

Stranger Things book artists show how to create perfectly retro – and spooky – covert art

Stranger Things is getting some prequels – and with it some classic looking art from some of the best genre book cover talent out there.

The success of retro paranormal drama *Stranger Things* has seen its universe expanded into games, comics, and err non-canon Italian TV commercials, but now the show has acknowledged its deep roots in the ‘attacked adolescent’ corpus of Stephen King with a series of prequel tie-in novels.

Stranger Things: Darkness on the Edge of Town by Adam Christopher comes with a cover by Welsh Poster Posse veteran Richard Davies, whilst *Stranger Things: Suspicious Minds* by Gwenda Bond sports the art of Tony Mauro, an illustrator who has not only designed for Stephen King but the show’s other main influence of classic drama, *The X-Files*. Both covers come with look one might expect from a well-worn 1980s horror paperback you’d find down the local bookstore, fitting perfectly with the *Stranger Things* aesthetic.

“I’d worked on a portrait piece from the show just because I was a fan, so perhaps this was why I was approached to do the cover,” explains Richard, mentioning his picture below of Millie Bobby Brown’s iconic Eleven.

Richard is a graphic designer by trade but recent years have seen his illustration take off thanks to his alternative movie posters for new and classic films. Inspired by artists like Drew Struzan, Richard Amsel, John Alvin and Brian Bysouth who together created the movie posters of his childhood, Richard

believes the cinematic approach of his work is another reason he was approached to design for *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, making the book seem like a forgotten 80s film.

“I have a love of cinema and so that culminated in me producing my own takes on movie posters,” says Richard. “I’ve always thought that the great movie posters have everything in them – illustration, graphic design, composition and typography and so were a great way of showcasing your skills.”

The artist has only recently turned his hand to book covers, but Richard says this sort of project isn’t so different to his one-sheets.

“I really love working on book cover illustration as in some ways it’s like creating movie posters on a smaller scale,” he says. “It has to create an impact but you’re somewhat limited with the space that you have.

“You also have to be aware of how the title and author name fits into it all too. So it can be a challenge to create a memorable image in a tight space that also complements the title and feel of the story too.



Richard Davies

STRANGER THINGS

AN
OFFICIAL
**STRANGER
THINGS**
NOVEL

*Lights out in
the city that
never sleeps*

DARKNESS ON THE EDGE OF TOWN

ADAM CHRISTOPHER

The cover to *Stranger Things: Darkness on the Edge of Town*

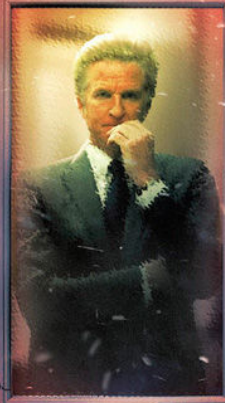
"I learned through the process that less is more for the cover, to not to have too many elements going on. The cover is really there to strip everything away to focus simply on what the story is about – characters, setting and mood.

"Any advice I would give is to keep it simple and create an illustration that sums up the story and compliments the author's vision and storytelling. It sounds simple but you have to go through numerous hurdles to get there."

This is a philosophy shared by Tony Mauro, an artist with an impressive number of book covers to his name.

"A simple bold, compelling image often works best to catch someone's attention," Tony tells us. "Trying to say too much on the cover can often work against you."

STRANGER THINGS



*Before the Demogorgon . . .
before the Mind Flayer . . .
terror wore a human face.*

SUSPICIOUS MINDS

GWENDA BOND

Cover to *Stranger Things: Suspicious Minds* by Tony Mauro

"My job is to capture someone's attention enough to pick the book up off the shelf as they're scanning through a sea of books. Once they flip it over and read the short synopsis on the back cover it's no longer in my hands. At that point it's up to the author/publisher to write a compelling synopsis that makes them want to read the book.

"The simple, bold approach also works well on social media

because it will still read small. With so many people viewing artwork on their phones it's important that an image will hold up when reduced to a much smaller size than it was originally intended to be viewed at."

Tony's design career began with him as a traditional airbrush illustrator, before switching to computer in 1998.

"When I was painting with an airbrush my goal was always to make things look as realistic as possible so once I transitioned to the computer I found utilising photographic elements came pretty naturally.

"I describe my style today as photo-based illustration," he continues. "I start with a basic photograph and paint on top of it in the computer using Photoshop and a Wacom tablet. While the tool is different, the painting techniques and rules of design are all very much the same."

Tony counts among his inspirations his father, a commercial artist, a college level art instructor and now a fine artist, along with non-Mauro household names such as Norman Rockwell, Frank Frazetta and Boris Valejo.

From the mid-90s, Tony based himself in LA for just over a decade, working as a poster designer for movies along with 90s-defining TV properties like *The X-Files* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, shows whose storytelling DNA can be seen all over *Stranger Things* regardless of its 80s setting.

