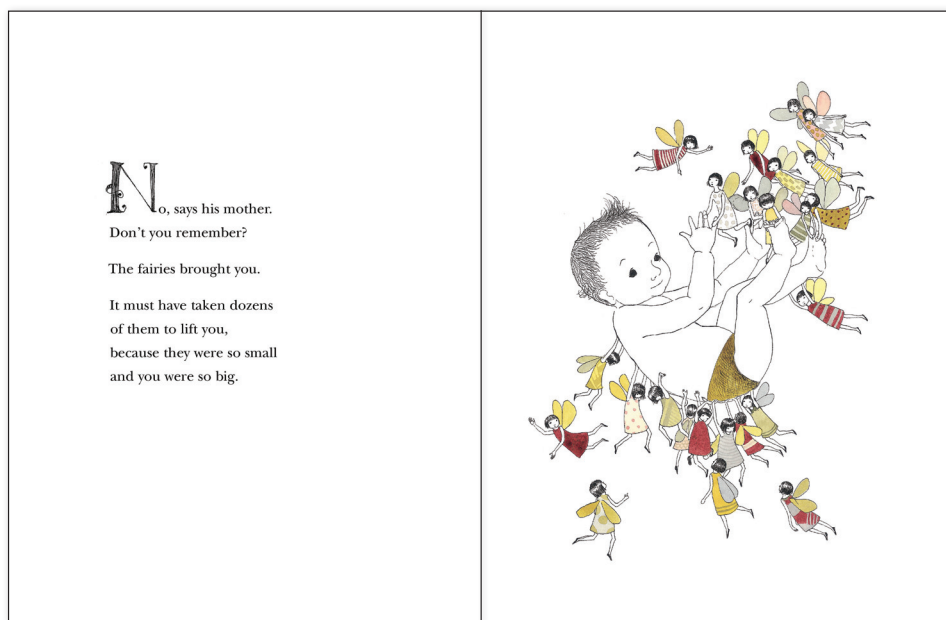




# Making Things Look Nice

*Award-winning Vancouver designer Robin Mitchell-Cranfield gets animated about having a passion for craft and finding fun in the details*

By Peter Mitham



*Spread from Where You Came From.*

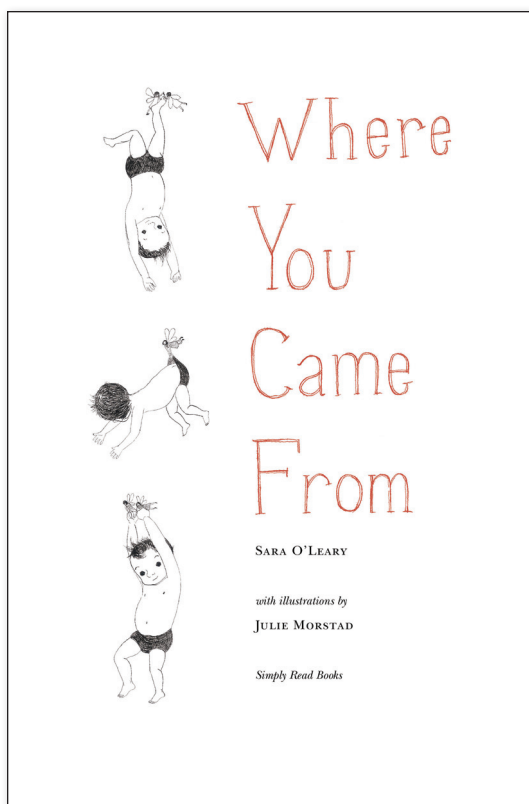
GIVEN THE NUMBER OF AWARDS she's won, it's surprising that Vancouver designer Robin Mitchell-Cranfield, principal of the Gastown studio hundreds & thousands design, isn't better known. Though she's enjoyed long-standing collaborations with the likes of artist Rodney Graham and author Judith Steedman, her Web site is a mere one-page placeholder that describes itself as still "under construction."

It's somehow appropriate for the 34-year-old designer who prefers to keep a low profile despite garnering three awards from the Alcuin Society this year for her work on titles such as Sara O'Leary's *Where You Came From* (a companion volume to the AIGA award-winning volume *When You Were Small*) and *Vancouver Matters*, a collection of essays that writer Frances Bula praises heartily as "a small, PhD-holders version of Chuck Davis's *Vancouver Book*."

Having arranged to meet at a café just around the corner from her office at Vancouver Film School, where she teaches digital design part-time, Mitchell-Cranfield comes in with an armful of items that provide tangible confirmation of her wide output. There are books, the slipcase for one of Graham's recordings and other items. Some serious art, and then some fun stuff. All of it finely crafted.

