

Laura Wyss

By Louisa J. Curtis



Photo Researcher Laura Wyss, © Glyn Wyss

One of the things I love about writing these articles is that I get to interview my friends in the industry, and this month my conversation is with Photo Researcher [Laura Wyss of Wyssphoto Inc.](#), a photo research company specializing in, but not exclusive to book covers. Since I first met Laura, I've always thought what a cool job she has, and I admire how she has established herself in this business with her niche specialty. We met a few years ago now through the photo industry and have always enjoyed one another's company.

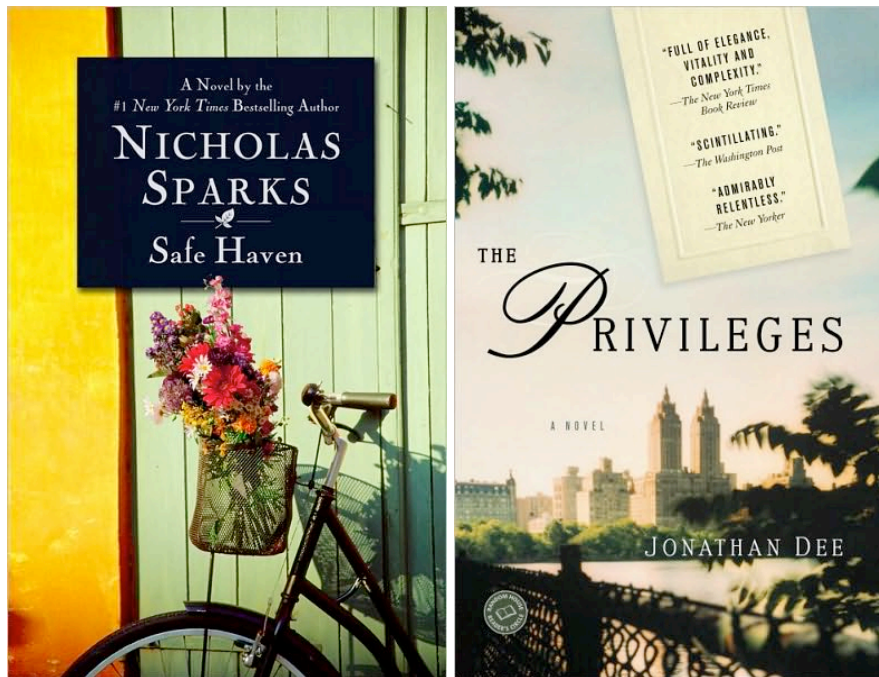
Plus, she is married to a 'Brit' and knows more about football (soccer to U.S. fans) than I do! Well, to be honest, that wouldn't be too hard, but she and her husband are definitely big fans! I fondly remember one of our "bonding" moments at one of the ASPP Holiday parties a few years ago, and Laura managed to win most of the door prizes, including about 3 or 4 wall calendars! In those days, pretty much everyone used to win something, but I was empty-handed. So the ever-so-gracious Laura was kind enough to give one of her calendars to me! I've always remembered that.

So to begin our conversation, I asked Laura how long she has been a Photo Researcher and when did she start her own company? I started in the industry in 1993 and was doing photo research in a various capacities. I had originally come to New York to be a fine artist, so this paid the bills. Before book covers, I was doing coffee table art books. Then in 1998 I was hired by St. Martin's Press, which was my entrée into the world of book covers. After 4 years I then began my own venture and branched out to other publishers, although I will say that St. Martin's is still one of my best clients today! They were a really good training ground. The book covers world is a small community and I have built most, if not all of my business through word of mouth.

I was curious as to what she likes best about her job? First of all, it's very creative work, and I find it really satisfying because I get to see the beginning and the end of each project. I can (and do) go to the bookstore and literally hold my projects in my hand, and in addition, knowing the backstory behind them is also so much fun. I drive my friends crazy sometimes because I'll walk around the store saying, "I did that one, and that one, ooh and that one as well!" I am fortunate in that I am able to work on a big range of topics – I always say, "I know a little bit about a lot of stuff!" because every request I receive sends me in a different direction, which definitely keeps me on my toes. This variety also gives me the potential to work with just about anybody, which makes me very "inclusive" and when I visit trade shows such as Visual Connections, every table or booth is interesting and a possible resource for me.

