Always Judge A Book By Its Cover

Abby Miller
asm139@uakron.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/honors_research_projects

Part of the Book and Paper Commons, Graphic Design Commons, and the Illustration Commons

Please take a moment to share how this work helps you through this survey. Your feedback will be important as we plan further development of our repository.

Recommended Citation
Miller, Abby, "Always Judge A Book By Its Cover" (2024). Williams Honors College, Honors Research Projects. 1772.
https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/honors_research_projects/1772

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by The Dr. Gary B. and Pamela S. Williams Honors College at IdeaExchange@UAkron, the institutional repository of The University of Akron in Akron, Ohio, USA. It has been accepted for inclusion in Williams Honors College, Honors Research Projects by an authorized administrator of IdeaExchange@UAkron. For more information, please contact mjon@uakron.edu, uapress@uakron.edu.
Always
Judge a book by its cover.
artist statement

With this project, I took the challenge of designing and completing ten children's book covers, endpapers, and spot illustrations to understand the narrative illustration process further and build my portfolio. Building my portfolio will both allow me to strengthen my skills but also help me break into the children's book illustration industry. The motivation for my work stems from my love for illustration, films, and storytelling. I want to be the person my six-year-old self wants me to be, and my six-year-old self had dreams of being an artist. Completing this project is a stepping stone for a dream I've always wished for. Since I was small, watching movies and reading stories has been a cornerstone of my experience, and it felt fitting to incorporate that into my project. I will take films I love from my childhood and make them into book covers geared toward a middle-grade reader audience. I want to answer a significant question with this project. What does it take to create a convincing narrative illustration? If this project is successful, I will better understand narrative illustration, composition, and theming, and hopefully, I will have a strong illustration portfolio.
Breaking into the children’s book illustration market is far from easy, but it is becoming more accessible to freelancers and illustrators, even with little experience in the field. In recent years, actors, singers, entertainers, and even everyday individuals have picked up the pen to write children’s books. 1 With this influx of interest in storytelling, illustrators are quickly gaining opportunities to debut their first book cover or picture book. Smaller startups and self-publishers provide an excellent chance for illustrators to get their work published and eventually noticed by more prominent traditional publishing companies. With this in mind, I took on this project as a step towards starting a portfolio. I want to graduate college with an extensive collection of book covers to boost my chances of getting hired as an illustrator for a book.

When talking about today’s struggles in the industry, it would be remiss to ignore the threat of AI art. As an illustrator, I firmly believe that the artist should make illustrations entirely, and using AI steals bits and pieces from other’s artwork without their consent. Thankfully, a few courts have gone over this issue and declared that AI art is not copyrightable, protecting artists’ jobs everywhere and ensuring no one’s art will be stolen like this in the future. 2 With my project, I wish to fight against the threat of AI technology and show that a program cannot and will never make the kind of art a human can.

Another big issue in the children’s book market is banning or challenging books. Books are getting banned or challenged by libraries all over the U.S. when they have never been an issue before. Recently, a few books that have movie adaptations have been challenged in various libraries in the U.S. The Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling has been banned in a few libraries for witchcraft and the characters using nefarious means to attain goals. 3 A Wrinkle in Time by Madeleine L’Engle was challenged for opposing Christian beliefs and teaching occult practices. 4 Charlotte’s Web by E.B. White has been challenged for depicting talking animals, which is an insult to God. 5 With the threat of a book getting banned, it is more important than ever to fight back against those who oppose the freedom of information and imagination. With this project, I hope to fight back in my own way with stories that have the same qualities as the ones banned before.

Representation in children’s books is getting better and better by the day. As an illustrator, I must represent different cultures as well as possible and with as much accuracy. Books with poor representation can skew a child’s perception of themselves, and it can serve to erase their own identity. 6 On a personal level, I usually draw people in my spare time. For this project, I wanted to take a turn and draw book covers mostly without people, to challenge my artistic skills, and to leave a lot of interpretation of the characters up to the book’s author. Too often, I have read books where the cover art does not match the inside description and feels very discordant. I wanted to take a different approach and leave drawings of people out of the book covers to keep the reader’s interpretation of the main character wide open.

ideas & sketches
ideas & sketches
ideas & sketches
Spirited Away by Hayao Miyazaki follows Chihiro, a ten-year-old girl who stumbles upon an abandoned amusement park with her parents. Much to Chihiro’s chagrin, her parents wander through a tunnel and come upon a boulevard with decrepit facades and deserted restaurants. Eerily, one restaurant has hot steaming food but no customers or workers. Chihiro’s parents partake in the buffet while Chihiro feels much apprehension about eating the mysterious food. Soon, her parents turn into pigs after eating the food that the witch of the Bathhouse had cursed. Night falls, and Chihiro begins to see ghostly figures walking about the now lively street. Chihiro starts running away in a panic, only to find no escape as a river now blocks her path. Chihiro’s physical form begins to fade, but she is saved by a mysterious boy, later known as Master Haku. Trapped in the spirit world where humans are despised, Chihiro must find her way out by working for the terrible witch Yubaba, who steals people’s names in exchange for their servitude. With the help of friends along the way, Chihiro manages to work out from under Yubaba, saves her parents, and helps Master Haku remember his own name to free him from Yubaba’s control. After the adventure, Chihiro kept lasting memories and learned a lot of important lessons about independence, resolve, and rising above your circumstances. \(^7\)


“If you completely forget, you’ll never find your way back home.”
inspiration & process
I wanted to subvert expectations with what is illustrated for this book cover. Spirited Away DVD boxes and merchandise often have a very distinct aesthetic and feel. The same images are used time and time again with slight variations. Most Spirited Away products feature a palette of reds, greens, and golds. While this color palette certainly gives off an affluent feeling, whenever I watch this movie, I am always taken by the more soft and emotional moments rather than those centered around the richness of the Bathhouse. I love the quiet moments of this film and the times when the viewer can take a moment to let the story sink in. Instead of an opulent color palette, I wanted to focus heavily on the tranquil moments of the film by using soft pinks and purples. Since the story heavily relies on the difference between the spirit and real worlds, I wanted to blend the supernatural and natural on this book cover. We see Chihiro’s back as she walks through glassy water, which, to the reader, is a rather familiar experience. However, right next to Chihiro is her spirit companion, No-Face. Chihiro and No-Face walk through a typical scene, but this body of water seems to have no end. To further demonstrate this blend of the two worlds, in the far distance, we can see Master Haku in his dragon form flying through the sky. The title on the front cover is hand-lettered, and I wanted it to feel like a new take on the original logo without straying too far away. I wanted the letters to match the soft feeling of the cover by being rounded and inviting. The letter “T” is replaced by a paper bird, an integral part of the story, as shown later in the movie. Addressing the endpapers, I wanted a solid companion piece in color. The warmness of the cover matches the warmness of the inside. The depiction of soot sprites is a trendy addition to any Spirited Away media, and I thought it just worked nicely here. The spot illustrations feature a collection of bath tokens, a form of communication in the Bathhouse. Overall, I set out to blend supernatural and natural while giving it a fresh color palette and mood, which I feel was successful.
A

The air was thick with an otherworldly energy as Chihiro navigated through the bustling streets of the mysterious spirit realm. Lanterns glowed softly, casting intricate patterns of light and shadow on the cobblestone pathways. Bizarre creatures of all shapes and sizes moved about, their voices creating a symphony of strange melodies.

