

Interview with book designer Melanie Shellito

Debbie introduces the topic of eBook cover design, followed by a detailed Q & A with Melanie Shellito, Principal of branding, strategy and design firm Artezen: <http://www.Artezen.com>

Debbie: Hello, this is Debbie Weil with Beta Author Boost. Our guest today is Melanie Shellito, who is a branding expert and a book cover designer. Our topic today is eBook cover design. Melanie has designed custom covers for authors since 2006. She's done over 500 covers, and she figures that probably 75% of them are nonfiction.

She has a degree in graphic design from Illinois—Wesleyan University. She lives in Bloomington, Illinois. In 2003, she went out and launched her own design/branding firm with her husband. She's worked with a range of clients.

The reason she likes doing eBook covers – which she calls an informal branch of her company – is because, “Doing eBook covers and working with authors are like mini branding projects to me, and I love working with creative authors. We tackle every book cover project as if it were launching a brand. Meaning, how to convey a complex message or concept as a compelling visual and a visual that inspires people to take action.”

That's a perfect setup for talking about covers and eBook covers. Let me start with that. Are there best practices in book cover designs, in an overall way, and can you share them with us? What does “visually powerful” mean when it comes to a book cover?

Melanie: First of all, let me quickly say “thank you so much” for having me on this call. I'm really excited to talk to you and your authors, and answer questions. I've worked with so many different authors, some of them experienced and some brand new. There are still a lot of different questions and different levels of “I know what's best,” versus “I am putting myself in your hands. Do something amazing.”

When I got started doing this, print was the way you did books. As of yet, eBooks had not come on to the scene. At least you knew you had these print books, and you had to figure that if they're sitting at the shelf at your local [Barnes & Noble](#), you had about 8 seconds as someone's eye scans the shelf. You only have 8 seconds to grab their eye so that they pick it up, read the back, flip through it, and decide if they want to take it home with them.



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[Amazon](#) started making that shift in that you had to make a book cover that looked good enough on a thumbnail, about 600 pixels, to at least make you glance at it over the line up of all the other books that may have shown up, doing a genre search. So the game changed from being in a busy store, trying to attract attention with all the books jammed elbow to elbow.

Now you have to go to a website, navigate it, find what you want, and be attracted by a tiny picture of a book. So you have to get that message across. When it comes to compelling visuals, the thing that most often comes up is that they have spent months or years writing this book, and everything in it is important.

But when it comes to the cover, every bit of minutia from the story cannot and should not go on the cover, because visually, it becomes completely unintelligible to someone viewing it for the first time. It has a whole story to you, the author, because you've already read the book.

But for someone trying to get a glimpse of “What is this book going to offer to me? What is it going to solve or improve in my life? What am I going to take away from it?” That's what we need to solidify. I have a questionnaire that my authors fill out, and it gets those juices flowing to figure out what the key concept is, and then a few sub-concepts. But how do we visually pick one key concept to take away, and then put that visually into a cover that's bold?

Debbie: That's a great setup for a conversation. In a minute, I'll actually read out some of the questions you ask in your creative brief that you give to authors. But before we do that, let's talk a little bit more about eBook covers. Leaving aside illustrating a specific concept from a book, are there best practices on certain colors? Yellow seems to work for me. Or, how much detail should be on the cover?

Seth Godin and some of his [Domino Project](#) books – there was no text at all on the cover. Are there any rules of thumb about thumbnail covers as you would see them and also in other online stores that authors should know about?

Melanie: I think that there are some colors that punch a little harder on a web page, those being the reds, oranges, and the yellows. But I think it's really easy to get hung up on that. I had an author come to me and say, “I read somewhere that green covers sell better.” I don't even know what that means—in what genre? Better than what? Maybe green covers in the financial sector simply blend in, because they're all green. I don't know.



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But it struck me as funny. I don't think you can really make a blanket statement like that and think that it's going to apply. I think what's most important – you mentioned **Seth Godin's** book, and he is so brave. His stuff is going to sell regardless, because of who he is and people know him.

But in all honesty, the minimalist approach is best. Any page that you go to on [Amazon](#), there's a lot going on. We're all familiar with the site layout, we navigate it pretty well, but visually, there's a lot going on. If your book cover really does illuminate details, it gets lost in there.

