

Just my Type

A book about fonts

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This is a book I might have received for free, maybe few people would consent to buy it for good money. It is about fonts and their designers presented in a chatty and disorganized way, more intent on gossip than clear explanations.

Letters are given by their general features, in handwritten practice they necessarily vary, but ideally not too far from their norms in order to ensure immediate recognizability. One may even be tempted to speak about Platonic forms of letters, forms that only reside in our minds, and which can only be conveyed and communicated by specific examples. When it comes to signs such as that of Chinese characters there is an art form of calligraphy, which is rather interesting. It is a form of abstract beauty, in the sense of objects not found in nature. When it comes to the Latin alphabet there is nothing corresponding, except of course one can speak about a nice or pleasing handwriting but it relates not so much to individual characters as to an overall view of a chunk of text. With Gutenberg and his movable types it all changed. Then letters came with uniform sizes and forms, and the notion of a font was born. Admittedly it had an earlier history, because after all the way letters were handwritten or better still carved in stone, became an inspiration for the original types. To produce types was cumbersome. You first had to chisel out a letter to serve imprinting a mold, which later could be used to duplicate en masse. Hand-setting type survived well into the 20th century and then it was mechanized but that only speeded things up, it did not change the principles. Then later on came photocopying and computer settings, which totally revolutionized the process making the past procedures entirely obsolete (one can no longer, as in the past discover slightly unaligned letters in a book). With computers the creation of new fonts became so easy that amateurs could do it, and this has produced a great proliferation of fonts. However, to design a new pleasing and original font remains as much of a challenge as it has always been, the purely mechanical ease with which it can be done only clogs up the fontal landscape. It takes much more passion, endurance and skill to produce a font the old-fashioned way, which served as a filter to ensure that only the devoted would do it.

Now fonts are ubiquitous, you cannot escape them, and for commercial reasons it is very important to have your products presented with a pleasing font. The book does not dwell much on fonts in serious texts, such as books, but more as eye-catching means for traffic and general information signs (as in subways and airports), movie posters (and in the past covers for records) and not to forget computer word-processing, and everything to be shown on a computer screen (what is on the keyboard is of less importance). A pleasing font is one you hardly notice, at least not in a text or on an information sign, but as indicated sometimes the font needs to call attention to itself. A fair number of different fonts come and go in the book and you tend not to retain them in memory, unless you

are quite familiar with some. I learn though that there are two different kinds of fonts, the more traditional being serif, meaning the letters stand on shoes when appropriate (such as Times and Palatino), while a sans-serif does away with that unnecessary frill and thus appears cleaner and more modern (such as Helvetica and Univers). The fonts I am most familiar with are those provided by PostScript, which made me familiar with Helvetica, Palatino, Courier and their bold and italic variants, as well as the more exotic ZapfChancery-MediumItalic, and in the book I learned that Zapf refers to a real person, a German designer.

There are various discussions about the worst fonts and inappropriate use but nothing memorable. Most memorably though is getting a name on phrases containing all letters of the alphabet, namely *pangrams* , the classical one being *the quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog* , the 26 letters of the alphabet included in a phrase of 35 letters, shorter ones have been designed, but they tend to be gibberish¹. This one stems from the 19th century and originates with the Western Union.

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¹ One of 28 letters is *Glib jocks quiz nymph to vex dwarf* repeating *i* and *o* . To go down to 26 letters you need to use abbreviations or loan words such as *Cwm fjord bank glyphs vext quiz* where *cwm* is Welsh meaning steep-sided valley. Anyway the phrase is hardly understandable and eminently dispensible.