



Grand Designs

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Shirley Hughes considers the state of the art of book design

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'Design' is a word which seems to be on everyone's lips these days. Even the Prime Minister approves of it. Art colleges are encouraging it more than ever and design-consultancies are thriving. But, outside specialist circles, there seems to be some confusion about what good design really is, a vague assumption that it's something you spray on to a more-or-less finished product to make people want to buy it.

Book publishing, like the rest of our media, is run at the top by 'word' people; that is, highly articulate people who have been educated from an early age to write essays, pass written examinations, get most of their information (and a lot of their entertainment too) from the printed word. If they have also developed a good eye or any capacity whatsoever for draughtsmanship this will probably be through some accident of birth or happy chance outside the main thrust of their 'serious' education. This, of course, is very proper in an industry in which the most precious raw material is words, not pictures. But where this order of merit applies we tend to get a rather rigid division between verbal and visual communication.

Books will increasingly be required to thrive alongside other media, addressing an audience accustomed to getting stories in a variety of different ways. The design of a page, its attractiveness, clarity and accessibility is more than ever important if we are not to lose that audience. Originators of children's books know this better than anyone. Young readers require the utmost care in the way their books are designed. This area is of particular interest because, at its best, it can be a spearhead of experiment and innovation for the rest of the book trade.

With longer fiction the process is still traditional. An author may work closely with an editor during the writing of his or her book. When it's accepted he will be consulted about the illustrations if there are to be any. But the main decisions about how the book will actually look, the choice of paper, type-face, cover design will be made in-house (much of this depends on costing). The members of the design department have nothing to do with the editorial stage and rarely meet the author. This division of skills is often accentuated when the two departments are in different parts of the building, and in very big firms can be totally compartmentalised. Where an enormous number of titles are being put out pressure of work probably makes it impossible for the designers to read all the books, even if they wanted to. The illustrators, on the other hand, work free-lance and in this situation it is difficult for them to have a close rapport with the design team.

Picture-books are another matter. If they are from the hand of an author/artist they will probably be submitted at the rough-dummy stage with the position of all the type-areas already indicated and the illustrations sketched in round them. Not all author/artists, however, have a good eye for typography (if they have it will probably be something they have

simply picked up rather than a matter of formal training) and may need a lot of help from the in-house designer. Author/artist collaborations have all too often in the past been vaguely assumed to be made in heaven - or rather, that the two have somehow magically got together to dream up this intimate combination of word and image. As in film-making, the pictures are part of the main ingredients rather than an entrancing afterthought, and have to be conceived as such. Good children's publishers regard it as part of their job to set up a framework in which these ideas can happen, develop and come to fruition as a finished book.

Rona Selby at Bodley Head has, in spite of her youth, a long experience in this skill. The most important thing about a picture-book, she says, is a good plot, whether this is told entirely in pictures, or in words, or any combination of the two. From the enormous number of texts which are submitted she will select the very few which have real visual possibility. Though herself a 'word' person by training, she must carry in her head a large memory-bank of possible artists, whose work might marry well with a certain text. She will try to bring the author and artist together at an early stage (if they live a long way from London it isn't always easy). What makes a good story told in words may nevertheless have to be adjusted for a picture book. For instance, a story about a journey with a small child in the back of a car was, after joint discussion, agreed to be visually too static and was changed to a train ride instead. The format of the book having been worked out with the illustrator, the design department will then draw up a grid. The choice of type-face is crucial. Rona must put the needs of her young audience first. She takes meticulous care that the line-breaks are of a length that a child can manage, that they relate to natural reading sense and aid reading aloud. This concern takes precedence over, for instance, centred or justified lines of type, however pleasing this may be to the adult eye.