As Chihiro walked, her eyes widened with a mix of wonder and trepidation. She tugged nervously at her dress, feeling a bit out of place amidst the colorful spirits. A small, frog-like spirit hopped up to her, its eyes wide and curious.

"Hello there! You must be new here, aren’t you?" the Frog Spirit said.

Chihiro nodded, her voice barely a whisper. "Yes, I... I’m not from this place."

"Ah, don’t worry! You’ll get used to it. The bathhouse is where most of us spirits gather. If you’re looking for work, that’s the place to be!"

With the Kodama leading the way, Chihiro entered a clearing where a gentle stream flowed. Haku stood at the water’s edge, his dragon-like form shimmering in the sunlight. “Chihiro!” he exclaimed, relief evident in his voice.

Chihiro ran toward Haku, a mixture of emotions flooding her. “Haku, I was so worried. I thought I’d never find you.”

Haku’s emerald eyes met hers, filled with understanding.
Muppets from Space, directed by Tim Hill, follows the story of Gonzo and his struggle to find his identity. Gonzo has a prophetic dream in which he is refused entry onto Noah’s Ark for being the only one of his kind. Waking with a start, Gonzo gets ready in the morning with a sad outlook on the day, feeling lonelier than ever. As Gonzo goes downstairs for breakfast, he looks at shelves full of pictures of his friends and their families. The last photograph Gonzo looks at is of himself standing on a beach far away from everyone and everything.

While very upset about his situation, Kermit comforts Gonzo, even though it doesn’t seem to get through to him. While Gonzo is eating alphabet cereal, he spills some pieces onto the table, and they rearrange themselves into a message reading, “Are you there.” Feeling a distinct sense of urgency, Gonzo forgets about feeling down. At night, Gonzo looks up at the stars and is met by two cosmic fish that tell him his family is coming to get him from outer space and that Gonzo needs to send a message back to them, which Gonzo mows into his lawn. A nearby government space and extraterrestrial organization called C.O.V.N.E.T is reporting sightings of “Are you there” messages worldwide. They pinpoint the final message and capture Gonzo, who the messages are meant for. Throughout this story, Gonzo learns that family is not about blood. Family is about who actively seeks out your presence and friendship. 8

“No matter what happens, we never forget one of our own.”
inspiration & process
Just based on the title alone, Muppets from Space already has a distinct aesthetic that comes to mind. We often get a strong sense of cutting-edge design and a futuristic aesthetic when thinking about space and technology. Again, with this movie, I wanted to change what the viewer might expect the cover to look like. This movie is not really about space. It is more about Gonzo’s friends saving him from the clutches of C.O.V.N.E.T. Being a muppet movie, nothing would necessarily line up with a substantial outer space or futuristic aesthetic. Muppet movies are all about having fun and making kids laugh. In addition, this movie features a soundtrack filled with 70’s funk. For the color palette and placement of the colors, I wanted to have a slightly retro feel to the whole book. The colors are more modern than the 70s, but I needed to tie in the time period for those who may be reading this book now.

As the plot summary mentions, Gonzo gets a message in his cereal from his family in space. Making the whole book cover follow this theme was a fun idea. I did the hand lettering and art in a vector-style format, which worked nicely to make the colors pop. The endpapers feature Gonzo’s message to his family in space, mowed into his front lawn. The spot illustrations show the crazy inventions Honeydew and Beaker made for Gonzo’s friends to break him out of C.O.V.N.E.T.
“Have the rat sent down to Dr. Tucker for some tests,” Singer said to the bodyguard.

Rizzo started to panic. “Tests? But I haven’t studied. I don’t even have a number two pencil!”

The bodyguard walked over to Rizzo, picked him up by the tail, and took him over to a garbage-chute-like drawer. He opened it and dropped Rizzo inside. Gonzo jumped up from his chair. “Hey—what are you doing with my friend?” he said.

Whoosh!

Rizzo was gone, but Gonzo could hear him yelling as he plummeted downward: “Gonzooooooo...!”

Rizzo fell for a long time, yelling all the way. Then he bumped and slid and fell some more, through a long series of tubes, until at last he dropped unceremoniously into a rat cage. When he looked up, he found himself in the company of six other rats. They were a tough-looking scarred-up bunch. Many of them sported Band-Aids, eye patches, and ice packs. One had an arm in a sling. A couple of muscular types were bench-pressing weights. Another sat on a bunk playing the harmonica. The popular “Mice Girls” poster hung on their wall. It was more like a prison cell than a rat cage.

The lead rat, a huge, overweight rodent, extended a paw. "I’m Phineas "Bubba" Bumper," he said. "I run this joint."

“Are you sure this is covered by my health insurance?” This was a matter of genuine concern for the doctor. “Good question,” he said. “I’ll check.” He turned around to check Gonzo’s chart, and while his back was turned, Rizzo climbed up onto Gonzo’s gurney. “Rizzo! You’re alive!” whispered Gonzo. “Where’ve you been?”

“Are you sure this is covered by my health insurance?”

"I’m a rat," said the doctor. "Are you sure you aren’t?”

"Silly," mumbled Gonzo. “It’s a joke, silly!” said the doctor. “To put you at ease!”

“Okay just a few standard questions before we get started... Now,” said Dr. Phil Van Neuter joyously. “My first! Okay, so how are you feeling?”

“Terrified,” Gonzo replied. "Vampires," said another rat, wiping his nose with a Band-Aid. "Our wheel’s on fire!"
Mulan follows a young girl named Mulan living in China during a war brought on by the Huns. At the film’s beginning, we see that Mulan is not your average dutiful daughter. She is clumsy, forgetful, and tomboyish. Mulan is getting ready to meet the town’s matchmaker, and she struggles with the idea of being someone’s wife but ultimately wants to bring honor to her family. She fails terribly at the matchmaker’s meeting, ruining the chance to make her family proud. She will never bring honor to her family. Mulan is distraught when she comes home, a father she cannot bear to face. Later that day, it is announced that one man from each family must fight this war the Huns have brought upon China. Unfortunately, Mulan’s father is the only man in her family, and he has a weak constitution in his old age. Knowing this, Mulan understands that her father may never return from the war. At dinner, Mulan pleads with her father to stay home, but he refuses. That night, Mulan resolves to fight in place of her father in secret. Calling upon her ancestors for help and protection, she flees from her home after taking her father’s armor and leaving behind her hairpin. Mulan faces many challenges in training to be a soldier but overcomes struggles with her intellect. In the end, Mulan gains praise from the Emperor for saving all of China and offers her father gifts from the Emperor to prove herself. In response, her father tells her that his greatest honor is to have her as a daughter. Mulan learns that honor is all about being true to yourself and standing up for what’s right.

“The greatest gift and **honor** is having you for a daughter.”

