

# Frank Newfeld

*Books to Stir the Imagination*

PETER MITHAM



*Discussing his work at the Alcuin Society's 'An Evening with Frank Newfeld,' April 2, 2009, Simon Fraser University.*

*What matters about books and their design is not the degree to which they faithfully present reality either in words or in image, believes Frank Newfeld, but the power they have to inspire.*

One of the first judges of the Alcuin Society's annual book design competition in 1981, Newfeld returned to Vancouver at the beginning of April to judge entries in this year's competition. During a special evening presentation, he was also honoured for his contributions to book design in Canada with the society's Robert R. Reid Lifetime Achievement award.

But his concerns were not with the past when he spoke to members of the society, Graphic Designers of Canada and members of the public on April 2. Rather, one of the key messages he brought was of the growing role "the screen" plays in the experience of reading and the work of the imagination.

Rather than the act of "sustained attention" that Sven Birkerts associates with reading in *The Gutenberg Elegies* (1994), readers today increasingly understand the world through the omnipresent screen. "It's quite inescapable, whether the screen is in a cinema, on a TV set or part of the omnipresent computer," Newfeld says. It's an awful prospect, he explains, because it threatens to reduce reading from an act of the reader to a passive experience in which content is simply consumed. What readers do is no longer active, reducing books to the print equivalent of television.

This is particularly true in the case of book illustration, for which Newfeld won renown in



Frank Newfeld's illustration for Dennis Lee's poem "Higgledy Piggledy" in *Alligator Pie* (1974).



Frank Newfeld's initial "T" from Roy Daniells, *The Chequered Shade* (1963).

Canada and around the world in his long career devising designs and illustrations for works ranging from Leonard Cohen's *Spice Box of Earth* (1961) and *Beautiful Losers* (1966) to Dennis Lee's *Alligator Pie* (1974). Pointing to what has happened to illustrations on movie and television screens, Newfeld says book design risks relying too much on illustration to tell stories, in turn eliminating the need for the imaginative work that allows the reader to become engaged with a particular book. The illustration moves from enhancing stories to being the medium through which stories are told.

"You've witnessed a steady metamorphosis from Mickey Mouse," he says in a conversation before his presentation in Vancouver, tracing animation from the famous mouse through *Bambi* to *Toy Story* and finally *The Polar Express*. ("I don't know whether you've seen all those," he adds as an aside. "Well, you shouldn't.")

"In *The Polar Express*, of course, you recognize all the actors and then suddenly realize that they've been computer-produced – that they're not the actors! So we've gone from a beguiling fantasy to far too-credible unreality."

What was once accepted as fantasy, inducing the willing suspension of disbelief critical to successful and meaningful fiction, is now all too often designed to mimic reality. Moreover, the

screen democratizes all images – and even more so in the age of the Internet – dulling critical perception, and the imagination as well. "Nothing is left to the kid's imagination," Newfeld says. "It's a fait accompli. The child becomes a spectator. This is simply an anticipatory role, it's no longer a participatory role at all."

One almost hears Marshall McLuhan's theories of hot and cold media running through what Newfeld candidly calls his "whine." Where books were once hot media, allowing for and even demanding a high degree of reader involvement, they've increasingly chilled and left nothing to the imagination. There's something deadening in that shift, he contends, something that goes against the very design he attempted to practice during his 13-year career with the art department of McClelland & Stewart, work for Oxford University Press (it issued his first children's book, *The Princess of Tombozo*, in 1960) and Macmillan Canada (where he worked with Dennis Lee) and commissions for a host of other clients. Writing in *Drawing on Type* (2009), his newly released memoir, he says:

In 1965, people valued the book as a traditional instrument of entertainment and edification; books belonged with the theatre and the concert hall, rather than with the cinema, the television and the



Participating, with Alan Stein, on the 2008 jury of the Alcuin Society's Awards for Excellence in Book Design.

newspaper. Designers actually worried about interpreting an author's message, and finding the typeface that might best accord with the tone and tempo of the text. Some of us even sought to give 'sight-sound' to an author's far-too-often muted voice.

The strategy of enlivening a book's content with visuals that work in tandem with the other elements applies as much to an adult audience, where text is often the dominant element of a book's content, as it does to children's books, where illustrations hold an equal or greater weight with the text.

"If we expect the book's verbal [aspect] to perform magic, should we not demand the visual to do the same, not boringly controlled but bringing a magic of its own to" – and here he inserts the possessive voice of the eager child – "my book." A book can't really be claimed by its audience unless it has that magic about it that makes people want to own it, Newfeld argues. "I think it's terribly important, especially at this particular time."

