Design Matters

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illustrated by Lane Smith
designed by Molly Leach

Design is an essential part of any picture book. It is the first aspect of a book that a reader judges. It is the framework for the text and illustration. It is the subtle weave of words and pictures that allows both to tell one seamless tale.

And because good design is, by its very nature, nearly invisible in the final product, most people have no idea what design contributes to a picture book.

My idea of what design contributes to a picture book pretty much starts and ends with my first sentence. So I asked Molly Leach (designer of *The Stinky Cheese Man* and *Math Curse*) and Lane Smith (illustrator of *The Stinky Cheese Man* and *Math Curse*) exactly what it is that design contributes to a picture book.

The job of a designer, in its most basic form, is to pick the style, size, and color of type, maybe pick the kind of paper and size of the book, and arrange how the type and illustrations are to be displayed on the pages available. But Molly does so much more than that in our books. When she's done, the design tells as much of the story as the text and illustrations do.

Molly designs all kinds of things, from magazines to books to CD covers. She is asked to do elegant, bold, hip, or striking design (to name just a few styles). But the most important thing she does is to find the design appropriate for the piece. *Business Week*'s Mutual Fund Report is not the place for "zany." *The Stinky Cheese Man* was not the place for "stuffy" or "quiet" design.

When I wrote the stories in *The Stinky Cheese Man*, I wrote them with an ear for how they would sound when read aloud. My finished version of "The Really Ugly Duckling" looked like this:

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THE REALLY UGLY DUCKLING

Once upon a time there was a mother duck and a father
duck who had seven baby ducklings. Six of them were
regular-looking ducklings. The seventh was a really ugly
duckling.

    Everyone used to say, "What a nice-looking bunch of
ducklings—all except that one. Boy, he's really ugly."

    The really ugly duckling heard these people, but he
didn't care. He knew that one day he would probably
grow up to be a swan and be bigger and look better than
anything in the pond.

    Well, as it turned out, he was just a really ugly
duckling.

    And he grew up to be just a really ugly duck.
    The End.
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Which might explain why it got rejected by so many publishers. The final line, "And he grew up to be just a really ugly duck" looks a little harsh in its bare typewritten form.

Lane illustrated a goofy little duck. He and Molly designed a page turn so the duckling grows into a bigger, goofier duck on the next page (working almost like a flip book). And then it was Molly

who came up with the idea to have whatever words were on the text page expand to fill the space. The final punch-line sentence of the story, the transformation of the illustration, the turn of the page, and the blown-up type—text, illustration, and design—all combine to create one hilarious ending:

THE REALLY UGLY DUCKLING

Once upon a time there was a mother duck and a father duck who had seven baby ducklings. Six of them were regular-looking ducklings. The seventh was a really ugly duckling. Everyone used to say, "What a nice-looking bunch of ducklings—all except that one. Boy, he's really ugly." The really ugly duckling heard these people, but he didn't care. He knew that one day he would probably grow up to be a swan and be bigger and look better than anything in the pond. ▶

Well, as it turned out, he was just a really ugly duckling. And he grew up to be just a really ugly duck. The End.

Ha. Ha. Ha.

Well, you've at least got to admit it's funnier than the typewritten version.

Some people have described our books as "wacky" and "zany" and "anything goes." I wouldn't want to say they're wrong, but I would like to suggest that they're not exactly right. In order to create the humor and illusion of wacky/zany/anything goes, there has to be a reason for *everything* that goes. And this Law of Reasoned Zaniness applies just as inflexibly to design as it does to writing and illustrating.

In *The Stinky Cheese Man*, Molly chose, for the entire book, a classic font (Bodoni) and used it in unusual ways (expanding, shrinking, melting) to emphasize the fact that these were classic fairy tales told in an unconventional way.

The flexible font size also made it easier for Molly to break the text at any given point to give the punch lines of the tales more punch.

The expanding text pushing the boundaries of the page says the book is bursting with stories.

The Red Hen speaks in red type throughout (no other character speaks in color) to visually accentuate her annoying voice.
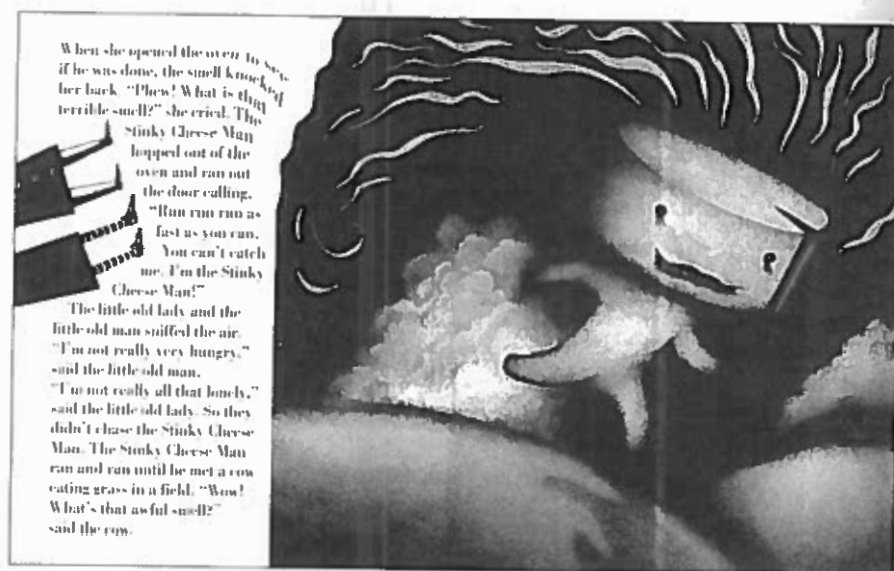
I thought it would be funny if Jack's never-ending tale in "Jack's Story" ran right off the page.