"I think I could have gone into a lot of different things and just enjoyed making things look nice in my home," she says, noting that she started out studying linguistics at the University of British Columbia and flirted with the idea of a career in medicine during a stint of hospital work during her undergrad years.

She eventually enrolled at Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, where children's books and then the potential for motion and interactive



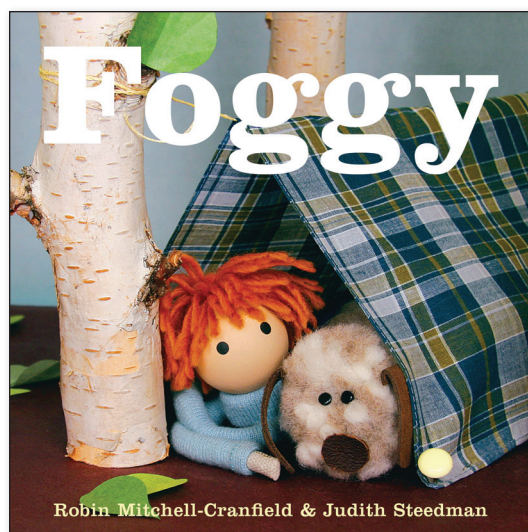
projects caught her attention (notably, three of her books, including the soon-to-be-released *Foggy* [Simply Read, 2009], are being made into animated films). What attracted her to the latter was the pacing, an interest that deepened her understanding of proportion and how things work together.

Graduating in 2001, Mitchell-Cranfield joined a fashion designer and photographer as part of the Vancouver design collaborative picnic. She struck out on her own in 2008, however, so that she could focus exclusively on print design.

"The thing I like about print, and the reason I keep coming back to it, is because it's concrete and tangible, and when it's done it's done," she said.

The hubbub at the café begins to drown out the conversation, so Mitchell-Cranfield suggests we head back to Vancouver Film School, her base for a course she teaches that focuses largely on print design and typography.

Books have a long history, and Mitchell-Cranfield believes their production has less to do with the heroic work of innovation than with the patient process of craft. Of course, innovation still happens, but when it does, it's more likely to



happen with the application of the accumulated knowledge of generations to a contemporary problem—something that gives a tradition its vitality. A craft is learned, and through that learning, the artist develops a sense of taste that influences how she (or he) tackles each project.

That sort of apprenticeship is less common among artists in the visual or digital realms, Mitchell-Cranfield says, where younger artists are tempted to frame themselves as The Next Big Thing, always trying to innovate and be brash and new.

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*"With book design there's a more patient quality to it.... You're learning how to do something very well."*

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"For younger designers, there's tremendous pressure to be unique," she says. "I think with book design there's a more patient quality to it. When you've mastered various production techniques and when you've mastered typesetting, or at least gotten a good handle on typesetting ... those aren't necessarily things that you're making brand new. You're learning how to do something very well."

Her own influences include Italy's Bruno Munari, Paul Rand (best known for his design of the IBM, UPS and ABC logos, among others), and designer and filmmaker Saul Bass. Her study of Jan Tschichold taught her the importance of professional detachment, something she doesn't feel she had in school, while New York's Push Pin Studios is currently helping her understand the



“Quick!  
The compass,  
the telescope,  
we’re almost home.”



tactful incorporation of political ideas into design.

Delving into what others have done, learning from it and then adapting those lessons to her own context is what Mitchell-Cranfield enjoys, and something she believes lies at the heart of a successful design career.

“Being a good designer is more about the passion that you have for mastering things really well, and that takes time—that takes years. It’s not a flash of passion, it’s more like a consistent, low-burning flame,” she says. “I think someone could have a design career in which they’re just aiming to do really good, solid work as opposed to sort of standing at the forefront.”



That reticence to put herself forward doesn’t mean Mitchell-Cranfield doesn’t have set ideas about how to go about projects. Rather, it highlights the quiet but powerful role she envisions design playing in the success of a book.

“When I’m working on books for other people, my job is to push them to the forefront and just create a really nice structure for them to inhabit,” she says. “If I’m doing my job well, I feel like people will notice it but they won’t really notice it.”

A typical design project begins with Mitchell-Cranfield determining a suitable format for the material she has to work with. Next, she’ll take the various aspects of production into consideration, as these will follow from the format and may prompt adjustments depending on the client’s budget. Once these are identified, she’ll identify an entry point that’s going to make the project

fun for her. Most projects have potential for fun, she says, whether it’s in the use of colour, fonts or shapes. Finding what makes a work sparkle is part of the challenge.

Sara O’Leary’s works are prime examples of projects where Mitchell-Cranfield had fun.

