

can You
make

the
Title
Bigga?

The Chemistry
of Book Cover Design

jess!ca Bell

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“Every time a font is stretched, a designer cries.”

So I’ve heard.

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“The Garden of Perfect Brightness outsold *The Fragrant Concubine* for the first time ever last month!” said my client, Melissa Addey, after I redesigned the covers of her *Forbidden City* Series.

Figure 3



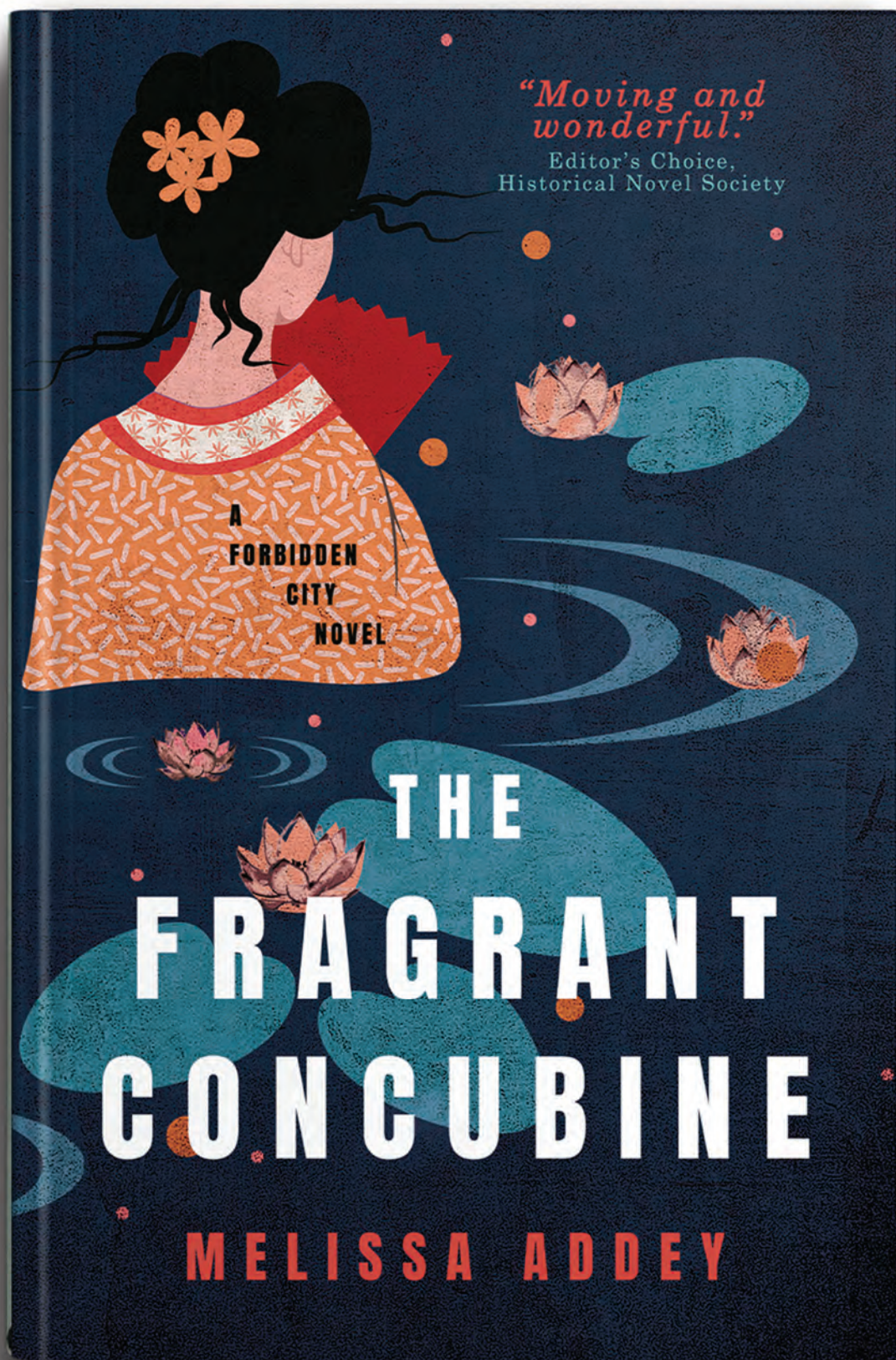
