
Opening Extract from...

Just My Type

A Book About Fonts

Written by Simon Garfield

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Simon Garfield

PROFILE BOOKS

To Ben and Jake

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 is 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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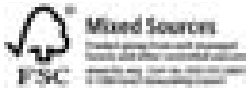

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In Budapest, surgeons operated on printer's apprentice Gyoergyi Szabo, 17, who, brooding over the loss of a sweetheart, had set her name in type and swallowed the type.

Time magazine, 28 December 1936

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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.

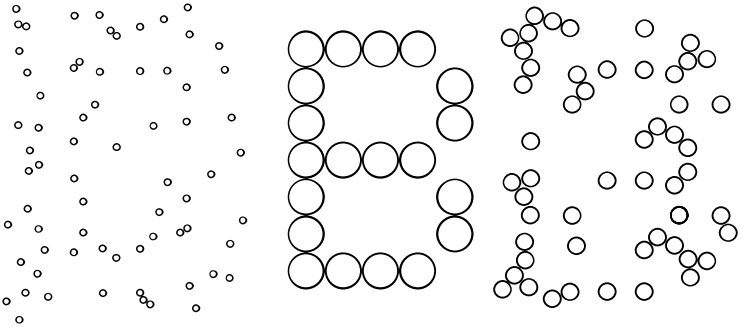
And today we can imagine no simpler everyday artistic freedom than that pull-down font menu. Here is the spill of history, the echo of Johannes Gutenberg with every key tap. Here are names we recognize: Helvetica, Times New Roman, Palatino and Gill Sans. Here are the names from folios and flaking manuscripts: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



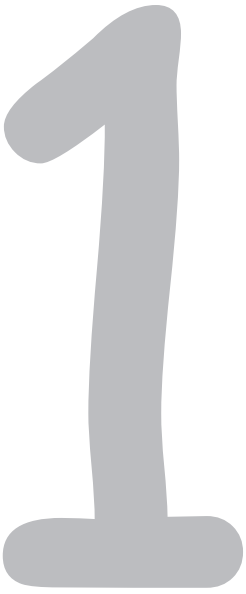
Bubble Bath – light, regular and bold

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.

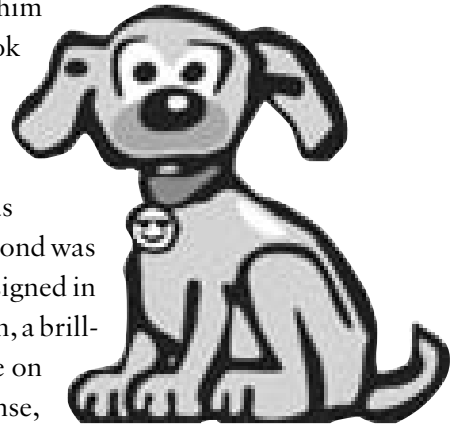
Connare worked at Microsoft Corporation. He joined not long after the company had started to dominate the digital world, but before it became known as the Evil Empire. His job title was not 'font designer', for that might have implied some sort of old-world arts-and-crafts chair whittler, but 'typographic 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

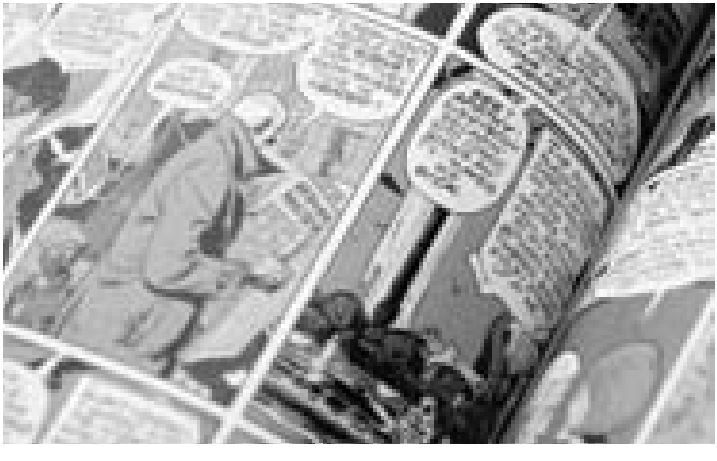


Microsoft Bob, a dog in search of a font

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 'AAARRRGGGHHH!!!', 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.

