
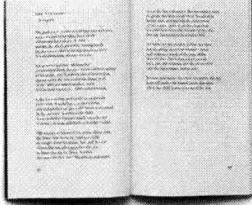
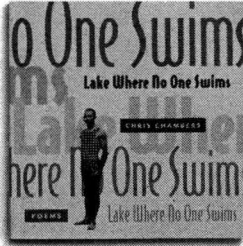
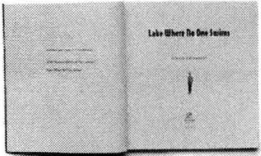
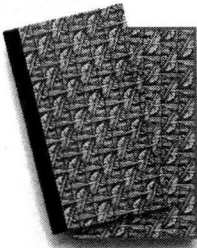
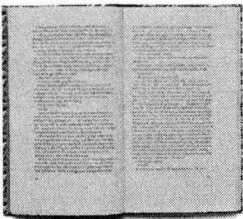
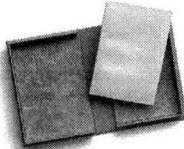
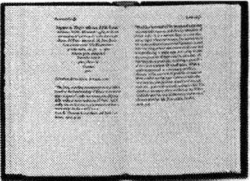


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| Poetry | First Prize | <p>TITLE Waterglass</p> <p>AUTHOR Jeffrey Donaldson</p> <p>PUBLISHER McGill-Queen's University Press</p> <p>DESIGNER Santo Chow</p> <p>SIZE 16 x 19 cm</p> | Poetry | Second Prize | <p>TITLE Lake Where No One Swims</p> <p>AUTHOR Chris Chambers</p> <p>PUBLISHER Podlar Press</p> <p>DESIGNER Zahr Design & Typography</p> <p>SIZE 17 x 17 cm</p> | | |
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Pages from a catalogue of the awards in the Book Design Competition for 1999.

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|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
| Limited Edition | First Prize | <p>TITLE Inishbream</p> <p>PUBLISHER Barbarian Press</p> <p>DESIGNER Crispin Elsted</p> <p>SIZE 16 x 27 cm</p> | Limited Edition | Second Prize | <p>TITLE Francesco Griffio da Bologna Fragments & Glimpses</p> <p>PUBLISHER A Lone Press</p> <p>DESIGNER Rollin Milroy</p> <p>SIZE 9 x 13 cm</p> | | |
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By Chance, By Design

A Brief History of the Alcuin Society Book Design Competition



Springtime is awards season for the arts: for films there are the Oscars; theatre has the Tonys; for books there are the Governor General's Awards, the Bookers, the Oranges, and on and on—all of them awards for writing. For the physical book itself, for the design, there is today only one Canada-wide award: the Alcuin Citations (the "Alcuins").

Despite the fact that it is design that makes one want to reach out a hand, pick up a book and leaf through it, the Alcuin Citations are not very well known outside of publishers and designers. Their purpose is to recognize good book design in this country, encourage publishers to hire good designers, and show the designers themselves that they really are noticed and appreciated.

The competition started small. It was June 1981, and the Alcuin Society was in its sixteenth year. Peter Quartermain, chairman of the Society's board, had the idea that the Society might be able to have some kind of small competition to see who could produce "the best designed trade book published in Canada in 1980." The idea was brought to the monthly board meeting, and a motion was made that was to be the first reference, in writing, to what was to become the Alcuin Society's Competition for Excellence in Book Design in Canada.¹

The competition was much less ambitious then than it is now. One of the board members, Bryan Peet, moved (seconded by Desmond Harris) that Helen Moore and Don Atkins (still a director of the Society in 2005) be appointed to secure judges for what was then known as the Alcuin Citation. Publishers were canvassed with the idea of presenting the award in October; but because only a few entries were received, they were solicited again. Only one more book was received.

As it turned out, it wasn't so simple to choose one book that was "the best." Instead, the judges—Jurgen Grohne and Reinhard Derreth—selected three, in three categories:

- Pictorial: *Down to Earth: Canadian Potters at Work*, by Judy Thompson Ross *et al.* Published by Nelson/Canada; designed by Frank Newfeld.
- Prose: *A Trip Around Lake Huron*, by David McFadden. Published by Coach House Press; designed by Glenn Goluska.

