

THE OLIN COLLEGE YEARBOOK

2003-2006 [FOUNDER & CO-EDITOR]

CREATING A COMMUNITY YEARBOOK

In the spring of my freshman year, we realized we had forgotten to found a yearbook. We had forged the first year of a new college, but we had been so busy experiencing the New College Thing we hadn't taken time to capture the experience along the way.

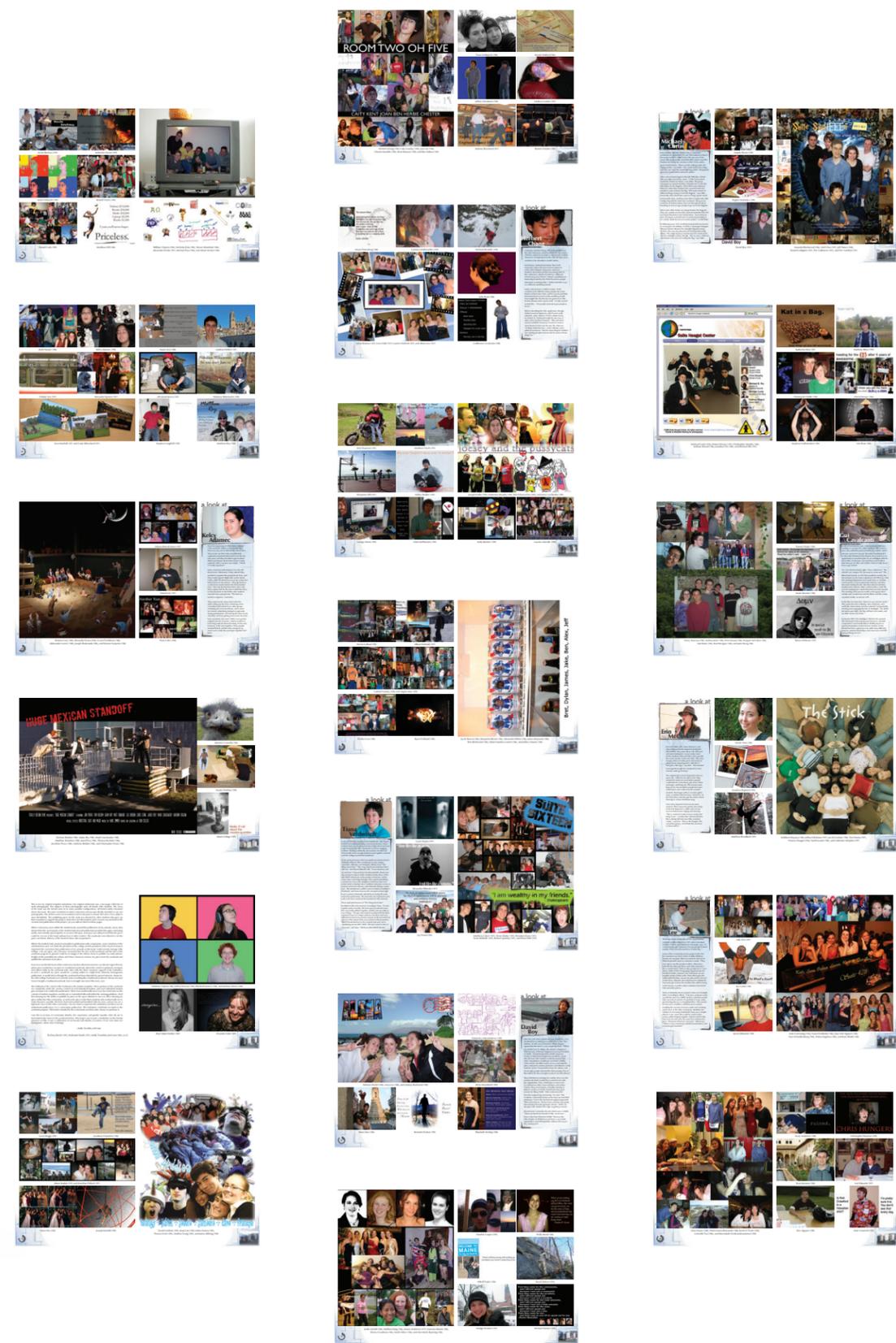
Determined to prevent this from happening again, about 15 of my classmates (out of a class/school of 75 - that's the way Olin rolls), showed up to discuss what to do next, and three of us volunteered to found a yearbook program.

