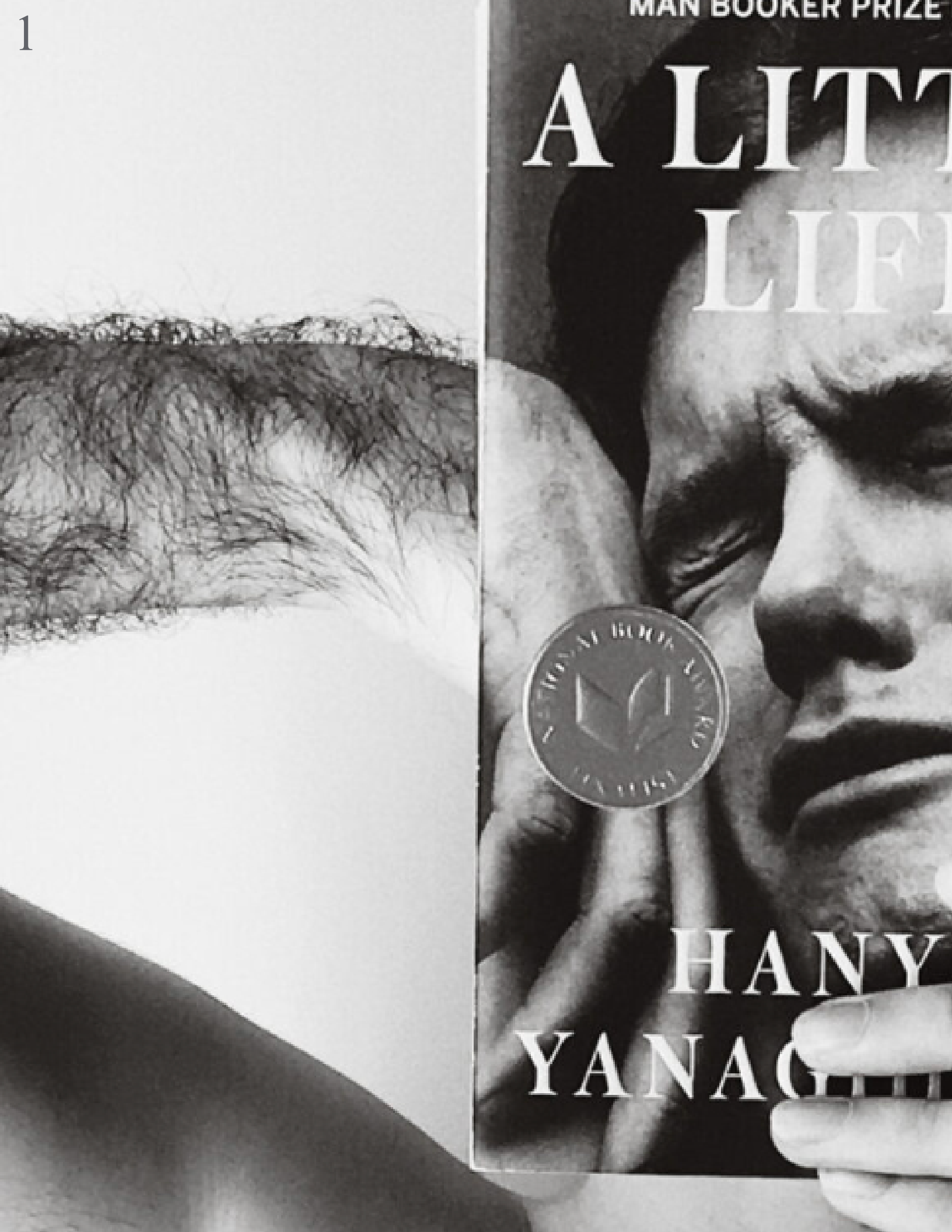




^BOOK
**A PUBLISHER'S
GUIDE TO**
photography

THEY **ARE** JUDGING YOUR BOOK BY ITS COVER:
GIVE THEM A REASON TO TURN THE PAGE



MAN BOOKER PRIZE

A LITTLE LIFE



HANY
YANAGI

FINALIST

TITLE
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2

**OVER 2.5M
COPIES SOLD**



AUTHOR'S Introduction

Welcome to this visual guide to book cover marketing, where photography meets fiction. As a graduate student studying visual communication and photography, I've combined academic insight with a deep personal passion for storytelling and book marketing. This guide explores how photography-based book covers influence reader perception, purchase behavior, and emotional connection—key considerations for anyone involved in publishing today.