"LA was where I developed the style I use today and found my love for working on things with a little darker twist to them.



Tony Mauro does *The X-Files*



Tony Mauro promo art for the underrated *X-Files* movie (1998)
“I then returned to my home town, a suburb of Buffalo NY, and shortly after I started getting contacted by publishing companies to work on book covers.

“I loved the work and soon it completely took over my business. 14 years later I have well over 600 book covers under my belt.

“One of my clients at Simon and Schuster recently got assigned the rebranding of the Stephen King library and I was fortunate enough to be selected to work on the majority of the 20+ covers that needed new cover art. That was an absolute blast

to work on and led to many other projects including *Stranger Things* for Penguin Random House.”

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

STEPHEN KING



The concept for *Stranger Things: Suspicious Minds* was already pretty much decided in Tony's words, with the artist being given very precise direction as to the look of the book's cover.

"Sometimes you're given tons of freedom and told just to do something cool as long as it falls within the perimeters they set out for you. Other times it's very concise notes describing a specific scene," he reveals.

"I'm very used to using existing elements from my movie poster days so that wasn't much of a stretch for me," Tony says. "The only photo I was provided with was the shot of Matthew Modine as Dr. Brenner; the rest was built from scratch utilising stock photography. The vines though were drawn and painted by hand."



Detail from Tony's *Neptunes Brood* cover



Tony Mauro

The tight brief and art direction of the brief was also familiar to Richard Davies, a man well-versed in adapting licensed intellectual properties.

“But in the case of *Stranger Things*,” Richard points out, “you’re not just dealing with an author and publishing house but also a huge company like Netflix who carefully guard all their properties.”

“Generally the brief was to focus on the relationship between Jim Hopper and Eleven and the New York blackout of 1977. It had to look like the *Stranger Things* that we know and love but also tell a different story.

“Starting with many sketches and layouts there is a lot of back and forth with the art director (which is normal for working on such a big property). It’s quite a long process to whittle it down to the final design as there are so many different parties involved.

“There was a certain amount of freedom involved but you know when you take on such a project that there is only so much that the client is willing for you to do with their property.”

So it was familiar territory for the pair, then – but how did each artist capture that retro ‘chiller’ feel with their designs? And with what tools did they make the spooky-looking covers?

“I work predominantly in Adobe Photoshop and work on a Wacom Cintiq tablet which has revolutionised the way that I work these days,” Richard says. “Photoshop just gives that total freedom, particularly with a job like this where you are constantly repositioning or enlarging elements in the piece – you just have to remember to place everything on separate layers.

“I also have a stock library of textures that I like to use – these are often just scans of found textures or painted textures that I’ve taken from past traditional work which I recycle into my digital work now.”

“It always helps to be a fan of the subject and in this case I very much am,” Richard adds when explaining about the nostalgic feel to *Darkness on the Edge of Town*. “I grew up in the 1980s and soaked up all the TV, movie and book culture of the time; somehow it’s all still there in the back of my brain (along with a few cobwebs).



Richard Davies

"I still love how a lot of sci-fi and fantasy looked in that era, the over saturated colours that were used or the way a film was shot," he adds. "All these things were elements that

I tried to capture but not overly so.

"Whilst *Stranger Things* is set in the 80s and in many ways is a homage to the pop culture of those times, it's still its own thing with its own distinctive look too," Richard stresses. "So I tried to respect that and not get too bogged down in creating a pastiche."

Tony meanwhile points to his 80s high-school years as being formative for this sort of project, but acknowledge the irony in how his *Suspicious Minds* cover is a million miles away from the modern look he gave to Stephen King.

"The assignment for the King covers was the complete opposite of *Stranger Things*," he admits. "The best part of my job is every book and every assignment is completely different with a new set of challenges."

"That being said, the fundamentals of design are always the same, as you're still always trying to draw focus to a certain area and properly prioritise the elements to get your message across effectively and efficiently."

"The biggest difference between the decades is the typography and how its handled. You can take an image from the 80's and make it look more contemporary by using modern type design and vice versa."

"While I did the title treatment designs on the Stephen King books, the type for *Stranger Things* was done inhouse by the publisher. The image I created for *Stranger Things* was actually a contemporary image done in my current style and I think if it had contemporary type on it it wouldn't have looked like an 80s image at all."



Tony Mauro

Stranger Things: Suspicious Minds by Gwenda Bond with cover art by Tony Mauro is out now on Penguin Random House.

Stranger Things: Darkness on the Edge of Town by Adam Christopher with Richard Davies's cover is released June 4th 2019 by the same publisher.

Read next: The wonderful *Stranger Things* poster and the 80s cult films that inspired it

<https://www.digitalartsonline.co.uk/features/illustration/stranger-things-book-artists-show-how-create-perfectly-retro-and-spooky-paperback-covers/>