

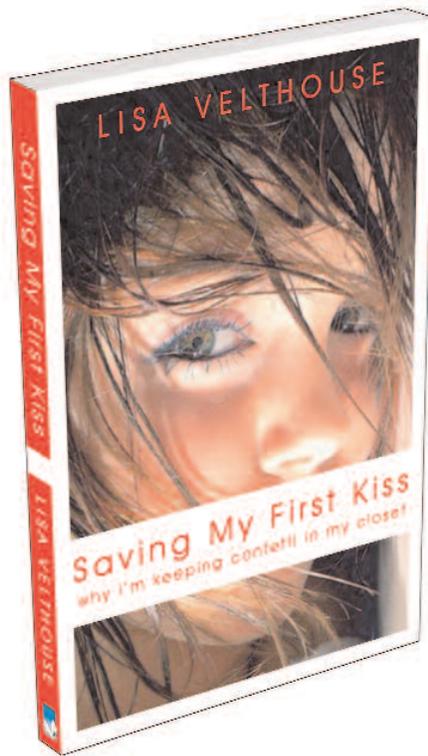
# Judging a Book by Its Cover

“You might want a cover to appeal to everyone,” says Aleks C. Tan, of OMF Literature Inc. ([www.omflit.com](http://www.omflit.com)), in Manila, Philippines, “That is a mistake. If you want to succeed, design for the target audience.”

**D**o not judge a book by its cover,” goes the popular adage. While it holds a valuable truth, it is not the kind of saying that a cover designer should frame and hang on the wall. And neither should anyone who works in Christian publishing!

When we send out a book into the big jungle that is the bookstore shelf or the church book table, before it can impact a life, it first has to arrest the attention of a potential reader. And it is not the book’s first paragraph or chapter, no matter how clearly written and impeccably edited, that achieves this. This practical and crucial responsibility rests on the cover. Book buyers make impulse decisions—to pick up or simply ignore our book—based on how the cover affects them. After all, reading and book-buying are visual activities.

In the creative section of the marketing department at OMF Literature, the largest Christian publishing house in the Philippines, I oversee the work of our designers and preside over the covers committee. This group—composed of the CEO and representatives from marketing, sales, and editorial—brainstorms, critiques, and approves cover designs. To keep abreast with trends in cover design, I browse book catalogs. During short breaks at the office, I roam



*“Designing a new cover saved us the cost of acquiring the rights for the original cover design,” says Tan.*

our bookstore. There I scan covers of our stock—a mixture of local publications and books imported from the U.S. and the U.K.

On one such “reconnaissance” exercise, I noticed that one of our newly licensed books had arrived. With this title, *Saving My First Kiss*, we had decided not to use the original U.S. cover; instead, we designed one that we hoped would hook our local target segment:

female teens and twenty-some-things.

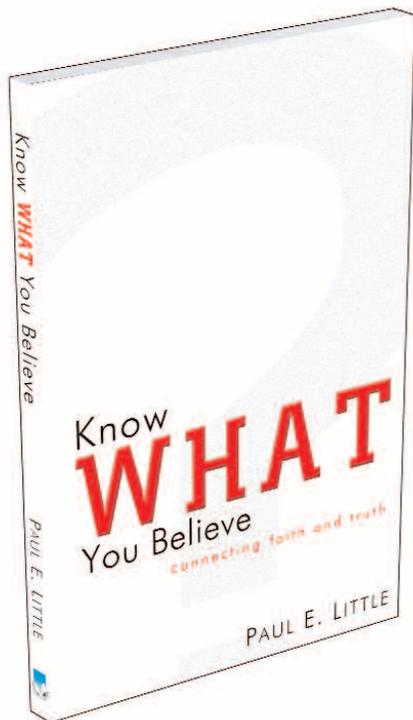
The new cover shows the close-up of a teenage girl’s face, made-up and with a fashionably disheveled hairdo. This is not the stereotypical portrait of a Christian girl pursuing sexual purity. The title, set against a white text box, cuts horizontally through the area where the girl’s lips ought to be. The covers committee approved the design with minor revisions. We hoped our design, a departure from the original’s conservative concept, would appeal strongly to the target market and send the radical message that purity is more than external appearances. It did not hurt that the design stood out from among other titles in its category, with the kindred appeal of a fashion magazine cover.

