Readability and Legibility in Text

Learning to understand the subtle distinctions of fine text typography will help you specify the most readable type.

By Betty Binns

This article is about type that is meant to be read—whether read for pleasure or information or instruction—and read for more than just a sentence or a few paragraphs at a time. While there are many visually striking and exciting ways of using type in advertising, promotion, packaging, and in other contexts, they are simply unacceptable in setting text type.

This specialty has its own set of design guidelines. What makes for good text typography is independent of the type-setting system used to produce it. Whether you are setting it on the most sophisticated Linotronic or Composing machine or using desktop equipment, the principles remain the same, although the best results may be more difficult to achieve on less advanced machines. What is important is to be able to evaluate the type you get. This means training your eye to perceive the subtle ways in which letters and spaces relate to each other. And please note: The fact that the equipment on which type is set is sophisticated (and expensive) is no guarantee that its output is good. What is more important is an understanding of the subtle distinctions upon which fine typography depends. The guidelines discussed here should help you toward that goal.

LEGIBILITY AND READABILITY

A minimum requirement for text type is that it be legible, which means that it should be large enough and distinct enough for the reader to discriminate individual words and/or letters. If type is too small to focus on, or if letters are insufficiently distinct from each other to be easily recognized, then type is illegible. While eccentric letterforms such as a capital "N" without a crossbar can be effective in a display face, this kind of eccentricity makes a text type illegible.

Readability takes legibility a step further. It is the quality that makes text easy to read, inviting and pleasant to the eye. Text may be legible, but if the reader is unable to read smoothly and easily, and becomes quickly tired and bored, the designer has not achieved readability.

LINE WIDTH/TYPETRACE SIZE

The major factors affecting readability relate to the relative proportions of the visual size of the type, the width of the line, and the space between the lines. How these works becomes clear when we understand something of what psychologists have discovered about the process of reading. They have found that we read in a series of eye fixations; that is, when we read, we scan a page in terms of words that have crisp eye span and then shift our eyes in what is called a saccadic movement along the line to another group of words. At normal reading distance, a normal eye span is between 12 and 15 characters wide. If a column of text is set too wide—slightly more than two eye spans—we must move our heads as well as our eyes to follow the line.

This is a tiring and inefficient way to read.

The width of line, however, is only the first factor determining legibility. Two further elements make for readable composition: the proportion of the type size to the line width, and the ease of horizontal eye movement conditioned by the white space between the lines.

On the other hand, if the type is too small for the measurement, the reader will have to focus more closely, reducing eye span and increasing the number of saccadic movements. This quickly leads to fatigue. There are certain rules-of-thumb about the proportion of line length to type size. For example, the width of the line specified should be equal to 1.5 to 2.5 times the length of the type's one-inch measurement. This is the case for fine type, the visual effect of the same size of type is radically different on different machines. (See Figure 1.)

LINE WIDTH/LINE SPACE

In our culture we read horizontally, from left to right. Curiously, the design of our alphabet is such that there is a preponderance of vertical strokes, tending to work against the direction of reading. For this reason, we need to place the letters in a way that helps the eye move easily in a horizontal direction. However, there must not be so much space between the lines that the eye cannot move from the end of one line to the beginning of the next. How much space is right is partly a function of the type, with longer lines requiring more space, and the tightness of the design of the face. If small lines need less space than faces with long spaces between the letters and strokes, serif faces are read more easily. Since serifs on letters and strokes, serif faces do tend to draw the eye movement, forcing the
an additional means of differentiating letter forms. It would therefore seem that
serif types should be easier to read. However,
there is no evidence that proves sans serifs decrease
legibility. Nevertheless, many people do
find that long passages of sans serif type
can be tiring. My own feeling is that some
sans serifs, because of their overall visual
emphasis in context and emphasis in many
pages.

