

Selling Books by Their Gilded Covers

By Julie Bosman

Even as more readers switch to the convenience of e-books, publishers are giving old-fashioned print books a makeover.

Many new releases have design elements usually reserved for special occasions — deckle edges, colored endpapers, high-quality paper and exquisite jackets that push the creative boundaries of bookmaking. If e-books are about ease and expedience, the publishers reason, then print books need to be about physical beauty and the pleasures of owning, not just reading.

“When people do beautiful books, they’re noticed more,” said Robert S. Miller, the publisher of Workman Publishing. “It’s like sending a thank-you note written on nice paper when we’re in an era of e-mail correspondence.”

The eagerly anticipated 925-page novel by Haruki Murakami, “1Q84,” arrived in bookstores in October wrapped in a translucent jacket with the arresting gaze of a young woman peering through. A new novel by Stephen King about the Kennedy assassination, “11/22/63,” has an intricate book jacket and, unusual for fiction, photographs inside. The paperback edition of Jay-Z’s memoir “Decoded” features a shiny gold Rorschach on the cover, and in March the front of “The Song of Achilles” by Madeline Miller will bear an embossed helmet sculpted with punctures, cracks and texture, giving the image a 3-D effect.

Publishers in recent years have had a frugal attitude about so-called special effects, but that attitude has begun to shift, said Julie Grau, senior vice president and publisher of Spiegel & Grau, part of Random House.

“We’re rethinking the value in certain cases of special effects and higher production standards,” Ms. Grau said, citing “Decoded.”

“Now in some cases, creating a more beautiful hardcover or paperback object is warranted.”

For publishers, the strategy has a clear payoff: to increase the value of print books and build a healthy, diverse marketplace that includes brick-and-mortar bookstores and is not dominated by Amazon and e-books.

Their efforts will be especially tested this holiday season, when e-readers from Barnes & Noble (priced as low as \$99) and Amazon, (as low as \$79), are expected to be popular gifts.

Booksellers, worried that e-readers could displace paper books under the Christmas tree, say that a striking cover can lure buyers who might not have noticed the book otherwise.

“These extra fancy covers, if tastefully done, cause customers to notice the book, pick it up and look it over,” Paul Ingram, a book buyer at the Prairie Lights bookstore in Iowa City, Iowa, said in an e-mail.

“It works the other way too. A dull uninteresting cover can make people pass over the title.”

To showcase books with special design elements, booksellers at Changing Hands Bookstore in Tempe, Ariz., created a display of lushly embroidered Penguin classics with a sign reading, “Give classical beauty this holiday season.”

There are indications that an exquisitely designed hardcover book can keep print sales high and cut into e-book sales. For instance, “1Q84” has sold 95,000 copies in hardcover and 28,000 in e-book — an inversion of the typical sales pattern of new fiction at Knopf. Scribner, an imprint of Simon & Schuster, published “11/22/63.”

“We hoped that a handsome object would slow the migration to e-book for King and, in fact, we are now in our fourth printing,” said Nan Graham, the senior vice president and editor in chief at Scribner.

Bloomsbury, which released the Harry Potter series in Britain, has been using a strategy to increase the premium design flourishes on its print books.

“How to Avoid Being Killed in a War Zone” by Rosie Garthwaite, a survival guide for traversing the world’s most dangerous places, was released in June by Bloomsbury USA with a sturdy paperback cover designed to appear tough enough to be carried into battle.

“A More Perfect Heaven,” by Dava Sobel, released by Walker & Company, an imprint of Bloomsbury, has deep red endpapers, the first page that a reader sees when opening a book. Bloomsbury also released Ms. Miller’s “The Song of Achilles” in Britain (in the United States, it will be published by Ecco, part of HarperCollins). Evan Schnittman, the managing director for group sales and marketing for Bloomsbury, said the strategy emerged from internal conversations about the future of books and which formats would thrive in the long run.

“If we believe that convenience reading is moving at light speed over to e,” Mr. Schnittman said, using the industry shorthand for e-books, “then we need to

think about what the physical qualities of a book might be that makes someone stop and say, ‘well there’s convenience reading, and then there’s book owning and reading.’ We realized what we wanted to create was a value package that would last.”

Some editions can command higher prices, like the \$35 list price of a new translation of “The Iliad” by Stephen Mitchell that has a red silk placeholder, deckle edges, embossing and an extra-heavy paper stock. The paperback edition of Jay-Z’s “Decoded” costs \$25.

Martha K. Levin, the executive vice president and publisher of Free Press, the imprint of Simon & Schuster that published “The Iliad,” said the presentation sent “the message that even if you’re buying 90 percent of your books on your e-reader, this is the one that you want to have on your bookshelf.”

Mr. Schnittman of Bloomsbury said the publisher had not yet raised prices on books with premium design elements, though he thought customers “would easily pay a dollar or two more for a beautiful book.”

In October, the British novelist Julian Barnes underscored that point when he accepted the Man Booker Prize for “The Sense of an Ending” by urging publishers to pay attention to aesthetics.

“Those of you who have seen my book, whatever you think of its contents, will probably agree that it is a beautiful object,” Mr. Barnes told the black-tie crowd in London. “And if the physical book, as we’ve come to call it, is to resist the challenge of the e-book, it has to look like something worth buying and worth keeping.”