

# George Salter's Book Jacket Designs, 1925–1940

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The paradigm of the reader as a “poacher” or intruder on the relationship between the author and text is integral to an interpretation of design in the history of modern book production. As described by the theoretical framework of reception theory, the meaning of the text depends on how an audience receives an objective formula of letters arranged on the page, and the jacket designer could be regarded either as an intruder or as a bridge between the author’s intention and the audience’s reception. Belonging at once to the interpretive level of the book and to the market forces that led to the production of its meaning as an objective text, the book jacket designer bridged the book and its audience by wrapping the object in an advertisement, targeting the mass market reader. Book jacket designers, then, interpreted the author for the reader: rather than “poach” meaning, the jacket designer drew attention to the practice of reading by visualizing the book’s interior. With the rearrangement of type on the page, and with the introduction of “breathing space” between the letters, the “horizon of reception” changed, as cultural historian Roger Chartier noted.<sup>1</sup>

The value of the book encompasses its literary and aesthetic nuance, but it also includes its more tangible surface appeal. Rather than a practice imposing on the readers’ silent interaction with a literary narrative whose meaning is determined by “poachers” who steal interpretative elements for their own purposes, the jacket served to confine the space within which meaning was constructed. The importance of the jacket, as one trade journalist commented, had little to do with protecting the book. Rather, it “accompanies the book on its long journey from publisher to reader. In the hands of the book agent, it presents the books to the bookseller, in the shop window to the buyer and, thus, is its own publicity agent.”<sup>2</sup>

George Salter was among the most prolific of the commercial designers who applied their talents to the promotion of books, and to the professionalization of the book jacket as a design specialization. Born in Bremen, Germany in 1897, Salter studied at the Municipal School of Arts and Crafts in Charlottenburg between 1919 and 1922, when he started work as a stage and costume designer, completing sets for one-hundred and twenty operas and more than two hundred plays in five years. In 1931, he taught commercial art in the Municipal Graphic Arts Academy in Berlin and, within two years, supervised ten instructors. Salter’s stylistic

- 1 Roger Chartier, *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 1-23.
- 2 Charles Rosner, *The Art of the Book Jacket* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954) xviii; *Jackets Required: An Illustrated History of American Book Jacket Design 1920-1950* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1995).

Figure 1

*Der Tunnel* by Bernhard Kellerman, published by S. Fisher Verlag, c. 1929.



roots were in the “new typography” that evolved from the Bauhaus era. The propaganda value of the book during the Weimar era was equally important to his evolution as a designer. The political power of the book, and its implications for the social order, belonged to the intellectual current of the artistic revolutionaries of the Bauhaus, and the Russian constructivists, suprematists, Italian fascists, and British vorticists. In Berlin between 1927 and 1930, the political value of the public text, particularly its potential power to change the social order by influencing the reader’s mind, overshadowed the aesthetic interest held by any design element or nuance of the letter. As one German printing trade magazine reported, “Publishers of political books with extreme tendencies were the first to recognize the possibilities latent in the protective jacket and the first to produce good and striking effects. It was relatively long before more hesitant publishers of *belles lettres* followed their example.”<sup>3</sup>

Salter’s early jackets completed in Germany for the firm of Fischer demonstrate that he, like Jan Tschichold, had been deeply impressed by the 1923 Weimar Bauhaus exhibition, and earlier experiments by El Lissitzky and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy with the form of the book, including typo-photo (type superimposed on a photo), and the kinetic power that could be conveyed through design, as in *Der Tunnel* by Bernhard Kellermann (see figure 1). Other elements typical of the new typography or plain style that occur in Salter’s early work include the rearrangement of the axis of the page, as in the cover for *The 42nd Parallel* by John Dos Passos (see figure 2); the hyper-textual concentration on a single letter or groups of letters, as if disembodied from a narrative or interpretive context, and suspended in space as if fixed by the book’s architecture. Salter’s affection for the principles of the new typography, though, were tempered by his roots in Germanic script. So we begin to see in his early covers for Fischer the delightful combination of typographic elements in his hand-lettered capitals mixed with calligraphic

3 *Graphik* 38 (Zurich, 1951): 147.

