1,000 Authors Podcast Transcription: Episode Two Hundred And Six: Book Covers That Sell with Julia Brown

In an industry stuffed with marketing bullshit, empty promises and shiny-suited liars, one woman's had enough. She knows what it's like to have the wrong clients, no money and no time for fun, but she also knows how to fix it, and, on the Business For Superheroes Show, she promises to tell the down and dirty truth about business, sales and running away with the circus! Here's your host: Vicky Fraser...

Vicky: Hello, and welcome to The 1000 Author Show. I'm Vicky Fraser, and this week, I'm joined by Julia Brown of Brown Owl Design. Hi, Julia.

Julia: Hey.

Vicky: Thank you for joining me. It's always really funny when I do these introductions, 'cause like we've already been chatting the whole time, So it's like, hi Julia, It's like yeah, I said that five minutes ago.

– [Julia] It's lovely to be here.

Vicky: Thank you. We're both feeling quite pleased with ourselves today 'cause we've got our hair and makeup looking nice. I have just been deciding whether or not to wear a hat, cause I was having a bad hair day. So that's a little insight into behind the scenes of a podcast. Anyway, and we're talking to Julia today because Julia does all of my book covers, she designs all my book covers and they're so fabulous and I love them so much and they're just totally different from any other book covers that I see out there which is part of the reason why I love them. But I just wanted to talk to you today Julia about both book covers and generally art because you're also an artist I'm gonna talk about that and a little bit about you, so tell my listeners who you are, how did you become an artist?

– [Julia] Well, I'm Julia Brown and it's the old cliche that I've been drawing and painting since I was a small child, so it's kind of one of those I was lucky enough to be able to pursue it at school and had the support of my parents to

go and do it at university and with a fine art degree and then painted for a few years and then kind of life got in the way because with many artists having to earn a living and I had to get a job and pay for houses and all life throws at you. So yeah, I've kind of always kept my hand in doing more commercial art I guess. So concept design for Christmas decorations company for a long time. And that was kind of designing the massive grottoes that you see in places like Westfield in London and Centre Parks and all sorts of places. So, that was kind of weird doing Christmas in April four years running. Yeah, I kind of got that commercial side and designing illustration and fell in love with that as well because it's a completely different discipline and earned a living from it. And then eventually I just got to the point where I kind of missed the fine art side of it, the painting and I think it was something more recently as well that I've taken a lot more time to kind of get back to and realize how much I enjoy. So yeah, I had a horrible job for a while, I didn't feel like I was going anywhere. So I quit that, decided to start up on my own doing design illustration. And then that's kind of like coming full circle back into painting again.

Vicky: That's pretty cool because most people, I think a lot I think a lot of people, a sad number of people hate their jobs I think, most of them I think just stick with it. So it's a really brave thing to do, to leave your job. How did you feel when you did? Was it scary?

– [Julia] Yeah, very, very scary. I was quite lucky at the time that I kind of eased into it because I had an old contact I ended up doing a few months of freelancing for. So when I decided to press the quit button on my job, I kind of knew I'd got a few months money coming in, and to get my shit in order and then start, obviously, building up with the clients and going my own direction. So that was a nice way of doing it. And I was lucky and it was great because I didn't have the traditional thing everybody says, "You're going to quit a job and start your own business, you must have a six months buffer of salary." But if you spent your life building that up You'd probably never quit your job because it's never possible. At least not on the wages I was on.

Vicky: Sometimes circumstances force you don't they? 'Cause I didn't, I had nothing I left I was like, you can't fire me I quit, and that was it. And that was like.. "Oh!"

– [Julia] That was kind of pretty much where it was getting into it with my job. It was a very quite toxic workplace. And yeah, it was never gonna go anywhere, really. So there's times in your life when you just gotta draw the line and get on with it and kind of stand up for yourself and carve your own path I think a little bit and it was very, very scary at times, quite frankly it still is. But being the mistress of your own destiny. is absolutely fantastic. And I you know, it's lovely, being able to work hard, but work hard when you want to, take time off when you want to fit other things in and have a much more flexible life. And so that's a fantastic bonus to it. And you know, I'm not gonna kind of be one of these people who say, Oh yeah, I jumped in and made my million in the first year of the business. I had a huge amount to learn, I don't think I ever realized how much I needed to learn about business, marketing, everything and apart from my own skill sets. And, and I'm still learning and I think it's only just after four years, nearly five years it's starting to come together. So yeah, it's not easy. But if you've got space for learning and then kind of making yourself better, and I think that's one of the fundamental things you need to have if you're going to run your own business. You need to have that passion for and improving what you do and making sure you can wear quite a few hats to start with.

Vicky: Yeah, for sure, it's a scary thing. I've just closed my email program so that it wouldn't distract me and that's where my questions are. Such a professional. Okay, so yes, I love your story and you've worked so hard as well, I know how hard you've worked because we've been working together for quite a long time. Which leads me on to, how did you get into book covers what made you decide to do book covers?