TYPE COLOR
Color may be an odd word to apply to
something that is essentially black and
white, but it is the word designers use
to describe the appearance of the mass of
type on a page, the precise shade of gray
that is created by the visual mixture of
black type on white background. A common
thread of design is the effect that type color
has on its overall color and texture. The

Figure 4
Line spacing has the strongest effect on type color. Here, example A shows
extreme tight line spacing and example B shows moderate line spacing. Both of
these styles have their own considerations that can create
interesting and beautiful typefaces on a page. However, neither is as
readable for prolonged reading, moderate line spacing, in proportion
to the length of the line and the design of the type, as C is,
a better choice.

produce a rough, "tweedy" one. A good
way to think about such textures is to
be more or less visually "active." (See
Figure 2.) The distribution of the internal spaces
within a typeface is also very important in
determining the evenness of texture. If,
for example, the enclosed space of letters like "e" or "r" is very small in comparison
to the non-enclosed space of the same
face, it will be less useful for more active one which does not contain
these internal spaces evenly. The relative proportions of upper and lower
strokes also influence overall color and
texture. Although these differences in
design may seem slight, their overall con
sequences in the color and texture of the
type mass are very obvious. (See Figure 3.)
SPACING IN TEXT TYPE
Perhaps the most fundamental criterion
for good readable type is the consistent
similarity of color. This is achieved by
the apparent equality of the spaces between
the words on a line and between each of
the characters.

LINE SPACE
Line space has a great effect on
type color. As we add space between
the lines and reduce line length,
evvery line looks lighter. Even very black
faces look less heavy with a good deal of space between the lines,
and faces tend to look somewhat less active with
added space. Care and judgment are
needed, however, to be sure that the space is
not too great; otherwise, readers will not be
able to find their way to the beginning of
the next line.

Character spacing between
words on a line and between each of
the characters.
character must also appear to be consist-
ent. As mentioned above, in the hand-
drawn process, some space may be added
and taken out between characters in order
to justify a line. If the spaces are very
small, they are virtually imperceptible. The
result is an evenness of color that is unlikely
if word spacing cannot be consistently
rationalized. Often, however, this kind of letter spacing is very obvious. A good rule is that
any variation in character spacing that is noticeable is too much.

A more intractable problem is one which
is integrally tied to the design of the alphabet
we use. Our alphabet consists of straight-
edged letters such as "A", "L", "M", curved
edged letters such as "W", "E", "Y", and "T". These contours can appear in any
combination. The eye perceives the
spaces between the characters, which differ greatly among the shapes, even if the measurable space between them at their narrowest or widest points is the same.

In any typesetting system, a fixed space
is assigned to either side of a character
that assigned to the right of a character
to the left of the following space may
create the intercharacter space. Since the
beginning of typography, type designers
have had to consider the variations in
edge shapes in deciding the amount of
space to allow on either side of a character.
This is done, of course, in order to give
the illusion of even space between letter pairs
differing shapes. Inevitably, compensating
measures must be made. Systems which
permit the greatest possible number of variations
in the spaces between characters will
come closest to achieving visually equal
character spacing. Systems which
produce wide variations in space will
produce extreme results unless further
manipulation is done.

Most typesetting systems permit some
manipulation of the spaces between
characters. This can be done in the form of adding
or subtracting space between
each character pair, which is
called kerning. A change can be done as one thing
or another as a keyboard or as an overall command
which changes the sequence of time order
that a pair appears. Whatever the capacities
of the system, the ideal is the same—space
that appears to be even. Sadly, there are
systems which simply do not have the
flexibility to achieve this.

HOW MUCH SPACE IS ENOUGH?
Although all professionals agree that appearance of
word- and character-spacing is the first criterion of good typesetting, there is
no agreement on exactly how much
space should be. Highly sophisticated computer systems permit much tight-
ter spacing than older methods. For
this reason, a typeface may very tightly
emphasize typographic beauty to do very
the detriment of readability. Very tight
typesetting is fine for many applications in
advertising and other high impact
materials. In ad

At the other extreme, many desktop
systems produce type which is not
only not readable but which will
require more word spacing to balance
those spaces.

SETTING UNJUSTIFIED TYPE
Unjustified or ragged right setting is common
now in a great variety of contexts, although
there are still a few people who feel
that this is a sin of typography. In ad
unjustified, ragged right type
setting is
advantages of setting type. There are many design
reasons why you might prefer to see
r
type—such as informality of effect or
additional visual space—but there
are also some very good technical
reasons which might apply. In the absence of
a sophisticated hyphenation-and-justification
program to make line break and
word space decision, ragged right
spaces can be used as a visual unit. A similar
standard for character spacing is that
letters should not be so tight that they
lose their distinct outlines, or so open
that the words cease to be perceived as words.