When you shrink it down to a postage stamp size, is there a bold color that's going to stand out a little better? Or maybe you put a bold cover, but then you put a lot of little pictures all over it. Then it doesn't look like anything.

I don't know that I can say with any certainty that there is a color that is going to read better. I think that's something that you need to consider for your audience. Maybe for your yoga studio, a purple or serene color would work well, whereas a book about the stock market may respond better to reds or green.

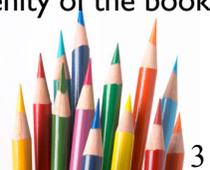
Again, you run the risk of blending in. Maybe you should zag when everyone else zigs, and look at what's out there. Look at the top sellers and maybe, “I'm seeing an abundance of white covers with red text. Let's shake it up a little bit, so when someone does a search, mine will stand out.”

That might actually be a better indicator of where you should go and how you can stand out, than making a blanket statement. My recommendation is to always research what's going on in your genre, and the competitive books out there.

Debbie: I do hear you saying, “Less is more,” in terms of the design of any book cover. Can you talk a little bit about the relationship between the cover and the title? You always see the full title, and then you see the subtitle, and the author's name next to it. Are there any tips or tricks that we should be aware of, in terms of how those two elements should play off of each other?

Melanie: What's nice about the way [Amazon](#) does that is that it does put the subtitle sort of front and center for you. A lot of times you want the title to be big. When someone's looking at a small picture, that title definitely has to be legible. The subtitle is traditionally smaller. It can become unreadable at that size.

What's nice is that you have that subtitle right up there, and easy to read. So then people can just focus on the graphic of the cover for what it is - this little icon that speaks to you, the energy of the book, or the soft serenity of the book. I'm not sure if you're asking what's the best way to format that.



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I can't really speak to that. I just think it's nice that you don't have to rely purely on a thumbnail to get your subtitle and any additional stuff across. You don't have to worry about making your name gigantic.

Debbie: That's exactly what I was asking. Let me jump to your creative brief. A client wants something – a new website, a new logo – and the agency basically gives the client some homework and asks a bunch of questions. So I'm going to read out some of your questions to share with the Beta Authors.

You asked your author who's commissioning a cover from you, “If you have a cover idea, tell me what it is and describe it. What message would you like your cover to convey? Who is your target audience? What style or feeling is appropriate to your book subject - bright, dark, whimsical, serious?”

And then you also ask authors to give you two or three book covers that they like, and explain why. So given that direction, you're pointing authors in terms of what they need to tell you. Can you talk a little bit on how an author should work with any book cover designer?

What's the most productive way to work with a cover designer? If they don't have a creative brief, should you be supplying them with those answers? Are there general rules for how to work with a cover designer to get the best results?

Melanie: That's a great question. It expands past the cover design realm. If you're going to have someone do a logo or web page design, these are great questions when you're working with anything creative. It gets your creative juices flowing too. One of the things that I would say that is great about when you go through the cover questionnaire is, don't just whip out the quickest and easiest answer.

Dig deep. Maybe by the time you've finished up the book, there's a little bit of something different in your mind. Maybe you've realized that this book could appeal to a whole secondary audience as well. The time you spend filling out this questionnaire is time well spent.

When you're working with any cover designer and the time that they spend with you, digging into your brain and trying to understand the vision in your head – that's all time you're paying for. So if you can spell that out ahead of time, you've got a piece of paper to refer back to if things veer off course. I think it makes the process much smoother and less frustrating.



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It's a good way to go about it. I do think that 90% of the authors come to me with, "I have this idea in my head. Here's what I'm thinking." It's good to write those things down. It's something that I probably won't produce exactly as you described, but there are usually some good pearls of stuff in there that we like to strengthen.

The way I work that has been proven to be really successful – whether you come to me with an idea or description or not - I will always provide you with two cover concepts. One of them will always be my interpretation of what you're asking for—the terms that are visually the strongest, but using your suggestions and your vision.

The second one will be my approach. That approach may be very similar to yours, or it may be a wildly different direction. But it will give you food for thought. "Here's how my idea has been realized in a strong visual, and here's what the designer had in their mind – wow, I had never thought of that."