Our most senior bookstore staff member was arranging copies of *Saving My First Kiss* that afternoon I was roaming the bookstore. He frowned at the cover and, upon my inquiry, expressed that he did not like it. Just then one of our female colleagues, who is in her mid-20s, happened to pass by. She looked at the same cover, smiled approvingly, and exclaimed, “Cool! I like it!” I felt then that this book stood a good chance of getting noticed by the target market segment. A month later, we started receiv-

ing feedback from readers—females in their teens and 20s—about how the book has ministered to them.

Publishers can make the mistake of wanting a cover to appeal to all kinds of people, but what we should seek is for our identified target audience to gravitate to our cover—yes, sometimes even at the expense of negative impressions from other non-targets. Merely three months after releasing *Saving*, the initial run of 3,000 copies was almost sold out and we were up for reprinting.

We have had our share of missteps too. With our edition of Cook's *Know What You Believe*, we designed a cover that was almost entirely white, except for the title, which was set in red, along with a big question mark in gray. It was a no-nonsense design, simple and strong, to appeal to college-aged readers. The creative people were quite happy with it, but our retailers were not. The white cover in matte finish was easily soiled, so stocks became less saleable. We had to individually seal our remaining stock in plastic.

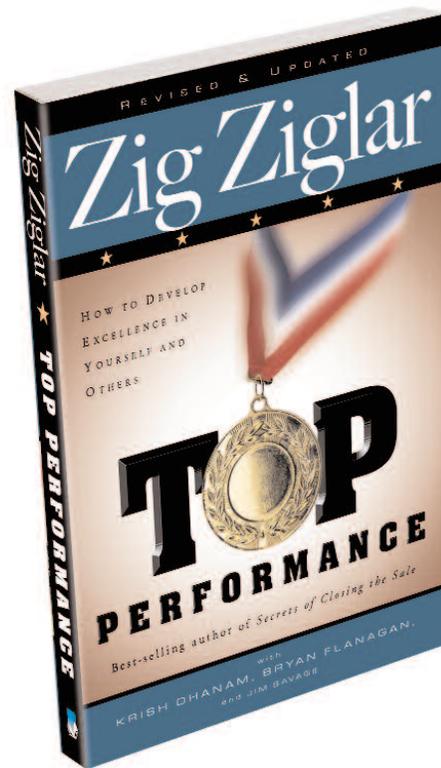


*Good design requires attention to practical concerns too.*

We now steer clear from doing white or very light motifs. When we do choose a light motif, we make sure the finish is laminated and not matte so that it can readily be wiped clean if necessary. Feedback, both negative and positive, helps us develop covers that work on both artistic and practical levels.

In bookstores in the Philippines, more than 90 percent of the books on the shelves are in English. Most titles are imported from the U.S. and U.K. Only a few are Filipino-authored and locally published. This is true for both Christian and secular books and bookstores. In fact, one local publisher observed that bookstores in the Philippines have a Filipiniana section when everywhere else in the world there is a foreign section.

It is in this context that OMF Literature provides Christian books—publishing original works



*"The medal is a strong symbol for rewarded excellence in Philippine culture," says Tan. "Our senior designer was right on target in using it on the cover."*

In a book market dominated by imported products, the unspoken—and, if I may say, unfortunate—standard for professional book packaging is to be “imported-looking.” When we design a cover for a licensed title, we must remember this. With the book’s American or British cultural references and style, it would not be appropriate to

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## It was a no-nonsense design, simple and strong, meant to appeal to college-aged readers.

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despite the dearth of national writers and the limited market for indigenous publications; importing books from Christian publisher-partners in the U.S. and the U.K.; and acquiring licenses for some titles to be produced locally.

have a distinctly Filipino or Asian design element on the cover. The product would strike the reader as inconsistent.

Although we may work to make our covers look “imported” to suit the fancy of the market, there are local visual preferences to be considered. Covers with

high-contrast and warm color schemes are well-received in the Philippines. In a country of brightly-adorned jeepneys and endless fiestas, cool colors can be dismissed as too bland or boring. With another of our licensed titles, *Top Performance* by Zig Ziglar, the decision to redo the cover was almost instantaneous. We shed the pale yellow of the original cover for the deep blue of our edition.