Another factor to keep in mind is the
amount of variation between the
longest and shortest lines; others prefer a
strongly irregular edge. Getting the result
you want requires some method of
control of the line endings. One way
of doing this is by permitting or hindering
hyphenation. If you allow for
hyphenation, the ragged
edges will be rougher than if words
were hyphenated. If absolutely no hy-
phenation is permitted on narrow
margins, the rag is bound to have
some disagreeable short
ends, especially if the copy
contains very long words. On the
other hand, if hyphenation is permitted on large
margins, various lines will appear to
be almost justified and the feeling of rag
will be lost. There are intermediate ways
of handling this, such as never allowing
two consecutive hyphenation or
hyphenation only to avoid lines shorter than a certain
specified measure.

The relationship between the degree of the
rag to the length of the line and the
amount of space between the lines are as
much factors, in the final appearance as the
shape of the right edge.

LITTLE ACGRONMS/GREAT OAKS
I know of no other field in which seeming-
ly small factors like these have such
great overall effects. The difference
between a point of inkspace, a half-point
of word space or a quarter-point (or less)
of character space can make all the
difference in the readability and quality of a
piece of composition. If you are a designer
concerned with setting text type, the
most important thing you can do is train
yourself to see and use these differences.
This way you will be able to control the
character which makes type look
like this
and evaluate the final quality of the
composition in order to achieve the
expressive effect you want. Although the
technology by which type is produced is
changing rapidly, the standards of good
typsetting remain constant.

Bettina Bissm, proprietor of a firm that
specializes in the design of general
illustrated books, art books, catalogues
and museum publications, is also an educa-
tor and author of "Better Type," Watson-
Techniques for Display Type

From letterspacing to retouching display type, these time-proven methods will help make your design optically sound.

By James Craig

"Readers want what is important to be clearly laid out. They will not read anything that is troublesome to read, but are pleased with what looks clear and well arranged, for it will make the task of understanding easier."

—Jan Tschichold, "Asymmetric Typographic"

"You may ask yourself if I ever heard a housewife say she bought a new denim jacket because the advertisement was set in Caslon, No. But do you think an advertisement can sell if nobody can read it? You cannot save souls in an empty church."

—David Ogilvy, "Optim on Advertising"

The past quarter century has seen dramatic changes in typography. First, metal type was replaced by phototype and now phototype setting is giving way to digital type. This has been a great boon to graphic designers who enjoy working with display type. Along with these changes in typesetting technology have come desktop software programs which permit designers to experiment in ways that would have been impossible a decade ago. One thing has definitely not changed, however, and that is how we read. What Jan Tschichold and David Ogilvy wrote is still true today. There is a limit to how much time and effort the average person will spend on reading, especially an ad.

To ensure that our printed pieces continue to be read, we must treat type for what it is—a means of communication—and not as some kind of decoration. Promotions, ads, and product literature that cannot be read do not sell products. While experimentation and a sense of adventure are essential to typographic creativity, the bottom line must be legibility and readability. The following methods should help foster those principles.

LETTERSPPACING TNT AND TOS

Designers who do not set their own type on the desktop—and a large group of us still are not—are to a great extent dependent on typographers for type quality. With so many typefaces, typesizes, and letter combinations, there are any instructions we can give the typographer that will ensure we get what we want?

To begin with, there is no universal standard for ideal letterspacing. Some designers prefer their type set normal, others tight or very tight. Having a general preference, designers then strive for even letterspacing, that is, equal optical space between letters.

Unfortunately, our alphabet does not lend itself to uniform letterspacing, especially words set in all caps. Furthermore, the tighter the letterspacing, the more difficult it is to achieve greater legibility. When type is specified TNT (Tight, Not Touching), the typographer will attempt to give you even letterspacing with none of the letter touching. This may or may not be successful depending on the words to be set; chances are that some of the letter combinations will be less than satisfactory.

