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Beyond the Book

A podcast series on the business of writing and publishing

Interview with [Simon Garfield](#) Author, “Just My Type.”

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Q: Typefaces, like superheroes, all have original stories. From Garamond to Georgia, Palatino to Proforma, the look of letters tracks back in time to a moment of inspiration that can be fascinating or frightening. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Copyright Clearance Center’s podcast series. My name is Christopher Kenneally, and for our conversation today, we really will go beyond the book, diving down to the level of individual letters. Joining me from London is the author of *Just My Type*, out recently in the U.S from Gotham Books. Simon Garfield, welcome to Beyond the Book.

A: Hi Chris, it’s really nice to be talking to you.

Q: It’s a pleasure to have you join us today, and it’s a book I’m really looking forward to talking with you about. *Just My Type* is subtitled *A Book About Fonts*, and while our listeners wrap their minds around that intriguing notion, let me also tell them about your work as a book author and journalist. Simon Garfield is the author of twelve books of nonfiction, ranging from *The End of Innocence: A Study of AIDS in Britain*, which won the Somerset Maugham prize, to *The Nation’s Favorite: The True Adventures of Radio 1*, which can be described as a year in the life of a radio station. Simon has also written for the *Independent* and the *Observer*.

And Simon, *Just My Type* arrived in U.S. bookstores at the end of August and has already seen a number of praiseworthy reviews in major newspapers, and we hear you’re on the New York Times bestseller list, so congratulations on all of that. But most of the reviews begin along these lines: Who knew a book about typefaces could be so interesting and so much fun? Are you surprised at that reaction, not only that critics enjoy the book but that they express such shock over the subject?

A: (laughter) Well, it’s interesting because when I told my own friends that I was doing a book about fonts, I had two reactions. One was, Um, what? And, Are you mad? And, Do you really want to spend a couple of years on that? And the other was, great! I love fonts! I can’t wait! So absolutely more than anything else I’ve ever written, it absolutely sort of split people. I’m happy to say that the former group, the what, group, are sort of coming round to it now, especially those who have read the book, and they think, actually, you know, this is interesting. They do, all the fonts, from whatever it is – Arial to Baskerville to Helvetica to Sans Serif– they do all have an interesting tale. These things don’t fall from the ether, they are

put together with a huge amount of thought by very skilled people. And so it's really, I think, as we say at the beginning of the book, it's about fonts, but it's really a book of stories behind the fonts.

Q: Absolutely. The invention of the printing press, of course, gave birth to the first typeface, but for the first 500 years or so of publishing, the only people who worked with type were in printing or in publishing. That's changed, and there's one individual who gets the credit for changing all that. Can you tell us that story?

A: That's right. A man, who in recent days we've read a lot of great things about, when he retired from Apple. So, Steve Jobs, he dropped out of college ten years before he made his first Mac, and he found that he had a lot of time on his hands, and one of the things that he enjoyed doing was dropping into courses that he had no obligation to go to, but he just found them interesting, and one of these was a calligraphy course. And Jobs found that there was a fascinating tale about letters, about letter-forms, about why they look the way they do, and then that made him think about fonts, and then the Mac came about, and we are the beneficiaries, we were the beneficiaries in the '80s, of, as you said, a choice that we never had before. On the very first Macs, there were fonts that resembled ones that were previously available only to professional typesetters and graphic designers. And he called these after places that he'd been to, that he liked, including Los Angeles and Venice, and I think there's a London font as well.

Q: There's a Chicago as well, I believe.

A: And a Chicago, exactly. We had the first pull-down menu. I don't actually think it was a pull-down menu as such, but at least we had a choice, whereas before, even if we did have a computer early on, they tended to be the sort of dot-matrix thing. The font really depended on your printer as much as anything else. And it – absolutely, it made us all into font gods. After that Windows PCs followed suit, Microsoft followed suit pretty soon afterwards. With any new computer that we have, we now have a choice of 50 or 60 fonts to choose from.

Q: How do you think the rise of the screen culture is affecting typography? Certain fonts simply don't render as well in pixels as they do on the page. Are we losing anything as we transfer from page to pixels? Obviously the choice has grown, but is legibility – are any of those old arguments coming back?

