

JUST
MY
Type
a book about fonts

Simon Garfield

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PROFILE BOOKS

JUST MY TYPE:
A BOOK ABOUT FONTS
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The main chapters of this book are typeset in Sabon MT 11/15pt. Sabon, a traditional serif font, was developed in the 1960s by Jan Tschichold, a Leipzig based designer. Its story is told on p 251. Interspersed with the chapters are a series of 'FontBreaks', which are set in Univers 45 Light 9.5/15pt, except for their initial paragraphs, which appear in the font under discussion. Univers is a Swiss font, designed in 1957, the same year as its compatriot, Helvetica. Their story is told in *Chapter Nine: What is it about the Swiss?* But, being a book about fonts, *Just My Type* also samples more than 200 other fonts, from **Albertus** to **Zeppelin II**.

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Introduction

Love Letters

On 12th June 2005, a fifty-year-old man stood up in front of a crowd of students at Stanford University and spoke of his campus days at a lesser institution, Reed College in Portland, Oregon. ‘Throughout the campus,’ he remembered, ‘every poster, every label on every drawer, was beautifully hand calligraphed. Because I had dropped out and didn’t have to take the normal classes, I decided to take a calligraphy class to learn how to do this. I learned about serif and sans serif typefaces, about varying the amount of space between different letter combinations, about what makes great typography great. It was beautiful, historical, artistically subtle in a way that science can’t capture, and I found it fascinating.’

At the time, the student drop-out believed that nothing he had learned would find a practical application in his life. But things changed. Ten years after college, that man, by the name of Steve Jobs, designed his first Macintosh computer, a machine that came with something unprecedented – a wide choice of fonts. As well as including familiar types such as Times New Roman and Helvetica, Jobs introduced several new designs, and had evidently taken some care in their appearance and names. They were called after cities he loved such as Chicago and Toronto. He wanted each of them to be as distinct and beautiful as the calligraphy he had encountered a decade before, and at least two of the fonts, Venice and Los Angeles, had a handwritten look to them.

It was the beginning of something – a seismic shift in our everyday relationship with letters and with type. An innovation that, within a decade or so, would place the word ‘font’ – previously a piece of technical language limited to the design and printing trade – in the vocabulary of every computer user.

You can’t easily find Jobs’s original typefaces these days, which may be just as well: they are coarsely pixelated and cumbersome to manipulate. But the ability to change fonts at all seemed like technology from another planet. Before the Macintosh of 1984, primitive computers offered up one dull face, and good luck trying to italicize it. But now there was a choice of alphabets that did their best to recreate something we were used to from the real world. The chief among them was **Chicago**, which Apple used for all its menus and dialogs on screen, right through to the early iPods. But you could also opt for old black letters that resembled the

work of Chaucerian scribes (**London**), clean Swiss letters that reflected corporate modernism (**Geneva**), tall and airy letters that could have graced the menus of ocean liners (**New York**). There was even **San Francisco**, a font that looked as if it had been torn from newspapers – useful for tedious school projects and ransom notes.

IBM and Microsoft would soon do their best to copy Apple's lead, while domestic printers (a novel concept at the time) began to be marketed not only on speed but for the variety of their fonts. These days the concept of 'desktop publishing' conjures up a world of dodgy party invitations and soggy community magazines, but it marked a glorious freedom from the tyranny of professional typesetters and the frustrations of rubbing a sheet of Letraset. A personal change of typeface really said something: a creative move towards expressiveness, a liberating playfulness with words.

And today we can imagine no simpler everyday artistic freedom than that pull-down font menu. Here is the spill of history, the echo of Johannes Gutenberg with every key tap. Here are names we recognize: Helvetica, Times New Roman, Palatino and Gill Sans. Here are the names from folios and flaking manuscripts:

Bembo, Baskerville and Caslon.

Here are possibilities for flair: Bodoni, Didot and Book Antiqua. And here are the risks of ridicule: Brush Script, Herculanum