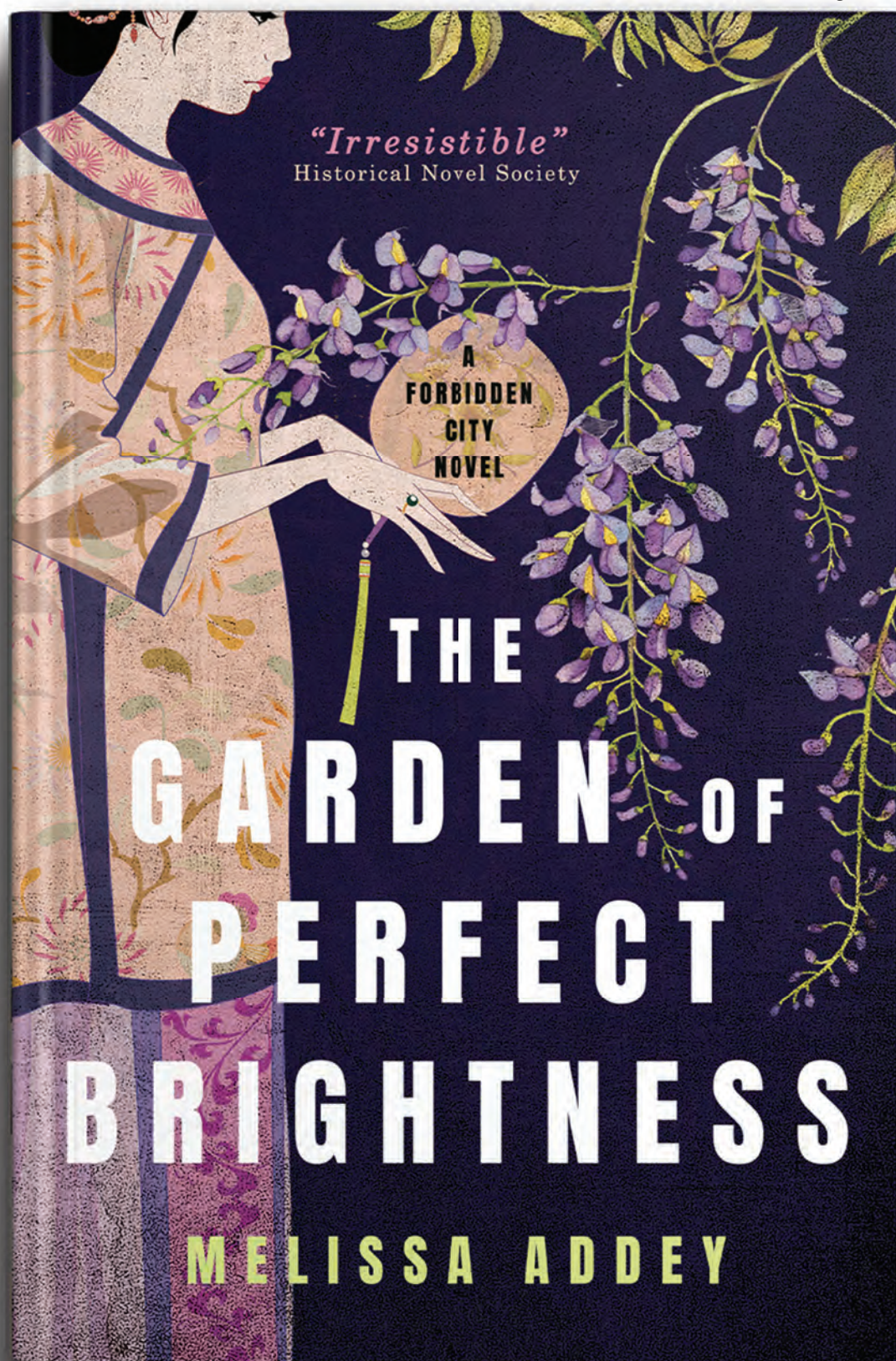


Figure 5





INTRODUCTION

Though I have written this book to educate the self-published author, it will also be useful if you're head of marketing or the graphics department at a publishing house, if you're studying graphic design and have dreams of designing book covers professionally, or if you are already a designer and you're looking for inspiration for workshops and classes. If you're reading this because of the latter, I simply ask for one little kindness: credit me and this book.

