Judging a book beyond its cover

—

Reading the Alcuin Society Awards for Excellence in Book Design in Canada, 1981 to today

Grant Hurley | University of Toronto
June 5, 2019 | Bibliographical Society of Canada 2019 Annual Meeting, Vancouver, BC

Outline

- A brief history of the Alcuin Awards
- The Awards dataset
- Some initial analysis

Questions:
- Were the Alcuin Awards successful in encouraging the growth of Canadian book design?
- What can the Alcuin Awards tell us about the history of books in Canada?

The Awards: History

- Late 1970s saw the waning of the Society's fine press publishing program due to financial struggles

- Precedent for awards-giving had been established with an essay prize for library students at UBC and a typographic set piece for students at the Vancouver Vocational Institute

- At the August 12, 1980 Directors Meeting, Vice President Peter Quartermain moved that "the Society offer a Certificate of Merit to all interested publishers for the best designed trade book published in Canada in each calendar year"
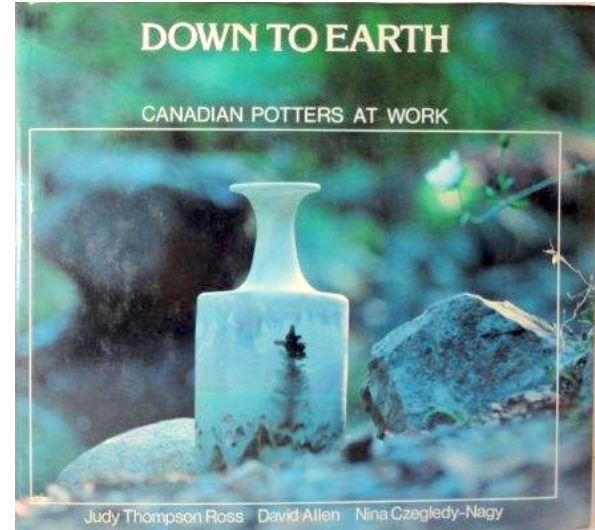
The Awards: Winners for 1980
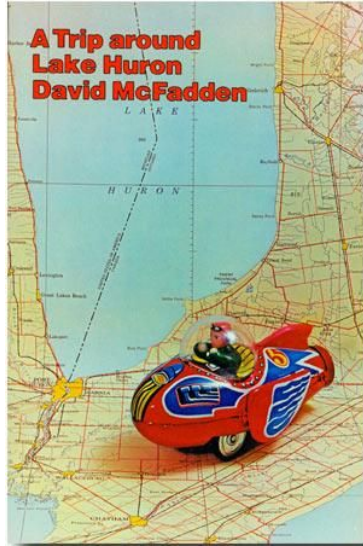
Prose: *A Trip Around Lake Huron* by David W. McFadden (Coach House). Designed by Glenn Goluska [Image source]

Poetry: *McAlmon's Chinese Opera* by Stephen Scobie (Quadrant Editions). Designed by Tim Inkster

Pictorial: *Down to Earth: Canadian Potters at Work* by Judy Thompson Ross et al. (Nelson). Designed by Frank Newfeld [Image Source]

The Awards: History

- By 1985 the general form of the Awards had been set:
  - Letters are sent to publishers in January asking for books published in previous calendar year
  - Three judges are appointed
  - Publishers submit books under selected categories, though judges can re-assign books to categories where they feel it is appropriate
  - Judging takes place in Vancouver in March or April
  - Books are awarded First, Second, Third Prizes and Honourable Mentions within categories, though judges may choose to not award a certain prize
  - Awards are announced and books exhibited

- Eligibility set in 1985: that books be "designed by a Canadian and submitted by a Canadian publisher"

The Awards: History

- Other milestones:
  - At least one judge from outside BC from 1996
  - First catalogue of winners published starting in 1996
  - Books started to be exhibited in provinces beyond BC during the mid-2000s
  - Catalogue translated into French beginning in 2004
  - Books submitted to Stiftung Buchkunst international competition from 2005 onwards
  - Awards ceremonies in Toronto and Vancouver from 2006 onwards

