

# *It's Hard to Sign Blood, Sweat and Tears*

JESSICA SULLIVAN talks about her first foray into creating and publishing an Alcuin award-winning limited edition book, and how the experience compares to her equally successful career as a commercial book designer.

The name of one winner from this year's annual Alcuin Book Design Awards appeared in several categories, and not for the first time. Jessica Sullivan's covers and layouts for Vancouver's Douglas & McIntyre have garnered 18 awards over the past five years, including four of her books from 2007 singled out for attention. One of these books was in the Limited Editions category, for Sullivan's first foray into the field: *A Body of Parts, Vol. 1, Allusion*. As Sullivan is a first-time limited editions creator/publisher, but also one with an established reputation as a commercial book designer, *Amphora* wanted to talk to her about how the two realms compare.

*Can you name any designers or imprints that have been particularly influential, if not to your work itself, to your interest in book design?*

So many people and things have been influential to my design aesthetic, and probably lots that I'm not even aware of. Anything old, not of this time, not computer generated or reliant on futuristic technology. So lots of dead people have been influential: William Morris, Charles and Ray Eames, Paul Rand, the unknown artist, hand-painted signs. Stuff from the '20s, '30s and '60s: couches, phones, wallpaper, objects. And then we have Chronicle, Knopf, Penguin, Peter Cocking, Chip Kidd and Gabriele Wilson.

*Describe A Body of Parts, Vol. 1, Allusion, perhaps starting with why you wanted to create a book entirely yourself, from content through creation. What is it, what is it about, and why did you want to produce and issue it yourself?*

Well, I think like any creative person you always have ideas running through your head, and at a certain point you just decide to try to do something with one of them. I thought it would be fun to try to produce a limited edition book, because it would allow me to play with an idea that didn't require a "market." Something I didn't need to hone for a certain audience; the audience could just be me, and maybe two or three other people.

The book is sort of an exploration of how the English language is open to interpretation, or how language isn't necessarily black and white. One word often has many different meanings, depending on its application, whether used properly, colloquially or in a different connotation. This is an alphabet book of these sorts of words, words that have multiple definitions, one of which defines a human body part. In some cases I think some interesting comparisons come across.

In terms of doing all the work involved myself, I didn't necessarily have a choice. In the same way that it would be great to have a maid or a cook, I wasn't really in a position to be hiring anyone to take over those chores. And I'm always up for an unreasonable challenge, and it seems especially if it's time-consuming and painful.

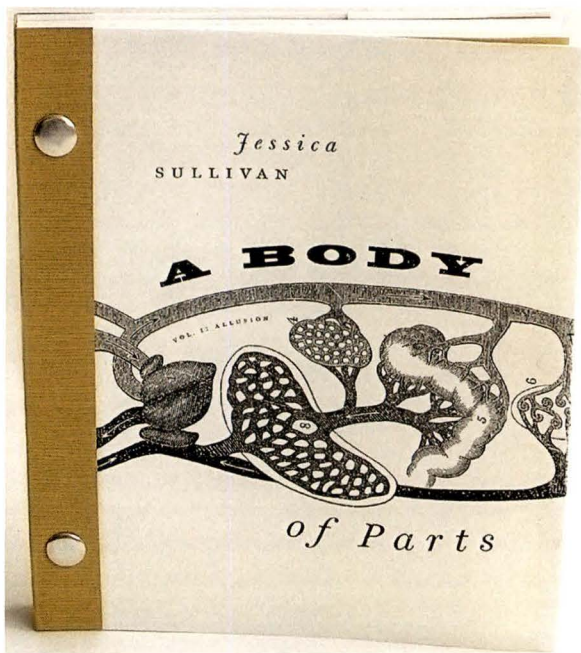
The book was laser printed, on 8.5 by 11 sheets, trimmed and folded in a French fold fashion. The side-stab binding was an interesting process. As I desperately tried to solve the problem of how to punch smaller than "hole punch" holes, I happened to mention the dilemma to my dad, who immediately ran downstairs and appeared with this bizarre tool he'd picked up at a garage sale. We have no idea what it's actually for. His basement is sort of like that, filled with things whose purposes and origins are unknown. I've often looked around down there for a letterpress.

The finished book is 5.5 by 6.75 inches, 58 pages. The copies are not signed. I thought about that, but I guess it felt a little too precious for the object. And it's hard to sign blood, sweat and tears.