So, let's begin.

Great covers sell books. Bad covers do the opposite.

This is probably the first thing you need to tell yourself before making a mistake and publishing a book with a subpar cover. Don't have the budget? Then wait until you do. Because, trust me, publishing your book with a bad cover so that you can make money to buy a better cover DOES NOT WORK. Not to mention that this may sully your reputation. I have lost count of the times I've seen authors remorsefully admit defeat on social media, explaining why they've decided to discard their self-made covers and fork out the dosh for a professional design. These kinds of posts usually start with "I wish I would have known then what I know now." Hopefully this book will prevent this from happening to you.

This book is not about DIY book cover design. If you're looking for a tutorial on how to use Photoshop and design your own covers without first knowing what makes a book cover appealing to a reader, go ahead and swish on over to YouTube for some tutorials.

Though there is nothing wrong with designing your own covers (hell, I design my own!), knowing how to use Photoshop is not the place to start.

In order to do it well, you first need to understand how to create an eye-catching cover that is not only going to attract great praise from readers, but is most importantly, going to sell your books... TO READERS, not your friends. It's your ultimate marketing tool. Hate marketing? I bet you won't once you're finished reading.

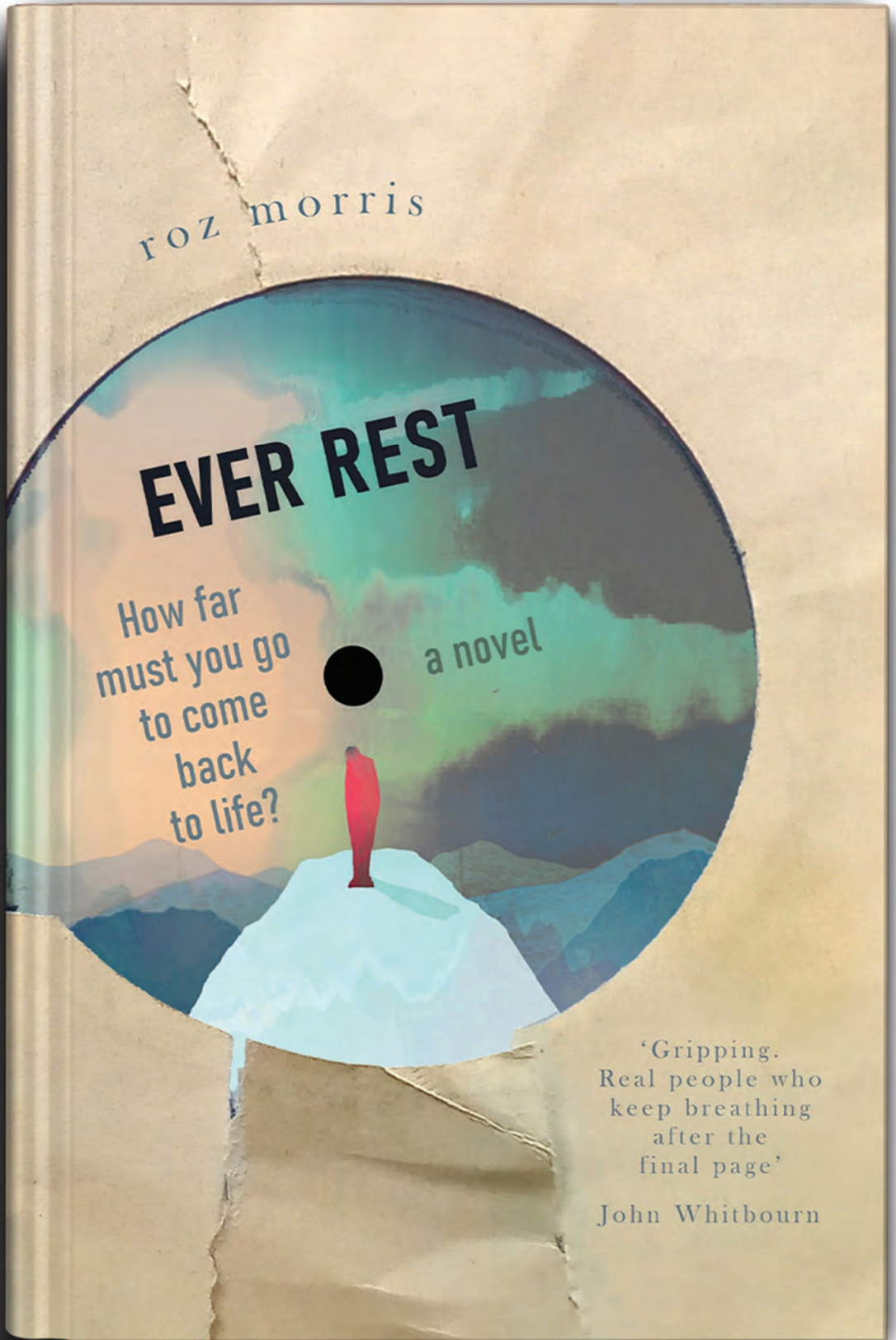
I'm going to get stuck into the nitty gritty creative stuff like design elements that do/don't work and design trends in the marketplace, navigate the wishy-washy headspace of not being sure what you want, tell you how to organize the fundamental technical details that you may not know before commissioning a cover, show you how to get along like a house on fire with your designer (and find the *right* designer), and arm you with essential knowledge before you start learning how to design your own (if you ever want to).