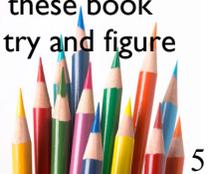
It gives you two directions that you can consider. I think that in all honesty, most "creatives" will come back to you with that. I think where the author gets done a disservice is when they say, "Here's what I want. Here's my sketch." And the designer takes it and becomes mouse controlled, and creates it exactly.

I don't know that there are many authors out there who feel strongly that they are a designer, and that they are the best designer they could ever hire. If they were, they would probably be doing it. So if someone is just becoming the execution person for your vision, you're probably not getting the high level of thinking that you should be.

I think that's why it's always good to get a couple of concepts. Find someone who's not just going to be purely executorial, but is going to evaluate your ideas and take that to a concept that's going to be a strong result. Because ultimately, that's what everyone wants – a compelling result.

That's what you get by doing this questionnaire, and asking for them to think outside of the box sometimes. With regards to the book covers, such as pasting URLs of book covers that you like – this can be really helpful. Maybe the books aren't in your genre; maybe there are pieces that you like. You don't have to love the whole cover.

But sometimes I'll get an author who has this idea that they've laid out to me, and then they'll give me samples that are completely different. You sort of go back and say, "Talk to me about why you love what you love on these book covers. Talk to me about what is speaking to you, and then let's try and figure



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out how we use these things that you're responding to and how we translate that into your vision.”

Because sometimes the two are just really different, and they don't even realize it. It really helps to know the kind of stuff that you respond to as an author, and as a consumer. You've seen these books, and what really trips your trigger? What makes you go, “Wow, that would be a neat book to read”? Those are all valuable things, both aesthetically and practically.

Debbie: That is fascinating. Tell us a little bit about the revision process, because that's part of the way you do a cover package and I think most cover designers do it. Can you clarify what that means? What can an author expect? What happens in your mind when they say, “I like the first one, but I kind of like the second one, and I also like these other two samples. Can you combine these?” How does it work on your end, and how does it work best?

Melanie: Usually, if we've had a productive conversation, then by the time we get to the point of submitting the two concepts, I have never had both concepts be so completely off base that the author asked, “Where were you getting that?” It's just never happened. We have better communication than that.

So generally speaking, clients either go, “This is fantastic.” Or we do some minor tweaks. They might say, “Could you brighten up this orange to be a little bit more yellow? Could you soften this?” Things like that. Those are typical kinds of edits by the time we've chosen a concept. “I would like this to have a little bit more emphasis in this space. I would like the font to have more contrast.”

Minor stuff like that. It's usually not full redesign type things. Occasionally an author will change midstream, and it's happened once or twice for reasons no one can predict. Then we re-evaluate where we are. Maybe they fill out a new brief with these new directions, and then it's sort of a quoted basis.

But honestly, I think that's happened once, so it's not even worth mentioning. Then what happens is, once a direction is chosen, maybe they say, “I like most everything about this, but I like the type treatment on book cover #2.” So we ask them, “What works for you on that type treatment? Let's incorporate it here.”

It's usually not a matter of copying it from one and pasting it on to another. It never is. We work on that and finesse it to exactly where it needs to be. I allow three rounds of that kind of stuff. Sometimes there are five changes the first time around, and two the next time. By the third time, they love it. It's usually pretty



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seamless. I do allow three rounds. Once it gets beyond that, then we start talking about an hourly rate. But again, it's very rare.

Debbie: The other thing I find really helpful about this is thinking about these really cheap cover design services like [BookBaby](#). I'm starting to read between the lines and see what you don't get if you go with [BookBaby](#). They say they do it for \$149, and I can't remember if you get two samples or not.

But this multi-level way of thinking about it, you probably don't get that. I'm actually advising the Beta Authors to spend a little more and go with a professional designer. Let's talk a little bit about technical specs, pixels, resolutions, and sizes on the web page.

I think a lot of people want to understand what they need to know about this, and how the cover will look on different eReaders – on the [Kindle](#) versus the [iPad](#). They want to know enough so that they can direct the cover designer, or know that what they're getting is the right thing.

