



*Got Anything to Eat?, Woodcut by Leonard Hutchinson*

# BOOK DESIGN IN CANADA

THE FORM OF THE (CANADIAN) BOOK

*Dean Allen*



WHAT'S the measure of a well-designed book? Appropriateness? Beauty? Elegance? Would it sit happily in a *Toronto Life* decoration spread? Will it fly to Frankfurt? Is it world class?

All and none of the above, it would seem. It's a fussy game, turning a pile of words into a physical object.

Without getting too lofty about it, it's useful to view book design as a sort of performance: an actor starts with a script, a musician with a score, a book designer with a sum of text. Each is called upon to interpret the material in a way that works, or at least in a way the market will bear. Each is subject to the whims of taste and fashion, and each runs the risk of shouldering the blame if no one applauds. Happily, the talents of those designing books in Canada have never been stronger, and, casting an eye over the retail bookshelves, there's cause for at least one healthy round of applause, if no standing ovations just yet.

It took the usual few years for Canadian publishers to catch up, but the explosion of innovative and elegant book design in New York and London in the late 1980s has fully resonated here. The bell-bottomed, parted-and-feathered McLelland and Stewart jackets of the 1970s, dripping with ludicrous display type, and the busy-busy, DTP-software-driven covers of the 1980s and early 1990s are almost all gone. In their place are handsome crops of sturdy volumes, not quite so informed by the trends of the day, or what the latest design tools can do.

Predictably, economics have dictated this resurgence. Now that book publishing has been fully uprooted from its quiet corner of the cultural landscape and transplanted to the centre of a rapidly globalised and concentrated media economy, book marketing has had to respond to the cold Darwinism of the free market. The stakes are high, and for most of the industries producing in the new cultural economy, nothing is to be left to chance, and market research rules all. But publishers don't do market research, preferring to base decisions on instinct and the opinions of salespeople and retailers. However, the prospect of sending big-ticket books out into a market crowded with competition from all media has led some Canadian publishers to re-examine the importance of design, which

PORTRAIT OF

# Fred Ferris

## AS A Moral

His name is Ferris. Fred Ferris, although no one ever calls him by his first name. For a joke, he tells strangers his parents named him after Ferris Fan, the baseball player who won the American League batting titles in 1951 and 1952. Knowledgeable baseball fans eventually realize that our man was five years old before Fan won his first batting title, but they rarely notice the first-last name crossover. When they do, Ferris reminds them that "true" means bullshit with a straight face.

In case you think Ferris and I are one and the same, let me list some key biographical differences. He's from a small town in northern British Columbia. So am I, but my home town is about seventy miles south of mine, smaller, and more stunk up by its pulp mills. Both his parents were dead before he was twenty, while mine are still hale and hearty in their sixties. He grew up with a lone sister who lived with a distant aunt during the war, while they might have bonded usefully. He hasn't seen her in more than twenty years. I have three siblings I see all the time.

*An opening from  
Gender Wars  
by Brian Fawcett,  
Somerville House  
Publishing.*

had for so long been the most disregarded line of production budgets.

Those designing books in Canada include full-time staff in publish-

ing companies, who range from genuinely talented and motivated designers to bewildered interns plunked in front of computers and told to get to work. Then there are corporate designers from the arena of annual reports and huge retainers, descending now and again to snap up some literary street cred. And there are the plucky few of dubious career moxie who dedicate themselves to doing nothing but freelance book work.

Book design, like any other craft, is a process of solving problems and overcoming hurdles, the most common of which starts at the concept stage. Publishers will want to shoehorn as much information as possible onto book covers, leaving no ambiguity as to what's inside. But attempts to summarise everything going on under the covers by cramming multiple images, visual metaphors or marketing copy into such a small canvas are doomed. Someone looking for a specific book will find it. Shelf browsers, open to enticements, will always let their eyes fall upon the quietly beautiful rather than the noisily demanding. Compare the clarity of Toronto designer Gordon Robertson's jacket for Barbara Gowdy's *The White Bone* (1998) to, say, the cover of Russell Smith's *Noise*, (1997) which, like many Porcupine's Quill titles, oddly combines splendid interior typography, paper and binding with brutally dissonant and anachronistic cover design.

Much of Robertson's work is notable for innovation and hitting the mark, from the austere directness of the Noam Chomsky collections he designed for New Star Books (1992, 1997), to the slightly chilled wit gracing the pages of Lynn Crosbie's *Click* (1997), to a cheeky cover design for *Chips and Pop* (1998) which seems to satirise the book's breathless, implausible offer-

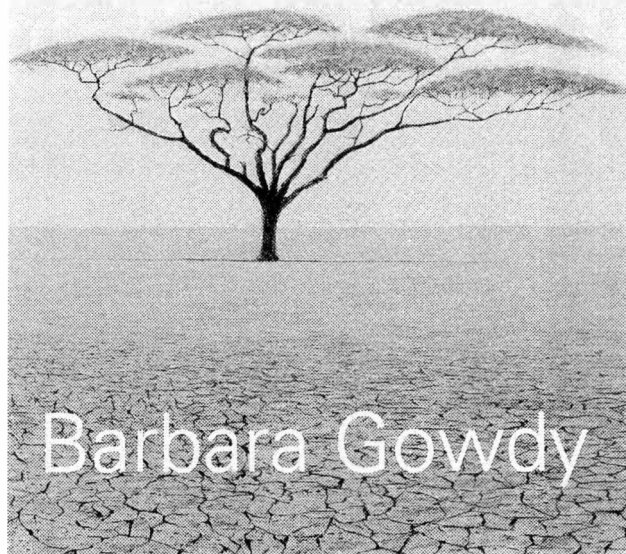
# The White Bone

ings of ways into the wallets of the young.

