

The Visual Realization of Fantastic Worlds in Book Cover Design

Melanie Korte

For someone wishing to become an illustrator in the realist field, the most inspiring but also the most important aspect is the observation and study of landscapes and people. Another crucial element is the study of historical images (paintings), which give visual evidence of what life would have looked like in the past. The following article is concerned with conceptual work in the creation of illustrations for fantasy literature, though not so much about the process from the sketch to the elaboration.

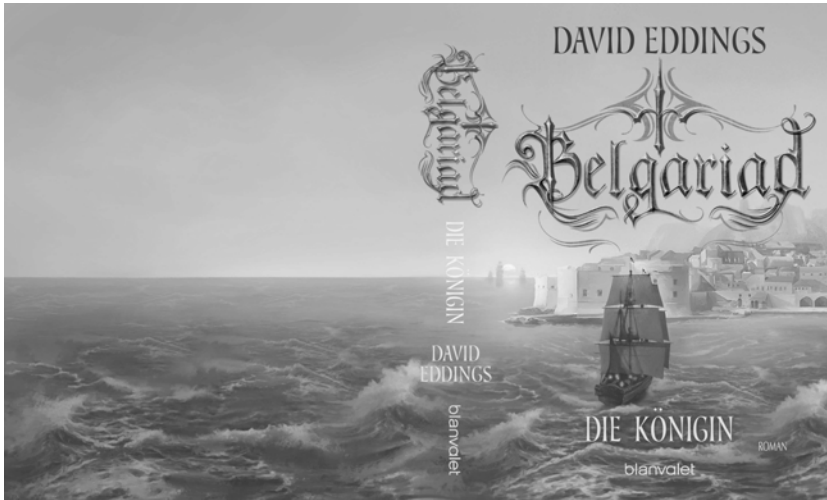
There are various approaches to presenting a fantasy story on the cover. Several factors play an important role here, some more important than others. Today marketing and sales departments follow certain guidelines and rules; the different fantasy stories are placed in particular categories from the outset, and this determines the type of cover illustration selected:

1. Representations of Landscapes

Landscape illustrations are usually used for old classic fantasy epics, such as the *Belgariad* series. All the illustrations I have illustrated in this series are based on the epic landscape concepts. As a general rule, epic stories need epic pictures, enabling readers to immerse themselves in the fantasy world immediately and effortlessly. Landscapes make it very easy for viewers to immerse themselves in the new world.

The representation of the epic landscapes usually takes a wide-angled view, in which the landscape can stretch out horizontally. This image format works most effectively when the illustration takes up the whole cover. We know this landscape orientation from television and cinema formats, which have been influential here. More recently, the games industry has also had an impact. The images are familiar from concept art, the pre-production phase when the artists develop preliminary ideas and images on the basis of the script and thus begin to define the world before other artists get involved.

Fig. 1



The use of perspective in modern landscape illustrations for fantasy book covers is aligned with concept art. This means that there is always a small person in the foreground – usually the protagonist, in rare cases the antagonist. Behind the protagonist, the vastness of the landscape stretches out, usually ending with a monumental structure (a building or a whole town) towards the horizon. In *Belgariad – Die Königin*, the German edition of David Eddings' *Belgariad – Queen of Sorcery*, the ship, or rather the people on the ship, serve to show the scale.

From a conceptual point of view, the person in the foreground serves solely to clarify the scale in the picture. We know from everyday life and from the conventional rules of perspective that a person in the foreground must be depicted as larger than something in the background. If the proportions are reversed, we immediately realize that the structure in the background must be massive. This gives us a sense of epic vastness.

