

EPISODE 104: COVER DESIGN FOR AUTHORS – WITH STUART BACHE

Announcer: Two writers. One just starting out, the other a bestseller. Join James Blatch and Mark Dawson and their amazing guests as they discuss how you can make a living telling stories. There's never been a better time to be a writer.

James Blatch: Hello and welcome to the Self-Publishing Formula podcast with James and Mark. Just about hanging in there.

Mark Dawson, you're not very well are you?

Mark Dawson: Not particularly, no. I've been coughing away for three weeks, and now I have to go to the doctor. We won't say why it's cough-related, so I'm off to the doctor in about an hour and a half.

Nothing too serious, but great timing considering we're about to move house.

James Blatch: Did you not listen to a word that Jo Penn said about a healthy writer last week?

Mark Dawson: I did, I did. I am quite healthy. It's just, this is a ... well for those of you who don't know in the UK, there's a cough sweeping the country.

Actually it is really prevalent, and it's pretty tough to shift. I've had it for about three weeks now. So if I cough during our little chat, I'll try and mute my microphone, so I don't deafen anybody. But yeah, it's a bit of a pain in the neck, unfortunately.

James Blatch: It's a fascinating thing, the cough, because obviously in your case it's a hacking bacteria-filled ill cough. But coughs can also be a little polite cough which is a sort of form of communication, a disingenuous cough when you clearly don't believe what someone is saying.

The Simpsons use it, don't they, for a joke that fails in an audience. There's a bit of silence, and then a coughing. The cough ... for a writer, there's a myriad ways to employ it. So I think you should see this period as one of research.

Mark Dawson: That's very interesting, James. Yeah. Carry on.

James Blatch: Should we do a podcast on that, on non-verbal communication?

Mark Dawson: Yeah, why not.

James Blatch: We're actually going to be talking about cover design this week. It's been a good week for the book collab project, because I've done my first interview, our candidate, David F. Behrens.

We had a chat with Stuart, who's going to be our guest today from an interview we recorded earlier, actually, about his design course. Stuart went through David's cover, got about a 15-minute feedback from him, some analysis, and I'm going to hold it all a secret for now.

But it's going to be a good episode. I think people will have the Amazon page up at the time that they're listening, to hear what Stuart says. It's going to be very, very interesting, very valuable.

We love hearing from Stuart. He's been on the podcast before. He's done a bit of training for us before.

He always goes down well because, frankly, he knows what he's talking about, doesn't he?

Mark Dawson: Yeah, he does. Coincidentally the other day, he sent me an email saying it was six years since he'd started working with me, and in that time we worked out he's done about 29 covers for me, with one thing and another. Probably more than that, actually, because we had a couple that we changed.

I don't think it's a coincidence that I started selling more books. It's not a coincidence. I started selling more books as soon as I changed the covers that I was using, which, some of them were a bit terrible, for the pro covers that you can see over my shoulder, for those of you who watch it on YouTube.

That's Stuart's work. He's had a big impact on how things have gone for me over the last few years, and I'm looking forward to getting this course out there as well. He really does know his stuff.

We know there's lots of people who have been emailing, asking us when the course is ready. So people know it's coming, and we're excited to share.

James Blatch: Yeah. He's fascinating to listen to about this, because he is focused commercially on covers.

I'm sure he would love just to paint some wonderful artwork that looks amazing on someone's wall, but he thinks 100% of how this cover's going to help sell the book.

He's very interesting on subjects like familiarity versus standout, and when you should be the one that looks different and when you should be the one that's familiar, and he's very much on the familiar side in terms of the converting it into sales.

Let's hear from Stuart, and then you and I will have a little chat off the back, if you're still with us.

Welcome back to the podcast. Some people will be familiar with you, Stuart. Your name comes up from time to time. You're a cover designer, and as Mark and I just described, you design Mark's covers. You do quite a few, actually, of the SPF community, but you also have some really big names who you've designed the covers for their books.

Give us the most famous authors who you've worked with.

Stuart Bache: Well, I mean other than Mark ...

James Blatch: Obviously.

Stuart Bache: Yeah, obviously, I have worked with Stephen King, John le Carré, Lionel Shriver just to name a few.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Stuart Bache: Greg Iles ... and as you say, absolutely tons and tons of SPF community authors as well, lots of wonderful people, with wonderful stories. But I've been very, very lucky over the years.

James Blatch: We talk about luck, and I always quote, I think probably misquote Gary Player or attribute it to Gary Player, the golfer, who was told once he had a lucky shot, and he said, "It's funny. The harder I try, the luckier I get."

Stuart Bache: Yes.

James Blatch: No coincidence, is it.

Stuart Bache: Yeah. Blood, sweat and tears.