Over the next three years, I lead a team of between 4 and 10 volunteers to publish three issues of the Olin College yearbook, and along the way developed the product form and business model the program still uses today.

Olin's size (topping out at 300 students my senior year) exacerbated the natural challenges of publishing a yearbook. Yearbooks are difficult to sell to college students, but we needed a huge participation rate to sell enough books to break even. Students have expectations of what a yearbook is like having purchased them in K-12, only we had a handful of publishing novices to put the book together instead of an experienced faculty editor with a staff of middle/high schoolers. Perhaps most importantly, we had no clue what we were doing. :-)

Probably the single most important design decision we made was to devote a large fraction of the yearbook to content submitted by students. In the first two books, each student was given a quarter of a page that they could do whatever they wanted with, as long as their face appeared somewhere in the space. We found this dramatically increased community buy-in to the yearbook because people wanted to see their content published, and it gave us breathing room/time to learn how to lay out a yearbook.

*Our book was different...
every student had a quarter
page of the book to do
whatever they wanted*



THE OLIN COLLEGE YEARBOOK

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THE EVOLUTION OF THE PRODUCT

By the third year, we knew how to run a publication and we knew we could create content that would positively contribute to documenting the Olin experience. As the school grew, I realized giving each student a quarter of a page was no longer in the best interests of the book (or our budget).

There had always been a percentage of the Olin student body that did not want to contribute a quarter of a page, but because the quarter-pages were in lieu of headshots, we were often left pulling teeth to capture the last of the student body. To remedy both the space and laggard issues, we reduced the space each student was entitled to from a quarter to a sixth of a page, but allowed students to pool their space together into larger contiguous blocks. As you can see on the previous page, this led to an explosion of creativity among the student body. We had known that some students were more passionate than others about creating content and by enabling passionate and less passionate students to collaborate, we dramatically improved the quality of the overall book. Students became even more invested in the book as well, because the new collaborations usually represented circles of friends.

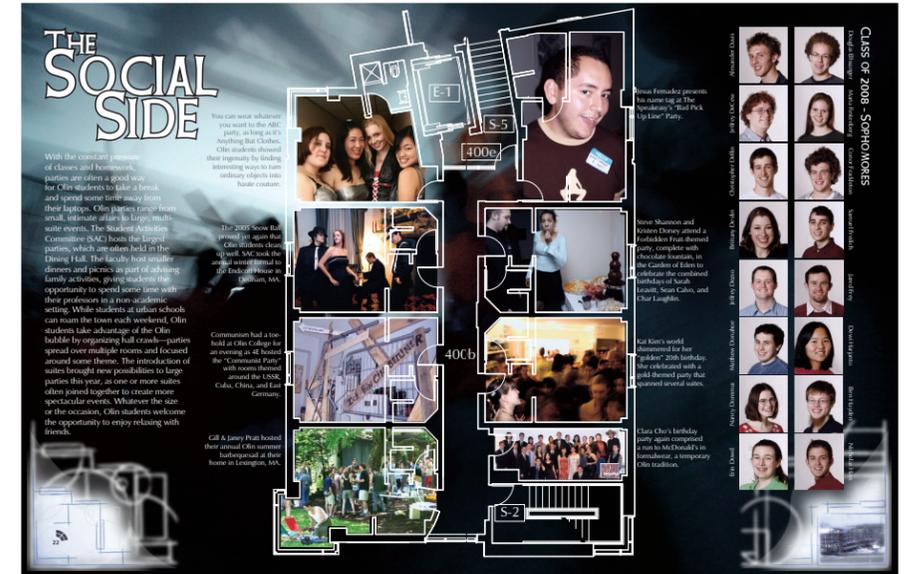
We used the new extra space to more formally document the Olin experience. We incorporated touches like a flip book in the corners (the right-side flipbook shows the construction of our new dorm that year) and increased the number of feature spreads. I've included two of the spreads I designed on the right.

