To some, Peter Mendelsund might seem like an imposter. (And, hell, he might even agree with that.)

He has no background in design—he didn’t study it, he doesn’t fetishize it. He built a career not in Adobe Illustrator, but at the helm of a century-old Mason & Hamlin baby grand piano. He came to design haphazardly and later in life, and wound up in a top-tier gig with virtually no experience.

Long before he found himself in the publishing wonderland of New York City, Mendelsund grew up in an arts-loving family in academic Cambridge, MA. But when his parents would take him to art museums or exhibitions, “I was just like, I don’t get it,” he says with a laugh. “I probably still don’t get it. I don’t have an educated eye. I just never felt the same, especially in comparison to music, where it’s like you hear something beautiful and it’s such a visceral, emotional response that you have. I’ve never had that response to date looking at a visual work of art.”

Which is perhaps ironic, given that some people have probably looked at the iconic book covers he has created as associate art director of Alfred A. Knopf books and, indeed, had that very emotional response.

“I doubt it. You never know,” he says. “[When I look at art, it’s] like what I imagine someone who is colorblind trying to imagine people who are fully sighted, what their lives are like. It’s like a missing rod or a cone or something.”

Mendelsund started playing piano at the age of 4, and says barely a week has gone by since when he hasn’t practiced at least an hour or two a day. While he was initially forced to play—he notes that...
his father had quit playing when he was younger and had never forgiven his parents for allowing him to do so—he had an epiphany around the age of 10 or 11, and discovered that he felt a deep satisfaction from it. “From then on, I was entirely motivated,” he says.

But when it came to selecting colleges, Mendelsund’s father, an architect and staunch supporter of all things liberal arts, felt it was crucial for Mendelsund to go to a school with a larger focus than just music to build a cultural vocabulary. Thus Mendelsund found himself studying philosophy and literature at Columbia University, “being able to table-hop intellectually,” which he loved. Afterward, he spent time at a conservatory, and began playing professionally. But it wasn’t all it was cracked up to be. In fact, he was miserable.

“The level of competition is so high. There’s no moment of relaxation. It’s just constant work and work and work and solitude, which is not a natural thing for me.”

So Mendelsund started poking around at what else he might do in lieu of the career he had always envisioned for himself. But his epiphanies were spent. This time, the epiphany came from his wife, Karla Silverman, who had watched him toying around with some designs on his computer, and suggested he look deeper into it.

“I think she noticed that I was enjoying myself doing it, and I was not terrible at it,” he says with a laugh. “It took me a while of doing it before I was like, ‘Hey, wait a second, this feels right in some ways.’”

He began designing small projects for friends and acquaintances—business cards, identities—“really small, unpaid bullshit work.”

He threw it all together and assembled a ramshackle portfolio. And not long after, he heard that strange name “Chip Kidd” for the first time.

Mendelsund was having dinner with his mother in Manhattan. He told her he was trying out “this graphic design thing.” She said she had a friend who was close with a designer—a guy who made book covers at Knopf, had worked on some Batman projects, and so on.

“He just seemed so odd,” Mendelsund recalls of Kidd. “Like the name, and the Batman stuff and even book design, which is just something that seemed so out of left field.”

Kidd remembers getting the call from a friend, asking him if he would chat with Mendelsund. “Your eyes just sort of like roll into your head and you think, oh my god,” he says. “But I said, sure, absolutely, I’ll do that. I was just doing a favor.”

Mendelsund went in to meet with Kidd, toting “this crazy hodgepodge of self-generated and small job stuff in my portfolio. None of it glamorous.”

But he had bigger problems. “The idea of working in-house was just so terrifying to me at the time. It’s not only that I didn’t think I would ever get a job, but if I did get a job, I’d just be called out for being a total fraud immediately.”

Despite his reservations, Mendelsund showed his portfolio to Kidd.

“I was just … surprised and sort of blown away,” Kidd says. “I know two other self-taught graphic designers who are at that kind of level. It’s pretty amazing.”

As for Mendelsund, “I didn’t know if I had a snowball’s chance in hell.”

He got the gig.

Mendelsund was petrified. But he went at it. Soon enough, he became the “handlumuch-as-humanely-possible guy.” He produced brilliant award-winning designs that resonated with originality and authenticity. In his career he estimates he has created between 700 and 1,000 published covers, and tens of thousands that didn’t make it to print.

“That ratio is really cruel to consider, actually,” he says.

When he designs, his process is always the same: Read the manuscript. Maybe read it twice. Mark it up. Make notes. Make sketches, pen on paper. Take it to the computer. Show the team what he has made. Deal with the feedback. “You’re responding as a reader, and then you’re making shit out of that response. And then you’re trying to get that shit approved. Just substitute something for that expletive, and that’s the methodology. It sounds maybe easier than it is, but maybe it is easy,” he says with a laugh.

Mendelsund’s success and background (or lack thereof) naturally leads one to ponder the age-old question: Are creatives, and in this case, designers, made or born?

“I think there are some aspects of the making of visual material that have to be sort of god-given,” Mendelsund says.

“At the end of the day, when you’ve made stuff you then have to look it over and be like, ‘This works, this doesn’t.’ And that depends on a critical sensibility and an aesthetic sensibility that I wonder if it can be taught. The rest of it, I assume, isn’t hard to learn, right?”