Melanie: There is a lot of mystery surrounding it, but if I were to give you the three-sentence solution, here's what it is: if you forget everything else, remember that 600 pixels by 800 pixels will cover pretty much any base. You might have it show up on [Barnes & Noble](#) with a little white strip on the left and right, because their viewer is a little bit different.

But 600x800 pixels will work for both the [Kindle](#) on Amazon, [Barnes & Noble Nook](#), and the [iPad](#). So that proportion will be the bare minimum of what you can use effectively, and make it work across the board.

Debbie: What about resolution?

Melanie: The flip side of that – resolution has less to do with it when it comes to online than what you think. Everyone talks about 72 DPI, or somewhere between 167 and 300 DPI. Here's the thing – DPI are Dots Per Inch. It's a term from the printing industry, and it has to do with the resolution of the offset printers.

When it comes to resolution on screen, there is no ink being laid down from a printer. It's all pixels. So DPI is actually not even a concern, to tell you the truth. If you have your 600x800 pixels, that supersedes any resolution issue if you are only working with an eBook online. If it's print, it's a whole other beast and we can talk about that later.

What's more important is that for instance, [Barnes & Noble](#) and [Kindle](#) have maximum file sizes that they will allow. If you have a 600x800 pixel image at 300



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DPI, that's full print resolution – it's probably not going to make it within their maximum size requirement. You can knock that down to 72 DPI and it will look the same. It will be a fraction of the file size.

Don't get hung up on the DPI, deal with the pixels. You want RGB, not CMYK, if you're just doing it online. And deal more about the final file size. JPEG is pretty universal. The [Nook](#) will take the GIFs and the PNGs, but JPEG is universal. Also, watch the compression.

If you have it at 300 DPI for maximum resolution, and then if your solution is to compress that JPEG down to about a 3 – it's going to look terrible. You're far better off leaving that JPEG compression at a full 10, and just dropping the resolution to 72 DPI. People get hung up on the DPI, maybe because they've been beaten about it by their designer about resolution. It's not the game changer.

Debbie: Say an author is going to launch first with an eBook, but they're considering a print edition down the road. And they're self-publishing, so this might be print on demand or a short-run printer. Can they commission the same cover – does it need to be exactly the same cover, or could you put more detail on it for the print cover?

I'm assuming then that you will get back from the designer, several different kinds of files. You'll get the RGB 600x800 and 72 DPI for the eBook cover, and then you'll get something else. Of course, the print cover will have the spine and the back. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Melanie: I could probably do a day-long seminar on that. This is why we work the way we do, because you can never predict the future. Right now you may be thinking, “Just an eBook is fine.” We build our files at 300 DPI, print quality resolution, for our two top programs that we offer.

The reason is because too many times something has happened. “I've had an offer, someone is going to sell my book at this event. I need to have some printed ones.” Well, guess what? Your book cover was made by a designer who only designed it as an eBook, and now you're scurrying around, trying to get one remade that looks similar.

And you're starting from scratch. You're paying a print designer now, because that guy doesn't know what he was doing. So it definitely pays to think big and plan for massive success and print runs up front. We don't charge extra, that's just how we work, for the top two. We do offer print packages for marketing materials.



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So if you came back to us in a year and said, “Hey, I bought the pro package. I'm going to be doing a print run.” We'll say, “Great!” And we pull your files off of a back up, and we're essentially ready to go. Over the years, I've had authors come to me who got messed up. “I had this cover, I don't even know where the designer is anymore, but all I have is the eBook cover.” So it has to be recreated, and those images aren't available.

So we say, “Let's deliberately change your cover, but make it clear that this is the same book.” I don't think that's fatal, but it's a hassle for the author if they didn't want to change the cover. “Sorry, there's nothing we can do.” So we always try to plan in advance for our authors, and make that an option.

Debbie: So you're saying that you agree on the image, and then you create that image in several different formats. And one of them is this high resolution, 300 DPI. So you agree on the image, and then you as the designer will give the author the different kinds of files that they need for either a print cover or eBook cover.

Melanie: Exactly. When I'm designing these, we've agreed on the concept and they've approved it. Then we go into full production with high resolution images. Honestly if need be, if they take this book, and it's eBook only and they call me up a month later and they say, “My local [Barnes & Noble](#) is going to do a book signing. I need posters.” I could print your cover for you on high resolution.

