

My Life with Fonts
by Klancy de Nevers

In my father's day a typeface was a collection of many small bits of cast metal, sorted letter by letter into small compartments. His print shop boasted cabinets full of type, each drawer labeled with a name and a size. For example: Garamond 10 point. That was a font. Each individual letter of a font had been designed to be a good neighbor to other letters in the set as a printer placed them side by side in a composing stick to make beautiful words.

Most hot metal letterpress printing equipment has been replaced by offset, ink-jet, or Xerographic devices, but typefaces, or fonts, are still indispensable to anyone involved in sending words to screens or paper. Certain fonts cause my pulse to race. My childhood name set in *Cornet script*, with its characteristic lazy, looping capital *N* and the delicate *y* in *Nancy*, sets my heart aflutter, reminding me of home.

Printing was once the family business. As a child I wandered among the narrow aisles in our print shop and listened to the sounds of a press or the paper cutter or the big folding machine. A visit often began at the Ludlow machine, where my father selected bits of metal (molds of type) and arranged them into a stick and tightened a knob. Then he said, "Watch this," as he snapped the stick into a slot and pushed a lever. A humming pause, then a bright thing called a slug clicked out into a tray. The hot, shiny strip of metal looked small in his calloused, ink-stained fingers. I knew the smooth flat shapes would show my name in mirror writing. Sometimes the backward letters stood up straight like words in a newspaper headline because that's what he'd been working on. Sometimes they were the slanting and connected curves of an italic font. I could brush ink onto the face of the slug and press it on a piece of paper—I, too was a printer.

One of those slugs used to sit in a shoebox along with an old skate key and my grandmother's buttonhook, a box I can no longer find.

As I mastered handwriting and cursive, I really was collecting fonts. In first grade we learned

to print simple, upright lower-case letters: a b c d e f g... The next year our teacher gave us small pieces of a blotter to put, shiny side down, under the heel of the small hand holding the pencil over the paper, to allow the writing arm to flow freely. Using full arm motions, we scrawled pages of circles and looping arcs before we were allowed to attempt that first cursive *a*. The alphabet of the Palmer Method loomed on heavy cards tacked above the blackboard, a new font to be mastered. *À á Â Ë Ç È ...* On a calm day with just the right pen and lined paper I can still reproduce a sample that Sister Pauline would approve.

Cursive is no longer taught in most schools. My youngest grandsons have not had the pleasure of imitating the Palmer or any other curvilinear script, but have been exposed only to “handwriting” that looks like printing, and “keyboarding.” What they aren’t learning is how to connect letters in a word together in agreed upon ways in order to write by hand more efficiently. How will they be able to read old “love letters” they might find someday in their parents’ attic?

*M*y father learned to be a printer in 1929 and 1930 by working through the correspondence course of the International Typographical Union. The lessons gave serious attention to different typefaces, just as graphic design manuals do today. An illustrated discussion of typeface history noted that books printed by Benjamin Franklin and others of his time were hard to read because of the “bothersome” long lower-case s. That s looked like an *f* as it clung to adjacent letters. The redesign of the s is credited to the Italian printer and type founder Giambattista Bodoni. Already in 1783 Italians were showing us the advantage of clean and simple styling.

One lesson titled *How to Set Type by Hand* was largely dedicated to encouraging the student, with sprinkles of “you will soon learn to...” throughout. Inky fingerprints, smudges, and pencilled sketches of letters in the margins of these pages assure me that my father spent time on this lesson. It showed him how to set type by hand in a composing stick, his left thumb securing the bits as he added one letter at a time from one of the many compartments in the type case. He filled out lines and tied blocks of text together in a galley and learned to read type that was upside down and backward, an ability that contributed to the mystique of hand-set type and hot metal printing. It is a lost, and largely unlamented, art, practiced only in craft letterpress shops today.