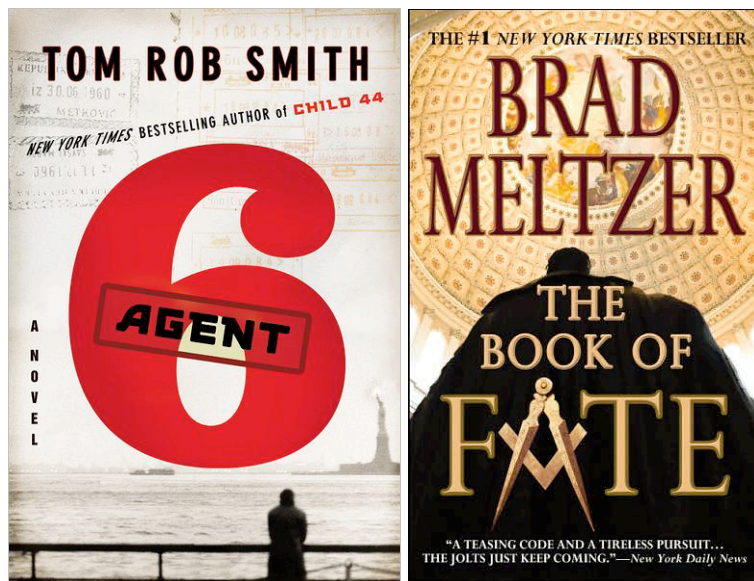
And then I asked her what, if anything, do you not like, or what are the more challenging aspects to what you do? Some of the more challenging aspects to what I do have to be the negotiating, but I love it, even though it can be intense. Part of my job is to be aware of and protect my clients from copyright issues, so I keep copyright attorney Nancy Wolff on retainer for when I need a legal opinion. I respect the copyright laws and want to abide by them, I am not interested in violating anyone's copyright, so my goal is to make sure that all the images are cleared and that I takes care of all of that for my clients, so they don't have to worry about it. One of the biggest misconceptions is that just because someone found an image on Google or Flickr, it doesn't mean that it is available. Another thing I don't like is Microstock, because I feel it is undervaluing photography.

I wanted to know more about this and what particular trends photographers should be aware of? Many really good shooters have sadly had to close their studios because their photography has less value now, and I have less amazing images to choose from so the selection has become more generic. Microstock is not a good solution for book covers either, because we still need the quality of images found in the more independent stock agencies. It is hard to see some of the more traditional sources struggling to survive, which is why I use the smaller agencies when I can. I would say that photographers are still able to make money in the stock industry, but not an income so I recommend placing your images in multiple agencies, rather than putting your eggs all in one basket.