James Blatch: Yeah, well exactly. And your covers are superb, Stuart. They're gripping, they're compelling.

I think you did a module for the advertising for this course if I've got that right?

Stuart Bache: I did, yes, I did indeed.

James Blatch: You described the process of how ... It was quite good, actually, in terms of, even if people are going to go to a professional cover designer, how they should couch that conversation and that process.

Stuart Bache: Yes.

James Blatch: That's when I started to understand your process and the thought that goes into it. And, it's another world.

I don't design covers, so why would I know the ins and outs of it? But it starts to make sense as to why your covers are good, and why they sell books, and there's a focus from you right from the beginning, a commercial focus.

This is not a piece of artwork you're designing to hang in a gallery for people to say, "Well that's nice."

This is a bit of creativity that does a job, right?

Stuart Bache: Absolutely. Well, that's my position anyway.

I know, in the industry, and especially in the larger traditional publishing industry, there still is a lot of more artistic license involved, that literary

fiction tends to be much more beautiful in the way it looks, and things. And I do love working on literary fiction, myself.

But beautiful covers are wonderful and they're great on the shelves, but they don't always sell as well as something commercial or mass-market.

So when I'm offering advice or when I'm working with an SPF author, for example, I always aim to be as commercial as possible, because I want the book to sell as hard as it possibly can.

That's always been my philosophy. It's always been my position on book cover design.

James Blatch: And it's one of the things that Mark says, time and time again.

In your approach to self-publishing, you should make your books as professional as they can be, and indistinguishable from a traditionally-published book when they're alongside each other on the platforms.

Stuart Bache: Absolutely.

James Blatch: The cover designer is absolutely critical to that. We still see, and I'm not being patronizing here at all because it's a complex world, but we still see people who join the community and they publish a cover. They say, "Well, what do you think of my cover?"

And it's clearly something they created in MS Paint or something, and a couple of really-badly put together photographs, and people weigh in politely and firmly and say, "You want your book to sell. Does this look like a cover you're going to see in Waterstone's, or when you're browsing through books on Amazon?"

If the answer's no, it doesn't look anything like that, scrap it and start again.

Invest in it. It's not massively expensive, and it's such an incredibly important part of the process.

Stuart Bache: It is. It's absolutely massively important. People spend seconds making decisions on all sorts of different products, and book covers are no different from that.

When you are shopping on Amazon, or if you're in a bookshop or whatever, you make decisions very, very quickly. I'm a strong believer in the familiarity theory, which is having a book cover look similar or very similar, anyway, in emulation to another book within that genre, so that it fits it.

I don't mean that it blends in. I mean so that you know instantly. It gives you all the information that you need, straightaway, whether it's how the fonts are laid out in the hierarchy, or how the images look.

For example, action thrillers within Lee Child and Mark Dawson sort of genre or area of this sort of crime and thriller genre often have a character walking off in a scene, or running, or whatever.

But that scene is a place. It's often a city. It gives you all the information about where that book's going to be. It gives you the style of the genre, and it gives you a bit of the character as well.

That's where all the narrative is, in those book covers. So when you're looking at similar book covers, you know pretty quickly what you're going to get from it, the style of writing, and all those sorts of things. You can just convey all of that in a book cover, very very quickly.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Stuart Bache: There is one thing that a lot of bookshops do, as well, and I know Amazon is a little bit different and obviously we work with a lot of

people who are digital only. But in bookshops, they set up their tables in such a way that they will have familiar or very similar books around a very popular book, with the idea that, if you've read this one, and you more than likely have, then you are likely to pick up the ones around it as well.

So it is something that is real. It's not just something that I've made up in my head. But familiarity theory is a real strong theory when it comes to selling your books.

James Blatch: That's the physical version of the Amazon algorithms, which do exactly the same thing.

Stuart Bache: Yeah. Yeah, I guess so. Very likely.

James Blatch: There's a close similarity with film posters here, as well, of course. I remember ... I wish I could find the link. Maybe I'll find it and add it to the podcast, but I probably won't.

Somebody sent me a link once of an analysis of film posters, and it had a description of the genre of film posters. So it might be big heads floating in the sky, or a single figure walking away from camera, and you had 25 film posters, of films we're all familiar with, all looking incredibly similar.

It went down these various different types of cover, and I think the post was being patronizing. It was being kind of condescending. "Oh look, how they copy each other, and nobody's got any originality. What a shame this is."

And I'm thinking, "This is a multi-million dollar industry. These people know exactly what they're doing."

It's what you've just described, isn't it?

Stuart Bache: Yeah, exactly. Okay, I can understand the sort of maybe not negativity, but I can understand the criticism of it. It does seem lazy, but it really isn't.

