

# COVER DESIGN SECRETS

BESTSELLING AUTHORS USE TO  
SELL MORE BOOKS



DEREK MURPHY

Brought to you by...  
[www.creativindie.com](http://www.creativindie.com)

Make sure you watch the free video series on cover design and get  
the sample cover design templates at...  
[www.DIYbookcovers.com](http://www.DIYbookcovers.com)

# INTRODUCTION

You probably already know that your book cover is important. Maybe you're determined to get a *good* book cover. The *best* book cover. The problem with that is, when you search for "best book cover designs" you'll get a whole bunch of literary fiction or traditionally published covers, often by famous authors. Those kinds of covers are *supposed* to be creative and innovative. They don't *need* to be obvious or sell the book because readers are going to buy the book anyway. If you already have a huge platform of readers and want to stand out and do something different, go for it (although, you'd still be missing out on all the readers who haven't read your books yet—I've seen people with a huge platform get this wrong and be disappointed with the results).

What most authors don't realize is that a "good" cover isn't the prettiest or even best-designed cover. It's the one that sells the book; or rather, the right cover is the one that catches the attention of the right reader, communicates genre and setting, makes them feel the emotional payout your book will satisfy, and gets them to read the description.

This last part is crucial: The cover doesn't actually sell the book, and it's not just one part in your sales funnel. It's the *first* step, and it is essential. With an unprofessional cover, or a cover that doesn't immediately communicate the benefits, readers will *never read the description* of your book. They won't know what it's about or

whether they might like it. Everything you say about your book to try and convince them to buy—it's too late, they're already gone. Your cover has to slow them down enough to read the description, otherwise it's a failure.

Unfortunately, self-publishing authors and even lots of small presses have creative control over the cover design process without actually understanding what type of covers sell books. If you hire a designer to make what *you want* and what *you think* should be on the cover, even if they're a very talented designer and give you everything you ask for, it probably won't sell books. Nor can you assume that whoever you hired to do your cover will make the type of cover that sells. Especially in the lower price range, there are lots of designers who are pretty great at design and illustration, but don't know the market or the publishing industry. Just because you paid for it, doesn't mean it will sell.

## So what's the answer?

The solution is, *you* need to learn enough about cover design to make sure you get the best cover for your book, and *you* need to be flexible enough to listen to expert advice rather than pushing your own agenda. Nobody else is going to do it for you. I'll wrestle with my clients as long as I can, but if they stubbornly persist in the direction of their choosing, I'll grumble but make them what they want anyway. (That's because I get paid for delivering covers; if I got paid a percentage of sales, I'd demand to use the cover that would sell the best).

In this book, I'm going to show you some simple strategies for designing covers that sell. I'll share some DIY options and choices for low-cost or budget cover design. I'll demonstrate the common mistakes that most authors make and show you what I do differently (to make sure my books keep selling with zero promotion).



## Why should you listen to me?

I realized recently that I've sold over \$200k in book covers. If that sounds impressive, divide it by six years and it's not that much. But it does mean I've designed a lot of covers, over 1500. And unlike most book cover designers, I routinely work with first time or indie authors with little to no platform, which means the cover has to do *all of the work*. When you send out cold emails to reviewers; when you try to get press coverage or a blog feature; when you send paid traffic to your sales page—the wrong cover can become an insurmountable hurdle to getting traction for your book. I design covers that at least pass the first glance test (to see if this is an amateur project or something professional enough to warrant a closer look). And hopefully, I make *amazing* covers that incite a storm of desire in the right readers (so they want it even before they know what it's about).

Most of the “famous” book cover designers design a handful of books a year, and have no idea how well those books are actually selling (or performing online, which is hugely important!). They might be creative geniuses, but hiring them for your book cover and letting them do something innovative would be a mistake (you'll learn why soon).

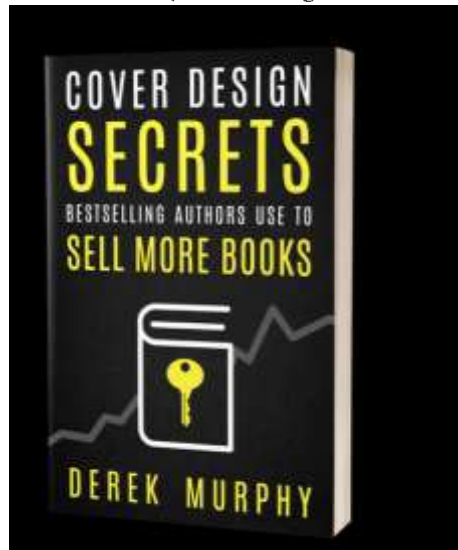
But more than that, I've got a PhD in Literature and have been helping authors publish for the past decade. Books are my life, but reaching readers and getting them to buy, review and share books is my passion. I recently published *Guerrilla Publishing*, about the more creative book marketing strategies I've been using to earn thousands of dollars a month from my fiction, and now I mostly write full-time (I still take on a limited number of design clients a month, but usually just one or two).

My first book however, was a disaster. I painted a picture, then photoshopped in dozens of symbols, and used text effects and “cool stuff” I thought would make my book stand out. I brought a box of books to work with me, proud as a peacock, and quickly recognized that my co-workers were less than impressed with my self-published efforts. So I got better. I studied branding, marketing, design, and

began doing free book covers to help me practice (I was working as a book editor, so it was easy to offer free covers to my clients).

Since then I've worked with dozens of bestselling authors (I'm not going to name-drop, but there's a good chance you've read a book with one of my covers on it). After lots and lots of practice, I'm getting pretty good at cover design... *but I'm still learning*. When I published my first fiction a year ago, I thought I had very decent covers – but I've just redone them all, because I know they can sell better. (One of the advantages of indie publishing is that you can change your books whenever you want).

This book actually started with a different cover, which I thought was clever at the time (but is actually confusing):



The main mantra I'll try to communicate in this book is, "be clear before you're clever." Book cover design isn't about art or creativity or being innovative. A powerful cover will instantly let readers know the genre, mood and emotional payout promised; it'll attract and convey professionalism; it'll look like other bestsellers in the genre without looking *exactly* like any specific one. It's much better to play it safe with a "clichéd" book cover than try to reinvent the wheel and confuse readers. This may offend your artistic

sensibilities, because you've been trained to view art as the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion (Wordsworth). But which would you rather have, more people reading your book, or less?

## WHAT'S A BOOK COVER FOR?

Your book cover's aim is to overcome objections.

### **First objection:**

*The quality is bad, this is self-published, and probably not so good.*

This is a yes/no. It's a tick in the box. If it's "good enough" and looks professional and well done, not obviously homemade or cheap or crappy, then it gets a pass.

A good, professional cover vs. a mind-blowing, life-changing cover isn't any different, because there is no scale. At this stage, you're only looking to get past the first objection: is it professional enough to remove fears of poor quality? If yes, the cover is doing its job, move on to...

### **Second objection:**

*I don't know what it's about or if it will interest me.*

Does it convey the genre and subject matter? If not, readers will have questions. What kind of book is this? What's the genre? Where is it located? What is the main conflict/plot? What elements are involved? Is baseball a major theme? Kidnapping? Bank robbery? Summer romance? Lost loved one? Time travel? Supernatural powers? Vampires? Chick lit comedy? Without being too detailed, the cover has to communicate this, because you're not around to ask, and I guarantee you people are too lazy to click and find out.

Ways to do this:

1. Through pictures
2. Through the text
3. Through the style (colors and fonts)

The trick is to balance everything. You don't want too much information. You don't want too many keywords. But you can reveal the important features through a combination. Usually style (fonts and colors) is enough to get the genre and mood right. It can also be used to trigger pre-existing affinity: if you compare your book to Dan Brown's *Angels and Demons*, make sure your cover is similar in design. Not exactly the same, but close enough that someone could say "this cover reminds me a little of the *Angel and Demons* cover... maybe they're similar books."

PS) If you have no idea what your book is about or who will like it, that's a major problem. Even if you've mixed genres, you need to make choices about who you're trying to appeal to, and it's usually best to pick the biggest market. If you try to appeal to everyone, you'll usually fail. Do some research, choose the types of books that are most similar to yours, who you think will share an audience with you. Find out what keywords and categories they're using. Learn what readers who like those books are searching for. Figure out what they *want*. Then make a cover that appeals to them or checks those boxes.

## COMMON MISTAKES

*Indie author or amateur cover designers make a lot of the same mistakes. Here are the most common.*

## Focusing on scene or symbolism (head, not heart)

Fiction covers need to appeal to the heart. This means that what's actually on the cover doesn't really matter. Do you want them to feel afraid? Use red, or black and white. Want them to feel happy? Use light blue or bright yellow. With just colors and fonts you can get the right emotion, and they will feel it immediately, because they are psychologically set up that way. They can't help it. Our bodies are reactive. The fiction cover should never get up into their head. They shouldn't be thinking "I wonder what this book is about" or "what does this picture mean." You can do it with a model (especially showing a face with emotion on it) or a beautiful landscape.

For non-fiction, the cover *is* cerebral, but you still don't want them to think about it. It's got to immediately convey the topic. It should be obvious, instantaneous, but also (if possible) something new and unexpected – usually by combining two obvious symbols or objects in a way that perfectly embodies the main idea of the book. Go simple. Put as little as you can on the cover. Almost always, one main model and one nice landscape/setting picture will do the trick.

## Matching all the exact details

Book cover designers are not magicians. We use stock photography (which is a good thing, I'll touch on that later). So we spend hours searching for stuff we can use. For example today I was searching for a gun that is the right angle that I can fit it on a table. I can't just take a picture of a gun and spin or turn it to get the angle I want, that's impossible. So you can imagine this search is made even harder if I need to find an *exact model* of the right kind of gun (and authors almost always demand the right kind of gun). But readers who haven't read the book yet don't care about the type of gun.

They aren't going to say, "Oh that looks like a good book but I *hate* that type of gun. I only read books whose covers have *this* type of gun on them." Readers don't care about the details. Yes, you should make a bit of effort. It's pretty easy for example to change a

model's hair or eye-color to match your character. But it's much less easy to change their clothes. And it's impossible to move them around into a different posture like you would with a Barbie doll. Very often a better picture, though less precisely matching, will sell more books than a "truthful" picture that exactly matches the story but isn't powerful. Remember, the cover is packaging. When you buy Lucky Charms, is there really a Leprechaun inside? When you get a Big Mac, does it really look like that delicious picture they have above the cash register?

You don't want to be way off base or misleading, but people aren't going to stop on page 235 and check to make sure the cover is factually representative (and if it isn't, they aren't going to stop reading and feel lied to). Get the best cover for the book, the one that's *most effective* at getting strangers to start reading. After they read it, they'll have their own mental images to use and they won't need the cover anymore.

PS) The cover sells the story. If people *dislike* the story, that's a whole different issue. Then they may feel that the cover overhyped the experience, which is why \*sometimes\* starting with an ugly cover can lead to more positive reviews (low expectations but positive experience), and an amazing cover can lead to more negative reviews (high expectations but negative experience). But you shouldn't be thinking about that. You think your book is good, right? If you attract the right readers with the right cover, they should think so too. If they don't, you're either attracting the wrong readers still, or you \*assumed\* that those readers would like the type of book you've written, and are learning you miscalculated. Next time, focus more on the readers and writing something they're going to love.

## Trying to be different or interesting

I hear this one sometimes; authors want their books to stand out. They want to do something that's never been done before. That's a big mistake. Just like movie posters, book covers need to follow

design and genre conventions, so that readers know at first glance where to place it.

Look at any genre and you'll see the top 20 bestsellers have a lot of things in common. If you want to be a bestselling book in that category, *you need to look* like a bestselling book in that category. The cover isn't a place to be revolutionary and new and different; the cover is where you follow the design stereotypes so that readers can place your book quickly and start reading the book.

## Trying to give readers 'something to figure out'

Readers don't care enough about you or your book to spend time figuring things out. If they are confused, they will leave. If they don't know what the book is about, they will leave. Imagine if you set up a lemonade stand but only served hotdogs. You might sell a couple, but you'd really have done better selling lemonade. Or you could upsell with a lemonade package that included a hotdog—now you've met and exceeded expectations, and you'll probably make more money. You've got to make an easy promise and deliver on that promise, earning the trust of the readers, before they will enjoy being confused or surprised by you. So you can probably do it *in* the book. But not on the cover. Personally, I love starting books out that are trope heavy and cliched, earning readers' trust, then showing them something they've never seen before.

## Book awards

There are reasons you might want to enter book award contests, and if you win one you might want to mention it on the cover, but I would do it with text. A perfect book cover, like a perfect painting, is done when nothing can be added or subtracted without ruining everything. If your cover art is good enough, an award sticker will be distracting. I might only use one if it's a huge, major, recognized book award (and even then I probably wouldn't). And this is, again,

because book covers aren't cerebral. You're not appealing to the rational mind so it can make an informed decision. That process comes later, once they are reading the book's description (so I would mention the book awards there). The cover has to appeal to the caveman; it has to make people want it *without* giving any concrete supporting facts or social proof. (For fiction at least. For non-fiction, credibility is more of a factor, so I'd use the space on the front for a review from someone your readers know and trust).

Rather than put a big badge (or 3!) on the cover, you can write "multiple award-winning author" across the top in very small text.

## Badly used text or font

*(dropshadow, bevel or spacing)*

Text and font is the easiest thing to get right, and unfortunately also the most common thing you can screw up. A simple stock photo with great text will win over amazing cover art with badly placed text. Authors usually make their text "stand out" with effects like dropshadow or bevel (which makes the cover look amateurish). You don't *want* your text to stand out or look superimposed over the image. You don't want to cover up the image. You want the text to look natural, like it fits into the art, like it's all one big piece. You do that by using natural contrast: put white text over darker areas and vice-versa.

For spacing, you want a lot of space between the letters, the more spacing, the more epic or cinematographic it's going to feel. A lot of authors, under the mistaken opinion that all text needs to be bold and legible as a thumbnail, cram the text together so they can make it as big as possible. Use Canva.com to get ideas, or pick a font from another best-selling cover you like (unless it's super unique, then just look for a similar style). I also posted [a list of 300+ fonts by genre](#) to help you choose.

Title fonts should communicate the genre. Author name and subtext fonts should be simple serif or sans-serif. Your author name size depends on the genre conventions, not how famous you are



(lots of authors try to use a tiny author name because they're "not a big deal yet.") But readers don't know whether or not you're famous. Look at the bestsellers in your category. Are all the author names big? Then match their style. I wrote in YA dark fantasy, and author names are usually small and understated, so that's what I do.

## Taglines on book covers

Some people argue that small text won't be seen as a thumbnail. It doesn't matter. Put it on anyway. Why? Here's a simple rule that's the secret to life and happens to also apply to book covers:

If it's easy to do and doesn't cost much, and it might help achieve your goals, if there's no harm or risk, **do it**. Adding a tagline is something that can't possibly hurt your book sales but may possibly help them. Arguing that it "won't help very much" is foolish. If you do 10 things that only help a little, overall you'll vastly improve book sales.

Even if they can't read the small text, your book will appear more professional, because mainstream published books usually have some (a blurb or review, a tagline, etc). Indie published books often stand out before they've only got the title and author name.

HOWEVER, the tagline should be really small. Some authors make all the text the same size, and that's confusing. You need to choose what's most important, and emphasize that. Almost always, it's:

Book Title

Author Name

Subtitle or Tagline

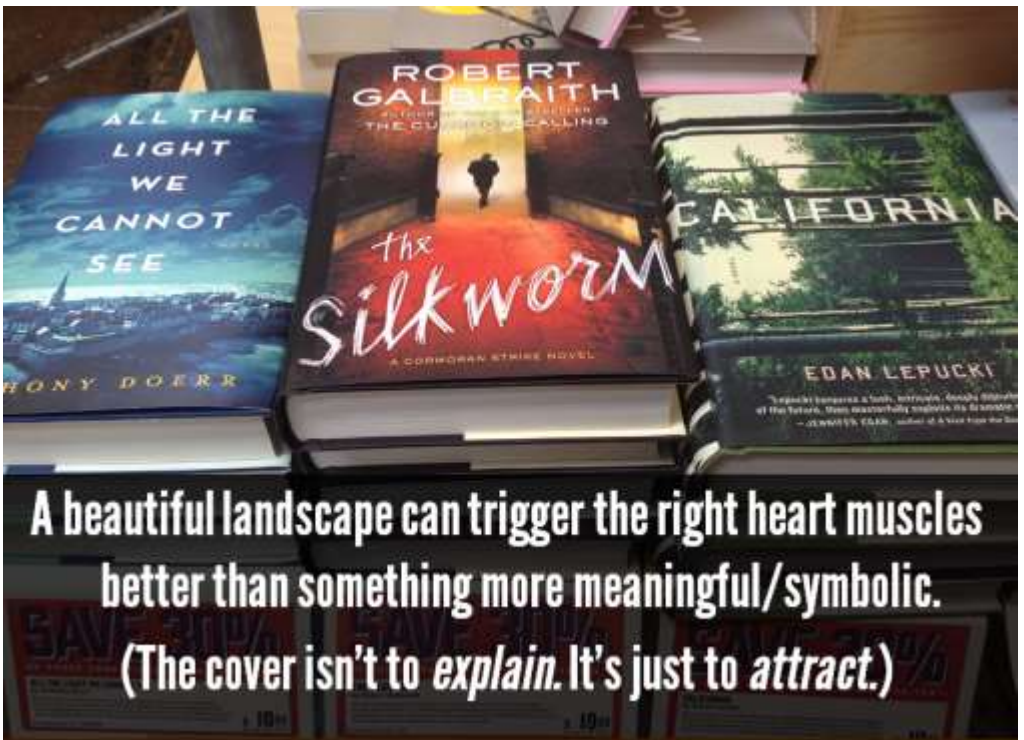
Review, blurb or 'bestselling author' tag

Also, remember for fiction, the art/emotion is the most important thing, so mostly all the text has to look clean and get out of the way. Don't kill the emotional experience by talking too much about yourself or distracting them with irrelevant text.

