

Chalk and Cheese

By Nick Shinn

Graphic Exchange

Nov./Dec. 2001

Chalk

Two new typefaces came into being for very different reasons, in very different ways, and with a completely different appearance.

By Nick Shinn

Two months after best-selling Canadian author and media icon Mordecai Richler died, Kelly Duffin, Marketing Director at Random House Canada, his publisher, sent me an e-mail.

She had been looking for a suitable memorial for the man. The same clichés that proved so inappropriate for Pierre Trudeau had surfaced—a mountain, a street name in Montreal, a bridge in Toronto, a statue, an award—but she had a better idea.

A typeface.

His family, Random House, and good friend Jack Rabinovitch (benefactor behind the Giller Prize) agreed, and I was on the short list prepared by Random House Creative Director, Scott Richardson.

I've spent many hours trying to think up ways to promote both typography and my fonts, (such as writing for *Graphic Exchange*), but this was quite unexpected. I sent back my proposal promptly, and was fortunate enough to receive the commission.

A little research revealed that while typefaces had been named after authors before, such as *Cicero*, *Dante*, *Byron* and *Swift*, it was usually centuries after they died, and no typeface had been designed to commemorate a contemporary author. A typeface in honour of a man of letters: like all great ideas it seems so obvious you wonder why no one has thought of it before.

SHADES OF MORDECAI

The obvious question was, how could a typeface represent a person? It's not a question that would be asked of the street or the mountain that might bear a famous name, but as a plastic art form, there was some expectation that the typeface would evoke Mordecai Richler.

My clients were a group of people who had all known him closely, and I had never met him. I could not presume to match their knowledge of him, or fathom their grief. I did, somewhat tritely, suggest that a cigar and glass of scotch would be a couple of good dingbats to include with the typeface, and my punishment for this was the chore of producing ten mini-illustrations of

objects associated with him, as dingbats (not shown).

Fortunately, he was a creative artist, and I was convinced from the start that *his* work would be the key to the design of *my* work.

It would be a book typeface (to be used by Random House for setting future editions of his novels and other writing), suitable for sustained reading over many hours. After all, as Richler had put it, "What I have to say is in my novels. The rest is gossip." So it would be a classic, serified face, with a good contrast between thick and thin strokes. Conservative, for a genre of page layout—the novel—that has hardly changed in centuries.

As I said, I never met Mordecai Richler. And when I started the commission, I hadn't read any of his novels. Nonetheless, I was familiar with his journalism in the *National Post* and other periodicals over the years, and of course, he was a celebrity, so he was an old acquaintance. He was well known as a man who enjoyed a drink and a smoke—the finer things in life—so I set out to lovingly craft a classic typeface in the time-honoured manner, like the aged scotch he was so fond of. And this prototype is shown (right).

I removed as much idiosyncrasy as possible, striving for pure archetypal form along the lines of *Bembo* or *Garamond*. This would not be bland, I reasoned, because it would still exhibit the character of its designer's sense of the archetype. Still, I sought to put a unique quality into each letter, in the manner of Herman Zapf's *Palatino*, where a stylized pen stroke informs the shape of the serifs, curves, and joints.

For contextual research, I began *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, an early novel. It was a good read, and pretty much what I'd expected, with a minority background, linear narrative and smart dialogue.

But *Barney's Version* (1996), arguably his masterpiece, upset my preconceptions. Sure, the broad jokes were still there, with the milieu of Jewish culture, the larger than life characters, and the outrageous story lines. But there was something else.

This novel had a thoroughly Post-modern structure.

cheese

The Richler Typeface

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyzÆŒ
0123456789(“”\$£€-?!.,:;*)[@æœ&fiflß]

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyzÆŒ
0123456789(“”\$£€-?!.,:;*)[@æœ&fiflß]

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyzÆŒ
0123456789(“”\$£€-?!.,:;*)[@æœ&fiflß]

Spooling MINION

Spooling RICHLER PROTOTYPE

Spooling RICHLER

Spooling DIN

In classic book faces such as *Minion*, the sidebearings of the round letters are narrower than those of the straight, producing a modulated rhythm. The *Richler Prototype* followed this model. The final *Richler*, however, with its squarish curved characters and their wide sidebearings — adopted from the contemporary sans genre (e.g. *DIN*) — has the repetitive beat of today.

PARAGRAPH SET IN RICHLER TO SAME SPECS AS MAIN TEXT

What a surprise, given Richler’s reputation as a satirist and mocker of intellectual pretension. Yet here it was: the layering of authors, moving from Richler to Barney’s son, who provided the footnotes and summary, to Barney’s autobiography, written in varying degrees of dementia, with letters penned by Barney under his own and assumed names. And the cinematic timeflow, all flashbacks and flashforwards, deconstructing the storyline. And Richler toying with the reader’s awareness of the author’s celebrity, as you wonder, yes, Barney is Mordecai and also a fiction, but where does one end and the other begin? I was reminded of another great satirist, Norman Rockwell, and his multiple self portrait for the cover of *Saturday Evening Post*, where he pictured himself painting himself, his reference material a photograph, a mirror, and a previous cover of the *Post*.

