

ALCUIN GOES EAST

An exhibition of the 2005 Alcuin Design winners and panel discussion at Toronto's DX explored what book design means today. Correspondent Marlene Chan attended.

WHEN INTRODUCING THE presentation ceremony that kicked off a month-long exhibition at Toronto's Design Exchange (DX) of the 2005 Alcuin Design Award winners, designer Linda Gustafson made a seemingly obvious, but on reflection profound, comment about book design: "The essential key to a book is, can you read it?"

The awards ceremony, held on July 13, was the first time a parallel event was organized to the one in Vancouver. The DX event was hosted by Martin Levin, book reviewer for the *Globe and Mail*, and was followed by a panel discussion with an extraordinarily long title: The Small Miracle of Fabulous Books that Manage to Get Written, Designed, Nursed and Battered Through the Publishing and Production Process, and Make It to the Reader with Some Measure of Dignity and Beauty Intact. The title inspired discussion among panelists and 100 attendees about the differences between well-designed and badly designed books in the context of the competitive marketplace. The panellists included Reg Beatty, a professional hand bookbinder, and Alcuin award-winning book designers Ingrid Paulsen, Paul Hodgson and Gustafson.

Coming from a more corporate environment, Hodgson said he rarely has an opportunity to design a book as a package (which is how books are judged by the Alcuin award judges). In his

"world of covers," the struggle is to find a balance between art and commerce. Book jackets need to stand out and create an identity for an individual piece. They serve as a marketing tool. As Ingrid Paulsen said, "Sometimes when they are works of art, they sit so quietly that the [whole] book does not get considered." Rather than being considered a constraint, entertaining the commercial side of book design is often embraced by the book designer.

Reg Beatty remarked that "a well-designed book is a curious thing." He noted that the title of the panel discussion implied that books do not have to be designed all that well to fulfill a utilitarian function or to be successful best-sellers. "They are part craft, part art. They are certainly literary, informative; yet all these things do not always mesh and come together seamlessly." He admitted to finding "flaws" in book design rather charming, bemoaning the need for perfection with the advent of technological advances in contrast to the casual imperfection and appeal of very old books accomplished by bookbinders and scribes of ages past.

All of the panellists agreed with Paulsen's statement, "You have to understand that everybody wants the book to be read." Books are written and published for this reason: to create a book that has a beauty on the outside and on the inside,



that will be read. The aim of every designer—a book that works for the reader, the author and the author’s work itself—was acknowledged as a rarity. By way of examples, Gustafson cited *Dave Heath: Korea* for which Michael Torosian was the designer, writer, editor and publisher; and *Looking for Snails on a Sunday Afternoon: Thirty-Six Etchings and Three Stories*, designed by Tim Inkster and Paul Hodgson (both books were on display at the DX and shortlisted in 2006 for the international Best Book Design from All Over the World competition held annually in Leipzig, Germany). Gustafson noted that, as these books demonstrate, endless variation and extensive embellishment are not necessarily required for effective communication with the reader.



Paulsen pointed out that old editions of books are endearing because of the story, and because one can actually get a sense of an old book’s era from the type, the paper and how it is constructed. She reminisced about a second-hand purchase of *Barney’s Version* by Mordecai Richler (cover designed by Paul Hodgson) with an inscribed dedication dated Valentine’s Day of a year she could no longer remember: “To Ron, I know that you like Mordecai Richler. Happy Valentine’s Day! Here’s to many more.” There is an “off story” in development that references the reading of the book: how long was the book in the second-hand bookstore? How long did he Ron hold on to it? What was the personal relationship between the giver and the receiver of the book? Ingrid further noted the parallel within the text of *Barney’s Version* itself: Barney is always looking for his ex-wife, and pining for her throughout the novel.

When designing books, Paulsen said she tries to put some history into it by allowing for thumbage, for notes, for people to actually live within the book. “I try to keep the craft as quiet as possible so that you are not interrupted in the reading.”

In *A History of Reading*, Alberto Manguel highlights the importance of illuminations, illustrations, woodcuts and pictures with respect to reading. In the Middle Ages, these embellishments made “reading” more easily accessible for the poor and illiterate. Today the reading of text

and pictures converge, presenting a major challenge for contemporary book design. “The pictures of medieval Europe offered a syntax without words, to which the reader silently added a narration. In our time, deciphering the pictures of advertising, of video art, of cartoons, we too lend a story, not only a voice but a vocabulary.”

Surprisingly, panellist Paul Hodgson admitted to never reading the books he designed beforehand. The one exception was *The Life of Pi* by Yann Martel. In most cases, he relies on the team he works with to have read the book. This seemed to be a contradiction at the time, but Paul did stress that someone on the design team has to have read the book before it can be published to ensure the integrity of the design with respect to the author’s words. His confession paradoxically served to underscore the fact that good book design—the calibre produced by Alcuin winners such as himself—can only be accomplished by people who read avidly and with the perspective of a general reader. From reading comes the knowledge of what happens when words are set into type. This is the “invisible” but essential part of book designing, making the difference between good and bad design.

Marlene Chan is an ex officio director on the Alcuin Society’s board. She works and lives in Ottawa.