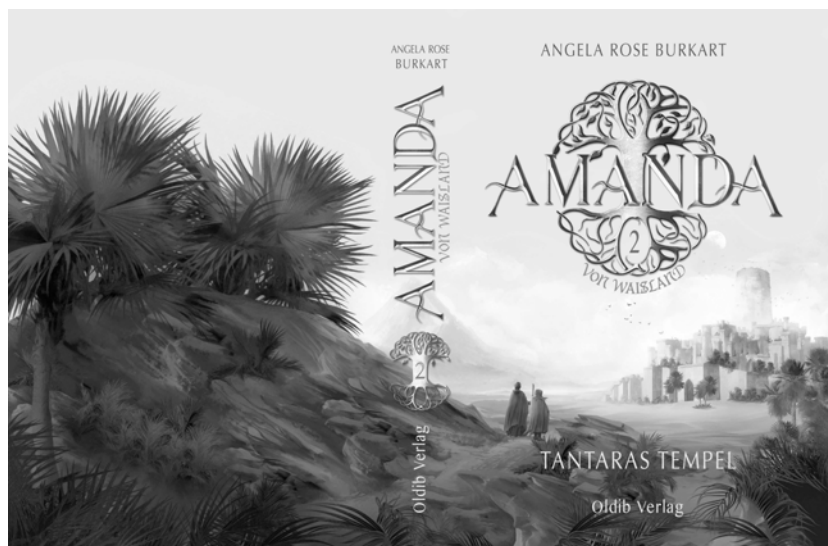
However, we also need this classic composition for an optimum arrangement of the picture on the cover – which also has to contain important information such as the title, the subtitle if applicable, the author and publisher.

Both in the classic *Belgariad* series by David Eddings (first published in English in 1982; a new German edition was published by Blanvalet in 2017) and in a new German four-part fantasy series *Amanda von Waisland* (first published in 2018), the titles are turned into large-format wordmarks, giving them equal status with the landscape.

Fig. 2



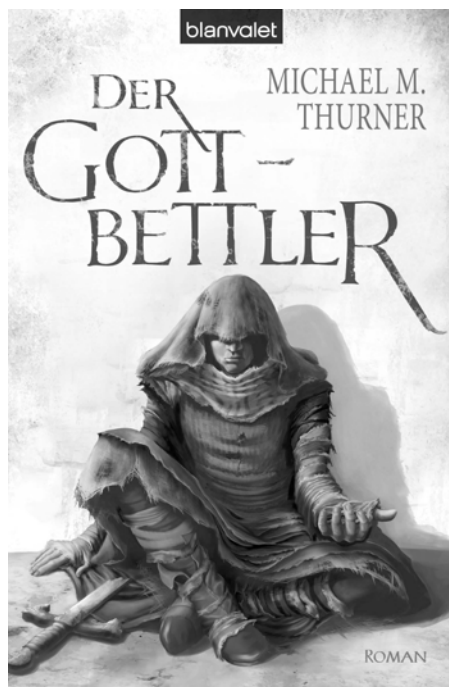
Fig. 3



2. Representations of People/Heroes

Things are different when it comes to representations of people or the detailed depiction of the protagonist. Here the distribution of space on the cover is always in favour of the person/the protagonist. This person has to take up almost all the space on the cover, otherwise we will not perceive them as important. They also have the function of generating sympathy, since otherwise the potential buyer will not pick up the book. Covers with this image composition always dispense with an elaborate wordmark. Here the title serves to accentuate the person depicted. *Der Gottbettler* (The God Beggar) by Michael M. Thurner was an exception: here it was possible to place a large wordmark because the protagonist is sitting on the ground like a beggar. Because of this position, he only takes up a fraction of the cover in comparison to a standing figure.

Fig. 4



One distinctive feature that became common from 2010 onwards was the depiction of people with their faces partly concealed. The covering of the eyes, sometimes down to the tip of the nose, was meant to create a sense of mystery, but also to allow

readers to use their own imagination. The point of this marketing strategy, however, was not to generate any antipathy in the observer. In most cases, the cover is the critical factor in the purchase of the book, unless it is by a well-known or even famous author. Covers must therefore fulfil certain requirements set by the marketing and sales departments. Here the effects of the mainstream and social media are particularly noticeable: the taste of the masses must be catered to.

The well-known series by Trudi Canavan may also be mentioned as prominent examples of this trend here. The protagonists have their hoods pulled down so far that their faces cannot be recognized. Thus, the decisive selling point is the buyer's own idea about what the person under the hood might look like. In other words, there are hints, but nothing is specified. To avoid showing the protagonist's face without having to cover it up, another variant has been developed: depicting the person from behind. This type of representation has not become widespread and is still fairly seldom used (an example is Patrick Rothfuss' series at Klett Cotta / Hobbit Presse).