Molly showed me it would look funnier and more like Jack's voice fading into the distance if the words got smaller and smaller:

The type and edge of the Stinky Cheese Man illustration melts because he smells so bad:

And every tale's "Once upon a time" and "The End" are in color to highlight the fact that these are stock parts of a fairy tale. None of these details is specified by the text. They are design decisions that enhance and amplify each Fairly Stupid Tale.

Design sets the tone for everything.

Don't you suddenly feel like you're reading a wedding announcement? You may not consciously know it, but when you pick up a book, you are reading its layout and typeface and color palette for clues about the story.

Modern kids are even more demanding readers of these design clues than most adults. They have been raised since birth in the ever-more visually intense world of TV, movies, and video. They are more visually literate than generations before them — quicker and better able to read what design has to tell them. They deserve good design.

Math Curse was an entirely different design challenge.

I thought it would be funny to write about a kid's day in which everything turns into a math problem. Lane thought it would be funny to paint the kid actually inside the nightmarish grip of the curse.

We both thought it would be funny to ask Molly to make (8 pages of text and problems) + (19 paintings) + (1 copyright page) + (1 dedication page) = one 32-page book that looked kind of like a math book but not so much like a math book that it would be ugly and scare people away.

Here is what a couple of problematical math text pages could have looked like:

Dividing by 10, 100, 1,000

A. Find 212 ÷ 100

$$100 \overline{\smash{)}212.00}$$ = 2.12

B. Find 412 ÷ 100

$$100 \overline{\smash{)}412.00}$$ = 4.12

C. Find 512 ÷ 100

$$100 \overline{\smash{)}512.00}$$ = 5.12

D. Find 812 ÷ 100

$$100 \overline{\smash{)}812.00}$$ = 8.12

E. Look for a boring pattern in the division exercises.

483.2 ÷ 1 = 483.2	50.3 ÷ 1 = 50.3
483.2 ÷ 10 = 48.32	50.3 ÷ 10 = 5.03
483.2 ÷ 100 = 4.832	50.3 ÷ 100 = 0.503
483.2 ÷ 1,000 = 0.4832	50.3 ÷ 1,000 = 0.0503

Talk about math Tell a way to remember in which direction you should move the decimal point when dividing by 10, 100, or 1,000. Have fun, kids!

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Check Understanding

Choose the correct answer.

1. 0.21 ÷ 10
A. 2.10   B. 0.021   C. 0.0021

2. 82.4 ÷ 1,000
A. 0.0824   B. .824   C. 8.24

Extra Dull Numbers Arrange the quotients from the least to the greatest.

3. a. 22.4 ÷ 100   b. 22.4 ÷ 1   c. 22.4 ÷ 10   d. 22.4 ÷ 1,000

4. a. 0.21 ÷ 1   b. 0.21 ÷ 10   c. 0.21 ÷ 100   d. 0.21 ÷ 1,000

Build Understanding

Divide $\frac{1}{2}$ by $\frac{1}{8}$

Estimation First estimate whether the quotient will be less than or greater than one.

6	÷	3	=	2		10	÷	5	=	2
Dividend		Divisor		Quotient		Dividend		Divisor		Quotient
6	>	3, so	2 > 1			10	>	5, so	2 > 1	

Now study some other boring things:

| 8 | ÷ | 2 | = | 4 | | 20 | ÷ | 5 | = | 4 |
| Dividend | | Divisor | | Quotient | | Dividend | | Divisor | | Quotient |

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Here is a finished spread from *Math Curse* designed by Molly:

Which of these statements is true?

A. The first design looks ugly.

B. In the second design, Molly boxed problems and broke the text into sections like every ugly math book does, but she used a bold (Franklin Gothic) type clustered in funny tangencies (shifting blocks of copy) to enhance the frantic feel of the illustration.

C. Molly also used bold colors and background tints in geometric shapes to give an overall playful feel.

D. All of the above.

If you answered "D," multiply your Designer SAT score by your shoe size and continue on to the next section.

When Molly, Lane, and I work on a book, I usually write the text and polish it with my editor first. Lane draws preliminary sketches. We decide what to keep, what to cut, how to order things. Then Lane and Molly fiddle with the design and illustration. With the three of us working in close collaboration, Molly, Lane, and I take the opportunity to play off one another's ideas throughout the process. Words can be changed to accommodate design. Design can be juggled to allow a new illustration. Illustrations can be altered to fit a new story twist. We also get to use every last part of the book—price, flap copy, dedication, and copyright—to tell the story.

In conclusion, I would just like to say the only thing that can be said, what you know I'm going to say, what I can't *help* but say: design is an essential part of any picture book.