Should you specify the type to be set TOS (Tight, Optical Spacing), the typographer will go to even greater lengths to create equal optical letterspacing, even if it means connecting serifs or overlapping letters. The success of this approach depends a great deal on the taste and discretion of the typographer. (See Figure 1.)

There are a number of problems with specifying TOS. First, should you as a designer turn over your responsibility for good typographic to the typographer? Is it enough to mark up the copy TOS and "touch where necessary?"

Typographers will make these decisions, but they won't all be to your satisfaction. Connecting serifs is one thing, but overlapping letters may mean replacing two beautiful characters with a single ugly form. (See Figure 2.) Before specifying type to be set TOS, perhaps designers should ask themselves some questions—for example:

Is the space between the letters becoming more important than the letters themselves?

Is the type being set TOS so that it can be larger? If so, just how much has been gained in size and is it worth the price you are paying in legibility and readability?

How tight is tight enough? Just because type can be set overlapping is that reason for the type to be set that way. What is normal for your typeface?

How much type is being set? A single word or logo may lend itself to special treatment, but longer copy tightly set may turn off the reader.

In the letterspacing becoming more important than your message?

Do you really want your typographer placed on this attempt to achieve the Holy Grail of typography—equal optical letterspacing? Jan Tschichold believed that spacing should not be conspicuous; I do not believe he ever thought it could be equal. That was simply a goal to strive toward. At some point there is a delicate balance between the letterners and the placement of the letters where designers realize that this is as good as it gets. Beyond that lies typographic gimmickery.

LETTERSPACING CAPS

Caps are notoriously difficult to set so that they appear to be evenly spaced, especially words containing the letters "L", "T", and "Y. While careful kerning can help in some cases, at other times more drastic actions are necessary.

The word "TYPESETTING," for example, has very irregular letterspacing: the spacing for the "IN" combination is much too tight for the "TT" and "TTT." While some space can be added between the "T" and "N," it would not be enough to balance the space between the "TT" and "TTT." There is just no way to achieve equal optical spacing short of opening up the entire setting so that all spaces match the widest space.

There is, however, a partial solution, and that is to reduce the generous spacing between the "TT" and "TTT" by reducing the length of the cross strokes on the three "Ts." This can be done either with a razor blade or brush. The trick is to remove just enough to improve the letterspacing without destroying the integrity of the letter, or bringing too much attention to the corrected letterforms. The same treatment can be used for words containing the letters "E," "F," and "L."

It should be obvious that this technique can only be used effectively with sans serif letters, as serif typefaces would require a great deal of retouching. (See Figure 3.)

LINESPACING

When setting display type on more than one line, one has to be careful that the space between the lines appears equal.
This is a simple matter when the type is set in all caps, but setting type upper and lowercase can be a problem. With upper and lowercase settings, it is not unusual to have lines with few or no ascenders and descenders while others have many. Lines without ascenders and descenders will appear to have more space despite the fact that all the lines will measure the same distance from baseline to baseline. To correct this you must adjust the space visually. If it looks right, it is right. (See Figure 4.)

SCREENING TYPE

Screening type is an excellent way to achieve color options without having to pay for additional colors. On the other hand, if the type is not properly screened, it can appear washed out, blotchy or uneven, giving the printed piece a rather cheap look. Screens generally run in increments of five or ten percent up to 100 percent. Choosing the right screen is more of an art than a science. The designer must determine just how light or dark the type can be in order for it to be legible. The size and weight of the type will also affect the designer's choice.

Another consideration is the amount of screened type to be read. A single word should not create any difficulty while an entire sentence might. Bear in mind that when screening more than one color, a common practice when your piece is printed with four-color process, problems may arise. Moiré patterns can be corrected by the printer, ragged edges may occur when screens are overlaid. Although moiré patterns can be corrected by the printer, ragged edges may necessitate a color change. Colors that are made up of low percentage screens tend to have soft edges, but increasing one of the screens to 100 percent may help sharpen the type. Screening is also affected by a number of factors, among them the paper, the amount of ink, the printing process and the press. One printer's 30 percent tint may look like another printer's 20 or 40 percent tint. The printer's 30 percent tint may look like another printer's 20 or 40 percent tint. To correct this you may want to retouch the strokes with some fine brushwork or carefully recut them with a very sharp razor blade.