Drawing from a mini qualitative study with readers, I share consumer reactions to a selection of photographic book covers currently on the market, offering practical insight for publishing professionals, self-publishing authors, and designers alike. In an industry long rooted in the written word, the growing role of visual media, especially in our digitized, image-driven age, cannot be overlooked.

To frame this study, I turn to Roland Barthes' concept of the punctum: the striking detail in a photograph that pierces the viewer emotionally and unexpectedly (Barthes, 1981). Applied to book cover design, the punctum helps explain why certain covers captivate and compel readers. Through this lens, we'll examine how photography on covers functions not just as an aesthetic strategy but as a form of narrative marketing in itself, powerfully shaping how stories are first seen, felt, and ultimately chosen.

And don't forget, people are judging your book by its cover: give them a reason to turn the page.

Gabrielle Piccirilli
Gabby Piccirilli

Methodology:

INSIGHTS FROM THE SHELF



To explore how photography functions in book cover design and influences consumer interest, I conducted a small-scale qualitative study using convenience sampling. For the purposes of this research, I visited a nearby Barnes & Noble, a strategic choice due to its diverse and current selection across genres. I moved section by section, recording the titles of any books that featured photographic imagery on their covers. These became the visual stimuli for my study.

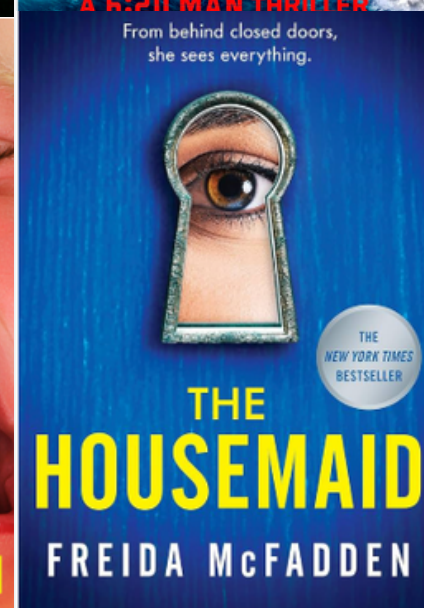
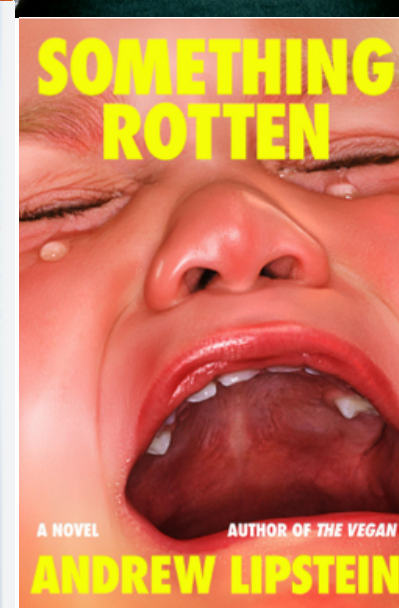
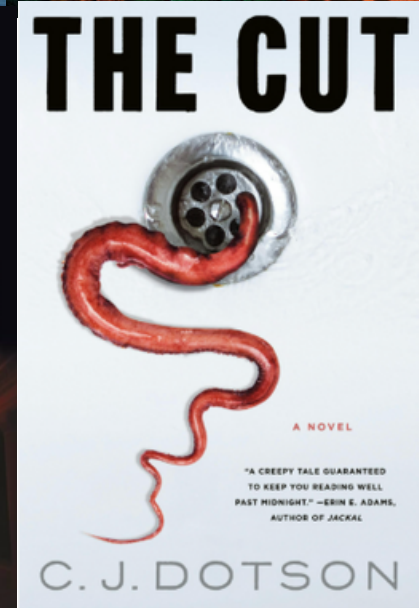
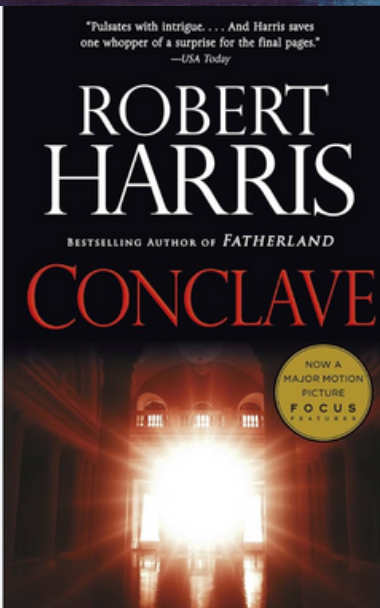
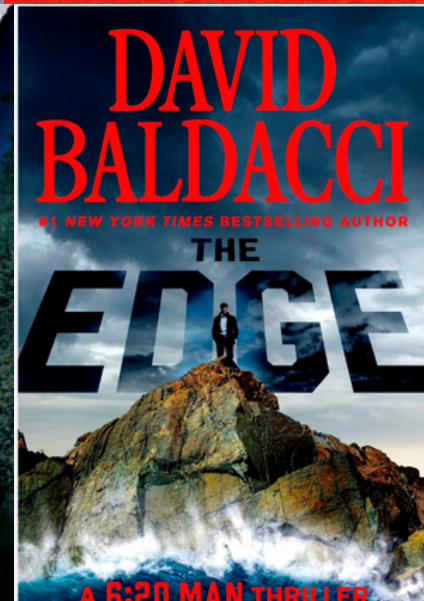
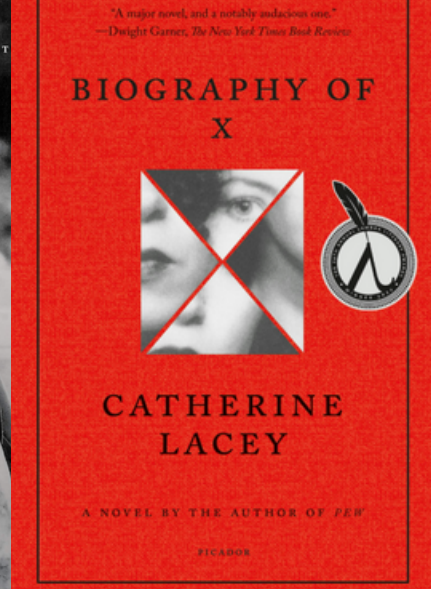
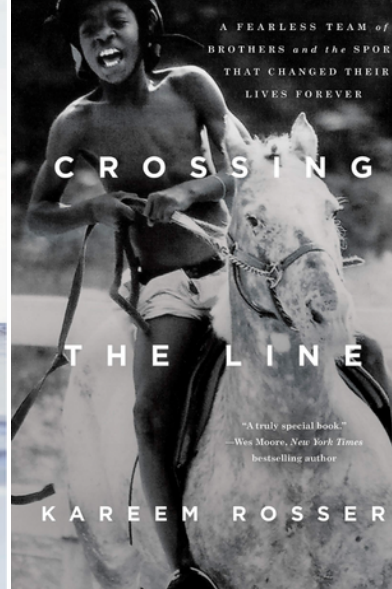
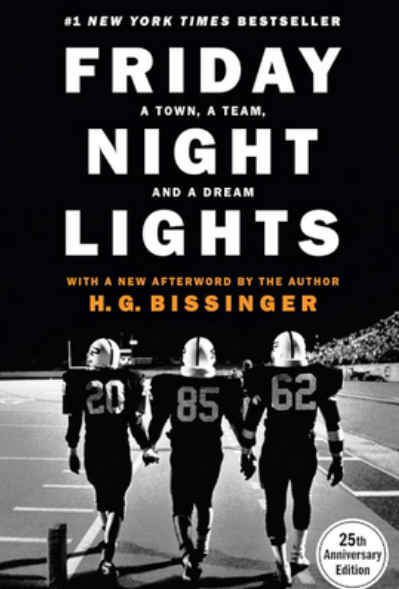
Participants were then engaged through visual elicitation interviews, a method that uses images to prompt deeper discussion. Each participant was shown the curated set of covers and asked to respond to the following prompts:

