a work of fiction.

You felt the revulsion. I didn't.

You didn't?

I first read "To the Lighthouse" in college, and I pictured it taking place not in an English coastal town (or the Hebrides, as Woolf fictionalized it) but at my great-aunt's house, in landlocked upstate New York. She lived in a kind of run-down area, but I loved going to her house when I was a child, even though it had a musty feeling. "The Sound and the Fury" takes place there. Odette's apartment, in "Swann's Way," is there, too.

So then what happened?

I reread "To the Lighthouse" a couple of years ago and I thought, I know this house is based on a real house where Virginia Woolf spent her summers. I did a little research and found the pictures you mentioned.

What I find interesting is that you wanted the real house. I would have tried to imagine a different house. You don't find something disappointing about . . . reality?

No, I do this a lot. But your book made me think about how picturing in my head is not really picturing. There is some sort of image in my head, but there's nothing clear about it at all. It's more like an outline.

It's not coherent in time or in space.

And it often changes over the course of the book.

Part of what I wanted to do in "What We See When We Read" is interrogate the ways in which we use the word "see." Do we mean when the light hits our retina—is that seeing? Do we mean what the brain does to synthesize that information into something understandable? Is it the *awareness* that we are seeing that is, in fact, seeing? In other words, it's not just the reading imagination that's mediated, that's a construct; all seeing is.

How did the idea blossom into an entire book?

I do this in my job with the view of actually putting something on a book cover. All of these steps are taking place for me every day—the reading, the translating of the reading into the imagination, and the translating of the imagination into an actual physical artifact. It has to be generalized enough that other people can look at the cover and say, "That's the kind of thing I would imagine as well."

When you talked to other people about what they see when they read, did you find that their experiences were consistent?

The thing that surprised me was how dogmatic people were. They felt that when they read a book they loved, they saw every aspect of it. Not only that, but they felt that the greatness of a book was predicated on the fact that they were able to visualize it. "That character was so real," they'd say. That myth of the little homunculus sitting in the back of your skull, watching the author's movie being projected onto the front of your skull—that's really important to people. But the whole edifice crumbles when you start to ask questions about it.

You talk, in "Cover," about some of the mechanical aspects of creating book jackets, but I'm wondering how an idea gets from your brain to your hand. What is that process?

Reading with a mind to designing a jacket is very different from just reading. When I'm reading for work, I'm looking for something described in the book that will be reproducible visually and that will serve as an emblem for the entire book—a character, or an object, or a scene, or a setting. That's not the way one reads when one is simply immersed in a book.

Let's say I'm reading something and I come across a scene that I think is particularly pregnant with significance and that could really work as that emblematic something to go on the jacket. It's not like I picture it completely and then render it on the screen. I have the idea that this scene and its structural components could work well as a jacket, and then I start making things. And when something is made, I compare it back to the reading experience and ask, Is this dissonant with the way I'm reading this, or consonant with it? Does it in fact represent the author's project? But it's not like I'm rendering something that I saw. When I start to make it, that's when I start to look at it for the first time—that's when it develops visual coherence. That moment is very satisfying, professionally, but also disappointing as a reader.

In what way?

It's disappointing to have something rendered that existed purely metaphysically before, and was special because of that. Look at Plato there. [*Points to a cover he designed, for "The Republic".**] That's a perfect example. Here we have a philosopher who spent a lot of energy parsing the distinction between the corporeal and the idealized, between the particular and the universal. He talks about an allegory that takes place inside of a cave. I think this is a successful cover, but it's a very specific cave, and the specificity of that cave crowds out all other caves. Whereas Plato's cave is an ideal of a cave. He leaves the cave indistinct enough so that it can be any cave you've been in, or any cave you can think of. But here we have this one cave, and that's limiting.

It often happens that a cover somehow colors my experience of a book.

I have to admit that my job, as fun as it is to do, is really evil in that sense. If it were up to me, all books would have all-type jackets. They should look like those classic Gallimard jackets, or old Penguins. There should be no visual prompts at all. But frankly a lot of people really respond to being given prompts. They want to be prompted as much as possible, to the extent that they'll buy the movie-tie-in cover. At Vintage, someone will do a really beautiful cover of a Jane Austen novel, and then they'll do the movie-tie-in cover and the movie tie-in will sell like crazy.

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People get very excited when movies are made of their favorite books.

I think that speaks to the fact that we're such a visual society at this point. There's this idea that if you can't make it concrete—visible in the ocular sense—then it's not "real." But I don't think of the empirical world as confirmation of anything in that sense. I think about the world in exactly the opposite terms—that everything lacks substance, that everything is ephemeral and mutating and dubious.