Mulan, directed by Tony Bancroft (1999. Walt Disney Pictures, 2023), DVD.
inspiration & process
When creating this piece, I originally wanted to show two different sides of Mulan on the front cover. I researched Chinese Tang Dynasty formal wear, hairstyles, and makeup for women of Mulan’s social class. I also studied a bit of traditional battle garments. I scrapped this idea and headed towards a more dynamic and simple composition. I happened upon the Mulan lettering on the front of the cover, trying out new brushes I had just purchased for my drawing program. Sometimes, we discover great things when we least expect it. After some quick research, I found that red and yellow are among the luckiest colors in China. The story is both subtle and explosive in its delivery, so I thought I would make this cover have a lot of movement while still being tactful with its application. The scallops on the edges and in the corners are representative of a popular and traditional pattern in Chinese culture. The main element on the book cover is the metal the Emperor gave Mulan for saving all of China. This element is half obscured by the book’s title, further strengthening the idea that, in the end, what matters most to the story is Mulan, not a piece of metal. I wanted to keep this cover simple because I felt it reflected the movie’s import. Mulan just wants to bring honor to her father and her family. She did not set out to save China but to make her father proud. The endpapers are in direct contrast with the outside of the book. The reader sees a serene mountainscape with a trail of yellow lights carving a path on its side. In the film, Mulan and her comrades fight the Huns on a mountaintop. Including this as the endpapers solved two artistic choices I had. The fight on the mountaintop is an immensely integral part of the story, and it also serves to create a great contrast with the color of the front cover. With the spot illustrations, I wanted to change the format to make this book feel more deluxe and decadent. The spot illustrations read “loyal, brave, and true,” sentiments Mulan would most certainly hold close to her heart.10

The sun had barely begun to rise, painting the sky with delicate strokes of pink and gold, as Mulan stood before the serene training grounds. The echoes of clashing swords and the shouts of warriors in training filled the air, but Mulan felt a sense of calm settle over her. This was her place, her chance to prove herself. General Li Shang approached, his expression stern but watchful. “Mulan, today we focus on mastering the art of balance and precision. These qualities are just as important as strength on the battlefield.”

Mulan nodded, gripping her sword with determination. She had come far from her days as a young woman disguising herself as a man to take her father’s place in the army. Now, she was no longer trying to fit into someone else’s mold; she was carving her own path.

As the training session progressed, Mulan’s movements became fluid, almost dance-like, as she engaged in a sparring match with a fellow soldier. She focused on her breath, her steps, her strikes, and blocked out the distractions around her. Each clang of metal against metal was a reminder of the challenges she had overcome and the ones she was yet to face.

Mulan’s brow furrowed in thought. “I know, General. But I need to perfect this move.”

General Shang smiled approvingly. “You’re improving. Keep pushing yourself, Mulan.”

After the training session, Mulan retired to her quarters, tired but content. She knew that she had a long journey ahead of her, but she was determined to face every challenge with courage and honor. The sun was setting, casting a warm glow over the training grounds. Mulan stood at the entrance, gazing out at the horizon, her heart full of resolve. She knew that she was living up to her father’s legacy, and that was something to be proud of.

EMBRACE THE WARRIOR WITHIN
Pirates of the Caribbean opens with a ship drifting gently along the ocean when the men suddenly spot a boy overboard and a flaming ship just behind him. This mysterious boy is wearing a necklace with a gold coin attached to a chain. Flash forward nearly a decade later, and we see the boy from the shipwreck is the swordsmith for the woman’s family that saved him. The young woman’s name is Elizabeth Swan, and she keeps the necklace from long ago hidden in a drawer with a false bottom, wearing it on occasion. She inadvertently falls into the ocean in a later scene, and a shockwave is sent out from the coin on the necklace. Elizabeth is saved from drowning by Jack Sparrow, former captain of the Black Pearl, then he is found by authorities and narrowly escapes their cruel treatment. The shockwave from earlier calls pirates to Elizabeth’s hometown, which is ransacked, and she is captured. After a series of perilous events, we learn that the pirates aboard the Black Pearl left Jack Sparrow for dead in the past and have been saddled with a terrible curse in their pursuit of treasure. This curse leaves the men as living dead, and their true form is revealed under the moonlight. The crew wishes to return to their natural state, and they need the gold coin on Elizabeth’s neck to break the curse and complete Hernan Cortez’s treasure. To complete the treasure, the blood of a true pirate must be spilled on the coin somehow. In the end, the captain of the Black Pearl is returned to his human state only to be killed for good. “Not all treasure is silver and gold, mate.”

inspiration & process
I wanted to create something for this book cover that pulls the reader into the art. The front cover features the captain of the Black Pearl, Barbossa. Barbossa is one of the living dead, so I wanted to show the change from living to dead when exposed to moonlight. This composition captures the reader’s attention and calls for further inspection. Pirates of the Caribbean merchandise is usually found to be red and gold, and I thought that it could use a new look. The first installment in the Pirates of the Caribbean franchise is rather gloomy in mood and aesthetic. Many of this film’s events happen in the dark or near darkness. I thought that instead of blackening the cover, I would give it a more blue tone to get across moonlight rather than complete darkness. This piece’s perspective creates a sense of foreboding and movement simultaneously. Reaching out with trepidation written on Barbossa’s face tells the reader that this curse is something to fear. The warped perspective also moves the reader from the hand to the face. The green apples match the background’s cool tone but pop against the warm tones of the wooden table. The title is carved into the table right underneath the bowl of apples, which also helps carry the eye around the page, interacting with the art itself. The back of the book cover shows the Black Pearl bathed thoroughly in moonlight at a distance from the viewer. Since the book is called The Curse of the Black Pearl, I wanted to add both elements to the cover. The “curse” is on the front of the book, while the “Black Pearl” is on the back. The endpapers show an essential part of the story when Cortez’s treasure is completed with a pirate’s blood atop the coin. The spot illustrations resemble Mulan’s, taking up an entire page. As maps are such an iconic symbol of pirates, I thought it would be remiss not to include them in the book somewhere. The spot illustrations feature essential places from the story. Rum Runner’s Isle is where Elizabeth and Jack Sparrow become stranded. Tortuga Tavern is where Jack Sparrow gathers a crew for sailing. Isla de la Muerta is where the final battle with the treasure occurs.
The moon hung low over the Caribbean waters, casting a pale shimmer across the deck of the Black Pearl. Captain Jack Sparrow, his eyes glinting with a mixture of mischief and determination, stood at the helm, the salty wind ruffling his unruly hair. Beside him, Elizabeth Swann leaned against the railing, her mind still grappling with the extraordinary events that had unfolded.

"Jack," Elizabeth began tentatively, "what's become of those cursed pirates? The ones whose blood was spilled on the Aztec gold?"

Jack's lips curled into a wry smile, revealing a hint of his notorious charm. "Ah, love, those cursed souls, they're neither dead nor alive, trapped in between, as the stories go. The moonlight reveals their true forms—skeletal and condemned to an existence filled with longing."

A shiver ran down Elizabeth's spine as she recalled the sight of the moonlit crew, their skeletal bodies a haunting testament to the supernatural forces at play. "And you, Jack? How do you know so much about this curse?"