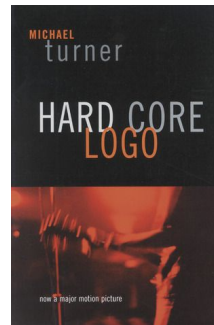# The Awards: Prose Winners for 1996

First: *Last Seen* by Matt Cohen (Knopf)
Designed by Gordon Robertson, Paul Hodgson & Spencer Francey Peters
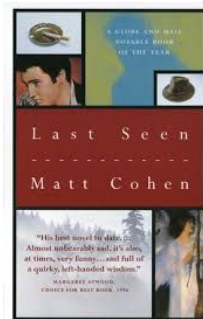
Second (tie): *Hard Core Logo* by Michael Turner (Arsenal Pulp)
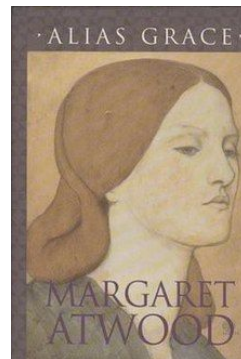Designed by Patty Osborne & Dean Allen

Second (tie): *Slow Emergencies* by Nancy Huston (Little, Brown)
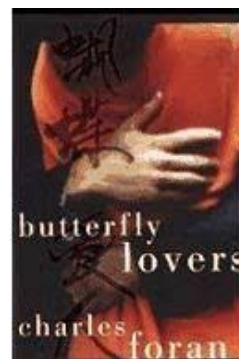Designed by Michael Callaghan & Tania Craan.

Third (tie): *Alias Grace* by Margaret Atwood (McClelland & Stewart)
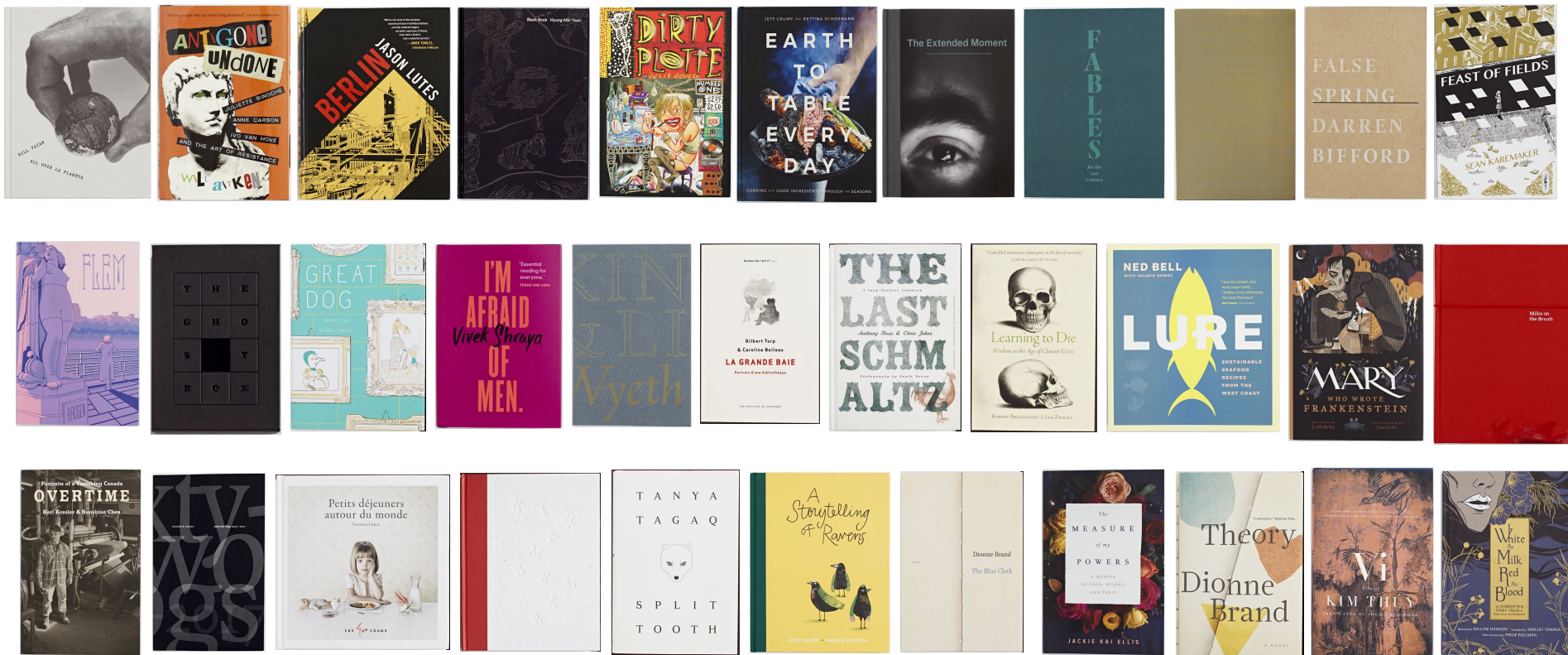Designed by Kong Njo.