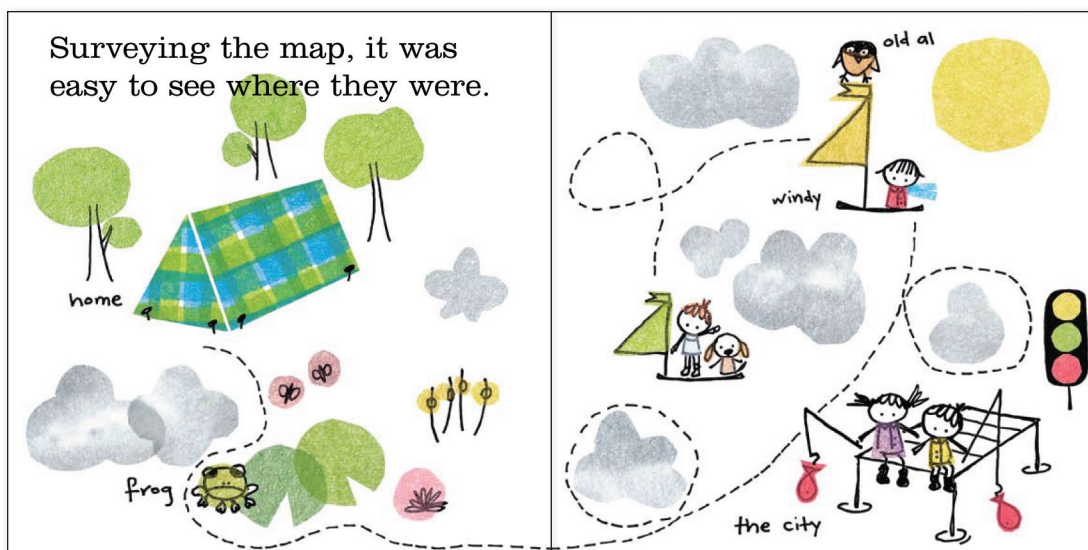
“[Julie Morstad’s] images are so beautiful, I don’t need to do a lot to the illustrations,” she said. “It becomes more about finding a nice proportion that’s going to contain the images well.”

With *When You Were Small*, she took a page of Morstad’s hand-drawn capital Ws to use in place of a drop cap on each page. Morstad was also cooperative about providing images for other details of the book, which was meant to feel like a high-quality production regardless of the budget. That sense was fostered through the use of endpapers decorated with a gallery of the exploits of Henry, the main character.

“For me, that’s the most fun part, is the little details,” Mitchell-Cranfield said. “[Morstad] was really great.”

The results are equally pleasing. The citation accompanying the award Mitchell-Cranfield received for her work on the project from the American Institute of Graphic Arts remarked, “Nice marriage of text and art, as well as design decisions such as cloth spine and charming endpapers that add to the nostalgic package.”

Better yet, the palette of colours in Morstad’s illustrations was relatively uniform, making it easier to develop a tone for the overall design and presentation of the text. Having too many colours



to work with is a pet peeve of Mitchell-Cranfield, who puts a high value on legibility, clarity and hierarchies in her designs.

But if that sounds too strict, she notes that she enjoys having fun with type, too. *The Rodney Graham Songbook* (2007) is a case in point.

Though the project had its design challenges, such as accommodating a CD in such a way that it wouldn't annoy readers, Mitchell-Cranfield was able to use a broad range of type, from super-traditional Venetian faces to mid-20th-century minimalist letters. A different type is used for the title of each song in the collection, a decision Mitchell-Cranfield took advantage of to comb old specimen books for typefaces that were both interesting and complementary.

The use of diverse typefaces reflects the liberality a good sense of taste, slowly acquired, allows.

"I don't tend to get that fussed about being in a particular camp of type," she says. "People will come up to me at a party and say, 'Is this a good typeface?' or 'What do you think of this?' or 'Isn't Comic Sans the worst typeface ever?' (And Comic Sans is a bad typeface.) But I don't really enjoy snobbery that much. I enjoy being particular, but I don't enjoy snobbery."

A solid sense of taste is a defence against snobbery, Mitchell-Cranfield suggests, especially in a society where designers face the temptation to identify themselves with particular camps as shorthand for broader design sensibilities.

It's something she's been thinking about a lot

lately, especially as she mulls future directions for her own career. Now a new mother, she's happy with the client list she's developed but strains against any limitations, whether imposed by the world of design or by accident. She emphasizes the importance of being open to new discoveries, regardless of the source.

"We all want to be on the same page—we all don't like Comic Sans or we all don't like Arial," she says of the recurring debates over the merits of specific typefaces.

However helpful those debates are in refining designers' tastes, she believes there's also a potential for them to foster an unhelpful orthodoxy that limits the imagination.

"Though there are good reasons to not like Comic Sans and Arial—I'm not going to take anyone on—I think that there's a danger in shutting down the kinds of things you're willing to look at."

~ Peter Mitham is editor of *Amphora*.