That's why we have several packages. Two of those packages do incorporate print marketing items, because I think a lot of authors really like the ability to hand out a little paper card sized promo, book mark, or postcard at events. So we make that option available to them as part of the package.

Debbie: I love the idea of the bookmark.

Melanie: It's huge. And now with [QR codes](#), it's so great. You can put a QR code on the back of that bookmark or business card. Someone scans it with their smart phone, and now they're on your page on [Amazon](#), or your web page. There they are – buy now, and you're done. It's fantastic.

Debbie: Oh wow, I love that idea.

Melanie: Then finally, the author decides that they're going to do a print on demand. Depending on who's publishing their book, that printer is going to have certain specs. It has everything to do with how thick their pages are. So they would need to provide the spine width and a lot of details that the printer or publisher will provide to us, and we will create the full print file with the bleeds, and the



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crops, and the back cover with the author photo or bio or whatever you want on there.

We set up that whole file, and it's ready to go. That's not part of the package that I showed you, because we're focusing on eBooks. But it's simply an extension of that; you don't need to recreate the wheel. We're halfway there already. It's just a matter of getting those printer specs and setting up the back cover and spine.

Debbie: The last question I have may seem a little strange, but there are so many eBook cover designers out there who seem to specialize in Gothic Romance – trees swaying at night, castles, a damsel in distress and thriller covers. I guess that's because a lot of eBooks are in that genre. Would you say that it's not a good idea to go to a cover designer and say, “I have this nonfiction book on this really serious business topic. Will you design me a cover?”

There seem to be fewer designers who are doing nonfiction eBook covers. Is that like the biggest “no-no,” or could you say, “I really like that romance cover. Can you change it to my idea?”

Melanie: Sexiest stock market book ever. There could very well be some talented book designers out there who can cross genres really successfully. I have been out there searching, I like to cruise through their sites and see what they're doing. But in all honesty, you may find that you have more frustration or maybe they're just not as “tuned in” to speaking your language.

You might be settling in for a bumpier ride. It may turn out well, though. I did one romance book cover once, but by and large, the books that I do – about 25% of them are works of fiction, and the rest tend to be autobiographies, instructionals, and truly nonfiction type books. I think that I'm just a little more geared to speaking the language, to knowing the genre, to keeping tabs on what's going on in the market, and what else people may see as they're searching for a book about investing.

What are they going to see when they're out there, and how does your book compare to what's out there? So I think it's one of those things where you can certainly stretch, and go find someone who's working in a whole different type of industry. You just might be a little bit more challenged.

Debbie: That's what I figured you would say, but I just wanted to clarify that. Let's open up the phones, and first, a huge thank you to Mazie, who met you at this neat marketing conference she went to. Mazie told me about you, and that was very



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fortuitous. The phones are open. Mazie and Jeanne, do either of you have a question?

Jeanne: I think you've probably answered everything. Do you have a preference of a simple line drawing, versus a photograph, versus a font treatment, given that you have constraints of things looking good in such small formats?

Debbie: Great question, I forgot to ask that – quirky line drawings, versus an image, versus different fonts and typefaces.

Melanie: I think there are definitely some big missteps you can do with regards to typography. Honestly, typography can set the whole mood for a book cover. In fact, I've seen some pretty compelling book covers that are purely a gorgeous type treatment. I'm a typography sucker myself, so a really well done typography can set a great mood.

As far as illustration versus photo, I've done both. I think where things tend to run amok is if you're trying to layer too many things. Maybe there's a background of a subtle image. Or one of my favorites is when an author will come to me with their own photos, and they want to do a montage. I really think it's more about a simple, dynamic image, or how you use the negative space, or how you weave that typography into the space or image – more than photo versus illustration.

Some concepts are just better conveyed through an illustration, and that is what it is. On the other hand, I've taken some pretty complex imagery and pared it down to one simple, beautiful item – just sitting on a colored field. I did a book for a woman about post-traumatic stress, and she had this idea of showing a whole filmstrip series of pictures of two officers folding a flag. It's a really neat concept, but I told her, “I get what you're going for, but you're going to see 36 tiny pictures of the steps of folding a flag – it's not going to look like anything, unfortunately.”