The same treatment may be required when the display type is sharp, the individual characters do not properly align along the baseline. Some rounded strokes may find their way into the white areas thus making the strokes even fatter and in some cases nonexistent. Ink squeeze becomes even more critical when the type is dropped out of a four-color image. If the type is to be legible it must drop out of all four color plates and be printed in perfect register. If one plate is out of register, color will peek outside the body of the letterform. All this does not suggest that designers should stop reversing type, but it does recommend caution. Many first class printers have no difficulty reversing type as small as six point Futura Light out of four-color reversed art. Others may have the equipment nor the capability—in which case you should consider using a larger or heavier typeface. (See Figure 9.)

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Creating Dangerous Typography

The secret ingredient for success when breaking the rules is contrast.

By Greg Paul

Warning kids, do not try this at home.

Even the riskiest stuff follows some basic rules, however. The secret for success lies in the single, unavailable truth in typeface-mixing: Always employ contrast.

Using four typefaces together is not unlike conducting a barbershop quartet. If the baritone should sing flat, the resulting discord can be exceedingly irritating. “Someone is way off,” one might protest.

But, in reality, that is not the case at all. When a singer sings flat, the sour note is a mere one-half tone off. If that interval were way off, say a whopping three tones, a perfect harmony would be produced.

These same dynamics apply in typography. Mix similar fonts (like Goudy and Garamond) and you will hear some sour notes. Common sense tells us that a single family of old style roman is adequate. Adding a second, similar family lends nothing but confusion without extending the design’s textural or emotional range.

However, bringing a contrasting typestyle into play can create harmony and logic throughout the design.

Obviously, the easiest route to typographic contrast is mixing serif and sans serif styles. Other surefire typographic contrasts include wide/narrow, heavy/light, roman/italic, caps/lowercase, script/roman, and round/square combinations. Skilled designers can sometimes combine two or more serif designs (mix a bold slab serif with a delicate old style). However combining sans serifs is much more difficult.

The stripped-down sans letter shapes tend to look more alike than different, limiting the possibilities for strong contrasts between styles. Not to worry, for few are the situations where a single sans serif family is insufficient. (The rare exceptions emphasize strong heavy/light and wide/narrow contrasts.)

TEXT TYPE When playing typographic mix-and-match, remember that these guidelines apply principally to display type. Body copy is another story altogether. Good text should be read but not seen, an evenly colored sea of gray. When choosing

Italics Mix Well Italics mix extremely well with most any roman letters, and even more successfully when serif or sans serif, caps/lowercase, positive/reverse and color contrasts also come into play.

The diamond motif and thematic color provide the glue that holds the whole thing together. (Pages from Boston Woman. Designer: Greg Paul.)

The Wizardry of Roz

Combining Sans Serifs The most difficult typographic combination is two sans serif families. Here we see Eagle Bold and Univers 49 sharing the same page. The secret is in the wide/narrow, bold/light contrasts combined with the unifying visual themes of semicircles and arrows seen in the headbands, clock, pill dispenser, and headline typography. (Pages from Boston Woman. Designer: Greg Paul.)
Typography in Book Jacket Design

Louise Fili discusses her working methods and the critical role type plays in designing book jackets.

Since singling out jacket design as her signature specialty in the late 1970s, Louise Fili has been quietly transforming the look of American books. As an art director of Pantheon Books for 11 years, Fili imbued the hundreds of titles she either designed or art directed with her own elegant style. Since leaving the company in late 1989 to open her own design studio, she has continued to play a major role as visual interpreter of American letters.

Perhaps what makes Fili's work so interesting is that she believes there is only one face that is right for every jacket—and she goes to great lengths to find it. Fili has resurrected forgotten typefaces from the early part of this century and has used them in fresh, often striking ways, and she is an avid collector of old faces, many of which she has found in European tea markets and used book shops.

While known for her rich use of illustration, especially on fiction titles, she also believes type-only covers can be equally effective in expressing the content of a book. In fact, she says, some titles or subtitles are so powerful they require nothing else. Fili has taught a senior portfolio course at the School of Visual Arts, has been recognized through awards by almost every design organization, and was a recipient of a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1984. In the following interview, Fili discusses how she approaches a typographic cover design, her sketching method, her extensive reference collection, and integrating type with images and how to achieve a distinct visual voice among the many book-like “designer book jackets.”