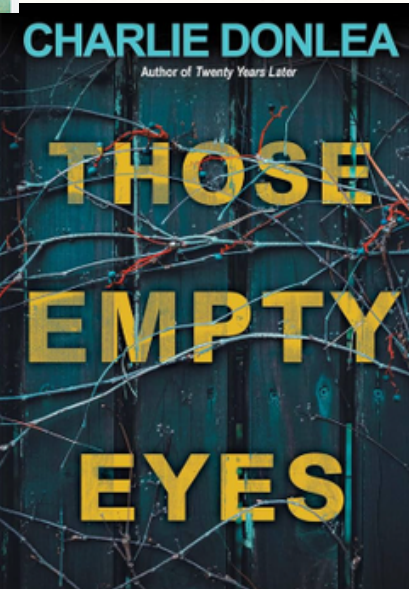
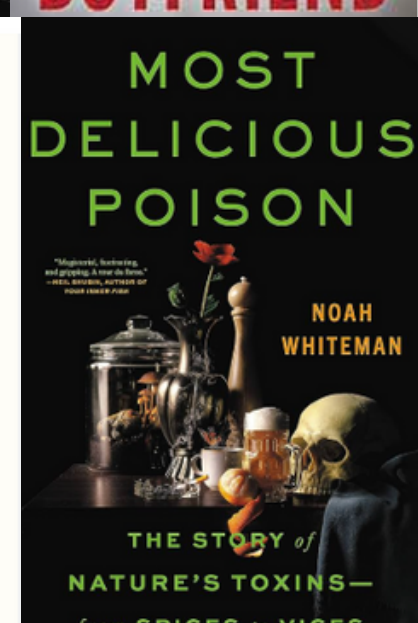
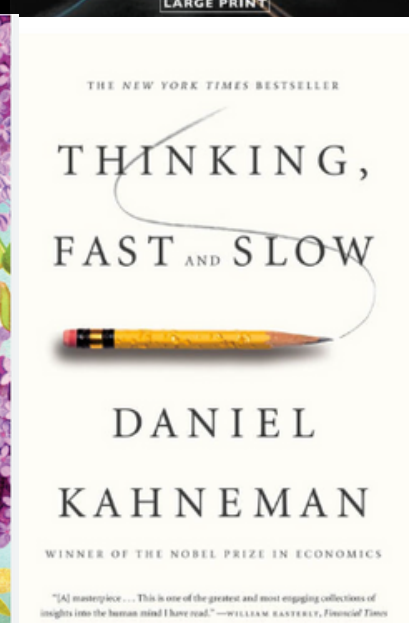
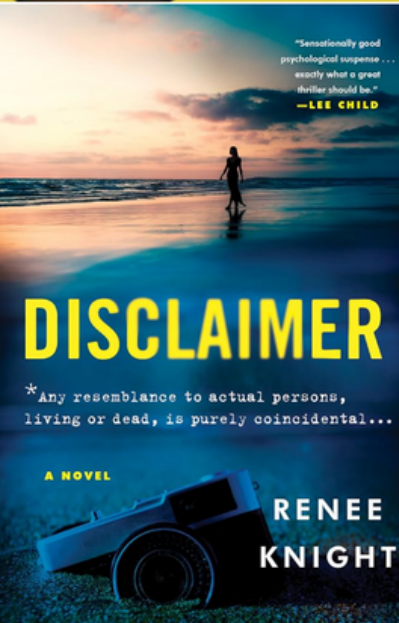
- *Which covers stood out to you—and why?*
- *Which books would you be most likely to pick up and examine more closely?*
- *Were there any covers that turned you away? What about them was unappealing?*

Their answers revealed not only personal preferences but broader patterns about the emotional and aesthetic influence of photographic design.

