

**Debbie Berne. 2024. *The Design of Books: An Explainer for Authors, Editors, Agents, and Other Curious Readers*. Chicago Guides to Writing, Editing, and Publishing. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 256 pp. US\$22.50. ISBN: 978-0-226-82295-2.**

In this informative volume, Debbie Berne offers her practical and professional insight into the processes of book design. Accessible—in both language and cost—the book skilfully caters to a broad audience of non-designers and book-lovers. The novice author, for example, is instructed on constructive participation in the design process, and will gain knowledge, vocabulary and confidence from Berne’s advice. Likewise, the self-publisher is introduced to the commercial rationale for certain design principles: not just what to *do*, but why to *care*, from a commercial perspective. Berne has considered these multiple, diverse readers with care, and applies a designer’s sensitivity to audience in her writing.

This is ultimately a book about practice, where Berne is comfortably at home. Starting with an introduction to book formats and terminology, we then learn about typography, cover design, internal layout, and the use of images. This is followed by a short chapter on specific considerations for ebooks, and concludes with a practical, step-by-step guide to the publishing process for self-publishers and those working within traditional publishing houses.

At her best, Berne reveals the processes of decision-making on the very pages we’re reading. By the time we reach the closing note ‘About the Type’, we can appreciate the care of her typographic choices and delight in her introduction to the book’s three typefaces. Berne has enabled us to understand the labour and craft that produced Dolly Pro, Larsseit and Whitney, and their distinct personalities.

This book brings great insights to the reader, but it gets off to a slow start. The first chapter, ‘The Physical Book’, offers a rather abstract introduction to the practical elements that Berne discusses with more insight in subsequent sections. This chapter might have been enhanced through the use of annotated illustrations, as many of the details that are introduced (expansion creases, for example) would benefit from visual representation for the uninitiated. Unfortunately, the illustrations that *are* present add little to our understanding of the objects or processes that Berne describes. A more imaginative approach might have brought these physical features and processes to life, and showcased images’

ability to complement and increase our understanding a text.

While Berne touches on book history to shed light on contemporary formats and conventions, there's a consistent separation between design and production. This narrow view that it's "effective *design*" that "makes books appealing and useful" (p3, my emphasis), minimises the key role of print and production in the books we love. This lack of acknowledgement has practical implications when considering the educative function of Berne's work. While she emphasises that it's "smart to involve designers in these conversations" (p18), there's less encouragement to discuss with *printers* how books can be made efficiently and economically (though a suggestion that publishers will talk to printers, p27). The introduction to trim-size ends with a brief note that "availability and efficient use of paper will help determine the best options for sizing" (p22), but this is a conversation between designer and printer—and arguably one where the printer calls the shots. By centring the designer, and minimising these collaborative elements of the design process, readers are less well-equipped to work with colleagues in the print and finishing trades.

Berne's commitment to foregrounding the work of the designer understandably leads her to prioritise key skills and practices, but it's disappointing that the book lacks a comprehensive discussion of publishing's sustainability. Considering the urgency and scale of the current crises in cost and availability of materials, Berne's brief paragraph on the environmental impact of book manufacturing could be expanded. While individual authors and designers might not have the power to shift their publishers' decision-making about paper and processes, these are important aspects of book production that deserve our understanding. At the very least, Berne's audience of self-publishers should be encouraged to educate themselves on their choices and responsibilities, and understand the environmental impact of their endeavours. If Berne's intention is to educate a book-loving public, and to shift appreciation and awareness of publishing, then the contemporary landscape of materials and production is important to discuss.

Ultimately, though, this is a work that's committed to understanding practice and valuing labour. There's a core belief that in order to work together we need to be informed and respectful. I'm deeply sympathetic to Berne's sentiment that good work comes from curiosity, knowledge and collaboration, and this book offers insight on those things to a very

broad readership—an uncommon feat.

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