Fig. 5



In recent years, representations of people have receded into the background again, since it has proven more and more difficult to design a person who will appeal to everyone and thus inspire a corresponding sympathy among all potential buyers. The difficulty of catering to all tastes cannot be resolved by means of portraits. A further reason to reject portraits of protagonists is the rapid changes in our visual language. In some cases, illustrators have been commissioned to produce cover art showing the protagonist in a full-body pose, but only a detail from the illustration has been chosen for the final product.

Fig. 6



In these exhaustive images, armour, clothes and weapons play a more important role, and these areas therefore have to be elaborated in more detail than in a representation of the whole person, where the focus is on the face. The garments and armour in the cover illustrations must give an unmistakable sense of which epoch has inspired the novel. Even if there is more room to manoeuvre here because armour and clothing have undergone extensive design developments thanks to our film and gaming industries, there must still be a clearly discernible reference: is this some kind of crusader, or a knight from the late Middle Ages?

Thus, clothing and armour have also become part of our mainstream language. In *Der Weg des Inquisitors*, the computer game series *Diablo* is the inspiration for both the novel and the cover illustration. The pre-eminent theme is the battle between divine heaven (angels and gods) and the demons of hell (devils). Here the armour and especially the tabards have been redesigned, leaving only a hint of the originals.

2.1 The Significance of the Mainstream in the Representation of Characters in Fantasy Literature

Obviously, we still benefit today from the knowledge and development of earlier epochs, but today's art is also in a constant state of evolution. And it has never evolved at such a rapid pace as in our present time. Social media have a huge influence (sometimes positive, sometimes negative) on our world of images, thus accelerating the development of visual language. This can also be observed in publishing houses, which produce new editions of some books very soon – less than five years – after the initial publication, in the hope of regaining the attention of current audiences.

The earlier paintings and pictures of the Middle Ages serve only as a point of reference for those times. For many years they helped us to imagine what life might have looked like in the past. But stories such as the *Lord of the Rings* or *Game of Thrones* have completely replaced these old images with their own version of the Middle Ages and now serve as models for new developments. Here too, it is essential to keep creating new designs – and ideally to stay ahead of one's time.

This is why the medieval and early modern pictures, even the medievalist imaginations of the 19th century, are no longer relevant for our modern visual language for the fantasy genre. Our visual language is based on the new modern implementations and can only develop in this way.

If fantasy illustrators were to continue using the medieval paintings as basics, the fantasy novel would no longer be distinguishable from the historical novel. Historical novels have their own audience. The distinction must remain clear also in terms of illustrations. Every epoch of the Middle Ages had different styles of representation – and this applies especially to depictions of people. These dominant styles changed many times over this 1000-year period. In the German-speaking countries, representations of people have proven more and more difficult over recent years, since the influence of other countries is very strong, and the mainstream in fantasy is not defined in the German-speaking area. Here the American market is at the forefront. Furthermore, most big epics such as *Game of Thrones*, *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Witcher* are not written or filmed in the German-speaking countries. Most books are purchased from overseas publishers, often with their cover rights. This has a major impact on the development of images on our book market.

2.2 Scenarios: Another Popular Representation of and with People is Their Integration into Fully Described Scenes from the Novel

When characters are integrated into a complete scene they have to be represented in a slightly smaller size for optimum interaction with their surroundings. These staged compositions come from classical painting and are still found frequently to-

day. Here too, it is seldom possible to work with wordmarks, since the scene usually requires a higher degree of detail and thus more space.

Fig. 7



Fig. 8

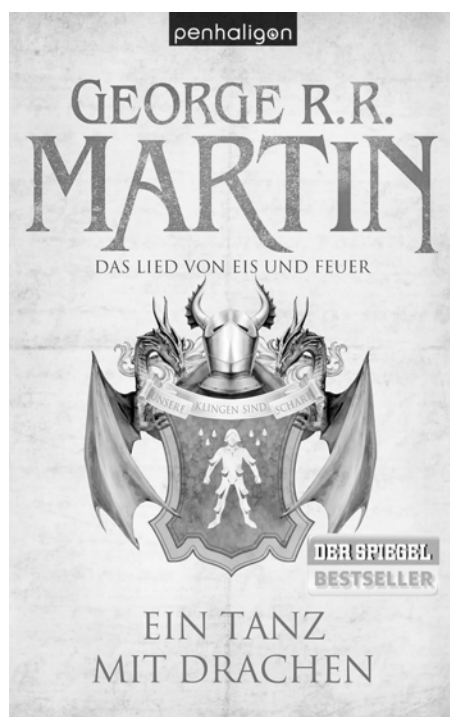


3. Emblematic Representations

The development of emblems in recent years has its origin in coats of arms. This direct link can always be found in fantasy novels, as in other genres, and is a clear distinguishing feature from the medieval period. Even if it would be appropriate, in the case of vast serial epics like *A Song of Ice and Fire*, to represent them with landscapes,

