

How I Buy Fiction



Does fiction vary from nonfiction at the point of purchase?

by Kim Pettit

I am an inveterate consumer of fiction. When I buy fiction at a bookstore, I follow a very specific process. Perhaps your customers do the same.

I keep a list of books to buy on different subjects, and often have a list of titles to look for on the next visit to the bookstore. But if I buy three books, it takes me two months to read the two nonfiction titles while the novel is devoured immediately.

Special displays. In many bookstores, best-selling titles, new releases, and special offers are found at the front of the store. An attractive cover or a catchy title may capture my attention, but as I have definite tastes, interests, and goals in entering a store, I spend minimal time in this area.

Categories. Even readers who appreciate a wide variety of fiction—mystery, suspense, romance, fantasy—have a favorite category. I invariably head towards science fiction. In each category, the best stores usually have mini-displays of books relevant to interested buyers, who examine these books with great interest and might select one or two.

Authors. At the shelves most likely to hold the treasures I am seeking, I look for new titles by my favorite authors. Then, I search for titles in a favorite series or for award winners. If a new release is available, my search ends there; that is the book I am going to buy. If a new novel is not on display, I start hunting through the rest of the books on the shelves.

Titles. Limited space means most books are shelved “spine-out,” with only the titles visible. Short titles work best, as they are easy to read quickly. However, the titles themselves must be intriguing. At this writing, the top 15 best-selling general fiction titles in the United States include such titles as *Skipping Christmas*, *Desecration*, *The Fiery Cross*, and *The Mitford Snowmen*. Only two of the 15 have over three words in the title. One book has a subtitle. Longer titles, and subtitles, are critical for nonfiction books, because these are vital to communicating the subject matter and scope of the book. In fiction, however, the title cannot possibly

convey the plot (nor should it, if the story is a mystery or a thriller). Fiction titles must pique readers’ interest.

Covers. I look for covers that heighten the interest created by the title. If the title suggests a serious topic, but the art on the cover is cartoonish, I put the book back. As a frequent reader of books in a particular category, I have found that covers, over time, create a mental image or brand for their publishing houses. I know the name of the science fiction publisher whose books and covers most appeal to me. Because I have enjoyed that publishing house’s books, once in a while I will buy one of its books on the strength of the cover alone. Usually, however, a good-looking cover will only lead me to turn the book over.

Back-cover copy. On the back of the book there is a paragraph setting the stage for the story told within the book. Does the plot sound interesting? Do the characters and subjects merit further attention? Does the book promise to entertain and inform? I check for endorsements, especially from other authors in the category, and take note of the biographical data on the author, if it is included. Still, one final step determines whether I will head toward the cash register or place the book back on the shelf.

Interior copy. I open the book at random, and read a few paragraphs, quickly, to see if I will enjoy the writer’s style. Does the copy flow? Is the dialogue effective? Are the descriptions boring? Interior design is important when there are illustrations as in fiction for children or young adults. For adult readers, however, the primary concern is the quality of the expected reading experience.

Readers expect fiction will be enjoyable, entertaining, and informative. Do your books promise to meet such expectations? Are you carefully selecting the titles, covers, and back-cover copy for your novels? Work to help your fiction titles move from the bookshelf to the cash register. Study your prospective customers’ behavior at the point of purchase. v