

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,

Ethel & Wallace Wilson

notably in his discussions of the first transcripts of, and initiatives to publish the legends of this continent's first peoples.

For example, "The Humanity of Speaking" goes to some length (and at no small profit to readers) to counter one critic's remark that a First Nations legend is "odd and incoherent." Those who argue so have not taken time to familiarize themselves with the legend's context or, really, to understand it, Bringhurst contends.

Elsewhere, he reminds us that mythtellers just as easily tailor what audiences hear to current circumstances. The Haida whom John Reed Swanton recorded, Bringhurst writes, "told him what they wanted written down and declined to tell him what they didn't." A more egregious example was the Crow mythteller Yellow-Brow's baiting the soon-to-be-married Robert Lowie with digs regarding male-female relations: "The joke he played did damage to the myth, but it is evident that Yellow-Brow and Lowie both thought it was a good one."

Amid discussions of oral literatures and the importance of them being written down for others to appreciate, Bringhurst cautions against esteeming books to such a degree that we lose sight of the literature without which we would have no need for books. For literature exists independent of books; Bringhurst exhorts his audience at one point to arm themselves against books by reading the book that was neither written nor published, the book of living experience that gives rise to literature, stories and books.

To say much more threatens to detract from essays that are more eloquent than this review claims to be. As a friend who received them as a gift remarked, "I almost forgot that people can write in these beautiful ways." A companion volume, which Gaspereau plans to publish this fall, promises to extend some of the discussions started in *The Tree of Meaning*.

The current volume has an elegance in design that matches the prose. Arabic, Chinese, Hebrew and other languages that don't use the Roman alphabet are set in typefaces that blend with the Rialto Piccolo of the main text.

The appearance and content make this a book to feed on rather than devour in one sitting. And, as enlightening as it is on a first read, I believe it has the potential to enrich our understanding of the texts we collect and those we don't.

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Though the bookplate can be an intensely private expression, it is also a public piece; the act of naming has little place in a strictly private context. But once the plate leaves the private domain, its images and symbols fall open to interpretation. This particular plate belonged to B.C.

author Ethel Wilson and former Canadian Medical Association president Wallace Wilson. It is a case in point.

A biographer might draw connections between Ethel Wilson's precarious orphan upbringing and the plate's roman-

tized representation of B.C.'s landscape. Perhaps nature's apparent timelessness and stability provided a measure of comfort against the uncertainties of Ethel Wilson's life.

Or maybe a researcher has just found Wallace Wilson's copy of Thackeray's novel *The Newcomes*, which he kept scrupulously clean all through his time in the Great War. The bookplate then takes on heightened meaning. More than whimsy, it has grown out of a life-long respect for literature.

On the other hand, a master's student with a passion for cultural criticism might see something quite different: a famous Canadian author, who grew up in South Africa, England and Canada during the heyday of the British Empire, married a soon-to-become prominent Canadian physician. This colonizing couple, using the ultimate symbol of old-country, privileged leisure (the bookplate), reproduced a middle-class wilderness, violently stripped of its original inhabitants.

Taken out of its owners' library, this bookplate is now left entirely to the public imagination. It's a new life of possibility and peril for this little object.

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