

# Peter Mendelsund:

by Stefan Kamph

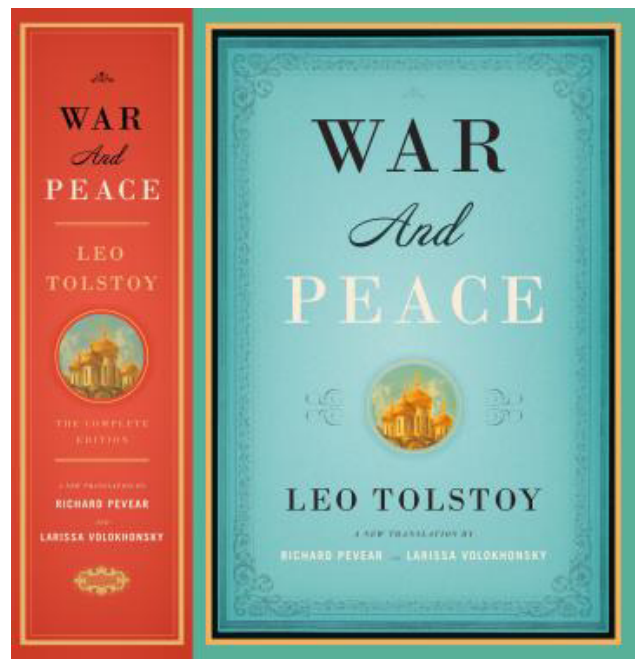
A cover (or jacket) is a token for remembering a book: after its initial task of enticing a consumer, it will be opened, closed, looked at and handled dozens of times. After the sale, matters are in the reader's hands, and a gawking author photograph can haunt his experience as much as a well-planned cover can illuminate it. Still, he traverses two worlds: carrying the book as object and then diving into its textual content, forgetting (one hopes) all superficial cues.

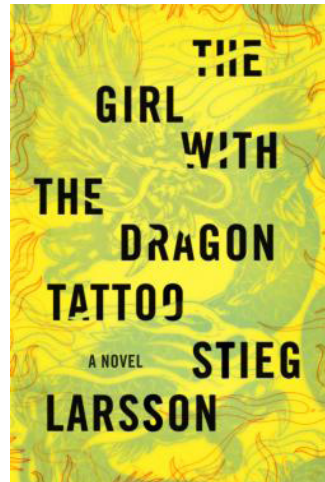
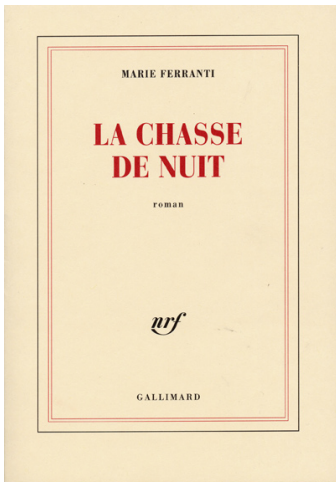
A lifelong reader and Russophile, Peter Mendelsund entered the design world seven years ago, securing a position with the acclaimed in-house team at Knopf. Trained as a concert pianist, he sought more productive work to earn money after the birth of his daughter. "Someone must have been pumping narcotics into the water fountains at Random House the day I came in,"<sup>1</sup> he says. His selling points? An eye for color and composition, and familiarity with the books themselves. Today his designs fill bookstore windows. But translating the ambiguous, ethereal literary universe into concrete visual signs has never been easy. Thus Mendelsund's style cautiously fuses abstraction and wit, leaving room for the relationship between a book and a single reader.

When Mendelsund met with Richard Pevear to discuss the jacket for a new *War and Peace* translation, they both brought the same unconditional demand: no representations of the characters. I can sympathize: my searches on both sides of the Atlantic for a lady-less copy of *The Portrait of a Lady* have turned up fruitless. The scenes in a book should be privately imagined and deeply personal. I ask Mendelsund if this leads to performance anxiety: "Absolutely," he says. "What's great about literature . . . is its amorphous quality, its ability to transport. The moment when you have to make something concrete . . . That is frankly really depressing."<sup>2</sup> Every design is necessarily a funeral, a pinned-down creature committed to visual form.