Enjoy! Seriously, it's actually going to be fun.

**“The jacket design is just right and draws
one in ... Trust me, I was a bookseller.”**

From a review of *Ever Rest* by Roz Morris

Figure 9 Cover design by Roz Morris, figure image copyright Owen Gent.



WHO AM I?

As a child of parents who are songwriters and musicians, and also artists in other ways such as dabbling in painting and drawing, I was singing before I could speak. Around the age of eleven, this turned into poetry writing, and then song writing, and playing piano and guitar. When I reached high school, I became extremely passionate about creative writing too. Already by sixteen I was writing short stories and at least one new song a week on my twelve-string guitar.

During my last year of high school, I had a strange obsession with graphic design. But as I was terrible at math, I failed my graphic design class, and didn't pursue it, because the school put a huge emphasis on graphic design leading into a career as an architect, and I just wanted to be creative. I was told to sign up for 'Art' class. All the meanwhile, my music was going strong, but my grades weren't perfect. All As and Bs in English and craft subjects, and mostly Ds in math and science, etc.

Those Ds meant I couldn't even get into my first choice of university course: Professional Writing at Deakin University, and I had to settle for Arts at Latrobe Bundoora (Victoria, Australia). At university, I majored in English and focused all my energy on my band. We were called spAnk, and we won some major competitions, got radio airplay, and appeared on TV. But then, I fell in love with a boy in Greece and moved here from Australia, leaving behind everything I had achieved music-wise by the time I'd turned twenty-two.

The responsibility of being an adult in a foreign country wasn't easy, so many of my first years were spent earning a living working in bars and restaurants. By the time I turned twenty-five, I had landed a job

at a publishing company as an editor of English Language Teaching books, where I learned the ins and outs of editing, publishing, and eventually authoring ELT text books. I stayed in that career for eleven years. In my late twenties, I had the urge to write a novel. So, I did, sneaking in writing time before and after my day job. That novel was titled *String Bridge*, and was published in 2011 by a small press called Lucky Press. (Actually, the first novel I ever wrote ended up in the trash, but it did eventually lead to *String Bridge*!)

Unfortunately, just six months after its release the publishing company liquidated, and so I chose to self-publish it. This was the beginning of me becoming my own boss. I had the publishing and editing know-how, so I thought, why not try my hand at designing my own book covers, *and* start a literary journal?

Very soon after my design debut, I started designing covers for author friends as favors. I didn't charge back then, as it was just a fun way to make use of my creative energy. Until one of my friends told me I had talent, and that I should start a business. I took her advice, (thank you, Carol Cooper!) and since then I have designed hundreds of covers for indie, traditional, and hybrid authors, many of which have hit bestseller lists, and won awards. A few have even graced the shelves of WH Smiths at Heathrow airport.