Jack's eyes flickered with a mixture of memories and shadows. "The Black Pearl was once mine, you see. And that..."
Kiki’s Delivery Service follows a young girl learning to be a witch. Kiki, a witch in training, is just about to leave her family and find a town to practice her craft. Kiki and her trusty familiar Jiji set off with no destination in mind, hoping the wind might lead them to a great village. On her travels with Jiji, Kiki ends up sleeping in a bale of hay on a traveling train and wakes up to cows tickling her toes. Kiki and Jiji have found the perfect city with an ocean view. Kiki is serious about finding a place to stay, so she asks anyone she can find. In her travels, she meets a young boy named Tombo and is rather brusque with her responses as she often feels different from other kids. Kiki is often seen putting up walls and convincing herself that no one likes her for being different, even though none of it is accurate, and her differences are what makes her unique. Kiki lands a home in a bakery after helping the pregnant owner return a binkie to a woman far away down the hill by riding her broom to catch up. Impressed with her skills, Asono, the owner, tells Kiki to start a delivery service.

After a few failed or nearly failed deliveries and mishaps, Kiki ends up losing her ability to fly because she doesn’t believe in herself anymore. Kiki decides to take a break from delivering and slowly regains her powers after a few small victories. Kiki discovers that even if she is different, that doesn’t mean she’s worthless. She makes her strengths work for others in a way that satisfies herself, her friends, and her customers.  

“We need to find our own inspiration, Kiki, sometimes it’s not easy.”

Kiki’s Delivery Service, directed by Hayao Miyazaki (1989, Studio Ghibli, 2023), DVD.
inspiration & process
Initially, I had a few ideas for his book cover since I love the movie so much. I had a few different concepts ranging from a simple cover showing Kiki and Jiji delivering items to showing Kiki working in the bakery. Typical of Kiki’s Delivery Service merchandise and various media, the covers usually feature the characters going about daily activities or relaxing around familiar scenes from the movie. Since I don’t usually draw settings like this, I figured this would be a nice change for my book covers. Even with all this in mind, I had a stroke of genius while developing ideas for this book cover. I had the idea to make the book look like it’s one big package being delivered by Kiki herself. Even though my other ideas were solid, and I was relatively excited about completing them, I found that this book cover was an opportunity I simply could not pass up. As mentioned in the plot summary, Kiki is a witch in training that picked up a delivery service job because she can fly. Kiki’s Delivery Service is suggested to take place sometime in the 1950s, which is why I took on a slightly older style of packaging with the fancy indicia and collectible stamps. The book is “wrapped” in brown paper and adorned with various packaging stickers. I wanted all the text and illustrations to be inky as if they had been stamped or written with a pen. On the back of the package, we can see that Jiji has stepped into ink and onto the box. This same element is reflected in the spot illustrations, which are more ornamental than usual spot illustrations. The endpapers are meant to look like a receipt book that Kiki would use to complete her deliveries. In the movie, Kiki has a small book she uses to track payments, completed shipments, and signatures. Ultimately, I am happy that I came upon such an excellent concept for this book cover, and I think it worked out well.
A Sky Full of Dreams

Kiki stood on the rooftop of her cozy apartment, the wind playing with the ribbons in her hair. Below her, the bustling town of Koriko was alive with the hum of daily life. She gazed at the horizon, where the sun dipped below the edge of the sea, casting the sky in shades of pink and gold.

Beside her sat her faithful companion, Jiji, a black cat with wise eyes and a penchant for honesty. He blinked lazily as he observed Kiki's wistful expression.

“Thinking about something, Kiki?” Jiji asked, his tone a mixture of curiosity and familiarity.

Kiki sighed, her gaze never leaving the horizon. “I’ve been thinking about my place in this town, Jiji. I’ve made new friends and started my delivery service, but sometimes I wonder if I’m doing enough. If I’m truly making a difference.”

Jiji leaned closer, nuzzling her hand affectionately. “You’re doing more than you think, Kiki. You bring joy to people’s lives, and that’s a kind of magic in itself.”

A melancholic smile tugged at Kiki’s lips. “I know, Jiji, but there are days when I doubt myself. Like I’m not as skilled as the other witches, like I’m still finding my way.”

Jiji’s eyes glinted with understanding. “Kiki, everyone has their own journey. Just because you’re still growing doesn’t mean you’re not already amazing. Remember, even the most seasoned witches started somewhere.”

Kiki looked down at Jiji, her heart warmed by his words. “You’re right, Jiji. I shouldn’t compare myself to others. Maybe I should give myself more credit.”

Whispers of the Wind

Kiki soared through the azure sky, the wind whistling in her ears as her broomstick carried her effortlessly over the picturesque coastal town. Her heart swelled with a sense of freedom, her worries momentarily forgotten in the exhilaration of flight. The town of Koriko unfolded below her like a patchwork quilt, its red-tiled roofs and bustling streets a testament to the vibrant life it held.

As the sun began its descent, Kiki began her gradual descent toward a familiar rooftop. With a graceful arc, she touched down and dismounted her broomstick, the polished wood warm beneath her fingertips. Her trusty black cat companion, Jiji, hopped down beside her, his eyes gleaming with curiosity.

“Kiki, you’re getting better and better at flying,” Jiji purred, his tail swishing contentedly.

Kiki grinned, her cheeks flushed from the wind’s embrace. “Thanks, Jiji. Flying never gets old.”

They settled down on the rooftop, gazing out at the town below. The fading sunlight painted everything in hues of gold and amber. Kiki’s mind, however, was preoccupied with thoughts of her recent challenges.

“Jiji, do you ever feel like you’re not good enough?” Kiki asked, her voice tinged with uncertainty.

Jiji stretched lazily, his eyes filled with wisdom beyond his feline form. “Of course, Kiki. Everyone has moments of self-doubt. But what matters is how you deal with them.”

Kiki traced a finger along the edge of her broomstick, deep in thought. “I used to be so sure of myself, but lately, it’s like I’m losing my way. I feel like I’m not as skilled as the other witches, like I haven’t found my place yet.”

Jiji gave a reassuring purr. “You’ve got this, Kiki. You have a heart for people, and that’s the most important thing. You’re on the cusp of something amazing. Don’t doubt yourself.”

Kiki looked into her broomstick and pushed off the ground, her heart鼓 full of new determination. The world around her blended into a blur of motion and excitement.

The coastal town stretched out beneath her, its red-tiled roofs and cobblestone streets weaving a tapestry of everyday lives. Kiki’s destination was a bakery on the outskirts, where a warm batch of cinnamon rolls awaited delivery.

With the town’s map tucked safely in her bag, Kiki navigated through the currents, her broomstick responding to her every shift and sway. The wind carried the scent of the sea and the promise of adventure, and Kiki couldn’t help but feel that this was where she truly belonged.

