



MABEL'S DRAGON REPORTS FOR DUTY

Article Series 10 of 10

Published 31 October 2026 · 4 min read

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Theo delivered the painting in April, wrapped in two bin bags and a great deal of pride.

He unwrapped it on Mabel's kitchen table. A castle stood on a crag beneath a full moon. A silver sword lay in the foreground, catching the light. And wheeling above the castle's tallest tower flew the most magnificent dragon Mabel had ever seen.

He had green-gold scales and an expression of great intelligence. Theo had clearly worked on him for weeks.

Mabel loved him immediately. She propped the painting on the mantelpiece, where Pudding regarded it with deep suspicion, and told everyone at the Thursday book club about it.

It was Hazel Quayle who looked at the photograph on Mabel's phone for a long moment and asked, quite innocently, whether Mabel had started writing something new.

"It's for A Crumb of Suspicion," said Mabel.

"Oh," said Hazel. "I thought you'd started a fantasy."

A cover is a signal

Readers browsing a bookshop or scrolling an online store make very fast judgements. Before they read a word of the description, the cover has already told them what kind of book this is likely to be.

That is the cover's main job. It isn't there to illustrate a favourite scene, or even to be the most beautiful image possible. It is there to help the right readers recognise a book they will enjoy, and to let the wrong readers pass by without feeling cheated.

Theo's dragon was beautiful, and he was making a promise: adventure, battles, magic, possibly a prophecy. A reader who picked up A Crumb of Suspicion expecting that would be disappointed within a page. A reader who loved village mysteries would never pick it up at all.

Learn your genre's visual language

Mabel did what she should have done before anyone picked up a paintbrush. She went to the library and the bookshop and looked at the covers of cosy mysteries, dozens of them, side by side.

Patterns emerged quickly. Many were illustrated rather than photographic. Colours tended to be bright and warm. Shop fronts, cottages, kitchens and village streets appeared again and again, often with a cat, a dog or a plate of something delicious. The titles were frequently playful, with lettering that felt friendly rather than menacing. Danger, where it appeared at all, was hinted at gently: a knife beside the scones, a shadow in a window.

None of these is a rule. But together they form a visual language that readers of the genre understand without thinking about it. A cover that speaks that language tells them, in a glance, that this book is for them.

The point isn't to copy. It is to belong.

Write a proper brief

Mabel decided to hire a designer who worked on mysteries. Before she contacted anyone, she wrote down what the designer would need.

Genre and audience. Tone: warm, funny, gently puzzling, no gore. Title and author name. A short description of the story. A note that she hoped Iris might return in a second book, so the design should be able to grow into a series. The formats she intended to publish. And a handful of cosy covers she admired, each with a sentence about what she liked: the title is easy to read at a small size, the colours feel like summer, the setting is clear at a glance.

Specific notes are far more useful to a designer than general feelings. A good brief sets out what is essential and then leaves the designer room to do what they are good at.

Test it small

Most readers will first see a cover as a small image on a screen. Mabel learned to shrink every draft to the size of a postage stamp and ask two questions. Can you still tell what kind of book it is? Can you still read the title?

Lettering matters more than many authors expect. A lovely image with a title that disappears into the background is a lovely image, not a cover.

Check the practical details

Make sure you have permission to use every image, illustration and font for publication and promotion, and keep the licence records and the designer's agreement somewhere safe.

For a print edition, the full cover must match the printer's specifications. The width of the spine depends on the page count, so if the interior changes, the cover may need to change too. Order a printed proof if you can. Colours that glow on a screen can look rather different on paper.

Ask the right question

When Mabel showed draft covers to her readers, she stopped asking whether they liked them. Instead she asked what kind of book they expected.

"A fantasy" was an honest answer to the dragon. "A cosy mystery, probably set in a village, probably something to do with cake" was the answer she wanted, and eventually she got it.

The final cover showed a village green in high summer: bunting, a white marquee with its flap tied back, and on a trestle table near the entrance, a lemon drizzle cake that nobody appeared to be watching.

Hazel said she'd buy it on sight.

As for the dragon, Theo took him home in the same two bin bags. He now hangs over Theo's desk, where he is serving as the official inspiration for the first volume of a fantasy trilogy. He seems much happier there. It is, after all, the kind of book he was painted for.

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