One very impressive work of Robertson's is Brian Fawcett's *Gender Wars* (Somerville House), as much for the strength of its design as for the variety of strong opinion surrounding its release in 1994. Its fragmented, self-conscious meta-narrative is bolstered, and in many ways fully outshone, by fragmented, self-conscious design. The combination of design interoperating with text produces a book worthy of repeated exploration.

Another unfortunate tendency of publishers is to not give the public much credit for being able to read. Much hand wringing surrounds the packaging of books intended for specific demographics, especially on the part of sales and marketing people. Business books come under intense scrutiny if not designed with a certain "look," as though the Babbitry need to have their heads hit over with hammers to find this season's boosterism manual. Funny, then, that the suave cover design for *Boom, Bust and Echo* (1996), a book offering to drop Organisation Man right at the doorstep of target demographics, didn't look anything at all like the business books of its time. If memory serves, it did rather well.

Whatever ambitions they may have about the quality of a finished book, Canadian designers are at the mercy of budget and the limitations of what our printers can do. Compared to the US, where competition among book printers is high and quality is paramount, Canadian printers don't always provide much help in the production of well-made books. Just one example: early perfect bound books tended to fall apart. Improvements in adhesives and binding equipment have long since solved the problem, but most every Canadian printer – presumably fearing the return of a single crumbling book – will cram the spines of trade paperbacks with glue. That this format is also dubbed "quality paperback" holds some irony: there's not a



great deal of quality, never mind pleasure, to be found in reading a book constantly trying to snap shut. To kick this shabbiness up a notch, one Toronto book printer has been known to cut costs by binding paperbacks against the paper grain, making for restless little books that won't open comfortably while being read, and won't stay closed when left alone.

Vancouver's George Vaitkunas, who undertook a design education at Yale and in Switzerland before alighting on a career of designing books, and who, like Robertson, has collected several Alcuin Society Distinctions for Excellence in Canadian Book Design, brings both a quiet serenity and studied precision to the large illustrated volumes he works on. His catalogue of the recent Art Gallery of Ontario Cornelius Krieghoff exhibition (Douglas & McIntyre) is a remarkable success, given the restraints of an awkward format and having been printed at a certain high-volume printer on the prairies not exactly known for its sensitivity to colour precision.

A tricky and frequent problem is how to turn the coercive power of graphic design – used so effectively in propaganda and advertising – back upon itself, in the interest of commenting on propaganda and advertising. Bruce Mau's design of Naomi Klein's *No Logo* makes an effort at this, but in the end throws off all sorts of mixed messages. If the book aims to take to task the darker forces of marketing who use graphic design as a tool of coercion, then the (presumably ironic) gesture of making the book look so self-consciously designed strikes an odd note. But then, shipping the book in stapled, photocopied, Samizdat form wouldn't make it far past the first marketing meeting.

Curiously, the American edition of *No Logo* (Picador) just looks weird: the title fairly shrieks from the cover, beneath which an innocent child is pictured, plainly waiting to have his head filled with advertising's cruel lies. Politically off-base or not, the Canadian jacket rocks in comparison.

To give the publishers due credit, sometimes designers are allowed to do their job with complete liberation, and often the results can be stunning. Vancouver designer Val Speidel, whose sensitivity to the interaction of type and image is always a pleasure to admire, brandishes a wonderfully exuberant set of design riffs in *Boys Like Her* (Press Gang, 1999).

Wither the book? No. Seems unlikely the desirability of printed books

as physical objects will ever decrease. Despite all the third-wave cheer-leading about a paperless, networked world in which “content” is shunted about at the speed of money, it’s become clear that hypertext is a perfect complement to the book. While it offers the wonders of speed, dynamic revision and ease of navigation, hypertext has none of the tactile intimacy or eminent legibility found in printed books. Movies and television may have taken something away from the publishing world, but the Internet, fundamentally based as it is on reading and writing, has been a boon.

Thankfully, the next few years should see the design of electronically delivered text come into its own. Today’s computer monitors and handheld devices are awkward and hinder readability, but developments in high-resolution LCD screens and type-rendering software are proceeding at the same frantic pace as everything else digital.

And for those choosing to remain in the three-dimensional world, computer design tools have, after fifteen long, bumpy and regrettable years, finally started to take the fundamentals of good design seriously.

One of the shibboleths of the book industry is that design cannot save a bad book, which is total balls. Each year sees countless titles (“earnest midlist” as one publishing professional puts it) whose only saving grace is found in their good looks. Looking at the stacks of pretty, empty cookbooks, lifestyle manuals and aphorism collections, one wants to forget about the usefulness of design entirely. At this point the route many continental European publishers take is so appealing. A quiet austerity of title, author’s name and publishers mark resting on an otherwise nude cover, free of shrieking hyperbole, fully acknowledging the public’s ability to read, confident in the quality of the writing within. And beneath the surface, well-chosen words are rendered in a lucid, unencumbered and engaging way, the typography, as Robert Bringhurst has written, “not exploding before the eye but invisibly and slowly catching fire in the mind.”

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