You may not have thought there is emotion in type fonts. I'm happy to say there is. Some fonts are light and airy, allowing a pleasant breeze to whisper through the text. Others are sturdy fences. Some are tentative, like good old typewriter *Courier*, whose delicate lines and curves give too little contrast to be read easily. According to the printing lessons, an appropriate font can illustrate *Elegance*, DIGNITY, Reliability, *Unusualness*, *Femininity* or **ADVENTURE**. My father's 1920s printing instructor argued that a font can evoke even stinginess, severity or effeminacy! (effeminacy?) Mr. Chambers urged the student, "Don't forget that type talks. When you understand its language, it often results in both substantial advancement and increased salary."

But my father's eloquence on the printed page was limited by what existed in the banks of type in the print shop he inherited. When his font sets seemed inadequate, or when one showed wear, he had to buy and store a whole new type family, a twenty-pound set of type for each point size, including upper and lower case, as well as for each attribute such as **bold**, *italic*, or *condensed*. My own type vocabulary resides in the set of digital fonts provided by my word processors, to which I recently added more than 1000 fonts, usable in an infinity of point sizes and attributes—virtual drawers of type, representing a plethora of expressive tools unimaginable in his day. Think of the emotions and ideas that can be illustrated with such a treasure trove! It's *overwhelming*. One becomes *inarticulate*, suffers ~~writer's block~~ a loss for words...

Throughout most of printing history, type fonts were graced with serifs. Any short line or curve or bump attached to the strokes of a letter is a serif. (This H has four serifs; this H has none.) Serifs can be curlicues, tails, squiggles, flared embellishment, fat little circles that make you want to doodle, any one of those non-linear elements that pay homage to the illuminator's brush, the scribe's quill or the broad-point pen of the calligrapher.

Even serifs have a vocabulary of their own. The barb, the bracket, the spur, and the serif itself, can be slanty, pointy, forked, rounded, sculpted, shaded, hollow, fluted, connected one to another, all or none of the above. The Romans created serifs to add grace and definition to their large bold capital letters while penning words on scrolls or carving them in stone. An early specimen of the original Roman alphabet is still visible on a marble monument in Rome. Inscribed in 113 A.D., the text on the base of TRAJAN's column is the most celebrated example of

the ROMAN font.

As a daughter of one of the last of the hot metal printers, of course I notice serifs. I've admired Roman lettering on ancient blocks of marble in Delphi, in Ephesus, in Split on the Dalmatian Coast, and near Hadrian's wall. It is sometimes spidery, sometimes deeply chiseled, but always recognizable wherever Roman legions marked a mile. Articles in *The New York Times* and most magazines are set in variants of its descendant, Times New Roman. Those serifs guide a reader's eyes from letter to letter, from word to word, to make the text flow.

Before Times New Roman was created for the *London Times* in 1932, there were Roman fonts—that is, fonts with serifs. Type foundries often gave the surname of the designer to their offerings, such as Baskerville, **Bodoni**, GARAMOND, Goudy, and Caslon, names I first saw on drawers in my father's type cases. Less typical fonts such as *Old English*, **Cloister Black** and *French Old Style* pay tribute to the architecture and cultures their names suggest.

At one time publishers acknowledged the typeface in the back of each book. Knopf, for one, still does. My copy of *The Prophet*, a Knopf product from 1960, closes with "A Note on the Type." The short essay discusses the font and the man who designed it, M. Fournier (le jeune), the typographer most notable for formalizing the point system that resulted in standardization of type sizes. (One point equals 1/72 of an inch.)

The latest *Elements of Style* (illustrated) by Strunk and White, Penguin, 2005, tells the reader (but only if you search diligently) that it is set in **Bodoni Book**. A further but non-exhaustive investigation of the eclectic collection of books in my shelves reveals that Random House and its imprint Ballantine Books also reward readers with charming bits of typeface history. All is not lost.

