Special section editorial

> ### Kyle Rath

School of the Arts, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa.
Kyle.rath@up.ac.za (ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8336-849X)

> ### Jacques Lange

School of the Arts, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa.
bluprint@iafrica.com (ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7675-6777)

ABSTRACT

This special thematic issue of *Image & Text* focuses on storytelling and how selective aspects manifest in the domain of communication design. It is noteworthy that this particular special issue has arisen as a result of the landmark *Stories Worth Telling* retrospective exhibition[1] curated by the Information Design division of the University of Pretoria's School of the Arts in June of 2023 at the Javett-UP Student Gallery, showcasing 218 book designs by final year Information Design students. Following the exhibition, this special edition of *Image & Text* invited scholars, educators, writers, design practitioners, curators, and critics alike to submit articles specifically on the art of storytelling through an image/text interplay that dances upon the editorial stage or other spaces.

In this editorial, we highlight eight original peer-reviewed research contributions that offer unique perspectives on the role of storytelling in design, design education, and illustration as depicted in a multitude of media that run the gamut from poster design to creative writing, picture books, postcards, comics, wayfinding, and place naming. Moreover, we also provide an overview of academic contributions that discuss aspects related directly to the exhibition itself, an exhibition review, and a book review that comments on the importance of writing as a directorial storytelling tool.

Keywords: *Stories Worth Telling*, design as storytelling, editorial design, writing for design, narrative design, design pedagogy.

Editorial

Stories Worth Telling - crafting stories through the art of design

The art of storytelling is very much like constructing and writing a play. It is just as much the challenge of organising the interplay of vivid imagery and dialogue, transcribed in text, on an otherwise untouched 2- and 3D stage: the editorial interface. In illustrating, drawing, painting, constructing, sculpting, compositing, designing, photographing, editing, and composing imagery on the page, screen, or physical space, the storyteller acts out, visually, a play of rhetorical signs – from a gesture as simple, yet profound as a single line to the complexity of a fine watercolour.

From a typographic point of view, text is, first and foremost, the visual articulation of an enchanting, comedic or sobering script that the creative writer has artfully composed, act by act, chapter by chapter. Yet, text is not only a tool for transcription, but it affords the director the opportunity – through the spatial organisation and craft of letters into larger bodies (headings, body, captions, imprints, pull quotes and so on) – to set the stage. It matters not if a character plays a starring role or a minor part – every colour, indent, rag, font choice, and manipulation acts out a vital role in plotting out the writers' seductive imagination. The same principles also apply to storytelling through imaging. Storytelling is, arguably, at once the most basic and complex challenge facing communication designers. Editorial and display design is one such space where this challenge is made explicit. It is a spectacular stage that highlights some of the most fundamental storytelling tools a designer has in their rhetorical arsenal.

It is, of course, imperative that we point out that this particular special issue has arisen as a result of the landmark *Stories Worth Telling* retrospective exhibition curated by the Information Design division of the University of Pretoria's School of the Arts in June of 2023 at the Javett-UP Student Gallery (Figure 1). It showcased 218 book designs by final-year Information Design students, many of whom are well-established and even internationally renowned designers today. The projects on display were produced over the previous two decades as the outcome of an assignment aimed at teaching students about the storytelling proclivities of the book as medium. Following the exhibition, this special edition of *Image & Text* invited scholars, educators, writers, design practitioners, curators, and critics alike to submit articles specifically on the art of storytelling through an image/text interplay that dances upon the editorial stage or other spaces. In this issue, we feature a selection of articles that articulate, critique, and engage with visual stories that weave together pockets of history, cultural experiences, design pedagogy, unique points of view, and creative engagement with indomitable, unshakable characters of all kinds, set upon the editorial stage.

FIGURE **Nº 1**   〈

Installation view of the *Stories Worth Telling* retrospective exhibition, 2023. Image by Jacques Lange.

The first three articles offer a critical look at different dimensions of "editorial design-driven" storytelling and utilise examples from the *Stories Worth Telling* exhibition as case studies to explore storytelling as a civic act (process), writing as design (practice), and storytelling as a means to create a sense of belonging and identity (purpose and empathy). Moreover, while the contributions offer insights that apply to design practice broadly speaking, as design educators, the four authors position their arguments within the context of design education specifically.

In 'Visiting Hannah Arendt: reflections on the civic affordances of storytelling in design education', Fatima Cassim considers the role of storytelling as a civic act, which is made visible through a reflection on the storytelling processes that informed a curriculum project featured in the *Stories Worth Telling* exhibition. Cassim's article focuses on how the stories worth telling are shaped, archived and celebrated through participatory engagements and experiences by Information Design students. She employs Arendt's notion that storytelling serves as a bridge between the private and public realms as a scaffold to highlight the civic affordances of the storytelling process that may ultimately augment the students' critical thinking and not only their technical design capabilities.

