

The humility of details

While judging this year's Alcuin Awards for Excellence in Book Design, I was fortunate to be part of a team that truly loved books and the process of making them. It was pure bliss. We all had ardent opinions formed by years of experience in the publishing world. We came from different places and had different industry involvement, but what we had in common was that we noticed the *details*. Sometimes we noticed different minutiae, sometimes we noticed the same ones, but it was always the 'little' things that determined if something was eliminated immediately or was placed high in the final rounds of judging. And it was these details that sparked the most conversations.

Years ago, as a junior book designer at a University Press, I quickly learned that the little things in book design and production mattered. A lovely endpaper, a well-designed copyright page, or a particularly clever approach to a complex table of contents became the challenge in the design process. They were a manner of creating enjoyment in the most banal of manuscripts, even though practically nobody, including the author, would ever notice them.

In the 1951 publication *Books for our Time*, the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition of the same name, John Begg referred to a book as 'a three-dimensional container for ideas. . . . [and with] it the desire to communicate has been given enduring form'.¹ If books are the packages for information, and book design is the creation of that form, then as much as I appreciate the design of and the *designing* of that package, I would like for book design to be thought of as something more.

Perhaps a book is the sum of the parts and not the whole? Or could it be the true sum of the *details* and not the parts? If so, then it becomes, as Robin Kinross so eloquently put it, 'where the dear god lives'.²

¹ John Begg. 'Tradition in motion'. Marshall Lee, Ed. *Books for our time*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1951. 29.

² Robin Kinross. 'Where the dear god lives'. *Looking Closer 2*. M. Bierut, W. Drenttel, S. Heller, DK Holland, Eds. New York: Allworth Press, 1997. 92. (Originally published in the *AIGA Journal of Graphic Design*. Vol. 12, No. 1. 1994.)

Most of Latin-alphabet [publishing] humanity still does not know what an *fi* ligature is and why it might be good to have this little thing in text. This despite the fact that in taking care to search and replace ligatures there is only increased expenditure of time in production and no measureable gain for the reader. But the dot of an *i* is where the dear god is to be found.³ Although he wrote this in 1994, nearly twenty years ago as the graphic design world emerged bruised and bloodied from the post-modernist/deconstructivist era, it is still surprisingly applicable in the present.

I believe that training in book design is crucial for today's graphic designer, not because they should be typographers or book designers but because they must understand the ultimate in design for usability while truly sweating the details. The goblet that we design must be worthy to hold the vintage of the author's thoughts. Perhaps typography today is as much about patience with the process as much as it is about the details themselves. Kinross describes the ignorance of the unnoticeable:

The realm of detail remains stubbornly out of reach of the theorizing and polemic that has surrounded recent typography.... Such details are too small, too mundane, too material, too much just a matter of keyboard layouts and pixels.⁴

He concludes that 'there is still [detailed] work for a typographer to do. It is modest work, but essential'.⁵ Nearly sixty years previous, typographic doyenne Beatrice Warde also invoked the exalted goal of humility when she declared that well-designed typographic applications '[serve] a purpose which is distinctly humble' and that 'no line of type can be as beautiful, visually, as can be the thought it conveys. Indeed one may say that successful [typography] is invisible'⁶.

³ Kinross. 92.

⁴ Kinross. 93. However, with the burgeoning interest in type design, one can hope that this is no longer the case.

⁵ Kinross. 93.

⁶ Beatrice Warde. 'Printing standards are improving: some reasons for the sudden advance made by British typography of books and advertisements'. *The British and Colonial Printer and Stationer*. 6 December 1928. 128.

Not for [average designers] are long breaths held over serif and kern, they will not appreciate your splitting of hair spaces. Nobody (save the other craftsmen) will appreciate half your skill.⁷

It would certainly be a stretch to state that the junior designer of today is humble (and I feel quite comfortable stating this as I was once the epitome of the insolent rookie). But with hindsight, I now feel that the swagger that surrounds so many novices could be beneficial and not a burden in achieving our usability aims for the printed or digital book. We need that same swagger, that chutzpah, to attempt perfection in details and to aim for the supreme solution to the book design need at hand. Without that drive for detail, that drive for unacknowledged perfection, I doubt that we could ever expect to design a book, much less win an Alcuin Award.

⁷ Beatrice Warde. 'The Crystal Goblet or Printing Should Be Invisible'. *The Crystal Goblet: Sixteen Essays on Typography*. London: The Sylvan Press, 1955. 17.