

Sara Reynolds remarks at Atha Tehon Memorial - October 17, 2014

I am honored to be here today, but even more honored to remember and pay tribute to Atha Tehon.

Atha's life work of designing and art directing children's picture books has had an impact on many who never knew her name. Generations of children, parents, and teachers have enjoyed wonderful art, fine design, and beautifully integrated text and illustration in many, many picture books, thanks to Atha. Others were fortunate to learn the art of book making from her. I was one of those lucky ones. For where better to learn children's book design, art direction, and illustration than the School of Atha?

From hot metal type, tracing paper layouts, and hand-painted acetates, to digital fonts, Macintosh computers, and laser printouts, Atha's career spanned the revolution in design technology. But Atha herself was timeless: whatever the latest method, good design and good books were the constant.

Atha taught us that our roles as designers and art directors were to support and enhance the artist and the art in service to the story. But that didn't mean we were to be silent. Just as a child pours over the pictures of a favorite book, we were taught to pour over sketches and dummies, and then write pages and pages of detailed comments in constructive but gentle critiques. Before working for Atha, I thought that by becoming a designer I could avoid the arduous task of writing. Not so. I learned from Atha that the best bookmaking was collaborative, with insights from editors, authors, art directors, and designers pulled together in those long letters.

Atha was an exacting taskmaster. I'll let the illustrators here speak about their experiences. But I can tell you what it was like to be a designer under her direction. Let me give you an example. In traditional typography, the standard unit of measure is a point. 72 points equal one inch. Sometimes measurements are given in half points – so we are talking about one /one-hundred and forty- fourth of an inch. Finer than that was Atha's measurement – “a cat's whisker.” Many of us adjusted spaces “a cat's whisker” at her request, not suspecting that this foreshadowed her deep attachment to felines in her retirement.

Atha applied this precision to every aspect of a book. She was also a fine artist – so she could suggest adjustments to illustrators as only a fellow artist could to improve the anatomy of a hand or the curve of a mouth.

It could be exasperating – but we all knew that she was right. She made our work better.

Atha loved typography, graceful and elegant as well as humorous and quirky. She appreciated color, exquisite and subtle as well as punchy and bright. She respected traditional art yet valued the unexpected and playful. As I say this, I realize that this isn't just about design preferences --this was Atha herself.

Atha cared about those who worked with her as much as she cared about every detail in a book. She was kind, patient, thoughtful, and always ready to listen. When we worked with Atha we were a family, and after we left her staff we were still part of the family.

Atha seemed ageless, and now of course, we know that she wasn't. But her voice, vision, and legacy live on in thousands of books, hundreds of illustrators, and scores of editors, designers, and art directors who benefited from her wisdom, taste, sensitivity and support. Atha will always be a part of us, and how truly enriched we are.

Sara Reynolds

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