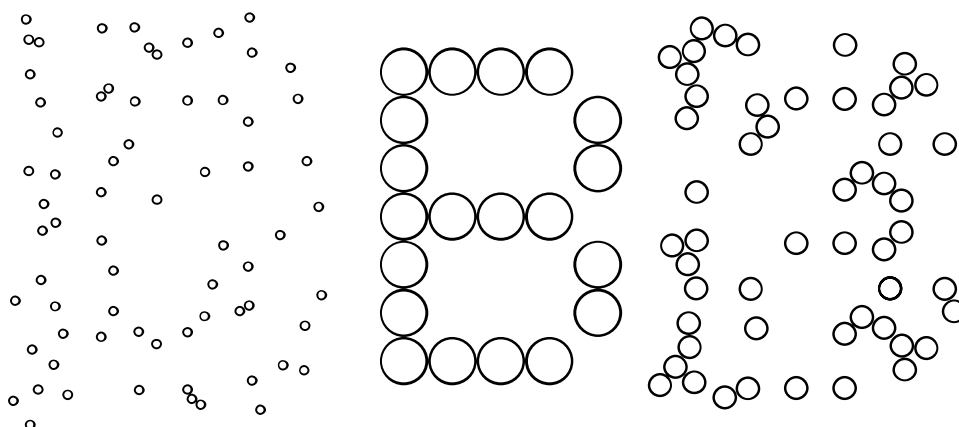
Chicago on an early iPod



and Braggadocio. Twenty years ago we hardly knew them, but now we all have favourites. Computers have rendered us all gods of type, a privilege we could never have anticipated in the age of the typewriter.

Yet when we choose Calibri over Century, or the designer of an advertisement picks Centaur rather than Franklin Gothic, what lies behind our choice and what impression do we hope to create? When we choose a typeface, what are we really saying? Who makes these fonts and how do they work? And just why do we need so many? What are we to do with Alligators, Accolade, Amigo, Alpha Charlie, Acid Queen, Arbuckle, Art Gallery, Ashley Crawford, Arnold Böcklin, Andreena, Amorpheus, Angry and Anytime Now? Or Banjoman, Bannikova, Baylac, Binner, Bingo, Blacklight, Blippo or Bubble Bath? (And how lovely does Bubble Bath sound, with its thin floating linked circles ready to pop and dampen the page?)

There are more than 100,000 fonts in the world. But why can't we keep to a half-dozen or so – perhaps familiar faces



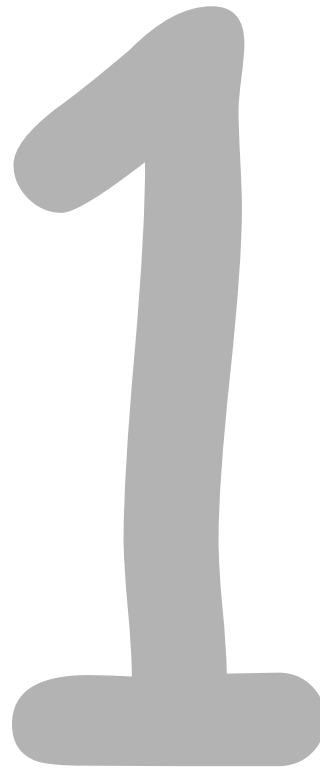
Bubble Bath – light, regular and bold

like Times New Roman, Helvetica, Calibri, Gill Sans, Frutiger or Palatino? Or the classic Garamond, named after the type designer Claude Garamond, active in Paris in the first half of the sixteenth century, whose highly legible roman type blew away the heavy fustiness of his German predecessors, and later, adapted by William Caslon in England, would provide the letters for the American Declaration of Independence.

Typefaces are now 560 years old. So when a Brit called Matthew Carter constructed Verdana and Georgia on his computer in the 1990s, what could he possibly be doing to an A and a B that had never been done before? And how did a friend of his make the typeface **Gotham**, which eased Barack Obama into the Presidency? And what exactly makes a font presidential or American, or British, French, German, Swiss or Jewish?

These are arcane mysteries and it is the job of this book to get to the heart of them. But we should begin with a cautionary tale, a story of what happens when a typeface gets out of control.

**We don't
serve
your type**



A duck walks into a bar and says, 'I'll have a beer please!' And the barman says, 'Shall I put it on your bill?'

How funny is that? Quite funny. The first time you heard it. It's the sort of joke you can remember – one that shows people you are not totally unable to tell a joke. A joke that a child can tell, or an uncle. The sort of joke that if you saw it on a greetings card would appear – as it does above – in *Comic Sans*.

Even if you didn't know what it was called, you will be familiar with *Comic Sans*. It looks as if it was written neatly by an eleven-year-old: smooth and rounded letters, nothing

unexpected, the sort of shape that could appear in alphabet soup or as magnets on fridges, or in Adrian Mole's diary. If you see a word somewhere with each letter in a different colour, that word is usually in Comic Sans.

Comic Sans is type that has gone wrong. It was designed with strict intentions by a professional man with a solid philosophical grounding in graphic arts, and it was unleashed upon the world with a kind heart. It was never intended to cause revulsion or loathing, much less end up (as it has) on the side of an ambulance or a gravestone. It was intended to be fun. And, oddly enough, it was never intended to be a typeface at all.

The man to blame – although you wouldn't be the first to do so, and he takes any criticism with a genial shrug of his shoulders – is Vincent Connare. In 1994, Connare sat at his computer terminal and started to think that he could improve the human condition. Most good type starts out this way. In Connare's case, he wanted to fix a problem his employers had stumbled into without thinking.