The ideas Newfeld is mulling these days may not be new, but if they're old they're old in perhaps the best sense because they put the present in context from the perspective of long life in both the world, and the world of design. It's a life that Newfeld jokes makes him old enough to warrant

a place at the beginning of Robert Bringhurst's survey of book design in Canada, *The Surface of Meaning* (2008). But it's also one that never lost an appreciation for the child's delight at finding a book one could call one's own. Writing in the *DA: A Journal of the Printing Arts*, Randall Speller notes that Newfeld's work on Roy Daniells poetry collection *The Chequered Shade* (1962) was a foretaste of the illustrations he would do for children's books in the 1970s. The combination of design and illustration, especially through the use of illustrated initials throughout the text creates a single design package, Speller says, exemplifying the balance between the various visual contents of a book – type, illustration and layout.

Traces of several accents catch the ear of anyone listening to Newfeld, as he admits in his memoir. His words, shaped by the countries through which he passed en route to Canada in the 1950s, reflect the diverse influences that also came to bear on his creative work. What he brought when he landed in Toronto was a youthful enthusiasm that masked the modesty and uncertainties that came from an upbringing in Czechoslovakia and experiences across Europe, Canada and as a solider and kibbutznik during the late 1940s.

Canada was not accustomed to what Newfeld had to offer when he arrived in the country for good in the early 1950s, but which was readily put to service shaping the confident new Canada that

was taking shape in the post-war era. Design was coming to the fore; Newfeld was a co-founder of the Typographic Designers of Canada (now the Graphic Designers of Canada) in 1956, and publishers were willing to invest in a higher level of design for the books Canada was producing. At the same time, a number of significant writers were rising to prominence – Raymond Souster, Leonard Cohen and others who have become intertwined in the cultural fabric of the country, or at least the canon of Canadian content. Giving the work a verve that helped make it memorable was Newfeld and his colleagues, who contributed as much as the writers to shaping what Canadians read and understood of themselves.

My own youth was surrounded by books handed down from my older sister and brother – or handed over as gifts by them – that Newfeld designed or illustrated, such as the New Canadian Library edition of Stephen Leacock's *Literary Lapses* (1957) and Lee's *Alligator Pie*. The leeway Newfeld was given in applying his imagination to his work in the hope of inspiring the imagination of readers in turn is something he believes the current style of illustration prevents by its desire for realism. He notes that the title page of *Alligator Pie* was left half uncoloured to encourage readers to exercise their own imagination by colouring it. The feature backfired, he admits, but it's a good example of what's become his rejection of the drive to provide a finished package of goods for readers.

Reading isn't just a textual experience, Newfeld contends. It's an engagement with the whole medium known as the book, from the words through the illustrations to the packaging. Newfeld's first rule of illustration holds true throughout the book arts, it seems: "Don't deprive the reader of his/her own flight of fancy." Perhaps this was why so many of those attending his presentation in Vancouver came clutching copies of *Alligator Pie* for him to sign, 35 years after it was originally published. Its hold on them remains, in turn upholding him in the respect of readers and those who would follow his example.

~ Peter Mitham is editor of Amphora.

## IN HIS OWN WORDS

*I confess to always having preferred illustrating for young people over most other commissions, even though it was more complex and challenging. And my list of rules to be followed seemed to grow with each commission.*

*The first thing an illustrator needs – especially in the case of the poetry book – is a willing author. An author who does not view the use of an illustrator as an assault on, and detraction of, the quality of his or her writing; or on his or her retaining control of his or her creation. A foregone conclusion is that somewhere along the line the visual response will not correspond to the image or images conjured up by the author. This can be hard to accept, even when an editor objectively concurs that the illustration provided really works with the text. Also hard to accept is the fact that the reader might successfully conjure up yet a totally new image; and the next reader still another quite different one. And so on!*

*The argument frequently put forth is that an author should really be compared to a composer. And an illustrator compared to a soloist. Thus it is up to the composer, and only the composer, to establish the auditory interpretation to be followed. The problem is that with music the interpretive is between two versions of the same art form. Obviously there are differences in execution. Just compare James Ehnes to Itzhak Perlman interpreting the same piece of music! But the music written stays the music heard. With both disciplines, just music ensues. And both disciplines are aimed at the same sensory receptacle. Whereas, in the case of the verbal compared to the visual communication, two quite separate sensory receivers come into play. The contact that the visual communication makes is on a completely different level to that of the written or spoken communication.*

~ Frank Newfeld, speaking 2 April 2009 in Vancouver, British Columbia. The complete text of the address may be found on the Alcuin Society's Web site, [www.alcuinsociety.com](http://www.alcuinsociety.com)