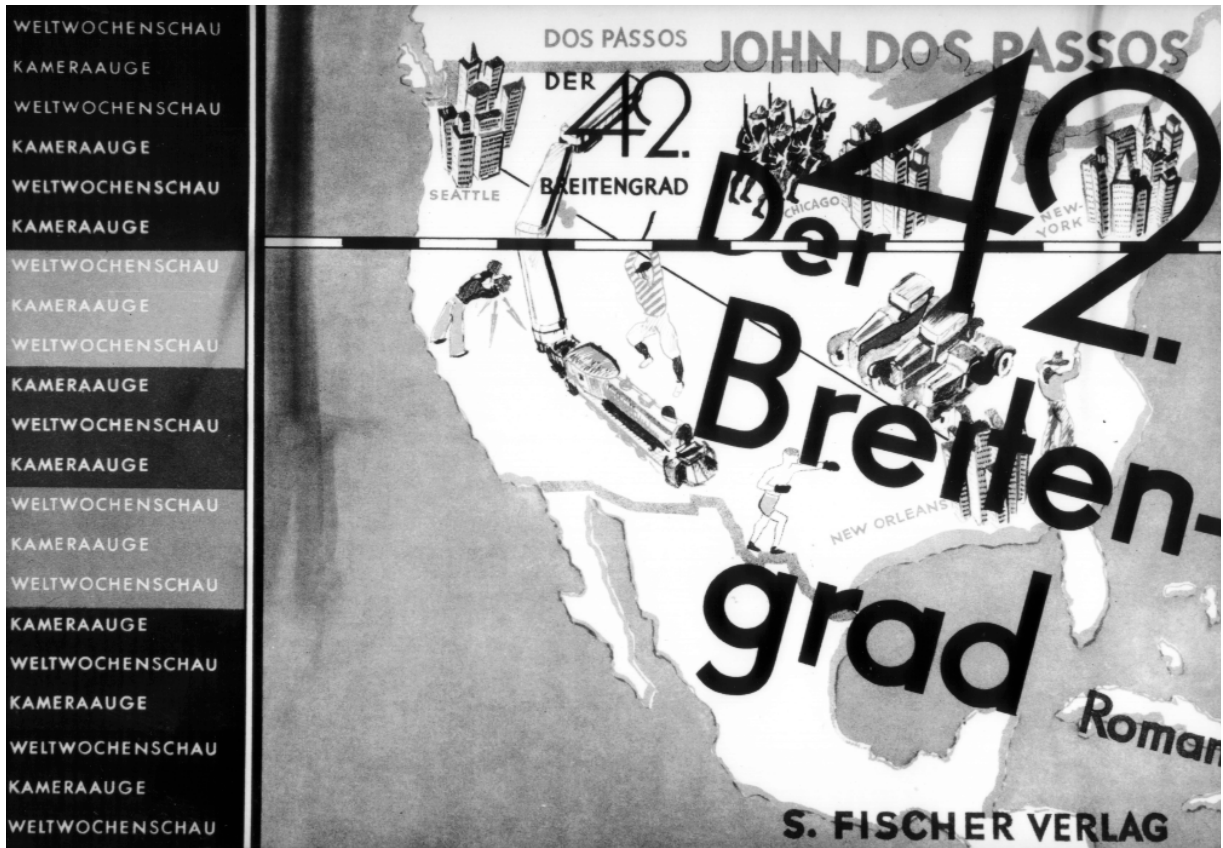


Figure 2  
 42nd Parallel by John Dos Passos, published  
 by S. Fisher Verlag, c. 1929.

Figure 3  
 Original cover design for Berlin Alexanderplatz  
 by Alfred Döblin, published by S. Fisher  
 Verlag, 1929.