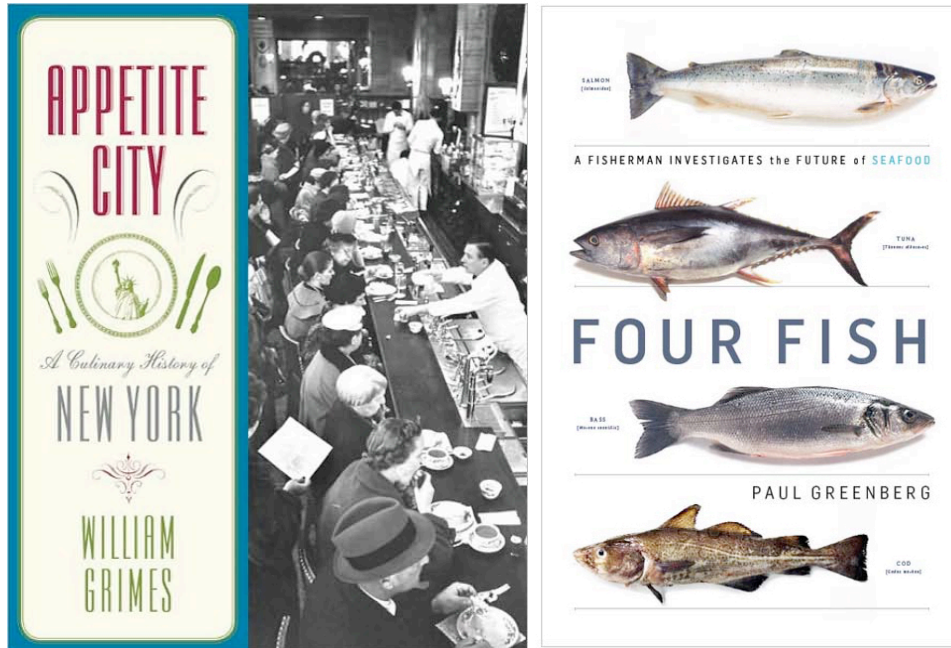


Many times it is the images that a photographer has not placed in an agency that she uses. Think of it, for every 100 images they submit, I'll look at the 90 that the agency didn't take! Ironically, Art Directors are still looking for beautiful, moody images, much like those that were produced by such agencies as Photonica, Graphistock and Nonstock. These agencies have all been swallowed up by the larger companies, so I find myself exploring a new wave of smaller agencies that are taking over again because there is a need. For example, I've been tapping into such agencies as [Trevillion](#) and [Wildcard Images](#) in the UK, [Plain Picture](#) in Germany, and <http://www.arcangel-images.com/Arcangel> Images from Spain. The bigger agencies are more "stocky" while these smaller agencies are more "Photonicaey!"

And while we're on the subject of trends, I was curious as to what she gets asked for the most. The most frequent requests I get asked for are images of women from behind with "interesting detail", and variations of dark shadowy figures running down an alley. Dark shadowy figures are always being used and are still my number one request! I'll often see specific trends such as high-heeled shoes after *Sex in the City*, but shadowy figures are never out of fashion! Right now it's 40's style women, WWII books or a *Mad Men* kind of vibe, and I'm also getting a lot of *Twilight* requests (more shadowy figures!) as well as dark angels. And with the recent release of the *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, I am also starting to look at images of hard looking tattooed women. The message is to be aware of current trends and all the potential spin-off's that can happen from that.



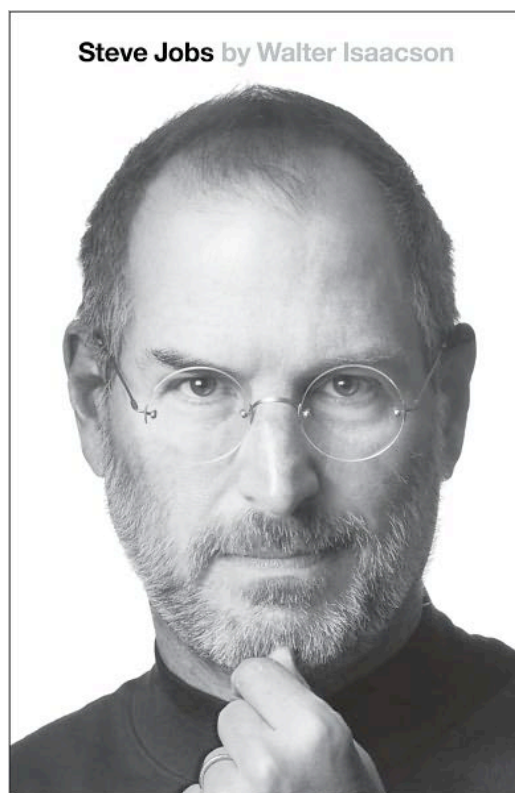
I asked Laura what exactly she's looking for when seeking out new talent, and does she have any favorite resources besides the stock agencies? I'm always open to working with new people, although I do have a few regulars that I like to use. I love doing portfolio reviews as a way of finding new people and I will always check out a photographer referral. My chief concerns are - do the images work for covers, and does the photographer respond in a quick manner? And no, I don't pay for your scanning fees! Basically, I need to see samples of the work, and the images must already be model-released and workable for covers. Street photography and abstract are not so good for what I do, but many subjects are. This is not a gig for purists though! Photographers have to be okay with their image being altered, because it will be cropped, photo-shopped or changed. My clients need a clean image that the Art Director can manipulate, if necessary, so my advice to photographers is to be the photographer and not the art director. As soon as someone signs up with me, I send them my guidelines so I can establish how I work right away, and if you don't fit in with that, it's fine, you don't have to participate. I like to keep things fair and friendly and I always aim to get the best price I can for my photographers, based on the client's budget.



