

# “An opportunity to do something better”

Star book designer *Chip Kidd* addressed the Alcuin Society’s New Old Book Symposium in October 2012. The following is an excerpt from his presentation.

FIRST, I AM GOING to tell you about when I was studying design at Penn State University from 1982 to 1986. Our very first assignment in Introduction to Graphic Design was to design a book cover for a collection of short stories called *Museums and Women and Other Stories*, by John Updike. Well, I thought, *I’ve got the inside straight on this because John Updike is from the exact same tiny town in Pennsylvania as I am, and his father was my father’s math teacher, and so I thought, I have the hometown advantage.* And in the title story of the collection he writes about going to his childhood museum, which is the Reading [Public] Museum in Pennsylvania, which is also my childhood museum.

I went back that weekend and took all kinds of pictures and thought, *This is going to be my book cover. I have this advantage over everybody else.* So I put a collage together and I was so excited. Our critique was the next week, on Tuesday. The teacher comes in, looks at them all, stops next to mine, and says, “Whose is this?” I said, “It’s mine.” (Well, I thought, *Ho ho ho!*) And she said, “This is the area of graphic design I want to steer you away from.”

She proceeded to dissect my design and explain why it wasn’t working, and why it wasn’t effective. And she was totally right; that’s what great teachers do. I made sure I learned from that instead of feeling like I failed. I tried again, even to this



*Chip Kidd addresses the New Old Book Symposium in Vancouver, October 19, 2012. Jason Vanderbilt photo*



Peter Mirzabam photo

Chip Kidd told the Alcuin Society that young designers need three things to succeed: “You need to have some talent. Then you need to work work work work work work work work to hone the talent, which you will be doing for your entire life, so get used to it. Then you need to get lucky. That’s it. There’s a lot more nuances to it than that, but that’s what I’ve found it comes down to. I’ve seen a lot of talented people just not get it right, and it’s heartbreaking.”

day. Things get rejected all the time; it still just happens. I try to look at it as an opportunity to do something better.

This memoir by David Shields, *How Literature Saved My Life*, is about his midlife crisis and how he gets through it by reading books. My idea was, OK, you are out on a ledge on top of a skyscraper and are about to jump—but you read a book first. We were trying to figure out how to stage this. I use a photographer named Geoff Spear all the time, and he did it with models. It works perfectly. We didn’t have the budget to stage it with real people, but if we did it wouldn’t have worked nearly as well. It is much, much more of an allegory now. Is he going to jump or not? You can’t know; you just have to read it.

I assume Augusten Burroughs is popular. He wrote *Running with Scissors*, which I did not do, but I designed everything after that. This book came along of his essays about how horrible Christmas is, and about how horrible his Christmases have been—*You Better Not Cry*. At the time, a photographer friend of mine named Tom Allen had started a blog called *The 12 Tawdry Days of Christmas*. He would go to the local goodwill thrift

shops and buy the cheapest, most horrible, worst Christmas object he could find and then photograph it and post it on the blog.

So I contacted him and I said, “You know, there was that one figurine that you showed that I would like to try and use.” It’s a little porcelain gewgaw girl; she is dressed up for winter and she is holding a Christmas wreath and she is freaking out (we don’t know why but it doesn’t matter). I sent this to Augusten directly, and he wrote back and he said, “It’s cute, but it’s not mean enough. I’m really mean.”

So I went back to Tom and I said, “Remember that other thing you have, that ceramic Santa Claus candy dish thing with a sack? Let’s try that.” He sent the image back to me, but I thought, *Instead of people, let’s try firearms. And let’s turn it around, so Santa’s back is to the viewer*. So we had Santa, we had firearms, and it was almost there. Then we brought back the little gewgaw girl.

I sent it off to the publisher. A week goes by—nothing. It’s a freelance job, and as we all know, that’s the kiss of death: when you send something away and they like it they contact you right away, because they’re relieved and because they really

like it. Hurrah. And if they don't contact you, that means they don't like it and they don't know how to tell you and they've probably reassigned it.

Another week goes by. Nothing. The third week, the art director finally has the balls to call me and says, "Um, you know, this just isn't working for people here at the publishing house. It is too mean. I have to be honest with you. We had a 10-minute discussion in the marketing meeting this morning about whether or not Santa Claus is showing the girl his penis." (And I'm thinking, *You mean the guns aren't enough?*) I said, "Do they want him to?"

And he said, "No! They don't!" He offered to pay me a kill fee, but I was like, *Damn, this should be so easy. It's* Horrible Christmas *by Augusten Burroughs.*

I started to think about what else people do at Christmas that's totally fucked up. Well, they dress up their pets for the holidays (and it's not just Christmas). What says "Let's celebrate our Risen Lord!" more than clamping a pair of rabbit ears on your cat or turning it into a sacrificial lamb? (We've set the right tone, but we have to steer it back to Jesus' birthday.) The important thing is that these animals look very, very angry—dismayed. One image was probably illegal in half the States; another image is very Dr. Seuss... but this guy is *really* upset. However, the image I chose really nailed it, because Augusten actually had a pit bull. Anger, anger, and I would like to think that the second that the photographer snapped, his face was bitten off. Yes—nailed it!

