

Hello, Designer!

Below are some pieces of text from the story “In Tents”. Use this to come up with ideas and flavor for the cover.

Pieces important to the story are:

1) The “Freak Show” - this is described in the fourth paragraph below as an old-time poster – finding out what this really is becomes one of the story’s central mysteries. Feel free to use this image in the cover design. (The “reality” of this image is discovered later in the story.)

2) Whatever the cover does, I’d like it to be made clear that the story takes place in a circus (apart from the title itself).

...and now for some story text to give you ideas.

FLAVOR TEXT – The “Freak Show” and other circus acts

A hallway split into side partitions and rooms, the trailer was crammed with artifacts and posters. The little man and I edged around a carousel horse, mounted on a hand-made wooden stand. It was black, with fully-white eyes like huge cloudy marbles. Reins and a saddle looked worn but cared for. Minus an actual carousel, it looked ready for action.

Rickety card tables filled other partitions, and they were covered with cheaply-framed posters, hand-carved elephants, toy tigers roaring inside cages, paintings of trapeze artists mid-leap, and statues of clowns with emotions ranging from death-stare to orgasmic.

Browned, brittle paper advertised “The Most Dangerous Show on Earth” and an illustration of “Inferno the Fire-Eater” vomiting an explosion of fire from his wide-open mouth. I saw one for “Sharp-Oh the Blade Man” with a gleaming sword sliding halfway down his throat, the metal blade flat and wide, looking as long as he was tall. Another illustration was for “Sampson the Strong”, a wide-bodied muscleman who was holding a barely-dressed woman over his head.

Another ad caught my eye because it looked the oldest. Fading brown ink stained the thick yellowed paper and block letters at the top proclaimed “Freak Show”. This hovered above a detailed drawing filled with more artistic interpretation than reality: In a circus show, a spotlight angled down on a naked hairless man. He crouched on all fours, except his arm and leg joints bent the wrong way so he looked like was standing on four twisted animal legs. His head arched from an impossibly long neck. Pointed teeth gnashed at the sky in an open-mouthed howl. An audience of children clustered at the edge of the spotlight, their mouths and eyes wide with delight, their hands mid-clap, all of them enthralled with this screaming nightmare creature.

Blazoned below the brown-on-yellow drawing was the only color in the picture. Faded after what had to be decades, red cartoony letters spelled out “The Mad Moonshine Circus”.

ANOTHER EXAMPLE – One of the main characters – the vendor of the “Apache Action” game (an antagonist)

“Hello again, sir. Care to try your luck?”

The Apache Action tent stood in front of me. The vendor stood inside, black-cloaked over pale skin. Emaciated lips pulled and smiled, exposing his rodent’s ribcage of teeth. Gray smoke danced up from a cigarette he held in one hand. Long bone fingers brought the cigarette up to his mouth. He closed his black eyes as he pursed his thin lips around an unfiltered end and inhaled. His chest expanded, giving his skinny cloaked body a brief illusion of a wide muscled chest. The ashen tip of the cigarette flared orange-red, and I thought I saw a bit of flame appear at the end. He exhaled towards me, and the smoke undulated out of his mouth, so thick and voluminous I could barely see him. When it cleared he looked normal again, emaciated and frail.

ANOTHER EXAMPLE – a Native American “peace pipe” - it makes several important appearances in the story

...part of the booth illuminated to display a tiered display of Native American artifacts. The bottom of the shelves held hand-painted pottery and handfuls of arrowheads. Higher shelves showed more elaborate prizes – I saw beaded jewelry, carved wooden masks and colorful woven moccasins. All of it looked handmade, and while I was sure it was all fake, whoever made these did a great job. They looked more authentic than anything in Weeko’s Cave.

“Whoa,” I said, my mouth dropped open as I saw what was sitting along on the top shelf. “That’s perfect.”

“Ah yes,” the skull said. His white shaking hands reached up to reverently to touch an elaborately-carved, long-stemmed wooden pipe. About two feet long, dark wood gleamed with expertly-applied wood stain and a shiny polish. Looking both delicate and solid, it was practically museum quality. As he lifted it away from the shelf, feathers and beads attached to the bottom edge of the pipe opened and expanded, giving the impression of a colorful feathered fan hanging from below the pipe itself. “A ceremonial pipe. Nothing I have is more sacred. This pipe is your prayers in physical form.”

ANOTHER EXAMPLE – This occurs near the end of the story, but it’s so weird and unexpected that it could conceivably be a part of the cover design.

Dottie turned on the blacklights as I stepped towards the audience, curls of smoke spiraling away from my body. The crowd was an amazed silence as they saw me still alive, and reborn: My now-exposed skin was painted in bright phosphorescent stripes that glowed orange, red, purple and pink. My legs – still smoking, clearly consumed by the fire, looked like charred, skinny, stiff bones keeping me upright, the shoes blackened lumps.

ANOTHER EXAMPLE – An image from the story that’s more simple than the above.

The light resolved into a flag, bone-white and billowing in the increasing gale of the wind, dancing despite the freezing rain. Below the flag was the massive tent of the big top.

Other tents around me were small, weak, and were trembling from the heavy wind. As I watched, one tent broke free. Anchors tore away from the earth, mooring lines snapped away, and the tent upended and vomited out an explosion of clothes, tables and chairs, all of which the wind spun and dragged off into darkness.

The big top was just up ahead, closer now. It looked sturdy and unmovable even in this monster of a storm. I stepped on the midway and breathed a sigh of relief as my worry drained away. I began to walk towards the moon-shine of the flag.