## Use a solid color scheme

Don't just add pictures and leave them whatever color you found them. Put a color wash layer over everything, so there are only one or two main colors in the cover (including the text – blue covers go well with yellow font. But if the art has two colors, the text should probably be white).

“Color washes” are usually just a layer over the art changing all the colors. Easy to do in Photoshop, but there are tons of programs with filters you can use to enhance or change the colors.

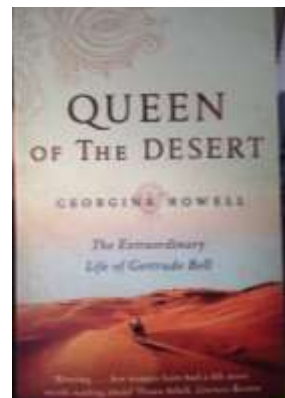


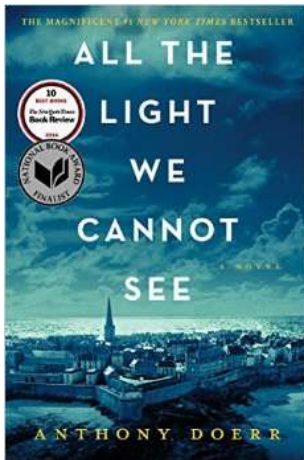
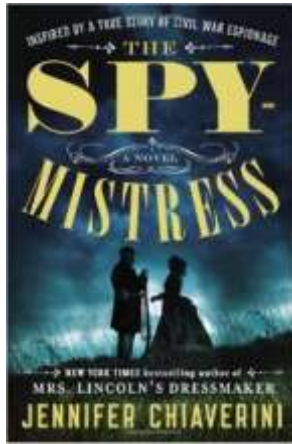
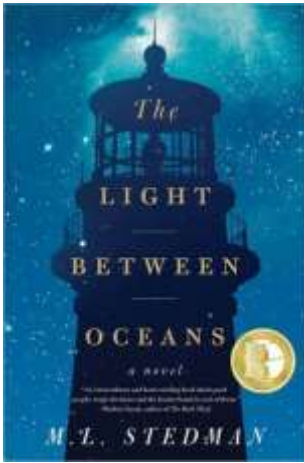
# LAYOUTS THAT WORK FOR ANY GENRE

I talk a lot about book cover design, but when you start out with that blank canvas and your eager imagination, you're bound to get lost in the possibilities of what to put on your book cover. So let me simplify things for you, a lot. First you can write down all the stuff you dream about putting on the cover. Got it? Great—now crumple it up and throw it away. Your vision, as the author, for your own book cover, is probably a big full scene with different characters interacting in different ways, expressing different emotions, wearing specific types and colors of clothes and jewelry, with three different important settings behind them.

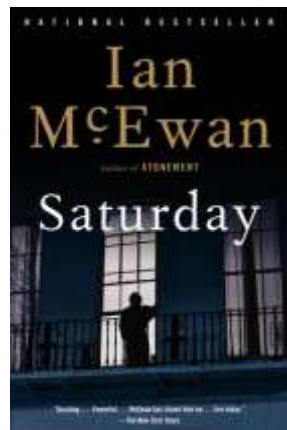
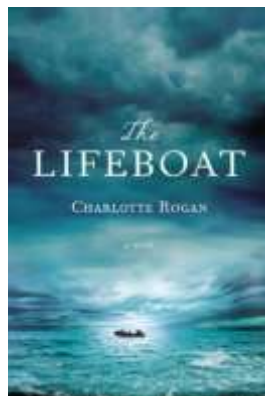
None of that is going to work. Even if it were possible for a designer to pull it off and do it well, it won't be nearly as strong or powerful as something much simpler, which means, it's more work but will result in less sales. I sometimes feel like I'm being lazy when I explain this to authors, but it's not that I'm afraid of hard work, I just know they'd rather sell more books than less, and that's the standard I try to hold myself accountable to. Take a look at bestselling fiction in any genre, and you'll see it matches one of the three simple layouts I'm going to suggest below. Contrast that with any self-published cover that looks like crap, and you'll find they avoided these simple solutions and tried to do something more complicated, that failed horribly. The BEST designers know how to simplify, and yes, sometimes that means just using one simple image and some clean, simple text. It may have taken them 5 minutes to make, but still looks better (and will outsell) something an amateur designer spent 25 hours making.

## One: Find a Picture and Keep It





This works best



for memoir, historical fiction, literary fiction, self-help/spiritual and possibly some romance. It's not about the details, so don't mess up the picture trying to change things to make it more accurate. That's a mistake. You can add a little bit of texture or design to make it more attractive and appealing for the genre. Sometimes changing all the colors to a monochromatic scheme is a good choice, or using a color gradient, or make everything gray with one red element. But stick with the picture. The better picture you start with, the better your cover is going to be. There is a small danger if you just pick the most amazing, genre specific cover you find (like a vampire couple) because a dozen other books are going to use the exact same image for their cover. So this is mostly about generic landscapes or nondescript pictures which are simple and beautiful, but not so perfect that other authors are going to want to use them on their covers. The best option is usually to add a small scene at the bottom and fill the space with clouds or sky—a large patch of uniform color where it's easy to add text. Fonts and text effects will depend on the genre (in general, the more literary and highbrow the book, the more simple and boring the text... or to use another rule, the younger the reader, the bigger the design).

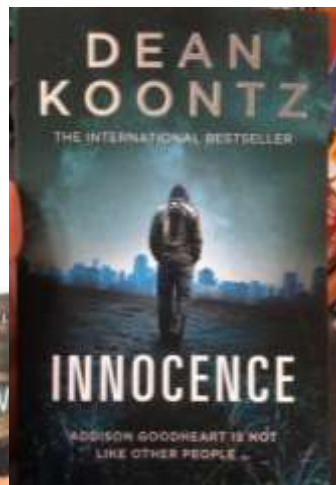
However, most covers that just use a landscape will also have a “humanizing element”—the hint of a person, such as an object. I'm not a fan of silhouetted people (it's not actually that easy to use them because it depends entirely on the lighting in the scene) but take a look again at the covers above. Most of them have a person (in a boat, on a camel) even if they're really small. That's because, stories are *character-based*. Without a person, there's no story. Though if the story is about a place, or event, and larger than one character, then just using a landscape (as long as it's cool and interesting, like a circus or European city) that might work.

PS) You'll notice a couple covers above break my rule about book awards on covers... firstly, it's not so bad because those are major, recognized awards, however I still think it's ruining the effect of the cover. I'd love to split test those without the awards. My guess

is, taking the awards off the covers would boost sales rank and increase conversions.



**Two:** Foreground character with background scene





Take a simple background, add a simple character. Again, appealing to the right target readers is MORE IMPORTANT than getting the details right. Take a look at the Fallen cover by Lauren Kate. I've always loved this cover but I only read the book recently. It's a modern story about a girl who recently cropped all her hair short. It takes place in an old school and in a cemetery. So the long hair and beautiful dress in the cover doesn't fit at all (except if it represents one of the protagonist's past lives), and the background doesn't represent any of the specific settings of the book, it's just a forest scene. But none of that matters—the cover's job is to attract the right reader, NOT to tell them what the book is really about. This usually works best if the character is facing away.

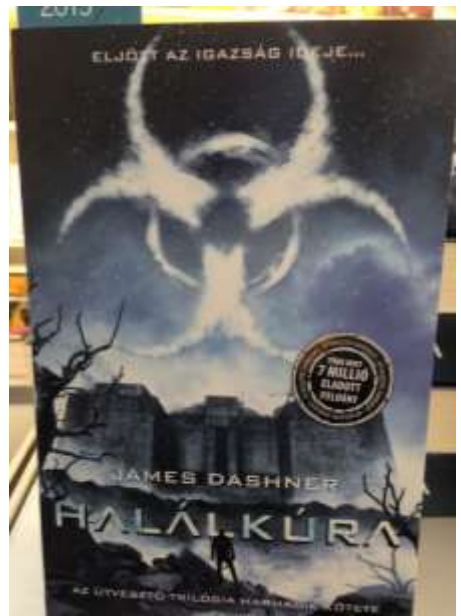
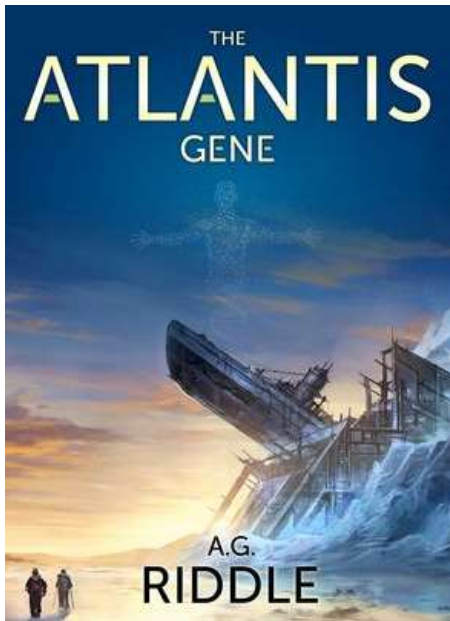
## Two A: character on top with scene on bottom



## Two B: Big scene with a small character

This is great if you want to show the size of something. It also works well for most thrillers, having someone running through a city.

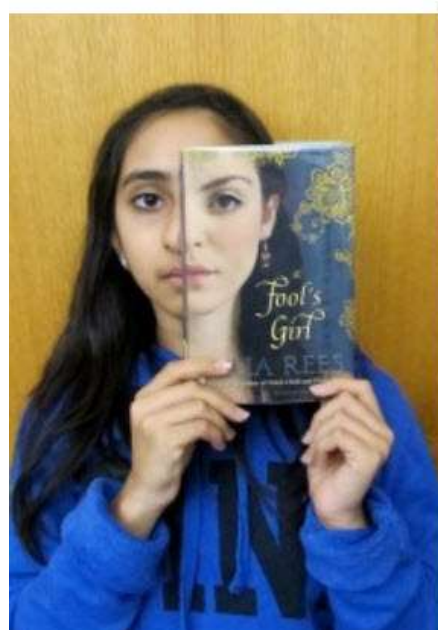
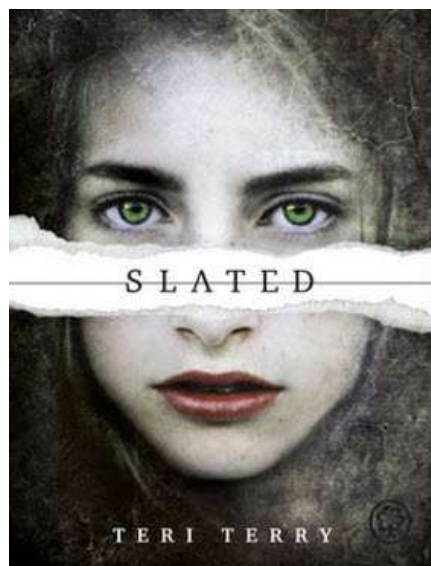




### Option Three: Close up face

This works especially well if the model is looking right at the reader with a captivating gaze. There is no need to fit the whole face; adding just half gives it some extra intrigue. These are fun because readers can put them up over half their face for selfies, which you could turn into a contest with prizes. Even if you use half a face, don't feel like you have to fill the space with setting or more details; most of these covers use half a face and still leave the background empty, except for a little flair or decoration. It can be indistinct; some texture or leaves or fire, close up, rather than panned out and fitting a whole landscape or view. These covers are not about details, they are all about that captivating gaze. Don't distract away from it with other elements. Support it but stay out of the way.

PS) These can work, but I don't think they work as well as earlier options.



# 7 BRILLIANT DESIGN STRATEGIES

I was chatting with friends at the London Book Fair when one of them reminded me of a presentation on book cover design; which I felt duty-bound to attend. Frankly, I wasn't expecting much, since I consider the cover design strategies I recommend for indie authors to be *avant garde* and not mainstream. But Damien Horner (@Damienhorner) delivered a 5 minute value bomb—7 tips plus a golden rule—that was concise and flawless. I took notes but am paraphrasing below; I second all of these tips, especially for self-publishing authors.

## #1 Membership

Your cover is about membership, not aesthetics. It doesn't have to be “interesting” or “beautiful”—it needs to let people know immediately what genre it belongs in. It needs to look like one of the gang. Don't worry about being a cliché or looking like other books in your genre. Far better to fit in and sell some books than to stand out and sell none.

## #2 Lust Factor

That said, sometimes you can stand out with a really freaking beautiful book cover, but these are usually for literary fiction books with mainstream publishing and a big promotion budget; they need to be designed well, and a little artsy, to appeal to the people they are supposed to appeal to. For most popular genre fiction, indie authors attempting to go this route will fail, because it's really difficult to create a cover so beautiful people want to lick it, unless you've been designing book covers for years (and even then!). If this is your very first book cover and you're designing yourself, or hiring someone cheap, it's doubtful you'll come up with a lustful cover.

### #3 The Blink Test

Whether you go with basic genre conventions or attempt the trickier “lust factor” cover, your book cover needs to tell people what it’s about in one second. Flash the cover in front of someone quickly. Can they make out the art? Does it communicate the genre immediately? The book cover isn’t the place to “explain” all the details - people aren’t going to read all the text on the cover unless they are already hooked by the cover alone in under one second. It has to appeal, attract and communicate the basics (genre, maybe setting) and as I like to say, have an immediate emotional impact.

### #4 The Title is Integral

You need to have a great title and be sure about it before you start the cover design, because book covers have to compensate. If you pick a simple, abstract, one word title that doesn’t say anything about the type of book or story, the cover art has to do all the work. On the other hand, if you have a very long, keyword rich, descriptive title, the cover art can do less work.

### #5 Straplines (taglines, subtitles...)

Damien says publishers rely on straplines to explain a crappy title. If you had a great title with great cover art, you wouldn’t need a tagline to add more information (and people are unlikely to read the small cover text on your book cover anyway...). If you do a brilliant job, you don’t need them. However, almost all the indie authors I know are doing a firmly mediocre job, with not-great book covers and abstract titles that don’t mean anything—and then they also don’t add any small text. Which means the covers aren’t passing the blink test, at all. In my opinion, almost all self-published books would benefit from putting a strapline, subtitle or at least blurb on the cover that gives more information. If it’s a werewolf romance, you need either:

1. A werewolf on the cover, preferably with another boy/girl to show “romance”.

2. “Werewolf” in the title.

3. A subtitle or strapline that mentions werewolves, lycan, or hints at romance somehow

4. At the very least, even though it’s cheesy and obvious, put “a werewolf romance” and use that as the subtitle as well on Amazon. It’s heavy-handed, and unprofessional, but it will help you sell more books than every other self-publishing author who doesn’t use any keywords and has covers that don’t convey the genre.

## #6 Consider your Distribution Platform

If Amazon/ ebook retailers are your primary sales platform (and they are, unless you are a professional speaker or planning to sell thousands of copies at events) you need to design for Amazon. Most indie authors already know this and recycle the (in my opinion) bad advice that you need the text to be legible as a thumbnail. It isn’t true. Your cover has to stand out and be impactful even as a thumbnail, yes—but people don’t read text on thumbnails! They read the text on the side of the thumbnail, or if the cover is great, they click the image to find out more. Damien used the example of one of Seth Godin’s covers, which just have big, fun art and no text at all. Really big text has its place (thrillers, horror) but some genres don’t call for it, and big text may ruin the emotional promise your cover needs to be making. Big text is just like all caps, shouting at the world, LOOK AT MY BOOK, DAMN YOU!

## #7 Hierarchy

You can’t stress everything all at once, and you need to decide what’s most important. If you are a first-time author with no platform, it’s probably not your name, because nobody knows who you are. So the title is almost always most important. It will fill most of the width of the cover. Then, probably is your author name, which can be at about 50%. Don’t make the mistake of thinking because

you aren't famous, your author name should be tiny and invisible. Make your author name roughly the same size as other authors in your genre. People don't know you aren't famous. You can even make your name HUGE and people may assume you are famous, even if they've never heard of you (but it can backfire, so don't use that as strategy). On the other hand, if you are famous, the title doesn't matter so much, because you already have millions of fans who will buy anything you write—so the name would be 100%, and first, and the title would be smaller and down below. You may have a series title as well, plus a book title, plus a tagline and your author name. Some elements should be really small (12pt font, but stretched out widely at 600 spacing) which will look more professional than trying to make the small text as big as you can and cramming it in... something you might do if you believe the mistaken advice “make the text legible as a thumbnail.” Don't make the text fight for attention.

