Give 'Em Helvetica: Picture Book Type

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Type — the formal language of the printed word — speaks to us in mysterious ways. It's not always clear just what type is saying, or how our reading experience is enhanced or undermined, however subtly, by slight variations in point size (the overall dimensions of the type), or the thickness and proportions of an ascender or terminal (particular elements of certain letterforms). But at a minimum, type is one of the major ingredients in the creation of a visual environment that is favorable to reading, and a book designer must always be thinking about how to achieve this result in a given situation. In the case of picture books, there seems to be widespread agreement among design professionals that the best type is most often the one that calls the least attention to itself.

Not long ago, Claire Counihan, director of art and design at Holiday House and a type devotee from her student days at Pratt Institute, was planning a new series of easy readers to be illustrated by a variety of artists. Among Counihan's first decisions was to select a sans serif type for the entire series. "Older, more accomplished readers," she explains, "are better served with serif faces, which help the eye travel more swiftly from word to word by making a series of visual connections. But for new readers, word recognition, not speed, is the point. My editor, Grace Maccarone, and I considered the usual suspects: Gill Sans, Helvetica, Futura. In the end we picked Report School because it has a nice high *x* height (the height of the lowercase letters) and the letterforms are simple, with the *a*, *d*, and *g*, for example, formed from just a circle attached to either an ascender or a descender."

On Holiday House's inaugural I Like to Read series list was Paul Meisel's *See Me Run*. Counihan continues: "Paul studied graphic design at Yale before turning to illustration, so type is always a big part of our discussions. Because Paul's text was just eighty words long, we agreed that the initial point size I had chosen should be increased to better counterbalance the art. I kept the leading — the space between lines — the same, however. Too much leading and your eye plunges from line to line! For display, I picked Wild Ketchup, a typeface as bouncy and wacky as the dogs that run through the book." *See Me Run* won a 2012 Theodor Seuss Geisel Award Honor.

Martha Rago's approach to typography is rooted in classic design principles learned in the 1980s under mentors Nanette Stevenson, Atha Tehon, Riki Levinson, and Cynthia Krupat. Rago, executive art director at HarperCollins Children's Books, believes that a successful book

design "brings order and cohesion to the whole work" while also "matching the book's emotional content." As the designer of *Night Driving*, the first picture book illustrated by Peter McCarty, she noted the spare, poetic, and nostalgic tone of both John Coy's text and McCarty's pictures as well as the emotional impact of the story they told — a reminiscence of a boy's nighttime drive in the company of his father. McCarty's "shaded, tonal black and white images, rendered in grainy, textual graphic, and featuring round, sculptural forms" were, she says, "both warm and refined." They referenced period cars, clothing, landmarks, and other details suggestive of the 1940s or early 1950s. With this in mind, Rago chose Gill Sans Light for the text, a sans serif font that had been designed by Eric Gill in 1931. "It is a humanist font, with warmth in its round forms, but also with an elegant, no-nonsense quality, especially in its lighter weights. I used fairly open leading to keep it readable and accessible, with a generous negative space around the blocks of text on each page, to face images framed in a margin of white. The display, Umbra, is also from the 1930s, a cut that relates to the forms of Gill Sans but with sharper verticals, and has a shadow effect that echoes the glow of light and shadow through the book's imagery."

While harmoniousness and understatement are clearly among the watchwords in picture-book type selection and design, the element of surprise also has a role to play. Lee Wade, vice president and publisher of Schwartz & Wade Books, recalls with delight her decision to set the copyright notice for *Velma Gratch & the Way Cool Butterfly* in the shape of a butterfly. She admires the boldness with which the great American graphic designer Paul Rand, in the picture book *Sparkle and Spin*, broke with the typographic scheme of the book to create a dedication page to remember. "The dedication," Wade says, "appears in black hand-lettering in the top right-hand corner of the first page of the book. And since it is the only hand-lettering in the whole book, and seems to have been drawn with a black felt-tip pen, it looks like a personalized message to each reader — a design surprise for sure!"

The picture book has a long-standing tradition of hand-lettering, motivated (one assumes) by the basic desire cited by Wade to connect with young readers in the most intimate way possible. Examples from the 1920s and 1930s include William Nicholson's *Clever Bill*, Wanda Gág's *Millions of Cats*, and Jean de Brunhoff's *The Story of Babar* (as originally published). More recently, Vera B. Williams's *"More More More" Said the Baby* and Chris Raschka's *Yo! Yes?* have continued in this vein. David Saylor, vice president and creative director of trade publishing at Scholastic, observes that a combination of hand-lettering and idiosyncratic type decisions that skew in the direction of hand-lettering are among the factors that define the special visual impact of Margaret Wise Brown and Clement Hurd's *Goodnight Moon*.

"The design of *Goodnight Moon*," Saylor notes, "is not complicated, but you can tell that careful thought went into it. You can see this in the decision to add color to the type on full-color pages, the sizing of the type so as to sit well on the page without competing with the artwork while still holding its own.