My love affair with fonts took off in high school, when, as editor of the school newspaper, I created the layout, a paper mock-up, for each edition of the paper and wrote the headlines. My father's shop printed the paper, and to ease the headline task he gave me a page of sample typefaces and sizes to choose from. It was like getting to change my handwriting to show how I felt about each story: **BODONI** for the sports stories, condensed **Clarendon** for wordy headings, lovely *Monotype Corsiva* for my editor's column. For features I chose a tall skinny font, something like one called **HUXLEY** in my word processor. I used every choice offered, in caps and lowercase, almost at random, so that the first several issues of the paper boasted a hodge-podge of fonts—too much of a

good thing.

But isn't a font just a tool for putting letters into words and words on paper? Well, yes, but it can affect how one feels about a thing. After I was married, my father sent a small packet to our first apartment. Inside a shiny, flat white box were ivory calling cards and small thank you notes bearing my new name, set in a font often seen on wedding invitations: elaborate, ornamented and hollowed letters. *Mr. Noel de Nevers* looked stiff and formal. Whoever that was would have to wear a silk dress, hat, hose and heels—and little white gloves—at all times. I did love my husband's name. But where was I in the image my father sent? Had I become an ornamented title, no longer a person?

There are other fonts I dislike, for example, one called *freehand*, which allows middle letters to bump above their defining line, and a font that *tries too hard to be cute* (*Gigi*). Had my father asked, I would have chosen a plainer font for the thank you notes, as I did later for stationery, something like this: *klancy de nevers* centered, sans capitals, in a spidery sans serif with tall ascenders.

Before serif-free fonts like **Helvetica** arrived on the page, and maybe well into Ben Franklin's time, there was in Europe a Gothic font that truly looked like Gutenberg's text. Its strong strokes and embellishments were reminiscent of shapes in a Gothic cathedral. When monks began to copy holy texts on parchment or vellum, they developed angular lower-case letters that were easier to inscribe with the writing tools of the time. In Germany, the birthplace of moveable type, this style is called *Fraktur* or **Black Letter Text**.

One of my father's lessons compares these angular fonts a la Gutenberg with more rounded fonts: "The text-letter design may be compared to a viaduct supported by pillars, while the roman-letter design may be compared to a viaduct supported by rounded arches." The example, labeled "Pillars and Arches," showed this clearly:

muniti~~o~~nmen muniti~~o~~nmen

We can't get away from that Roman heritage: those well-engineered Roman aqueducts. The modern-day (and misnamed) Gothic font, a sans serif precursor of **Helvetica**, possibly called **Franklin Gothic** in most word processors, bears no relation to earlier, angular Gothic fonts.

I once tried to teach myself German from my husband's *Beginning German* text, published in

1941. The fine points of grammar and definitions of German vocabulary appear in English and are set in a Roman font such as readable **Bookman**. The German language content of the book is set in **Fraktur**, a font choice nowhere acknowledged. The full page German readings, titled **Text A** and **Text B**, fairly prick out of the pages. They seem filled with angry, assertive ideas and the shouting of capitalized nouns. I didn't do well with this book. I confused the German **ſ** with **f** because the long **s** occurring inside a word has no *tortuous* curve (that's the technical term for the Roman **s**), and the other curvy and ornamented **s** is used only at the end of a word. I puzzled over the word **waffer**—to drink or not to drink?

And the **k** looks like a **t**, and so does the real **f**, the one that isn't an **ſ**. Don't get me started on the capitals—the highly ornamented letters overwhelm recognition. I persisted as far as the **Junfer Aufgäbe**, trying one night while cutting up vegetables for dinner to memorize the definite and indefinite articles for nominative and accusative cases: I would check the homemade flash card on the window sill, recite “**der, die, das, ein, eine, ein,**” peel two more carrots, “**den, die, das ...**” Again and again. By the time dinner was ready, I'd given up, and never learned the plurals.

German is less intimidating when set in a modern Romanized font, and I've done better with more recent texts, though that's not saying much. **Leider, ich spreche kein Deutch**. I let my husband do the German speaking for both of us.