In 'Designing with words: Writing as design', Kyle Rath and Jacques Lange posit that designers should not only be trained in the domains of communication design, marketing, and strategic problem-solving, but also in terms of developing literary/wordsmithing skills, as a form of creative writing ability. They argue that:

> [T]his is because writing is not merely a tool that helps enhance communication design. In a sense, it is the fundamental principle of communication (design) – communication driven by reading (understanding) and translation (articulation). It is through the act of writing from a place of sincerity, that design writing lends a sense of empathy, authenticity, authority and relatability to the work (Rath & Lange 2024).

With this in mind, Rath and Lange explore the interconnections and interdependence of narrative, writing, a systematic design process, and why communication designers benefit from multiple forms of writing skills in their communication design practice. To demonstrate this, they too explore, as case studies, a selection of student work from the *Stories Worth Telling* exhibition (2023).

In the third article, Marguerite van der Merwe critically reflects on what she titles 'Storytelling, belonging and identity in the graphic design classroom'. Van der Merwe notes that in a diverse student cohort, learning can be designed to encourage belonging and celebrate identity in the classroom. However, she argues that in increasingly international student cohorts, foreign students may find themselves displaced, living and working in new environments, and might struggle to express their heritage in the context of their studies. She further argues that by designing curricula to encourage storytelling, educators can help students develop their identity as designers and create a space for safety, vulnerability, and belonging in the classroom. She explores Cormier's rhizomatic learning theories and Brookfield's model for critically reflective teaching, which she applies to a series of vignettes featuring student projects from the *Stories Worth Telling* exhibition (2023).

The subsequent three articles focus on visual manifestations of storytelling through diversely different media – wordless picturebooks, vintage postcards, and comics. In 'A framework for creating and analysing wordless picturebooks', Maria van Os, Adrie Haese, and Deirdre Pretorius explore how wordless picturebooks serve as texts that convey a narrative through a series of images with little or no written information and *because* of this limitation, how they have gained popularity among academics, readers, and illustrators. The authors explain how picture books have evolved from purely educational tools to complex and experimental works, attracting prominent artists and addressing challenging themes. Described as "crossover", wordless picturebooks frequently attract readers of all ages. Furthermore, it is telling that the authors argue that while research on wordless picturebooks is

growing, literature generally focuses on wordless picturebooks as educational tools for a younger readership and the aesthetic qualities of the finished picturebook – rarely examining the complex process of creating a wordless, visual narrative. Therefore, the authors reflect on creating a wordless crossover picturebook to gain insight into this process from the lead author's perspective as a practising illustrator and imaging lecturer.

From wordless illustrations to salaciously illustrated and wittily captioned postcards, in 'Postcards of "Cape Girls": telling an Edwardian story of Cape Town', Jeanne van Eeden investigates picture postcards that originated in the nineteenth century as an efficient, cheap, highly entertaining, and democratic form of mass communication. She argues that as bimodal texts (comprising image and anchoring textual caption, often accompanied by a message from the sender), postcards communicate complex ideas and ideologies in a compact, transferrable format. She states:

> Under the influence of cultural studies in the 1960s, which stated that culture itself is the site of struggle for social meanings expressed in class, race, and gender relations, postcard studies (deltiology) has become an important interdisciplinary field since the 1980s. The postcard exposed millions of people to visual culture and predated the functions of the mobile phone, the Internet, and social media platforms such as Instagram (Van Eeden 2024).

In her article, Van Eeden focuses on a series of artist-drawn postcards by Dennis Santry in Cape Town in 1904. The series depicts six so-called "Cape Girls" engaged in leisure activities against the backdrop of iconic Capetonian sites. In her analysis of the series, Van Eeden provides insightful interpretations of the postcards and, in doing so, points out that their narratives tend to privilege the tastes of a white, middle-class, English-speaking imperial audience.

In 'Between memory & fantasy: Autofiction & worldbuilding in autobiographical comics', Octavia Roodt and Natalie Fossey locate the practice of creating autobiographical comics (autobiocomics) as products of autobiographical fiction (autofiction) and imaginary worlds. Autobiocomics is a comics genre characterised by imaginative and subjective representations of the autobiographical self. Autobiocomic stories attempt to convey an emotional 'truth' by depicting Roodt's authentic reactions to people, places or events. Their article contributes to existing autobiocomic scholarship by demonstrating that autofiction and worldbuilding theories can deepen the analysis of specific autobiocomics when instrumentalised in tandem. This provides the opportunity to read autobiocomic texts for their shared characteristics and documents insights on the author's relationship to their 'representation of self' and the textual world wherein the self is revealed.