Amelia Edwards at Walker Books was trained in the U.S.A. with a sound background in typography and graphic design. In a firm which so successfully specialises in children's picture-books, with a reputation for helping and bringing on new illustrators, she also finds herself working closely with authors. The open-plan atelier-style office facilitates a constant flow of ideas and exchange between the concerns of word and image, with both authors and artists positively encouraged to come in and work on the premises. Amelia says that, if an experienced author/illustrator prefers it, their policy is 'simply to leave them alone', but has found that when a writer has been brought together with an artist with an idea at an early stage, with 'a designer close by if they need one' the results can be very rewarding. She describes the combination of these open working conditions, with activity and distraction going on all around, with the kind of thoughtful availability the whole team offers to both authors and artists as 'very hard work, but well worth it in the long run'.

Children's publishers are much exercised at the moment with the design and illustration of the next stage beyond picture-books; that is, short-text stories on which tentative young readers may be encouraged to try their skills in reading to themselves. Just as there is no cut-off age in the enjoyment and use of picture-books, inventive design is important in books for any age-group, adults included.

Nick Thirkell is one of the most distinguished free-lance book-designers in the business with several awards to his credit. He ran the design department at Macmillan for some years and now has his own design consultancy partnership. His style springs from an elegant feeling for typography and a scrupulous attention to the needs of a particular text. Like an illustrator, he aims to give the book a visual pace, a dynamic which flows through from page to page. This, he feels, is what distinguishes design from mere layout. He applies this to non-fiction; art books in which the text may be minimal, such as a stunning boxed set of colour books for the Victoria and Albert museum on decorative papers. In his design for a luxury edition of **Larkrise to Candleford** (Century) he builds on the evocation of the period with pressed flowers lying alongside the letterpress (they are in reality artfully photographed and designed into the lines of text), and vignettted sepia photographs of turn-of-the-century rural life, off-setting carefully selected colour-plates of paintings from that period, dreamily pretty but just on the right side of schmaltz. All this was the work of months, combined with the skills of a picture researcher. It's the kind of job for which a publisher or packager, through pressure of time, would seek to commission a free-lance to give it exactly the right treatment.

Nick feels strongly that the amount of care and consideration taken is well worth it and shows up in the sales of the books. Tiny touches really are noticed by the reader and add up to a general feeling of rightness and harmony which is the essence of good design.

Of course, everyone knows about the highly designed book (usually non-fiction) in which the tail is wagging the dog; it looks wonderful in the shop, you take it home thinking that you've found your heart's desire only to find, in addressing the text, that it turns to dust and ashes. This is because the lay-out designers have disregarded the real essence and sense of the book. Some unfortunate writer has been brought in as an afterthought to fit some words into an already tightly-designed grid. But rigorous attention to the right kind of design, one which grows out of the demands of each individual text combined with exacting printing standards, will increase our reputation abroad and help to create a public at home who are not only readers but want to own and treasure books as desirable artefacts.

I have my own strong memories of books I had as a child where the design has stuck in my head even longer than the content. In **Bill the Minder**, written and illustrated by Will Heath Robinson (that giant of a draughtsman in both colour and line, lost to classic book illustration by his success in comic magazines), the pages seemed to me so astonishingly striking and intriguing that I never wanted to read the text in case it was a disappointment (most readers, I know, get this feeling the other way round). Who could forget that elegant and deceptive insouciance of Leslie Brook's **Johnny Crow's Garden**, or the guileful way in which E. H. Shepard gently scattered his line drawings into the pages of **The House at Pooh Corner**, or those garlanded ovals enclosing H. Willebeek Le Mair's illustrations for **Little Songs of Long Ago**, with colours like fragile fragments of faded silk, offsetting the austere lines of music on the opposite page? And who has ever equalled the rapturous simplicity of word and image achieved by my hero, William Nicholson, in his **Alphabet**?

More recently Edward Ardizzone's **Diana and her Rhinoceros**, Raymond Briggs' **Father Christmas**, Maurice Sendak's **In the Night Kitchen** and **Higglety Pigglety Pop!** and John Burningham's **Mr Gumpy's Outing** all struck me, from the moment I laid eyes on them, and ever since as a near-perfect blend of text and a strong illustrative style. Some day perhaps someone will write a history of how, in design terms, these actually came about. Speaking for myself, I'm just happy to know that they did, and hope that there will be others to equal them.

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