*How long have you been designing books? How (and/or why) did your interest in design take you to books?*

I have been designing books for five years now. I ended up in the field for two reasons. One is Peter Cocking, who was and is the art director at Douglas & McIntyre. He was also one of my instructors at Emily Carr Institute of Art + Design, and as well as being a book designer was quite the inspirational instruc-





tor. Two is that although I always wanted to be a designer, I never wanted to take part in advertising or the design of selling. I wanted to design “the thing” instead of “the stuff” to sell “the thing.” I also love books, so when Peter presented me with the opportunity to design that sort of “thing,” it wasn’t something I could pass up.

*In addition to winning in the Limited Editions category, books you designed also won for Pictorial, Prose Fiction and Pros Non-fiction. As a designer, do you have to consciously approach these broad categories differently, from a creative perspective? Is there one category that has greater appeal to you?* Each category certainly requires a slightly different approach. The content drives the design, so every genre requires a certain amount of specific consideration regarding how the reader is going to use the text and what elements

## Tokyo Exhibition

*Alcuin Book Design Award winners travelling farther and farther*

Thanks to the efforts of the design awards committee members, the 2007 winners will be seen farther and wider than any previous year. In addition to being displayed at book fairs at Frankfurt (October '08) and Leipzig (March '09), a set of the winning books will also be on display at the Canadian embassy in Tokyo in July. The Tokyo exhibition was organized by board member Nick Collins, who had visited the country in the early 1990s.

“On my first full day in Japan I was taken to a mulberry farm and papermaking factory, in Obara. We actually made paper ourselves and wrote characters on our sheets. I wrote *innu* (dog) on mine and still have it,” Collins remembers.

The memory of this trip, and the Design Awards committee’s interest in expanding the circulation of the winning books, prompted Collins to contact Christine Nakamura, counsellor in charge of cultural affairs in the embassy in Tokyo, wondering whether the Society could mount an exhibition to coincide with the Tokyo Book Fair in July.

“The Japanese co-operation has been at the highest level. Christine has been a delight to work with. Not only are the books

