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Don't Judge a Design Book by Its Cover: A Review of Six Books on Journalism Graphics

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One may never be more tempted to judge books by their covers than when the books are about publication design. But the old adage is as relevant as ever. It seems that even in the world of design textbooks, it's a gamble as to whether the cover really indicates what's inside.

Nonetheless, an indication of Yolanda Zappaterra's reverence for the past is apparent in her book *Art Direction + Editorial Design* (2008, Abrams Studio Series), which has a cover dominated by an image from a 1959 issue of *Harper's Bazaar*. Zappaterra's book has many dynamic graphic ideas that are as useful and effective today as they were when first published.

She makes a cogent introduction to publication design for young designers and editors. The concepts behind creating layouts (Chapter 3) and essential design skills (Chapter 4) are not discussed until after editorial design and its objective (Chapter 1) and the anatomy of a publication (Chapter 2) have been examined.

The book includes a timeline of the printed page that begins in China in A.D. 105. There are also profiles of influential art directors of the 20th and 21st centuries. They are presented along with case studies ranging from *Fortune* in the 1930s to the psychedelic Oz in the 1970s. Of particular use to young designers are pages like those in the appendices that profile and provide URLs for 15 type foundries that are among the most influential today.

A hint of the confusion found in *Designing Magazines, Inside Periodical Design, Redesign, and Branding*, edited by Jandos Rothstein (2007, Allworth Press), is on its cover where four magazines are portrayed in such a way that makes it difficult to determine which magazines they are or why they're on this book's cover.

The problem with *Designing Magazines* is that it's presented as if it's a textbook when the book is really a collection of independent musings by professionals on various aspects of the business. The essays and interviews were written by a score of professionals, many of whom first published these chapters as disparate articles in *Media Bistro*, *Print*, and *Folio*. Rothstein has filled in some of the gaps with five chapters of his own, but it's not enough.

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Turning these essays into an instructive text is like herding cats—an interesting exercise with a not very satisfying result. I want my students to read what Roger Black and George Lois have to say, but students also need a coherent context in which to understand the roles and functions within a magazine and its staff.

Section Nine is titled “Is the Editorial Format Obsolete?” Your students may be tempted to think so, especially given that the interior of this text is printed entirely in black-and-white on uncoated stock. This may be the most uninspiring context in which to examine magazine design.

How does one instruct novice designers in the use of color from a book limited in this way? The answer appears to be to avoid the topic as much as possible. A check of the book’s index confirms that color is discussed on a mere five of its 197 pages.

Layout Workbook: A Real-World Guide to Building Pages in Graphic Design by Kristen Cullen (2007, Rockport Publishers) has type and design fundamentals as well as many inspirational quotes. The book also carries profiles of designers and design firms.

But the textbook is a victim of its own success. Yes, of course we want what we read to be inviting and comfortable. But the design of this book is itself so relaxed that students who examined the book felt they might not get their money’s worth. A great many of the spreads carry no more than three or four paragraphs. The over-abundance of white space suggested to students they might feel cheated out of a more substantive text.

A good book on typography is essential. When available photography is mediocre, when no budget for clever illustrations exists, when all else has failed, a designer who is inventive and dramatic with typography can rescue his or her publication.

My current favorite among type books is Ellen Lupton’s ***Thinking with Type, A Critical Guide for Designers, Writers, Editors & Students*** (2004, Princeton Architectural Press). The cover for this book is a sleeper, but the interior is a lively examination of typographic possibilities. Lupton’s illustrations range from a contemporary designer’s initial notes scribbled on a paper napkin to an examination of the dot-matrix typography of cash register receipts and the pixel-by-pixel construction of digital typography for Web-based displays.

A little shorter on explanatory text but nonetheless very useful and equally passionate is ***Type Idea Index*** by Jim Krause (2006, How Books). I thought this small book (with its 4-5/8 by 6 inch page size) contained a great many dramatic, witty, and contemporary illustrations. And, in fact, promotional material for the book puts the illustration count at an impressive 650.

Instructors may be tempted to use books published by professional groups like the Society of Publication Designers. Their annual competition books are usually rewarding explorations.

The first few pages of ***Solid Gold: 40 Years of Award-Winning Design*** from the Society of Publication Designers, edited by a team of SPD members (2005, Rockport Publishers), are encouraging, with full page reproductions of winning designs. Unfortunately, what follows are hundreds of pages in which scores upon scores of magazine pages are reproduced at a mere 1 by 1 3/8 inches, a size so small that they are as unintelligible as they are ridiculous.

Elsewhere, one should look to the work of Steven Heller, formerly the art director of *The New York Times Book Review*. His history, ***Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant-Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century*** (2003, Phaidon), is particularly fascinating. Before your students get wild and crazy with type and design, why not show them where the wild and crazy youths of decades past have gone? See what Salvador Dali, Man Ray, and Picasso did in the pages of *Minotaure* in the 1930s or what the flower children of the 1960s did in publications like *Rat*, *Eros*, and *Kiss*. This is niche history—no *Forbes* or *Sports Illustrated* here. And neither should this substitute for a textbook, but the presentation is lavish and the edgy designs of decades past are thought provoking nonetheless.