## The GOLDEN RULE of book cover design

I've said this in hundreds of ways, but never quite as well as Damien phrased it: ***“Be clear before you are clever.”*** Indie authors often want to stand out and do something creative. They want to refer to or symbolize the contents of the book—a book people haven't read yet! Readers won't get what you're referring to or symbolizing. Don't be clever. People aren't going to reflect on your cover and try and figure out what it means, and analyze while they read the story. The cover is packaging. It's a billboard. It catches the eye and attracts people to read the summary and reviews. That's it. It's great if it can also truthfully represent the book, but it's always better to use a powerful cover that doesn't quite represent the book accurately, but doubles your sales, than it is to represent the book accurately (a mistake most authors make) with a confusing cover crammed full of exact details and pictures and scenes and meanings that you can explain and talk about for an hour but nobody else gets (or even likes). Make a beautiful cover that sells the book. Selling the book is the cover's only job. Don't get caught up in all the other stuff

that doesn't matter. The best cover is the cover that sells the most books (unless you're writing literary fiction or you have a career goal that doesn't include on book sales).

## COVER DESIGN SECRETS PUBLISHERS USE TO MANIPULATE READERS INTO BUYING BOOKS



Indie publishers are slowly coming to realize the importance of an amazing book cover. Since many self-publishing authors are starting out on a very small budget however, homemade, DIY book covers are still a popular choice.

But be forewarned: although book cover designs come in a wide variety, publishers consistently use reliable, time-tested techniques and guidelines to catch your attention and make the sale. You want your cover to be different and unique, but you also want to tick all the right boxes (because they *work*). The worst thing an author can do is consider their cover design like a blank canvas and add whatever they want, wherever they want. So here are the tricks you need to know.

## 1. Make it “Pop”

A lot of authors ask for covers that “pop.” And many designers have no idea what this means. But I’ve narrowed it down to *contrast*. You want a strong light to dark transition, with strong shadows.



You want the central object or character to really “pop” out, by being spotlighted and lighter in color (you can also do the reverse and have a very light cover, with a bold, dark central image). But you also want contrasting colors: colors that are opposites on a color wheel. Movie posts use orange and teal *all the time*, because they are a very pleasing color combination.





You can also use blue and red (although it's hard to do well—black/gray and red usually works better), purple and yellow (colors which, I believe, only those born in Aquarius truly love). Non-fiction covers don't need to “pop” in the same way; they can stand out by using bright colors or a simple central image.

## 2. Lots of space

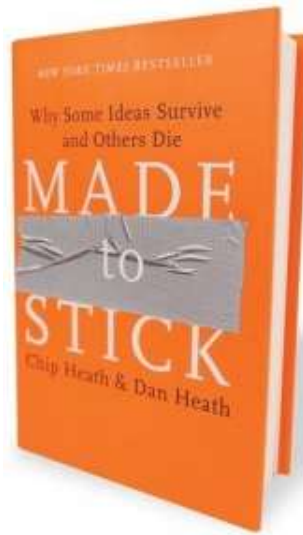
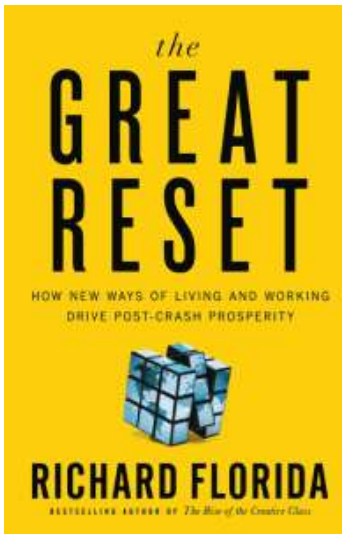
A lot of book covers are too busy. Many of mine certainly are (partly due to my design style, partly because the authors want to include *everything* on the cover). Even if there are lots of elements, the background should be blended together smoothly. This can be done with a color wash (for example, in *Fallen* below, the dress could have “popped” more if it were deep red... but that would have made the text harder to read. Lauren Kate's covers are breathtaking, but very simple.) There's also a lot of space in Guy's cover below. Most non-fiction books will have a central background color/gradient, and a very simple single image that illustrates a concept. If you're designing your own cover, there probably needs to be a lot more space between the letters. The normal spacing between letters is too

cramped for a book cover. This is especially true for author names. See how far the letters in “Lauren Kate” stretch out? (Probably about 350% of normal). It makes it more cinematographic somehow. More epic.



Guy’s last name and author title are both pretty long, so he couldn’t fit as much space between the letters, but he makes up for the cramped letters by adding a lot of extra spaces in the middle, and to the sides of the subtitle and blurb lines (look at the subtitle on the very bottom. No reason to break that into two lines. But the extra space makes the cover layout less box-square, and more fluid – like two inverted triangles.

### 3. Make it clever (non-fiction) or emotional (fiction)



Here's a quick rule of thumb: **non-fiction appeals to the brain.** You want an instantly clever image to catch their *mental* attention. Non-fiction covers should have a central “gimmick” and a solid color background or gradient (orange and yellow are very popular for business books). Notice also how wide the spacing is between the letters on these two covers. You catch the brain's attention by showing a juxtaposition—things that shouldn't really go together and are unexpected. Then the subtitle tells them what the book is about.

On the other hand, **fiction appeals to the heart.** So fiction covers should be bursting with color, vibrancy, action. They should be *beautiful*. The art alone should make you *feel*, something like longing or loss or passion, *immediately*. Here are two covers for books I really enjoyed: both are simple and use a lot of space. Both use the orange/teal contrast. Both don't really show *anything* about the book itself... but the bold, industrial fonts show they're YA dystopian fiction (paranormal books will have more curly, sharp or 'wicked' looking fonts; romances will have a lot of curls and decoration).



I like that *Allegiant* put in a little bit of setting on the bottom, which is easy to do and usually works well (so the author name had to be moved up). *Ignite Me* is done very well too though, and the dark contrast on the bottom getting lighter as it goes up makes the dark eye really stand out. Something else to notice: both had to use dropshadows to make the text stand out – something it's usually better to avoid (in other genres) but since dystopian fiction covers can be a little aggressive, it works here.

*Allegiant* really pops out with a heavy dropshadow (and metal gradient), and it also makes the teaser (at the top) easy to read—unlike the teaser for *Ignite Me*, which I can barely see. Be careful of overusing dropshadows though, I try to avoid them by using natural contrast (put light text on dark areas of the cover). So when designing for fiction, you're appealing to the subconscious and the emotions. You're not providing detail for the brain. Focus on colors, abstract symbols, representations (or better, a simple protagonist+scene like I showed above—symbolic covers are very hard to get right. Focus on strong contrast and mood. How does the cover make you *feel*?

#### 4. Use a subtitle, teaser or tagline (and a review!)

Once you've got that down, provide just a tiny bit more information with a teaser. For fiction, a teaser should hint at the major plot point or conflict (star crossed love, a family feud, a personal growth quest, etc). It should excite interest without giving away too much. Far too many indie authors aren't using teasers; just the extra bit of small text makes the covers look more professional. Make them simple, in a serif or sans-serif font, and small, but find a way to fit them in (and get them edited – pay someone on [fiverr.com](https://www.fiverr.com) to help you brainstorm. The teaser has got to be really good. You should also get feedback on the title....)

For non-fiction, your subtitle is crucial because it allows you to fit more keywords. You don't want to stuff your title with too many keywords, so you can fit in a few more with a very nice subtitle (it should be clear and easy to read, not just a string of keywords). Fiction books can benefit from subtitles too: recently I helped an author change a one-word title, which nobody was finding, or if they did find, didn't know what it was about, to include the subtitle "A Dystopian Adventure." Not all books will need this, but his book was hidden on about the sixth page of nonrelated books with a similar title, even when I was searching for the title of his book. Adding a simple genre-subtitle into the title field on Amazon can help you be found. Example (I'm just making this up).

Title: Smasher

**Title+Subtitle:** Smasher: a paranormal fantasy

**Title+Teaser:** Smasher: sometimes you have to break everything before you can put the pieces back together...

You probably don't need a subtitle *and* a teaser. A teaser is probably better for fiction (except if adding keywords or the genre helps your book find the right readers). You can also add a blurb or review—these help sell books even if the reviewer/source isn't recognized or famous. Edit it down to make it short and punchy, ten words or less. Smart indie authors in related genres will trade cover blurbs (so start networking!) Reviews establish credibility. Big publishers aren't using them as much anymore, because demonstrating credibility can actually show insecurity. Something to keep in mind...





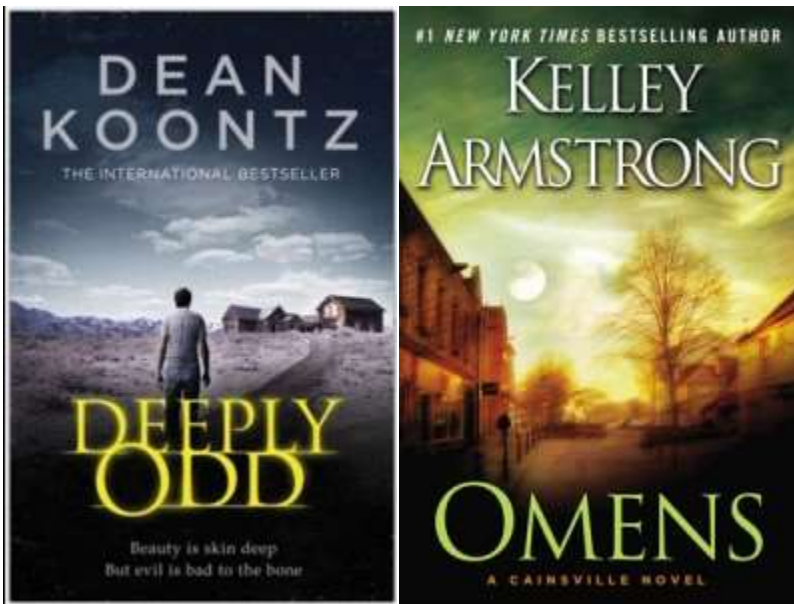
Here are three covers with different teasers on them (all in different places; you may have to squeeze the teaser wherever it will fit). All three have strong dark to light contrast, and all three use color contrast (yellow and blue; *Odd Thomas* more purple) *Bared to You* fits the title in nicely over the image; it would be hard to put it anywhere else. Not my favorite cover, and I prefer warm colors to be on top of cool colors (blue doesn't seem very romantic to me...) but the title font and keywords "possession" and "obsession" let me know what to expect (even without the naked woman, so that's a bit overkill). *Soulbound* uses a very nice background (red goes well with cool blues or grays, there's a lot of natural contrast) but the text isn't great. The red+blue+yellow is too much, and title font is a little boring/flat, and I'll bet that cursive "S" doesn't belong with the rest of that font family. It's common to change the first letter of a word (like in *Bared to You*) but the two font styles shouldn't conflict. Also the author font is too fancy (stick with one fancy font.) *Odd Thomas* is one of my favorite covers. It'll be easier to see why by comparing it to something else...

A lot of indie authors say that you shouldn't use small text on ebook covers. This isn't true. Designing for print and ebooks is the



same. Thumbnails don't matter. Small text like reviews and blurbs makes your cover look traditionally published, and actually gives viewers *a reason* to click on the cover and see the full view (so they can read the small text, which may clinch the sale.) People don't read the cover; they read the description right next to the cover, and if they want to find out more, they click and see the big view.

## 5. Pick the right font (and effects)



Here are two very similar covers. *Deeply Odd* uses a pale blue/yellow contrast, which is stronger than Kelley's green/yellow. The fonts are nearly identical, but I far prefer the Koontz cover, because:

1. The two different fonts make a nice contrast. They aren't fancy fonts, but a very simple serif and sans-serif.
2. They use natural color contrast for text and light/dark contrast. The top and bottom of *Deeply Odd* are dark enough



to add the text without a drop shadow or special effects to make it stand out. *Omens'* top is in that annoying twilight, in between light and dark, where neither dark nor light text will stand out well, so she had to add a strong drop shadow. Yes it helps the text stand out, but it overpowers the title and kills the fluidity of the cover.

3. The letters in “Kelly Armstrong” are too condensed, whereas “Dean Koontz” is widely spread. True, he was lucky to have a shorter name, but it’s also the lack of drop shadow and the simple sans-serif font that make it so clean and elegant. Even using gray rather than white increase its subtlety.
4. Ditto with the “bestseller” tagline. Kelley’s is a little too heavy and long (probably English Gothic). Koontz’s is elegant and minimal (Open Sans or Lato?)
5. With the dark cover, the yellow *Deeply Odd* really stands out, because it’s the lightest thing, in a way that *Omens* doesn’t, because the top is too light.
6. *Deeply Odd* uses two special effects, a very subtle glow which is great to suggest a bit of paranormal, and an underline (the two words in *Deeply Odd* would probably have been too cramped, if not for the underline, which connects everything.) I would have at least liked to see a subtle gradient on *Omens*.
7. I don’t know what either book is really about, but *Deeply Odd* fixes this with a great teaser “Beauty is skin deep but evil is bad to the bone,” So I know it’s a struggle between good and evil.
8. *Deeply Odd* is a little more interesting because it *has a person in it*. More on that in the next section.

When choosing fonts – don’t use anything that comes installed on your computer. Search through hundreds of fonts, on sites like [DaFont.com](http://DaFont.com) or [MyFonts.com](http://MyFonts.com). You can get a free one, but a paid one will be less used. You can make your font unique by hiring a designer to tweak it, for example the Twilight fonts which have extended letters (l, n, p, k) which are suggestive of fangs, knives,

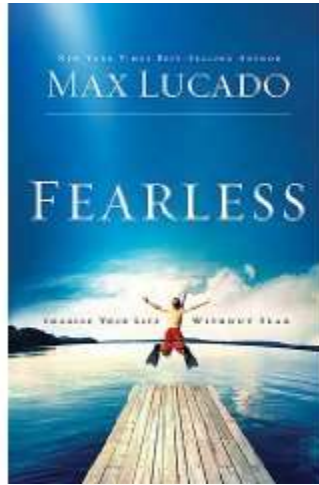
danger. You can also get a custom font made, if you need a truly 1-of-a-kind, brandable font for a huge publishing phenomenon (like Harry Potter).



If you use a fancy font, stick with just one, and make the rest of the fonts clean and simple. (See how widely spaced “Stephanie Meyer” is? She could have made her author name much bigger, but it works better this way).

## 6. Make it personal (but not cheesy)

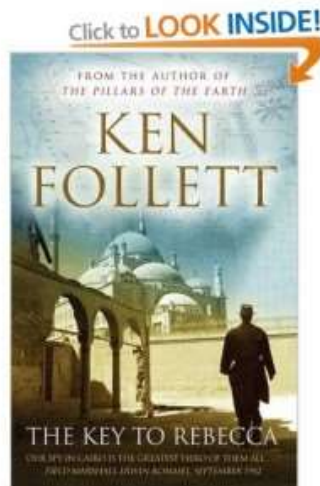
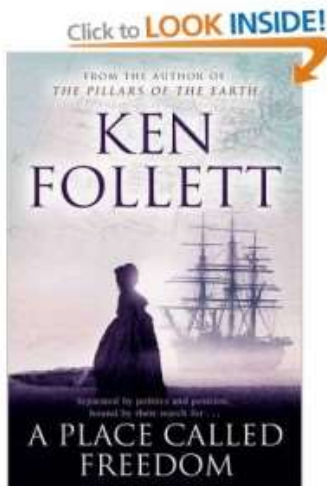
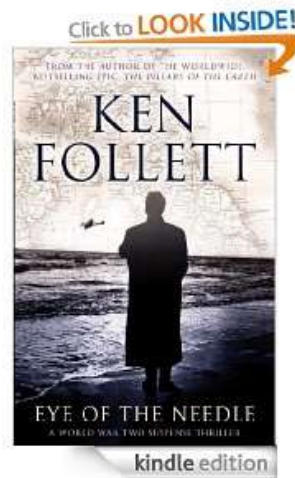
As I pointed out above about the *Deeply Odd* cover, **people sell**. Having a person on/in the cover creates intrigue and interest. But only if done right.