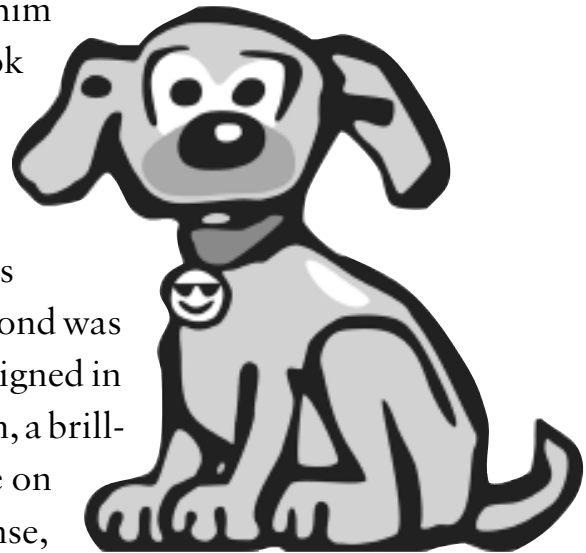
Connare worked at Microsoft Corporation. He joined not long after the company had started to dominate the digital world, but before it became known as the Evil Empire. His job title was not 'font designer', for that might have implied some sort of old-world arts-and-crafts chair whittler, but 'typographic engineer'. He had arrived from Agfa/Compugraphic, where he worked on many type designs, some of them licensed to Microsoft's rival, Apple, and had trained first as a photographer and painter.

One day early in 1994, Connare looked at his computer screen and saw something strange. He was clicking his

way through an unreleased trial copy of Microsoft Bob, a software package designed to be particularly user-friendly. It included a finance manager and a word processor, and for a time was the responsibility of Melinda French, who later became Mrs Bill Gates.

Connare spotted that there was one thing particularly wrong with Bob: its typeface. The instructions, designed in accessible language and with appealing illustrations (designed, in fact, for people who might otherwise be scared of computers), were set in Times New Roman. This looked ugly, because the software was warm and fuzzy and held your hand, while Times New Roman was traditional and chilly. It appeared an even stranger choice when paired with the child-friendly illustrations that accompanied it, not least of Bob himself – a waggy, sweet-talking dog.

Connare suggested to Microsoft Bob's designers that his experience of working with the company's educational and kids' software might render him suitable for revamping the look of their newest product. He probably didn't need to list the reasons why Times New Roman was unsuitable, but the first was that it was ubiquitous, and the second was that it was boring. It had been designed in the early 1930s by Stanley Morison, a brilliant typographer whose influence on modern publishing was immense, to update *The Times* newspaper. This work had nothing in common



Microsoft Bob, a dog in search of a font

with the way papers are updated today – redesigns intended primarily to increase the impression of youthfulness and upend a decline in circulation. Its prime intention was clarity; Morison maintained that ‘a type which is to have anything like a present, let alone a future, will neither be very “different” nor very “jolly”.’

But types have their time, and in the middle of the 1990s, at what was still the dawn of the digital age, Vincent Connare set about proving Morison wrong.

In many ways, Comic Sans existed before Connare made it legitimate by giving it a name. It existed, naturally enough, in comics and comic books (indeed the typeface was originally called Comic Book). One of the books that Connare had by his desk at Microsoft was *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, by Frank Miller with Klaus Janson and Lynn Varley. This



Watchmen – a dark inspiration for Comic Sans

told the tale of the elderly justice-doer jumping from his anxious retirement to take on terrible foes, only to find that he was even more unpopular with Gotham authorities than ever. The book was a huge crossover hit, reaching people who would previously have been embarrassed to carry what was then becoming an acceptable art form, the graphic novel. Along with Alan Moore's and Dave Gibbon's *Watchmen*, another influence on Connare, it marked the point where comics staked their claim as both literature and art.

Batman: The Dark Knight Returns was not that dissimilar from DC and Marvel comics of old, although it was now increasingly sinister, its characters taunted by terrible inner demons. Its value to the typographer was that it achieved that near-sublime melding of visuals and text, where one didn't swamp the other, and both could be absorbed simultaneously. It was like watching a perfectly subtitled film. When the Joker, seemingly dying, spits out 'I'LL ... SEE YOU ... IN HELL—' the reader skips from box to box gasping. This is perfect type, or at least perfect type suited to the medium; it might look odd in a Bible.

This was Connare's goal too, but he was aware that comic-book text was not always used so seamlessly. Those not exposed to comic books for years would perhaps be more familiar with Roy Lichtenstein's pop art type, inspired both by comics of the 1950s and the poetry of Phil Spector records. There was a primitive irony in Lichtenstein's use of the words 'WHAAM!' and 'AAARRRRGGGHHH!!!', and a knowing humour in his yellow-haired damsels sobbing, 'That's the way it should have begun! But it's hopeless!' But this was obtrusive type, type with an arresting message.