

How the Web, Digital Printing and ‘The Plop’ Brought Mr. Fooster to Life

The forces of the World Wide Web led a digitally printed three-chapter sample mock-up to help land a publishing deal for a ‘magical’ little book

By Bob Wagner

Doubleday Associate Director of Marketing Adrienne Sparks was unequivocal when asked what has changed in book publishing in recent years. “The Internet,” she said. “From online retailers to the changing media market to the marketing outreach that we’re doing online — it affects everything.”

In the case of a new book from Doubleday’s Flying Dolphin Press imprint, *Mr. Fooster, Traveling on a Whim* — called “one of those magical books” in a pre-publication review on the “Simply Bluestocking” blog — the forces of the Web also made both the book and the publishing deal possible. Consider:

- Author and musician Tom Corwin’s first book began as an email tribute to his late golden retriever, Bob. The missive to friends and family was shared virally and touched the hearts of professional colleagues, leading to the publication of *Mostly Bob* by New World Library (2006). *Mr. Fooster* is Corwin’s second book.

- Illustrator Craig Frazier has taken advantage of new marketing opportunities presented by the Web and digital printing to turn more of his energies to book illustration, a natural extension of his long career as a designer and illustrator. He has published an illustrated children’s book every year since 2003, following a 176-page personal monograph he wrote and designed in 2002.

- Widespread interest in Web-based self-publishing has built economies of scale for producing professional-quality bound books affordably on advanced digital presses in quantities as low as one. By producing a bound, three-chapter mock-up of their concept for *Mr. Fooster*, Corwin and Frazier gave their agent Robert Stricker a compelling sales tool that enabled him “to make the plop,” Stricker said.

“That’s Tom’s term,” Stricker explained, careful to properly credit the author he represents. “You plop it on someone’s desk. If I come in with a 2,000-page novel, I can wax on about it as long as I want, and the editor can read a paragraph — but what does that tell him? With a good mock-up, you can plop it on their desk, and they get a good sense of what the book’s about.”



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Within 48 hours of “the plop,” Stricker had turned a \$100 investment for a dozen prototype books into a six-figure advance and a June 10, 2008 release date for *Mr. Fooster*. “Without that mock-up, I doubt we would have made the sale,” he said.

It’s an ‘AA World’

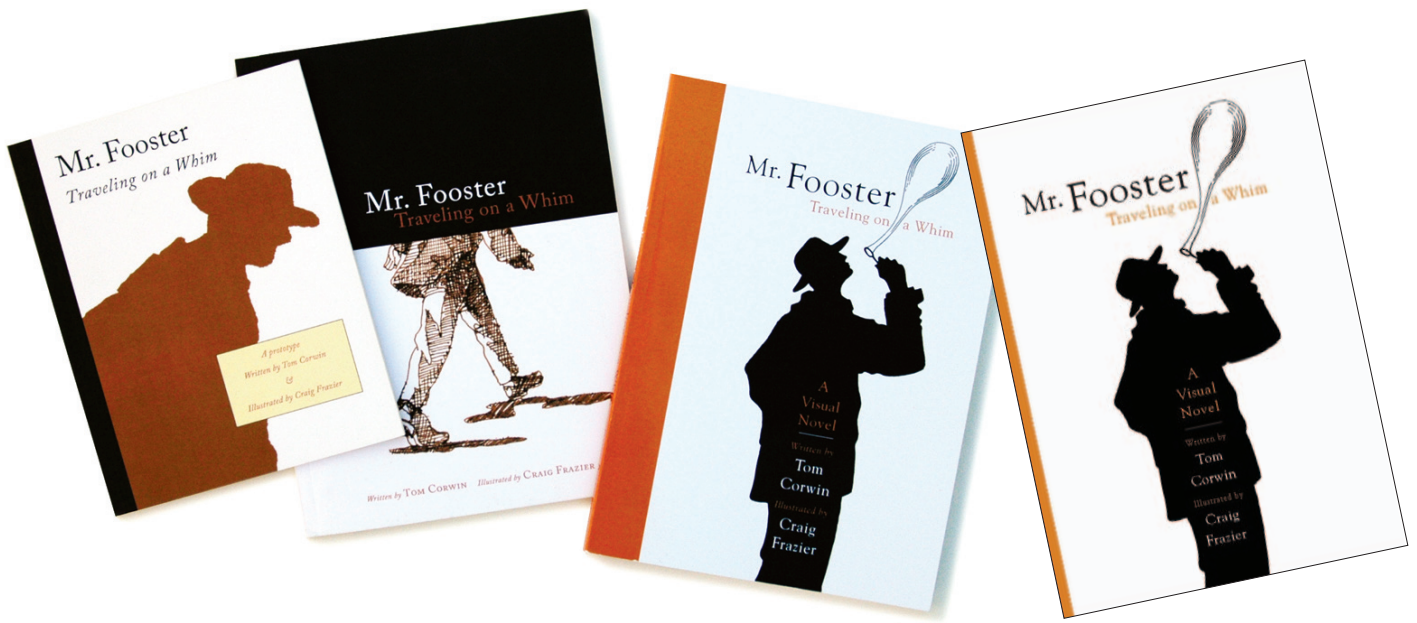
Corwin and Frazier are well-adapted for the new publishing landscape, Stricker said. “I have a phrase, ‘AA,’ which means ‘author active,’” he said. “There are millions of books out there screaming, ‘Read me!’ I tell them to be totally shameless. You are your own best promoter.”