Of course, Connare knew that both Lichtenstein and Frank Miller's Batman didn't use type at all, but letters that had been hand-drawn for each box. This gave it great flexibility and variety – no two letters exactly the same, the possibility of stressing a syllable by gently increasing the pressure on the nib – but Connare's appreciation of the craftsmanship did nothing to solve the problem of Microsoft Bob. This new software required a new type interface that looked as if it had been drawn by a creative and friendly hand (a hand that would hold your hand as you clicked through). His letters would be the same every time they were used but they would still look human.

Connare used the then-standard tool for designing type on a computer – Macromedia Fontographer – drawing each letter repeatedly within a grid until he got the style he required. He chose the equivalent of a child's blunted scissors – soft, rounded letters, with no sharp points to snag you. He drew both capitals and lower case, and printed them out to examine their dimensions when placed next to each

Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff
Gg Hh Ii Jj Kk Ll Mm Nn
Oo Pp Qq Rr Ss Tt Uu
Vv Ww Xx Yy Zz

Comic Sans in all its childlike glory

other. Like most designers, he had a way of relaxing his eyes so that he could concentrate on the white paper behind the letters, gauging the space between the characters, the space between lines of text and their 'weight' – how light or bold they were, how much ink they used on a page, how many pixels they occupied on screen.

He then sent what he had made to the people working on Microsoft Bob, and they replied with bad news. Everything in the software package had been set with Times New Roman measurements – not only the choice and size of the type, but also the size of the speech bubbles that contained it. Comic Sans was slightly larger than Times New Roman, so it couldn't just be slotted in.

Microsoft Bob duly appeared in its formal state, and was not a success. No one officially blamed the unsuitable typeface. But not long afterwards, Connare's work was adopted for Microsoft Movie Maker, a distinct hit. And thus the typeface intended only as a solution to a problem took off.

Comic Sans went global after it was included as a supplementary typeface in Windows 95. Now everyone in the world could not only see it, but use it. Because it was irreverent and naive, it may have appeared better suited to the heading of your student essay than something with a heavier formality like Clarendon (which dates back to 1845). People also began to use it on restaurant menus, greeting cards and birthday invitations, and self-printed posters stapled to trees. It was viral advertising before such a thing existed, and like a good joke it was funny at first. Connare

explained why it worked so well. 'Because it's sometimes better than Times New Roman, that's why.'

Then Comic Sans began to appear in other places: on the sides of ambulances, on online porn sites, on the backs of the shirts worn by the Portuguese national basketball team, on the BBC and in *Time* magazine, in adverts for Adidas boots. It became corporate, and suddenly Times New Roman didn't seem so bad any more.

In the new century, people began to get upset with Comic Sans, at first in a comic way, and then in a more emetic one. Bloggers turned against it, a dangerous thing, and Vincent Connare found himself at the centre of an Internet hate campaign. A husband and wife cottage industry sprang up

The bunny gets it – hard-hitting propaganda from the Ban Comic Sans website

around it, with Holly and David Combs offering mail-order 'Ban Comic Sans' mugs, caps and T-shirts. Alongside their own manifesto:

> We understand font selection is a matter of personal preference and that many people may disagree with us. We believe in the sanctity of typography and that the traditions and established standards of this craft should be upheld throughout all time … Type's very qualities and characteristics communicate to readers a meaning beyond mere syntax.

The Combs, joint authors of a book called *Peel*, which documents the social history of the sticker, met one Saturday at a synagogue in Indianapolis; Holly says she was smitten as soon as they started discussing fonts. Both of them were clearly fans of type with authenticity and purpose, as their manifesto makes clear:

> When designing a 'Do Not Enter' sign, the use of a heavy-stroked, attention-commanding font such as **Impact** or **Arial Black** is appropriate. Typesetting such a message in Comic Sans would be ludicrous … analogous to showing up for a black tie event in a clown costume.

The Combs' manifesto then began to sound like something the Futurists would write after too much absinthe, calling on the proletariat to rise up against the evil of Comic Sans, and to sign a petition for its prohibition.

Their website has attracted international feedback, highlighting the far-reaching and rapid spread of a font in the digital world. One post from South Africa lamented, 'I am forced to study a national language called Afrikaans, which is similar to Flemish. Almost every textbook is printed ENTIRELY in Comic Sans.'