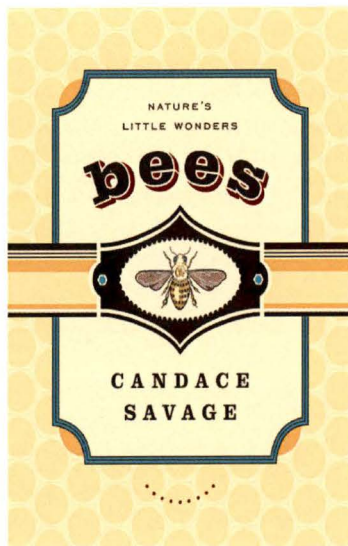
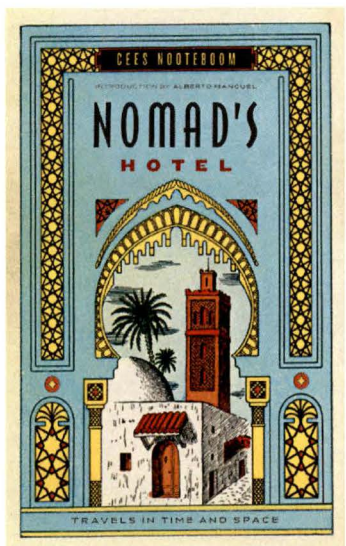
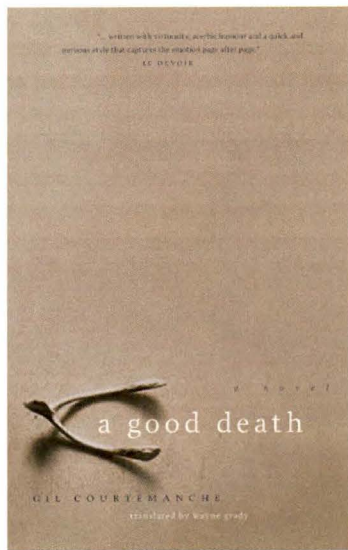
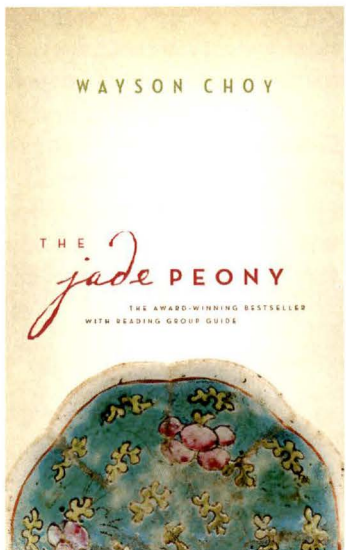
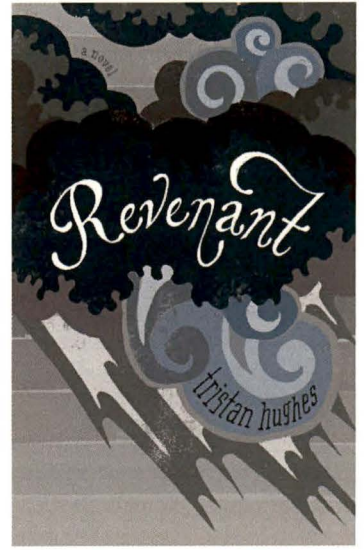
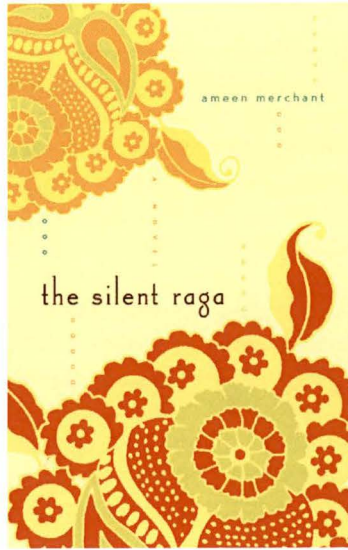
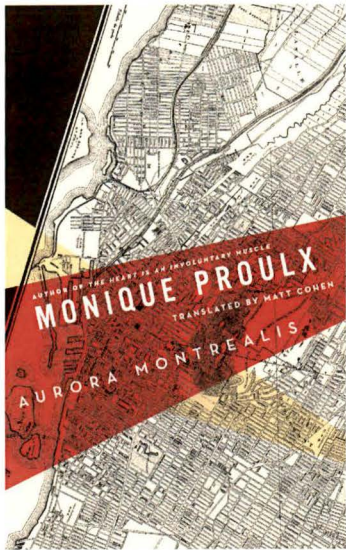
being exhibited, but they were shipped to Tokyo free of charge by JAL, and once the exhibit is over they will form part of the library in the embassy—the largest library of books from and about Canada outside of Canada,” Collins proudly reports.

Within Canada, the books will be more widely exhibited than ever before, with 19 stops organized across Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia. See the Alcuin Society Web site for the complete list of dates and places.

Two ceremonies will be held to present the awards in October. The first (October 2) will be in Vancouver, at the Emily Carr University of Art + Design. The evening will feature a keynote lecture by the designer and author C.S. Richardson, plus a presentation by Robert Bringhurst about his new book, *The Surface of Meaning: 25 Years of Book Design in Canada*. The second ceremony (October 6) will be at Toronto’s Arts & Letters Club, with Richardson again appearing as the keynote speaker. These evenings are free and open to all members; see the Web site for details.



DESIGN AWARDS



*Some of the covers Jessica Sullivan has created for Vancouver-based Douglas & McIntyre over the past five years.*



## AWARDS CATALOGUE

*A loud YES! from members*

Earlier this year Alcuin Society members were asked about their interest in continuing to receive a printed catalogue featuring winners from the annual book design competition. The question was sparked by the significant cost and effort required to put the catalogue together. Awards chair Leah Gordon and catalogue editor Marlene Chan were heartened by the number of people who responded, and by the almost unanimous opinion that the catalogue remain a regular publication of the Society.

“More than a third of our members responded to our question. We’d always hoped that the catalogue would act not only as a vehicle for each year’s winners, but also raise awareness of and appreciation for book design in Canada. The responses indicate the catalogue is succeeding on both fronts,” says Gordon, offering a sampling of the responses.

“I’m a new member and this is one of the main reasons I decided to join!”

“I’m surprised that any member would not be interested in the catalogue. It is sort of the flagship publication of the organization in my opinion.”