As she landed gracefully in front of the bakery, a warm
Ponyo by Hayao Miyazaki is the story of a little girl who is half fish and half human. Ponyo lives with her father, a former human turned wizard and protector of the sea. Ponyo’s mother is the goddess of the sea. While Ponyo’s father is helping other sea creatures, she sneaks out of her father’s submarine and kisses her sisters goodbye. Making her way up to the surface, Ponyo gets tossed around by a ship collecting trash from the ocean floor and gets stuck in a glass jar. Sosuke, a boy playing by the sea, finds Ponyo and tries to get her out of the jar. Sosuke cuts his thumb, and Ponyo licks the blood up as a thank you for saving her. Sosuke puts Ponyo in a green bucket filled with water to keep her hydrated and safe. Unbeknownst to her, this taste of human blood helps Ponyo shift into her human form. Ponyo’s dad is frantic in his search for her. Ponyo’s father finally rescues her and keeps her in a giant fishbowl to keep her from running away again. Ponyo, being mischievous, breaks out of her confinement and unlocks her father’s vault full of magical potions. Water floods into the vault, and the vat full of magic spawns prehistoric creatures and creates tidal waves that look like fish. Ponyo runs atop these tidal wave fish and finds Sosuke. We see Ponyo’s parents discussing her future and discover that the only way to keep the balance of nature is for Ponyo to turn back into a fish or become a human forever. In the end, Sosuke promises Ponyo that he will love her forever, and Ponyo becomes a human for eternity.13


“You should never judge others by their looks.”
inspiration & process
With this book cover, I wanted to try something I was uncomfortable with. Instead of drawing a scene or making the book cover look like something else, I tried illustrating something more abstract. The front and back covers mirror each other; compositionally, they hold a lot of movement. The cover’s monochromatic nature also makes Ponyo and Sosuke pop off the background nicely. This one was equally difficult for me but also straightforward to tackle once I had the idea. This turned out to be among my favorite book covers I’ve ever done. The composition on the front cover is asymmetrical, but the wave and the title balance each other to create a moment of movement and stillness. The difference between the poses of Sosuke and Ponyo shows their differences as humans. Being not wholly human, Ponyo can walk on top of the waves while Sosuke simply falls through them. As mentioned, Sosuke kept Ponyo in a bucket of water, so adding the green bucket shows that she has grown beyond it. I chose the salmon color first to contrast against the blue background, but it is also the color Ponyo wears throughout the movie. I also developed the typeface shown on the front cover and used it in the spot illustrations to have a fun and playful, almost bubbly sort of look. The bubbles on the flaps and the spine also match the simple lineart quality of the endpapers and the bubbles in the spot illustrations.

My main goal for this book cover was to try something new and challenging. I think it is among the more successful compositions I surprised myself with.
The seaside town was a tranquil haven, where waves whispered secrets to the shore and the salty breeze carried tales of the sea. In a cozy cottage perched on the cliffs, Sosuke, a young boy with boundless curiosity, peered out of his bedroom window. His eyes sparkled with anticipation, for he knew that today would be a day of discovery.

Down below, the vibrant fish of the ocean danced in the crystal-clear waters, but one fish stood out among them all. Ponyo, a curious and enchanting creature, had yearned to explore the world beyond the waves. Today, her dreams would be realized. With a determined leap, Ponyo transformed into a little girl, her vibrant red hair shimmering like a cascade of flames. Her laughter echoed like a melody as she scampered along the rocky shore, her eyes aglow with wonder.

Sosuke, his heart racing with excitement, rushed down to the beach to meet his newfound friend. “Ponyo, you made it! You’re human!”

Ponyo twirled around, her laughter like a symphony of joy. “I wanted to be with you, Sosuke. To explore your world and see it through your eyes.”

Their bond was immediate and unbreakable, a testament to the power of friendship. The sun hung low in the sky, casting a golden hue upon the tranquil sea. Ponyo, a curious and enchanting fish with a yearning for the human world, gazed up at the shoreline with wide eyes. Beside her stood Sosuke, a young boy with an adventurous spirit. “Come on, Ponyo,” Sosuke urged with a grin. “You can do it! Take my hand.”

With a determined leap, Ponyo breached the water’s surface and clasped Sosuke’s outstretched hand. A surge of energy pulsed between them, a connection that defied the boundaries between land and sea.

As they stood there, hand in fin, the world seemed to shift around them. Water surged and swirled, forming a magnificent whirlpool that spiraled towards the heavens. Ponyo’s transformation from fish to girl was underway, a journey that defied the natural order of things.

Sosuke’s eyes widened in wonder as Ponyo’s form shimmered and changed. “Ponyo, you’re becoming human!”

Ponyo’s laughter echoed like a melody as her body continued to transform. “Sosuke, I want to see the world through your eyes!” With a final surge of magic, their bond transcended the barriers of land and sea.

Sosuke stood on the rocky shore, the sun scattered its golden rays across the tranquil sea. Ponyo, a curious and enchanting fish with a yearning for the human world, gazed up at the shoreline with wide eyes. Beside her stood Sosuke, a young boy with an adventurous spirit. “Ponyo, you made it!”

Sosuke turned to him, his heart touched by Ponyo’s words. “Ponyo, you’re really special.”

Ponyo’s laughter echoed like a melody as her body continued to transform. “Sosuke, I want to see the world through your eyes!” With a final surge of magic, their bond transcended the barriers of land and sea.

Sosuke smiled, his heart filled with joy. “We’ll find a way, Ponyo. We’ll be together, no matter what.”

Their determination was put to the test as they faced a storm of mythical proportions. The sea roared and thunder rumbled, but Sosuke’s unwavering courage saw them through. With Ponyo’s help, the storm calmed, and the sea became a canvas of wonders, filled with breathtaking creatures.

The bond between Sosuke and Ponyo had deepened with each passing day, a connection that transcended the boundaries of land and sea.

As they stood there, hand in fin, the world seemed to shift around them. Water surged and swirled, forming a magnificent whirlpool that spiraled towards the heavens. Ponyo’s transformation from fish to girl was underway, a journey that defied the natural order of things.

Sosuke’s eyes widened in wonder as Ponyo’s form shimmered and changed. “Ponyo, you’re becoming human!”

Ponyo’s laughter echoed like a melody as her body continued to transform. “Sosuke, I want to see the world through your eyes!” With a final surge of magic, their bond transcended the barriers of land and sea.

Sosuke smiled, his heart touched by Ponyo’s words. “Ponyo, you’re really special.”

Ponyo’s laughter echoed like a melody as her body continued to transform. “Sosuke, I want to see the world through your eyes!” With a final surge of magic, their bond transcended the barriers of land and sea.

Sosuke smiled, his heart filled with joy. “We’ll find a way, Ponyo. We’ll be together, no matter what.”

Their determination was put to the test as they faced a storm of mythical proportions. The sea roared and thunder rumbled, but Sosuke’s unwavering courage saw them through. With Ponyo’s help, the storm calmed, and the sea became a canvas of wonders, filled with breathtaking creatures.

The bond between Sosuke and Ponyo had deepened with each passing day, a connection that transcended the boundaries of land and sea.

As they stood there, hand in fin, the world seemed to shift around them. Water surged and swirled, forming a magnificent whirlpool that spiraled towards the heavens. Ponyo’s transformation from fish to girl was underway, a journey that defied the natural order of things.

Sosuke’s eyes widened in wonder as Ponyo’s form shimmered and changed. “Ponyo, you’re becoming human!”

Ponyo’s laughter echoed like a melody as her body continued to transform. “Sosuke, I want to see the world through your eyes!” With a final surge of magic, their bond transcended the barriers of land and sea.

Sosuke smiled, his heart filled with joy. “We’ll find a way, Ponyo. We’ll be together, no matter what.”

Their determination was put to the test as they faced a storm of mythical proportions. The sea roared and thunder rumbled, but Sosuke’s unwavering courage saw them through. With Ponyo’s help, the storm calmed, and the sea became a canvas of wonders, filled with breathtaking creatures.

The bond between Sosuke and Ponyo had deepened with each passing day, a connection that transcended the boundaries of land and sea.