Q: To what would you attribute your general sensitivity to type treatments and applications?

A: Type has always been my primary interest, even before I knew what type was. When I first became an art director, I found that when I was given a project to design, I would first imagine the typography and then I would commission an illustrator for an image to go with it. I don't work quite that way anymore, although sometimes I'll admit that I do.

In my early years, I was always very interested in calligraphy. When I was in high school, before the calligraphy rage, I went to a seminar on it in Moscow. Since there were very few books on the subject at that time, I copied everything I saw. I found out in college that if you were interested in calligraphy that meant that you should grow up to become a designer. And then later I found out that designers grew up to be art directors.

Q: Explain how you approach a typographic design by walking us through the steps you take. As we understand it, your process might typically begin with a very thorough read, followed by thumbnails to develop a concept.

A: I read all of the fiction, and the nonfiction titles, I read a synopsis and usually the introduction and the first chapter or so. It's really not essential to read much more than that for nonfiction.

After reading, I usually have very specific ideas about what I want, and I'll show that in a rough sketch. Usually I just sketch out the type for the title cover and over again on a tracing pad. From a very rough sketch, it gets tighter and tighter and the type becomes more defined and focused. It will have the mood and the approach I'm looking for, but very often it turns into a typeface that doesn't actually exist. But at that point, that's exactly what I want and I can't settle for anything else. If that is the case, then I usually have it hand lettered.

That can be more expensive than specifying and hand-altering a face, but then you end up with something unique. I think that is essential because there is so much imitation in book jackets—and in everything else—that it is important to give an absolute identity to a design whenever possible. I don't want to use a typeface that anybody can use. I feel I have to go a step further to make it unique and, of course, appropriate to the subject matter, which is also something that is very important to me.

Q: When you create and hand-alter type, do you use a wide variety of typefaces?

A: Getting the type right is extremely important to me. And that's often what I focus on the most. I try not to repeat myself with book jackets. I always try to use a different typeface because I feel that every design solution has one specific face that's absolutely right for it. Whether it's a type that exists or not is another question. I often end up reusing old faces. In the reference material I collect, I often find that the whole alphabet does not exist, so I either rework the type or have the missing ones relettered. I'll even invent my own face beginning with an existing face or just start from scratch.