For Corwin and Frazier, active authorship begins with the pitch to publishers. With *Mostly Bob*, Corwin worked meticulously on a handmade mock-up to sell his concept, which included a flipbook animation of his dog walking off the page. Therein, “the plop” was borne.

Frazier is similarly motivated. He is an acclaimed illustrator and designer who has run his own shop since 1978. *Mr. Fooster* is his sixth book. He has hand-assembled prototypes for each, with prints from his office printer.

The pair began their collaboration after Frazier turned out to be the artist behind two designs that caught Corwin’s eye in the course of two days. After discovering that they lived near each other just north of San Francisco, Corwin initiated a meeting that developed into a friendship and eventually, collaboration on *Mr. Fooster*. “It was a wonderfully unusual collaboration, one in which the one man’s drawings informed another’s words that then informed his drawings—a creative mobius strip,” Corwin said.

As a designer, Frazier had a whole concept for the book as well as for the illustrations. Again, he designed a prototype, but with a new twist. Through a sketchbook promotion at the 2005 Illustrator’s Conference (ICON4) in San Francisco, he’d learned about digital color printing and the high-quality bound books produced on the Xerox iGen3® 110 Digital Production Press. “When I was introduced to the iGen3 press,



Four versions of *Mr. Fooster, Traveling on a Whim* are, from left to right: three-chapter soft cover prototype for pitching to publishers, slightly revised version for pitching for film, the 112-page final soft cover prototype and the hard cover book Doubleday produced for sale.

I just went, ‘Whoa! This is what I’ve been basically doing by hand all these years.’”

For the *Mr. Fooster* prototype, he engaged the same iGen3-press-equipped print provider that produced the ICON4 books, ColorCentric Corporation, Rochester, N.Y., one of the 725 global members of the Xerox Graphic Arts Premier Partners network of leading digital print providers. For about \$14 per book, he produced a dozen three-chapter prototypes for pitching and another dozen for pre-publication efforts to sell film rights. For \$20 per book, he produced about 20 advance copies of the entire book, for soliciting review quotes. “In the context of what we’re trying to do, that’s not much money,” Frazier said.

From the Prototype to ‘The Plop’

“The gist of all this is to demonstrate precisely what we wanted the book to be,” Frazier said. “Today, with the Internet, digital photography and digital printing, people are used to seeing what things will look like. That’s nothing new for me — I’ve been a designer for 28 years, and I’ve always done comps. What’s new is the packaging and the quality.”



The author of *Mr. Fooster, Traveling on a Whim* is Tom Corwin, left, and the book’s illustrator is Craig Frazier.

It certainly made an impression on Deb Futter, who bought the book and now is editor-in-chief, Grand Central Publishing (formerly Warner Books). “The mock-up was so incredibly professionally put together and beautiful,” she said. “It definitely stood out compared to a stack of illustrations and manuscript pages.”

It helped her, in particular, make a fast decision, she said, because “I don’t do a lot of illustrated books. I’m not an expert. With the mock-up, I didn’t have to work as hard to envision it. You can see what you’re buying.” The same was true for the other two Doubleday decision-makers. “Having what Robert sent was enormously helpful in getting people on board. They fell in love with it the minute they saw it.”

Post sale, Frazier modified the book design to shop the movie rights, reflecting his evolving vision. While there were no takers in Hollywood, the full version he sent for advanced publicity landed blurbs from about half the recipients, including popular children’s author Lemony Snicket and writer David Scheff. “The best quotes we got came from people who saw the mock-up,” he said.

As active authors, Corwin and Frazier also designed a Web site (www.mrfooster.com) featuring an animated version of the book’s first three chapters, narrated by Corwin and supported by music he wrote. And Frazier is also pitching in by designing all of the *Mr. Fooster* promotional materials, from postcards to displays. “In Craig, we have one of the greatest graphic designers we’ve ever worked with, and we’re making as much use of his skills as we can,” said Nicole Dewey, director of Publicity, Doubleday.

To Frazier, “It’s part of extending the long arm of control” over the project, he said, much as the professionally digitally printed prototype made the team’s intent clear to prospective publishers.

“This ultimately will become the default way to present works to publishers,” he said. ■

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