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- Poetry: *McAlmon's Chinese Opera*, by Stephen Scobie. Published by Quadrant Editions.²

The awards for the best books of 1980 were eventually given out in November 1981. The entries were all displayed at the presentation; representatives of the winning publishers were invited; and a press release was issued immediately. Prominent members of the local press (Chris Dafoe of the *Vancouver Sun* and Geoffrey Molyneux of the *Vancouver Province*) were invited to attend.

In December, the board asked Helen Moore to approach Irene Alexander with the idea of developing an award certificate, done in calligraphy, that could be presented to future winners. At the same time, Geoff Spencer suggested that the scope of the jury panel be widened. This suggestion was adopted several years later.

Some progress was evident by the January 1982 board meeting: Helen Moore had suggested several people who might be able to produce a certificate at a reasonable price. Bryan Peet moved (seconded by Gene Horvath) that the Society should continue to give the Citations. A first mention was made of a separate committee to deal with the awards: it was moved that Geoff Spencer be appointed to chair the "new sub-committee."

But this was not to be. In February, the board heard that Geoff would be unable to chair a committee that year, but would be willing to do it in 1983. After much discussion, the board asked a Toronto rare book dealer, David Mason, to become a director-at-large and to organize the Citations. The Vancouver group agreed to assume responsibility for all of the secretarial work. David agreed to this in May.

When the board reconvened in the fall, everything was apparently on track. However, Bryan had seen David Mason in Toronto only to discover that personal problems would prevent David from dealing with the Citations. Peter Quartermain was asked to contact Richard Hopkins (then living in Toronto) to see if he would take over instead, and if he would ask Robert Bringham and two others to be jurors.

November 1982: Richard wasn't yet able to take over the job. The board decided to approach Geoff Spencer again (he'd indicated in February that he'd like to take on the job in a year), but so much time had elapsed since the

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first Citations, Geoff was to be allowed to use his discretion as to the actual publication year of the eligible books. Unfortunately, by January 1983 Geoff was unable to act because of intervening personal circumstances, so the Citations were temporarily dropped.

A year went by. In 1984 Don Atkins again approached Richard Hopkins, who took over, this time with Anne Tayler-Bringhurst's help. They sent out a letter to publishers in February, and by April over 100 books had been submitted in the following categories: Pictorial, Poetry, Prose and two new ones: Juvenile and Other.

The board decided to present the awards on June 21, in conjunction with a wine and cheese party. By the June 4 board meeting, the number of entries in the second competition had risen to 116 books, submitted by 42 publishers. The ceremony (changed, yet again) was to be held on June 13 at the Canadian Book Information Centre; \$200 had been donated by Esmond Lando for the printing of the Citation certificates. The CBIC donated the use of their hall.

In July 1984, a question was raised: what should we do with all the books? The board decided to announce, through *Amphora*, that the books would be auctioned off in the fall to raise money to fund the next competition. Sealed bids would be accepted in advance.

At the October board meeting, Geoff suggested that Society members be asked to donate more books to be auctioned off with those from the competition. There would be a maximum of 30 books auctioned, with the rest to be distributed as door prizes. Geoff agreed to be the auctioneer. Rudi Diesvelt attended the function in full costume, dressed as Alcuin of York.

At the pre-Christmas meeting on December 17, 1984, the board set a schedule for the third competition that was, for the first time, close to the one that is used today. The letters to the publishers were to be in the mail at the beginning of January 1985; the deadline for receipt of entries was February 28; judging was scheduled for March 15. The winners, however, were not to be notified until April 1 (whereas today, the notification is done within a day of the judging). The books were to be exhibited on April 13. An application for funds was submitted to the National Book Festival and the B.C. Cultural Fund for \$1,700.

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Although the letters to the publishers did not, of course, get mailed out by January 1, they did get out early enough for the original deadline of the end of February still to be within reason. Some funding was received; it was only half of the amount requested, but enough to cover expenses.