I think it is always a challenge to turn this little thumbnail into something that works. From there, I have to select the right typeface and define the right treatment that will carry it through. If I ask an illustrator to show a scene from the beginning of a mystery, I will do a little thumbnail or I'll show reference of the kind of lighting I'm thinking about. I usually supply designers, illustrators or letterers with reference materials because...
I have a rather extensive library of design reference.
Q: What does your reference library include?
A: Books on poster design, alphabets, all kinds of type design. I'm always combing flea markets and old book shops. I also collect various printed pieces and I have a fairly extensive type collection. Whenever I go to Europe, I'm always photographing signs, which I also keep in my files.
I may give an illustrator or a designer an image from the side of a fruit crate or something else from my collection that has just the right kind of type or design. It is really important for us to see eye to eye from the beginning. With art direction, it's a communication game and there is always something lost along the way.
Q: While you are in the process of selecting a typeface for the cover of a book, can you detail what questions you ask yourself?
A: I think it's instinct. I don't think I've ever had to say to myself, what period are we dealing with and what typeface was being used then? I think it's all subliminal, but again, I think appropriateness is very important. Often it's not just the face you use, but how you use it that is important.
Q: Do you prefer some typefaces over others? What are they and why? And which foundries and type manufacturers do you tend to favor, for particular cuts of faces, if any?
A: I prefer anything that's pre-ITC (International Typeface Corporation). I'm getting more and more difficult to find the real Beaufort, and the real Kabel, and the real Clarendon, and all the others. I do have certain favorites, but I like to use new typefaces whenever I can.
Q: Do you prefer some typefaces over others? What are they and why? And which foundries and type manufacturers do you tend to favor, for particular cuts of faces, if any?
A: I prefer anything that's pre-ITC (International Typeface Corporation). I'm getting more and more difficult to find the real Beaufort, and the real Kabel, and the real Clarendon, and all the others. I do have certain favorites, but I like to use new typefaces whenever I can. The Photo-Lettering book has a million typefaces that you can only use once. If ever, but I'm always looking for that opportunity. In the back of the book they have all the novelty faces, like Log Cabin and Needlepoint. There is one that looks like a lasso. Someday I'll have the right book for one of them.
Q: Are there certain faces that you use more often than others?
A: The ones I use the most are very often the standard, like Futura Book, or Eagle Bold. Or else I have private stock faces—alphabets that I've found and have had a letterer rework. Whenever I need them, the alphabet are there. That's the great thing about doing book covers. Every day you do can use some other typeface.
Q: For what kinds of jackets do all type covers seem most appropriate?
A: If it's a boring, academic title, then I think it would be heartbreakingly to use all type. But if it's a wonderful title that really lends itself to a special type treatment, then why not?
Q: Do you impose any particular rules for yourself when mixing typefaces in display and text situations?
A: I don't believe in rules. For every rule, there is an example of how that rule is beautifully broken. A good designer knows when something works and when something doesn't. I also think a good designer is constantly trying to break pre-conceived conventions.
I'm always testing myself because I am caught in the middle between aesthetics and reality. I know that a book jacket must be read. I don't believe that it must be read from across the street. If it takes too much more than one glance to read a title, then I think there's a problem. But on the other hand, I have editors who think if a three-year-old can't read it, then it's out.
With text type, I have virtually no involvement, which is too bad. But you'll find in publishing that it's very hard for the two to connect. Because of timing, the inside of the book is done well before I do the jacket. Whenever I am able to do the jacket ahead of time, the inside designer will sometimes try to work off of elements that I've used on the jacket, and that's wonderful because it has a cohesive look.
Q: What qualities do you look for when you choose a hand-letterer?
A: I work with five hand letterers, and they're all very good. But I use them all for different specialties. Craig De Camps is very good with airbrush and with period lettering. If I have a typeface that I want developed or just cleaned up, I'll give that to a different person. If I have something that's more script oriented, I give it to Tony Dillipiana. They are terrific craftsmen, but I don't rely on them for design judgements. I really want the design to be totally in my control.
Q: When illustration is a primary element in the cover, do you wait until you get the final art before you start researching the exact typeface you will use?
A: I try to encourage illustrators to do their own typography. I feel that most illustrators do have a very good sense of typography, yet they're afraid to unleash it. Sometimes I have them draw the type from my design as part of their illustration. At other times, I will give them more

Using the Airbrush. Fill painted by Martha Lippman with what has become a trademark for her: shaded type. This type was rendered with an airbrush at left. Her goal was to make the typeface compatible with the mood of the photo. The typeface is Empire, available on Typostor, but the initial caps were redone. (The type is violet gray with airbrushed dark gray shadows.) The type on the recent Knots release at right (both the title and author's name) was hand lettered by Elisa Castelli, based on Fill's tissues. The inspiration for the type was old movie posters and lobby cards from the 1940s. A subtle, originally lettered in the same script and placed on the same angle under "Brooks," was eliminated. The photo is a dusttone, created with back and metallic bronze. The author's last name is printed in a violet metallic ink. (A.D. Carol Carson.)
of a free hand. In most cases it's been very successful. I think it can be a much stronger piece when the type is an integral part of the illustration.

Q: Do you find that they can also choose machine-set type well?

A: That's where we usually run into trouble. There's never anything wrong with it, but it's usually just a little too bland for my taste. That is not what I am relying on them for, or for my assistant to do that. What I want them for is to actually create the type as part of their illustration and to execute it with whatever medium they're working with.

Q: In some of your work, you use a shaded type that has become somewhat of a signature for you.

A: Whenever I give my slide show, I always open with a cover of an advertising annual from the 1930s designed by Gustav Jensen, who was the inspiration for this shaded type. It took me a long time to find out who actually designed that piece because they were very casual about credits in those days. The great thing about being an art director is that when I see something like this that I wish that I had done, I can turn it into a book cover. But I don't think in any of the cases where I have used this shading, it really had much to do with that Gustav Jensen sample. It just launched me in this direction. For this kind of lettering, I always work with Craig De Camps, and I direct him very tightly.