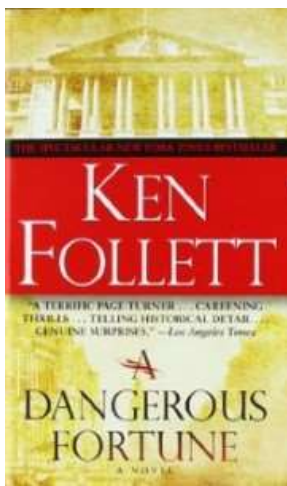
For  
imagine this

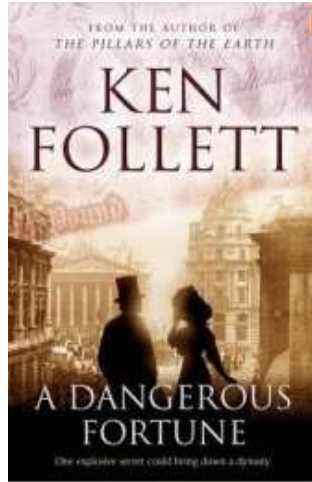
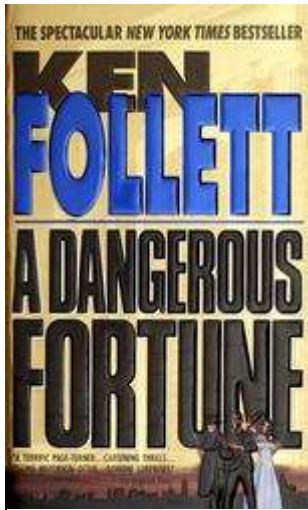
example,  
picture

(*Fearless*) without the guy in the center. It would totally change the cover, and make it a little boring. The boy adds adventure, focus, not to mention much needed color contrast (red on blue). Adding a person from the back (like the *Odd* covers) is fine—usually better—as it allows readers to form their own mental images of the characters. **But avoid total silhouettes.** A lot of indie authors are using them because they are easy, and it's really hard to find the right pose otherwise, but they are usually cheesy. An exception is Ken Follett's covers (the new ones), but even here they have some details and a bit of light overlay.



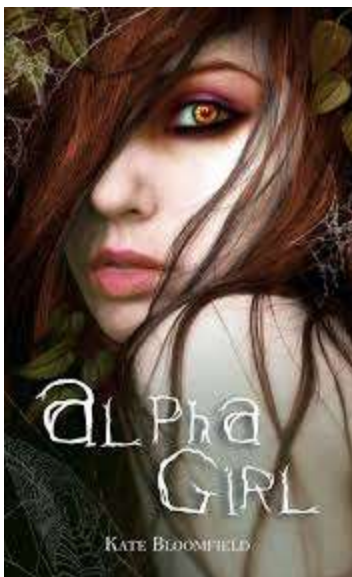
By the way, check out how the new cover for *Dangerous Fortune* compared to earlier versions. (Softer, more subtle, and much more intrigue with the characters, which also helps tell readers the time period.)





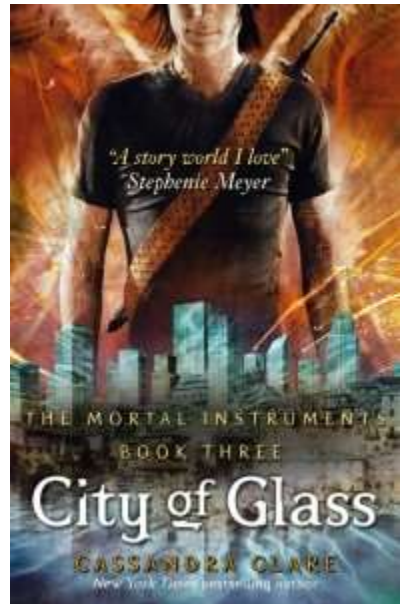
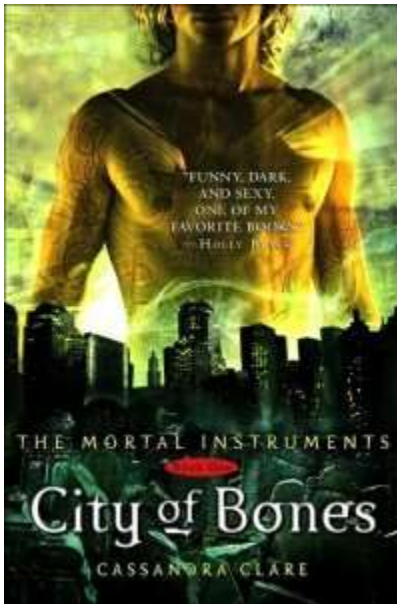
there's a good chance it will be used on another cover. (The better the picture, the more covers it will show up on). You can avoid this by getting a friend to pose or hiring a model off craigslist for a quick photoshoot, but generally, stock photos will be better quality.

Super close up of faces can be really powerful too, but if you find them on a stock photography site,





In these two covers, I love the girl in *Alpha* although I don't think the font is ideal. Also the author name is squished together needlessly. Requiem is a little boring but clean; although it doesn't tell me enough about the book. Both could have used a teaser. You can also cut off the top half of the head (or just use the top half/eyes) so that the model isn't as instantly recognizable.



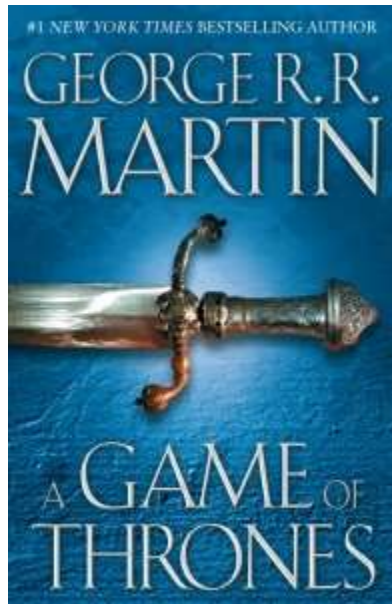
Cassandra Clare's covers are much loved... note the color contrast. The *City of Bones* cover is colorful but didn't have any contrast, so they add that little red circle! *City of Glass* already has the orange/teal contrast so they didn't need it. Both covers use exciting light-stream overlays to give them that magical bursting effect. Putting a character on top and a city on the bottom is a good (and common) balance for layout. *City of Glass* had to use a stronger dropshadow, because the author name and subtitle weren't standing out enough. They both use reviews instead of blurbs. The source is larger and clearer for the one by Stephanie Meyer because she's

more famous (the first one, by Holly Black, is smaller and a little hard to read).

Note: It's been pointed out that these covers are super busy – these are YA titles, which tend to sell well, and are colorful/busy/exciting to attract young readers. An adult thriller or law novel would be stark, simple—but still clean and stylish.

## 7. If it's too hard, go simple

It's a mistake to try and fit everything in. I'm working on some covers right now with two characters, and all the details (hair color, eyes, clothes, expression, weapons, decorations, etc) have to be just right. After weeks of work and hiring an illustrator from Russia to hand-draw some elements I can't make in Photoshop, it's getting pretty close to a decent cover. But it's way too much work and something simple probably would have been just as good, or better. If it's fantasy or paranormal, or epic, or just so huge it can't be well defined, go simple. Busy covers take more work and rarely outsell simple covers. If you're dealing with a lot of little details to make sure they match the book precisely, it's too complex already. You'd have to hire an illustrator or make a whole bunch of changes in Photoshop, and the result won't look natural. Even if it all turns out pretty good, you probably could have published earlier with a simpler cover.



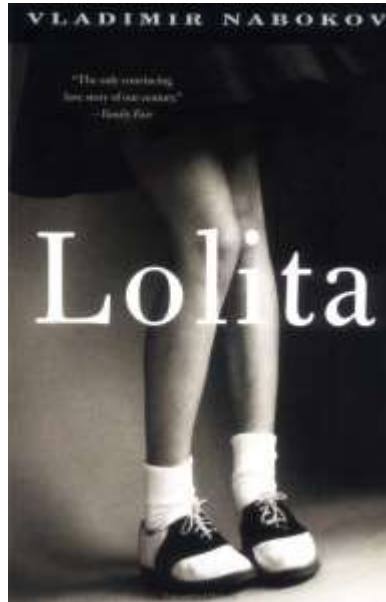
## 8. A little more on text placement

Try to fit the text/words together in a balanced way. Usually small words like “the, in, of, and, by...” can be italicized, lower case, and made small to fit between larger text better (example: *The Help*).

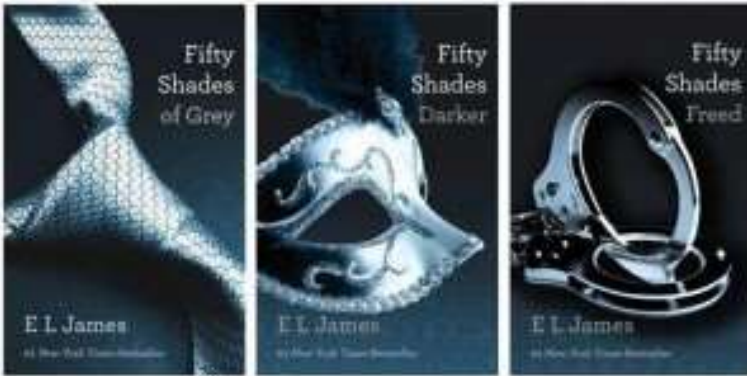




Try to add the text in a way that you don't need any drop shadow or glow – so that the text stands out naturally against the background (example: *Lolita*). Nabokov also has his author name on top, which makes the cover seem upside down or top heavy (perhaps symbolic of the fragile and perverse relationship in the book?)



Unique text placement can be a form of branding (example: *Shades of Grey*). I don't love the *Shades of Grey* covers, but they chose to use very simple, minimal fonts and a unique layout (title aligned top right, the rest aligned bottom left) to create a distinctive style. The diagonal layout makes room for the strong images and creates a moving interplay (symbolic of the submission/mastery in the books?)



## 5 COMMON BOOK COVER DESIGN MYTHS MOST INDIE AUTHORS BELIEVE

I've been designing covers for a few years, and I often have to confront cover design myths perpetuated by indie-publishing gurus and thought leaders.

There's a lot of advice out there for indie authors, and some of it is contradictory, which has the unfortunate effect of allowing indie authors to accept the advice they like and agree with, and ignore the stuff they don't want to think about.

My views on book cover design aren't in sync with the general pulse of the indie publishing community – but keep in mind that:

1. most of the indie publishing community are not book designers
2. most self-published books have pretty awful book covers

3. an extremely small percentage of indie authors are actually making a living

I feel like I'm battling a hydra (multi-headed dragon whose heads grow back) as I constantly deal with new authors over the same issues, so I thought I'd bust a few myths and possibly change some paradigms.

**So here are some things I think most indie authors secretly believe about book cover design, and why they're totally wrong.**

## 1. The book cover doesn't matter

Everybody in the self-publishing industry keeps saying how important book cover design really is, but it's one piece of advice that authors are quick to dismiss. Sure, they think, I know the book cover is important. But I don't want to spend a lot of money right now. I'll just hire someone cheap. Or I'll make it myself. It just has to be good enough – the story is what's really important. And after I'm successful, I can afford a better cover.

**Why it's wrong:** packaging is everything. Authors approach me every day, saying how hard they've been marketing and pushing their books everywhere, and it's all so difficult, and they don't know what they should do. If you have an ugly, homemade cover, everything you do to promote your book is a waste of time. You may be successful if you work hard enough, long enough, and if your story is good enough. But you're shooting yourself in the foot and then going to the ball naked. Nobody is going to ask you to dance.

Note: if it isn't the cover, then you don't have enough reviews. If you have enough reviews and a great cover, and it's still not selling, it's probably your story. Which means – *even* if you buy an amazing cover, your book will still fail if it's poorly written, or nobody is interested in it. You can't sell something people don't want to read.

## 2. The cover I made is great. Everybody says so.

I'm not against [DIY book covers](#). I'm all for indie authors saving money and taking control. The problem is, most indie authors have a terrible sense of design, and make their cover according to their emotional whims and flights of fancy, rather than what sells. Authors tell me all the time "I'm a writer, not a designer" but then take control of the process, tell me exactly what they want me to make, and ignore my protestations.

You may be pretty proud of what you were able to accomplish in publisher or gimp. But it's probably not good enough. Don't ask your friends or family: they will lie to you to spare your feelings. Paying someone \$5 on [fiverr.com](#) will probably result in a better cover than one you've made yourself. You can't trust your own judgment. Even (or especially) if you love the cover, it may not sell well. Get a damn good designer and trust them, or find a few friends who have thousands of Facebook followers and ask them to post your cover for some really critical feedback. (If you still think your cover is awesome, [make sure you're not making these mistakes.](#))

Note: I made my own cover for my first self-published book 10 years ago. I spent months. I agonized and obsessed over every detail. I kept asking my friends and family for reaffirmation, excited and glowing. It was busy and hideous. I redid it and made a slight less ugly (but still terrible) new edition. After designing almost a thousand book covers, I'm *beginning* to think I know what I'm doing.

## 3. The title needs to be legible as a thumbnail

I hear this one all the time: "the title font or subtitle or author name can't be read easily as a thumbnail. And nobody will buy the book if they can't read it immediately from the thumbnail size." It's bogus. Next time you're on Amazon browsing books, notice your own behavior. If you see a book that looks interesting, do you squint and read all the tiny text on the thumbnail, or do you read the big, clear text right under the cover?

Take a look at these bestselling book covers – you can't make out the title in all of them. You can't read the author name in all of them. And you don't need to, because that info is **right there** staring you in the face. What you *can* tell, immediately, even at thumbnail size, is that these are all stylish, high quality, well designed book



Brooke: An Under the Never Sky Story  
Veronica Rossi  
Kindle Edition  
\$4.99



Ruins (Partials)  
Dan Wells  
Kindle Edition  
\$11.99



Willow (Blood Vine Series)  
Amy Richie  
★★★★★ (74)  
Kindle Edition  
\$3.99



World After  
Susan Ee  
Kindle Edition  
\$5.99



Shadow Tag  
Marjorie Doering  
★★★★★ (2)  
Kindle Edition  
\$6.99

covers.

Focus on the design, the colors, the arrangement. You want your cover (even as a thumbnail) to make an emotional statement that resonates with readers. The text doesn't matter, as long as it looks well designed. If it looks good, they'll click on it, and then they get to see the full cover in all its majesty.

Don't screw up a cover design by trying to make the thumbnail legible. Indie authors mess this up by using huge text, which is OK in some genres, like thriller, but not in all. And small text can be nice too).

What this advice really boils down to is, don't make rookie design mistakes that are obvious even in thumbnail view, like using too much dropshadow or bevel, or using boring common fonts, or crowding the text, or clashing colors, or poorly Photoshopped elements, or putting dark red text on a black background. *Design matters. Text legibility doesn't.*

Note: Some readers have pointed out this isn't true for some mobile devices, which only show the thumbnail. However, I counter that people still click on the thumbnails if they want more information. You don't *want* them to be able to read everything, shrug and move on. You want them to say "Huh, what's that?" and click your thumbnail so they can actually learn more about the book.

Thumbnails get clicked based on design, colors and emotions – not because of the book’s title or author (unless they are pre-known to the reader).

#### 4. Amazon knows best (size and previewer)

Amazon recommends a 1.6 ratio – the same ratio as a 5"x8" book. So if you designed a cover for 5"x8", you'd be done. But most of my authors are choosing 6"x9" books, which is a 1.5 ratio. Often, they want to switch and follow Amazon's guidelines, because certainly "Amazon knows best."

Personally, I think Amazon's preferred ratio is too tall and thin, and a ratio of 1.5 looks more like a traditional book to me. My guess is Amazon wants books to look good on smartphones, especially iPhones, and the deviously tricky iPhone5, which has a very tall, narrow screen.

Maybe Amazon is expecting all digital devices to copy the iPhone 5, but that's probably not going to happen. Maybe they are pushing to get people reading on their smartphones instead of Kindles devices, because millions and millions of people use only their smartphone and will not buy a digital book reader.



But for the people who do have Kindles and other e-reading devices, Amazon's preferred 1.6 ratio is an ill-fit, leaving too much space on the sides. And even on cell phones, where the display size is already pretty small, the 1.6 ratio has drawbacks: to fit in the extra height, the book cover displays *even smaller*, making the text more difficult to read.

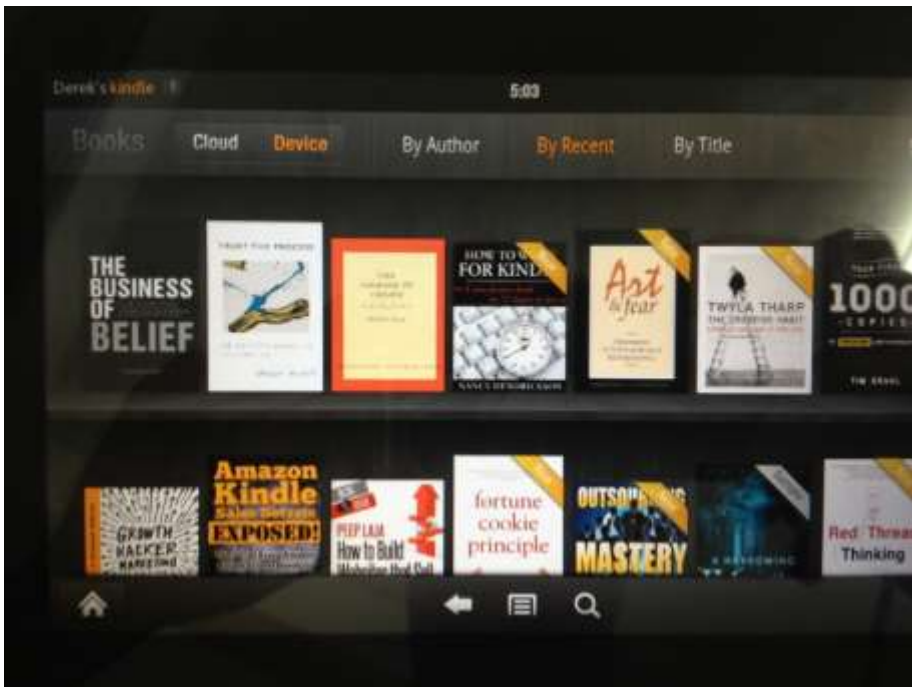
This is probably why **most traditional publishers and major bestsellers** ignore *Amazon's recommended ratio*.