As they stood there, hand in fin, the world seemed to shift around them. Water surged and swirled, forming a magnificent whirlpool that spiraled towards the heavens. Ponyo’s transformation from fish to girl was underway, a journey that defied the natural order of things.

Sosuke’s eyes widened in wonder as Ponyo’s form shimmered and changed. “Ponyo, you’re becoming human!”

Ponyo’s laughter echoed like a melody as her body continued to transform. “Sosuke, I want to see the world through your eyes!” With a final surge of magic, their bond transcended the barriers of land and sea.

Sosuke smiled, his heart filled with joy. “We’ll find a way, Ponyo. We’ll be together, no matter what.”

Their determination was put to the test as they faced a storm of mythical proportions. The sea roared and thunder rumbled, but Sosuke’s unwavering courage saw them through. With Ponyo’s help, the storm calmed, and the sea became a canvas of wonders, filled with breathtaking creatures.
Monster’s Inc. provides a clever take on the classic tale of the “monster in your closet.” The viewer is shown the inner workings of Monstropolis, a city full of working monsters living lives not much different from our own. Mike, a cyclops, and Sulley, a giant hairy monster, are roommates, and they work closely together at Monster’s Inc. Monster’s Inc. is a company that harvests the screams of children to power their world. We see that Monster’s Inc. works by taking physical closet doors from all over the world and using them as portals to enter children’s rooms to scare them. Scaring the children creates electricity, which is collected in metal canisters. Mike and Sulley work together on the scare floor at Monster’s Inc. Sulley is always the top “scarer” getting the most screams out of children. Randall, his close competitor, is not happy about being second best. One day, a little girl escapes from the human world and ends up scaring Mike and Sulley more than they ever did her. Human children are considered toxic, but this is soon found to be false as the little girl, Boo, is cuddly and safe to touch. To keep her safe from other monsters, Mike and Sulley make a costume out of an armchair to make her look like a proper monster. Randall is making a torture device that sucks the screams out of children to facilitate his need for first place. Mike and Sulley end up saving Boo, sending her back to the human world, and defeating the villains of the story. Mike finds out that laughter is far more potent than screams ever were and completely revolutionizes the industry. 

“...I’m watching you, Wazowski. Always watching. Always.”
inspiration & process
For this book cover, I wanted to take a twist on the viewer’s perspective. Most Monster’s Inc content is centered around the Monster side of the world, which does make sense. In the beginning, I did start with a Monster-centric design. I was going to make the back cover look like the Monster’s break room, and the front cover would have Boo’s closet door like it does currently. I drew the clock-in station and a corkboard for flyers. I felt I had a solid idea for the back of the book, but the front was not feeling right. I didn’t have a strong concept, and it felt like I was shoving illustrations together with no purpose. Begrudgingly I trashed the back of the cover and moved forward with making the whole book look like it’s Boo’s closet door. I then had the idea to make the book and all its pieces look as though they were from Boo’s perspective instead of the Monster’s perspective. The front cover features Boo’s door with drawings of Mike and Sulley taped to the door. The back cover is just the same. The endpapers show a pattern of Boo’s costume that Mike and Sulley made her to keep her safe. In the movie, there is a scene in which Boo is drawing the characters of the film and putting them around the floor of Mike and Sulley’s apartment. The spot illustrations are meant to show the drawings Boo did in that scene. I did the spot illustrations before tackling the titles on the book cover, and I am glad it worked out that way. I think writing the book cover letters the same way as the spot illustrations facilitated the theme and connected the two illustrations.
Morning in Monstropolis

In the heart of Monstropolis, the city that thrived on screams, a most unusual partnership was forming. Mike Wazowski, the one-eyed green monster with a penchant for comedy, stood at the door of a child’s bedroom, a clipboard in hand. Beside him, Sulley, the towering blue behemoth with a heart of gold, awaited the impending scare.

As the door creaked open, a soft and gentle laugh emanated from within, catching both monsters by surprise. Instead of the usual cries and screams, they were greeted by the sight of a young girl, Boo, with her infectious giggles filling the room.

Mike blinked, his single eye wide with disbelief. “Sulley, did she just laugh?”

Sulley’s own azure eyes were filled with wonder as he watched Boo. “It seems she did, Mike. I’ve never heard anything like it.”

Boo, oblivious to the monsters’ astonishment, continued to laugh and play, her innocence and curiosity lighting up the room like a beacon.

Over time, Boo’s laughter became a daily occurrence in Monstropolis, an unusual and heartwarming sound that had never before been heard in the monster world. She had bridged the gap...
The Sound of Music follows the story of Maria, a woman practicing to be a Nun in the Abbey. The other Nuns understand Maria to be very earnest about wanting to become a Nun, but she is just not cut out for the life of a Nun. Maria just needs to understand this concept. Maria loves to sing, frolic, and bask in the morning sun, which is not very becoming of a proper Nun. A few miles away sits the Von Trapps, a regimented, military-like family of one father and seven children. Mr. Von Trapp's wife died a while ago, and he was left to raise the children on his own the only way he knew how. There was little to no fancy or fun to be had in the von Trapp house, as Mr. Von Trapp was a military man at heart. The children still loved him, and he treated them with kindness to boot. When the Von Trapp family needed a new governess, Maria answered the call to see if she could truly live the life of a Nun. Maria brings great joy to the children, much to Mr. Von Trapp's initial dismay. After warming up to Maria's personality and way of life, Mr. Von Trapp slowly falls in love even though Maria feels she cannot because she is learning to be a Nun. Maria teaches the children how to sing and makes up songs they can sing with their newfound skills. Maria and Mr. Von Trapp finally admit their love for one another and get married. Right after their marriage, Mr. Von Trapp is urged to finally submit to the Nazi cause and support the party's wishes. Knowing this, the Von Trapp family escapes after devising a plan and makes their way out of Austria once and for all.

“The hills are alive with the sound of music.”
inspiration & process
This was the most challenging book of them all for me to complete. This book felt wrong from the start, as this was my first time doing something like it. I am so glad I persevered through the many trials I faced while drawing this book cover. This is easily a favorite book cover of mine as it is ornamental, something I need to get used to doing. I took a great lot of inspiration from Ryan O’Rourke’s project of hand lettering and illustrating book posters. I love to hand letter, but this was immensely difficult for me. I find drawing a scene that looks real with all the proper lighting and atmosphere much easier because physics informs my decisions. When I had to come up with the placement, color, and texture of every element on the book cover, I almost gave up. It is immensely difficult to make decisions like that and ensure they work together well. For the title, the “S” and “M” are meant to intertwine into a makeshift treble clef. It’s facing the wrong direction, but the intent is still there. The swirls and doodles surrounding the title feature all of the “things” from the song “These are a Few of My Favorite Things” Maria sings to the children. For example, you may find amongst the doodles crisp apple strudel, girls in white dresses with blue satin sashes, and a brown paper package tied up with string. The endpapers show the pattern of the curtains Maria cut the children’s clothes out of. The spot illustrations are simply a callback to the ornamentation and hand lettering on the front cover."

The Hills are Alive

The hills surrounding the von Trapp family’s Austrian villa were alive with the enchanting sound of music. Maria, the spirited governess, led the seven von Trapp children in a playful romp through the lush meadows, their voices rising in joyous harmony.

