

REVIEW

Alphabet Stories: A Chronicle of Technical Developments

By Hermann Zapf

(RIT Cary Graphic Arts Press,
2007, US\$50). Reviewed by Alan Stein

When Leah Gordon, the Alcuin Society's book design committee chair, confirmed that I was able to go to Leipzig in February 2006 for the city's well-known annual book fair, she asked, "Would you also like to meet Hermann Zapf?" I didn't hesitate. "Yes!" was my reply.

The book fair was huge, and after several days looking at displays, including the Alcuin Book Design prize-winning books, which were part of the annual Stiftung Buchkunst international design competition, we took the train from Leipzig to Frankfurt and then on to Darmstadt (as reported by Marlene Chan in *Amphora* 143). After checking into the hotel reserved for us by Mr. Zapf, we took a taxi to the outskirts of town to meet the Zapfs themselves. Hermann met us at his front door dressed formally in a suit and tie, and inside his wife, Gudrun Zapf von Hesse, was waiting, with an apple cake and tea set out on the dining-room table overlooking the garden.

I was reminded of this trip and my arrival at the Zapfs' beautiful home in its idyllic setting as I read the autobiography *Alphabet Stories* and especially the lines, "I didn't want to move to New York. Anyone who has seen our house on the Rosenhöhe in Darmstadt will understand why."

With its striking deep blue cover and gold-embossed HZ initials on the cover, the design of *Alphabet Stories* reminds us that calligraphy is the source of many of Zapf's type designs. The book itself tells the story of his life, with many anecdotes from his beginnings in Nuremberg as a lithography retoucher, through his early training as a type designer, to his thoughts on the history of printing, type design and composition, and his years during and after the war and all the changes he has seen in a lifetime.

After our tea Mr. Zapf was anxious to see my own work.

"You are a designer and a printer? Can you show me any of your work?" he asked.

I presented a couple of letterpress books for his inspection. It was good, I think, that I

didn't know as much about him as I do now. Of course, I knew about his many designs and some of his achievements. Perhaps if I had read the insights in this book, the lectures, the essays, his thoughts on design and his efforts to achieve a high level of perfection in his type designs, I would have been more nervous when I handed over my copy of *Home Country*. But to have Hermann Zapf pore over my work was a personally rewarding experience. He asked about the paper, and the choices I had made in the overall book design, commenting on the printing, the wood engravings, the hand-colouring and the special ink colour.

"This is not a standard colour. I think you mixed this yourself," he said at one point.

"Yes," I replied.

"We printers," he said and smiled (he included me, a compliment I understood), "know these things."

He reminded me in many ways of my grandfather, also raised in Eastern Europe before the Second World War, training in a traditional way as a craftsman, and how much they had seen in their lives, how much change, and how they both embraced that change with enthusiasm.

"In the year 1957, a new development in typography almost coincided with the launching of the first space satellite. Lead, which is heavy and earthbound, was challenged by photocomposition—a phenomenon similar to the victory over gravity. The coincidence is striking and deserves some reflection."

This is a quote from a lecture Zapf gave at Harvard University in 1964. Zapf never bemoaned the change to computer design and composition, but sought to improve the programming for computer type composition.

This book reveals much more about the man and his artistic vision than just a dry list of his many type designs, which include the well-known and much copied Palatino and Optima, one font of which was designed to be carved into the black marble wall of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Herman Zapf tells of being given one of the first Mac 128K machines by Apple founder Steve Jobs.

"Late one evening I received a telephone call from a person named Tom Suiter. He told me his boss had given him a list of ten names starting with Woody Allen and ending with mine (A to Z). Each was to receive an Apple computer."

REVIEW

The Tree of Meaning
By Robert Bringhurst
(Gaspereau, 2006, \$31.95)
Reviewed by Peter Mitham

This is followed by his description of the development of his computer-aided type design programs, which were meant to be used by anyone, the *hz* program, and the basics behind the concept; his system became the basis for the InDesign program of today. And Zapf shares his disappointment and outrage when his designs, on which he had worked so hard, were copied, changed very little and then re-named—copyright infringement on an international scale.

When asked to design a new set of dingbats for computer use, Zapf already had a collection of over 1,200 designs for signs, arrows and symbols, including the @ symbol.

“Herb Lubalin of International Typeface Corporation wanted to throw out the @ sign. Twenty-five years ago nobody was able to foresee that the @ sign would become so important one day,” Zapf writes.

He describes the development of his type design Palatino, which he reworked for IBM in 1996, so that it could be set in every language from Russian Cyrillic to Arabic Urdu. His commitment to this 50-year design concept has proved Palatino’s validity over all these years.

For an insightful picture of the man and his life’s accomplishments, I would highly recommend this book to anyone interested in book and type design. I will let Zapf finish this review in his own words:

The printed letter or a well-designed book—is something very unique compared to the fleeting resolution of a screen and quick access on the internet. A book offers a happy feeling in the hands of the reader and is quite different from an abstract electronic presentation of text. In a few years, books printed by the classic letterpress technique will receive a new esteem. Today they are sometimes disregarded as products of the past compared to what can be done with modern methods of composition and printing. But we should not forget they are examples of our cultural heritage and should not be forgotten, for they are still standards for all our achievements.

Alan Stein is the proprietor of Church Street Press in Ontario.

My first experience of Robert Bringhurst was in summer 1998, during the annual conference of the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing. Bringhurst was the keynote speaker, simultaneously opening the conference and welcoming participants to the West Coast with a typically thoughtful yet imaginative address.

In many ways, *The Tree of Meaning* extends that moment for me, consisting as it does of 13 lectures delivered between 1994 and 2005. Many of the talks have appeared elsewhere (*Wild Language*, for example, was issued last year by Nanaimo’s Institute for Coastal Research), but together they provide an extended survey of Bringhurst’s thinking regarding the oral literature of North America’s First Nations. In some cases, because the talks (we are told) remain as delivered to their original audiences, we also get a glimpse of how his thinking has developed.

While the primary interest of Alcuin Society members is the thing known as the book, as well as the various book arts and the lore of the sale, acquisition and disposition of various titles (and, of course, their reacquisition *ad infinitum*), Bringhurst bears witness to the many other forms literature takes while grappling with its particular expression in print.

The phenomenon of polyphony, particularly as it occurs in places such as British Columbia, where many cultures occupy a single geographical area, is a recurring theme in Bringhurst’s talks. While we may admire *Ursa Major* (2003) among his earlier explorations of polyphony, *Tree of Meaning* offers a glimpse of the thinking behind that work.

That thinking champions the oral literatures of North America’s indigenous peoples, not against or over those of Europe, but as full partners in literature, without which the stories of Europe and those of the rest of the world are that much diminished—as polyphony is by so many fewer voices.

This point is the focus of the title essay, which urges us to listen—not for what we wish to hear but for what is being told us. Bringhurst makes the point again and again,