As you say, a lot of money has been put into this, and looked at this. And okay, sometimes you want things to be original, and you want a book cover or a film poster to stand out from everything else. That works, on occasion.

It is actually very rare. It's one of the reasons why people don't always do it, especially in publishing.

We often, or I've often, over the years, have tried to create something completely, completely different, that will just stand out from everything. Everyone's loved it, and they've tried it, and it's failed. It doesn't happen all the time.

What's really interesting is books like *One Day*, especially in the UK, they tried to do something completely different with that book cover. However, they did have a huge marketing budget, thousands and thousands and thousands of pounds that went behind this author and this book, and also the author as I say was a massive name as well, so it was almost guaranteed.

I mean, they kept talking about it during the briefing process as the new number one bestseller. They knew that it had the potential to do that anyway.

What was really, really interesting was ... okay, so this brand-new cover did phenomenally well, even though it stood out from everything else within its genre, and from then onwards for years afterwards, things emulated that cover.

They wanted to emulate the success of that cover. So that familiarity theory still works, and it's still a process that works strongest against things like stand-out.

James Blatch: I think good advice for us, and this comes back a little bit to the writing process, when people decide, like I am for instance writing my first book, and who you want to be, and the amazing authors who win Booker Prizes and who I absolutely am devoted to.

Don't try and be them, because they are usually exceptional and that's not the everyday book that people buy that's going to make you money. That's your once-in-a-lifetime Ian McEwan-style book. If I tried to write like him, it would be a failure. I think it's a bit the same.

The Jaws poster is absolutely iconic, and it would probably look not much like any posters that came before it, and has done a similar job to One Day.

I was thinking of another, was maybe a change in style, is North By Northwest is what I was looking up. On a book cover and a film poster, rather a clunky image of Greg Peck or whoever it was ... Cary Grant, wasn't it? Running away from the plane. A rather kind of literal, "Here's what this story's about."

You wouldn't do that today, and yet at the time, that really sold, and it's become an iconic way of doing things.

Look at what is working, look at the choices other people have made in successful genres, and try and emulate that is really good advice, right?

Stuart Bache: Yeah, I think so. Why wouldn't you? If people spend, as I say, thousands of pounds over the years working on these book covers and trying to get something into the bestsellers list, and trying to figure out what works and what doesn't work, why you wouldn't emulate that I don't know.

It's basically free research just searching on Amazon, it's free research there. Why you wouldn't do that?

I understand the criticism of wanting to copy things. But it's not copying. It's emulating. It's trying to emulate, not the success, but the feel. Something is right about it.

Something works about it, so why wouldn't you use it?

James Blatch: You have had a slight departure ... I guess up until a year or so ago, you were more or less working bespoke individually for authors.

But I know from my own process with you, that you will put forward three or four options, minimum, for us to discuss at an early stage. I know that you've started to look at your shelf of the options that work right for that particular book, and realized that there was a possibility ... well, it makes sense to reuse those.

So you've launched an off-the-shelf business.

Talk to us a little bit about that, how that launch is going, and what that service is, and how that's available to people.

Stuart Bache: Well, it's doing pretty well. It's still very much in the early stages, and I'm learning a lot about that process.

We are still a very small team, so it can be hard to concentrate on one thing at a time. My premades, that's what you're talking about, is what I call ready-to-publish on our website. That's doing really well.

We designed completely new jackets for it as well, now, so we've spent time to actually create something brand new.

I started off using images where they were book covers that, as you say, had been put to the side during the process, and I just sort of started collecting them.

I have a folder called 'The Graveyard Folder' and they all go in there. For years I've hoped that I could resurrect some of them, so this is a great area to give them a new home. It's sort of like having a pet and unfortunately you've had to put it into a little home for a bit.

We're trying to find a new home, a forever home, for these book covers. Ready-to-publish has been a perfect area for that.

It's been doing really well. We've sold quite a few. I'm still working out what people want and what's most popular. We did a huge sci-fi series recently, and a good few of them have sold. But obviously sci-fi's a little bit more difficult than, say, thriller.

Thriller, you can be a little bit less specific. So I'm learning. Thrillers are always the most-used. They get bought all the time, as soon as I put one up.

We have clients who actually email me on a regular basis, asking when the next thriller list is going to come up. That's doing really well. I do need to do more on that, but there are some more updates coming by the end of the year.

We've also been playing with DIY adverts. This is a brand-new one. This is something I need to spend so much more time on, but it's just been such a busy year. But they are very popular, and people seem to want them.

Basically, the idea is that they're shaped and ready for Facebook advertising. But they are layered files, so you can manipulate them in Photoshop.