The fine old scotch of a typeface now looked decidedly out of date and inadequate.

But that was OK. I always present clients with at least two options. It involves them, helps daylight their preferences, and keeps me out of the rut of self expression which the single-solution *fait accompli* can lead to.

But what would option B be?

How could I inject a contemporary sensibility into the classic genre? (For a development it must be, like *Barney’s Version*, not an outright assault on convention from scratch.)

SYNCHRONICITY

As it was the overall shape of the novel that was contemporary, it stuck me that the answer may lie in the general metrics, or spacing, of today’s typography. And that meant the anti-humanist, mechanical rhythm of sans serif faces like *DIN*, with the vertical strokes in the lower case playing a steady, repetitive beat (à la Kraftwerk), and the capitals tending to a common width.

Whereas the traditional, humanist faces like *Minion* and *Bembo* have curved lower case letters with narrow sidebearings, to even out the hourglass space between round letters to match the

area of the rectangular space between vertically stroked letters—thereby emphasizing the contrast between the counters (the internal white space) of different letterforms—the industrial sans face has curved letters with straightened out sides and wider sidebearings, putting the emphasis on the strokes of the letterforms, not their negative enclosed space.

So I squared up the curves of the round letters in Richler, and gave them ample sidebearings. It didn't look right at display size—in fact, to the trained eye it was nothing short of a travesty—but I stuck with the theory. That's the thing about design, you have to stick with the concept and play it out. The new aesthetics will look wack at first, hence the frisson, and you get used to it. In fact, at text size the new Richler was quite acceptable—a very open setting, a look that's popular with many art directors and designers who like to track out lower case print settings. The faces designed by Matthew Carter for monitor display, *Verdana* and *Georgia*, also exhibit a measured openness, to avoid the “accidental” ligatures that coarse resolution causes in print-originated faces like *Times* and *Helvetica*.

Following through with the *DIN*-ization of my old scotch of a typeface, I condensed both the round and the wide capitals, giving them the same squarishness as the lower case. This worked particularly well on the two letters earmarked as “signature” characters, the M and R.



Squeezing the M without condensing it, I brought the “V” joint in the middle upwards, so the form resembled that of *Gill Sans*. Bingo!—a

most unusual kind of an M to find in a traditional book face, but quite in keeping with the rest of the caps. Same thing with the R: I squared up the curve, and bent the leg—again, an unusual form for the genre, but on strategy.

When I had finished this process, and worked it in throughout the typeface, I presented it to my clients both in text, with a mock-up of pages from *Barney's Version*—and in display, with a mockup of the cover. They chose it over the more conservative option.

Now here's the strange part: They said it reminded them of Mordecai Richler, that it even looked like him. Florence, his widow, described the k as looking like him sitting with a crossed leg holding a cigar. And after the face was launched in a press conference at Massey College, *The Globe and Mail* headline read, “Richler typeface fits the author” and the deck, “Robust, with attitude”.

So that's how Mordecai Richler came to influence the appearance of the typeface that bears his name, and that's the way design works. It's not about appearance, it's about function; but if the function is taken care of, the design will look exactly as it's supposed to.

At least, that's Nick's version.

EXTENDING A POPULAR PRODUCT LINE

It's funny how once you design something, it can take on a life of its own. For instance, one designer can create a brand identity, and others who work with (and against!) the parameters will contribute to the image. The same is true for magazines, newspapers, and web sites—they are ongoing projects. And of course, logos are often revamped during a company's lifespan.

When a typeface is first introduced, it usually has a small family. After all, fonts are a speculative business, and it's better to market a few styles and see if the face catches on, rather than invest gobs of time in launching a large family that no one takes to. (Of course, this didn't stop Luc de Groot from bombarding the world with *Thesis*, “The largest type family ever”.)

I designed *Fontesque* as a 3-style family, *Regular*, *Italic* and *Bold*, in 1994 for the FontFont brand, and it quickly became popular, especially in the food packaging and restaurant business. My first extension of the family in 1998 added *Bold Italic* and *Extra Bold*, along with 4 text-weight fonts. Then last year it dawned on me that a number of FontFonts (*Scala*, *Quadraat*, *Eureka*) that had started life as serifed faces also sported sans versions, and that *Fontesque Sans* was a distinct possibility.

The technical challenge—creating a large family from a few extreme instances—intrigued me. At one end of the spectrum, there had to be *Extra Bold*, and at the other, *Ultra Light*. I started by trying to adapt the outline paths of the original *Fontesque Extra Bold*, working in Fontographer, removing the serif BCPs, but it was too much work; I had to thicken the hairline strokes as well, and the end result was stiff and awkward. So I drew the characters on paper, scanned them, added fill in Photoshop, and traced in Fontographer to create the new outline paths.