publishers have instead chosen to use the coats of arms of the different houses. Even the 2010 German edition of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, published by Penhaligon, alludes strongly to the medieval language of heraldry. Not just the coat of arms itself, in the middle, but also the 'parchment' background are meant to convey a sense of something 'old'. Precisely because the first volumes have little to do with magic, and the whole story is very dark and brutal, the publisher deliberately chose this reference to history. In the tenth book of *A Song of Ice and Fire* I had to illustrate the skinned man in the middle of the coat of arms.

Fig. 9



It was only with the later edition (shortly after the launch of season one of the HBO series *Game of Thrones*) that the novels were reissued with the emblematic logo design. The advantage of a purely emblematic cover design is that it is concise and clearly identifiable with the series. It can also serve as a substitute for a logo. The advantage of a logo or figurative mark is its recognition value. At a time when we are inundated with images, simplicity is a successful strategy. The same strategy has

been used in the Netflix series *The Witcher*, but also in the new German edition of the novels the series is based on, published by dtv.

Fig. 10

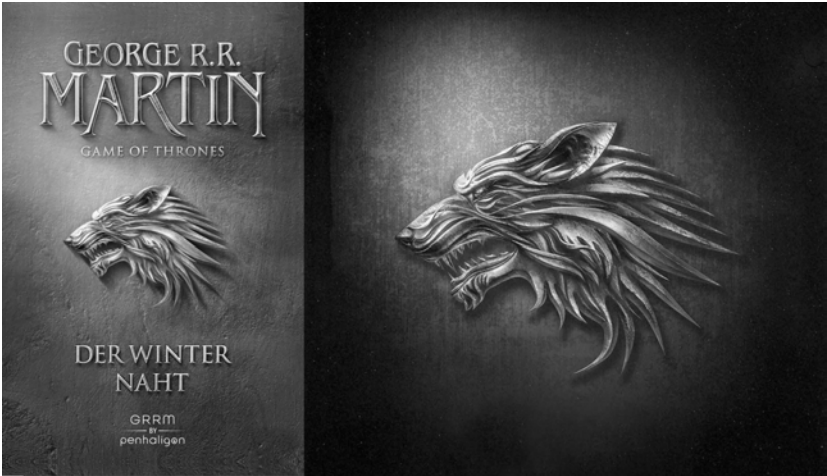


Fig. 11



In both series, the focus is on the wolf. In both series, the wolves represent the first books. However, the design of the two wolves is different enough to avoid any confusion between the series. The language of emblems offers more wide-ranging options for design than, for example, landscapes, where the illustrator is constrained by the facts of nature. A further advantage of emblematic representations is that they avoid restricting or even influencing the reader's imagination. This is the most neutral and functional language in the world of book covers.

