

behind the book cover

STORY BY

joy vanides deneen

I love holding a physical book, feeling its weight in my hands, inhaling the smell of the pages and running my fingertips over embossed or foil-stamped letters. I love that such a small object contains multitudes, wrapped in a cover that serves both form and function. Functionally, the cover needs to protect the book and display the title and name of the author. However, the cover is also the visual representation of the story within, using elements like illustration, photography, typography and hand lettering to attract the eye. A cover might even include an endorsement or blurb from a well-known author, to entice the reader to choose *this* book, amongst a sea of options.

Together, all of these components make for a unique intersection of design, storytelling and marketing. And in traditional publishing, a cover is quietly crackling with the energy and input of many people, from the author, agent and editor to art direction, sales and publicity, and, of course, the designer who works painstakingly to bring it all together.

Vi-An Nguyen

Raised in California and Washington, Vi-An Nguyen was always doodling as a child, filling notebooks with words and images. “I’ve been a lifelong lover of reading and have the thick glasses to prove it,” she says. Vi-An fell in love with the visual side of media while studying journalism at Northwestern University and worked in the magazine world for several years. She now works at Penguin Random House as an art director, designer and illustrator. Her design work includes covers for bestselling books *Such A Fun Age* by Kiley Reid, *The Prophets* by Robert Jones, Jr. and *Rebel Homemaker* by Drew Barrymore.

Book cover designers work under art directors, who guide and oversee each project. Vi-An has the unique

perspective of working in both positions. “I’ve worked with art directors with many different styles—some who get into the weeds with you about details of the design or art, and some who give you a manuscript and just tell you to do your thing. I have done great work either way! As an art director, I tend to be more of the latter style—once I’ve found the right illustrator or designer, I try to get out of their way as much as possible and the results are almost always spectacular.”

The design process begins with a brief (often with notes from the author) and the manuscript. These days, Vi-An typically reads manuscripts on her phone. “I fill my Notes app with lists of themes, symbols, moods and settings as I read. I will also take screenshots of inspiring passages to reference while I’m designing.” Vi-An particularly loves character-driven fiction and narrative nonfiction, but “as long as an author has a strong voice and point of view, the design possibilities will be exciting.” As an illustrator, she loves bold minimalism and says “it’s always thrilling to get a manuscript or brief that calls for that look.”

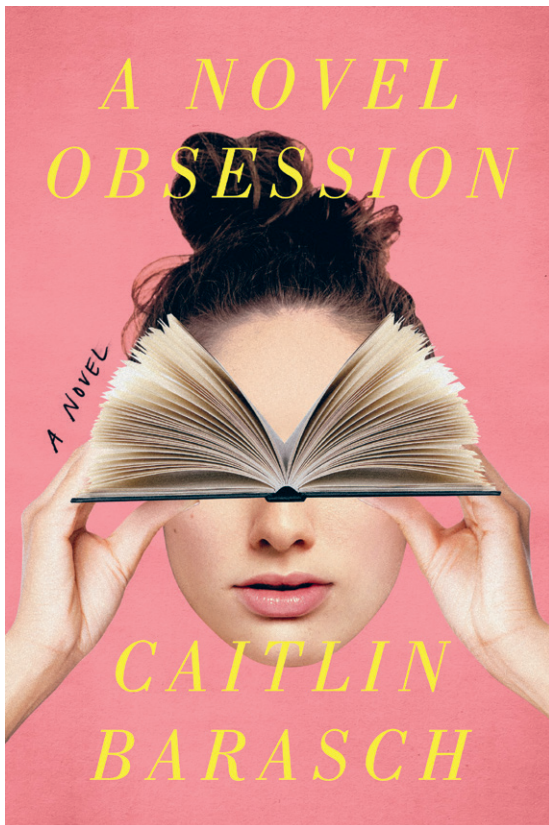
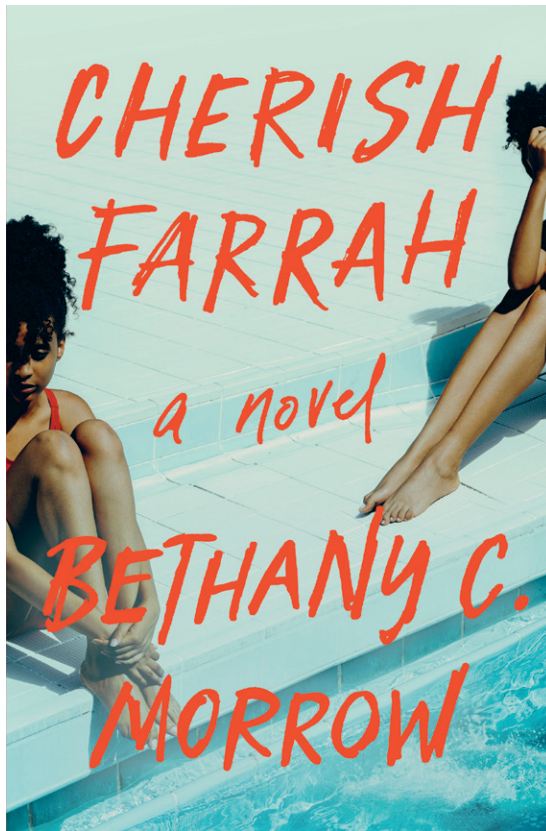
She explains that book covers can range from conceptual or “vibe-based” to more literal interpretations, featuring objects, scenes or characters from the story. For a given cover, Vi-An might work with a photograph, draw the illustrations, explore typefaces or create hand lettering. “It’s not an exact science, but generally speaking I’ll break out my paint brushes or pens and do hand lettering if something that looks