What we ended up doing for her was just a solid white field, with just the folded flag sitting in the middle of this barren white field. I centered that. It was so different from what she wanted that I didn't know what she was going to think. She saw it and she said, “Oh my gosh! It's so simple, but it's so alone and lonely in the middle of that white space. That's perfect.”

And that was it. That's all it took for her, to see how beautiful and touching something simple could be, the right image and the right setting – not huge, but tiny, in the middle of this cover. It looks great on a thumbnail. It looks great in



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print. It was just simple. I don't think it matters, illustration or photo. It just depends on what's going to capture that the very best.

Debbie: When you get concepts back, do you think it's best to view them at 600x800 so that you get that perspective?

Melanie: It's definitely a good idea. Oftentimes, when we're putting together concepts, we're using “comping” images. We do end up purchasing those high resolution images. So in the beginning when we're still trying to sort it out, they're just low resolution “comping” images. They're a little blurry, a little pixelated, and there's usually a watermark in them. We try to minimize that, but it is what it is.

Definitely look at it small, to get an overall feel. But there are some distracting elements that are going to show up in that early concept, just to be aware of. But overall, I would be real about shrinking it down and say, “The scale of my title should be a little bigger, because I'm having a hard time reading it at this size.” It's all something that we work through.

Debbie: Thank you. Mazie, are you there?

Mazie: I'm so thrilled to hear Melanie – this is fabulous. Debbie, you have to know that I have my list of things that have to get done, relative to getting this book out. One of my big issues was a cover designer. I was at a complete loss for a cover designer, so I sent that out to the universe, and then I met Melanie.

When we first started chatting, we weren't even discussing book covers. We were just discussing, and some how it came up in the conversation. I almost leaped into her lap. I really appreciate all that you've said so far today because it's very clear to me what the process is. I just feel relieved that all I have to really do now is get the inside of the book together, which is enough of a job, rather than having to worry about what the outside is going to look like.

After the eBook has been written and we have a chance to sit back – is that when we try to figure out what our overall message is? Even though I have a concept of my overall message now that I'm writing it, I can see as I plug along that it kind of changes. It doesn't waver very far, but it gets more fine-tuned and more explicit in my own mind. What do you usually suggest to authors as far as narrowing down the millions of things they're trying to accomplish with their book?

Melanie: I do think if your book is still under construction, it's probably best to wait. I do think that the writing process is organic, and things happen as you're writing.



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Usually when there's an editing phase, that will often times be going on simultaneously with the book cover design work.

So maybe the book has to be in its next phase, it's out of the author's hands and it's been handed off to the next stage in that game. But essentially, the writing is complete – that's usually the time. Then they can buckle down. It's fresh on their mind, they've completed it, and now they can start focusing on the questionnaire. Then we start on the cover.

Usually by the time the editing and interior formatting is done, we've essentially wrapped up our cover, too. In a perfect world, both elements come together at the same time. I send over the cover file for the formatter to embed, you upload the images to [Amazon](#), you get everything posted, and it's all away.

I would say if the book is still under writing, you should hold off. But it's good to have that questionnaire in front of you, so that you have those ideas in your head.

Debbie: Do you read the manuscripts, or do you rely on the author to tell you?

Melanie: I don't read them. Sometimes I'm not even provided the full manuscript. That's why that synopsis is so important. The burden is a bit on the author to gel the key points to be able to speak to what this book is about. It's the same sort of synopsis that they may put on the back cover of the book, so they have to be able to speak to it.

Sometimes the author will provide certain key chapters. "I really would like you to read these specific chapters to get a feel for this character." That has happened before, but it's not common. Usually it's a lot more back and forth conversations with the authors. If I were to read everyone's book, I would do about 5 people a year.

It's just not practical, and in the end, the author knows the key details of their book better than anyone. So I rely on them for that.

Debbie: That totally makes sense. Thank you so very much, that was absolutely fascinating. It makes me wish I were a cover designer. It was so hugely useful, so from all the Beta Authors – we thank you very much for your time, expertise, and your insights. Until we meet again, thank you.

Group: Goodbye!