A two-week exhibit of the winning books was arranged to be held at the Butler Gallery, on West Pender Street, Vancouver, in conjunction with the National Book Festival, April 13–20, 1985. The awards ceremony took place the same week. Martin Jackson, the calligrapher, prepared the Citations, as he does to this day. Anne Tayler coordinated events with that year's judges, Crispin Elsted, Jim Rimmer, Reinhard Derreth and Ron McAmmond.

By mid-March, more than 100 books had been received from about 40 different publishers. The Butler Gallery exhibit had been cut back to five days (April 13–17), and the third awards ceremony was held at the gallery. Many distinguished guests attended, with a good response and positive feedback; publicity was excellent, with television coverage by the CBC. Crispin Elsted spoke, and Bill Hoffer handed out the awards.

By the time the board began planning for the fourth competition, a lot of the problems concerning timing, schedules and procedures had been worked out, and the focus shifted to criteria for the award. The question arose as to whether books, to be eligible, had to be wholly produced in Canada. It was decided that the ruling should be worded "designed by a Canadian and submitted by a Canadian publisher." Then the board discussed whether there should be a separate category for private press books. A category was created for the best book from a private press. If the publisher wanted to have the books returned after judging, the Society would do so, but the publisher had to provide the return postage.

For the fourth competition, in 1986, things had been considerably streamlined. Takao (Tak) Tanabe, Glenn Goluska and Robert Bringhurst were approached to be judges. Winners were chosen. Citations were handed out in three locations: in Vancouver, at the Canadian Book Information Centre, on April 17, and at the Arts of the Book exhibit; and in Toronto, by Anne Tayler.

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In the spring of 1987, Ross Carter presented his views on the inclusion of small press poetry books and the eligibility of private presses for awards. Ross was asked to prepare definitions for the new category of books, the Poetry Chapbook Award. The existing ground rules did not change: books were not to be returned (too expensive). The new category was to be publicized through the Canadian Poetry Association and the League of Canadian Poets.

At the board meeting on April 13, 1987, another new category was added: Education, and Ross submitted the following proposal. The award was to be called the Alcuin Citations, the Award for Excellence in Canadian Book Design. It was to have the following categories: Poetry, Prose, Juvenile, Pictorial, Education, Poetry Chapbooks and Other.

The submissions were not to be returned and all submissions would become the property of the Society. For all categories other than poetry chapbooks, the following criteria would apply:

- The books should consist of not less than 30 pages in the Juvenile category and 45 pages in all other categories.
- The books should be published in an edition of no fewer than 500 copies.
- The books should be designed by a Canadian designer and submitted by a Canadian publisher.
- The "dollar amount" was to be removed: previously, there had been an upper limit to the retail price of eligible books.

For poetry chapbooks, the following criteria would apply:

- They had to consist of not less than 16 pages.
- They had to be published in an edition of no fewer than 50 copies.
- The books had to be designed by a Canadian designer and submitted by a Canadian publisher.

The proposal was accepted by the board.

The chairman's report presented at the Society's annual general meeting in May 1987 discussed the fifth competition. Submissions from all across the country were received. The four judges (Crispin Elsted, David Kerfoot, Dick Kouwenhoven and Jim Rimmer) chose 19 finalists from almost 200 books. The books were to be exhibited at various locations in Toronto and Vancouver. A Text and Reference category had been added, and Poetry

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Chapbooks were to be added as a new category for the sixth competition as well, with support and prizes for the latter offered by the Canadian Poetry Association. The last year that the Other category was used was 1988.

The American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) holds competitions in the United States that are similar to the Alcuin Society's. Their categories are Prose, Poetry, Adult Picture and Photography Books, How-To, Craft and Hobby Books, Text and Reference Books, Juvenile Books and Limited Editions.

In 1989, following the AIGA categories, the Alcuin Society adopted two more: How-To, Cooking, Craft, Hobby and Reference, and the much less inclusive one, Limited Editions. In that same year, Prose was split into Prose Fiction and Prose Non-fiction, temporarily reverting to a single grouping from 1989 to 1996, then dividing again in 1997.

Today there are eight categories: Children (the only one consistent throughout), Limited Editions, Pictorial, Poetry (not just chapbooks), Prose Fiction, Prose Non-fiction, Prose Non-fiction Illustrated (the three latter from the original Prose), and Reference.