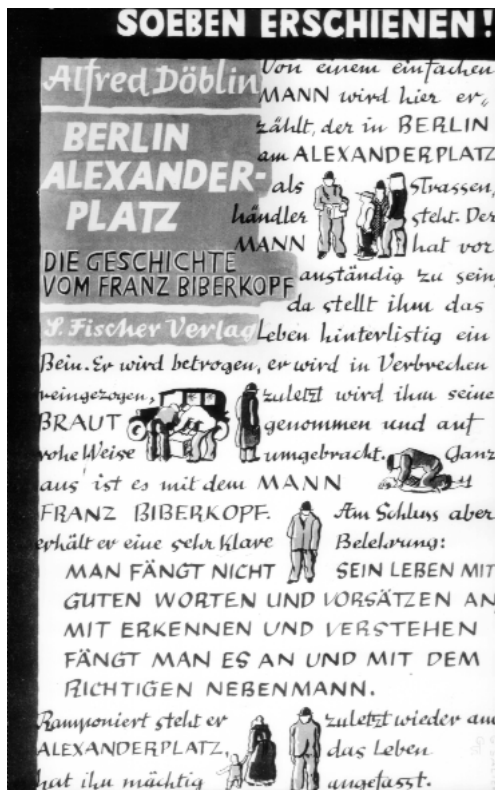


Figure 4

Original cover design for *Class Reunion* by Franz Werfel, published by Mercury Books, 1940.



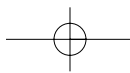
elements in his type. In Salter's cover for Alfred Doblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (figure 3), for example, the designer demonstrates his fascination with lettering as foreground that superimposes itself as text. In his later work for Alfred Knopf's Mercury label, Salter playfully arranges cartoon and type, counterbalancing the unfinished quality of the drawings with the rough edges and imperfect square of letters (see figure 4).

Salter moved to New York in November of 1934, a year after applying for a license to practice commercial art in Berlin, denied later by the Third Reich on the grounds that he could not be trusted to "cooperate as a commercial artist... in the furthering of German culture with responsibility toward the People and the Reich."<sup>4</sup> When George Salter arrived in the US, propaganda design was easy work to pick up: the language was plain, the purpose simple, and the genre something that pervaded public culture. Among his first assignments in America in 1935-1936 were six government propaganda books published for the Foreign Policy Association, a "nonprofit organization founded to carry on research and educational activities to aid in the understanding and constructive development of American foreign policy." Salter's widely reprinted later work, produced for Knopf's Borzoi label attracted public attention and awards. His greatest achievements were in the 1940s with covers for Knopf, Random House, Fischer, Sheed and Ward, and Little Brown.<sup>5</sup>

According to Sidney Jacobs, Salter knew "ten words" of English when he arrived, and it took him a week to read a manu-

4 Sidney Jacobs, "George Salter: A Profile" *Publishers' Weekly* (June 3, 1939): 2053-56.

5 *Ibid.*



script. Perhaps his early difficulties with language led him to adopt illustrating the jacket rather than the text of the book, which he could not yet read. According to Jacobs, Salter's younger brother, Stefan, who had been in New York for three years, would read the book aloud, and on the basis of that reading, George would design the jacket. "From an indecipherable German script," according to Jacobs, he developed "a rugged calligraphic hand."<sup>6</sup> Salter had been in America for about a year when Dr. Helmut Lehmann-Haupt invited him to teach at Columbia University. Salter also taught at New York University. He taught book jacket design at the Cooper Union Art School for thirty years. Teaching allowed him to develop the set of principles he incorporated in the "Code of Ethics" for the Book Jacket Designers' Guild, which he was instrumental in forming in 1947.<sup>7</sup>

In 1938, the American Institute for Graphic Arts, along with the London Society of Scribes and Illuminators, mounted an important, trendsetting exhibition in the British Building of Rockefeller Center, displaying the work of three-hundred English and American artists. Trade journalists hailed the exhibit as "New York's first comprehensive showing of calligraphy, illumination, and inscription lettering on wood, stone, gold, silver, and plastic."<sup>8</sup> Francis Meynell, the distinguished printer in England, thought the first exhibition of American book jacket design work so "delightful" that he wrote to request his own copy of the catalog, which represented the work of thirty-two artists. The art director of N.W. Ayer expressed an inter-