messy, emotional or exuberant is best for the book,” Vi-An explains. “I’ll gravitate toward typefaces if the book calls for something that looks authoritative, serious or has a connection to typographical history (for example, blackletter type for a gothic story). And sometimes we break all these ‘rules’ and do the opposite!”

In the case of *Darling Girl* (Dutton, 2022), Vi-An created a whimsical design for author

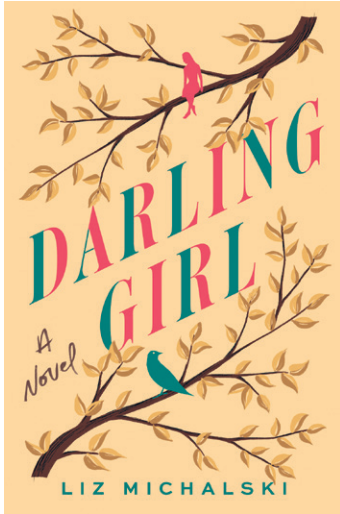
Liz Michalski’s modern-day Peter Pan reimagining. “The brief was to create a cover that emphasized the title and conveyed the magic in the story,” Vi-An says. “There were many beautiful motifs to play with, like flight and stardust. The author also mentioned that she loves the art of the Japanese painter Masaaki Sasamoto.” These elements and influences are evident in the various outtakes, especially with the use of gold, feathers and the female figure.





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 Vi-An describes Jenny Tinghui Zhang's *Four Treasures of the Sky* (Flatiron, 2022) as a dream novel for a designer: "Chinese calligraphy and art, the Pacific Ocean, fire, western landscapes, and much more give the story a deep well of visual inspiration to draw from." To read Vi-An's reflections about the design process, see cover outtakes and learn more about other book designers, visit spinemagazine.co.

COVER ITERATIONS



Vi-An initially perched the girl in a tree and then explored a delicate profile made of a curved branch, with leaves for hair. For the final design, the girl is falling through a dark sky of glittering stars and golden floating feathers. And while earlier comps had the title set in type, the final cover features Vi-An's hand lettering. "The title type evolved from Bodoni with the addition of sharp, pointed terminals on the A's and R's, sharper pointed serifs," says Vi-An, who wanted to hint at the darker elements of the story. The flourishes give a strong sense of movement, with the variations in transparency and also how the strokes weave around the feathers.

Overlapping is often employed in cover design, as a way to unify the art and title. "It does become a delicate balance between artfulness and legibility," Vi-An says. "Editors often want less overlap and we designers often want more, but the words are inextricable from the art so it often makes sense as a design choice, especially for novels. Nonfiction cover type tends to be more straightforward. But again, there are always exceptions! That's the fun thing about books—there's so much opportunity for creative rule-breaking."

vi-annguyen.com
@frenchchips

FINAL COVER



Dominique Jones

After graduating with a degree in graphic design from Mercy College, Brooklyn native Dominique Jones was thrilled to be offered an internship with publisher Penguin Random House. As a design intern, she learned the nitty-gritty aspects of production and how all of the elements of a book jacket work together. Her internship eventually turned into a full-time position as a designer, and at the same time, she took advantage of continuing education classes at the School of Visual Arts. She vividly remembers attending an exhibition with her photography class, where the instructor asked everyone to choose one image that they wanted to discuss. Dominique was drawn “Adeline in Barrettes” by Micaiah Carter, a striking photograph of the back of a young Black woman’s head, her braids adorned with colourful plastic clips. “It reminded me of growing up, getting your hair done,” Dominique says. “You felt like you were the baddest on the playground, with barrettes and braids in your hair. [The photo] was just breathtaking, honestly.”