A business design choice I made during the third year was to change what we charged for the book. During previous years, we had charged a sliding scale from \$30 to \$65 per book depending on how late a book was purchased. While this is a traditional yearbook pricing model, I thought it was deterring sales that we desperately needed (yearbooks have high fixed costs, but low variable costs). The students most willing to pay \$65 for a yearbook are the same students who buy first (at the low price) while the less interested students don't buy early, and are even less willing to pay the higher prices. By keeping the price flat at \$50 throughout the year, we were able to dramatically increase book sales - we sold over 280 books, including sales to parents/faculty/staff, when the student body was only 300.

... by enabling the student body to collaborate, we dramatically improved the quality of the book.

Students became even more invested, because the new collaborations represented circles of friends

The students most willing to pay... are the same students who buy first (at the low price) while the less interested students don't buy early, and are even less willing to pay the higher prices.



THE MOBILE BOOK READER & THE QUEST FOR BEAUTIFUL COVERS

2008-2009 [FOUNDING PRODUCT MANAGER]

A CRISIS UNCOVERED

In early 2009, my team faced a crisis. Our rag-tag band of 20% engineers and I had spent a little over a year breaking through institutional barriers to bring the first Google mobile book reader to market, but in the final moments, a tiny detail was lurking, ready to derail our efforts.

It's pointless to tell people to not judge a book by its cover. What a "book" is to most people *is* its cover. The cover seduces us in a book store and is what we see when we look across the aisle on the subway. Physical books are often identity symbols, telegraphing who we see ourselves as, where our interests lay, and what we care about, all from the comfort of the wall of our living rooms. All of that comes from the cover and what it communicates.

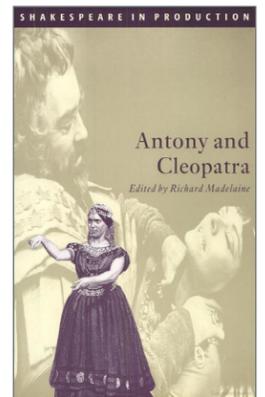
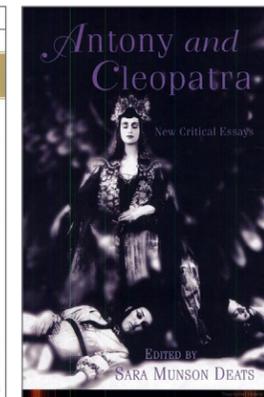
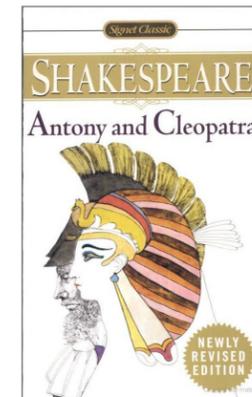
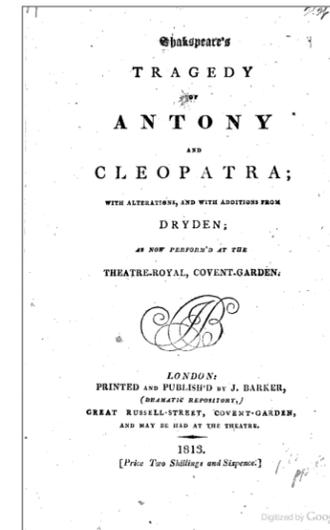
Covers also serve as a signaling function. Poor quality books have worse covers. Romance novels and science fiction have their own styles. Dry books look boring. Next time you go to the book store, make some guesses about what the books you browse are about without cracking any pages or reading the blurb on the back.

Our app had a serious problem. All of the books in the initial launch were public domain books (in the US, books published pre-1923). Nearly all the public domain books in Google Book Search lack covers because they were digitized from the collections of large institutional libraries which usually remove the covers when rebinding each book for archival preservation.