Turns out that teacher in high school who told me to do 'Art' didn't know what-the-fff they were talking about because now, being a self-taught freelance graphic designer is how I earn a living. Designing book covers may be my main income, but I am still also writing books and music, and running my own publishing house, Vine Leaves Press.

Trust me yet?

WHY BOOK COVER DESIGN IS SO IMPORTANT, WHETHER SELF-PUBLISHED, INDIE, OR TRADITIONALLY PUBLISHED

Let me explain with a few hard-hitting anecdotes.

1. Have you ever had a friend ask you to read and review their book on your blog or website, but the cover is terribly designed, something they thought they'd just quickly whip up in Canva? And while you didn't have the heart to tell them that the title was indecipherable above the multicolored photo of a crowded farmer's market in Marrakesh, you still cringed every time you looked at it. You even felt embarrassed when you had to post it on your blog with your *glowing* review because the cover just did not do the brilliant book justice?

I have.

2. Has a friend ever given you a book and said, "It's brilliant, read it"? And has that book been sitting in your to-be-read pile for years because every time you pick it up and consider reading it, you look at the cover and for some reason change your mind?

I have.

3. Ever been so in love with a book cover that you couldn't resist buying the book? And when you read the book, it was nothing at all like you expected and you ended up disappointed even though it was technically a good read?

I have.

Now let's break down these three examples of unsuccessful book covers.

1. This example reflects an unattractive cover design that will put people off buying the book and will therefore miss out on a read that they might have thoroughly enjoyed.

2. In this example, there's nothing particularly wrong with the design, but there's nothing special about it either. Perhaps this book will be bought because of its reputation. But will it actually be read and reviewed? And if it's not read and reviewed, will those people ever buy this author's next book?

3. Wow. This sounds like a successful book cover design. This book has sold thousands of copies because the cover is so enticing. But there's a problem. All the review sites have lots of two and three-star ratings. And is this because the book was bad? Maybe not. But maybe the cover was giving a false impression of its contents. Maybe the cover showed steamy romance, but the romance ended up being a real-to-life domestic struggle to keep a marriage alive and avoided sex. Are you willing to jeopardize your reputation for income? Yes, sex sells, but think wisely. Because you may not be so lucky with your next book.

So, what's the collective moral of these stories? *Try to get it right the first time.*

The book's cover is the first thing a potential reader will typically see, even before reading the description. It's important because it's a reader's very first (and uninfluenced) impression of your book. Don't judge a book by its cover? Bollocks. This is the real world, and you want the book to sell. In this digital age, those first impressions could last as little as a split second as potential readers scroll down a

webpage or social media profile. You need to catch their eye. Now. Dear writer, publisher, graphic artist, business person: first impressions always count. And they can *stain*.

That's not to say that there aren't exceptions. *Sometimes* you get a second chance. For example, my book *String Bridge* has been through the wringer.

The first cover was designed and illustrated by my then publisher. Then I got the rights back when they liquidated and I redesigned it myself. These were the early days back in 2012 when I'd just started messing around for fun. As you can see, the second and third covers are pretty dire. The last cover, which I designed in 2016, I still love, but it's not attracting many sales. It did a little better with each redesign, but nothing to shout about. And I honestly believe it's because it was not right from the very beginning. And I'm not sure I have it in me to give it another shot. It's time to leave that book in the past.

Sometimes, however, a cover reboot *will* revive a book, just like in Melissa Addey's case, which you saw at the beginning of the book. Also, there are covers out there that follow a tried and tested formula, that aren't particularly special in any way. I find that these kinds of covers are commonly used for genres that are binge-read, like romance, crime, and thriller.

Figures 15–18 (not designed by me) represent a very big trend for thrillers.

I can't tell you how tired I am of seeing shadowy silhouettes and bold lettering on thriller covers. But the trend works, and it catches the eye, so use it. But these trends only work until a new trend is born. By the time you read this book, the trend may be something different.

For example, since I started my career as a book cover designer, I've seen historical fiction covers with headless women (Figures 19–21), women walking away from the reader (Figures 22–24), and the bold and illustrated (Figures 25–27). These aren't my designs either and I've just sourced them from the internet.