An interesting trend emerged during fieldwork:

Mystery & Thriller titles were the most likely to feature photographic covers, often dark, moody, and evocative. **Historical Fiction** followed closely behind, with photography often used to invoke a sense of time or nostalgia. By contrast, the **Romance** section leaned heavily into illustrated or cartoonish cover art, making photography rare in that category. This genre-based pattern suggests that publishers may strategically tailor cover aesthetics to match genre expectations and reader psychology.



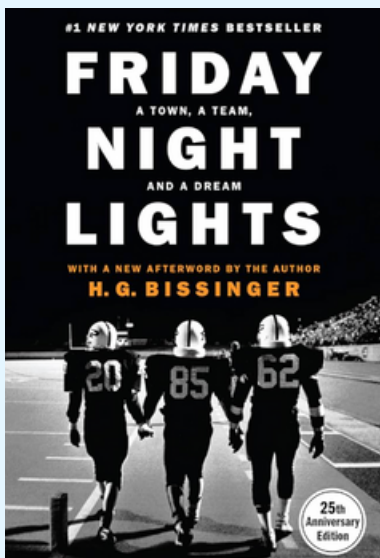




CRANK UP THE CONTRAST

In the crowded world of bookshelves and online thumbnails, a cover has mere seconds to make an impression. High-contrast photography, images with striking differences between light and dark or colors that allow the others to pop, naturally draws the eye and heightens visual drama. It creates instant intrigue, helping your book stand out whether it's face-out in a store or scrolled past on a screen.

Participants gravitated to covers with photographs that leaned into contrast, such as Frieda McFadden's *The Boyfriend* and H.G. Bissinger's *Friday Night Lights*.



“I really like the black and white covers, especially here there’s so much blank black space and then it brings your eye in in on the football guys. It’s really cool.”



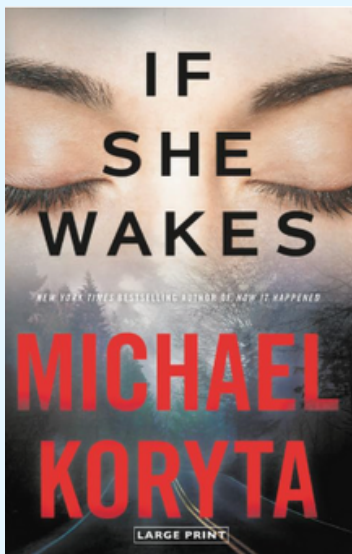
“That bright red just pops off the page and drew me in. It’s so stark against the pure white sheets and the suggestion that there’s blood or danger...I want to read it and find out”



GIVE THE FICTION A FACE

There's a reason we're drawn to faces. They reflect emotion, spark curiosity, and forge instant connections. Featuring a photograph of a human face on a book cover taps into our natural instinct to find meaning in facial expressions and understand the emotions of others. When marketing fiction, a well-chosen face isn't just decoration: it's a powerful emotional hook that invites readers in before they read a single word.

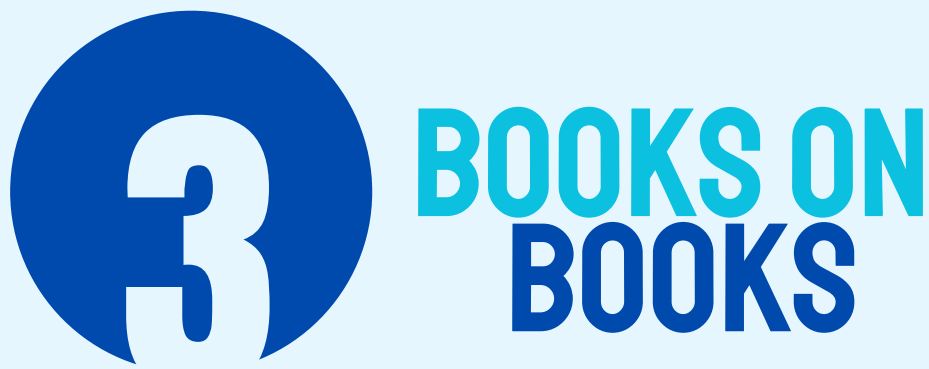
Participants were consistently drawn to titles featuring human faces, which sparked curiosity and emotional connection. However, close-ups of a single, open eye, while once striking, now feel overused and predictable. To stand out, lean into human emotion in fresh, unexpected ways that don't echo the three other covers on the same shelf.