Declared by many to be “The best font of all time,” **Helvetica** is the sleek, cool sans serif font that makes European café signs and German airports look so austere and sophisticated. It was derived from an earlier font family, **Akzidenz-Grotesk**, a curious name. In a German printshop, **Akzidenzdruck** is the term for a printing job. **Grotesk** can connote a departure from the natural or expected, so the name translates as **Unusual Type**. Typographers may have admired the font's simplicity and lack of decoration (serifs).

Helvetica was developed in the 1950s in a Swiss type foundry and its name honors its country of origin, **Helvetia**. It has been widely embraced as the font of choice for signboards. Its designers consciously strove to achieve clarity and good Swiss neutrality, wishing not to project any intrinsic meaning in its form. Ironically, many businesses choose **Helvetica** for their corporate image because they feel the font embodies a sense of stability or trustworthiness, those Boy Scout qualities they hope will lure customers to their doors. Even a “*neutral*” font choice conveys a

subliminal message.

Helvetica is not perfect. Neither is **HIGHWAY GOTHIC**, which was used on interstate road signs for years. Researchers developed a typeface called **Clearview** for highway signage intended to be easier to read at a distance or in badly lit situations. This font achieved greater clarity and readability than other sans serif fonts by opening up the centers of letters and heightening lowercase letters so that an **a** can be distinguished easily from an **e** or an **s**. Easier recognition meant a driver might not miss his exit on a rainy night. Alas, many highway departments have reverted to earlier, capitalized signage. *The New York Times Magazine's* latest redesign required a new body type, a bit heavier and more condensed, to preserve readability of the articles in the somewhat smaller format. A veritable font war erupted when Swedish furniture chain **IKEA** changed the font in their catalogues and advertisement. Who would have thought that a typeface decision could alienate clients and cause a loss of business?

The choice of font can announce a location; **MÉTRO** puts me in Paris next door to Maxim's, **METRO** places me firmly in New York, where subway signage is largely Helvetica. When making business cards for myself, I use standard Times New Roman and a very simple arrangement for the address and phone numbers. Nothing flashy, but I now like to see my name with serifs. Set in Helvetica or one of the modern Gothic fonts it seems both childish and too conspicuous. For my website I chose a hollowed Roman font and tried to bury my name in sand on a misty and wave-strewn beach, which tells me I'm uncomfortable having a web page at all.

Humor is shared by font fanciers: Two fonts walk into a bar. The bartender frowns at them, and says, "We don't serve your type in here." My father would have gotten a chuckle at that and hurried across the street to his tavern. It might have fallen flat there, but his fellow printers and his family would surely have laughed with him. Now, with personal computers, keyboards and digital printers, we are all typesetters, and font lore has a bigger audience. In this brave new post-Helvetica world, we can better notice letters and words, we can acknowledge serifs or lack of them, and intuit what the font designer is adding to the story. A well-stocked font library is like the costume closet in a repertory theater; a quick change allows our words or phrases to play new roles. And the type in those closets, unlike my father's metal fonts, will never show signs of wear.

Gone. My father's print shop is gone. The printing craft has been taken over by graphic designers, and printing plants have set aside cast-metal type for bit maps, sooty oil-based ink for ink dots or pulses of laser light. My father did not live to see digital technologies take over the printing processes.

My heritage is a psyche filled with sculpted serifs and graceful script fonts, ancient Roman inscriptions and old-fashioned texts, typesetting traditions and stories triggered by font choices. In the back of a closet I recently came across the missing shoebox. There they were, the skate key, my grandmother's buttonhook, even a protractor and compass—I'll bet my grandsons don't know what those are for—but still the slug my father made for me is not there. I sometimes google "fonts" just to fill the computer screen with an extravagant display of blocks and blocks of varied and sometimes weird fonts that scroll endlessly in cyberspace. Surely there is one more font to be deemed irresistible.

The End

"My Life With Fonts" appears in Cagibi Issue 1, January 2018, at cagibilit.com.