"The text font," he says, is "a solid, very friendly sans serif (Martin Gothic Bold, I believe), not typical of the classic picture books that relied on serif fonts for some sort of authority. And the hand-lettering of the title type adds a nice warmth and almost casual feeling to the book. It all looks effortless — and inevitable."

Wild Ketchup:
FREIGHT TRAIN

Bodoni:
Freight Train

Umbra:
FREIGHT TRAIN

Gill Sans Light:
Freight Train

Neutraface Text Bold:
Freight Train

Report School:
Freight Train

Futura:
Freight Train

Helvetica:
Freight Train

Playing Nice

Donald Crews has always turned to the same font—Helvetica—for the titles and texts of his now-classic picture books for toddlers and preschoolers. Asked about this, he responds—half in rapture and half in disbelief at being called upon to state the obvious—with a question of his own: "What would we do without Helvetica? Helvetica lets us create simple and beautiful words, phrases, and paragraphs that meld perfectly with the geometric, iconographic imagery in modern design solutions. It conveys the essential information but doesn't overwhelm the overall page, poster, or book. It plays nice."

The path to reaching that nirvana of ultimate design integration is, of course, maddeningly different for each and every book. As the art director for Stephen Savage's first picture book, *Polar Bear Night*, Saylor sensed the need for a strong sans serif to match the monumental feel of Savage's linoleum block illustrations. "I wanted the type to feel definite and confident, the same way the bear cub feels as she ventures out to explore the world." The font Saylor selected, Neutraface Text Bold, was inspired by letter designs of the twentieth-century American architect Richard Neutra, and it served to accentuate the retro flavor of Savage's art.

Given the inherent playfulness of the picture book as a genre, it was inevitable that type would one day assume a more kinetic and central role than the supporting one usually assigned to it. Iconoclastic artists of the last century, from French poet Guillaume Apollinaire to American painter Jasper Johns, produced modernist magic by shining a maverick light on the letterforms in a quixotic quest for the message embedded in the medium. And while news of their experiments was slow to reach Children's Book Land (surprise, surprise), when it finally did make an impression — most notably via the typographic high jinks of *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*, designed by Molly Leach — designers took note of a picture book that had clearly opened up new territory for everyone. As Laurent Linn, art director at

Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, observes, type in *The Stinky Cheese Man* not only harmonized with the art but also became "an integral part of the illustrations."

It was significant, he says, that Leach selected Bodoni, a classic font, for the body type, rather than a showier or more outlandish choice. "Using a single, well-known font established a solid foundation, which in turn helped to ground the overall design within which the illustrations were quite energetic and zany. But the real creative genius lies in how the type was manipulated and placed to create real emotion and energy and humor. You don't need to read a word to understand what each particular character means to say." For a pre-reader, Linn adds, the type becomes almost as big a part of the visual experience as the illustrations.

A picture book Linn himself recently designed shows how design ideas, including those learned from *The Stinky Cheese Man*, can travel and morph to suit the unique challenges posed by a very different kind of project. For *I, Too, Am America*, Linn wanted a way to signal poet Langston Hughes's contrasting vision of the prejudiced time in which he lived and the future that he hoped would bring racial equality. In addition to what became an exhaustive search for a single typeface that felt appropriate for both the historical and contemporary scenes evoked by Hughes and depicted by illustrator Bryan Collier, Linn wished to draw a clear graphic distinction between the two time periods through a contrast in the type presentation.

"For the first [historical] part, I set the type in white, framed boxes within the illustrations. I also placed the art itself in a similar, traditional frame. Then, for the second half of the book, I got rid of the frame around the art and had the illustrations go fully to the paper's edge, so that we no longer see the book's world through a frame, but are fully in it. I also eliminated the text boxes. In this part, the text flows freely, curved and floating on pieces of paper that swirl through the air, each incorporated into the art. The type goes from being outside of the action to being a part of the action, just as the reader does."

And as readers of *The Stinky Cheese Man* have been doing now for years.

All Types of Type

Goodnight Moon (Harper & Row, 1947) by Margaret Wise Brown; illus. by Clement Hurd
Night Driving (Holt, 1996) by John Coy; illus. by Peter McCarty
Freight Train (Greenwillow, 1978) by Donald Crews
Harbor (Greenwillow, 1982) by Donald Crews
The Story of Babar, the Little Elephant (Random, 1933) by Jean de Brunhoff
Millions of Cats (Coward-McCann, 1928) by Wanda Gág
I, Too, Am America (Simon, 2012) by Langston Hughes; illus. by Bryan Collier
Velma Gratch & the Way Cool Butterfly (Schwartz & Wade/Random, 2007) by Alan Madison; illus. by Kevin Hawkes
See Me Run [I Like to Read] (Holiday, 2011) by Paul Meisel
Clever Bill (Doubleday, Page & Co., 1926) by William Nicholson
Sparkle and Spin: A Book About Words (Harcourt, 1957) by Ann Rand; illus. by Paul Rand
Yo! Yes? (Orchard, 1993) by Chris Raschka
The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales (Viking Penguin, 1992) by Jon Scieszka; illus. by Lane Smith