A: Well, you're quite right. There are a lot of fonts that don't work, across the board, on the Internet, and there are, increasingly now, the arrival of things called Web fonts, which are guaranteed to work across any medium. I don't think we're losing them. The great typefaces – the Baskervilles, and the Garamonds, and the Caslons – aren't going to go anywhere. But you're right, especially on the mobile devices this is a particular dilemma. So on the iPad and the Kindle, and our mobile phones

as well, the smartphones, we have a very, very limited range, in some cases one, and in some cases eight or nine. But that will change as well, I'm convinced. There are lots of stories about the new Kindle coming up, I'm sure will have a much greater choice of fonts with which to read, and the iPad as well.

So it's a gradual process. It's interesting to talk about 500 years ago. We're not at the point where we're redefining the way type looks, but certainly in the last few years, when we can take anything anywhere, and read anything anywhere, we have had new challenges.

Q: Simon, you devote an entire chapter to the argument about legibility and readability, some of which relates, of course, to this transition to the screen culture. Is there life left in that old debate, and can you tell us, what it was that Beatrice Warde cared about back in the 1930s?

A: Beatrice Warde was, first of all, one of the few women in type at that time. She worked for Monotype in London and elsewhere, and she wrote a great deal as well about type. And her thinking was pretty pure, I suppose. Not quite in these words, but she believed that we shouldn't really notice type. One of her most famous essays was subtitled *The Crystal Goblet*, the idea being that if we drink fine wine, we don't really want to think about the goblet too much. So we should be able to read things clearly and easily, and enjoy the way the words fall upon the page, but not be snagged by them, and certainly not have our eyes ruined by them. And so her great thing was clarity.

And the theory also was, we read best what we read most, so we shouldn't frighten the horses with a lot of new types, and we should familiarize ourselves with the great types. But obviously, a lot has changed since the 1930s, and I'm happy to say that some of that theory no longer holds. We certainly don't want just the 1930s Monotype types that we had then, which were –now, I think, we'd regard them as very traditional and rather dull and unexciting and unoriginal.

So we look at modern advertising now, and the idea of clarity certainly doesn't hold the way that does, say, in books. In books we're still fairly traditional, we still tend to use a serif face in most cases, and Times New Roman looks fine still. You look at the billboards – if you had Times New Roman big on that, you'd soon get very bored, you probably wouldn't buy the product, you'd think, God, this is an ancient thing. Although I'm obviously fantastically respectful of the types of old, and the types that still work now, I'm absolutely delighted. Every month I get a huge amount of new types from all the font bureaus and font shops on the Internet, and there are some quite wild things in there that I'm sure Beatrice Warde would not approve of.



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Q: Looking in the other direction, from the wild to the not-terribly-exciting, I'm going to say a single word, and then I hope you'll tell us what it means to you. And that word is, Helvetica.

A: I have to admit that the idea of the book came about, pretty much, when, not long after Gary Hustwit's *Helvetica* film came out. I'm sure a lot of listeners would have heard of it even if they haven't seen it. It's a fantastic documentary about why Helvetica is everywhere, and why it took off, and about its history, and why it works even now. An editor thought, well, Helvetica, OK, it is a great story, but there must be lots of perfectly good stories about all the other typefaces, which is how my book came about.

Helvetica – I shouldn't talk about this in too much detail, I've just folded away a T-shirt which has Helvetica on it, and it's from the Strand bookstore in New York. And it's a T-shirt that I absolutely love to wear. Helvetica just looks great, for me, even now. There's lots of thoughts that, well, we should use something else, it's such an obvious choice. And it's used from American Apparel to BMW to Saab to half the products you can mention. You walk through any big city and you see it everywhere. But for me it still works.

Invented in the 1950s, and it hasn't worn thin. I do talk, in the book, about a man called Cyrus Highsmith, who set off with a grand mission to try and spend a day without Helvetica, and he proved this was a very hard task. So he would get up in the morning and he had to check his clothes for Helvetica washing instructions, and then he had to be careful about what he read in the newspaper, and he couldn't raelly – he lived in New York, or in one of the boroughs – he couldn't get into the city because obviously that meant seeing Helvetica on the New York subway. He obviously couldn't turn on his computer just in case anyone sent him an e-mail in Helvetica. He found that – I mean, I'm going on –

Q: (laughter) right.