– [Julia] A) I love books and I think also, I kind of did, what most graphic designers do and had a massive umbrella full of different things that you kind of not specialize in, but kind of know how to do and good design is good design, obviously certain aspects of it are completely different. So, I'm not a UX designer or a web designer, particularly, I can design stuff for the web, but my passion has always been print. And I think that maybe comes from the illustration as well. And so when I first started I offered quite a few different design packages and you could pretty much do what people asked, but I've got to the point where I wanted to specialize and learn more and do the book design thing more intensively because, it's such a creative, there's a huge creative breadth within the field of book design as it is, and I love the

fact that it it lends it's, there's nonfiction and fiction, there's the interior illustration, external illustration, the few be touching or kind of image manipulation that you'll have on the covers. And then also kind of layout and just making a book desirable from a thumbnail on a computer screen or on your phone or from 20 feet away in a bookshop or close up as well and books are, the actual paper and card and everything and it's beautiful. It's kind of something you treasure for lifetimes and we were just chatting before I came on screen, I've got books from my grandparents and they get passed down, and they they're constantly useful, but they can also be constantly beautiful as well. So, yeah, they're nice little objects that have a use and a lasting value. So I think making the covers, seen and making them beautiful, but also work really well as practical covers, it's a really, really nice kind of balance of creativity and problem solving and solutions that you need to make as a designer.

Vicky: Cool, and so what makes a good non-fiction book cover? Because I know people will be wondering that if they're thinking of writing a book.

– [Julia] I think in simple terms, it's got to, it's got to attract it's, the front cover, and the back is the advert for your book literally because, unless you don't see books, hanging around with just the writing on you know, the internal text as a cover because there's no way people would be able to decipher in the short seconds that it takes to make a decision about what you wanna read. So yeah, it's like a movie poster when you go to the cinema, it entices you into wanting to find out more about it adverts on the telly 30 seconds will make you want to look up something even more and buy it, basically so yeah, a good book cover must sell the book.

Vicky: So what do you think about when you're designing a book cover? What sort of elements do you think about?

Julia: The internal content, obviously, the genre of the book really is a good starting point, because although books need to stand out and look different enough to be attractive and not blend into the crowd, you do need to kind of fall within parameters of your genres, so you wouldn't design the cover of a horror novel in the same way that you design your book about business and finance for example. Although the two might be horror, it needs to sit within a sample genre and be instantly kind of recognizable in that context. But it

also needs to stand out. And I think, things like colors, there's obviously the client who is writing the book, will hopefully have a brief that will go into a bit of detail about which audience they're trying to appeal to, what they want to say in their book and how that needs to come across on the cover. So all those sorts of things taken into account. Where in the world it's gonna be sold as well, because I mean, most books these days are online sold worldwide but if it's a very specific target country or audience or community. It needs to appeal to that and going by the boundaries of etiquette, I suppose as well that you know, there's certain things you could do in one culture that would be acceptable and not in another culture, so you need to be aware of little things like that. There is a lot different. It needs to be legible, and the kind of text used needs to kind of sit well and be easy to read and noticeable so, again quite a few things to take into consideration.

Vicky: Yeah, it's interesting, 'cause if you there's a lot of, obviously loads of advice out there about how to design book covers and things. And I've seen a lot, And I often give advice as well that says, keep it simple if because a simple book cover is good. But then if you look at my latest book cover, which I will grab, mine is beautiful. but it's not the kind of simple look that a lot of books in my genre have. And there's a couple of good reasons for that, firstly, because I wanted one of your beautiful illustrations on the front, and second because I kind of wanted it it to stand out, so can you tell us a bit about the thought process between like the really simple styles of books, so maybe something a bit more like Drayton Bird's, book which is like a best seller or something like mine.

Julia: Okay, so I think there's a difference, maybe between simple and minimal. Minimal is very, you can have say like maybe two colors, you'll be, white background and black writing titles, and I think. with yours, your character had to come, So you're quite bubbly and I know your some of your dresses, I kind of took inspiration from the illustration and kind of the way you present your business and the way you encourage people to write. It's quite, it's not minimal, it's very involved. It's very supportive, and you kind of build a relationship with people in order to help them write their books. So I wanted it to be quite personal. And I think you already mentioned that you wanted an avatar for yourself on the cover anyway. So it makes sense to have this kind of, your love of books and your kind of various different backgrounds in copywriting and book writing, all that kind of thing sort of

shown in the books and then there's obviously the typewriter so that's kind of a nod towards the writing.

Vicky: And the cookies?

Julia: Also I know you have your favorite mugs and cookies. You have mentioned on various occasions that you have cookies for breakfast.

Vicky: Yeah, that was one of the other books I wanna write this year is "Cookies for Breakfast" because we've started working on that cover. .

Julia: Yeah, very simply, So yeah, there's a few nods towards your background as well like your tiny sheeps.

Vicky:Somewhere there is Whiskey, Whiskey the cat up in the top.

Julia: The cats up there. The flamingo on the side as well, which is one of you--

Vicky: My flamingo and there's also eggs. I love that Eggs and chickens Vicky: I didn't spot those at first. I love my book covers so much.

Julia: Yeah, I think because your insides of your book come from your heart, it kind of makes sense to help the outside of the book, sort of speak to that, as well. And I think, obviously, the vibrancy of the colour and that's kind of something, you notice from far away. So there's a lot of books about writing books that are very minimal and very matter of fact and straightforward on the covers, and I think it stands out quite well because I think..