1.5, or even wider, almost square-shaped covers, are far more common.

Interestingly it seems self-published and indie books are more likely to use Amazon's 1.6 standards, because they are concerned with doing everything just right, and have less confidence to ignore recommendations.

This paradoxically means self-publishing authors are making their books appear self-published by following rather than flouting Amazon's advice. **And it really doesn't matter!**

Amazon's recommended book cover ratio doesn't really matter at all, because *Amazon is not the only player* in the ebook publishing wars. This means that all devices need to be able to handle all different kinds of books. So what you actually see on ebook readers is that they automatically adjust to display covers of a variety of sizes and ratios.



In this picture, the 2nd book “Trust the Process” which is one of the *thinnest book* on my Kindle, is still not quite as thin as a 1.6 ratio. “The Business of Belief” is probably 1.5, and most of the others look even more box-shaped, and may be 1.4 or so.

The other issue that gets brought up all the time is “Createspace’s cover previewer flagged issues with my book.” If you’re uploading a PDF, either for the POD book cover or interior, Createspace has an instant preview tool, which can be pretty useful, although I also think it’s overly sensitive.

It can help flag issues, but you won’t really know how the book looks until you print it out. I often have to tell authors to just ignore the tool and print the book, so they can see that everything looks OK.

I especially hate that Createspace’s guidelines prohibit text elements going off the margins. So for example, if you have an elegant, curly font, it will almost never fit on the spine because Createspace demands unreasonable spine margins, so you have to



make the spine title very small or change the font (or cut off the text, which is ugly).

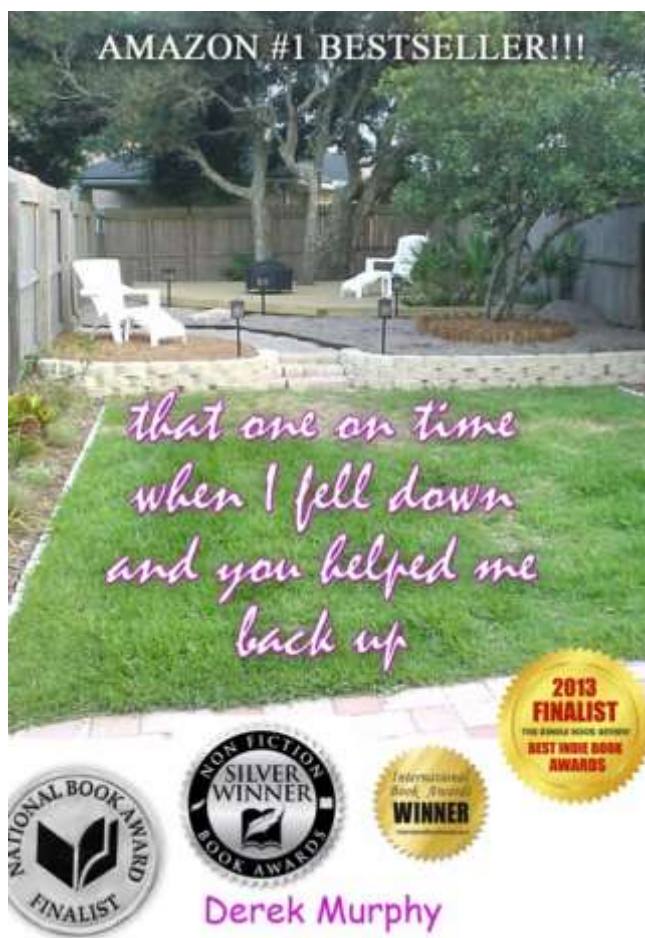


The previewer can be helpful, but it's just a machine. You should also be aware that KDP's Look Inside feature or previewer doesn't work that well, and won't show the ebook styles accurately.

## 5. "Award Winning" or "Bestselling" on a cover

You've chosen an obscure Amazon category and got 10 of your friends to buy it at the same time, and it was #1 in that category for 5 minutes. So why not just write "Bestseller"? Because of **the law of disappointed expectations**. If you have a plain, unpretentious book cover, people won't expect that much. Which means they will be pleasantly surprised, leading to more shares and a higher review. On the other hand, the more you "sell" it with false pretenses like "BESTSELLER", the more critically and harshly they will read (higher expectations are harder to meet) so you'll get less positive reviews and shares.

Readers are also becoming more savvy to the ploys of desperate indie authors. Don't oversell your book. Let readers discover it for themselves. "Bestseller" doesn't mean much, until you can back it up with real data, like "4 weeks on the NY Times best-selling list." Even then, it may do more harm than good. Reader reviews count the most, and you'll get more positive ones by soft-selling. Below is a deliberately ugly book cover I made to illustrate *what not to do*.



The same goes for awards – however: awards contests can be good to enter, as they can mean extra visibility for your book. And some of them are quite well known and even prestigious. If you win an award (first place...I probably wouldn't brag about getting 2nd place, finalist or runner-up) you may want to add it to your book. But unfortunately, most book award seals and logos are very likely to clash with and destroy your cover design. Book award seals can interrupt the emotional connection your cover is trying to make. It's in the way, which means its killing the sale.

It's much nicer to add WINNER OF THE SUPER-EXCELLENT BOOK AWARD across the top or across the bottom,

above or below the author name, in very small text. But unless it's a pretty well-known award, and unless you won first place, I don't think it's likely to drive sales. If it wasn't the *deciding factor*, as in they were just about to click away when they saw it and decided to buy, I wouldn't use it.

A blurb, book review or a well written teaser will mostly likely drive more sales than a "Book Award Winner" notice.

# BOOK COVER CLICHÉS: WHY USING THEM WILL ACTUALLY HELP YOU SELL MORE BOOKS

Recently I've seen some articles circulating about "Book Cover Clichés" which put a handful of book cover designs from the same genre together to point out the similarities. The point of such articles, I infer, is to shame those cover designers who went for the easy, the obvious, the "cliché" designs instead of trying to make something more unique and original.



However, these articles are founded on a false presumption – that book covers should be totally new and unexpected – which is downright dangerous and misleading for indie authors who don't understand the purpose of book design.

## What does a book cover actually do?

A good book cover needs to grab attention immediately, be striking, beautiful, clean and professionally made, **but also** let readers know instantly the basic genre. They'll also often convey the

geographical locations and main character's age and sex. So besides looking good, the most effective (and hence most used) book cover layouts will have a main character, not necessarily showing the face, with some famous city or landscape behind them.

Then, to make sure readers know the genre immediately, they will use fonts and colors that match the general design standards for that genre. An effective book cover will also be similar to other best-selling books in the genre. Not identical, but “sort of like” some other well performing books in the genre, so that readers will identify your book with other books that they liked and sub-consciously think, “This book kind of reminds me of those other books in this genre I liked... I guess I'll buy it to see if I like it.”

That's what a *successful book cover* does.

## Why genre cover designs are all similar

So it should be expected that all genre covers will look pretty much the same. All European thrillers will have big bold dirty fonts, a European city and probably somebody running. Maybe a gun.

All hard-boiled LA detective novels will probably have palm trees, a gun and some blood. All chick lit will be light blue or pink or purple and have curly fonts and feel cute and simple. All vampire romances will have sharp, gothic fonts and be mostly red and black.

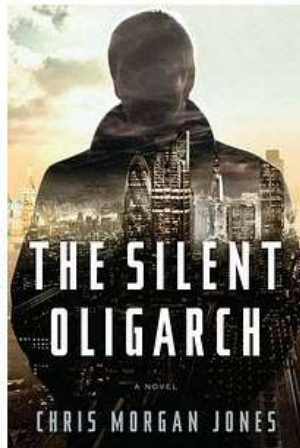
This doesn't make them a cliché, at all. Sure when you put a few carefully selected ones side by side, there will be (and should be) more similarities than differences. Just like, if you're walking down the aisle at the supermarket you'll recognize the cereal boxes because, even though they are all totally different, they also all kind of look just the same. You know what they contain. You know you're in the right section. So you stop and turn the box over to read the details.

Human beings have specific emotional responses to various colors. When we see red we feel stress – it heightens our fight or flight. Perfect for thrillers.

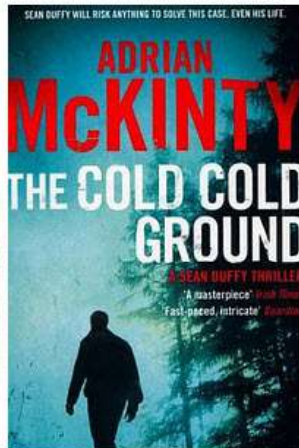
## 1. Scary silhouette man.



amazon.co.uk



amazon.co.uk



amazon.co.uk

If you're writing a book about magicians or people who wear hoods and you put a character on the cover, of course they are going to look like this:

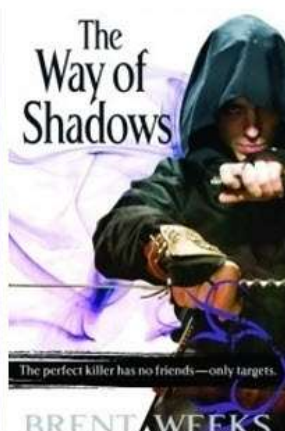
## 8. Bloke wearing hood and carrying sword.



thebooksmugglers.com



thebooksmugglers.com



thebooksmugglers.com

thebooksmugglers.com

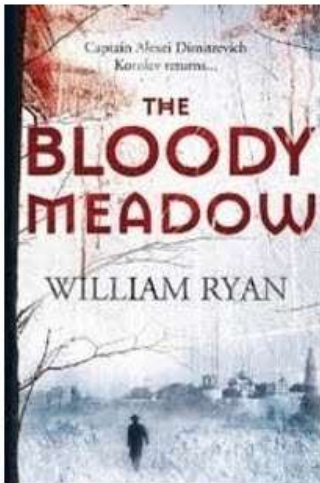
thebooksmugglers.com

thebooksmugglers.com

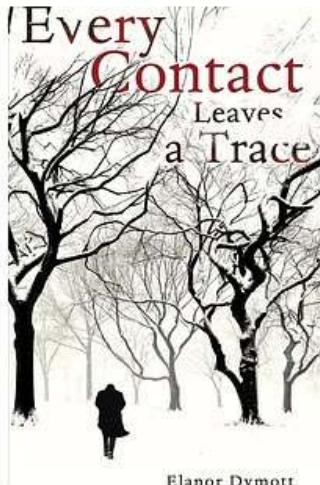


If you want a sense of space and mystery, adding a little silhouette man is an easy way to achieve it (I try to avoid this one, but it continues to be effective for most authors in the genre).

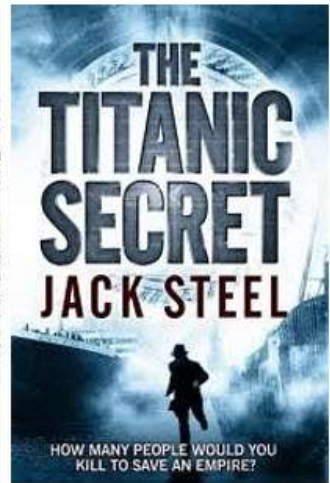
## 10. Shadowy man walking into the distance.



[timescolumns.typepad.com](http://timescolumns.typepad.com)



[timescolumns.typepad.com](http://timescolumns.typepad.com)



[timescolumns.typepad.com](http://timescolumns.typepad.com)

I don't even think these vampire covers have much in common (no obvious fangs for example), and I hate the "Bleeding Cowboys" font in the middle because it's so overused. But they do the trick. You can guess where they belong.

### 13. Lots of black and red. Gothic font.



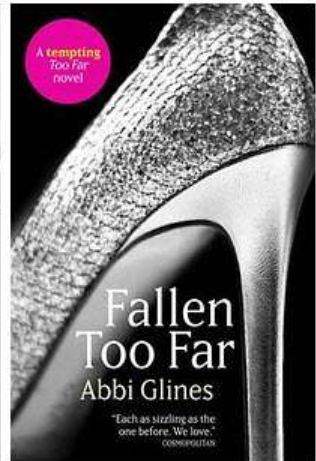
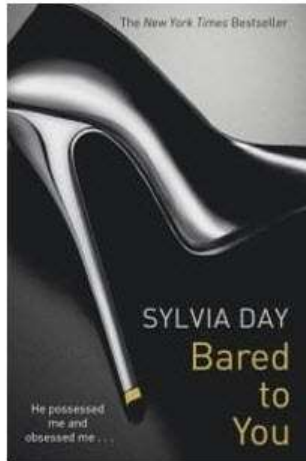
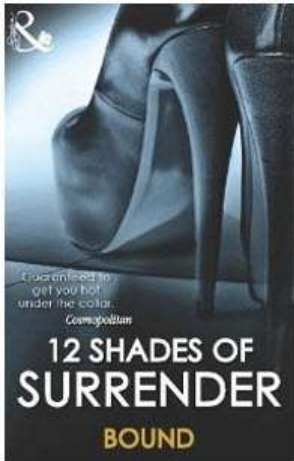
**Must be a:** *Twilight wannabe.*

**Free tip:** if you have the specific topic word included in the title or subtitle, you can safely remove it from the book cover. The cover design and the title work together to give all the necessary information to readers, without them needing to read the description to find out more. So the third book here, it's hard to even tell they are vampires, but it's OK because that's in the title. Same with the first and second books, which have "Vampire" in the subtitles. If that were missing, I would say these books aren't being obvious enough, because we wouldn't know just from the art what the genre was.

These are obvious "Shades of Gray" ripoffs... on the other hand gray has been the color of corporate thrillers for a long time. If you're writing a book about a woman in a corporate environment, possibly with some thriller or erotic elements, it should look something like these:

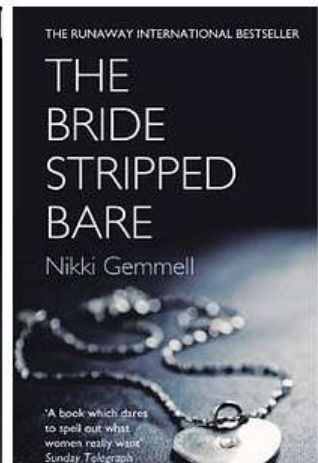
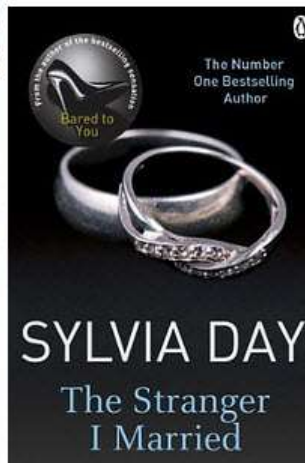
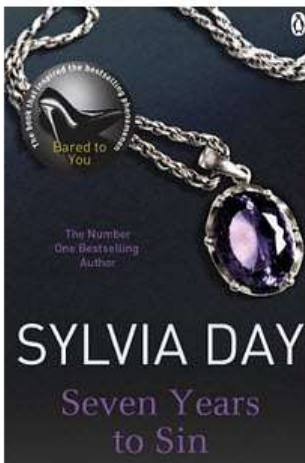


## 15. High heels, muted tones.



**Must be a:** Shameless *Fifty Shades of Grey* rip-off.

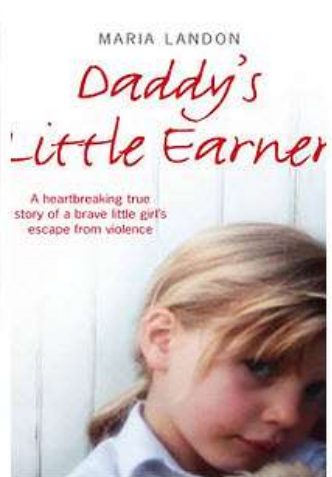
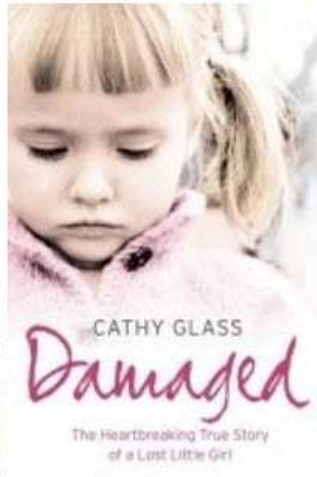
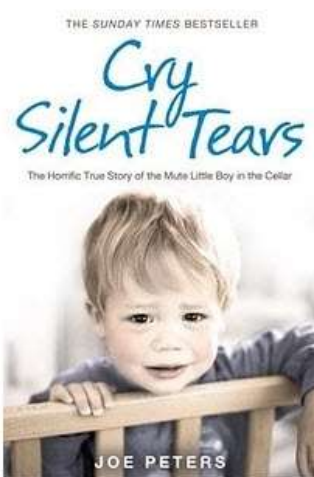
## 16. Jewellery, muted tones.