The final two articles explore different socio-cultural dimensions of storytelling viewed through the lens of designed urban spaces and places. The first loosely deals with urban planning and naming of spaces, and how spaces and their stories evolve (both planned and randomly). In 'Named after Nelson: Tracing the threads of graphic heritage in Gauteng, South Africa', Yolandi Burger, Robert Harland, and Celeste McKenzie explore how places named after prominent figures such as Nelson Mandela symbolise their legacies and shared values, offering an opportunity to learn about their lives and impact on society. This article explores the concept of *graphic heritage* – a term that extends beyond physical markers to include theoretical understandings that enhance our knowledge of and experience with these places. Employing a constructionist perspective, it views the meanings associated with these places as constructed through individual interpretations. Working alongside the Nelson Mandela Foundation, this research focuses on six locations named after Nelson Mandela. Using photographic documentation inspired by Zeisel's "Design by Inquiry" framework, the article examines the dynamic interplay between graphic heritage, toponymy (the study of place names), and topophilia (the emotional bond between people and places).

The final article for the issue offers an insightful case study that demonstrates something far more meticulous in its *planning* and management of narratives, specifically in the context of wayfinding design for an ancient, sacred and now contemporary public space. In 'Exploring complex storytelling through wayfinding design', Tonya Meyrick and Russell Kennedy investigate how designing wayfinding systems in the built environment presents multifaceted challenges. In particular, they remark on how designers are required to navigate not only the intricacies of wayfinding for physical spaces but also negotiate a variety of interwoven social and symbolic dynamics. For example, in the context of developing a new wayfinding and navigation design brief and project framework for the Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria (RBGV), Australia, the authors point out the many social complexities surrounding navigating Australia's (post)colonial history and the particular colonial inscriptions that mark the institution. While the research team started to address the given project through the Stanford University Design Thinking (DT) 5-Step method, they simultaneously questioned the appropriateness of western-centric design methodologies. As a result, the researchers carefully document their decision-making process, leading them to integrate Australian and International Indigenous Design Charters (AIDC/IADC) alongside the DT method. In effect, the authors highlight the critical role of empathy, achieved through sharing stories and deep listening, to negotiate DT and AIDC methodologies effectively. The work culminated in the integration of Australian Indigenous Cultural Knowledge into the wayfinding and navigation project for the RBGV.

Since this special issue is centred around and is an offshoot of the *Stories Worth Telling* exhibition, we would be remiss if not to provide something of a look into the exhibition itself. Thus, we are delighted to showcase an exhibition review of *Stories Worth Telling* by Lize Kriel. In her review, Kriel explains that the book-focussed exhibition, demonstrates their luminous legacy and *beautiful* future. She asks: 'Why *beautiful*?' and explains that a decade or so ago, the phrase 'the future of the book is beautiful' was used by a niche publishing house in Germany just at the time when e-readers hit the market. Kriel argues, 'The message was clear: if we were to continue making books, they had better aspire to the highest standards that book design can accomplish. They should showcase what paging through a book can be like: if books had a future, it lay within the medium's propensity to be beautiful.' Kriel concludes that the work showcased in the *Stories Worth telling* exhibition is indeed 'beautiful' in this very way.

In the spirit of the historically rich tapestries of South African stories presented in these articles and spotlighted by the exhibition itself, to round off the special issue of *Image & Text*, we are equally delighted to offer a book review (and an accompanying, non-peer reviewed essay by the author, Joan Hettema) by Jennie Fourie of Hettema's autobiography titled *Jacaranda rain – a South African story*. The book is a personal account that intertwines the author's life with the rich South African histories. Fourie points out that 'in this self-published book, Hettema skilfully navigates through her memories, presenting a vivid portrayal of her experiences growing up in Pretoria alongside the backdrop of significant historical events.' Fourie keenly observes how Hettema invites readers to embark on a journey of discovery, inviting them to explore the complexities of identity, belonging, and the enduring power of memory.

To accompany the review, and as if to offer a practical echo of the sentiments put forward by Rath and Lange on the importance of developing writing ability in the context of storytelling, Hettema herself presents the final contribution to this edition of *Image & Text* with an essay titled '*How Jacaranda rain – a South African story was written* in which she provides an account of her process in writing her memoir. She reflects that: 'Foremost is the fact that every person who picks up a pen, stylus, writing implement, or lays hands on a typewriter or computer, no doubt has a different and own reason, aim or motive for doing so.' She continues:

> What is it that induces that irresistible feeling within us that drags at one's gut nagging one to produce the words that hopefully reflect what we want to express. Is it because we are trying to restore order to the chaos of life around us? … I wanted to reveal the mysterious atmosphere that lurks around memories of the past. The silence that surrounds the

actors as they begin to play their parts in the story is always there as is the possibility that there are so many ways the scene could unfold.

Hettema's seductive final line summarises our concluding sentiment on this special issue. As important a director's role is to consider how actors play their parts and the many ways a single scene might potentially unfold, it is undoubtedly equally reflective of the role of the communication designer, who must skilfully reach into their arsenal of diverse tools to depict a visual story upon the editorial stage. As directors, they manoeuvre their actors (image and text) with an understanding of each communicative function and individual acting strengths. In telling stories visually, be it on printed pages, digital screens, or physical spaces, designers must produce not only a story, but one *worth telling*.

Notes

1. See https://www.behance.net/storiesbookex?tracking_source=search_projects%7CMichelle+Salas