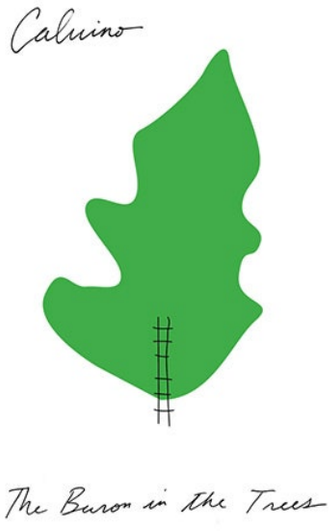
I wonder if the wish to see a book made into a movie speaks to an anxiety

people feel about reading and internal perception.

Reading is a very particular case, if you think about the arts. With music you have a direct sensory input, the sound of the notes. And with the visual arts or dance or architecture you have a direct visual apprehension of the thing that you're looking at. With books the sensory information you're getting is very limited. You can become aware, while you're reading, of the white page and the black marks on it, but that's presumably a neutral experience. You're supposed to see beyond that veil. And I think it's that extra step that people find anxiety-provoking. But that extra step is what makes reading reading.

You're in the middle of repackaging the work of the Italian writer Italo Calvino. Can you tell me how that project came to you?

A year or so ago I received an e-mail from Giovanna Calvino, who is Calvino's daughter, and she said that she had read, in an interview I gave somewhere, that I loved her father's work, that she was working with Houghton Mifflin Harcourt to repackage the backlist, and would I be interested in doing it? I can't tell you what a shock it was to have the name Calvino in my inbox. Obviously I jumped at the chance to work on these. So then I did what I always do when designing a backlist series: I started to reread all of the books. This is, by far, the most fun part of these kinds of projects—the reacquainting oneself with not just some of the work but all of it. But finding images that could represent all of these books, and make them work as a series, is a particularly tricky problem, because there are three distinct stages to Calvino's writing: a realist phase, a fantastical phase, and a kind of semiotic or metafictional phase. So it was a challenge, but a really fun one.



I'd been working on my monograph, "Cover," which is primarily photos of my book covers, and I wondered if it would be meta, in a way very appropriate for Calvino, if each of his books featured a photo of a book on it. The first idea that came to me was completely absurdist in a way that I imagine Calvino would have loved—to photograph each of the old editions of Calvino and frame them, so that you'd have a sort of catalogue of old Calvino books. Then it occurred to me: If we're going to take photos of Calvino books, wouldn't it be better if we made Calvino books that don't exist? The next stage was designing imaginary Calvino books. "The Path to the Spider's Nest" was going to be a kind of young-adult pulp book; "The Baron in the Trees" an old, eighteenth-century-style Italian cloth-wrapped, foil-stamped book; "Cosmicomics" a comic book. I could make them not just books but written artifacts of various kinds—"Six Memos for the Next Millennium" could be literally memos. We would make one copy of each book and photograph it for each cover. I don't normally collaborate, but there's a wonderful designer, Oliver Munday, who is also interested in Calvino, and we worked together on this project.

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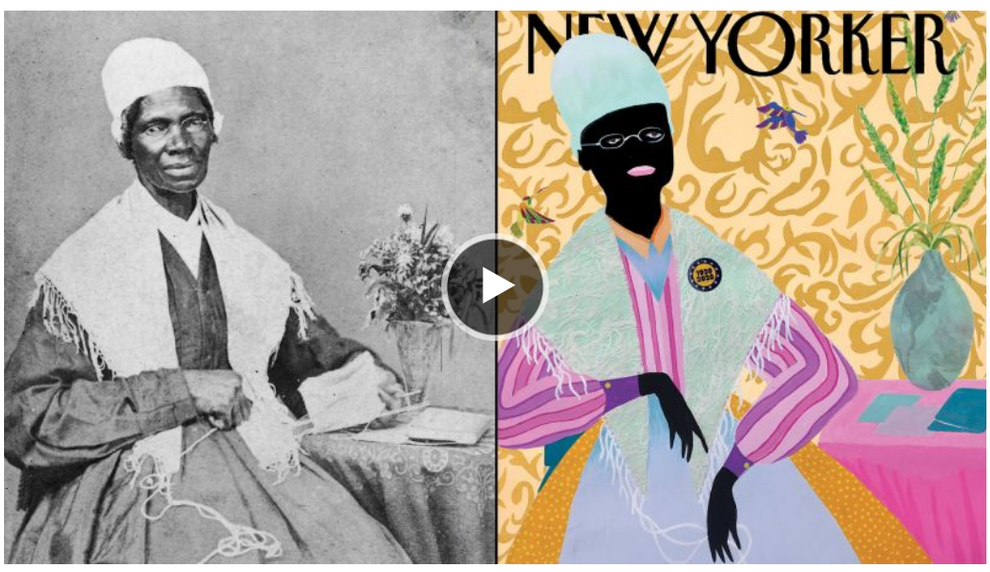

What came next?