Vicky: I think so too. So my next question for you, and I know that a lot of people will be thinking about this. And even if they're not they should be which is why I'm gonna ask you because I know this is something that that makes your life difficult sometimes. What are the elements of a good brief? What's the best way to work with a cover designer? Absolutely, actually, I'm gonna ask you first question what absolutely drive you nuts about people and you can totally say me if you want to cause I know I can be quite demanding.

Julia: You've not been too bad actually because you generally are happy to kind of leave me to get on with things. And we kind of now we know each other fairly well, and I'm on a similar wavelength to you anyway, I think it's that it chops and changes but in the initial stages of designing a cover for someone, if a client comes to you and says, "Oh, you can do anything you like." Well, no, you need some parameters to work by because most of the time and I'm one of these designers and most other designers will have a similar kind of working practice, is that you build a package for people and obviously there's a price, but that includes only so many revisions. It's not this kind of how long is a piece of string: design something, revise it, I don't like that. And when, when you're given a set of parameters in a brief, it gives you a much better fighting chance of getting on the same wavelength as applying in terms of what they like and what will actually be good for them as well as good for that book. Oh, yeah, I think having a brief gives the client themselves a lot more clarity about what they need think about in terms of what the book will look like and who it will appeal to, but it will also give the designer a chance to get on the same wavelength as the client in terms of what they like and give them a fighting chance of designing something strong for them that will work for the book. And they'll also like, and I think, also clients must realize that what they necessarily personally like, is not necessarily what will work well for their book cover, what will attract their readers. And now, I'll qualify that because sometimes, you find the person who would be reading the book In other words, that same attraction audience, but there's a lot of occasions where I've had it where someone will kind of say, "Oh, I don't really like that and this" But it's not gonna be targeted towards you it's gonna be targeted towards your readers. So you need to think about what will attract them and what will speak to them and why so, and I think that's a big thing that people need to think about when we're designing their covers. Don't take it personally and don't design personally for you.

Vicky: I think you've got a, cause with that, because you're totally right, you've gotta have a cover that speaks to your audience. And I also think that you've as long as you don't hate it, so I think if you hate it, then it's a problem and you need to change it. But as long as you don't hate it, if it's something that's gonna work well, for your target audience, then yeah, definitely. It's important to remember that it's aimed at you, and there are tests you can do,

it's like you'd get on Facebook and run some, run some split test to see which ones test well, same way you would with headlines.

Julia: It's kind of -- there'll generally be, in the first round of designs three minimum covers, that are variants on the same idea or you know, using different pictures maybe or different text and kind of layouts to get an idea. And, yeah, testing it out on either your email list or on Facebook, that is also a great idea, and you can kind of get a response back from that and see which one kind of works or gets the most clicks or whatever. I think it's it's a sort of balance between giving them kind of strong parameters around the author's target audience and then also get their personality maybe, or kind of making the book theirs and not just too generic and kind of faceless so yeah it's really hard to put into words sometimes there's a bit of a balancing act but I think in order to do a good brief the main points are the practical side of it. So you need to have a basic idea of whether you are publishing at a certain size and there's quite a few different book formats and sizes so, different colors and different covers can be different shapes. And it sounds weird, but a certain rectangle can be short and fat and a certain other rectangle can be tall and thin and sometimes when you design your layout for a book cover, they don't always work well together, though, you chop and change them. so I think your format and size and an idea of what you want content wise as well. You know, your titles, sub title if you've got any, lurb on the back cover that you want, or photographs or specific images and colors that's useful to help, designer and get an idea. And kind of times and dates as well. It's worth-- Sometimes people come to me saying Can you design me a cover, I need it for like two weeks. Sometimes it's possible but there's quite often occasions where I'm in the middle of another project, or you just haven't got that level of the development time and research and everything else I've got to do in order to create a really good book cover is not gonna get it in two weeks. So I have turned people down. It's well worth thinking far ahead. When you're when you're kind of at you're probably edit really,

Vicky: Definitely, yeah.

Julia: A good idea of what your books is gonna be about. So yeah, it's worth approaching a designer around that time just to make sure they can fit you in and do the job to the best of their ability as well. So the Brief really is-- I'm in

the current process of writing blogs and guides about creating briefs for designers and what to think about, so yeah.

Vicky:I was gonna ask cause I know you've been creating a useful document for people to help them brief designers and things, so where can people go to find that?

Julia: It's at www.brownowldesign.com. And it will appear on the front page of the website so you'll be able to have a look at that

Vicky:Awesome.

Julia: Easy to find link.

Vicky: So when this podcast goes out, it'll all be up, I think, because we're recording this in Advance. So yeah, go to www.brownowldesign.com And is that the best place for people to start if they want to get a book cover designed with you.

Julia: Yeah, definitely, I've got a contact page on there. So have a look, there's various blog posts I've done, that are quite informative about different things and there's a guide to an illustration brief as well, so, aside from the book design, I do the illustrations as well. That kind of thing in terms of book illustration.