Beginning with the second competition, in 1984, the Society listed the Alcuin Citation winners in issues of *Amphora*. The awards were announced irregularly.³

In 1996, starting with the fourteenth group of awards (for books published in 1995), the Society began to produce separate annual award catalogues. These were much more elaborate than the various *Amphora* articles, and were mailed to members and publishers in addition to the regular issues of *Amphora*.⁴

Reading through the various issues of *Amphora* and the catalogues, one is struck by a certain consistency in the award winners. Sometimes, a publisher and/or a designer has had an exceptionally good year and has won several prizes, often in different categories. This has happened even though the judges have changed over a period of years, and is a testament to the calibre of the designers' work.

A list of the "top seven designers," who have won a total of 130 awards (a staggering 21 percent of all awards given) appears at the end of this article. Gordon Robertson has the most consistent success record, having won in

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15 of the 23 competitions. Some relative newcomers are off to fast starts: Andrew Steeves and Peter Cocking have only begun to show their work recently, but have won several awards each. In total, 622 citations were awarded between 1981 and 2005.⁵

Some, though not all, of the judges are designers themselves,⁶ but in all cases they have been intimately involved with the production of high-quality, well-designed books. Until 1996 (with the exception of Glenn Goluska, who came to Vancouver from Ontario to be a judge in 1986), the judges were all from British Columbia. Beginning in 1996, the Society wanted to emphasize the national scope of the competition and, to this end, began to import judges to Vancouver from other parts of the country to join those from British Columbia. Peter Bartl came from Alberta, Sue Colberg from Edmonton, Linda Gustafson from Toronto, Karin Oest from Montréal, Randall Speller from Toronto and Andrew Steeves from Nova Scotia.⁷

As well as judging the competitions, the judges have been charged with writing commentary for the catalogues (and, previously, for the *Amphora* issues containing award announcements). Consequently, some of the issues of *Amphora*, and the catalogues, contain excellent short essays on various aspects of book design, from such authors (and judges) as Robert Bringhurst, Ronald Hagler, Andrew Steeves, Linda Gustafson, Gordon Robertson, Randall Speller and others. Although some of the articles discuss issues relating directly to the specific group of entries received in a particular year, most of the commentaries remain very relevant today.

Most of the *Amphora* articles contain photos of the winning books (progressively more, in the later issues); the March 1985 issue (*Amphora* 59) contains a special insert with its own subtitle page, based on the newly designed calligraphy that was produced for the award certificates. And of course, once the catalogues appeared as separate publications, there were photos of all the winning books (still, unfortunately, in black and white, because of the expense of printing in colour).

The question of what to do with the books, first raised in 1984, was later resolved. In the mid-1990s, the competition attracted the attention of Dr. Yosef Wosk, of Simon Fraser University's Canadian Centre for Studies in

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Publishing. He encouraged the Society in its efforts, both with major donations (from himself and his family) to help fund the competition, and with ideas and contacts. In keeping with the increased partnership between the university and the Society, the board decided to donate a full set of the winning books each year (excluding Limited Editions, which are returned to the owners) to the Special Collections/Rare Books division of Simon Fraser University Library, to augment the university's publishing program. This ensures that there will be a permanent archive of this material available to book designers and connoisseurs of book design.

The Society receives additional copies from publishers, which are then displayed in exhibits across Canada. Once the last exhibition is complete, the remaining books, now numbering some 300 yearly (compared to the original 30), are auctioned, as was first suggested in 1984. Holding the auction permits Society members to view the books, and the proceeds help to defray the cost of the competition.

What has been left out of this article is the story of all the struggles, disagreements and colour of this competition over the years. There has always been a relatively small number of people involved in running it, and all of the work is done on a volunteer basis. All of us have cared passionately about its success, and about books and book design. It has taken an enormous amount of work on the part of all the participants to produce what we hope has become a truly professional competition, still the only national one in the country, whose purpose is to encourage and reward those Canadian publishers and designers who have cared enough to produce work of the very highest calibre.