A week goes by, and another week goes by. Nothing. Total despair. The third week, the art director called and said, "Yeah, you know, these really weren't working for anybody so we solved it in-house. Just bill the kill fee."

OK.

And so I conceded defeat. But what's interesting is what they did go with—Santa and the whole penis thing. They changed their minds.

(This is very serious, and so you *must* stop laughing.)

David Rakoff was a good friend of mine. *Fraud*, his first book, was partly based on the shtick that he gets assignments by a magazine to go and do things that he is absolutely, totally ill-equipped or -prepared for. (He's an urbane, skinny, little guy.) So *GQ* sends him out whitewater rafting in Colorado, and he writes about it. But he writes really well. But the whole concept is that he is not what he says he is.

I wanted to play with the idea that the book didn't look like what it was saying it was. The first attempt was modelled on a cereal that came out in 1970s, called Life. Basically, it was made for a demographic of people of a certain age that once they consumed it, they would achieve a successful bowel movement. So everyone's very happy about that. But nobody understood it or liked it.

So for some reason I decided to extend the concept even further to advertising for erectile dysfunction. I've always been fascinated by erectile dysfunction ads, because they can't show the product in use. So what they do instead is show you how happy it makes everyone. So it's like: We just had sex and now we're golfing. This disturbed all involved even more.

I started to think, *I'm Joe Q. Public, and I buy this book. I'm starting to read it and I'm starting to think, "Wait a minute—this guy's a fraud, he's a joke, he's a liar."* And so what do I do? I take out a big red Magic Marker and I scribble on the front. And I keep reading. And for the spine I just get angrier, angrier, about all the testimonials and all. This was a two-colour job. It was so simple to make this book like somebody really did this. And it really was the best thing. And David really loved it.

I'm a huge Charles Schulz fan. This was going to be the definitive prose biography by David Michaelis. There is an overall look at his career. He worked and slaved on it for six years with the cooperation of Schulz's widow and his children. He finally got the manuscript done. In the meantime he wanted me to do the cover, and I am like, "What am I going to bring to this that is fresh or interesting at all?"

Part of Schulz's genius was to distill human personalities down to their most basic human components. So what if I took that idea further and distilled Charlie Brown down to just these five elements, that if there was anything less you wouldn't know what it was. But there is just enough there that there is the whole inner life and that is the signature and what have you.

Now, everybody loved this. In the meantime, Schulz's widow reads the book, children read the book. Hate the book. "What do you mean he had an affair with somebody young enough to be his daughter? What?" It's a great book but they didn't want any flaws. So they said, "OK, we can't stop you from doing this because you have enough legal stuff in place, but you cannot use any Schulz

imagery.” And at that point, poor David is like, “If you just want to bail, bail, and we will figure it out.” And I said, “No, let’s further distill the image of Charlie Brown down to his shirt, and use a font that looks like Schulz’s handwriting. It’s not really his handwriting, and you can’t copyright a yellow background. It’s purely innocent.”

Now we actually are talking about the real Jesus. I got this call years ago—1996: “I think we have your dream job. How would you like to design the cover of the Bible?” And I said, “Well, I don’t know.” And they said, “It’s a new translation by this Greek scholar named Richard Lattimore. But what we want you to do is to imagine it as this great epic novel, like it’s a work of fiction.” And I said, “Well, that’s fine with me because that’s how I’ve been thinking about it for quite some time.”

So I’m looking at all this artwork and I came upon all this photography by Andres Serrano—who you may or may not know. He is really great. He did this series called “Morgue Series” which is literally that. He got permission from a city department to hang out in a morgue and watch dead people come in for a week and photograph them. This is *Murder Victim #5*. He’s dead, but there is something really extraordinary about this picture because he sort of looks like he’s alive at the same time. It’s literally very beautiful but horrifying and surreal. So this to me seemed to encapsulate the Bible—the major themes of the book. I thought, *They’re never going to go with this but I think it is the right thing to do. I will send it to them. They will say thanks but no thanks and that will be the end of it.*

They loved it. And at that point, Richard Lattimore was dead, which made him very easy to work with. And the publisher was fearless and they’re like, “Let’s do it.” So out it comes. Now, as you may or may not know, Andres Serrano was also the photographer behind an image called *Piss Christ*, which almost single-handedly brought down the NEA in the U.S. in the late ’80s, and it became guilty by association. None of the chain bookstores would carry this book with this cover. In the meantime the jacket itself got tons of press. It won every design award it could have, but for the publisher it was a total disaster. It was a very interesting object lesson.

Then they came out with the paperback edition, which they did not ask me to work on, which is this—which is, you know, the same thing. It’s not what you show but how you show it.

*Chip Kidd* is associate art director at Knopf, an imprint of Random House, in New York. This is an edited version of his address to the Alcuin Society on October 19, 2012, based on a transcription made by *Wendy Massing*. *Chip Kidd* addressed the TED 2012 conference in Long Beach, California, regarding book design.

You can view his 15-minute presentation at <http://youtu.be/cC0KxNeLp1E>.

