Observer

The Well-Read Designer

Deciding which books will fuel your artistic fire is tough. And creating a must-read list for the Designers & Books website is no easy feat either. by Rick Poynor

About three years ago, I received an attractively courteous request to contribute a list of books that every graphic designer should read. This list was for a new website that will now be familiar to many Print readers: Designers & Books (www.designersandbooks.com), and the invitation came from Steve Kroeter, editor-in-chief. Unusual for such a venture, there would be an honorarium. Kroeter said that D&B would be designed by Pentagram, and he provided a persuasive link to the beta test site. In the modern way, I "googled" him and learned that he was a consultant and business strategist who'd clearly enjoyed considerable success. All of these factors combined to make D&B look like an ambitious initiative worth taking seriously.

The Designers & Books site provides insight into the works that inspire some of the top names in graphic design as well as other design professionals. A new book list is added every week.

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But for me, the irresistible lure was the opportunity to compile *a list*. I belong to that tribe of culture fans (and it might be most of us now) who cannot resist well chosen lists of items deemed to be noteworthy. Lists provide confirmation of what you already know to be good, useful reminders about things you've meant to check out and valuable introductions to previously unknown possibilities—how did I *ever* overlook that?

Kroeter wanted me to join a series of lists made by commentators who specialize in a particular area of design. Since the beginning of the site, the number of books selected has always been left to the list-maker. Kroeter requests two or three sentences in support of each book. Not everyone supplies them, and a few enthusiasts elect to write longer pieces. Overlong entries, however, impede the list's flow and are less likely to be read. These texts aren't reviews; they just need to deliver a concise sense of what the book is, what sets it apart and what someone might gain by reading it. I opted to provide a list of 20 books, which is enough to cover a fair amount of ground without being overwhelming on-screen, and I set myself a target of around 100 words per book.

In compiling my list, I decided to concentrate on books about graphic design and to avoid roping in old favorites from other areas that might notionally be good for a graphic designer to read, but end up looking arbitrary in an otherwise focused list. I wanted to assert the value of graphic design's literature as something worth reading. I tried to strike a balance between books that I and others believe to be of enduring relevance to graphic design (such as Robert Massin's *Letter and Image*), books that have been especially significant for me as a reader and researcher (*Graphic Design in America: A Visual Language History*), and a handful of less familiar books that I believe designers should know (Harold Evans'

Pictures on a Page: Photo-journalism, Graphics and Picture Editing). It was entirely possible for the middle category to coincide with either of the other two. Naturally, no short list can claim to be definitive; one dissatisfied commenter would later demand to know how I could possibly leave out Paul Rand. But I do believe that an educated graphic designer should be familiar with most of these books.

The D&B lists made by graphic designers are under no obligation to stick to graphic design. Designers are simply invited to share some favorite books. The last time I checked, out of a total of 169 respondents, 46 graphic designers had taken part, alongside 77 architects and 44 industrial designers (some people span disciplines). As one might expect, the contributors produce lists with greatly varying styles. Some are workmanlike and professionally orientated. Both Paula Scher (17 books) and Erik Spiekermann (11 books) offer lists stocked with helpful instructions and examples for fellow typographers. In a list of 48 books, which is unusually long for the site, Kit Hinrichs lays out a couple shelves' worth of trusty, old-school design guidance. Gail Anderson (14 books) compliments Scher's monograph *Make It Bigger*. She candidly suggests that plenty of design books are probably used more for browsing and inspiration rather than front-to-back reading. "I actually read *Make It Bigger*—meaning I didn't just look at the pretty pictures, and scan the captions," Anderson writes.

At the other end of the list scale are graphic designers who steer clear of design books as a matter of pride and principle. "I don't read directly about design, but instead look to the philosophies and experiences found in literature to influence my work," writes British designer Jonathan Barnbrook. Book cover specialist Peter Mendelsund states this "no design, thanks" policy even more emphatically: "I don't believe I've ever read a 'design book' in my entire life."

At a personal level, we can't argue with this disavowal of graphic design books. The highbrow reading tastes of these two exceptional designers are no doubt intrinsic to the idiosyncratic habits of mind that generate their design work—whether the choice of reading matter is the play *Waiting for Godot* (Barnbrook) or a collection of haikus by the Japanese poet Basho (Mendelsund). There can be no question that these and many other books recommended by the pair provide highly rewarding reading whether the D&B visitor happens to be a designer or not.

Browsing the site over the past three years, it's been fascinating to discover the serious literary enthusiasms of some graphic design people. Project Projects' Prem Krishnamurthy and illustrator Maira Kalman concur on the virtues of W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* (and so do I). Michael Rock of 2x4 admires Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, Haruki Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (an amazing book), Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*—also vouched for by Mendelsund, Chip Kidd, Massimo Vignelli and three designers from other disciplines. In fact, Rock deems Nabokov, "The author I most turn to when in

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need of reinvigorating my sentences," which gives anyone a good reason to read the great Russian-American novelist.

Speaking of Vignelli, not only is he a venerable statesman of the discipline, but he's also perhaps the most committed reader of classic literature to emerge in the graphic design lists so far. His weighty checklist of 32 titles includes Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Honoré de Balzac, Gustave Flaubert, Anton Chekhov, Thomas Mann, Alberto Moravia and Italo Calvino. Graphic designers aspiring to be properly cultured have their work cut out. And we haven't even begun to talk about the pressure to make inroads into serious nonfiction. Milton Glaser (14 books) eschews the distractions of storytelling entirely, at least in his D&B list, opting for three titles by the critic John Berger and three by the theorist Rudolf Arnheim. Abbott Miller of Pentagram, offering a list based on his reading as a student, has no place for fiction either. His colleague Harry Pearce's list is thoughtfully tailored toward books about mind and spirit. I'd never thought to read *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux* (1932), but Pearce has convinced me.

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My view of this potentially limitless variety depends on which hat I'm wearing. As a wide-ranging reader myself, I'm always open to suggestions about all kinds of books, although the less obvious, the better. (There seems little point in recommending a universally admired classic such as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*—which appears on five lists—when everyone knows it already.) If the recommenders are graphic designers, though, I want to know which design titles expert design readers consider the most illuminating.

I also can't help but wonder about the expectations of visitors to D&B. The name of the site suggests the presence of books relating directly to design, and this is the consistent focus in new areas of the site as it continues to develop. How useful to, say, students are some of the more digressive personal selections? There's a fine line between being delightfully tangential and merely whimsical. On the mounting evidence displayed at D&B, it's clear that many graphic designers prefer to read about anything other than graphic design. Is that a sign of maverick sensibilities at play or of a field not always convinced that its sphere of concern merits the reader's attention? ■

WEB EXTRA

Discover more about Designers & Books, and read Rick Poynor's list. www.printmag.com/April-2014

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