At first glance, my reader had no books. Page after page, all I saw was white rectangles with gray squiggles (across book search, title pages stand in for absent covers). We had committed the cardinal sin of mock making - we had not used the actual data the application would use. We had picked modern covers because they looked better, not realizing what that would mean when it came time to launch the first iteration.

With just days standing between us and the launch date, I knew I needed to create some covers fast - otherwise our reader was going to get panned.

you should judge a book by its cover



BEAUTIFUL COVERS

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WHAT DOES A GOOGLE BOOK LOOK LIKE?

I had several design criteria I had to meet for the meta-cover design. Our marketing team had asked that whatever design I created, it needed to stand out distinctly as a “Google Edition” just as Penguin or Signet Classics had identifiable styles for their public domain books. The covers would be used not only on our book reader, but also in our content API that would support independent readers like Sony’s Book Reader and in our print on demand efforts (ie, people would be able to buy books with my covers). “Distinctiveness” turned out to be a fairly major challenge as current publishers of public domain books had already staked out a large amount of the potential design space.

Second, the covers could only use public domain material, because there was no time to get rights cleared on anything else. This limited me to images from inside the books and other public domain books in book search.

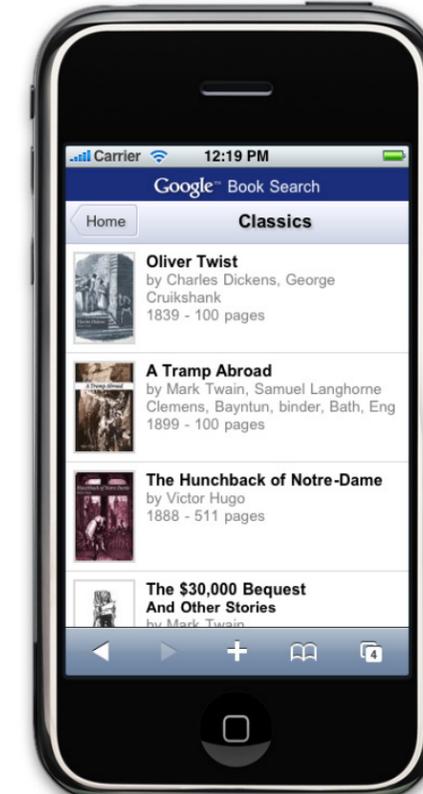
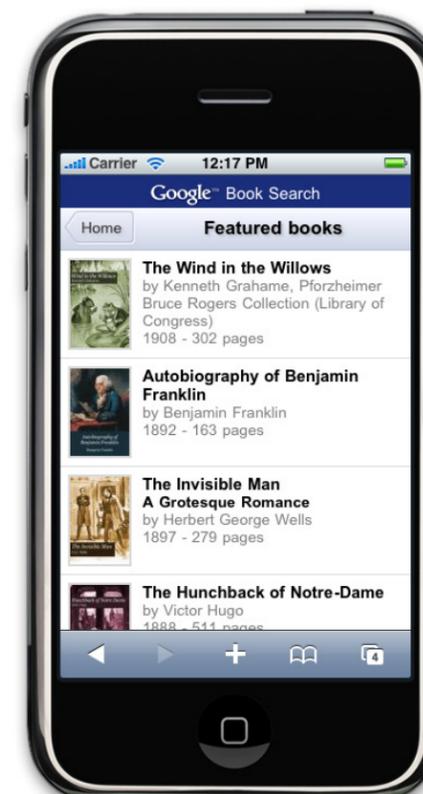
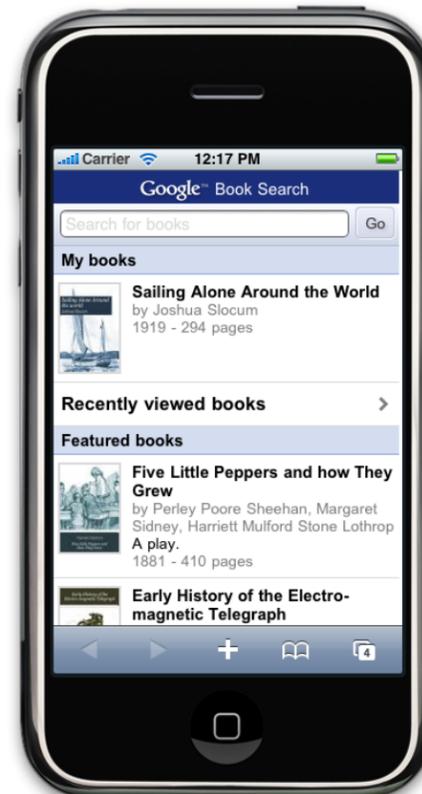
Lastly, the cover had to be simple and quick to make, with minimal tweaking for each book, because I needed to create over a hundred in two days while handling all the remaining details of the launch.