“I was drawn into her face and I wonder why we can’t see the rest of it. I’d want to pick it up and find out.”



“My eyes went right to this one. It’s a child crying! That pulls on my heartstrings. The little tears under his eyes, his mouth open. I need to know what’s going on here.”



As simple, or even silly, as it may sound, readers love books, and that affection often extends to how those books look. Unsurprisingly, they also love to see books on their books. In my study, nearly every participant was drawn to *The Booklover's Library* by Madeline Martin, specifically noting the appeal of its cover photo featuring stacks of books. There was something instantly comforting, familiar, and inviting about the imagery. Participants described it as “cozy,” “charming,” and “like walking into a favorite bookstore.” For book lovers, covers that depict bookshelves, libraries, or reading nooks evoke not just the act of reading, but the emotional space reading occupies in their lives. It’s a form of visual shorthand that says, “This book is made for you.” For marketers and designers, that’s a powerful cue. Book imagery taps into a reader’s identity and affection for the reading experience itself, making it more likely they’ll pick the title up in the first place.

“I love libraries. I feel so warm and at peace when I see a bunch of books on the cover. 100% I’m reading that.”



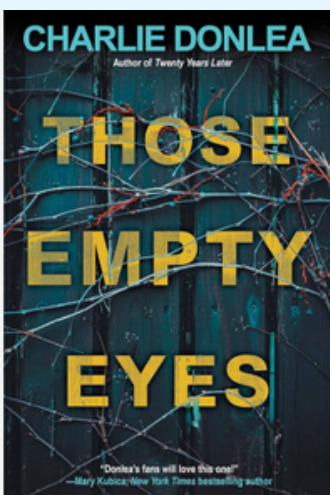
“If there’s a book on a cover I have to pick it up. Who doesn’t love a book *about* books?”

“I mean, c’mon it’s got books on it!”

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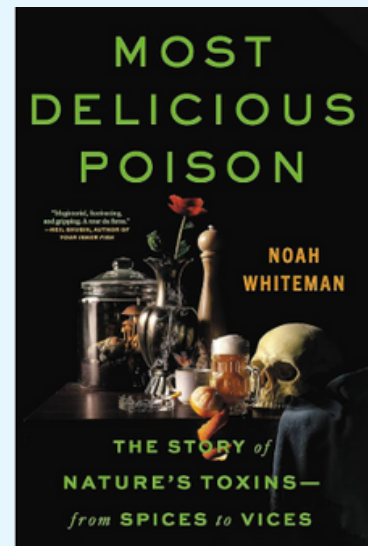
DESIGN WITH DOUBLE MEANING

Symbolism on book covers doesn't just catch the eye. It invites curiosity, interpretation, and emotional connection. A symbolic image gives readers something to feel before they even flip a page, planting a question or theme in their minds that lingers. Whether it's a keyhole, a wilted flower, or a broken glass, a symbol can tease the heart of the story without revealing it outright. It turns the cover into a conversation starter, and in a crowded market, that intrigue can be the difference between a passing glance and a sale. Participants consistently gravitated to titles with symbolic items and questioned their deeper meanings, such as cameras or gates.