They're all royalty-free, and they use Google Fonts as well, so you don't have to worry about any of those sorts of things. But they're basically set up so that you can play with colors, and do some mild tweaks.

For instance, there's one advert which has a guy walking down the street, but you can change that to a woman if you like. You could take it off completely. You can change the colors to whatever you like, and you can manipulate the type.

All the effects are already added and everything, so all you're doing is just tweaking it and adding your book cover to it, perhaps.

I also have what we call smart objects, which are very simple to use, and it's just a very simple, like, double-click opens a new little window, and you just put your book cover in there. You save it, and suddenly your book cover appears on the 3D representation, on the actual art.

So there's little things like that. I need to make more of those. I need to work into that more. But we've had people buying those, and I've actually noticed a few of the adverts on Facebook every now and again just pop up, so I'm glad people are using them. I think that's the thing.

Things like this is, people want to be able to do things themselves a little bit, because it is cheaper to do it yourself obviously, but what they lack is the ability or the experience to put together something that looks professional. So I'm trying to offer more affordable services for self-published authors.

James Blatch: So the process for this is that people download the Photoshop file, and they have all the elements in there, which they then manipulate themselves?

Stuart Bache: Absolutely.

James Blatch: As they wish. So they could even tweak the images. As you say, change the figure.

Stuart Bache: Absolutely, yeah.

James Blatch: Okay.

Stuart Bache: They could add their own figures in, and all sorts of things.

James Blatch: Yeah. I mean, they're great. And I know immediately people will be thinking, "Well hang on. This same image is going to appear selling somebody else's book, more or less," but all I'd say to that is, this is very common in the media world.

For instance, music, we use royalty-free music. We used it at the beginning of this very podcast. It's very rare ... it happens occasionally, it's very rare to hear the same tune twice, despite the fact that we all go to the same sites.

The truth is, the chances of there being a clash are pretty remote. But if there are, you pick another cover.

Stuart Bache: Absolutely, yeah. But these adverts specifically are super-cheap. I have them down for about £11 to £12.

James Blatch: I think they're so cheap, Stuart. I was shocked when I saw the price.

Stuart Bache: It's only because there is the chance that if more than one person buys that advert, then there is the chance they might set it up in a very similar way to you.

This is for people who are pretty much starting out, really. Their budget is low, and they want to create their adverts but they don't know what they're

doing. They can't afford a designer to do it for them, they've never experienced InDesign or anything like that, or Photoshop. This is just a great starting point for a lot of authors, I think.

James Blatch: Well, I think they look amazing.

You referenced the fact that you had a range of sci-fi covers done. They were gorgeous. I really liked them.

Stuart Bache: I actually didn't want to put them up, myself. I was thinking, I could write something for these maybe, if I could write. But if I could, then I would use some of those covers. I really enjoyed those. They were great.

James Blatch: Do you know what? You can go onto your site. You can look at one of those covers, and then back-engineer the book, because the covers are inspirational.

And some of the titles, obviously the titles change, but sometimes you come out with art in themselves. It looked to me like books I want to buy.

Stuart Bache: Brilliant.

James Blatch: I think they're great. Again, they're cheap.

£150, I think, probably, for the premium covers?

Stuart Bache: For premium. Yeah. That's right. That's correct.

James Blatch: For something that's so important in the process.

On the premium design, or the ready-to-publish cover, how does that process work? In those cases you don't hand over the PSD file, the Photoshop file.

You made the changes yourself and then deliver it, is that right?

Stuart Bache: That's correct, yeah. Because of the price and everything, it's a case of what you see is what you get, in a sense. I will make some changes, colors and obviously we're going to be changing the title and the author name anyway, and adding quotes and those sorts of things, so I don't mind making a few small changes here and there.

But ultimately, you are buying what you're seeing and that is reflected in the price, I think. It's a bit of time-saving. It's a design time-saving, as it were.

As I say, you're just buying exactly what you're seeing, but that's why I want to make them look as good as possible in the first place, so that what you see is what you get. You like that. "I want to use that for my book cover." And I will make a few small changes, here and there, and then that's what you get. I'll then save it as an ebook and send that out to you.

James Blatch: Ready to use. You can go to bookscovers.co.uk, if people haven't worked that out already, to have a look at these and follow along as we chat about it.

So you've got your tailor-made, which is your bespoke, the sort of thing you do for Mark, and John le Carré and all the others, ready to publish, where basically you get your title and your name on the front of a pre-done, beautiful-looking book cover, and then this DIY advertising for Facebook. Obviously a key part of your marketing for your book of the future is pushing at them on Facebook, and they have this range of adverts.

Do you do a package ... this might be the next thing for you, I guess, is where you get the cover and a range of adverts to go with it?