At the other end of the spectrum, things were easier. I had been impressed with Tobias Frere-Jones' absurdly thin *Interstate Hairline*, and knew that it was easy to create an *Ultra Light* sans by simply drawing a path in Fontographer and applying a stroke value. But what would happen when I merged this with the *Extra Bold* (with varying percentages of each) to create the in-between weights? Would they look OK? The set up was a bit of a slog—I had to go through each of the characters (257) in the *Extra Bold* and make sure it had the same number, and sequence, of BCPs as its counterpart in the *Ultra Light*. But once that was done, the technique worked almost perfectly. There was very little adjustment to be made of the in-between weights.

However, it was interesting to discover that the selection of the exact points on the spectrum that would constitute the *Light*, *Regular*, and *Bold* weights was a discriminating task. At one time, instead of five weights in the range, I had six, including *Medium*. But that moved the position of all the interpolated weights, and somehow the *Regular* didn't look like a regular (too light) and the *Bold* was too bold. And the *Medium* was just nasty. It's a problem I always had with the concept of Multiple Master fonts—it's like trying to compose a melody using an infinite number of pitches;

Fontesque Sans Ultra Light

Fontesque Sans Light

Fontesque Sans Light Italic

Fontesque Sans Regular

Fontesque Sans Italic

Fontesque Sans Bold

Fontesque Sans Bold Italic

Fontesque Sans Extra Bold



1. Fontesque Extra Bold is reference.
2. Sans letter is traced over it.
3. Tracing is scanned, filled in Photoshop.



4. Scan is imported into Fontographer.
5. "Autotrace" makes outline.
6. Path is cleaned up and repositioned.



7. Serified character outline is pasted into template layer of the Ultra Light Fontographer file.
8. Skeletal paths are drawn by eye, using the pen tools in Fontographer.
9. "Expand stroke" creates outline.

10. Extra Bold and Ultra Light are "blended", in varying proportions, to create intermediate weights.



as soon as you determine one key point on an aesthetic spectrum, there are harmonies which come into play which limit the number of possibilities that are be pleasing.

Some things just look right, and others don't. This was certainly true of the *Fontesque Sans* italics. I attempted to construct them in the same manner as the roman fonts, but the *Extra Bold Italic* proved impossible to draw to a narrower width than the *Roman*. (And an italic should always be narrower than its roman). Besides, I didn't see much use for it. So I drew a *Bold Italic* and an *Ultra Light Italic*, and merged those to create the other weights. The *Ultra Light Italic* was then discarded—it detracted from the roman *Ultra Light*, and with eight type styles plus one *Ornaments* font, that was a good value package. Any more fonts and the family would have had to be broken into two packages, which didn't make sense. Large type families are generally over-priced relative to individual fonts, given the ease with which multiple weights can be interpolated with Fontographer.

As in the original *Fontesque*, I made an *Ornaments* font, with a full set of the same characters, with a monoline, sans serif quality. Then I took it a step further, exactly matching the weight, size and variation in stress to *Fontesque Sans Regular*. In effect, the *Fontesque Sans Ornaments* are typographic glyphs, complete with upper and lower case, that can be mixed with the alphabetic characters to create words that are part rebus.

I spent most of March and April working on this typeface, hundreds of hours. Much time was spent creating kern pairs for character combinations that rarely occur in English, such as [PÆ], or ones that never do, such as [„T]. The typeface was released in October, and the first royalties are due in February, 2002. If this face does as well as the original *Fontesque*, the break even point (using the figure of \$75 per hour for average solo designer billing in Toronto) will be in 2005.

Retail font sales are no way to make a living. But that's not why I do it. I enjoy making typefaces like *Fontesque*, where I'm the client and get the final cut. It's art, a form of self expression. However, I also enjoy the challenge of working for clients. And I wouldn't get commissions such as the *Richler* typeface (which used the recommended RGD contract that specifies a percentage of the fee in advance), without the track record provided by the slower paying retail work.

Nick Shinn, R.G.D. is an art director/graphic designer and the proprietor of Shinn Design. He also designs and publishes typefaces through ShinnType. Tel. (416) 769-4198, email: nick@shinntype.com, Web: www.shinntype.com. *Richler* is not commercially available. FF Fontesque Sans is available through FontShop Canada, 1-888-443-6687.

SILLY & SERIOUS: An illustrated talk by Nick Shinn on the *Fontesque Sans* and *Richler* typefaces will be presented by The Type Club of Toronto, on Tuesday, January 22 at 7:00 pm, at The Arts & Letters Club, 14 Elm Street, Toronto, Ontario. Tickets: \$10, students \$5, free to members.