At the beginning of "If on a Winter's Night a Traveller," the narrator is addressing the reader in the second person, and he tells you that you see the steam from a locomotive go over the opening paragraph of the book. I loved the idea of the text itself interacting with specific imagery, and I thought maybe it would be interesting if I actually set the opening paragraph of each book on the cover, with an illustration intermingling with it. "The Baron in the Trees" would have the branches weaving through the words.

But somehow I worried that they wouldn't sell the book properly—that they might be too visually busy to be viscerally affecting. So I started thinking about doing illustrations of abstract shapes that by themselves don't necessarily have a ton of meaning, and on each one drawing a line or two that would add to that meaning, or bring it into focus. I made a tree-like thing that was just a blob, then inserted a little sword into it, like a sword a child might draw, which becomes a tree trunk. This seemed to work. I made some more of them. They have a kind of Calder-like feeling. I like their seeming naïveté.

And these were chosen for the finished covers, correct?

Yes, but in the middle of that I had this crazy revelation of how I thought these books should be, a kind of bolt from the blue, while I was on the subway. I just had this crystalline vision of the whole series. The covers would be all type, and each one would have a description of an imaginary book jacket on it, each one written by a different author. We would get a bunch of great writers I know who are huge Calvino fans to write them. The jackets would be ekphrastic. Everything would have to be imagined by the reader. No actual imagery on the covers. Robin Desser, an editor here at Knopf, said it was the most Calvino-esque idea she'd ever heard.

In the end I showed Giovanna all three ideas—the photographs, the illustrations, and the ekphrastic direction—and she liked them, and her mother, Calvino's widow, agreed to the all-type direction. But then there were some objections that they would be hard to see as thumbnails on Amazon. I think honestly the publisher was looking for something a little poppier and user-friendly. In the end I was happy enough with any of these directions that it didn't really matter to me, though I still think that the all-type thing was one of those once-in-a-lifetime ideas. The only thing that would have made it better would have been to have Calvino himself write those descriptions. But I'm happy with the finals, and I think they will really stand out on a shelf.

The first three out of twenty-plus illustrated titles are coming out in September: "Into the War," "Collection of Sand," and "The Complete Cosmicomics." "Into the War" is three coming-of-age stories—it's a kind of anti-memoir, without obvious drama. Calvino here is growing up at the same moment that the war is looming on the horizon. In the last story, there's a teen-ager who has been charged with being a lookout, and at one point he wanders off to a whorehouse, but then leaves and stares at the ocean for a while. He hears a siren and realizes that he's left his post, and he sees an enemy bomber far overhead. It's an incredibly poignant image, because you really get a sense of how far away the war and real life are for him—he's excited by the idea of these events, without any real knowledge about how horrific they'll turn out to be. The idea was to make the strap of the helmet—he's not quite strapped in yet; strapped into life, or the war—a dotted line, and the strap is the trajectory of the plane as seen from far below. "Cosmicomics" has an absolutely gorgeous story called "The Distance of the Moon," which, taking to an extreme the idea that the moon used to be closer to Earth, describes people jumping from boats to the moon. The moon, on this cover, has a face inside of it. But the face is a reproduction of the entire scene—the ocean is the mouth and the eye is another moon. This hits the comics note and performs a Calvino-style reflexivity move. Giovanna's mother said it looked like a big piece of Parmesan.

What attracts you to Calvino's work?

When I think back to that moment in college when I was discovering modernist, postmodernist, and experimental literature, literature that existed outside of the nineteenth-century linear-narrative tradition—I remember Calvino as one of these writers who was having a shitload of fun. He just brought a kind of life-affirming humor and curiosity to the whole enterprise. Of all of these writers, he was the one whom I think I would have liked the most as a human being.

**Correction: A previous version of this post said that the cover Mendelsund designed for Plato's "Republic" was never produced.*

Peter Terzian is a writer and editor living in Brooklyn.

More: book design cover art Italo Calvino Peter Mendelsund

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