Stuart Bache: One day I hope to. I mean, next year ... we're hoping to grow our team in 2018, and I hope to be able to offer more things like that.

We do that with you guys anyway, with SPF. We do an ebook and marketing bundle, so I have no issue with doing those sorts of things. Absolutely.

I've already played with doing big discounts and stuff throughout the year. If you go to our website, you can subscribe to us. A little popup comes up every now and again.

We haven't really pushed that but for subscribers we always try and do a discount or a sale, a little bit of ahead of time, before we start marketing it out to everyone else.

We did one a couple of weeks ago, and we had about 30% off, just for a summer sale. We said goodbye to a few of our premade book covers.

But yeah, at some point we will start to tie some of those up so you can have advertising and ready-to-publish bundles and things like that. But yeah, that will come probably next year, though.

James Blatch: You say you've got a small team. You're based at home?

Do you have an office? How does it work with you, Stuart?

Stuart Bache: I'm based at home. I have an office, technically, so I have one large room in the house, which is mine. Natasha is my wife, and she works next to me.

James Blatch: Okay.

Stuart Bache: We do design stuff, but we also have several freelancers that I work with, people that I trust, people that I've worked with for years, who are very good book cover designers.

I work with them and I work myself, obviously. I design, myself, but all of the stuff is art directed by me, so I never send anything out without having checked it myself first.

For the most part, it is myself and Natasha, and what I'm hoping to do next year is to expand that freelance list. There are so many wonderful book cover designers out there that I want to work with, and I think would be perfect, things like contemporary romance and things like that, things that I have worked on, but I know that there are people who have better experience of them.

What I really want to do, and I'm determined to do as well, is I want to literally change the face of self-published book covers, single handedly if I have to, because it is an area of design that is getting so much better, but it could be so much better.

That's what I want to do. I think there are so many wonderful authors out there who deserve the best first impression possible, and that's where we come in.

James Blatch: I think the covers are terrific. I think anybody who goes to the website and starts browsing through the even the ready-to-publish ones, the ones that have been piling up on your shelf there, will look at those.

And you've got to think to yourself realistically, is the cover you're planning to use or the cover you're using, is it as good? Would it sit on that page and look as good as those?

If the answer to that is no, then you need to be using Stuart or somebody else.

You need to be going professional about this. It just raises the game.

Your book deserves it, right? There's all that effort and sweat, believe me, I know about it, that goes into writing a book.

Stuart Bache: Absolutely. It's the best first impression.

James Blatch: Yeah. Unfortunately, books are judged by covers.

Stuart Bache: Yes, unfortunately.

James Blatch: Despite the advice in the old phrase not to do that. But there they are.

Okay, look, what we want to talk about today, Stuart, is you've done some bits and pieces for us in the past, for both courses, explanations of how the process works, a guide to designing adverts, which obviously dovetails very nicely with our Facebook course.

We started thinking that this is such a particular area, and it's such an important area, that we wanted to try something that we've not done before.

Rather than bundle something in with a premium course, which is a fairly significant investment, that we would work with you to create a standalone course at a much lower price that people can buy, that's going to be there, online, step-by-step tutorial guide to creating their own covers.

I think you are midway through that process as we speak at the moment. What Mark and I will do at the beginning and at the end of this interview is update you as to where we are and what the date is for that, and how to have a look at it and potentially go ahead and buy that for yourself. But we're looking, hopefully, at 2017 as the launch year for that.

Stuart Bache: Yes.

James Blatch: Tell us what's going to be in this course.

Stuart Bache: Well, it's very exciting, and it's been hard work but it's been really fun to do at the same time. There are basically two sections to this course.

The first section includes, it's more sort of coursework-based, I guess, in a sense, so it's things like an introduction to the world of book cover design, examples of what not to do, how to write a brief, how to even find a designer, what makes a good designer, where to find them, the costs involved, how to budget better, how to picture research, all those sorts of things.

It's lots of advice there in the first section.

In the second section, it's much more do-it-yourself. It's about, I take you into Photoshop and I actually design a series of covers from scratch, completely from scratch as well.

I write myself a brief, I come up with a title, and there are ... how many genres have I done? I've worked with the thriller genre for example, and in that I've worked with three separate areas of that genre. So action thriller, which is very similar to Mark's area, psychological, and crime.

There are differences, and there are distinct differences, and that's why I split those into three. What I do is I write a brief, and I do my picture research based on that.

On the screen, it's there. I've got my picture research. I've got my plain cover, ready to go, and I just take you through the process of how I design something like an action thriller, how I would design something like a Lee Child or a Mark Dawson.

I take you through each step. What I really, really wanted to do is I wanted to keep a student's budget in mind. For example, you will use two images, three max. That way, if you're going to Shutterstock and pick the best images that you could possibly find. You don't have to buy several.

