

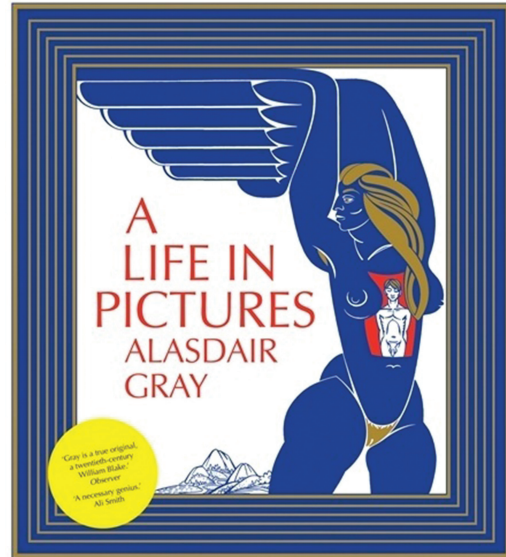
Alasdair Gray *A life in pictures and books*

WALKING THROUGH British Art Show 7 at London's Hayward Gallery in February, I was both startled and delighted to encounter, amid a performance piece of a naked man lying on a burning bench and a variety of video work lasting up to 24 hours, several paintings by Alasdair Gray. The fact this 77-year-old Glaswegian artist, novelist and book designer was included in this exhibition devoted to "artists on the grounds of their significant contribution to contemporary art in the last five years" is a wonderful testament to Gray's continued relevance. The publication of three retrospective works by Gray in 2009 and 2010 underlines his importance as a writer and book designer:

A Gray Play Book (Luath Press, Edinburgh), collect plays film scripts and librettos
Collected Verse (Two Ravens Press, Uig, Isle of Lewis)
A Life in Pictures (Canongate, Edinburgh), a lavishly illustrated "autopictography," including along with his paintings numerous examples of dust jacket design, typography and book illustration

Since the publication of Gray's acclaimed novel and probably best known book *Lanark* in 1981, he has produced over 20 books, almost all of which bear the distinctive look of his design and illustration. Of his 21 titles in 31 editions in my collection (a good but by no means comprehensive grouping), I count only three which he did not design. And his are wonderful designs.

Gray's book illustrations evoke William Blake and in them the portrait predominates. Unique in contemporary trade literary publishing is Gray's engagement with the whole book. Most of his books have elaborate front and rear gold- or silver-stamped designs on the boards, often with text. For example *Gray*, an ardent



Scottish nationalist, uses the exhortation "WORK AS IF YOU LIVE IN THE EARLY DAYS OF A BETTER NATION" combined with stylized Scottish thistles on the boards of *Poor Things* (1992) and *The Book of Prefaces* (2000).

This quote, which he attributes to another, is engraved on a wall of the Scottish Parliament building and is credited to Gray. (*Wikipedia* reports that they managed to misspell his name in the wall engraving, which I suppose is poetic or engraver justice if the attribution is in fact incorrect.)

The majority of Gray's books have complex title page designs. Frequently illustrations and printer devices appear throughout, leaving the reader no doubt that this is a book the author has considered in its entirety.

The best example of Gray's books to demonstrate his commitment and skills as a designer and typographer is his book of books, *The Book of Prefaces*. In an article published in *Bookseller* in advance of its May 2000 publication by Bloomsbury, Gray's editor Liz Calder recounts her dealings with Gray in the long lead-up to the appearance of the substantial 641-page volume.

Some of her correspondence with Gray involved delays in delivering text and design, the author's desire for advances, and his fundraising for the book from other sources (including £8,500 from a local pub owner!). What really stands out, however, is Gray's detailed engagement with

issues such as pricing (“I like it that the book will cost distinct pounds, £35 instead of £14.99”) and design details. For example, he wrote to Calder:

The dustjackets reached me this morning. The production department and printers have done what I asked with what I gave them and the result will be a good advert for the book: but like all first printings it is improvable, and will—I hope—be improved for the book itself. For instance the white-on-red lettering on front and spine is not as bold from a distance as I hoped, and on the spine and back flap the gold does not register perfectly within the black outline given for it. The faults are mine—I can now see how to correct these and will tell Penny how to do so when it will be convenient for her.

All of these deficiencies have been addressed in the finished book. I am sure the vast majority of authors can only marvel at this degree of willingly accepted involvement with book design and production. The book itself is a delight, with two-colour printing throughout and postmodern type layout and illustration.

As for the content, Gray in one of his typically amusing and ironic blurbs issues a warning to parents, teachers, librarians and booksellers about this collection of introductions to great books by their own authors:

Do not let smart children handle this book. It will help them pass examinations without reading anything else.

Alasdair Gray is an exceptional writer, painter and book designer who deserves far wider exposure. *A Life in Pictures* and *The Book of Prefaces* are two good places to start.

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~ Paul Whitney is a library consultant hoping to properly organize his book collection following his recent retirement as City Librarian at the Vancouver Public Library.

Welcome, New Members!

John Boutillier, St. John's, NL

Alvan Bregman, Vancouver, BC

Helen Brown, Vancouver, BC

Rebecca Hardwick, Richmond, BC

Caitlin Hildebrandt, Vancouver, BC

James Lovitt, Langley, BC

Muskoka Lakes Music Festival, Port Calgary, ON

Stephen Quick, Orleans, ON

Chick Rice, Vancouver, BC

Sarah Robinson, L'Île-Perrot, QC

Art Seto, Thornhill, ON

Stone Bunny Press, Oshawa, ON

The Wayfarer's Bookshop, West Vancouver, BC

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