4. Conclusion: The Illustrator as a Creative Professional in the Book World

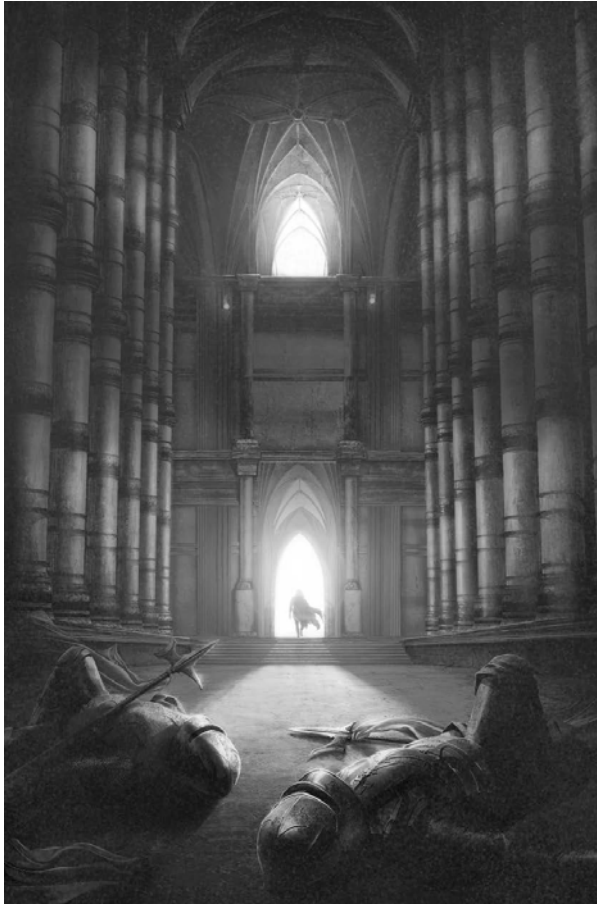
Commissioned work is no longer what it once was; book illustration is no longer the dream job that it is imagined to be. Just in the last ten years, the profession has undergone a number of transformations. Illustrators have less and less freedom. The flood of fantasy images in the media means that many people already have fixed pictures in their minds. As a result, there is less and less scope for creativity, and the artist is often just the executor.

Marketing and product placement play such a huge role that publishers, in extreme cases, are only trying to benefit from the success of other novels. The result of this are covers that are very similar – and deliberately so.

But even here there are particular illustrations that stand out and constitute a challenge for the illustrator, despite very strict specifications from the publisher. The cover illustration for Harry Connolly's *Die Pforte der Schatten* (Blanvalet, German translation of *The Way Into Chaos*) exactly matches the publisher's specifications. The knights' blood on the ground is symbolized by the red flags.

Despite all the publishers' stipulations, all illustrations require the production of a sketch after the briefing. This is followed by the elaboration, culminating in the final draft. Creating illustrations is still a craft that the illustrator acquires over many years and requires the illustrator to have a great deal of spatial thinking and knowledge. Even if the specifications are often very precise and leave little room for maneuver, it is the illustrator's responsibility to implement them skillfully and to the best of his knowledge.

Fig. 12



Illustrations

Fig. 1: David Eddings ›Belgariad 4; The Queen‹, drawn by Melanie Korte, 2019, © Blanvalet/Randomhouse Group.

Fig. 2: Angela R. Burkart ›Amanda von Waisland 2; Tantaros Tempel‹, drawn by Melanie Korte, 2019, © Oldib Publisher.

Fig. 3: Angela R. Burkart ›Amanda von Waisland 2; Tantaros Tempel‹, drawn by Melanie Korte including graphical design, 2019, © Oldib Publisher.

Fig. 4: Michael M. Thurner ›Der Gottbettler‹, drawn by Melanie Korte (née Miklitza), 2013, © Blanvalet/Randomhouse Group.

- Fig. 5: Patrick Rothfuss ›Musik der Stille‹, drawn by Melanie Korte, 2019, © Klett Cotta / Hobbit Presse.
- Fig. 6: Jeff Salyards ›Tanz der Klingen‹, drawn by Melanie Korte, 2016, © Heyne / Randomhouse Group.
- Fig. 7: S.A. Bottlinger ›Der Fluch des Wüstenfeuers‹, drawn by Melanie Korte, 2016, © Klett Cotta / Hobbitpresse.
- Fig. 8: Tad Williams ›Das Reich der Grasländer‹ (German translation of *Empire of Grass*), draft drawn by Melanie Korte, Klett Cotta/Hobbit Presse.
- Fig. 9: George R.R. Martin ›A Song of Ice and Fire – A Dance with Dragons‹, the skinned man drawn by Melanie Korte (née Miklitza), graphic design and illustration by Isabelle Hirtz, 2012, © Penhaligon / Randomhouse Group.
- Fig. 10: George R.R. Martin ›Game of Thrones – Der Winter naht‹ drawn by Melanie Korte (née Miklitza) and Isabelle Hirtz, 2012, © Penhaligon / Randomhouse Group).
- Fig. 11: Andrzej Sapowski ›Der Hexer – das Erbe der Elfen‹ drawn by Melanie Korte and Isabelle Hirtz, 2019, © dtv.
- Fig. 12: Harry Connolly ›Die Pforte der Schatten‹ drawn by Melanie Korte (née Miklitza), 2016, © Blanvalet / Randomhouse Group.