Third (tie): *Butterfly Lovers* by Charles Foran (Harper Collins)
Designed by Linda Gustafson.

Image sources: Cohen, Turner, Huston, Atwood, Foran

The Awards: Winners for 2018

Book covers photography by Bruce Law

The Awards: Categories (not exhaustive!)

1983-1986

- Juvenile
- Pictorial
- Poetry
- Prose
- Other

1988-1995 (summary)

- General trade books: Prose (fiction and nonfiction)
- General trade books: Adult picture and photography books
- General trade books: How-to, Cook-, Craft-, and Hobby
- General trade books: Poetry
- Text and Reference Books
- Limited Editions (numbered and/or signed)
- Juvenile books other than texts

1996-2016

- Children
- Limited Editions
- Pictorial
- Poetry
- Prose Fiction
- Prose Non-fiction
- Prose Non-fiction Illustrated
- Reference

2016-Present

- Children's
- Comics
- Limited Editions
- Pictorial
- Poetry
- Prose Fiction
- Prose Illustrated
- Prose Non-fiction
- Reference

The Awards: Discourses

"The Citations are intended to acknowledge Canadian publishers who maintain a high standard in book production. Publishers are faced more and more with the questionable commercial viability of carefully designed and produced books. Technology has made possible the mass-produced, throw-away paperback, and if were are to listen to some proponents of the future, books as we know them will soon be archival matter. Luckily we still have publishers who believe in their product." *Amphora* June 1985, p. 11.

"Indicative of the health of Canadian design is the fact that each year brings new names." *Amphora* Summer 1993, p. 31

The Awards: Discourses

"In this mass, we see values of diversity and cultural creativity which we think we can characterize and celebrate as 'Canadian.'" 1997 Alcuin Awards catalogue, p. 21

"Their purpose is to recognize good book design in this country, encourage publishers to hire good designers, and show the designers themselves that they really are noticed and appreciated." *Amphora* 140/41, December 2005, p. 15.

The Dataset

- Covers books published 1980-2018 (37 competitions)
- 1,074 individual awards across 4 prize levels: First, Second, Third, Honourary
  - 2008 enabled 4th prizes

Sources/Method
- Years 1980-2006 compiled from Alcuin Appendix in Robert Bringhurst's *The Surface of Meaning*: *Books and Book Design in Canada* (2008)
  - Winners for 1995 were accidentally omitted from this source
- 2007-2018 compiled from Society document (2007-2016, courtesy Peter Mitham) and spreadsheets (2017-18)
- Used Excel formulas to parse data elements
- Checked each entry
- Used facet functions in OpenRefine to unify some elements, such as Publisher names

The Dataset: Fields

Data fields:
- Year (books published)
- Category
- Prize
- Designer
- Author
- Author role qualifier (editor, translator, etc.)
- Title
- Publisher

Regrettably Missing (but often in catalogues):
- Other contributors - illustrators, photographers, etc.
- Printers
- ISBNs

The Analysis: Caveats

- Awards are constructed by their own biases/structural issues
- The Alcuin awards only represent those who submit books for consideration
- The Alcuin Awards depend on publishers/designers who:
  - Are aware of the Alcuin Awards
  - Recognize "design" as a category
  - Have resources to submit copies of the books and pay the submission fee
- While judges change from year-to-year, judging is still very much subjective
- Not focusing on prize levels or aesthetics of the books

The Analysis: Winners per Year

- Average of 29 winners per year
  - Low: 3 (1980)
  - High: 43 (2015)
- General increase over time

