

# INTRODUCTION

IN COMMENTING ON THE ALCUIN SOCIETY'S 19th Annual Awards for Excellence in Book Design, I must begin by explaining the criteria for selecting winners in this particular year. How could I do otherwise, when anyone looking over the list must surely be asking, "where are the winners?" The competition was not short on entries. These totaled 286, a figure twenty-five percent higher than the number of entries in 1999. Yet in five of the eight categories, no first place was awarded. In one category, Prose Non-Fiction, neither a first nor a third place was awarded despite the fact that there were 48 submissions. Clearly, designers and publishers are owed an explanation for the reluctance of the four judges to award in a competition that drew so many entries.

At issue is the occurrence of very basic design errors, found mostly in text pages, that overshadowed the good work that was done in the year 2000. These we attributed to either an unawareness of the principles of good typography, or simply a slack approach to their execution. Either way, the resulting poor aesthetic quality of so many books was deflating. As judges, our criteria were to appraise the book as a whole, cover and text together, so that if one let the other down, the book failed. After working independently in selecting finalists on the first day, we were struck by the kinds of typographic awkwardness we were routinely encountering. The following day, when we defended our choices in an effort to reach consensus, we found that in identifying the typographic faults in the selections of other jurors, many of our own choices fell victim to the same criticism. We realized that we had all forgiven errors to advance a book for one reason or another, most commonly on the merits of a strong cover. But in coming together as one critical voice on the second go-around, we decided it was incumbent on us to take the hard line, in fairness to the design excellence that *was* in evidence, and, perhaps more important, to affect a wake-up call to designers and book publishers in this country.

Here are some examples of the faults we found all too often: books with badly kerned running heads that were far too large or heavy; copyright pages unaccountably set at the same size and leading as text type; folios of enormous weight, haphazardly placed, often accompanied by superfluous lines or ornaments; display pages that lacked the spatial relationship and overall balance of type that is so crucial to design; and clumsy grids, or an unawareness of the grid entirely. Overall, we found too many books showing an inability to craft type respectfully, to compose or capture its nuance upon a page, or to carry a well-created design concept from beginning to end.

In the panel forum that followed the adjudication of the books, our collective complaints prevailed as the topic of discussion. Questions arose from this. Are publishers hiring designers more for their ability to get a readable set of pages produced than for their aesthetic judgement? If so, wherein lies the fault? Is the publisher as responsible for accepting poor design as the designer is for producing it? For that matter, are the publisher and designer recognizing the difference between good and bad design? If a publisher hires the designer who has ability to compose type and execute a good book design, will this cost more than hiring another designer who does not? If the publisher is relying on an “in-house design template” that gets applied to a body of text, perhaps by an in-house intern or novice designer, why isn’t that template up to the standard of good design? Is there some role the Alcuin Society should play, such as providing feedback to publishers on why their books weren’t selected, or suggesting improvements so that next year’s judges might see a more consistent level of competency? These are some of the questions that were raised.

That said, it’s time to report on the variety of talents that did produce high-quality work in this year’s show. All Limited Edition books, printed by letterpress, upheld the stellar command of typography that such books have been known for in Canada for so many decades. Typographic excellence of a

more complex nature was the standard in the Reference category. Here, the very challenging relationship of type and image was exquisitely executed by all winners, and then some. The first place winner, *Encyclopédie visuelle des sports*, was particularly impressive in its intricate marriage of text and image. These elements adhere to a strong grid, but one that allows for a great deal of freedom within its boundaries. The more direct and conventional *In the Sweet Kitchen*, the second-place finisher, offers a very clear and skilful presentation of the material, with tasteful embellishment.

Interaction of images and type were well handled by all winners in the Pictorial Books category. A first place was not awarded, as the judges didn't find a jacket as elegant and refined as the very thoughtful interiors. A beautifully resolved text was in evidence in *Susan Point: Coast Salish Artist*. And as is often the case in this challenging category, other winning entries were all very strong, self-affirming pieces. Images and text in Children's Illustrated books ran the gamut from the simplest of relationships to very dense and complex integrations which characterize a sizeable portion of the genre. The highest award this year honoured the simple, direct approach taken in a book entitled *My Sister Gracie*, which offers a very spare presentation that allows the reader to enter the book easily.

In Poetry, *Sensory Deprivation / Dream Poetics* is comprised of concrete poems. Consequently the typographic element found in the interior is in short supply, but the judges found this title to be a straightforward and refreshing piece of work, particularly in the minimalist presentation of its cover. The second and third place winners in Prose Non-Fiction Illustrated, were polar opposites in typographic sensibility. The former, *As the Centuries Turn*, is formally successful in its adherence to careful, conventional placement of text and image, and the latter, *Remembering Tim Horton*, renders type in a direct engagement with content. Throughout *Remembering Tim Horton*, type is oversized and knocked-out in white over hockey photos, resulting in image / type

constructions that create tension between the static and fluid. In Prose Non-Fiction, the judges recognized only *Dancing from the Heart*. Its jacket is appealing in its relationship of vertically rendered display type to a well-positioned photo and smaller modifying type placed skillfully on several horizons.

The winning entry in Prose Fiction, *Realia*, has an appropriately quiet jacket that is low in colour content, with display type well positioned vertically, nicely letter spaced, and accented by a discrete string of Japanese characters. The text follows this sensibility beautifully with its vertically oriented display type and carefully set body copy. *Rocket Science*, in second place, is an extremely alluring piece given over to a casual, contemporary feel. It's a gem of a design. On the cover, a daring use of funky colour combinations and equally funky type is a sheer visual delight. The carryover of this aesthetic into the text is handled perfectly. The small text type with bold folios hung in wide margins is a breath of fresh air that reflects back to the cover imagery. In all, the judges did not feel that 2000 was a good year for book design in Canada. While a number of titles may have been worthy of recognition not enough were in evidence in this competition. There is a real, identifiable problem in the setting of type, one that clouds a large segment of Canadian book design. This problem could easily be solved with a little education in the right places. Should that be done, we would likely see a level of consistency that would put us in good stead with book design outside our borders, and design in general as it is applied to other industries within Canada.

GORDON ROBERTSON

Toronto