**Must be a:** Same again, but with more romance, less bondage.

Same with these: a story about a young child. What are you going to put on the cover? Why would you do anything else?

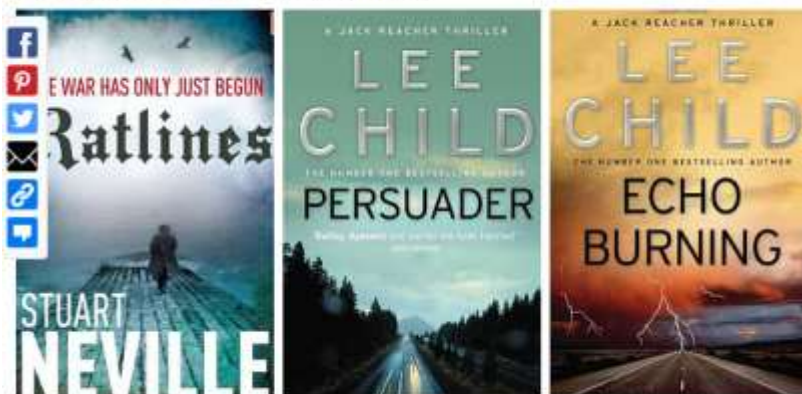
## 17. Child's sad face, handwriting-style font.



**Must be a:** Misery memoir, supposedly based on real life.

I have problems with the following one: yes there are a lot of spooky roads to nowhere, because it's a good, powerful image full of symbolism. But the first book has very little in common with the other two; and the other two are from the same author so OF COURSE they should be identical. That's not cliché at all, it's branding!

## 18. Spooky road to nowhere.



**Must be a:** No-nonsense page-turner, for which the film rights have almost certainly already been sold

## Defy design standards at your own risk

Let's say you read some articles about book cover clichés and decide "I don't want to be a cliché!" so you ask your designer to deliberately avoid all standard book cover design conventions.

Let's say you're writing a Western Romance but you don't want any curly, decorative fonts, or cowboy fonts, or cowboys, horses or sunsets, or couples kissing, or women in old fashioned dresses, or sunsets, or anything that gave away the genre. You wanted it to be "a surprise" rather than a cliché.

### What would happen?

The book cover lets readers know the genre, and if they are interested they will read the description and reviews, and maybe buy the book. But if your book cover fails its **#1 task** – to communicate the genre – the precise readers you are after will ignore the cover because it isn't hitting the right buttons.

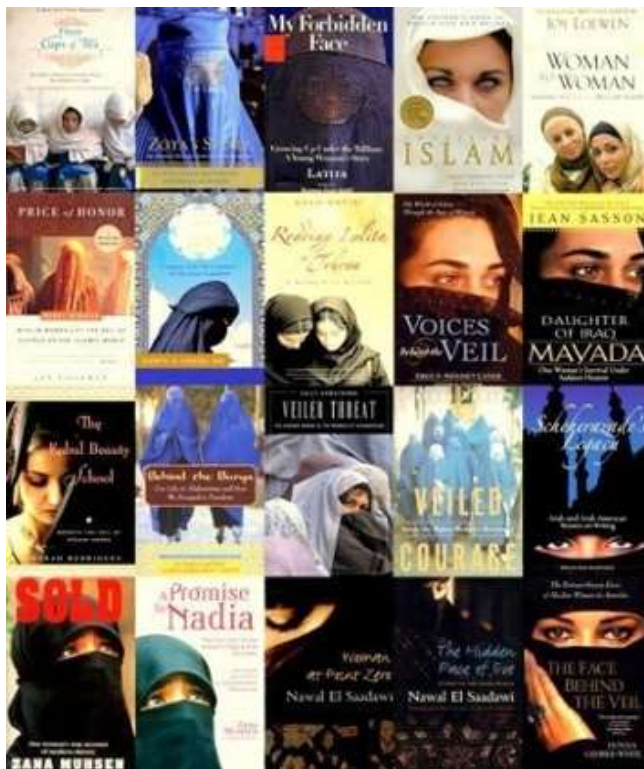
They are looking for Western Romances. Your book doesn't look like a Western Romance. They will probably never click on your

cover and read the description because you didn't get them past the first phase.

*Better to be a cliché than to be a failure.*

Incidentally, I've played this scenario out a dozen times with clients. They want something simple, suggestive, symbolic. I tell them to choose something obvious. A powerful, beautiful picture that hits all the right genre buttons. They insist, we finish the cover, six months later they decide they are frustrated with their low sales and they give me permission to redo the cover and make the design that will sell the best.

Are my book covers clichés? Probably. They also sell a lot of copies. For one project about a middle-eastern themed book, I forwarded this picture, which I'd saved for this article, to see whether there were any basic fonts or layouts we could use to get started, which would save a lot of time (the alternative would be for me to make 10 different layouts/cover designs choosing pictures and fonts that are appropriate for the genre, but they would have looked a lot like these.)



The person in charge of the project wrote back pointing out (rightly) that the image came from an article about book cover clichés; recommending that we start from the clichés must have seemed unprofessional, even ridiculous to him (shouldn't professional cover designers avoid clichés?).

Actually, the covers above don't have that much in common. Some are all black, some all-white and yellow. The fonts are mostly boring serif or sans serif, a few in script fonts. Most of them have some type of veiled woman on the cover, but most of them are *about Muslim women*. Imagine starting a book cover design that needs to convey the book is about a Muslim woman. Should you go for the obvious and include a veiled woman, or do something symbolic that could be about anything, or any genre?

I could easily design a ton of samples with a whole bunch of different fonts and pictures until we figure out what kind of style the author wants, but it's a big waste of time if the author could just decide first if they want a light or dark cover, or whether to use a serif or script font, by looking at what other book covers in the genre have done.

Turning your nose up at book cover clichés is like scoffing at *The DaVinci Code* because it was poorly written or because he mixed so many bad clichés into his writing. Did those impede the book's success? No. Having a cover design that fits the genre will not only boost sales, it's *necessary for commercial success*.

Take a look at these movie posters for example:

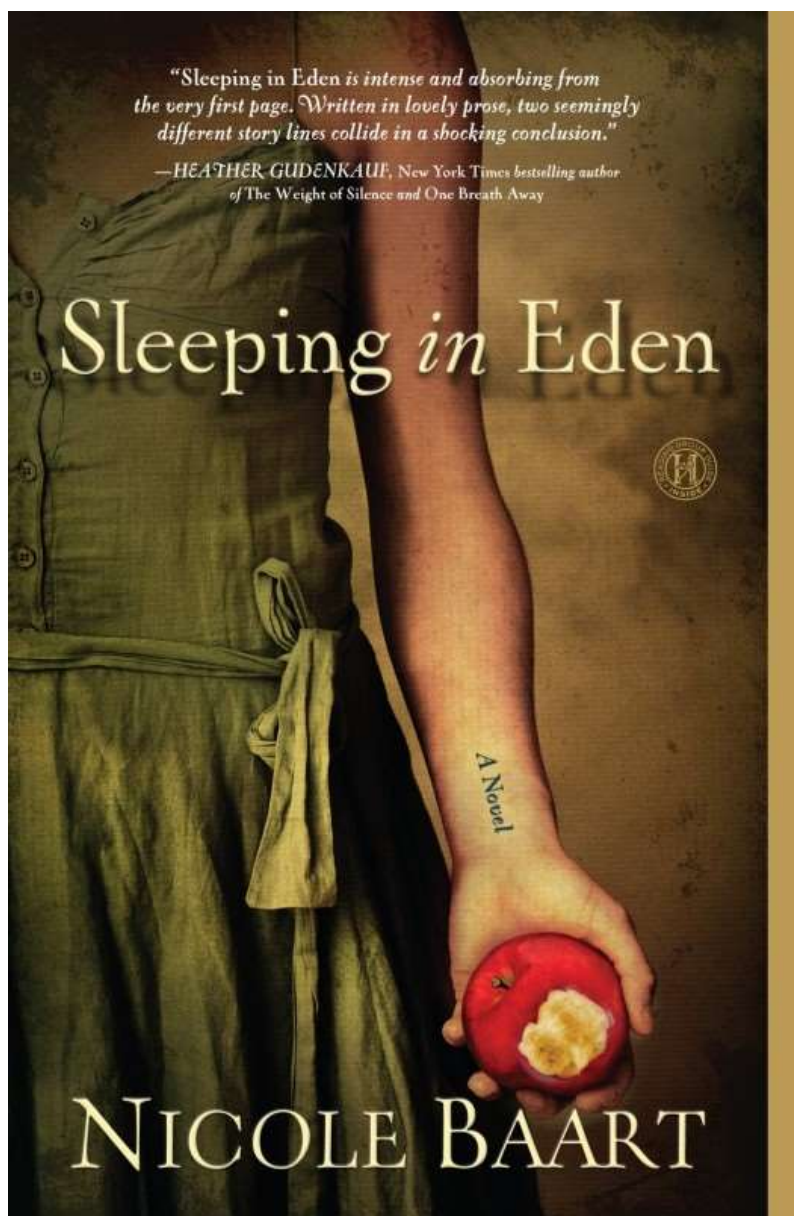




## The Obvious Idea

Let's say you're writing a book about Adam and Eve, or the Fall, or Satan's Temptation, or Forbidden Sin, or Fallen Angels, or the Garden of Eden. You want one powerful symbol that will represent the subject.

The obvious idea is going to be a bitten apple. The symbol is so well known it's immediate. You could try to avoid it and think of something "clever" – but it's dangerous to use a symbol that readers won't understand until after they've finished the book (if they don't get the symbol before they've read the book, it's meaningless to them, so you'll probably lose the sale.)



Luckily there are hundreds of paintings that feature Adam and Eve, the garden, and hundreds of stock photos that feature a bitten apple. It's easy to find one that isn't being used. You can add appropriate fonts and colors for the genre, and make a completely unique and beautiful book cover design.



**The Easiness or Obviousness of the idea does not mar the impact of the book cover!** There are only a few genres, for example a book about Creativity, or some general non-fiction books on business, that need a “clever” book cover design. This is usually because, while fiction books are about setting, characters and emotion that appeal to the heart (which can be achieved with pictures and colors) non-fiction books are about ideas that appeal to the head.

So for some non-fiction, you need a clever, non-obvious juxtaposition of things that represents your topic. It grabs attention by “shocking” or “confusing” the reader, who wants to take a second look so they can “figure it out.” But this won’t work for fiction – don’t try and make your readers “figure out” your cover. If they don’t get it, if it doesn’t hook *immediately*, without consideration, in less than 1 second, it’s a failure. It works in non-fiction because you’re usually using a simple background and 2 very simple objects merged together in a new way.

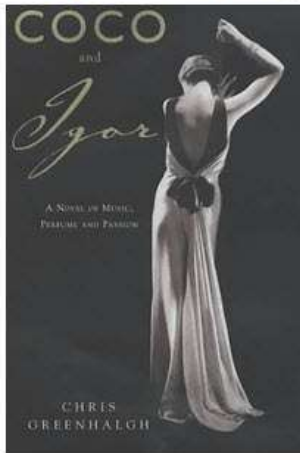
Even so, I could easily put a few dozen of the best-selling nonfiction books side-by-side, and although they all have clever and unique central ideas, the fonts and colors and layouts would be nearly identical. Clever and non-obvious cover design choices are actually *the genre standard for those types of books*, so even though they may seem clever and brilliant, they are adhering to the design standards rather than avoiding them.

## Cliché vs. identical

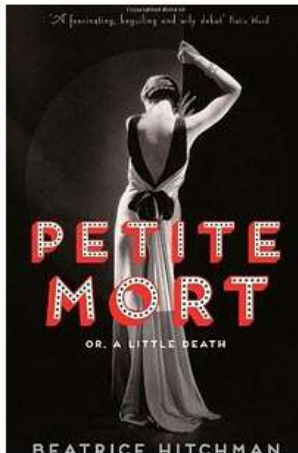
So your book cover *should look like* a bunch of other covers in your genre. It should “Fit in” with the others and it will probably be very similar to 4 or 5 (out of thousands in your genre). That’s no big deal. However some of the articles talking about book cover clichés are actually talking about using the same stock photography – and that’s a totally different issue.

This Buzzfeed list for example has [19 “Book Cover clichés”](#) but most of them aren’t clichés at all – they are just using the same image.

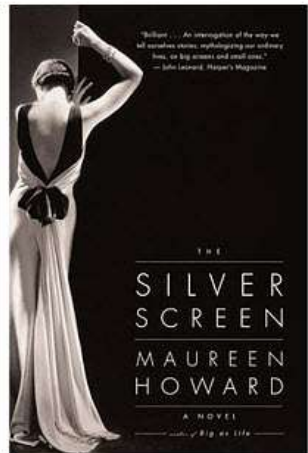
### 5. Woman in long backless dress.



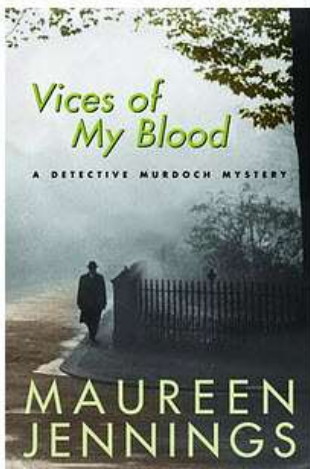
[causticcovercritic.blogspot.co.uk](http://causticcovercritic.blogspot.co.uk)



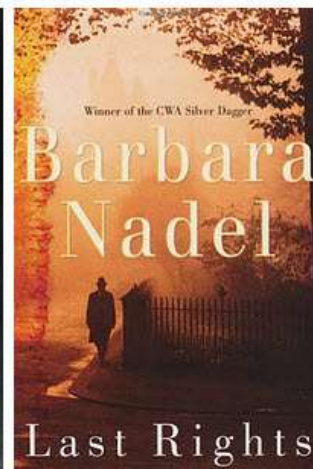
[causticcovercritic.blogspot.co.uk](http://causticcovercritic.blogspot.co.uk)



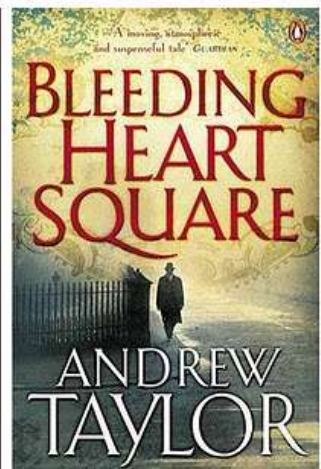
### 3. Man lurking by fence.



[causticcovercritic.blogspot.co.uk](http://causticcovercritic.blogspot.co.uk)



[causticcovercritic.blogspot.co.uk](http://causticcovercritic.blogspot.co.uk)



[causticcovercritic.blogspot.co.uk](http://causticcovercritic.blogspot.co.uk)

Everybody is using stock photography – even major publishers. Duplicates can't be avoided entirely and they aren't as much a big deal as you think they are. If you find a perfect, beautiful picture, there's a good chance someone else is going to use it also.

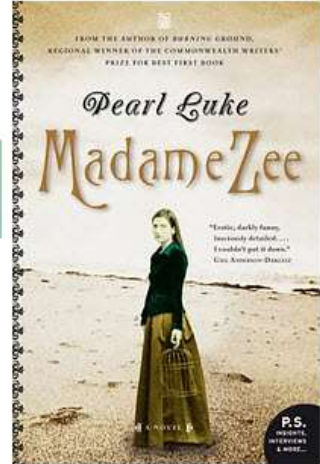
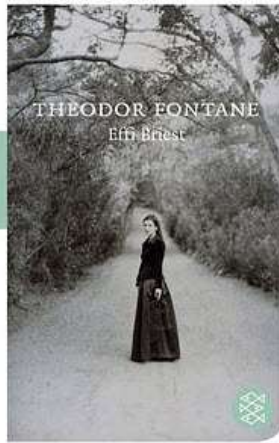
You should scroll through the first 10 pages or so of bestsellers in your genre to make sure nobody is using it already. (If they are using it in another genre, it's not a major problem, but you don't really want your cover to show up right next to another cover with the same photo).

However, if somebody used the photo and their book isn't selling well at all, it's probably fine to go ahead and use it, since people won't see their book much. ALSO – that excellent, beautiful picture you want to use may double your sales over the next best alternative, so *even if* a few people say your book cover is cliché or that you “copied” some other book cover design, who cares? Get as many sales as you can, because that's all that matters.