1. From *Notes / Alcuin Society*, no. 4, Summer 1981:

The establishment by your board this spring of the Alcuin Citation for Excellence in Canadian Book Design has created considerable interest. The award specifications call for nominated books to have been published during 1980 in an edition of not less than 500 copies, containing no less than 45 pages, and retailing for no more than \$25. A significant number of entries has been received, and an announcement of the winning entry will be made at a special social occasion during October. The Society has also received a number of constructive suggestions as to possible additional categories for the Citation in future years.

2. *Ibid.*, no. 15, Spring 1984.

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3. The following issues of *Amphora* contain material about the previous year's winners:
No. 57, September 1984: 2nd awards (1981–83 books); No. 59, March 1985: 3rd (1984 books); No. 64, June 1986: 4th (1985 books); No. 70, December 1987: 5th (1986 books); No. 72, June 1988: 6th (1987 books); No. 77, September 1989: 7th (1988 books); No. 81, September 1990: 8th (1989 books); No. 84, Summer 1991: 9th (1990 books); No. 89, Autumn 1992: 10th (1991 books); No. 92, Summer 1993: 11th (1992 books); No. 97, Autumn 1994: 12th (1993 books); No. 101, Autumn 1995: 13th (1994 books)
4. Subsequently, catalogues of the winners were produced annually. Roberto Dosil, as well as serving as a judge for the competition for several years, also contributed his time and effort each year by designing these catalogues. They were published as follows:
1996–99 (14th–17th): published annually; cover title lists catalogue publication (and award) year, with awards listed for books published in the previous year.
2000–03 (18th–21st) publications: covers read “1999–2002,” which is the year of publication of books receiving the awards, not the publishing date of the catalogues. 2001 (19th): also published as *Amphora* no. 124 (which appears on cover, with the date “2000”). 2002 (20th): published in two volumes: Text and Judges' Commentaries.
2004 (22nd): no date appears on cover.
2005 (23rd): has title page; dated “2004,” with publication date 2005.
5. Seven designers have won 21 percent of the awards: Gordon Robertson (33), Tim Inkster (25), George Vaitkunas (21), Peter Cocking (17), Alan Brownoff (12), Michael Solomon (12) and Andrew Steeves (10).
6. Judges who themselves have won design awards include Peter Bartl (1); Robert Bringhurst (6); Sue Colberg (2); Reinhard Derreth (2); Roberto Dosil (2); Crispin Elsted (7); Jan Elsted (1); Glenn Goluska (6); Jürgen Grohne (1); Linda Gustafson (8); Gordon Robertson (33); Val Speidel (4); George Vaitkunas (21); and Andrew Steeves (10).
7. The following lists all of the judges, the dates of the relevant competitions, and the number of times (in parentheses) that they acted as judges. Especially noteworthy are Roberto Dosil and Dennis Nagy, who each acted as judges 12 times, and Ronald Hagler, who served 11 times. This represents a tremendous commitment of time and effort to the Society and to the competition. Bartl, Peter—1995–96, 2001 (3); Bringhurst, Robert—1983, 1985 (2); Colberg, Susan—1999, 2002–04 (4); Derreth, Reinhard—1981, 1983–84 (3); Dickson, Don—1987 (1); Dosil, Roberto—1987–95, 1997–99 (12); Elsted, Crispin—1983–84, 1986 (3); Elsted, Jan—1988–90 (3); Goluska, Glenn—1985 (1); Grohne, Jürgen—1981 (1); Gustafson, Linda—1998 (1); Hagler, Ronald—1987–97 (11); Hoffer, William—1984 (1); Kerfoot, David—1986 (1); Kouwenhoven, Dick—1986 (1); Maddison, George—1998, 2000 (2); McAmmond, Ron—1983–84, 1987 (3); Nagy, Dennis—1988–99 (12); Oest, Karen—2000 (1); Reid, Robert—1997 (1); Rimmer, Jim—1986 (1); Robertson, Gordon—2000 (1); Romero, Sharon—2001–02 (2); Smallman, Sylvia—1996, 1999 (2); Speidel, Val—2004 (1); Speller, Randall—2001–03 (3); Steeves, Andrew—2004 (1); Swenson, Tree—1985 (1); Tanabe, Takao—1985 (1); Vaitkunas, George—2000 (1); Warburton, Matt—2003 (1)