A: I will stop at lunchtime, and at lunchtime, he found that he couldn't even go to his favorite Chinese restaurant because that had Helvetica on the menu. So, on and on. But I'm one of the great Helvetica supporters.

Q: I recall discovering Helvetica as a font. I had never thought about it before until I worked in television, and it was the one that just rendered, as we thought at least, the best on the screen, so that was a good reason for it in that particular instance.

I want to ask you about what we do when we choose a type for whatever we're working on, a sign or an invitation. How do we know when something is right or it's not? Are we relying on stereotyping? No pun intended.

A: There is a bit of that. I'd say if you had to pin it down, there are two great attributes that good type has, is clarity and emotion. Really, I think, again going back to the pull-down menu, only when we have that – so we put a document, a CV or a job application or any other Word document, into a whole range of different typefaces, and we find pretty soon that they tell a different tale. So we can set one in Gill Sans, which is obviously a reasonably modern typeface, if we're looking back over 600 years, from the beginning of the last century. And it's a sans typeface so we think, well, it's going to be quite modern. And it looks very, very clear, and it looks authoritative, and it looks as if we know what we're talking about, and it has a certain boldness to it as well.

But then obviously we put the same document in Comic Sans, and it's a very different thing. It looks like something that maybe a kid would have composed for their school project. So those, let's say, are two extremes, but if we see a type that we like, often it's very hard to say why we like it. It's a bit like a song or a painting. You can say, OK, well, it's got great composition, and it's been put together very well, and it sings to us. But there's something deeper, as well, about great type. I mean, as you said, there's a sort of inherent knowledge that it's just right, it feels right. It's a bit like when you put on a suit that fits. Obviously, a fantastically subjective thing as well, and people tend to be very passionate and obsessive about their fonts, and heated arguments online about what works and what does not. And also, there's a kind of great feeling that people possess their own fonts, and they have their own favorite fonts, and woe betide you if you criticize it.

Q: To the point about passion, Simon Garfield, I understand there's a typeface that you find absolutely wretched, yourself, but that everyone in London is going to be looking at everywhere they go come next year.

A: Yeah, that's the London Olympic font. It's less than a year, and I see it everywhere I go in London – on the sides of buses and cabs, and down the Underground, and huge amounts of e-mails I get because I applied for tickets, and everywhere you go now – so goodness knows what it's going to be like in a year – but pretty unbearable I think,

Q: And because? Because?

A: Because it is, I think, probably the most unathletic, unsporting font you could ever imagine. It's a very ugly, in my opinion, jagged font, which looks as though it's been put together without any great care. I'm sure that isn't the case. I've yet to get any explanation about – rather, I've yet to get any sort of response from anyone who thinks it's great. I'm slightly ashamed. This is the typeface that we're presenting to the world! I'm sure this isn't the best we can do.



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And then I thought, Well, OK, listen, when I first saw it, I don't know, a year or so ago, I thought, well, I'm going to get used to it. And like a lot of things, maybe tricky music, tricky twentieth-century music, you hear it a few times and you think, yeah, I can understand it now. But I've looked at the Olympic font many times, and I'm afraid to say it doesn't work for me, even now.

Q: Apparently the only thing about that font that's athletic is that it makes you want to run in the other direction.

A: That's right, yeah. And I kind of said, well, listen, you know, I hope for the athlete's sake that they don't put it on the medals.

Q: Oh, right. Well, we have been enjoying our chat today with Simon Garfield. He is the author of the new book, from Gotham Books here in the U.S., called *Just My Type*. He's joined us from London. Simon Garfield, thank you so much for being with us on Beyond the Book today.

A: Well, Chris, I really enjoyed it.

Q: Beyond the Book is produced by Copyright Clearance Center, a global rights broker for the world's most sought-after materials, including millions of books and e-books, journals, newspapers, magazines, and blogs. You can follow Beyond the Book on Twitter, like Beyond the Book on Facebook, and subscribe to the free podcast series on iTunes or at our Website, copyright.com/beyondthebook. Our engineer is Jeremy Brieske of BurstMarketing, my name is Chris Kenneally. For all of us at Copyright Clearance Center, thanks for listening to Beyond the Book.

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