

## *Telling, and retelling, our stories*

THE BOOK ARTS are all about presenting the stories we tell, and the Alcuin Society has found a particular mandate for itself in recognizing excellence in book design in Canada through its annual awards program. The mission is laudable; as Marshall McLuhan famously remarked, “the medium is the message,” and a message that’s presented well is likely to be taken more seriously than one presented poorly. Similarly, we’re inclined to lavish attention on our prize texts; to wit, the medieval scribes illuminating Scripture and other documents, and the calligraphers we commission to pen citations and diplomas. If we can’t make it new (to quote Ezra Pound), we can at least make it special.

But there’s also a need for novelty, and refreshing how we tell our stories. Alexander Pope knew the power of memory and its refreshment when he remarked that learning occurred best when new information was presented as continuous with the old:

Men must be taught as if you taught them not,  
And things unknown proposed as things forgot.

Discoveries may be revolutionary, but if you want them accepted, how much better to start from where people are at than where they’re lost.

Today, we’re awash in information. While a rising tide lifts all boats, many people are lost at sea because the amount of data is simply incomprehensible. This should boost demand for the book arts, and the importance of good design, so that the information people most need is also the information most accessible to them.

The medium is key to the delivery of the message, and ultimately, the message itself, as short prose forms deliver hit after hit of information and argument via hand-held device to attention spans shorter by the character count.

How do we get people to absorb the learning of the past in such an environment, and remain open to new ideas? How do we get people to think deeply about the world that was, and is, and is to come?

“If you want to change a society, then you have to tell an alternative story,” remarked philosopher Ivan Illich, well known for his countercultural takes on education, religious practice, and other matters.

This issue of *Amphora* looks at alternative storytelling in the fields of bibliography, librarianship and fairy tales.

Robert Coupe, for example, tells the story of his book collection—but also how he told the stories of the books themselves through a readable bibliography that steers clear of arcane descriptive formulae.

Robert Desmarais discusses efforts to make the rich holdings of the University of Alberta’s special collections library appeal to visitors, and perhaps even introduce them to people who might not have even known they existed. Print and material culture are brought face to face, and if the medium becomes the message in the telling of stories buried within the collection, so too the stories being told are found in the material artifacts the archive presents.

And, speaking of artifacts, Trisha Klus tells how she used the book arts to provide an alternative take on the familiar stories of Mother Goose. It’s also a reminder of how good design conveys fictions as well as truths, instructing as well as delighting us (as good *poiesis* should).

Ultimately, good design is an act of memory: continuous with the past, and ensuring that new memories are created for the future to remember.

~ Peter Mitham, editor