Fast forward a year after the exhibition, Dominique recalls the day she received an email at work about a forthcoming book of poems: *Black Girl, Call Home* by Jasmine Mans (Berkley, 2021). Attached was a photo that the author wanted to use. It was “Adeline in Barrettes.” And it was a full circle moment for Dominique. She knew that she had been “aiming for the right direction for life ahead, for the best life and my happiest self.”

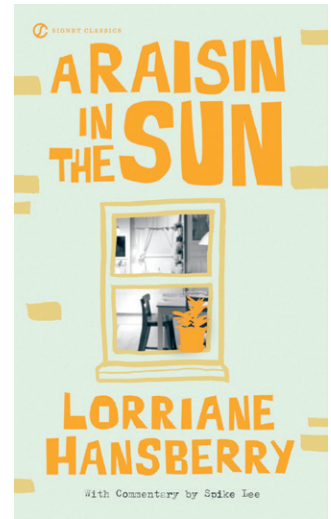
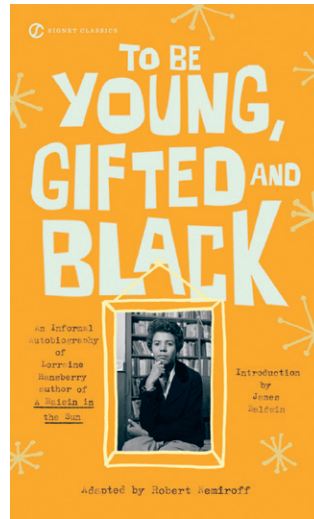
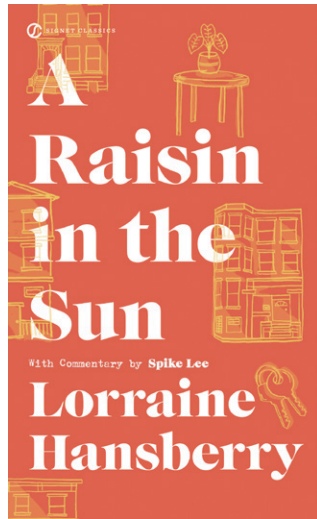
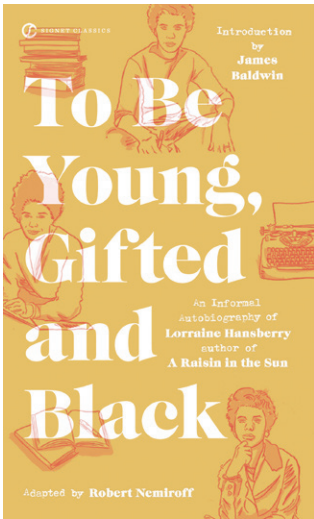
One of the main challenges with the cover design of *Black Girl, Call Home* was selecting the typeface to pair with Carter’s photograph. “As easy and simple as that sounds, it’s also complicated,” Dominique says. She initially considered hand lettering but then discarded the idea, as she didn’t want to put too much attention on the type. With such a strong image, Dominique knew that readers would see the photograph first and the type second. In the end, she opted for a thin, sans-serif typeface for the title and author’s name. “[The type] is not competing with your eye. It has a subtle, nice touch, where everything’s not too heavy and it feels just right.”

In contrast, Dominique created bold hand lettering on the repackaged covers of two Lorraine Hansberry titles: the autobiography *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*