As the children twirled and sang, the sun-kissed landscape seemed to come alive, echoing their youthful exuberance. Their laughter, like musical notes, danced on the breeze and filled the air with a sense of unbridled freedom.

Maria’s own heart soared with happiness as she watched the children discover the simple pleasures of life. She had arrived at the von Trapp home with a head full of dreams and a heart eager to embrace her new role as their governess. Now, she felt like a part of a family, and the melodies of their shared moments were sweeter than any song.

But beyond the joyful interludes, there were shadows of uncertainty in the world beyond the villa’s idyllic boundaries. The rumblings of war cast a pall over Austria, and the von Trapp family’s safety was no longer guaranteed.

Captain Georg von Trapp, the stern yet loving father of the children, approached Maria with a mixture of concern and love. He knew that with each passing day, the threat of war loomed closer, and he wanted Maria to be prepared for whatever might come.

But for Maria, the joyful moments with the von Trapp children were a haven from the world’s troubles. She felt a sense of belonging, as if she had found her true home in the embrace of the Austrian Alps.

Melodies of Change

The sun dipped below the Austrian mountains, casting long shadows across the garden of the von Trapp villa. Maria Rainer, in her elegant governess attire, stood at the threshold, gazing out at the hills that rolled endlessly into the horizon.

The hills were alive with the sound of music, a melody that seemed to emanate from the very earth itself. Maria’s heart swelled with a profound sense of belonging, as if she had found her true home in this beautiful place.

Inside the villa, the von Trapp children gathered around the grand piano. Liesl, her once-rebellious spirit now tempered by love, played the keys with grace. Friedrich, the ever-responsible older brother, harmonized alongside Louisa, who had found her mischievous spark once more. Kurt, with his shy smile, contributed his voice to the chorus, and the younger ones, Brigitta, Marta, and Gretl, added their innocent enthusiasm.

Captain Georg von Trapp, a man transformed by the healing power of love, worked alongside Maria. He knew that with each passing day, the world around them grew more uncertain, but he held fast to the belief that they could find joy in the midst of darkness.

A Symphony of Love

The hills surrounding the von Trapp family’s Alpine home were alive with the sound of music. Maria, the von Trapp children’s governess, stood atop the hill with her voice in full bloom, her heart filled with the joy of the moment. She knew that the world was changing around them, but for now, they could let their voices be heard, their spirits soar, and their hearts be free.

As the von Trapp family gathered around the grand piano, their voices blended into a harmonious chorus, a symphony of love that echoed through the valley. Captain von Trapp, with a smile of happiness, held Maria close, his hand warm and steady, his heart full of hope.

Together, they faced the world with a sense of wonder and resilience, their spirits unbroken by the challenges that lay ahead. For in the embrace of music and love, they found a place to hold on to, a place to dream, and a place to believe.
Emperor's New Groove tells the story of Kuzco, ruler of the Incan Empire, and his failed assassination attempt at the hands of his advisor. The story opens with Pacha, leader of a local town, traveling to the palace because Kuzco needs to speak with him. After a long montage of Kuzco being a spoiled rotten, selfish ruler, we are shown the meeting between him and Pacha. Pacha is excited about what this meeting pertains to as he assumes it will benefit the people of his town. What Pacha does not know is that Kuzco is a selfish little man. Kuzco tells Pacha that he will demolish Pacha's town for his new summer home, Kuzcotopia. Pacha is taken aback and leaves the palace feeling dejected. Kuzco and his advisor, Yzma, have a dinner to celebrate his new venture. Yzma tries to kill Kuzco with the help of her henchman, Kronk, but instead gives Kuzco a potion that turns him into a llama. Kuzco wakes up and is promptly knocked out by Kronk, who is supposed to throw him over a cliff. Kronk is too gentle to do something so terrible, and he inadvertently loses Kuzco in the throws of the city. Kuzco ends up on Pacha's wagon and is taken to his town. Through many more assassination attempts and Kuzco belittling Pacha to no end, Kuzco finally realizes that he's been a terrible person for a long time. Kuzco and Pacha travel back to the palace and rekindle their friendship. In the end, Kuzco and Pacha defeat Yzma by accidentally turning her into a kitten, and Kuzco still builds his summer home on the hill right next to Pacha. 17

inspiration & process
Traveling is an integral part of this story, so including it on the book cover only made sense. The front of the jacket shows Kuzco’s palace in all its shining golden glory. The back of the book cover is the town Pacha is chief of. This illustration also shows that Kuzco finally has his little summer home on the hill next to Pacha. While the compositions are very similar, the two images have many meaningful differences. Both illustrations show a general overlook of the space each character lives in. The front, showing Kuzco’s palace, represents the beginning of Kuzco and Pacha’s physical and emotional journey. The colors are a bit gloomy but also glamorous to show Kuzco’s mean-spirited nature and his spoiled outlook on life. Also, the surrounding mountains in the foreground and background are sharp and unyielding. The back cover shows where Pacha and Kuzco end up on their physical and emotional journey. The hills are soft and round, and the surrounding mountains are smooth. The colors are brighter and more inviting. This not only serves to show the physical path Kuzco and Pacha took, but it also represents Kuzco’s change in attitude. At the movie’s beginning, he is prickly and mean, but by the end, Kuzco is kinder and more understanding. The endpapers show a simple pattern of the potion bottle Yzma used to kill Kuzco. The spot illustrations show the potion bottles as well. The first bottle shows the “deadly” potion marked with a skull. Upon further inspection, the label on the first bottle is simply flipped down, and it’s a llama potion. Finally, we see the potion Kuzco took to turn human.
The Poison for Kuzco, Kuzco's Poison

In the heart of the opulent palace of the Incas, shadows danced along the crimson walls, concealing a sinister secret. Yzma, the cunning and power-hungry royal advisor, paced the dimly lit chamber. Her ambition knew no bounds, and she was determined to seize the throne for herself, no matter the cost.

Kuzco, the young and frivolous emperor, oblivious to the treachery that swirled around him, reclined on a gilded throne, his appetite leading him to indulge in a lavish feast. His trust in Yzma was unwavering, his naïveté a weakness she intended to exploit.

In a hidden alcove, Yzma's clawed fingers meticulously measured and mixed a concoction of rare and deadly poisons. Her eyes gleamed with malevolence as she whispered incantations, invoking the dark forces that would make her devious plan a reality.

The poison, a viscous liquid as dark as her intentions, dripped from a vial into a goblet. With a deceptively kind smile, Yzma approached Kuzco, who greeted her with a cheerful grin.

"Yzma, you're just in time! Try this delicious drink."

The emperor extended the goblet towards her, unaware of the peril that lay within. Yzma's heart raced as she contemplated her audacious scheme—a sip from that goblet would end Kuzco's life. But fate had other plans.

As the ill-fated goblet was handed to Kuzco, the world around him twisted and contorted in a kaleidoscope of colors. He clutched his throat, gasping for breath, but instead of meeting his demise, an astonishing transformation overtook him.

Kuzco's limbs elongated, his skin sprouted coarse fur, and his fingers fused into hooves. In a matter of seconds, the once-arrogant emperor found himself staring at his own reflection—only he was no longer human. Kuzco had been turned into a llama.

The palace erupted into chaos as Yzma's plan spectacularly backfired. Gasps and shrieks filled the air as courtiers and servants fled from the bewildered llama that now occupied the throne room.