I ended up settling on two general designs based on etchings found in public domain books. To make the covers pop and make each book look independent, I shifted the hue of the black and white etchings to a range of colors and placed the title and author name on a rectangle of a coordinating color. When a full page image was available, I would use it as the cover with a small rectangle floating from the side. When a smaller or square image was available, I increased the size of the colored box to fill the bottom of the cover and sometimes added a second at the top of the page.

I had a feeling few people would dive deeply in the browsing system provided on the Reader, so I only made new covers for the first ten books (one screen deep) in each category, and for the first forty books (four screens deep) on a our “featured” book list. As a result, when the average user opened up the reader - it gave the impression the entire collection of books was polished.

The reader launched to rave reviews from the New York Times, LA Times, Chronicle of Higher Education, and other publications. Perhaps the best part, it forced Amazon to pre-announce their Kindle iPhone app.

The Reader launched to rave reviews... and forced Amazon to pre-announce their mobile app



BEAUTIFUL COVERS

PAGE 3 OF 4

BUT DOES IT SCALE?

While my stop-gap covers pulled our mobile reader launch from the fire, we would never be able to make covers for our 1.5 million public books by hand. The following month, an engineer and I simplified my cover design and created covers automatically for around three hundred thousand books.

We were limited in our initial launch because of international variations in what is considered public domain and concerns from our legal department. Each book had up to three candidate covers generated using images from within the book, and the candidates were run through our human quality assurance group to make sure images were oriented correctly and appropriate for covers.

The effect the new covers had on Google Books was extensive - a wide range of books suddenly became "real" overnight. One fun thing to note, while all of my covers have the same aspect ratio (they're optimized for the mobile reader), the new covers are tailored to the exact dimensions of each book.

At launch, our covers brought 300k books to life



BEAUTIFUL COVERS

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WHICH BOOK DO YOU WANT TO READ?

After the launch, one of the places the new covers stood out most dramatically was on the search result pages. As you look over these pages of search results, which books do you want to read?

Our public domain books have historically been the least read, but as I went through and made this portfolio, I was drawn into old book after old book - even I hadn't realized what treasures were there.

This screenshot shows the Google Books search results for the query "butterflies". The page displays a list of 13 books, including titles like "Butterflies, their structure, changes and life-histories, with special...", "The butterfly book: a popular guide to a knowledge of the butterflies of...", and "Butterflies, Volume 2". The interface includes a search bar at the top, a sidebar with navigation options like "List view" and "Cover view", and a footer with the Google logo and search controls. The page is dated 2009.

This screenshot shows the Google Books search results for the query "Travel". The page displays a list of 43 books, including titles like "Travel and adventure in South-East Africa, being the narrative of the last...", "Three essays: On picturesque beauty, On picturesque travel, and On sketching...", and "Primitive travel and transportation". The interface is similar to the first screenshot, with a search bar, navigation options, and a footer. The page is dated 2009.

This screenshot shows the Google Books search results for the query "electric". The page displays a list of 12 books, including titles like "Electric waves, being researches on the propagation of electric action with...", "The American Electric Railway Company", and "Electric lighting: a practical exposition of the art, for the use of...". The interface includes a search bar, navigation options, and a footer. The page is dated 2009.