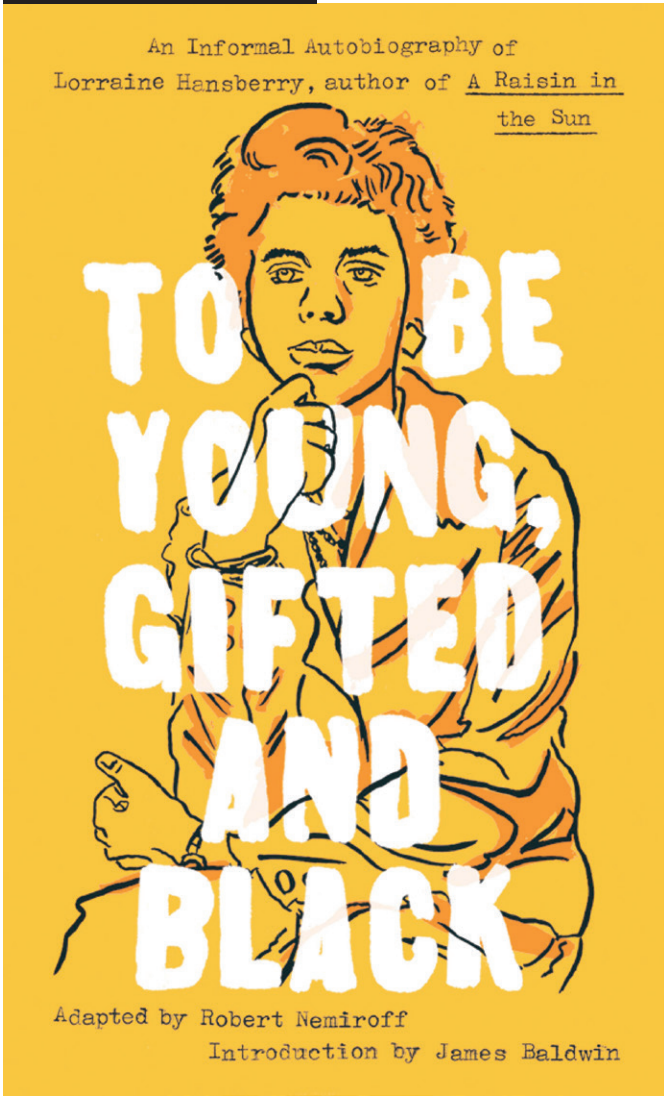


and the original screenplay of *A Raisin in the Sun*. The direction was for large type and a striking image. “I was so afraid at first, but then my art director [Kaitlin Kall] told me to step away from the computer. Sometimes you get so absorbed into the computer that you forget the regular [tools] like pen and pencil.” Drawing the illustrations by hand turned out to be the best approach for the two covers.

Another challenge was to ensure that the books worked visually both as a set and alone. For the key images, they chose a person (Hansberry for the autobiography) and a place (the south Chicago apartment building for *A Raisin in the Sun*). Dominique drew both illustrations by hand, pulling the orange from *A Raisin in the Sun* into *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*. For the titles, she used a trick she learned in publishing: find the perfect type and redraw it with a marker. That personal touch is evident in both covers, as the edges of the letterforms are rough and the shape and counters of repeated letters are slightly different. For the subtitles (such as “An In-




FINAL SERIES DESIGN





formal Autobiography”), a prior edition used a typewriter-inspired typeface. For the new covers, Dominique’s art director typed out the words on an actual typewriter and sent her the scans. “It’s that cool effect that you can get with the little things,” Dominique says with a smile. “Now I have a typewriter just because of that.”

Some of Dominique’s other notable cover designs include the repackaging of a number of Terry McMillan’s novels (*Waiting to Exhale*, *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* and more) in collaboration with illustrator Brittany Harris.

When she thinks of dream projects, her eyes light up when she speaks of her desire to design a cookbook. But ultimately, Dominique enjoys the “new slate” of each project and the chance to work on a wide variety of titles. “You’re always challenging yourself to think outside of the box,” she says. “[Reading] all of these diverse stories and then being able to expand in different creative ways... it’s very pleasing to me. It’s very challenging but also very rewarding in the end.” 

dominiquejones.work

“I love the process of what it takes to design a cover. You can bring a book to life in so many ways.”

—DOMINIQUE JONES

RESOURCE



Blk + Brwn Book Designers

Founded in 2020 by Dominique Jones, Blk + Brwn Book Designers was “created by and for underrepresented communities to showcase their work, find job opportunities, share their experiences and feel seen.” The website features a freelance directory and blog, as well as The Hub, a private community space where creatives can chat, ask questions about negotiating rates and contracts, share resources and more. Dominique also dreams of turning Blk + Brwn Book Designers into a nonprofit, to benefit young designers. “It’s just the beginning,” she says. “I hope that [BBBD] will shed light on underrepresented creatives and designers. And hopefully allow us a spot at the table, to create our own table, in an industry that’s predominantly white.”

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