Yzma, stunned by the unintended outcome, blinked at Kuzco in disbelief. "What did you do? You were supposed to be... gone!"

Kuzco, now a llama with all the expressive powers of a llama, gestured to the potion. "There it is, Kuzco. The key to becoming human again."

Kuzco, his llama eyes filled with a mixture of hope and trepidation, approached the potion. With Pacha's guidance, he carefully sipped the elixir, his fate hanging in the balance.
In this installment of Star Wars, we are greeted with the inhospitable windswept landscape of Hoth, an ice planet. The rebel alliance was forced to move to this planet to escape the clutches of Darth Vader. Darth Vader is searching for Luke Skywalker, a young man who came about when the galaxy thought they had seen the last of the Jedi. Luke Skywalker resides on Hoth with the rest of the rebel alliance, but one of Darth Vader’s probe droids suddenly ends up on Hoth, meticulously searching for Luke Skywalker. Luke disappears, and Han Solo, his friend, searches for him. Luke ends up in a cave with a monster but narrowly escapes by using the force. Darth Vader ends up on Hoth and starts a battle with the rebel alliance. The main band of characters narrowly escapes Hoth with Darth Vader on their tail. Luke runs to Degobah to learn the ways of the force under Master Yoda, while the others end up in Cloud City. In Cloud City, Han Solo is greeted by an old friend who soon betrays him and turns them in to Darth Vader. Han Solo is frozen into carbonite and taken to Jabba’s palace. Luke Skywalker feels trepidation about his eventual battle with Darth Vader after the sudden death of Master Yoda, but Luke knows what he must do. Luke enters Cloud City, and after a long battle, Luke finds out that Darth Vader is his father. The movie ends with Luke losing an arm and falling out of Cloud City.17

“No, I am your father.”

17 Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back, directed by Irvin Kershner (1980: Lucasfilm, 2023), DVD.
inspiration & process
The Empire Strikes Back is arguably the most iconic film of the three original Star Wars movies. This movie has a lot of unforgettable scenes and memorable moments. With all this in mind, I had difficulty determining which moments to include on this cover. After considering Han in carbonite, tauntauns, and Cloud City, I came up with the perfect idea. Non-Star Wars fans know the iconic line “No, I am your father,” which lent itself to my final decision. Darth Vader is such a powerful symbol of the series, and I thought there was no better time to include his visage than on this book cover. When Vader tells Luke the truth about his lineage, all the pieces come flying together, and it quickly became one of the most replicated and well-known phrases in cinema history. I drew Darth Vader’s helmet as an almost chilling view of his gaze. I rendered this piece as realistically as possible to sell the reflective nature of his helmet and the pristine quality of his figure. The background is black to make Vader seem as if he is part of the background. When considering Vader, one may think of making his accompanying color red, the color of his lightsaber. I considered this, but I thought it would be more interesting to flip that on its head. Blue is the color of Darth Vader’s lightsaber before he turns to the dark side, and I wanted to remind the reader that while Darth Vader is a villain, he is still a human behind the mask. I wanted this illustration to be as sleek as the Death Star interior, so I kept everything minimal. The vertical stripes on the flaps are the lights that can be found on the walls of the Death Star. The barcode is also the ship that Darth Vader flies in. The endpapers also match the color scheme, representing the “jump to hyperspace” these ships take to travel quickly over large distances. The spot illustrations show the Star Wars common language called Aurebesh, underlined by none other than Darth Vader’s lightsaber.
The Millennium Falcon soared through the inky void of space, navigating the asteroid field with the deftness of a seasoned pilot. Inside the ship, the atmosphere was tense, as if the very walls bore witness to the looming darkness that had descended upon the galaxy.

Han Solo, his rugged features etched with worry, piloted the Falcon alongside his loyal co-pilot, Chewbacca. Leia Organa stood nearby, her thoughts a mix of determination and fear. Beside her, C-3PO and R2-D2 bleeped and whirred, their own anxiety palpable.

But it was Luke Skywalker who bore the weight of the galaxy on his shoulders. His Jedi training had led him to Cloud City, where his destiny would collide with that of Darth Vader. As the Falcon touched down on the floating city, Luke's heart raced with anticipation.

Cloud City was a vision of grandeur and luxury, its architecture a stark contrast to the battles raging in the far reaches of the galaxy. Lando Calrissian, the city's administrator and a friend of Han's, greeted them with a charismatic smile, though there was a hint of unease in his eyes.

"Welcome to Cloud City, my friends," Lando said,
For the Gallery Exhibition, I wanted to keep everything relatively simple. I needed to have all parts of the whole project represented. For each book, I have the dust jacket, the endpapers, and the three spot illustrations laid out flat. I wanted there to be at least a small amount of color coordination so I organized the book covers accordingly. The covers with darker colors are together and the covers with pinks and purples are found together. Over to the right, I have an iMac showing my process in real time. I created a video in After Effects that is playing in real time. The video shows recorded timelapses of my illustrations as they were created. At the beginning of each timelapse is a mockup of the book. I am satisfied with how this project turned out and how it was presented.
gallery exhibit

screenshots from timelapse
At the end of the project, to ask myself again whether or not this project was a success would be farcical. I put countless hours into this project and really sat down to analyze these movies I loved when I was little, and just that effort alone makes this project a success. The process of taking a film and narrowing down all its parts into one book cover is quite the challenge. I kept thinking, “Well, if I squeezed this detail in, I would be able to cover more events of the movie.” But this way of thinking is not what ended up working best. Having small details to strengthen an illustration is always a great addition, but squeezing many elements into one illustration for the sake of “having more” is not always the best way to think about things. Before I started this project, I felt that way about a lot of design and illustration work that I did. Recontextualizing my process and better understanding what it takes to distill a story down to its most important moments is what made many of my book covers better than what they could have become. Do I think I have a solid portfolio? I would certainly hope so after all this time. I really made an effort to think of things from every angle, and I think it paid off. I have never done a self-driven project as large as this one, and I think I am only better for it. Was it immensely difficult sometimes to get the motivation to keep going? Yes. But do I also know that creating and making is what I am meant to do? Yes. Do I know what it takes to make a convincing narrative illustration? I think I am better at what I set out to do, but one project does not make me a master. I now understand the struggles and know what pitfalls to avoid, but as always, I can grow even better with time. From my first book cover to my last, there has been a general improvement in composition and color schemes, and it is evident this project has been invaluable to me as an illustrator and helped me better understand what it takes to illustrate a book.
b Bancroft, Tony, director. Mulan. 1999. Walt Disney Pictures, 2023. 1 hr., 27 min. DVD.


k Kershner, Irvin, director. Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back. 1980. Lucasfilm, 2023. 2 hr., 4 min. DVD.

m Miyazaki, Hayao, director. Kiki’s Delivery Service. 1989. Studio Ghibli, 2023. 1 hr., 42 min. DVD.
Miyazaki, Hayao, director. Spirited Away. 2001. Studio Ghibli, 2023. 2 hr., 5 min. DVD.


Wise, Robert, director. The Sound of Music. 1965. 20th Century Studios, 2023. 2 hr., 54 min. DVD.
Always Judge a Book by Its Cover

Abby Miller

Department of Graphic Design

Honors Research Project

Submitted to

The Williams Honors College
The University of Akron