- Submissions data is incomplete but it seems to have topped out at 375 in 1997 and stabilized to 200-250 since
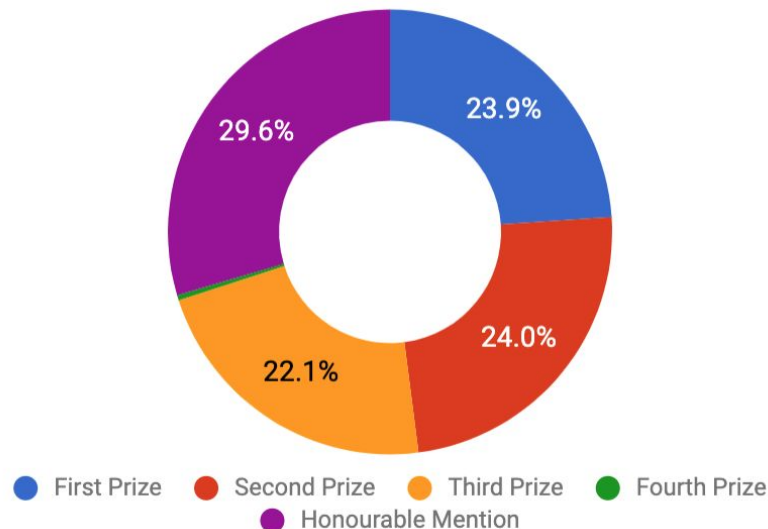

Number of Winners vs Year
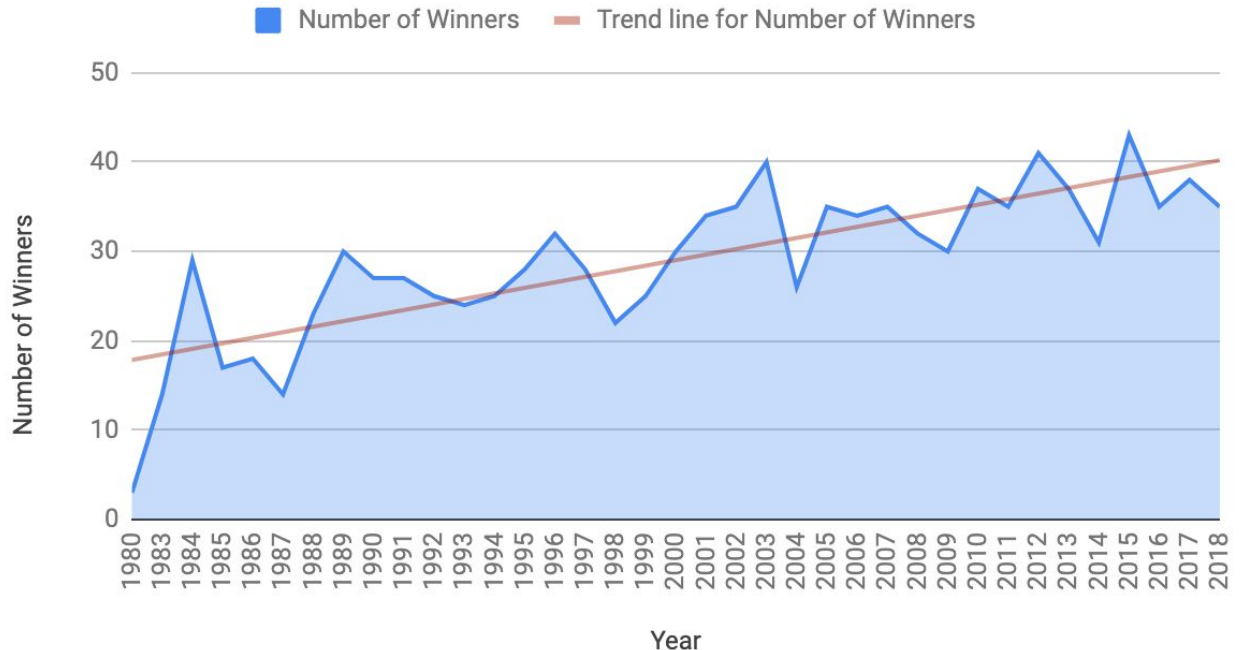
The Analysis: Prizes Given

- Distribution of prizes relatively even*

Fourth prizes were awarded in 2008 but this was not repeated. 1980 had no prize categories and all are counted as honourable mentions.