I'm not expecting you to buy 10 or 12. Sometimes I work on book covers where I'm just filling it with images because I'm spending hours and hours on it. But what I want to do is really make this as simple but as effective as possible. So in that process, I'll show you some really cool little tricks.

They're not complicated at all. Not at all. I don't go into it in too much detail. There are lots of little secret ingredients in there, which can take you from designing a pretty good cover, but making it look as professional as possible using just a few simple little tweaks here and there.

I go through the whole process, and they last from between 30 minutes to 45 minutes, so they're not that long either, per tutorial.

I also look at contemporary romance, new adult and sci-fi and fantasy as well. But also within that DIY section, I'm looking at the process of design as well.

I'll talk you through that genre, and I'll talk you through the fonts that are prevalent in that genre or for those covers. I'll show you which professional fonts you can buy, but also which Google Fonts you can download.

Obviously Google Fonts are free, and you can use them any way you want. They're royalty free. I'll show you the affordable options all the time. I even go through the picture research process in Shutterstock, to show you how I picture research and the best sort of terms to use, and that sort of thing.

It's been really, really fun. It's not complicated at all, and throughout, if you just practice and you can go through all of the different tutorials if you want, or you can just go through the tutorial that's based on your genre.

I would recommend going through each one. They're only 30 to 40 minutes long, but in each one there's something slightly different. I use a different tool, a different adjustment layer, or something like that, and I show you step by step all the way through.

I assume that you've never used Photoshop before, so I go through every step. I even go through a whole introduction to Photoshop process tutorial, which shows you how I set up my desktop so that you can set up your own desktop the same way, so that if you are working through a tutorial with me, that you can see where I go and how I use the different tools.

James Blatch: That's great, and that's really good advice for people who are going to take the courses, to do the other genres. Just because you've got a sci-fi book or a thriller, watch the romance genre as well because of the extra little bits in there, because your particular idea for your cover may involve something like that.

I mean, I think that some people have a real eye for design.

Stuart Bache: Yes.

James Blatch: I would put myself in the category of somebody who doesn't. I mean, I have an eye for what I like. I'm very happy to look at art. I love art, and I look at your covers and I know what I like.

Give me a blank bit of paper and ask me to design, and it's just not a strong point with me. I don't know why. It is with John Dyer, our colleague, so that works nicely in our company and he does a lot of our design stuff. I'm just wondering how much this would help someone like me, who doesn't really know what a good layout looks like?

You go into that kind of aesthetic detail as well?

Stuart Bache: Yeah, I do, yeah. I'll look at, once again, looking at something like what we spoke about earlier, about action thrillers. I'll talk about where the font should go, and where your characters should go and where your background should go, and that sort of thing, and what works best, and what works aesthetically when it comes to things like typography and things like that.

How best to line up your type, when to use things like drop shadows and stuff.

But when it comes to actual formulating your concepts, that's all in the course as well. So when you're sort of thinking about, "What are my ideas going to be?" We look at covers in the genre, and I talk about what works and what doesn't, and as I've said before, the familiarity theory, what things you should concentrate on.

You can break it apart and pull it together yourself. If you know that, once again, an action cover needs to have this character here, this background, and this sort of type, then you're halfway there.

The rest of it is about making it look a bit better, and that's in the course as well. I call them my secret ingredients. They're little things that you can do that will just really completely change something from being just an okay layout, to really just popping and just really looking really professional.

I probably shouldn't be telling anyone these secrets at all, and I'll probably be sacked from the graphic design community for doing it, but they do really work and they're very, very simple tricks as well.

James Blatch: Mark faced the same question when he started with the course, and he got a bit of resistance from one or two other authors, saying, "You shouldn't be telling people how to use Facebook ads. It's our secret."

But our philosophy is, let's empower people. It's a big world. Lots of people out there and lots of space to grow.

That's what I particularly love about this, Stuart, that it really is the SPF philosophy of empowering people to be successful. I think this course will ... it won't be for everyone, but I think for a big chunk of people this will be ... it takes them from the bare ... When we see, like I've mentioned earlier, we've seen some stuff that gets posted into the Facebook groups that isn't good enough.

Stuart Bache: Yeah.

James Blatch: But there's technical skills there, right? People have opened a Photoshop file. They've manipulated the layers.

It's that next stage of making it look indistinguishable from the le Carré and the Dawson on Amazon, and that's what people will get out of this course.

Stuart Bache: Occasionally, I'll come onto Facebook and I'll see those images in people's covers in the SPF community, and I don't always get a chance to but if I can I'll offer some advice.

I want to offer good advice as well, because people's opinions can be quite harsh, sometimes. I know they don't intend to be, but you've put your heart and soul into something, and if people don't think it's good enough they will tell you that.

