

Judging a Book by its Title

Some titles make you think that the book was created with the title stamped on the front: *To Kill a Mockingbird*; *Gone with the Wind*; *The Great Gatsby*. Others seemingly don't relate at all to the novel. It is well known how close *The Great Gatsby* came to being called *Trimalchio in West Egg* (among other rejected titles), and I can't imagine that a book with Trimalchio in the title ever would have been admitted into the canon. Authors worry all the time that a bad title could doom a book before the spine is cracked (or the Kindle turned on).

A great title should give you a preview for what you're about to read, and create a page-turner all by itself. Who wasn't already intrigued by *Gone Girl* before even before the opening line?

I've stayed away from titles that sound too genre-based, and therefore have never used the word *murder* or any legal phrase. Of course, *Murder on the Orient Express* and *Presumed Innocent* prove that there are no hard and fast rules about this.

I consider my books to be first and foremost about the relationships that drive the story. For that reason, I want to capture that dynamic in the title. Or I try to crystallize the inner turmoil of the protagonist.

No matter what I come up with, it isn't the last word on the matter. Marketing people weigh in with their thoughts too.

For my nine books, only three were published with a title I selected. And even with those three, I second-guessed the title right up until the end. The titles for my other six books were all changed, usually after the submission of the finished manuscript.

Here's the run down:

Actual Title

A Conflict of Interest
A Case of Redemption
Losing Faith
The Girl From Home
Dead Certain
Never Goodbye
A Matter of Will
The Best Friend
The Perfect Marriage

Working Title

Secret Identity
Legally Dead
A Fall From Grace
A Better Man
Never Goodbye
Never Goodbye
A Man of Wealth and Taste
The Best Friend
The Perfect Marriage

The reason for the changes vary, from it being too closely associated with another book (*A Fall from Grace*), to the publisher thinking having *Girl* in the title was the key to unlocking

best-sellerdom (*ala Gone Girl, The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, The Girl on the Train*, etc.), to copyright issues (*A Man of Wealth and Taste*) to just not being any good (*Secret Identity*), to they never really gave me a reason and to this day I regret changing it (*Legally Dead*).

I am somewhat gratified I selected the titles for my last two books – *The Best Friend* and *The Perfect Marriage* – before I wrote the first word. I like to think that was because I had a clear vision of what the book was going to be about from the outset; but it was likely more than anything else just luck.

The book I'm currently writing has been titled *Untitled* for more than a year now.