6 Ibid.

7 Salter papers, Wing.

8 In 1947, Salter was one of several designers who organized the Book Jacket Designers' Guild in New York. The purpose of the organization was to "raise the standards" of design. Salter, along with his cofounders, established bylaws, a code of ethics for book jacket designers patterned on that articulated by the advertising profession, created a consultation service for young designers to help them learn the business, a publicity committee, and a cultural committee whose activities included, but were not limited to, arranging for exhibitions. At one mid-December meeting in New York, for example, the cultural committee chaired a "two-hour discussion of cultural values from early beginning of time to the present." Because Salter was a teacher, and the Guild's purpose was to instruct as well as preserve principle, the cultural committee set a schedule of six meetings at two-month intervals during its first year to cover the following areas: the history of the book jacket; the content, style, and individuality of expression through the jackets (two sessions); sources and research for their stylization; "The blurb versus the manuscript," weighing the commercial advertising value of the jacket copy against the textual value of the book itself, and last, the function of form: letter, calligraphy, and text.

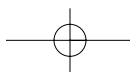
The Guild announced its existence and celebrated its first organizational year by

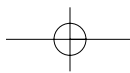
sending letters to 152 publishers, inviting them to submit entries for the juried, retrospective show, exhibiting jackets from books published between 1940 and 1947. The new professional organization received more than 1,000 jacket submissions for the 250–300 spots in its first juried exhibition. The Cultural Committee afterward reported that all services but \$70 had been donated by members of the Guild or contributing publishers.

Reflecting the increase in the number of jackets produced by the industry, the exhibit consisted of the following: eight jackets for 1940; eleven for 1941; fifteen for 1942; twelve for 1943; twelve for 1944; seventeen for 1945; fifty-five for 1946; one-hundred and twenty-four for 1947; a total of two-hundred and fifty-four jackets, almost half produced in 1947. Similarly, the catalog for the exhibition included one selection for 1940; two for 1941; one for 1942; three for 1943; none for 1944; five for 1945;

fifteen for 1946; and twenty-one for 1947. Similar patterns could be demonstrated in Guild membership. The catalog displayed one-hundred and seventy-three jackets completed by twenty-nine members of the Guild; and eighty-one by those who did not belong to the organization. Of the two-hundred and fifty-four jackets in the show, forty percent were two-color, and sixteen percent were four-color; the rest were black and white.

The Guild's retrospective was an important exhibition for the new professional network. Its formation and development built upon earlier advances by the American Institute of Graphic Arts' Book Clinic, which selected fifty books each year during the 1930s to stimulate interest in improving the quality of trade book production. Publication of the catalog and news of the jacket exhibition had a ripple effect, according to the Guild's cultural committee report.





est in reprinting twelve jackets from the catalog in an article he intended to write for *Advertising & Selling*, the largest trade magazine in the U.S. read by those in the book publicity industry. Similar requests for specimens to be used in critical reviews and trade journal articles about book jacket design came from *Publishers' Weekly* and *American Artist*, and *Bookbinding & Book Production*. The Society of Typographic Artists in Chicago wanted the exhibition to travel to the Midwest, as did the Arts and Crafts Center of Pittsburgh, and a thirty-week national tour was arranged by the American Federation of Arts in Washington, DC. The exhibition included the work of Alfred A. Knopf, publisher of the Borzoi label: The House of Knopf and Random House (one corporate entity by then) had produced nearly a third of the titles exhibited. The other firms included the university presses of Princeton, Oxford, and Columbia; Sheed and Ward; Macmillan; Farrar Straus; Viking; Doubleday; Pantheon; New Directions; and Little, Brown. The books exhibited the work of typographer and designer William Addison Dwiggins, as well as Paul Rand, Miriam Woods, Jean Carlu, Alvin Lustig, Leo Manso, Jeanyee Wong, and Gene Federico; and the book jackets of George Salter (1897-1967).<sup>9</sup>