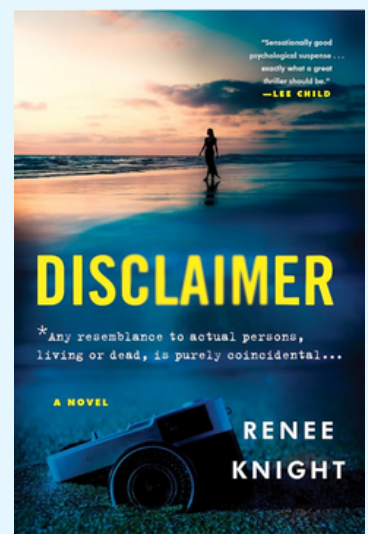


"This one has a really cool photograph it's like a gate but then half tree branch, half wire? String? It seems like a forgotten space...maybe something is half dead. I want to know."

"There's all these random items bunched together. I wanna know why. What do they have in common? Like what's their significance to the story?"



"I'm really drawn to this camera abandoned in the sand and the person far from it in the distance...It makes me think of lost memory or a vacation gone tragically. I'd want to read and know what the camera means."



5 LESS IS MORE

There's great power in absence. In book cover photography, what's hidden can be just as compelling as what's revealed. When selecting or capturing a photograph for a book cover, consider not just what you're showing, but what you're intentionally leaving out. What isn't in the frame? What detail is just out of view? What's concealed from the reader's eye?

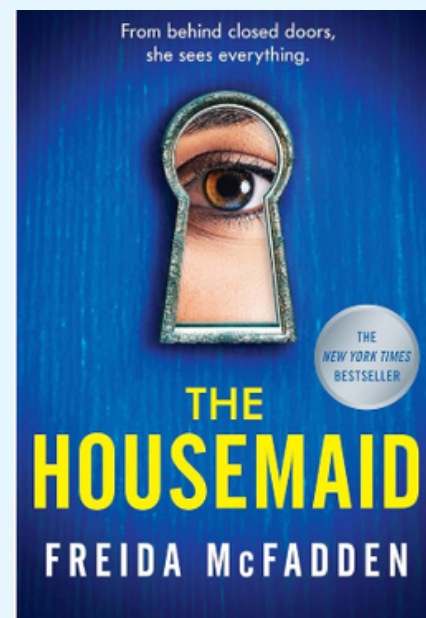
Participants in this study were consistently drawn to covers that evoked a sense of mystery or left them with questions. They were especially intrigued by images that felt incomplete or obscured, covers that hinted at a story beneath the surface without giving too much away. *The Housemaid* by Freida McFadden was mentioned by every participant, largely because of the way its photographic cover leaves key visual elements shrouded or obscured. It invites the viewer to fill in the blanks, creating a moment of mental engagement before a single page is even turned. A strategic absence can act as an invitation, drawing readers in not by showing them everything, but by making them wonder what's waiting inside.

Take it from McFadden, she's sold over 2 million copies!

"We only get the eye! We don't really know where this keyhole is or who this person is. I can't really tell what emotion this eye is giving away either. I need to know!"

"I actually read this one, and I literally bought it for that cover. I love when covers get me thinking."

"When I read this, I'm gonna keep going back to this cover and trying to figure out who that is. Someone's in there, are they trapped? Are they spying? Is it the main character? I'd read to see what color eyes she has and check back. That would be fun as I go."





Those in advertising know that sex sells, and it is true that the romance genre thrives on what readers consider the "spice" within its pages. But readers seem to prefer these steamier moments stay inside the book, and do not make their way onto the cover. Utilize a more subtle cover image that evokes the sensuality within, without crossing into the realm of explicitness.

Langlais' *Growl* was particularly eye-catching for participants, but for all the wrong reasons. The cover features a provocative image, which caused discomfort for potential readers who imagined being seen carrying the book in public. Despite the book's potential appeal to its target audience, the explicit nature of the cover made it difficult for participants to engage with the title in a way that felt socially acceptable. For many readers, there's a threshold beyond which a cover may alienate rather than attract, even if the content promises what they crave.

"I would never wanna be caught buying this, or out in public reading it! Actually, I don't think I'd want it out on my shelf either..."

"I'm all for a book with spice, but let's keep it in the book. This is just embarrassing."



"Well...that makes me uncomfortable. Is that a wolf watching them?"

"Are those naked people? On the cover? Yeah, I'd skip that one for sure."

"Yeah that's a no. I have kids!"