The campaign also neatly demonstrated that the public, beyond the world of type design, has an awareness and an opinion about the everyday appearance of words. The *Wall Street Journal* wrote a column about Comic Sans and the banning movement on its front page (in its dour Dow Text font with a crisp Retina headline), explaining that the typeface was so unpopular that it was becoming retro chic, like lava lamps. *Design Week* went so far as to put Comic Sans on its cover, with a provocative Lichtenstein-style speech bubble asking, 'The world's favourite font!?'

The Combs don't really believe that Comic Sans is the plague of our time. In interviews they sound reasonable: 'Comic Sans looks great on a candy packet,' says Dave Combs. 'A place where it doesn't look great, in my opinion, is on a tombstone.' You've actually seen that? 'Yes, actually I have.' Where else was no good? 'I was in a doctor's office,' Holly Combs remembers, 'and there was a whole brochure describing irritable bowel syndrome …'

Connare could have taken this one of two ways, but he was smart and appreciated the attention. He came to Comic Sans' defence, but also acknowledged its strict limitations. Like Dr Johnson's lexicographers, type designers can rarely expect acclaim, but they do well if they avoid recriminations.

And they rarely receive even ignominious fame, unlike Connare, who for a while became the most famous type designer in the world.

In the sixteen years after he developed Comic Sans, Connare has designed several other noteworthy typefaces, notably Trebuchet, which is a nicely rounded semi-formal humanist font ideal for web design.* But his fame rests with his original creation. 'Most everyday people that aren't in my industry know the font,' he says. I get introduced as the Comic Sans Guy. "What do you do?" they ask. "I design type." "What do you design?" "You might have heard of Comic Sans." And everybody says yes.'

One reason for this may be Comic Sans' emotional attributes, not least its warmth. Connare has written a monograph about his own type hero, William Addison Dwiggins, who in 1935 designed Electra, a sturdy book face that he intended to reflect the clanking machine age, its edges like the sparks and spits from a furnace. This too was emotional type, and Dwiggins envisaged a conversation in which he would justify his ambitions. 'If you don't get your type warm it will be no use at all for setting down *warm* human ideas – just a box full of rivets ... By jickity, I'd like to make a type that fitted 1935 all right enough, but I'd like to make it *warm* – so full of blood and personality that it would jump at you.' (Dwiggins was a man for the catchy phrase: he is credited with inventing the term 'graphic design'.)

* Both Trebuchet and Comic Sans are highly regarded by those who work with dyslexic children – their easy, unthreatening clarity proving far more accessible than harsher and more traditional fonts.

Connare can sometimes be elliptical about his fame. 'If you love Comic Sans, you don't know much about typography. If you hate it, you really don't know much about typography, either, and you should get another hobby.' And sometimes, rather than regale new acquaintances with the whole naive saga, he can email them a pdf slideshow. This shows not only odd uses of his font, but also a letter he received from the Ban Comic Sans campaigners thanking him for being 'a good sport'; on subsequent slides he showed a letter of appreciation from Disney after it used Comic Sans at its theme parks (it was signed by Mickey Mouse). His conclusion as to why Comic Sans has become one of the most widely used fonts in the world is arresting: people like it, he says, 'because it's not like a typeface'.

By jickity indeed. This suggests that, even in the digital age, we don't know very much about type, and may in fact be frightened of it. Here is something that has always been central to our lives, but when the pull-down menu offers us the opportunity to choose type for our own ends we appear to opt for the one that most reminds us of the schoolroom. At every opportunity our computer asks whether we might like to spend the day with Baskerville, Calibri, Century, Georgia, Gill Sans, Lucida, Palatino or Tahoma. But we choose old Comic Sans.

Perhaps this is just as it should be. In its attempt to resemble handwriting, Comic Sans has its roots in type from the Middle Ages. It is the logical conclusion to a technological breakthrough that transformed everything. Of course, if Johannes Gutenberg had imagined that his greatest endeavour would end up as a funny sign above a

funeral parlour he might just have wrapped his plump stained fingers around all the printer's ink in Europe and thrown it in the sea.

But come on Johannes, loosen up! Tell us a joke! As the *Wall Street Journal* observed, at least Comic Sans has stepped out from under a computer's toolbar to become a punchline:

> Comic Sans walks into a bar and the bartender says, 'We don't serve your type.'