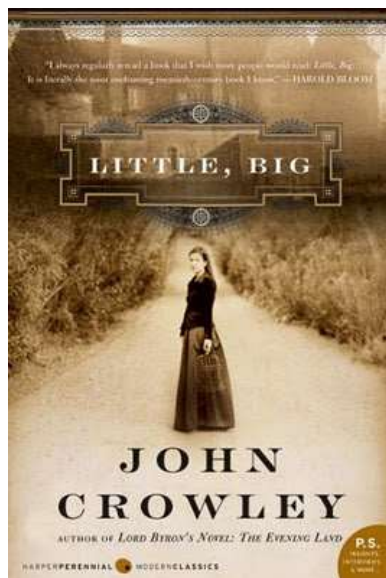
(If you resist this idea because you are defending your honor or integrity or reputation – what's it worth if nobody knows who you are and nobody has ever read your books? That said, of course your cover shouldn't be a clone or look exactly like another cover. But if there are similarities because you started with the same image, it's not the end of the world).

Another example of book cover duplicates from [Caustic Covers](#) features these covers, about 8 in total, all using the same woman with a birdcage.

## 2. Woman holding a birdcage for some reason.



Even though the fonts and style is different, side-by-side it's obvious they are using the same image. But some of them are designed poorly, so the image doesn't really matter. And some (like "Little, Big") are designed so well that it makes the others look bad.



If you are using a picture that other book covers are using, *make sure yours is the best one*. If yours is the most professional, people will subconsciously assume yours was first and the others are bad copies of yours.

If you *were* first, but others came after you, don't assume you were "copied." It's very rare (I'd like to say it never ever happens) that someone else will deliberately copy your book cover and use the same image. But it does happen by accident, and is increasingly common. If somebody uses the same picture, they've probably never seen your book cover before, because you aren't selling well).

*Note: I'm a Boy Scout and I have faith in people... but it seems flat out copying does happen, [like in this example](#).*

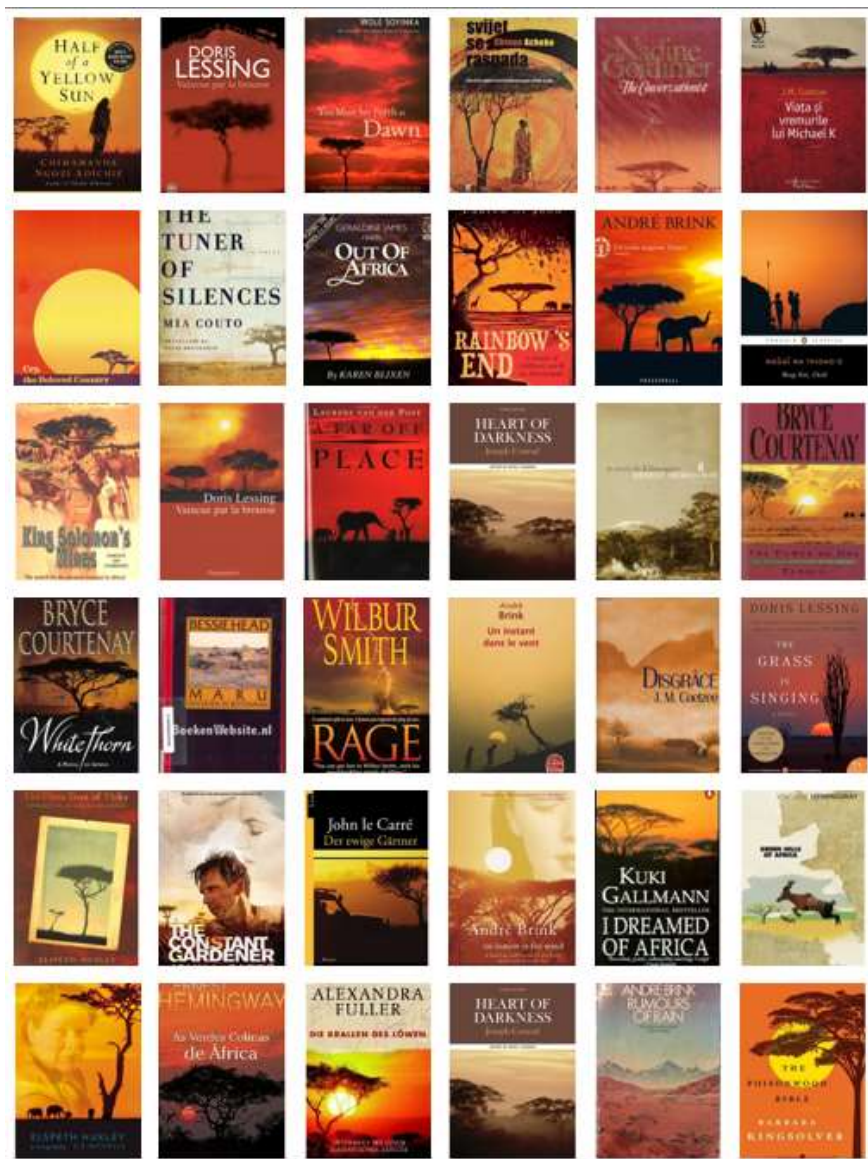
Even so, I would argue, you just need to have the better design and the better book. There's nothing that can be done about someone using the same colors and fonts as you. If they used the same picture as well, you both used a royalty free image. It wasn't very nice of them but ranting about it isn't going to do anybody any good (in fact your rant just means free marketing for them – maybe that's why they did it in the first place, to piss you off so you would share their book for free!)

## Cliché vs. Cultural stereotypes

A similar but vastly more interesting topic is the use of cultural stereotypes in book cover design.

A great article from [Africa A Country](#) pointed out that most book covers for books about Africa involve a sunset or orange sky and an acacia tree.





The reason this is a bigger issue rather than just the topic of design clichés, is that these covers represent (and perpetuate) cultural stereotypes and bias. Readers in the West don't associate Africa with bustling cities or technological development. We picture "The Lion King."



Indeed *The Lion King* might be the only full-feature film the average reader has ever seen about Africa, although even movies like “Blood Diamond” are full of cultural stereotypes.

But if you’re writing a book about Africa, you still need a way to let readers know that the book is about Africa. How do you do that when the average reader doesn’t know anything at all about Africa, couldn’t pick out a single country from the African map, and only has vague ideas about sunsets and acacia trees?

In other words, do you design for what’s real and accurate, or do you match the false stereotypes that readers already have in their heads?

It’s an interesting and complex issue, but you can’t teach people about Africa through an accurate book cover!

All you can do is use their stereotypes to present an “African Cover” that they can recognize, and then use the book itself to teach them and educate them about “The Real Africa.”

## Clichés don't matter

Don't obsess about being different.

DESIGN matters. Make sure yours is amazing and professional. Get feedback, because most authors have a very poor grasp of quality design. If you make your own book cover, you're going to really like it (and that's probably bad for you).

Make sure the cover design, title and subtitle communicate all the information readers need, so they don't have to read the summary to get answers or find out what the book is about. The cover should already make it clear which genre the book is in; the description details are just to push already interested readers over the edge.



# WHY ASKING FOR FEEDBACK ON YOUR BOOK COVER IS MOSTLY USELESS

I tell my book cover clients to get a lot of feedback – especially when they’re starting to commit to an idea I disagree with. Authors can often get too close and personal with their covers; they stare at the options for hours, making decisions, slowly forming a bond that is hard to break. Which means, when they ask for feedback, they are *really asking* for confirmation.

They say, “Which of these do you like? I like this one...” and then continue to explain why their choice is the best choice. 9 times out of 10, the other person will agree with them. But that’s not the only reason getting feedback on your book cover is usually a waste of time. Here are some others:

## 1. Nobody will agree

If you have a large following, you may get hundreds of comments, and rigorously keep track of votes, and find everybody is pretty much split between all your options, or offer even more recommendations that you aren’t prepared to make. So you’ll end up making the decision from your gut anyway, because “it doesn’t matter.”

## 2. You aren't asking your target audience

If you ask your followers or Facebook friends, it isn't likely that those same people are readers of the particular genre. They may not know what books in that genre should look like. They may not find appealing the things you used to appeal to your target readers. Which means all of their feedback and advice is dangerously misguided.

## 3. They approach the cover differently

A buyer on Amazon would glance at the cover for a second, click and glance again at the bigger size, then read the book summary. You're asking people to really consider the cover itself. They'll look at it, think about it, dissect it, criticize it. Of course they will find things they don't like or that could be improved. Their interaction with your cover is very different from the natural interaction of would-be buyers, as such you can't rely on their feedback.

## 4. Aesthetics vs. Function

The most beautiful or "best-looking" cover is not necessarily the winner. The cover's job is to convey the genre and subject immediately to target readers. You want to make an emotional connection (for fiction) and attract readers who would be interested in your genre/subject. If you can't do it all with the pictures, you do it with the title or subtitle by hitting the right keywords.

When you ask people to vote on their favorite cover, they ignore that stuff and vote on the one they think looks the best.

## 5. The limited-set problem

You may be asking friends and followers to choose between a handful of covers. If you have 5 amazing, excellent covers to choose

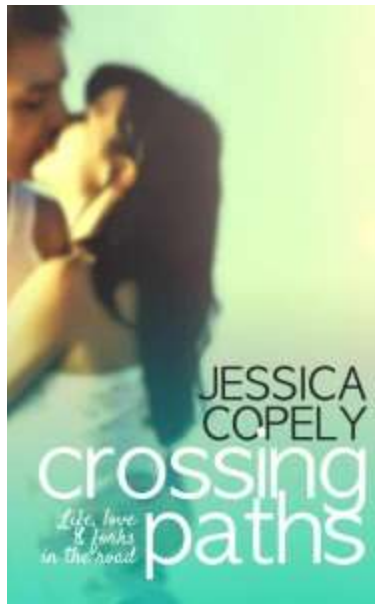
from, any of them would work. But it's more likely you have 5 mediocre covers, and none of them is a great option. If you made them yourself or hired a designer, you'll probably be pretty excited about them already and maybe have your heart set on one (especially if you made it yourself, and have spent hours and hours working on it, you'll get attached).

Feedback on mediocre covers won't lead to a better cover, *unless* you're getting feedback from really brilliant cover designers, who know a lot about using design to sell books.

## Case Study



When the author posted these, she was looking for feedback, and ended up going with the one below, trying to merge the best features. It's very clean and nice, although the pink script font in #4 says "Romance" more clearly, it's still an attractive cover. Sometimes feedback can help and actually result in a better cover, but it doesn't always happen.



## 6. The “expert panel” problem

A lot of authors use their “publishing team” for feedback – which may include their book marketer, small press, proofreader or copyeditor. Or it might just be some “indie publishing experts” who blog about self-publishing. *Sometimes* this works out well – for example a previous client of mine ignored my recommendations, until his team told him he should improve his cover; when he came back to me I just urged him to use the really good one I’d already made, but he hadn’t wanted. He showed it to his team and they loved it.

But a lot of other times, an author gets feedback that is in line with general indie publishing thinking about book cover design (**a lot of which is wrong**). Most editing websites, or author services sites, or small press websites, are ugly and unprofessional. Just because they know something about publishing doesn’t mean they *really know* what kind of covers sell books; and if they can’t get their shit together to make a professional and well-designed website for their

own business, they shouldn't be giving you advice on your book cover. (On the other hand – it's not uncommon to see a great looking website because someone paid to get it designed or are using a nice theme, but the actual covers on the site are crappy.)

It isn't about which cover looks the best – it's about which cover most effectively conveys the essential qualities that readers need to recognize instantly to affect their purchase decision. It's not a game, and it's not a nuanced thing where everybody will have different but equally valid opinions. Different covers will sell a different number of books, and selling more books should always *be your only consideration* when it comes to book design.

“Book cover design by panel consensus” is dangerous territory. Any piece of art worked on by a group of artists will be incongruous and strange. And the real danger (for me at least) is that all my cover designs are pretty good, so if the client chooses one and his team likes it (but recommends some big changes like “make the text bigger and darker and bolder”) everybody will be pretty happy – except me, because my really brilliant work won't get seen, and the author won't sell as many books (two things that are bad for my business).

## So how do you know if your cover is any good?

Despite the limitations raised above, it's still really important to find out whether your book cover is good enough to sell the book.

### **Here's a test you can use:**

Get the covers for 5 other bestselling books in your genre – your direct competition. Try to get the mainstream published ones (they usually have a reasonably good design standard). Some indie book covers are great too, but if you pick out the ones that you like, you don't have a consistent measure or standard for what qualifies as “good design.”

Then, print the covers out along with your book cover, or Photoshop them together. Block out all the author names. Now ask

people to vote on them. Ideally, people will pick your cover over those other books!

But failing that, your cover should at least get picked as a favorite as much as any other cover. If nobody picks your cover, ever, then the others are all much better than yours.

Another way to do it is to use Google or Facebook ads showing the different covers (make each ad with the exact same text, but change the covers). Then just see which get clicked on the most. You can also use “Boosted Posts” – post each cover on Facebook with a short description, with “click if you like this book cover”, then boost the post for \$15. See which one gets liked the most.

You can also try two ads, one with *just text* and no picture, the other with the cover. If the one with the cover gets clicked on *less than* then text only version, then your book cover is killing your sales.

However, you’d really need to get a few hundred clicks before you get reliable data. You can also just use a cover for a few months, and change to another one for a few weeks to see if your sales improve. It’s easy to switch the covers on Kindle.

## When should you ask for feedback

Even though getting feedback from followers or friends may not be useful, it *can* be helpful for reader interaction. People like to be involved. Make sure you narrow it down to 2 or 3 really good choices, then ask for comments and feedback – then boost *that* post for engagement. Asking for feedback on the design is much more effective than doing a “reveal” of the final cover.

Just don’t take the comments and advice too seriously, and if you’re really stuck, email a few high quality book cover designers for their feedback (you can email me too if you want. I’m becoming somewhat of a book cover guru since I publish a lot of research and case studies on how book cover design impacts book sales).

Warning signs that you have an ugly cover:

- You have a lot of good reviews, but sales aren’t as good as you would like.

- When you email people about your book and include the cover, they don't respond (or you get a lot of rejection).
- When you ask people about your cover, they give feedback but you ignore it because "they just don't get it".

It's a difficult situation – what we really need is a "hot or not" style website for book cover design (EDIT – I made one of those, it was fun, but too hard to keep updated, so I let it go and just use a Facebook group now for feedback called "does my cover suck.").

But a book cover makes a *huge impact* on your sales, marketing, reviews and everything else. Don't just pick the one you like. Often getting a designer to make exactly what you have in mind is a terrible idea – because you've mapped out a detailed "scene." Or you've made book cover choices based on your opinions and not market testing or sales data.

Don't assume you're "right" about your book cover design. There is no right. There are only more sales and less sales.

A BETTER COVER WILL SELL MORE BOOKS.

**MORE SALES ARE GOOD FOR YOU**, your book and your author platform.



# IS YOUR BOOK COVER DESIGNER LAZY?

(Stock photography and cover clones/cliches AGAIN)

You always want to fit into a genre and appeal to the style conventions that are being used: you want people to recognize what your book is about. No, they won't say, "Gee that looks interesting, but I have no idea what it's about, I think I'll read the summary."

Recently I saw an article about "The Dangers of Stock Photos on Book Covers." They make some great points:

- If you use stock photography, you may see the same images on other book covers in your genre
- The licenses to use the photos for items for sale are usually more expensive

But they conclude:

Stock photos are cheap, but not appropriate for use on book covers. If you use a stock photo, you'll end up with a less original and impactful cover, you'll be legally and financially vulnerable, and you'll run the risk of your image appearing on a competing book.

Even worse, they say "authors are **victims of unethical or lazy designers** who failed to warn the author about the risks of using stock photos."

Since A) I'm entitled to defend myself from the accusation of being a lazy and unethical designer and B) their book cover advice

will lead authors in the wrong direction, and result in *less book sales*, I thought it appropriate to respond.

The website that posted the article was singling itself out in the book cover world for designing 100% custom book cover art, using no stock photography. It's a smart business move, and putting up stern warnings about the "Dangers of Stock Photography" on book covers is excellent marketing.

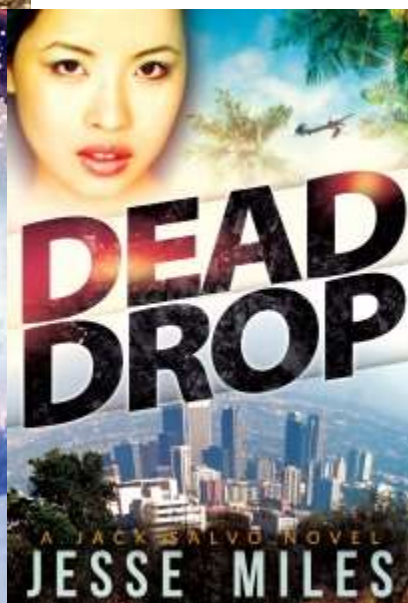
**But here's the other thing:** I've done a plethora of testing and photos sell more books than custom illustration in almost every situation. Being *unique* and different and having an original, one-of-a-kind book cover doesn't mean shit if nobody is buying your book.

Illustration is almost always too busy and not impactful enough. If you've read my views on book cover design, you'll know that fiction covers need to make an immediate emotional connection. This is very difficult to do without photos.