As for Mendelsund’s self-taught aesthetic, Kidd says, “It’s amazing. One thing that I really like about it is that I think he prescribes to the idea of not really having a recognizable style, as opposed to just a really smart problem-solving sensibility. That said, there’s a terrific formal quality to it. And you can tell that, like myself,
he’s a big fan of Alvin Lustig. There’s a wonderful sense of humor to it.”

Still, as the years passed, “what he hadn’t had really was what I would call, at the risk of modesty, his Jurassic Park moment,” Kidd says, “where you get the really great design that lands on a book that connects with a huge readership. And then, that of course happened with The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo.”

After several iterations of the cover for Stieg Larsson’s thriller, Mendelsund arrived at the design that has since become iconic and emulated—and has also since made him the go-to designer for the thriller genre. “I can’t get it out of my life,” he says with a laugh.

If only he had done a terrible job on The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo. “I thought I did!” he says.

For many of Mendelsund’s designs, you could easily tear the cover off of the book, frame it, and hang it on a wall. But Mendelsund is not the type of designer who kids himself in the everlasting battle between art and commerce.

“What we do is not fine art,” he says. “We’re not setting the bar at profundity. We’re setting the bar at ‘make something as cool as possible that is as eye-catching as possible that will hit the proper notes and get this book into as many hands as possible. Those are totally different criteria than when somebody sits down at a blank canvas. Hopefully. But the other thing is that if I started to think about it as art, I’d probably freeze up and die.”

Mendelsund’s strategy for coping: Look at cover design as trivial. As soon as one starts to elevate what she’s doing, he believes, she begins to overcomplicate it. That being said, he doesn’t underscore the impact a book cover truly has. He believes it becomes a placeholder in a reader’s mind, a static mental touchpoint referenced any time a reader ponders the book while experiencing it, or even decades later. (Think about your favorite book. What do you see?)

So how does he deal with the psychological weight of that?

“Here are the check boxes,” Mendelsund says. “[First,] it’s gotta reflect the reading experience of that particular book; whatever this visual analog is that you’re looking at, it has to be somehow parallel to a mapping of what the reading experience is like, or will be. [Second,] it has to be visually stunning. By that I mean it can be even ugly or startling. But just so arresting in one way or another in the literal sense of the word that it has to stop your eye from flitting on to the next book. So, ‘true’ and ‘arresting’. That way you’re serving two demographics equally well that are equally important: One is the author, and the other is the reader.”

For a designer with such a high degree of specialty—and, for that matter, a wide berth of talent in several other realms—one wonders: Does he ever worry he’ll be pigeonholed as “The Book Cover Guy”? All the time. Which is problematic for a pianist and designer who is constantly turning the page.

“It’s probably a product of having come from a different career altogether that I sort of feel a certain anxiety about being able to shape-shift. I just want to be free to try something else, but I also have a fear of being thought of as an amateur. Not in sort of the original sense of the word that was positive, but in the pejorative sense, like ‘jack of all trades, master of none.’ So you don’t want to spread yourself too thin. But I’m really, really interested in learning how to write a good sentence. Or a bunch of them in a row, even. The truth is, if I had all the money in the world I would probably stop designing today and just write. The problem is I have a great job, which is super fun, and I’m dependent on the salary and I have nothing to complain about at all.”

Last fall, Mendelsund produced two books: Cover, a monograph of his jackets, and What We See When We Read, an illustrated prose reflection on the intersections of word and image. The books were released on the same day by two different publishing houses. Both received well-deserved acclaim. Both received a fair amount of press, in not just design-related outlets but mainstream media such as The New York Times, The New Yorker and NPR. And the coverage they received in the latter realms brings up one of Mendelsund’s biggest criticisms—and calls to action—of the design world.
After his books debuted, an array of designers—many with their own monographs—asked Mendelsund how he got so much press for the titles. What he wanted to say to them but didn’t: He was aiming the books beyond the design community—not in an intellectual sense, but rather for designers and the public at large to read.

“There is this huge world out there, and there are people who will read about design if you write about design in a way that is not just accessible to the general public, but is hopefully smart.”

The mindset of many in the design community is that of self-pigeonholing, Mendelsund says; design books are often written in the style and voice of other design books, resulting in a culture of back-patting within the same elite circles. “This could come across as hugely offensive and snobby, and I really don’t want it to,” he says. “You’ve gotta get outside the design community, in terms of your social life, in terms of the reading you’re doing, in terms of what you’re listening to, and just read some books about stuff that is not design. There’s more to life. It’s just this silly thing that we do. It’s great and we love it, but there’s more out there.”

For Mendelsund, it brings him back to when he was choosing colleges, and his father swayed him away from a strict music school and toward a liberal arts degree and all the cultural capital—interaction, business acumen, problem-solving skills, negotiation, moving up the ladder, etc.—that comes with it.

“My father just felt very, very strongly that the liberal arts thing was just so crucial—that even if I didn’t use it professionally, it was so important to develop your mind in that way. And in retrospect he was completely right. I have no idea what I would have fallen back on.

“If you don’t want to be treated like a slave, don’t be one. And what that means is, be a citizen of the world.”

You may see Peter Mendelsund as an outsider, an imposter, an intellectual table-hopper who has made a stop in the design world, or maybe even an arrogant asshole. But then you look at his work, and you listen to his words. Sometimes, outsiders have what a community doesn’t: perspective. And sometimes, outsiders are more than just arrogant assholes.

Sometimes, they’re just what an industry needs.