Distribution of prizes

23.9% First Prize
24.0% Second Prize
22.1% Third Prize
29.6% Honourable Mention

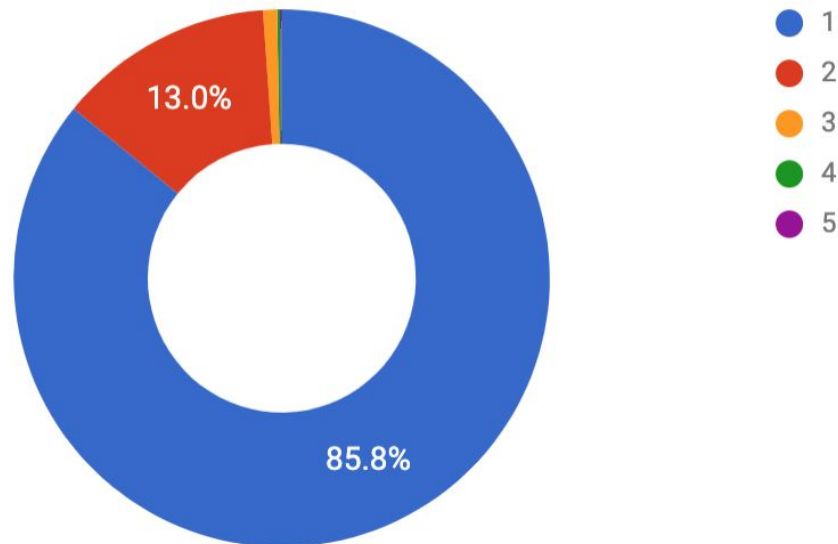- First Prize ● Second Prize ● Third Prize ● Fourth Prize
- Honourable Mention

The Analysis: Designers

152 (14%) are collaborations between 2 or more designers

- 2 designers = 140 (13%)
- 3 designers = 9 (0.8%)
- 4 designers = 2 (0.18%)
- 5 designers = 1 (0.09%)

Number of designers named on an Award


- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

13.0%

85.8%

The Analysis: Designers

- 1,242 named designers across 1,074 award citations
  (accounts for collaborations, and includes agencies and collective entities)

- 504 individual designers

Number of wins	Number of designers	Number of awards	Percentage of named designers
1	359	359	29%
2-5	107	289	23%
6-9	20	148	12%
10-20	9	119	10%
More than 20	9	327	26%