Two expert opinions on jacketing differ subtly in their implications. In 1967 the vehemently old-school designer Adrian Wilson wrote, "Jacketing is much more than packaging because the product inside is not cornflakes or detergent but human thought and spirit."<sup>3</sup> His designs are restrained, hand-lettered and almost primitively composed. Charles Rosner, a decade earlier: "In a space [of] six inches by eight inches it has been necessary to convey visually, by word or design, the feeling and character of a book which often may run into four or five hundred pages."<sup>4</sup> The first opinion conveys solemn reverence,

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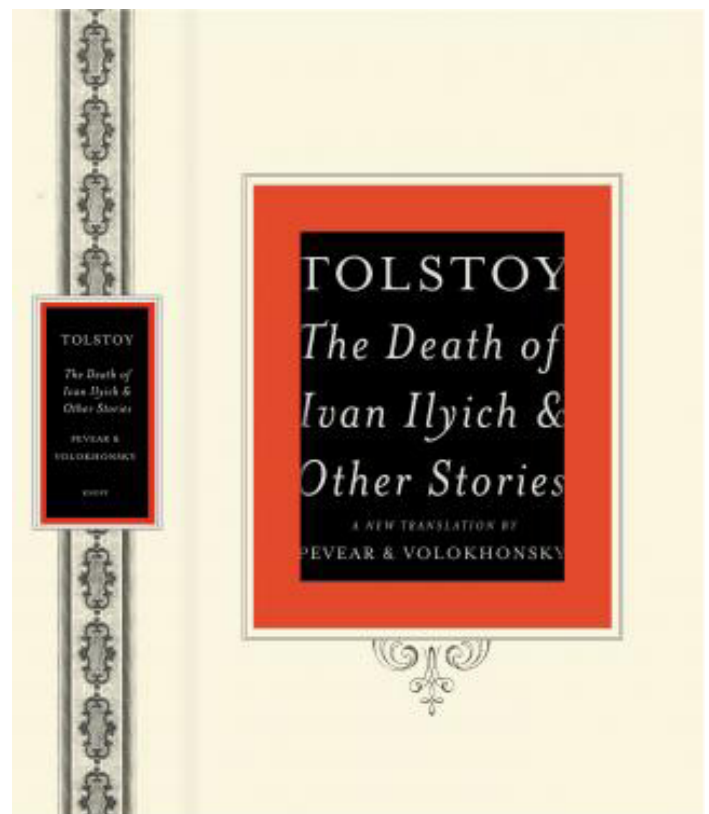
the second a need to distill and communicate. Taken to ideological extremes, the first leads to the uniform typographic covers of French **Gallimard** editions; the other to pulp paperbacks and movie tie-ins.

A designer has two mandates: make something pretty and signal the book's genre. "Hopefully," Mendelsund says, "you're allowed the freedom to express something deeper that's in the prose . . . but really, our mission statement is just to do those two things." Moments of humor and surprise in a cover are a designer's "little acts of civil disobedience," says Mendelsund, and he "would like to think that if you're a good reader there are little exegetical clues you can sneak in."<sup>2</sup> The court artist hides his private mark in the appointed painting.

Of course, the publisher and designer may not agree on what constitutes proper communication. Mendelsund mentions his recent work on a **Stieg Larsson** novel: a cold, bleak, hauntingly quiet Scandinavian mystery. His first proposal was a blank snow-white cover with a blind-debossed title. "Marketing went completely ballistic,"<sup>2</sup> he says. He dragged them to a bookstore and demonstrated how much a minimal design can stand apart. Still, they rejected it. Another Larsson book inspired a muted typographic layout entwined with a girl's long hair, preserving a feeling of simple ambiguity: vetoed again. The accepted designs are brightly colored or awash in motifs.