But I always think it's brilliant that they've made that start, and they should be commended for that as well.

What I like to do is, I offer advice and say, "That's a really good start. This is what I would do," and try and think about these things, and "Have you

thought about this?" That's kind of what I did in the course as well. It's not about being critical. It's about being ... what's the word? It's about-

James Blatch: Constructive.

Stuart Bache: It's about being constructive, that's exactly it. I think that's important, because if you can start the process, you can finish it, I think. With just a few little lessons here and there.

It can take practice, but it's so much more affordable I think, as well. I'm talking myself out of business here, but I do believe that if you really want to make something and you don't have the money to do it, and you have Photoshop, then you should at least give it a go.

James Blatch: Well, I think this is a stage thing, isn't it? I think at the early stage, the stage I'm at, this is perfect, absolutely perfect, to design your own cover. Then hopefully what happens, Stuart, is the books sell.

Then they come to you to get their covers designed by you when there's a bit more money in the system. But for the first, for the early stages, the getting going this is absolutely perfect.

Now, I'm making this up as I go along because we haven't quite, as you say, as the point we're recording this you're in the midst of creating the screen flows and the course.

But the next stage will be how we launch it and so on. It seems a very obvious thing to me is to create a bespoke Facebook group to support the course. You buy the course, you go into the Facebook group.

What we'll hope will happen there is that one or two people who are the early adopters and the more proficient, perhaps, with the services, will become the gurus. That usually does happen on the back of a course.

We may start it within our main community group, but we'll see if we need a separate group for that. We'll announce that at the time the course goes live, because that's a very useful thing. Very useful.

Stuart Bache: Yeah. It would be.

James Blatch: Some people, there's no stupid questions, and I'm definitely somebody who struggles a bit with the intricacies of Photoshop, so just to have those questions easily answered quickly would be very useful.

So we'll look into that at the time of launching as well. That would be something that you can dip into as well, and have a look at covers, and it will be a nice place. We should say, you're growing your team.

You are growing your own team this autumn, aren't you?

Stuart Bache: Yeah. Literally.

James Blatch: Another little worker. So the patter of tiny feet is entering the ...

Stuart Bache: Within weeks.

James Blatch: Within weeks. You're on the runway as we speak.

Stuart Bache: Yeah, pretty much. We're about a month away, but it could be the next couple of weeks.

We've got our next little art director, or editor as it were. Yeah, we're having a little girl and she's on her way. She's been baking away now for eight months, so we're looking forward to seeing her.

James Blatch: Nearly done. Yeah, that's exciting. The only thing I would say, that, however exciting, is it'd be good if you could finish the course, first?

Stuart Bache: Yeah, I'm going to try my best. I'm actually getting used to the lack of sleep by staying up all night doing the course work.

James Blatch: It's good practice, yeah.

Stuart Bache: Yeah, it's nature.

James Blatch: I cast my mind back 13 years, and I can remember what it's like at the beginning. It's best to, I would say, get stuff done just before.

Stuart Bache: Yeah.

James Blatch: I was doing an open university course, and I finished my final essay the night before the baby was born.

Stuart Bache: Wow.

James Blatch: I'm pretty clear that if I had not finished that essay that night, that would have been a failed course, so yes. Oh yeah, it's very exciting for you, Stuart.

Stuart Bache: Yes, it is.

James Blatch: Congratulations on that forthcoming event.

Stuart Bache: Thank you very much.

James Blatch: We think about the same time as this, there's going to be a busy autumn for you. One way and another, we'll be launching this, but at the time this podcast goes out, we'll have all the details for you of where to go and do that.

But bookscovered.co.uk is the place to go to get into contact with Stuart, and there are three primary levels that Stuart talked about, the tailor made, ready-to-publish, and DIY advertising to get the adverts for your Facebook covered.

I think just looking at your covers is an absolute must for somebody to put them in the frame of mind of what is possible, what covers should look like, and so on. So make sure that you are getting it right. It's such an important part of it.

Stuart Bache: Yeah, it is.

James Blatch: Stuart, thank you so much indeed for joining us. It's been a real pleasure, as always, talking to you.

Stuart Bache: Oh, absolutely. Yeah. I really enjoy it.

James Blatch: I've seen some of the stuff coming through in the curriculum for the course. I'm very excited about it.

For someone like me, who I think knows some of the nuts and bolts but doesn't have that ability to create something, I'll be very interested to see how I get on with it, and what sort of things I do.

I'll set myself a little task there and see if I can post a cover onto the group.

Stuart Bache: Yeah, please do. That'd be wonderful. Yeah, that'd be really good.