The Analysis: Designers

Percentage of first-time winners by year
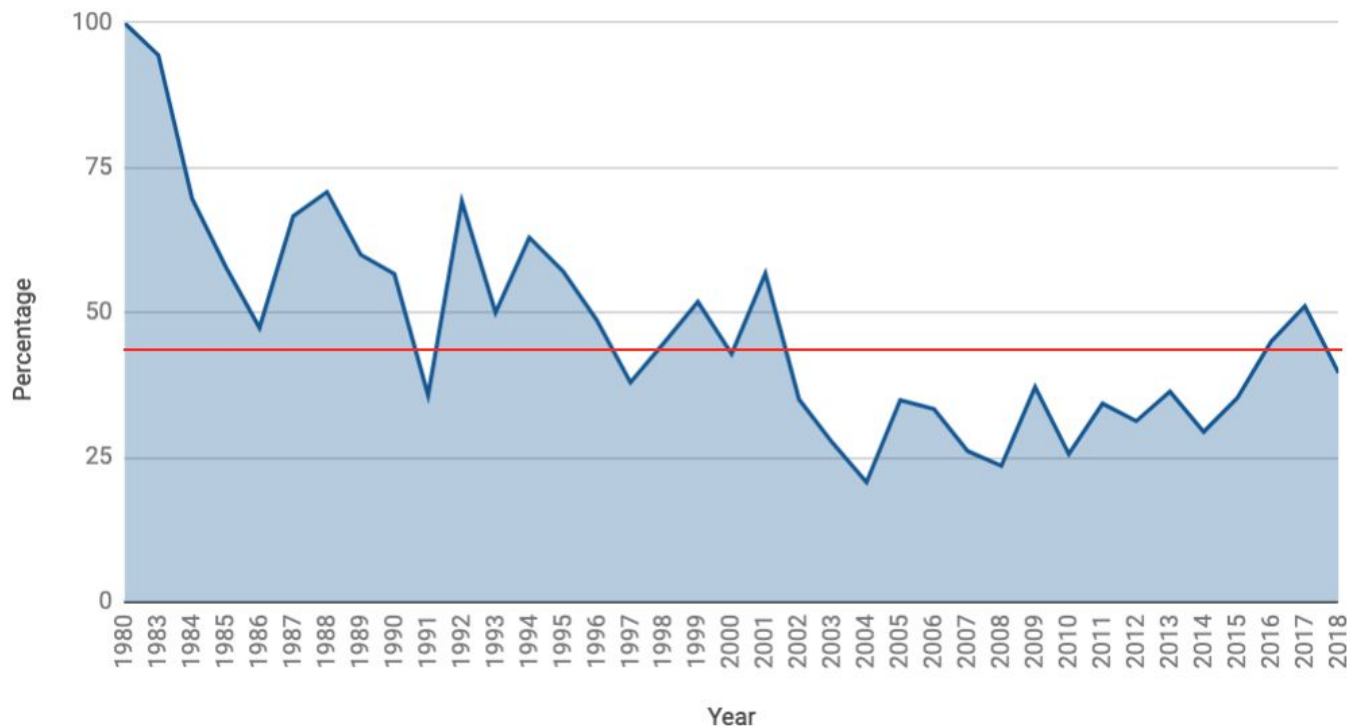
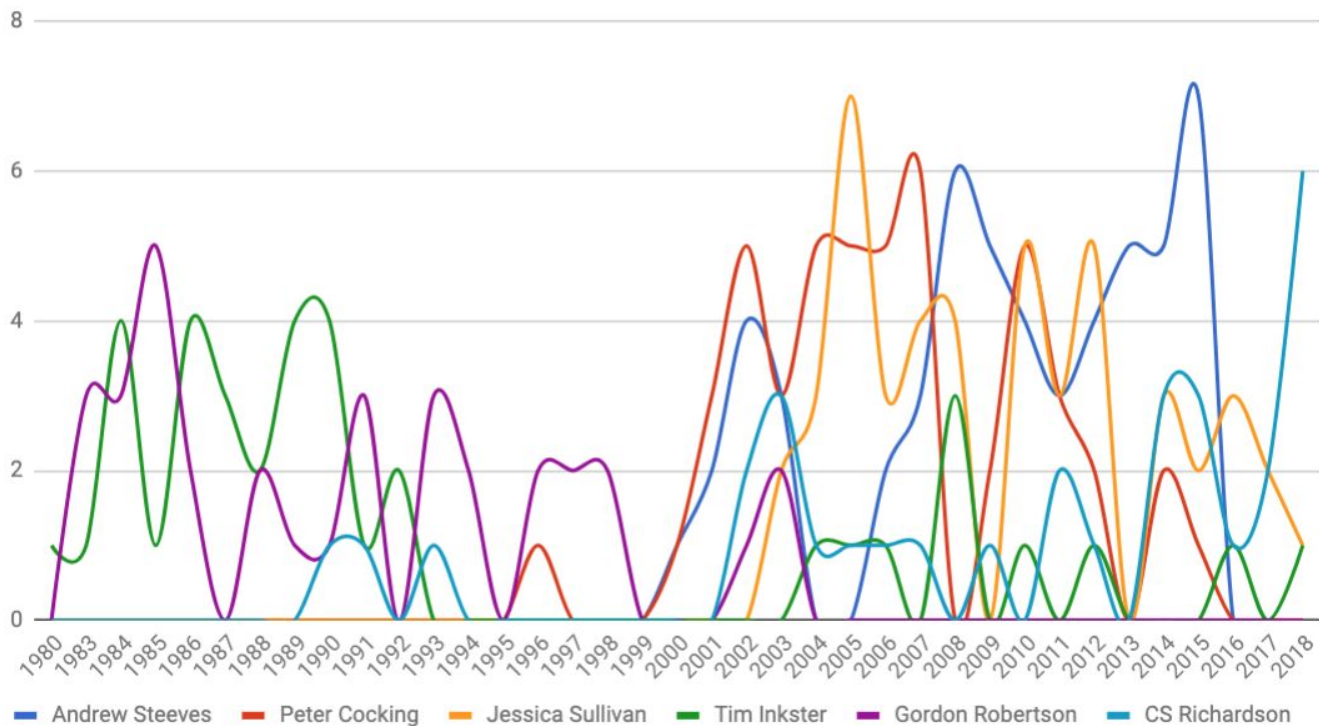Average of first-time winners overall: 43%