But editorial intervention can be a plus, says Mendelsund, especially in tempering the guilt of modifying what has previously belonged entirely to an author. Copy editors have already had their way with a book when it arrives on his desk, so he is not the first to manipulate the author's work. The hardest books for Mendelsund to design are the ones he loves the most, particularly Dostoyevsky and **Tolstoy**. "I always try to bear in mind the triviality of what I'm doing,"<sup>2</sup> says Mendelsund. This mentality helps hurry the process along, but

*"It's hard to work when you are encumbered by the anxiety of influence. I am pretty much blissfully unaware."*



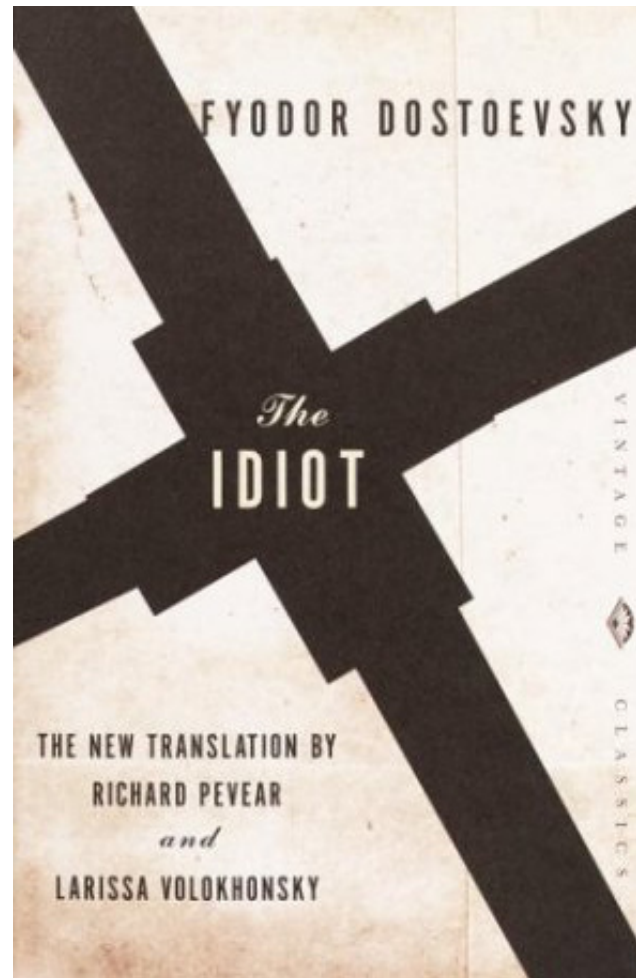
it may not be true. Books are not only judged but identified by their covers. They are tangible objects that must be fetched and carried as long as they are read. Mendelsund had a “very difficult”<sup>2</sup> time designing *The Idiot*, finally committing to the blocky constructivist design that I, as a result, have always associated with the story.

While its responsibilities are grave, design begets a wonderful arena for creativity, every generation of covers forming the names and faces of otherwise amorphous text. While beloved classics present a humbling design challenge, they are also most appealing to Mendelsund. He lists Calvino, Borges, and Thomas Pynchon as authors whose work he would love to design because of their “narrative, story-telling brilliance” and “stunningly imaginative visual landscapes.”<sup>1</sup> A personal affinity for a story is both the threat and the potential reward behind a design project.

When pressed for his favorite jacket design, Mendelsund first recalls a book that he has not read: *Transrational Boog*,<sup>2</sup> an obscure title by the Russian artist Olga Rosanova. He flips through a MoMA exhibition catalog to find the work in question: a tiny, square kraft-paper cover with beautifully set Cyrillic typography. A misshapen cutout heart sits large and off-center, adorned with a single white button. Mendelsund has no idea what the book says, but the simple, beautiful arrangement of the cover has carved out a place for itself in his memory. The jacket remains separate from the text, sheltering it, advertising and interpreting it perhaps, but never entirely matching it.

### Works Cited:

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[http://designrelated.com/news/feature\\_view?id=16](http://designrelated.com/news/feature_view?id=16).
2. Peter Mendelsund, telephone interview with Stefan Kamph, February 27, 2009. (Including second pull quote.)
3. Adrian Wilson. *The Design of Books*. Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1974. 101.
4. Steven Heller and Seymour Chwast. *Jackets Required*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1995. 16.



More images of Mendelsund's work can be viewed at his website, [mendelsund.com](http://mendelsund.com).