Q: What are media being used to create this effect?

A: We tried different styles each time. The first time, with "Daybook." Craig used a pencil. A couple of weeks later we worked on a one-line Dufourville book. "The Elements of the Spirit Come First," and we decided that he should use airbrush. When "The Lover" came along, we used still another approach. The type was done in a fine line, with a shadow on a separate overlay.

Q: Your work has been characterized as part of a movement that finds its primary inspiration in early 20th-century graphic design, especially in its use of long-forgotten and eccentric typefaces. Who and what are these influences?

A: I am influenced by historical styles and typefaces of the past and incorporate them into my work. But I transform them into my own style, giving them my own identity. In general, I'm very influenced by European poster design from the 1930s and early 40s—generically French and Italian. I've always been very enamored with Jean Carlu, whose poster design has a distinct style of typography. But there are certainly many other designers of that period who interest me.

Q: At Pantheon were you involved in every title?

A: I was at Pantheon for 11 years. In the beginning I used to design everything myself. When I first started they had a very comfortable list, about 20 books. It was ideal for me because that was my first experience as an art director. As more titles were added—it averaged 100 to 120 titles a year—I really wasn't able to do everything myself, nor did I want to. So I just started delegating and eventually learned that could be as satisfying as any other aspect of art direction.

Q: What advice do you give your SVA students and young designers on type?

A: What most students lack is a sense of history. When I was teaching my students' idea of design history went back about as long as Herb Lubalin, if at all. Fortunately, books concerning design history are more available now, making it easier for students to understand the past.

Students just don't realize that there aren't a lot of new things out there. When they're using ITC Bookman, they don't have a clue that there was an original Bookman. But once you introduce it to them, students are receptive to this idea of history. And I think in some ways they're more receptive to that than to what you can do with type on a computer. I also wish that students could be a little bit more literate than what I found them to be. When I taught a senior portfolio course in design, none of them ever felt that it was necessary to know the least thing about the book they were designing a jacket for.

Q: In looking at examples of ineffective type treatment, what are some of your most common observations?

A: I think it's all part of faddism. Some people think that all they have to do is letterpress the title and they have a design. It takes a little bit more than that. It takes a concept and a type treatment, which may or may not have anything to do with letterpressing. That's always a problem. It's the same in illustration. People think that as long as you can buy an airbrush you're an artist, but it does take more than that.

There's also a sameness in terms of selecting typefaces. But even more than that, there is just a lack of understanding of what the book is. I'm not only looking at a good jacket, I like to read a book every now and then. I don't think that a lot of jacket designers actually think about who is reading these books. Some people just want to make it look wonderful without realizing what tone to give it. That can be very important—the design must be appropriate to the title. There are a lot of decorator jackets out there now that don't have a lot of thinking behind them.

Q: Can design actually affect how a book is received in the marketplace?

A: Absolutely. I think design always has an effect on a book. Consumers are certainly becoming more sophisticated about good design. Of course, if you have a great book by an existing author, it probably doesn't matter what kind of jacket you put on the book. But if it's a first author or an unknown, why not make it beautiful—if that is appropriate to the book. It's always interesting to see when a dark horse inadvertently becomes a best seller, which happens all the time. In those cases, design plays a major role in the success of a book.

—John Rechell

Hard-To-Find Type

For this book of woodcut illustrations by Belgian artist Marius, Fill wanted to use a bold, condensed face with a woodcut quality (at left). After sketching the letterforms to get the feeling she wanted, she found a similar face in an old typeface book. But it required major reworking: fixing the crookedness of the "x" and creating an "z." The title of the book was set in a Morgan wood typeface available on Typositor. She also decided upon the size of the book, 5x7 inches, so it would be easy to hold. The paper stock is Spectrolite, Red becomes an accent color in the dark grey type, and in directing the cover at right, Fill had to have an image that would work both on this hardcover jacket and a trade-released paperback. The face is Ultra Modern, which is no longer available, with arched shadows to give it the same quality as the photography, shot by Marica Lipman. Fill feels that script faces like the secondary typeface used here, Solanki, only work well when used sparingly.