

This year marked the final pre-millennial competition for the Alcuin Society's Citations awarded for excellence in book design and production. The Society was founded in 1965 to promote a wider appreciation of what goes into finely-wrought books, a wider appreciation of books and reading, and to support excellence in book design and production.

The state of the book arts in Canada is ever-evolving, and this year's entries proved that. The digital revolution that has swept over the world, accelerating over the last 15 years, has changed print production and methods of communication forever. But despite rumours of its demise, the book instead is evolving into a very special vehicle of communication. Raw information distribution is finding other routes, leaving a higher ground for the archaic but still wonderfully efficient and sensorially satisfying form of the book. As the Song of Solomon says, "Of making many books, there is no end..." Typography has been democratized, placing more and better typefaces into more people's hands. Of course, that means that each person or company who produces the book pages now becomes the gatekeeper of the standards of the craft. The restless human imagination continues to find new ways, using the software now available, to interpret and style the words and images that explain, enhance and decorate the missives from the authors.

The selection process was in some ways more complicated than I was expecting, often comparing sweet juicy oranges to crispy bright apples within one over-broad category, but in a disheartening way was also simpler, as so many books that had interesting and worthy features, beautiful details, ingenious and lovely covers, were fatally flawed in the poor levels of typographic craftsmanship. And while we live in a marketing-and packaging-dominant world where how (and how many of) something is sold is more important than any distinguishing feature of the "product" itself, in the now somewhat contradictory book world, content and function – the words themselves from the authors, and how the solitary readers at the other end sink their teeth into the story or information – still must rule. Some books that should have been simple and direct were dressed up with gaudy baubles of design features that created a distracting visual jumble for the reader, often compounded with text-type treatments with egregious type-size, letterfit and leading balances, not to mention some careless or clumsy typeface selections and combinations.

Good typography for book work is the visual parallel of good copy-editing-invisible to the average reader, other than having a calm clear sensation of being able to directly connect with the material itself – but horribly revealing of clumsy unprofessionalism when it is deficient. Times Roman, set 11 points on 12, is right up there in the verboten zone along with spelling or punctuation errors, run-on sentences with dangling modifiers, wearing pink, red and green together, or beige golf shoes with the charcoal pin-striped suit.

The majority of the entries fall into the General Trade category, which concentrates on the book as a tool of contemporary communication, as opposed to the book as a fine object. While there is plenty of scope for fine craftsmanship, the main master is the communication of ideas, while the form of the book is the humble servant.

The Fiction category is both the simplest category – most of the books fall into a fairly standard format and trim size, with simple blocks of run-on text - and the most frustrating. The literary as opposed to “commercial” nature of many of the titles permit a greater scope of expression, even elegance, on the covers, but the lack of attention to the typography of the text page itself proved a fatal flaw for many books with lovely covers. The standby method of using the cover’s display typeface for display titling within the book was sometimes used, to mixed success, but too often the text itself was graceless and difficult to read. While it is not appropriate in many cases to use baubles and ornamentation in works of fiction, a baseline of clean, readable typography is expected.

The first place title, *Olivo Oliva*, designed by Angel Guerra at Stoddart Publishing Limited was actually a reworking, using the same elements and typefaces, of the original edition, but the simple but strong elegance, and the balance of colours were very satisfying, and the interior text showed very clean carry-through of the style and tone. The second place title, *Gabriel Dumont in Paris*, was designed by Alan Brownoff for the University of Alberta Press using cheeky type, and brash colours, and a thoughtfully harmonious and elegant interior appropriate for a fictional recasting of historical events. The two titles that tied for honourable mention, *Slander*, and *The Question*, both published by McClelland & Stewart, were both commercial titles, both well and appropriately executed within their genre, with skillfully handled display type and clean interior typography.

In the Non-fiction category, it is difficult to draw a precise line between the various sub-categories. Non-illustrated prose can range from straight run-on academic prose crammed on the page for budgetary reasons, to complex typographic structures handled beautifully. It is a difficult category, as readers and publishers alike pay the most attention to pictures, and the careful work that even text-only books require is often underestimated. The visual balances in illustrated books can run from having a small number of marginal images to a running text heavily supported with visual material, while Pictorial books are primarily collections of images with captions, with some supporting or introductory text. Many books in all of these categories had ingenious design ideas, lovely details, but fell down in either an intrusive overbalance of visual elements, or a lack of control of the many fine details that make up good book craftsmanship.

In Prose, Non-fiction, first place was awarded to *Setting the Stage: Montreal Theatre, 1920-1949* which used a simple, telling photograph, straightforward typography that interacted beautifully with the image, in a pleasing format, slightly larger and more square than the standard 6x9 trade format. The interior text design was clean and appropriate, with a good use of white space. Second place was awarded to the lyrical and lovely *Desire in Seven Voices*, published by Douglas & McIntyre and designed by Val Speidel. The text design had nice decorative details, and was handled well. There were three books tied for Honourable Mention, in the more standard format, all having either ingenious or impeccable text typography, and clean and appropriate covers.

In the Illustrated category, the three books selected were very different from each other. The first-place holder, *Remembering Bobby Orr*, published by Stoddart, was in some ways an orthodox genre sports book, but was designed by Bill Douglas & Bang in a clean, bold, fresh manner, while being beautifully balanced and controlled. The second place book, *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art*, published by UBC Press/Washington University Press, and designed by George Vaitkunas, seemed to have presented a complex challenge. The cover composition was quite formal, but the colours were lavender, yellow, pink, red and shades of blue. The editorial structure matched the spirit of the trickster: unpredictable, erratic chaos, and the typography and page design managed with messy vitality to represent interwoven voices and competing elements,

while not disintegrating into unmanageable chaos. The third-place holder, also designed by George Vaitkunas, was *A History of Domestic Space: Privacy and the Canadian Home*, a more orthodox volume, presented in a clear and disciplined manner.

