As the literary editor of one leading British newspaper pointed out recently, the book ‘has kept pace with virtually every technological change you care to think of, from the internal combustion engine to television’. Indeed, though increasingly sophisticated production techniques have been developed and its external face has been subjected to the whims of any and every graphic design style currently in vogue, the inside of the book has essentially kept the same format since the first ‘codex’ books were created by the Romans thousands of years ago.

The combination of the desktop publishing revolution, advances in print quality and the emergence of a global economy has led to many titles being published than ever before. Book design is increasingly important in the publishing process thanks to stiff competition between publishers and the development of a visually literate audience. When presented with two books offering roughly the same content at the same price, the increasingly design-conscious book-buying public will always choose the volume that is more attractive to look at, easier to read and that presents information in the clearest, most easy-to-understand manner.

Book design is one of the earliest examples of what we now call ‘graphic design’. The Church was its first patron. In the West, the original book designers were 9th-century monks copying scriptures onto parchment, and the first attempts at printing were designed to emulate these beautifully hand-produced pieces. The designer Jan Tschichold spent many years examining these beautiful medieval and Renaissance manuscripts and books in an effort to discover their underlying design principle. After painstakingly measuring a wide variety of examples, he concluded that the majority used the proportions 2:3:4:6 for the size of their inner, top, outer and bottom margins respectively. He also found that the height of the text box equaled the width of the page where there was a page width/page height ratio of 2:3. This ‘golden ratio’, used by many (including Gutenberg), was first described in Tschichold’s *The Form of the Book: Essays on the Morality of Good Design* (1955) and was instrumental in establishing the basic principles of modern book layout. Josef Müller-Brockmann’s exploration of the grid system was another huge influence on post-war book design. Both he and Tschichold are still very important today. However, rules are made to be broken and for every designer following the ‘golden ratio’ there are many more who are willing to throw the rulebook out of the window.

It is hard to generalize about current trends in book design. Editorial design (like any other type of design, such as packaging, annual reports, brochures, etc) is for ever subject to the constantly shifting directions and stylistic approaches that influence graphic design as a whole. While it is possible to note the popularity of a certain sans-serif typeface, or the growing use of a certain style of typography, the most significant trend in design at the moment is ‘anything goes’. Designers will go to any lengths to create the design that is most appropriate to the book’s content and its intended audience.

The single factor that has had the greatest impact across all genres of both fiction and non-fiction publishing is that of increased production values. The most lavishly produced books are generally those about visual culture; many use unconventional formats and unusual print techniques and materials, and are conceived to appeal to the design-literate consumer. For the most part, these are books made by designers for designers, and as such all the design elements (layout, typography, imagery) have to work even harder to satisfy this most discerning and critical section of the book-buying audience.

The standards set by these books have had a big influence on book design across other genres, a good example being the once-humble cookery book. These are now so concerned to combine seductive imagery and cool typography with clear layouts and high production values that the recipes have become almost secondary. Of course, the commercial success of these books is helped greatly by the celebrity status of the authors and TV tie-ins.

It was the 19th-century US clergyman Henry Ward Beecher who asked, ‘Where is human nature so weak as in the bookstore? Designers more than anyone seem happy to endorse his theory. Few of the books that we buy – with the exception of a dictionary or the Highway Code, perhaps – are, strictly speaking, essential purchases. Books are really just another way for us to relieve ourselves of our disposable income, and for this reason they have always had to possess an element of seduction. Although all the various elements (such as layout, typography, use of images, print quality, paper stock and finishing) combine to give an overall feel, it is the cover of a book that has to work the hardest. Whoever coined the phrase about never judging a book by its cover was misguided – the classics notwithstanding, if a book can’t be bothered to attempt to gain your interest with its cover, then the chances are that what’s inside will be equally dull. The design writer Alan Powers argues in his book *Front Cover: Great Book Jacket and Cover Design* that successful covers possess ‘a form of hidden eroticism, connecting with some undefended part of the personality in order to say “take me, I am yours”’.

The concept of the cover design being a book’s main selling point is relatively recent, however. Traditionally, when books were the prerogative of the very wealthy, the inside of a book would be typeset and printed by the printer, and a bookbinder would then create a binding in the style of the customer’s personal library (invariably leather-bound and gold leaf-embossed). Cheap reprints of novels were available to the masses, but it was not until 1935, when the first ten Penguin Classics were launched, that ‘quality’ fiction and non-fiction were published for a wide audience of ordinary readers. The brainchild of Allen Lane, managing director of the Bodley Head, the venture was seen as a huge risk at the time. Design played a very important part in the series’ success. Featuring a ‘dignified yet flippant’ logo (later redrawn by Jan Tschichold), simple typography and blocks of solid colour, these covers made the Penguin titles instantly recognizable. They used an easy colour-coding system: orange for fiction, dark blue for biography, green for crime, red for plays, cerise for travel and yellow for miscellanea. In a shameless piece of marketing, the price (a modest sixpence) was displayed prominently twice on the front cover.

As Penguin increased the number of its imprints, its covers became more adventurous. In the late Nineties, Penguin tried to inject new life into its Modern Classics series by commissioning some of the UK’s most fashionable designers to come up with designs that would appeal to the under-25s. Despite being somewhat swiftly received by the purists, the new covers were a huge financial success and provided a perfect example of the importance of distinctive cover design.

Traditionally, it is the hardback edition of a book that has enjoyed higher design and production values. However, many publishers now offer ‘paperback originals’, which have some of the higher production values associated with their declining hardback editions and so neatly bypass the need for the hardback edition as a marketing tool. Things are slightly different in the United States. Unlike Europe, where margins are becoming increasingly tight, North America has an ongoing tradition of