Production Editor’s Retrospective: EJ’s Illustrious Design History

I’ve been a part of English Journal since the late 1980s, when Ben Nelms was editor, but my work has always been behind the scenes. As the production editor, I work with the typesetter, printer, designer, and proofreaders; I generally don’t even see an issue’s contents until after the articles are all accepted and copyedited. From then on, it’s my job to see that the issue looks good—that all the articles have been typeset properly, that all gets proofread and corrected, that there aren’t any awkward discontinuities or overly busy pages. I also keep track of the schedule and, to some extent, the costs, and I iron out any technical difficulties that arise that would slow down the job at the printer or cause an error. The methods for doing all these things have changed a lot over the past 20-plus years: we didn’t have a single computer in the editorial department when I first started working at NCTE!

But my favorite part of the job (besides working with the editors, of course!) has always been working with the art that goes into the journal or on its front cover. The first EJ cover that I remember working on was for the November 1989 issue; it featured a porcelain sculpture that looked exactly like a house of cards built on top of a pile of books, realistic down to the details of worn binding on one of the books and a slightly bent ace of hearts. And it was in glorious color—the first full-color cover I had worked on at NCTE!

We were working from a photo of the sculpture, but there was a slight problem with the proportions—there was not enough of the black background to allow for placement of the EJ masthead. Today, with Photoshop and other electronic tools, that would be barely a blip in the production of the cover, but at the time, it was a big deal. We sent the artwork out of house to be scanned on a large drum scanner that rotated at tremendous speeds to create the four-color separations. Then a stripper—the person who assembled the film negatives—had to cut around the intricate image of the sculpture by hand to remove the background and insert a new, larger one. It took a lot of time and skill (and some extra money!), but in the end, the change was invisible.

I’ve worked on many memorable EJ covers over the years, including some beautiful fine art covers during the editorships of Ben Nelms and Louann Reid. For the last few years, I’ve also been choosing some of the photos that we use inside the journal, which has been great fun. (Thanks, Ken, for the opportunity! How often do I get the chance...)

The November 1989 cover (under Ben Nelms’s editorship) features a realistic porcelain statue by Richard Shaw.
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The December 1928 English Journal broke from the then-current design and featured a Dickensian font on its bright red cover.

to search for zombie photos on work time? (See inside the July 2009 issue.)

Recently, I’ve been poring over the EJ archives, first for the NCTE Centennial issue and then for this centennial celebration of English Journal, and I’ve found some really interesting stuff. In a complete departure from the then-current design, a holiday-themed cover in December 1928 (labeled “Christmas 1928”) had “The English Journal” in a Dickensian font centered in a medallion on a bright red background.

During Stephen Tchudi’s editorship in the 1970s, many of the article opening pages included cartoon-style art and some distinctly nontraditional fonts. The November 1973 issue, for example, themed “Teaching English—A Balancing Act” (after the first Secondary Section National Curriculum Conference held earlier that year), featured a circus motif. Arthur Daigon’s article, “English: A Three-Ringed Circus,” opens with a festive, highly embellished font and a drawing of a ringmaster under the big top. The same font appears in other articles in that issue, accompanied by drawings of a fortune-teller, lions, tigers, clowns, and sideshow acts. A very playful design!

Viewing the changes in EJ cover designs and typefaces over the years has been an education in itself. From the dignified scholarly look of the first issues to the elegant art deco–style font used in the 1930s to the stylized graphic “EJ” employed in the 1960s and the chunky “EJ” with the lowercase “j” of the 1980s, the journal covers have reflected the design trends of their times. Even the photos of students and teachers that appear within the journal’s pages are interesting as a scrapbook of changes in fashion and hairstyles over the decades. I’ve learned some history from the EJ covers, too: the words “NRA Member—We Do Our Part” on covers from the 1930s sent me to Wikipedia, where I learned that NRA stood for National Recovery Administration, a Roosevelt New Deal agency.

Yes, in its 100 years, English Journal has published some outstanding articles with great classroom ideas and theoretical (sometimes controversial) discussions. But the design of the journal has a story to tell, too.

Rona Smith took a one-year leave of absence from graduate school in 1986 and has been working at NCTE ever since. She currently handles production for English Journal and six other NCTE journals.

CEE Awards Announced

A number of awards were presented by the Conference on English Education at the NCTE Annual Convention in Chicago. The 2011 James N. Britton Award for Inquiry within the English Language Arts was not awarded in 2011. The 2011 Richard A. Meade Award for Research in English Education was presented to Mollie V. Blackburn, Caroline T. Clark, Lauren M. Kenney, and Jill M. Smith, Acting Out! Combating Homophobia through Teacher Activism (Teachers College Press, 2009). The 2011 Janet Emig Award for Exemplary Scholarship in English Education was presented to Glynda A. Hull, Amy Stornaiuolo, and Urvashi Sahni, for their article, “Cultural Citizenship and Cosmopolitan Practice: Global Youth Communicate Online” (English Education, July 2010). The 2011 Cultural Diversity Grants went to Delicia Tiera Greene for her proposal, “Concrete Roses: A Case Study Exploring the Reading Engagements of Black Adolescent Girls in an Urban Fiction Book Club,” and Elaine L. Wang for her proposal, “Teacher Understanding and Facilitation of High-Level Thinking as Components of Instructional Quality: Reaching for High-Level Cognitive Demands in Text Discussions.” The 2011 James Moffett Award for Teacher Research was presented to Marianne Forman and Melissa Yip, MacDonald Middle School, East Lansing, Michigan.