The books in the Pictorial category of course often represent a publisher's showcase book for the year, and this year there were two titles that tied for first place. The more surprising winner ran counter to many of the expectations for this category. *First Son: Portraits by C.D. Hoy* was published by Presentation House Gallery and Arsenal Pulp Press, and designed by Mark Timmings of Timmings & Debay. This title, for some of this year's judges, was the show-stopper that won our hearts. It presented innovations in the form that caught your breath in their bold simplicity and effectiveness. The trim size was modest: 6.75 by 10.5 inches, and the photographs were printed in black and grey duotones, on smooth uncoated paper with an overall matte varnish. The first 95 pages of the book are a simple gallery of photographs, generally the same size, one per page or spread, set in flat black. There are no captions, just a discreet folio, with the names and explanations in a three-page catalogue in the back matter, after the main essay/text of the book. The title page of the book does not appear until page 96, set in simple classic typography in the book's typeface, Monotype Bembo, in black on white. The copyright page is buried on page 160, the final folio in the book. The visual simplicity and the emotional impact of the presentation of these portraits of First Nations, Chinese and Caucasian people from in and around Quesnelle, B.C., from 1909-20, is indescribable and powerful. The success of the best book work is in the control and execution of the craftsmanship, and not in the amount of money in the editorial and production budget, and this book is a wonderful example of that.

The other title that tied for first place in the Pictorial category is a more classic representation: *Kreighoff: Images of Canada*, published by Douglas & McIntyre for an exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario, and designed by George Vaitkunas. It is a magnificent, impeccable volume. The reproductions of the paintings are even scaled relative to the originals themselves - small reproductions of small works, large reproductions of large works. The third winner in the Pictorial category, holding second place is Otherwise Inc. Editions' millennial offering, *Canada: Our Century*, the visual essay published by Doubleday Canada, and designed by Concrete Design Communications Inc.

Although it broke many typographic “rules,” the tone it achieved with this, a tip of the hat to post-war photojournalism and mid-century graphic design, is very effective. Honourable mention was given to *Carlo Scarpa, Architect: Intervening with History*, produced by the Canadian Centre for Architecture and designed with his usual control and grace by Glenn Goluska.

In the Poetry category, some of the similar problems to the Trade Fiction category arose: beautiful sensitive covers, with unskilled text type handling. Our first-place selection, *Waterglass*, published by McGill-Queens University Press and designed by Sonia Chow, as was our third-place selection, *Chess Pieces*, managed to deal with many of the problems of publishing poetry. Although the text design looks to be a formatted series design, it is understated, disciplined and elegant, and clean enough to still be harmonious with their beautiful and innovative covers. By contrast, the second-place title, *Lake Where No One Swims* published by Pedlar Press and designed by Zab Design has a very graphic cover, with large, vintage forties display type, and beautiful endpapers with a bold use of archival photos of swimmers. The text is whimsical but not coy, brash but not loud, and seems very reflective of and complementary to the writing style of the poetry. Although this book was definitely not Beatrice Ward’s crystal goblet, its design features enhanced and expanded the reading experience, rather than intruding on it.

The Text & Reference category was a difficult category to judge. The submissions were very few, perhaps as many publishers or designers felt uncertain about what this category covered, and what kind of books they would be competing against, and we awarded no prizes. This category presents difficult design challenges, presenting complex material in a functional, economical and clearly organized manner, while trying to maintain a sense of grace and order.

The Children’s category was a pleasure to look at, and the first-place title, *The Magic Mustache*, published by Annick Press and designed by Andree Lauzon, was a delight for us all. Second place was held by *A Barbeque for Charlotte*, published by McArthur & Company and written, designed and illustrated by Marc Tetro, with charmingly hand-written text. Honourable Mention was awarded to *The Prairie Fire*, published by Orca Book Publishers, and designed by Christine Toller. The illustrations and visual organization were quiet, dignified and

effective. This category also was plagued with beautiful imagery, and clumsy typography. As well, this category should probably be more fairly divided into pictorial story books for young children, and more prose-oriented books for older children, as the big pictures so quickly catch your attention, leaving little competitive space for the story books for older children.

The last category we judged was the Limited Editions. Far from the world of trade publishing is a world where, like the gnomes toiling for gold, people come up with a vision for a book as an object, where size and shape are dictated by the producers' instincts rather than the profit and loss sheets, and they labour with all the inspiration and craftsmanship they have until the physical book becomes their vision. The scales of the books vary, the qualities of the materials range from the finest binding leathers to photocopies, but in the world of the Book Arts, all speak in their own voice, and hold their own place. Selecting and ordering the winners was difficult, and a bit arbitrary. Crispin and Jan Elstead of the Barbarian Press continue to produce masterpieces, such as the first-place winner, *Inishbreem*. The beautiful little typographic paeon, *Francesco Griffo da Bologna*, by Rollin Milroy took second, and *Island of Demons*, Harwood Press, Hugh Michaelson, took third.

All in all, it was an impressive and heart-warming collection, and we look forward to the continuing commitment of Canadian publishers and book workers to excellence in book design and production.

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