James Blatch: If you can make a designer out of me, Stuart, you are some sort of genius.

Stuart Bache: Everyone has the ability. Do you know what? You just have to look at any community anywhere, and everyone has an opinion about design.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Stuart Bache: Everyone has it in them a little bit. They know what they're looking for.

James Blatch: That's for sure. Well great. Good luck with your forthcoming events, and we look forward to catching up with you again once the course is launched, and we'll see how people are getting on with it.

Stuart Bache: Wonderful. Thank you very much, James, and thank you as ever to all of you at SPF and the community for continued work and support for Books Covered, and for giving us this opportunity. So thank you very much.

James Blatch: There you go. You must bless the day that you found Stuart.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, I was trying to think how I did. I don't quite recall. I think it may have been something like, there was a comment in the Guardian about book covers, and Stuart's books were involved, and I tracked him down.

I liked the covers, and then just found out where, who he was, and reached out to him. I think he'd just left, or he was just setting up his business and doing the freelance stuff, and that was the start of a very fruitful relationship. Yeah, that was a while ago.

James Blatch: Good. If you are watching on YouTube, apologies we didn't have video of Stuart. He's just moved house. Everyone's moving house at the moment, apart from me, and yeah. His webcam is now in, so the new

interview we've done on Book Lab is in full Stuart Bache glory. We'll see him in that.

It's one of those things that you just can't cheat on or gloss over in the process. I mean, there are ways I suppose, of getting around one or two other of the professional services that a traditional company would provide. One of the areas not to cheat on is your book cover.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, exactly. It's a really false economy. We're lucky in that there aren't many capital requirements to say I was an independent author.

Starting a new business has a ridiculous low bar to entry. There are some things that I don't think we should scrimp on, and a cover is the most important thing because people do unfortunately judge books by their covers.

Editing is the other thing. But you can get a good cover and a decent edit done for not a huge amount of money, in terms of what you could stand to benefit from.

If I'd cut corners and got covers off Fiverr that look terrible, I'd have never sold any books. I probably wouldn't have left my job. I wouldn't be doing this podcast ... there's a lot of things that have stemmed from taking that kind of approach, so I do think it's important that you get the covers right.

Now, it doesn't have to be that you get somebody to do it. If you've got a little bit of design experience and you're prepared to learn from someone like Stuart who is a book designer, they're not necessarily ... just being able to use Photoshop probably isn't enough.

You need to understand the tropes, the conventions for book covers. You need to be able to do cover research so you see what's selling in your genre, and then perhaps a brief for designing yourself, or then make a cover yourself using that information.

That's one of the things that Stuart's been able to help us with. That's one of the things that writers will be able to see in the course when we put it out.

James Blatch: Okay, well the course is there, actually, from this moment. If people head off to this URL, selfpublishingformula.com/design, they can read all about it.

In brief, the course not only covers practical tutorials on how to operate in Photoshop, how to set everything up and how the tools work. That's actually towards the back end of the course.

The front end of the course is all about why you should have certain elements on your cover, how the mechanics of it work. It goes into sci-fi. What works with sci-fi. Thrillers, mystery, romance. Different genres, so you'll find it very useful.

Even if you aren't going to design your own covers, frankly I think it's a useful course, because he actually talks to you about how you should get the brief together, what's a good brief for a designer, and how to work with a designer when the brief comes back.

Yes, so I think it's a really useful course. We're going to price it at \$197.

Mark Dawson: Which I think is pretty competitive, to be honest. That's a big saving. If you get a designer to design designs, you're going to be looking at a minimum of \$299 for a cover, and that's probably around about the ballpark for getting a pro to do your cover.

This is a one-time expense. If you learn how to do it yourself and you do have the aptitude to do it, then you won't need, in theory at least, to go back and continue to engage designers at \$300, \$400 levels.

We think this is probably an introductory price. I don't think this is going to stay this low forever, but we think for the SPF communities, as we just get this started, we think this is a fairly attractive price to put the course out there.

James Blatch: Great. Selfpublishingformula.com/design. Okay. That's it for this week. Thank you very much indeed. Thank you to our Patreon supporters for this podcast. You can join them if you go to patreon.com/spfpodcast. It's been a long week.

Mark Dawson: It has been a long week.

James Blatch: Yes. Good. Mark, good luck with the cough.

Mark Dawson: Thank you.

James Blatch: And the house move. Actually, by the time this goes out ... oh, no. You'll just be ahead of the house move, won't you?

Mark Dawson: Yep. As this goes out, I will be ... thinking about myself in the future, I should imagine I'll have less hair and several big arguments with various people, and will be ready to jump in a lake.

James Blatch: Hurrah. Good. And, on that note, non-verbal communication, we'll see you next week.

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