

AS WE ENTER A NEW YEAR, decade, century and millennium it is useful to reflect back briefly on the history of book design competitions in Canada. Certainly the heady days of the mid-1970s, when the Department of Industry, Trade and Commerce and the National Design Council of Canada granted \$50,000 to a design committee of the Canadian Book Publishers Council to organize a national design competition, are long gone. All that we have to show for this short-lived government sponsored initiative are two wonderful bilingual catalogues entitled *The Look of Books / Les plus beaux livres* produced by Design Canada in 1975 and 1976.

The Alcuin Society first began to think about a national design competition in the early 1980s. Board members of the Society at that time were concerned that while there were many competitions and prizes for other creative work in Canada, there was no competition or prize specifically for book design. It would take some research in the Society's archives to establish the exact starting date for our competition, for although the 1999 competition is designated as the 17th, we can only locate published records for the competition back to 1985. The results of this particular competition,

judging books published in 1984, were published in a slight, mimeographed catalogue dated 1985. The results of the next ten competitions were published in various issues of *Amphora*, the quarterly journal of the Society. The last four competitions have received more handsome treatment in beautifully designed catalogues by Roberto Dosil, produced by Vancouver printers Benwell-Atkins. That only accounts for 15 competitions; what happened to the first two? One thing we do know is that the most recent book categories chosen for the competition were established in 1989 and were based on those of the American Institute of Graphic Arts. The initial categories were: Prose (fiction and non-fiction); Adult Picture and Photography; How-To, Cooking, Craft and Hobby; Text and Reference; Limited Editions; Poetry; and Juvenile.

The Prose category over the years has evolved into three separate categories, since the various judges involved became increasingly tired of judging apples with oranges with bananas. The three Prose categories at present are: Prose Fiction; Prose Non-Fiction, Unillustrated; and Prose Non-Fiction, Illustrated.

The Adult Picture and Photography category has been renamed Pictorial Books; the recollection is that we thought that “adult picture and photography” might have carried some rather unseemly connotations!

The How-To category, due to a declining number of submissions, was folded into Text and Reference, where it seems to have found a comfortable home. Text and Reference remains, as does Limited Editions and Poetry. “Juvenile” was thought to sound rather dated and so it was renamed “Children’s Books.” We even tried a “Mass Market Paperback” category one year but the results were so god-awful that we rather hastily abandoned that category.

How is the actual judging done? Well the principles of the judging are that each book must be judged as a total entity, that is holistically. What the judges are looking for is conveyed by such words and phrases as “consistency,” “continuity,” “integration,” and “total attention to detail.” The judges examine every aspect of each book including the following: dust jacket, binding, end papers, half-title page, copyright page, title page, page layout, typography (size and font), integration of illustrations, chapter openings,

running heads, reproduction of illustrations, clarity of printing, and choice of paper. The method of judging is to place all of the books for each category on several large tables. If the judges feel that a book has been entered into the wrong category then they will move it to a new category where it is felt that it will receive fairer treatment. Each judge examines every book in a specific category. They place the books they believe merit attention on a finalist’s table. Then the serious, but friendly, debate begins. The judges argue, discuss, debate, joke, cajole and rebut for as long as it takes to reach consensus about which books deserve prizes (it is this series of debates that we hope to start taping for posterity!). If no meritorious books are found in any one category then no prizes are awarded. If books are judged to be equally meritorious then a tie occurs.

All that remains for these concluding remarks is to thank the judges for this year’s competition for their hard work, fellowship and sagacity. They are:

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ROBERTO DOSIL
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