DON'T KILL IMAGINATION

In recent years, the surge of film and TV series adaptations of popular books has become a cultural phenomenon. Fans of the original literary works eagerly anticipate seeing their beloved characters and stories come to life on screen. While these adaptations often lead to a spike in book sales, they don't always translate into favorable reactions when it comes to book cover designs.

One trend that's emerged in the wake of these adaptations is the incorporation of actors' images on book covers. At first glance, it seems like a natural choice, as an immediate connection between the visual representation of characters in the adaptation and the book itself. However, reader feedback indicates a notable disinterest in this trend. Many participants voiced their dissatisfaction with covers that prominently featured actors or stills from the corresponding movies or shows, stating this minimized the imaginative aspect of reading.

These types of covers can come across as commercialized and formulaic. Rather than feeling like a representation of the book's essence, these covers can feel like an overt marketing ploy, capitalizing on the popularity of the adaptation rather than offering a meaningful visual connection to the story itself.

"Yeah I'm not a fan. It's the absolute worst when casting ruins the image you had in your head of a character. We all see someone different and I think that's really cool."

"[The characters] need to be who I need them to be in my head. I don't want to be told what they look like. I want to connect to the story personally and get involved in it."

"If I wanna see the actors, I'll watch the show. If I have the book, I don't care about the show and the actors."

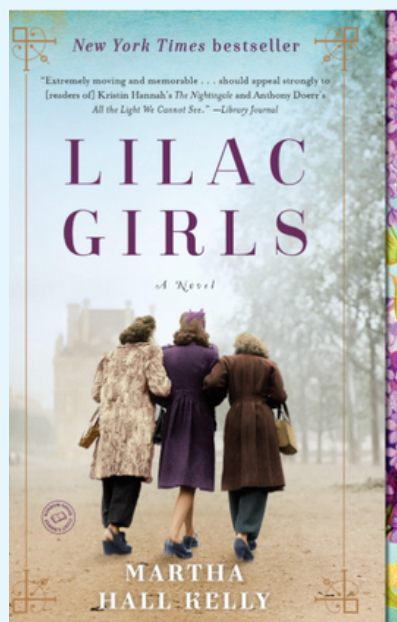


8 MIX UP MODELS

The portrayal of characters on covers has traditionally leaned toward conventionally attractive, youthful figures, often featuring young women or shirtless young men. This approach has become a staple in the industry. While these covers may appeal to a younger demographic, they often alienate older generations who feel disconnected from such representations.

Participants in the study, especially those in an older age demographic, expressed a desire for more inclusive and diverse portrayals on book covers. Many noted *Lilac Girls* by Martha Hall Kelly as an example of a cover that resonated with them due to its depiction of older women. For these readers, the inclusion of more mature, relatable characters on the cover was not only refreshing but also made the book feel more accessible. It suggested that the story could be one they could see themselves in, both in terms of themes and characters.

“We aren’t all young anymore! Show me an older lady who’s lived. I want to hear her story. These three seem like they’ve lived.”



“All the big books today are about a young, attractive women living in their youth. These are fine, but sometimes I want the main character to be an older woman. I’d want to read this one, it’s got three older ladies on it and I think it would be really refreshing.”

9

DON'T GROSS 'EM OUT

While readers appreciate bold, contrasting visuals that make them think, there is a fine line between captivating and off-putting. This study revealed that readers are quick to reject covers featuring images they find distasteful or "gross." These negative reactions can range from images that are overly grotesque to ones that evoke a sense of discomfort or unease. It's important to ensure that the imagery aligns with the tone of the book without veering into territory that feels off-putting. A cover should remain accessible, engaging, and thought-provoking, but not so disturbing that it deters potential readers from even picking it up.

Don't get me wrong, these images might work in certain genres, such as horror or psychological thrillers, where readers expect intense, unsettling visuals, but in others, they may alienate readers.

"I couldn't look at that every time I picked up my book to read. Ew. Just ew."



"I mean it's cool but I wouldn't buy it."

"Why would I want to read that? I'm uncomfortable already"

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