Now although Laura specializes in book covers, her company is by no means limited to just that, and she finds herself working on many book interiors these days as well, two of her favorites being the autobiography of Betty White, and former *New York Times* Restaurant Critic William Grimes' book *Appetite City*, a history of New York City restaurants. Another of her recent and most exciting projects was for the Brooklyn Navy Yard in which she helped to clear the rights and assemble close to 500 images for the new museum that will house a permanent exhibition on the history of the Navy Yard. And who better than a Virgo like Laura for this project! I had to deal with a lot of public sources, fill out a lot of forms, and so on, which takes forever. With many of my book cover projects, it is very creative and the images don't always have to be historically accurate, as long as they tell the right story. But with the Brooklyn Navy Yard, it was much different because they were precise photographs, most of which had been pre-selected, that simply needed clearance, and no substitutions. Some of the photographs were literally two stories tall (much different from a book cover!) so it was challenging to get large enough scans and work on such a large scale.

I asked if she had always wanted to be a Photo Researcher and if she wasn't doing this, what might she have done instead? I would still be doing something creative – either fine art or writing. I was an art major in school and my dad is a retired English professor, so I've always loved books as well. What I do now is the perfect combination really.

With the evolution of e-books upon us, I wondered how this might affect what she does both now and in the future? E-books are a big addition to the industry and causing a lot of changes, but they still need an image that sells the book, almost like a brand, so I'm not seeing much change in the way I work at this point. I have already done some e-book images, which involves additional usage for digital format. I am happy that with so many options out there now for entertainment on our smart phones, tablets and other hand-held devices, it's keeping books in the mix, and some e-books even have their own Apps. My own personal prediction is that physical books will become more "collectable" and special editions will be more beautiful and expensive again. A library will become like a museum but most of their new collections will be digital. There will be more enhanced e-books which contain links to websites and so on, but again, all of this may lead to more photo research, which is good for me!



And last but not least we have the **ChatterDozen** quick questions:

- 1) What is your favorite day of the week, and why? Saturday – ‘cos it’s Liverpool football day and I get to spend time with my husband and I like to cook on the weekends.
- 2) What is your favorite TV show? Dancing with the Stars - I love to dance (me too!) and just recently had my “hubby” start to take some Tango lessons! I also love Top Chef (girl after my own heart!) and What Not to Wear. I was a big fan of Lost when it was on, and I also like to watch Jeopardy as background - I am good at answering the questions because of all the subjects I have covered over the years in my photo research!
- 3) What was the last movie you saw? The Muppet Movie with my nephew!
- 4) When is your birthday? September 17th – Virgo – Yes, I’m a “details” girl!
- 5) Who (dead or alive) do you admire? Steve Jobs – I just did his book cover and it was such an honor to do it. It was so inspiring to hear all of the tributes to him. I really respected his aesthetic and sense of perfection (spoken like a true Virgo!) and how he was able to combine technology with creativity and good design – he took design and made it such an important and accessible part of his products. I also admire Hillary Clinton - she’s a tough woman...
- 6) What is your favorite music, song, or band? I was a DJ in college and have a huge, eclectic taste in music - I pretty much love everything from Run DMC to Wagner!
- 7) If you could be born in another period of history, when would that be? Rome – during the Renaissance - but maybe as a man! As a woman, I think we’ve got it better now than at any other time!
- 8) If you could get on a plane tomorrow, perhaps to somewhere you have never been before, where would you fly to and why? Provence, France during the lavender season, which is not now, so if it has to be tomorrow then it would be to one of the Virgin Islands with that turquoise water...
- 9) What is your favorite food? Avocados and dark chocolate, but not together! But if someone could figure out a way to combine them...
- 10) And your favorite color? Turquoise Blue (no big surprise there – see number 8!)
- 11) How about your favorite animal? Cats (me too!) - I have two of them, Xabi (who was named after Liverpool soccer player Xabi Alonso before we realized she was a girl!) and Ganesh (who’s the boy named after the Indian Elephant God)
- 12) If I handed you an Oscar, whom would you be thanking in your acceptance speech? ASPP (The American Society of Picture Professionals) - the organization has helped me get a lot of good contacts – like how I met you, for instance! - as well as have a place of community, because I work alone a lot. I would also thank all the people at the stock agencies and reps I have worked with over the years, and my clients, especially those who have been so supportive of my business, given me referrals, and trusted me with big projects that were very important to them. When a particular client asks for my input as to what they should do for their project and the creative process, they have also given me their trust, so I am able to provide even better images for them. Most of the time I don’t get a credit, which is fine, but the designers say they couldn’t do what they do without me, which is the most rewarding thing.