“The catalogue is one of the main reasons I renewed my membership in the Alcuin Society.”

“I have actually bought several books solely on their being included as winners (or second or third choices), so the catalogue is occasionally more than just a pictorial record to look at and enjoy.”

“As I live in the east, I cannot make it to the actual competition, so the catalogue is the only form I have of viewing, at least, the winners.”

“I very much appreciate receiving the catalogue, which I think is one of the best I have seen. I like the comments from the judges and the layout and design and attention given to each of the winning books. It is easy to see why it is a money-burner.”

are involved. An instructive book (cookbook, guidebook) is used very differently from a pictorial book or a textbook, so the creative or design decisions should reflect that.

Fiction for me has the greatest appeal. It’s interpretational, requires the most critical thought, and demands the designer to be very familiar with the text. It affords me an opportunity to find that hidden gem in the text that’s not necessarily the most obvious choice for the cover. I’m also given a lot of freedom and consideration when designing fiction titles, which is always appreciated.

*What are some of the most important things you’ve learned about book design? Or what would you say are some of your foundational beliefs or philosophies as a book designer?*

I think the single most important part of book design is the interior. If the text is not set with readability in mind, with nice margins and colour, in a comfortably readable face, printed with adequate quality, the book is a useless object. If you can’t read a book, all you can do is prop up a couch that should probably be let go.

I also think it’s important that the design reflect the actual content, not the content it should have been, or you wish it was, but what it truly is. So, if it’s not funny, it shouldn’t look funny; if it’s not happy, it shouldn’t look happy. In fact this rule sort of works across the board: a couch shouldn’t look comfortable if it’s a back breaker. I don’t understand why so many uncomfortable couches are produced, but I guess you could say the same about books.

*What has been the single greatest piece of book design orthodoxy that you have come to reject (or at least question) as a professional designer?*

That’s a good one. I work on intuition, so I don’t give a lot of conscious thought to rules and systems. That doesn’t mean I don’t understand them, comprehend their usefulness, especially in teaching, and it doesn’t mean I don’t apply them. But I don’t think any piece of orthodoxy should inhibit one from trying anyway. Especially, and most importantly, if you can make it work.

*Working on A Body of Parts, I’m assuming you had almost none of the kinds of constraints and concerns that attend a trade publishing project. If so, how did that affect or alter the designing experience for you?*



## LEIPZIG AWARDS

### *Continued success*

The 2006 Alcuin Book Design award winners appeared last February at the Leipzig Book Fair, as part of the annual Best Book Design from All Over the World exhibition and competition. From a total of 626 registered books on display, two of the '06 winners were shortlisted for prizes: Dawna Rose's *Smoking with My Mother* (JackPine Press) and Robert Majzels' *Apikoros Sleuth* (Moveable Inc.). Both books were profiled in *Amphora* 146.

I think the only similar constraint was budget. So, the same as any smaller Canadian publisher, I needed to figure out how I could produce this in an affordable manner, knowing I wasn't going to make any profit off of it (ha ha). Other than that, which was a fairly affecting constraint, the design was pure joy. It's not that I am hugely constrained at my job, but it's certainly nice to have the freedom to implement any and all ideas that come to mind without numerous departments weighing in.

*Are you particularly interested in creating limited editions, or was A Body of Parts more of a de facto*

*limited edition—limited in terms of your production abilities, and time and energy available to put into printing and binding copies?*

I would love to create limited editions, in terms of limited availability. I think it allows one to explore ideas that aren't going to be vastly popular, which is the essence of their charm. And also to produce objects that would not be possible on a large scale, in terms of the production. I would love to be able to create books by hand in the traditional sense. I just have to learn how to use a letterpress, get some land and find me some machines. I figure by the time I'm old and retired I might be able to get something going.

*Will there be subsequent volumes?*

At the outset my plan was to do one a year. Now that I've actually produced one, and I realize the magnitude of such an undertaking, I may have to revise this plan. But we'll see. I really am a sucker for punishment.

*In addition to placing in the Limited Editions category, Jessica Sullivan won third (with Lisa Hemingway) in Prose Non-fiction for An Enchantment of Birds: Memories from a Birder's Life, tied for second in Prose Fiction for The Silent Raga, and received an honourable mention (with Naomi MacDougall) in Pictorial for Spotted Owls: Shadows in an Old-Growth Forest.*