Non-fiction covers need to be simple, clean and usually represent the main idea of the book with a clever juxtaposition of two distinct images in a novel combination. Simple, but striking and extraordinary.

Yes it sucks if somebody else used the exact same model or photo for their book cover; and it does happen A LOT, especially with so many people publishing. It can of course be minimized; if I'm making a vampire book cover, I won't search for stock images of vampires (because there are only 20 or so great ones, and they are going to get used).

Instead I'll look for a model and use Photoshop to turn them into a vampire. I'll almost always change the setting or background, add other pieces, and do a lot of editing. *I build worlds*, not just covers. As an example of what I'm talking about, here are a few things I made recently.





I'm not saying my covers are the best in the world – but they are very *functional*. I use a lot of contrast and bold colors to attract attention, and I make it pretty clear what the book is going to be about and what genre it fits into.

It's true I use mostly stock photography – and that some elements of these covers (especially the Roman guy, there just aren't many good stock photos of Roman-era soldiers for some reason) are bound to be used again by many other books in the same genre.

And that's unfortunate. But what's the alternative? How are you going to portray a Roman-soldier-based novel without photography? What are you going to draw or use to convey the historical time-period? Not only would it be difficult, I'd be willing to bet good money that my stock-photo Roman Soldier will outsell anything else you can come up with.

Because here's the thing – it doesn't really matter what's on the book cover. It has to be good enough, and it has to *do its job* of telling readers what to expect so that they buy and read the book. After that, it's all up to you. Choosing to avoid stock photography because everybody uses it is like choosing not to buy an Apple product for the same reason, and going with something else that

(maybe) isn't nearly as awesome and doesn't do all the things you want it to do.



Here's another cover I made recently. In this case, I chose to use a stock photo – mostly unedited, with nothing added but the text. Am I “lazy and unethical”? I could have cobbled something similar together with bits and pieces, but this artwork is strong and the cover will work pretty well. It doesn't *need* to be more complex.

More work and effort on my part does not guarantee extra sales. You don't want a book cover designer who *works hard*, you want one that will give you the cover art that will sell the most copies – even if it was easy for them to make.

Once this cover is up on Amazon, although it's *possible* that another author or designer will use the same photo, it's unlikely: most (good) designers and (smart) authors will check at least the first 50 or so best-selling books in their genre to make sure they don't use the same images. (EDIT: I wrote this a few years ago – I wouldn't actually do this anymore, I want my covers to be 100% unique so I do heavy photoshopping and won't use a simple stock photo in most cases... however for an author on a budget, using one is usually OK).

Of course out of the tens of thousands of books being published, it's very possible that others will use the same image. But if their sales rank is somewhere over 1 million, *nobody else* is ever going to see their covers. Sure you could dig around and post them side by side, but most of the time readers will never see them side by side and probably won't notice the similarities while browsing.

And even if they do – some stock photography covers look well done and professional, others using the same image look home-made and sloppy. We tend to assume the “real one” is the nicer looking one. So the danger isn't in using stock photography, the danger is getting an amateur to make your book cover and mess up an otherwise beautiful image.

As for the thing about stock photography licensing: if you're hiring a cover designer it's their responsibility to choose the right option for your book. It's usually safest to buy the upgraded license for selling products, although book covers are sort of in a gray area.

You aren't selling the book cover, you are selling the book, the inside, the writing – the book cover is just decoration. Most stock photography site's legal jargon can be interpreted such that using regular license for book covers is fair game. Plus it depends whether you are selling an ebook or print book, and whether you plan to do other things with it. You probably can't print and sell posters where the “product” is really just the image. But unless you are a major best-seller and making lots of money, your book won't get seen enough for anyone to care; for someone to sue they would have to A)

assume and B) prove which license you bought on which stock photography site.

I'm not recommending negligence, and you should be aware, but in almost every case a self-publishing author who sells a few hundred copies is never going to get in trouble for accidentally picking the wrong license for their stock photography (and even if they did, the penalty would be to pay the difference). So it's not a world-shattering issue of climatic legal repercussions. For more on [copyright laws and book cover design, read this article](#).

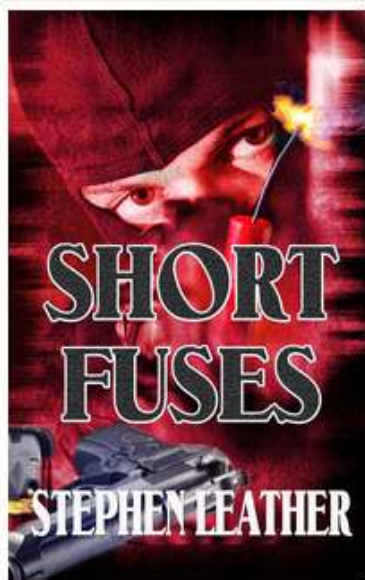
PS) All the stock photo sites I use allow up to 500,000 print books to be sold even on their *standard* license – you should just check and make sure.

## CASE STUDIES

I often help authors out by remaking their covers; seasoned veterans often sometimes come to me for a professional facelift. I like to claim that a redesigned cover can double sales, and it happens, but if your book isn't selling, then nobody is seeing the cover you already have, so it's hard to really predict the effect of a cover makeover.

I've done makeovers that should have tripled sales, but the authors say they didn't see any difference; however their books were ranking so low that they were only getting one or two visitors to their Amazon page a day. You need big numbers to get reliable sales data, so if you're testing something, be sure to send a hundred people to your sales page with ads or a promotion.





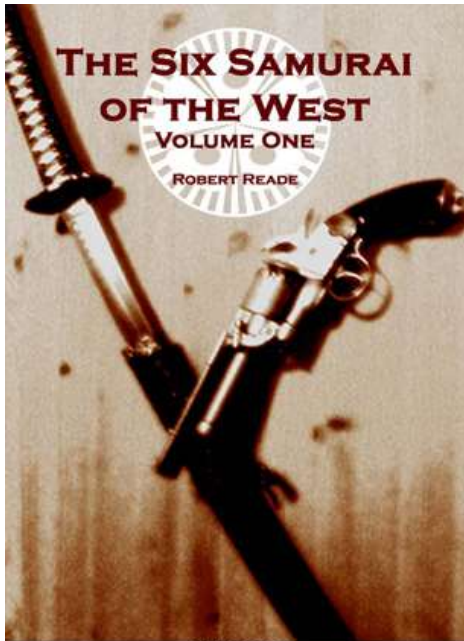
“It looks to me that in March I was averaging between 60 and 70 downloads a day. In April that had fallen to about 50 a day. But following the cover revamp on April 24, downloads rose quickly, to a peak of 112, and overall seems to be averaging about 90. I haven’t done any promotion at all so it can only be down to the new cover. I have to say I expected a short burst of extra sales, didn’t expect it to maintain those numbers and certainly didn’t expect them to keep growing!”

In the following example, the image on the far left is the one the author wanted; the one in the middle was my choice that didn’t get used. Months later his publishing team told him he needed a stronger cover, and urged him to use the sample I’d already made. But the girl in the dress wasn’t quite right, so we tweaked it a little more to get the much stronger far right cover.

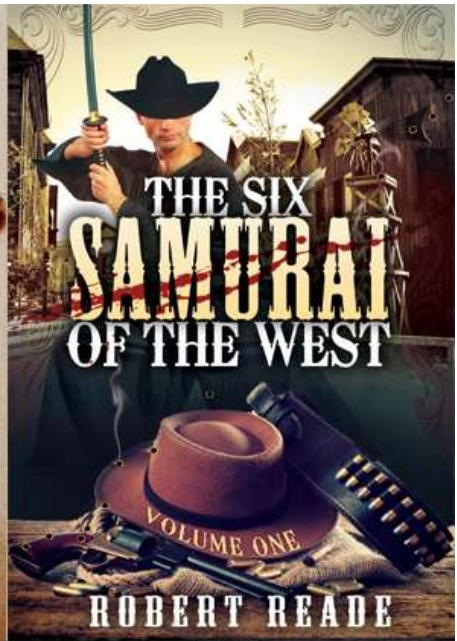


Joe was already doing OK before he let me redo his cover; the results are hard to pin down because he also did some promotion, but it seems to have boosted sales for *all his other books*, not just this one.





**BEFORE**



**AFTER**

My sales in October for “The Six Samurai of the West” were 18 copies... for the other two books in the series I sold 12 combined (30). My sales after the cover change for “The Six Samurai of the West” were 37 and for the other two books in the series I sold 21 combined (58).”

# **THE LOST KING: RESISTANCE**

**Martin Lake**

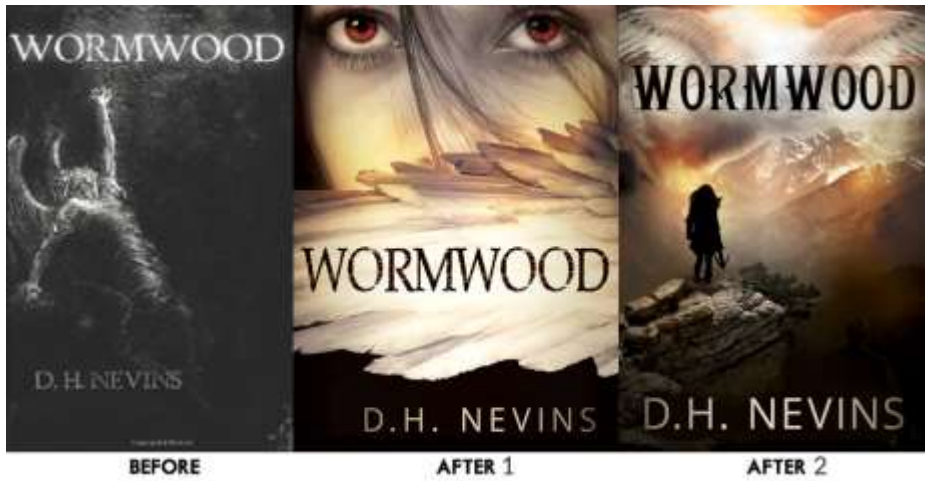


**BEFORE**



**AFTER**

Sales of all three books in the series tripled after changing the first book's cover. Two months later I changed the 2nd and 3rd books cover to match, and sales doubled again. (I went from 15 a month to 54 a month, then to 96 a month.) That's without marketing... once I started doing a little promotion, things took off: in June 2014 I sold 559 books.



I found Wormwood on accident and liked it enough to think it should get a beautiful new cover. I love the process and the results, it was one of the most enjoyable projects I've worked on for a while. Results so far: from a sales rank below 500,000 to above 300,000.





“So here are my preliminary results. The seven days before the cover change I sold 4 copies of the book. The cover change happened then the free 4-day promotion where BookBub promoted the book. 40,000 people downloaded free copies which is the best free promo I’ve ever had beating out by previous best of 35,000 in March of 2013 where my popular series book was free for 4-days. After the promo and cover change I’ve sold 286 copies in seven days.”

**HOW TO FIND THE BEST ART AND  
PHOTOGRAPHY FOR YOUR COVERS (AND  
CHECK THAT NOBODY ELSE IS USING THEM)**

## Stock Photography

These are the sites I use most often for stock photos:

- 123rf.com
- iStock.com
- Bigstockphoto.com
- Depositphotos.com
- Photodune.com

You can also find some on Flickr Creative Commons [www.flickr.com/creativecommons](http://www.flickr.com/creativecommons), which you can use as long as you credit the photographer. Flickr is also a good place for professional photography: although professionals will want to charge more, you can usually offer them one or two hundred bucks and a contract that says they will get their full fee (often \$800~\$2000) if you sell over 10,000 copies.

But I wouldn't get too hung up over using just the *perfect* photo; you can usually find something similar elsewhere. What you're in love with may only be the effects, which you can probably get with a photo editing program.

**Pro tip:** download [pixlr-o-matic](#) for a simple way to add high quality effects to your images; that way you can buy the stock photo you want but make them kick-ass before adding text.

## DeviantArt

If you don't see what you want, check out DeviantArt.com.

That's also the place to go if you want high quality, custom illustration (illustration doesn't usually sell books, but it works in



some cases). You can also find very rough photos that need to be edited.

<http://www.deviantart.com/resources/stockart>



These are the kinds of things you can find on DeviantArt – but be very careful to check their requirements or contact the artists directly before using them. Most of them will be happy to work with you, but offer them at least \$100. I often pay about \$350 to use artwork I find on Deviant, less if it's just a photo that needs heavy Photoshopping. Some artists will expect much more, depending on how established they are. You can also get some custom work done. But again, photography and realism usually packs more of an emotional kick than illustration possibly can. If you want that fantasy

look, you can have an artist edit your photos together in a scene and add some effects.

*Images by senshistock and quirkilicious.*

## DIY - THE BEST FREE ONLINE GRAPHIC SOFTWARE FOR YOUR BOOK COVERS

You can make a book cover yourself. Check out [www.canva.com](http://www.canva.com) to make a book cover for as little as \$1. Canva has excellent text layouts, but limited fonts, and you can only use one layer (so you may want to have some blend a few images into a scene, then upload to Canva.

You can also get a lot of cheap work done on Fiverr.com, or even get a cover made. You usually need to tell them what you're looking for, so be sure to send some samples and images, or even the fonts you want to use.

I also love the iPhone app WordSwag, it's amazing for easily turning your words into excellent layouts, with lots of options – but you'll need to download the photos you want to use to your iPhone first (you can email them to yourself, then save them).

Finally, I set up [DiyBookCovers.com](http://DiyBookCovers.com) as a place to help you make your own book covers. I got started by making book cover templates in Microsoft Word (because it's a more familiar program that most people have already), but soon I'll build it up into a big site with dozens of different ways to make book covers, with lots of templates and guided-videos. I also plan to build a "hot-or-not" rating system soon so that you can upload your cover and get real feedback. AND I'm making an online book cover tool, like Canva,

but that will allow layers, transparency, lots of fonts and some more cool stuff.

## WORKING WITH A DESIGNER

If you've decided to hire a designer or are looking for one, make sure you can see a whole bunch of samples and a lot of testimonials. When you buy a cover from Createspace, Lulu or Self-publishing.com, they are farming your project out to other designers, so you may get a really good one, but you may not, and they usually just give a couple options and charge extra for revisions (whereas, I keep working till you're happy, offer lots of samples, and will make changes for free whenever you need them).

But you can hire someone very talented for around \$250 if they're just starting out; but if the quality is good, word gets out and they have to raise prices because they can't handle all the demand (that's what happened to me).

I keep a list of book designers I like, you can access it here:

<http://www.creativindiecovers.com/resources/>

You can also check out [99.designs](#), where you can get a full cover for about \$300. Designers make samples and you choose the one you like.

Working with a designer can be frustrating, and we all have different personalities and practices. Finding one you get along with is nice, but having a cover that sells is more important than feeling like your designer really listens to you. I know that sounds awful, but listening to authors talk about their book and what they imagine for the cover is usually a waste of time for me, because how much they like the cover or how much they feel listened to won't have any impact on the number of books they sell. Other designers are much

better at customer service. I rarely allow clients to call me, because I'd rather spend time working. Sure I could be doing better business if I focused on making my clients feel happy, comfortable and understood. But I'm not a shrink; and no amount of customer service will fix the depression that sets in when their book doesn't sell.

If you like to "talk things out" when you do business with someone, that's fine, there are a lot of designers who are very happy to talk with you on the phone, and their designs are pretty good too. I'm kind of a jerk, but my covers turn out pretty good and sell books. (Actually, I'm extremely patient and will spend lots of time helping you publish; I just don't like talking on the phone.)

Don't email your designer with 50 covers you like that are all totally different. Don't pick out fonts, colors and ideas from 20 different colors and mix them all together. Pick one or two covers that you *really* like, that are in the same genre, and that are already selling well to your target readers (ie don't just pick random covers that YOU like, choose specific covers that your readers have already proven they liked). Then make something very similar to those covers.

## PRINT BOOKS

Print books are less easy to deal with. You can get a free template from Createspace based on the print size and page count; you need the right page count, after formatting is finished, to get the spine width right. It's *possible* to do in Microsoft Word, though not easy (you can use my templates if you want). It's also possible to use Createspace's templates.

Joel Friedlander put out some [Word Templates to make full print covers](#), and I've got a walkthrough on DiyCovers.com, but it's not fool-proof. But remember the ebook is going to sell about 10X as

many copies as the print book, so make sure the front cover is amazing, even if the spine and back is more makeshift or simple.

Once you've got all your files, you can upload to Createspace or another POD site – they will usually put an ISBN barcode on for you, though if you want to embed a price you can use the barcode generator I added to [bookcovers.creativindie.com](http://bookcovers.creativindie.com)

## IN CONCLUSION

Thanks again for picking up this short book on book cover design, I hope it's useful! If you sign up on my website [www.creativindie.com](http://www.creativindie.com), I'll give you **more** books on publishing and marketing for free (well over 100,000 words of practical content). You should also watch some of the videos on [www.diybookcovers.com](http://www.diybookcovers.com) and grab the free templates.

Thanks and good luck!  
Derek Murphy