Salter, a "second-generation Borzoi enthusiast," worked as art director for Mercury Publications between 1939-1960, in addition to designing the title page for the *American Mercury* magazine, which Knopf published between 1924 and 1934. Salter also designed the jackets for many of Knopf's Borzoi books, along with jackets for more than three-hundred other mass market trade books published by several competitor firms. Knopf's commissions established Salter's presence in the American literary design world, according to book historians, providing the status and connection with a network of prominent artists and commercial illustrators including McKnight Kauffer, William A. Dwiggins, and Oscar Ogg, all part of Knopf's design team. Salter later described the Borzoi brand as a design "mode rather than a fixed graphic form,"—"editorial system" rather than a style. "The good book-jacket is the product of an editorial mind," Salter wrote, "able to extract the essence of the whole contents of the book and project it on the cover in a visual manner."<sup>10</sup> So enthusiastic was Salter about calligraphy, according to Paul Standard in the *Penrose Annual*, that he "saw no reason why entire books should not again be written out in some agreeable script and so reproduced in quantity like ordinary trade editions." According to the British trade journal, Salter had gone far to prove the point: he wrote out a several page version of Franz Kafka's *The Trial* in calligraphy, and he "felt it only a matter of time before the idea is accepted by many a publisher as routine practice," wrote Standard.<sup>11</sup>

The Borzoi label represented a "planned" work, "produced with the greatest care," according to the designer, and represented stylistic and editorial techniques that left the design "unaffected,"

9 TLS Francis Meynell to BJDG, n.d. but probably 1948. Salter/Wing; Typed report of the BJDG, cultural committee, 1948. Salter/ Wing.

10 Typed manuscript, "There Is a Borzoi Style" (Salter papers). Draft for chapter in published in *AAK Portrait of a Publisher* (George Salter papers). Wing Foundation Collection on the History of Printing, Newberry Library, Chicago. Hereafter referred to as Salter/Wing. See also Joseph Blumenthal, *Printed Book in America* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1977); John W. Tebbel "Design, Printing, and Manufacturing" in *A History of Book Publishing in the United States*.

11 Paul Standard, "Calligraphy in Recent U.S. Book Production," *Penrose Annual* XLII (1940): 1-5.

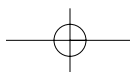


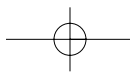


Figure 5  
Original cover design and revised cover for  
*Newspaper Days* by H.L. Mencken published  
by Borzoi Books, Alfred A. Knopf, 1941.

and the graphic designer free to interpret the meaning of the text, just as any common reader would. Knopf did not “impose his personal taste on the books,” according to Salter. The Borzoi style was the “instrument upon which the composition is played, not the composition itself,” he wrote. All Borzoi books bore a colophon on the last page giving proper credit to the designer. Salter wrote that Alfred A. Knopf was “the only book publisher in the U.S. who consistently gives credit to his designers in promotion and advertising.”<sup>12</sup>

A comparison of the designer’s rough and the publisher’s final cover design in one case, however, demonstrates how Salter’s style changed between Germany and his work in the U.S. The designer’s rough for Alfred A. Knopf’s edition of *Newspaper Days 1899–1906* by H.L. Mencken provides a rare example of how Salter’s work was altered by the Borzoi style. In Salter’s original, the title is weighted to the lower left, bridging the spine, with the word “newspaper” in gothic script centered above the word “days” in plain type; the author’s name is in calligraphy, and the whole title frame is superimposed over a background of newsprint (figure 5). The Borzoi influence on Salter’s drawing substitutes glimpses inside the newsroom and at the exterior of the building for the newsprint, itself, and the title frame is weighted at the top rather than at the bottom of the page. The word “newspaper” is in modern calligraphy, “days” in full capitals, perhaps Times New Roman, in advertising bold, as are the dates and the author’s name. The advertising “pitch” reaches out aggressively across the lower right of the cover to the casual reader, promising a memoir that is “shrewd, good-natured, and completely free from portentous whim-wham and

12 Alfred A. Knopf, *Portrait of a Publisher* (New York: Typophiles, 1942, v.2), 280–284; Cathy Henderson, compiler, *The Company They Kept: Alfred A. and Blanche W. Knopf, Publishers: An Exhibition Catalog* (Harry Ransom Humanities Center, The University of Texas at Austin, 1995), 217.



other forms of bunk." The "dust jacket blurb," something the casual reader might expect on the inside of the jacket flap has been moved from the interior to the exterior cover itself: the newspaper as background has been replaced by the advertisement as foreground. This cover, both the original drawing and the revision by Knopf, well illustrates the tension between art and commerce epitomized by the Borzoi label.