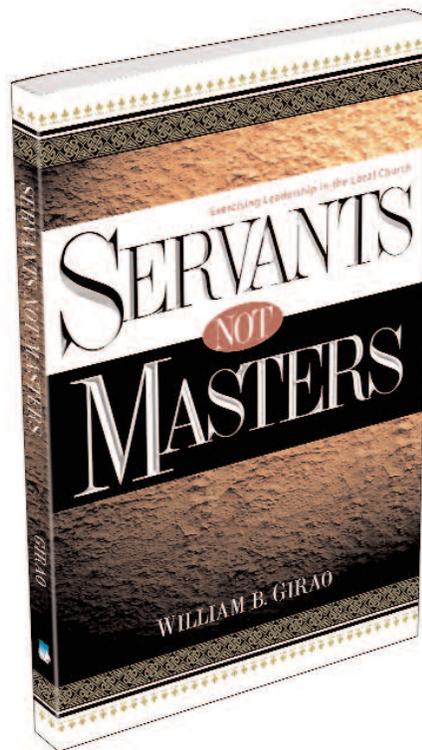
Designing covers for an original manuscript is an exciting process. Naturally, we put special care into this because the product is homegrown. The editor briefs the covers committee about the manuscript; the target market is discussed; the group brainstorms to get the designer started; the designer then works on several concepts which are presented in a subsequent meeting. Our most recent bestselling local title is *This Is My Story*, a compilation of 31 first-person conversion accounts featuring many prominent personalities. In response to market feedback, this book has under-

gone one cover revision in a span of less than two years since its release. Obviously, we do not always get it right the first time.

In the past, locally published books were deemed amateurish, but in recent years, local products, ours included, have greatly improved and enjoy relatively stronger patronage. When our current CEO assumed office almost a decade ago, one of his first priorities was to elevate the quality of our cover designs and packaging. Up to now, in addition to developing covers for new products, we are constantly rethinking the covers and packaging of our backlist, and then redesigning when needed. Titles sitting idly in the backlist for years are given fresh covers, and we start seeing movement on the sales charts. Examples of these are *Servants Not Masters*, an original OMF Lit. book on servant leadership; and *Hope Again* by Charles Swindoll. We want to keep on improving the way we visually communicate our books' messages.

I am proud to say that OMF Lit. is blessed with skillful and versatile designers who approach the challenges of our context and arrive at solutions on a par with, if not more attractive and effective than, those of their foreign counterparts.

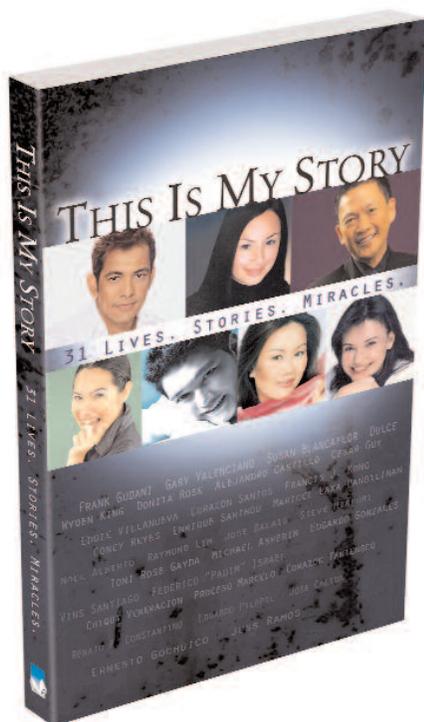
A great cover design is not just the work of a talented designer. Its success is a direct consequence of how clear the



*A bold type treatment and rich colors gave greater appeal to this title for church leaders.*

publisher's vision is for the product; how well he or she understands the market and its design preferences; and how well these are communicated to and implemented by the designer.

By all means, judge the books you publish by their covers. Because you know your readers will—whether they are aware of it or not. You make sure your content is fresh, biblically-sound, and relevant—why not create attractive covers too? Take the cue from the God we serve and proclaim in our literature. The Great Author and Designer has imbued His creation with beauty to capture our attention, invite us to know more, and prompt us to draw closer to Him. When you find yourself yearning for more of God after admiring a sunset or gazing in awe at a star-dotted night sky, remember that your book cover, in its own humble way, can have a similar effect on your readers—encouraging them to engage the message of your book, and there encounter God. ▽



*The cover for this OMF Literature title capitalizes on the fame of its contributors by showcasing their photos.*