Salter and Knopf shared two important "rules" about modern book design: first, the designer was free to interpret the text as a reader, not as a functionary of the publishing house or firm, and that represented a departure from general professional practices. Second, the sexual clichés of Hollywood were not the same as genuine public appeal. In fact, the use of "public appeal" and the cinematic text marks the stylistic difference between Salter's book jacket designs in Germany, in which he used the printing ideas generated by the disciples of the new typography, and those designed for Knopf and other popular American publishers.<sup>13</sup>

Salter noted that when he designed his first book jacket in Berlin in 1927, the idea of a jacket being an active element of the promotional side of publishing books "was still in its infancy." He wrote: "In those days, it was a statement rather than an advertisement, quiet, bookish, and not competitive."<sup>14</sup> Among the greatest advocates of the practice of advertising books through well-designed jackets, Knopf protested, years later, that he could not prove the link between sales and jackets, though publishers claimed that every book with a Salter jacket sold more than 20,000 copies.<sup>15</sup>

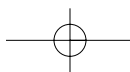
The two men, one the publishing giant and son of an advertising man, and the other a commercial designer denied the right to practice by the Nazis, were unabashedly enthusiastic about one another. Salter thought Knopf's work equal to that of the German publisher Fischer and, upon receiving the comparison as a compliment, Knopf replied to Salter, "Putting me in a class with Sammy Fischer suits me down to the ground. I bought my first Fisher book before I went to Europe in 1911." In anticipation of the fiftieth anniversary of the Knopf firm, Salter wrote to the publisher. The publisher remarked at the end of their long professional association that "There are some books which, without his [Salter's] help, would have taken a good deal longer to make the public grade. And there were others... which seemed to have been written so that George could design them."<sup>16</sup> During his lifetime, Salter reciprocated Knopf's high regard, inviting Knopf to address the *Trade Book Exhibit* of the American Institute of Graphic Artists. In Knopf's address, "Good Design Doesn't Cost a Nickel More," he said, "There is not the slightest doubt that every one of the long columns of Knopf books had been chosen for its worth and manufactured with respect for the simple fact that a book, every book, is an image of humanity. The blame for bad or indifferent design does not go to the manufacturing department, but to the publisher who does not

13 Borzoi Style, AAK.

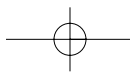
14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 TLS Alfred A. Knopf to George Salter, June 19, 1958 and TLS Alfred Knopf Jr. "Pat" to Agnes Salter, Nov. 2, 1967, Salter/ Wing.







concern himself with the physical makeup of his books. Conversely, the credit for qualitative consistency goes to the publisher whose convictions back up his consistent participation in the production of his books. When he feels that design is an integral part of the book... he will make design possible.”<sup>17</sup>

The artistic freedom Salter enjoyed in his work with Knopf not only provided him the opportunity to establish a popular reputation for his book jacket design work, but also contributed to the professionalization of an industry. Four years after establishing the Book Jacket Designers’ Guild, Salter commented, “Twenty years ago, book jacket assignments were easier to fulfill.... To attract attention was of greater importance than to represent the book. The artist received and accepted complete directives which left little to his ability of interpretation. Today, the book jacket designer is often given the manuscript of his book and also an opportunity to form his own reactions. His function is that of a reader who can express his impressions graphically.”<sup>18</sup>

One might conclude, in the context of the reception theory used by cultural historian Chartier, that the book jacket or dust cover of a book forms the constructed page, and that the space between the literary text and the well-designed book, as a material object with marketplace value, occupies the discrepancy between what the author intended at the time of composition, and readers’ consumption of its materiality, and that would change over time, depending on the cultural context within which the text was received.

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17 ALS George Salter to Alfred A. Knopf,  
Salter/Wing.

18 Jacobs, 2055.