The Analysis: Top 10 Designers

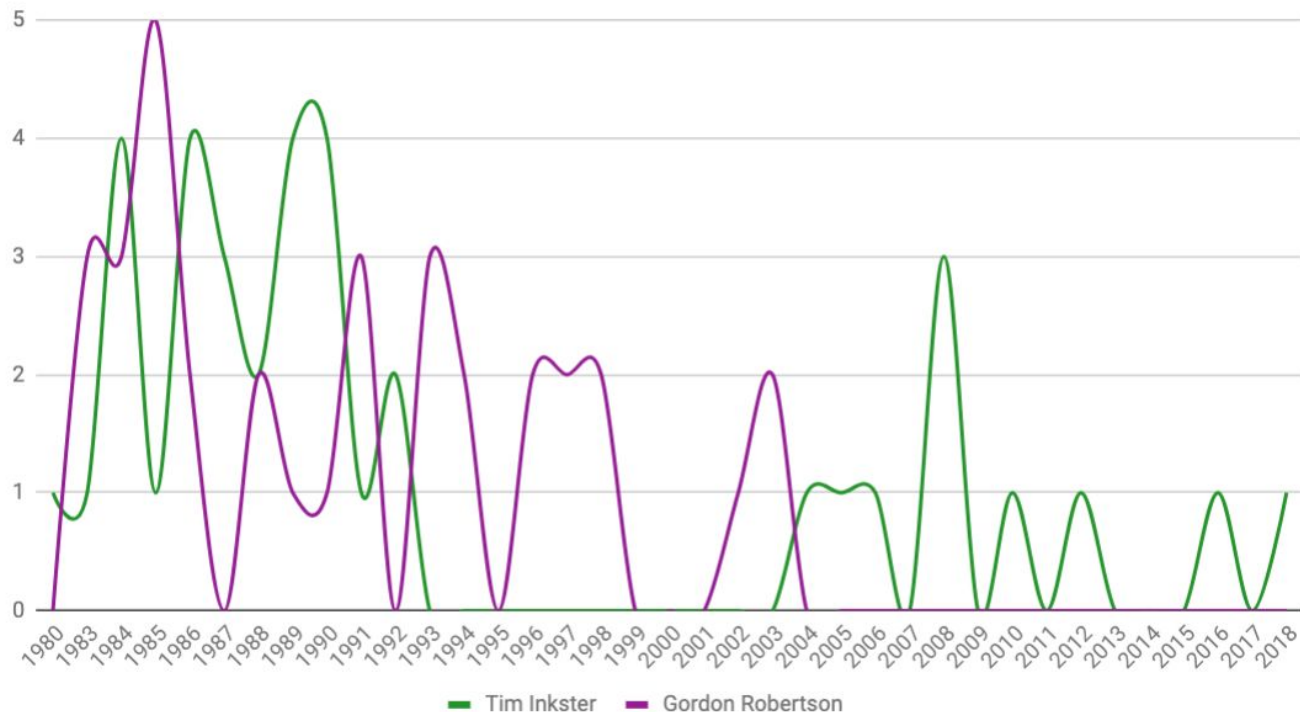| Designer	Main Associated Publishers	Number of Wins	Percentage of all named designers
Andrew Steeves	Gaspereau Press	54	4.3
Peter Cocking	Douglas & McIntyre, Figure 1	49	3.9
Jessica Sullivan	Douglas & McIntyre, Figure 1	47	3.8
Tim Inkster	The Porcupine's Quill	37	3.0
Gordon Robertson	Coach House, Mercury Press	34	2.7
C.S. Richardson	Knopf, Doubleday	31	2.5
Alan Brownoff	University of Alberta Press	25	2.0
George Vaitkunas	Douglas & McIntyre, UBC Press	25	2.0
Michael Solomon	Kids Can, Groundwood	25	2.0
Naomi MacDougall	Douglas & McIntyre, Simply Read	18	1.4

The Analysis: Designers
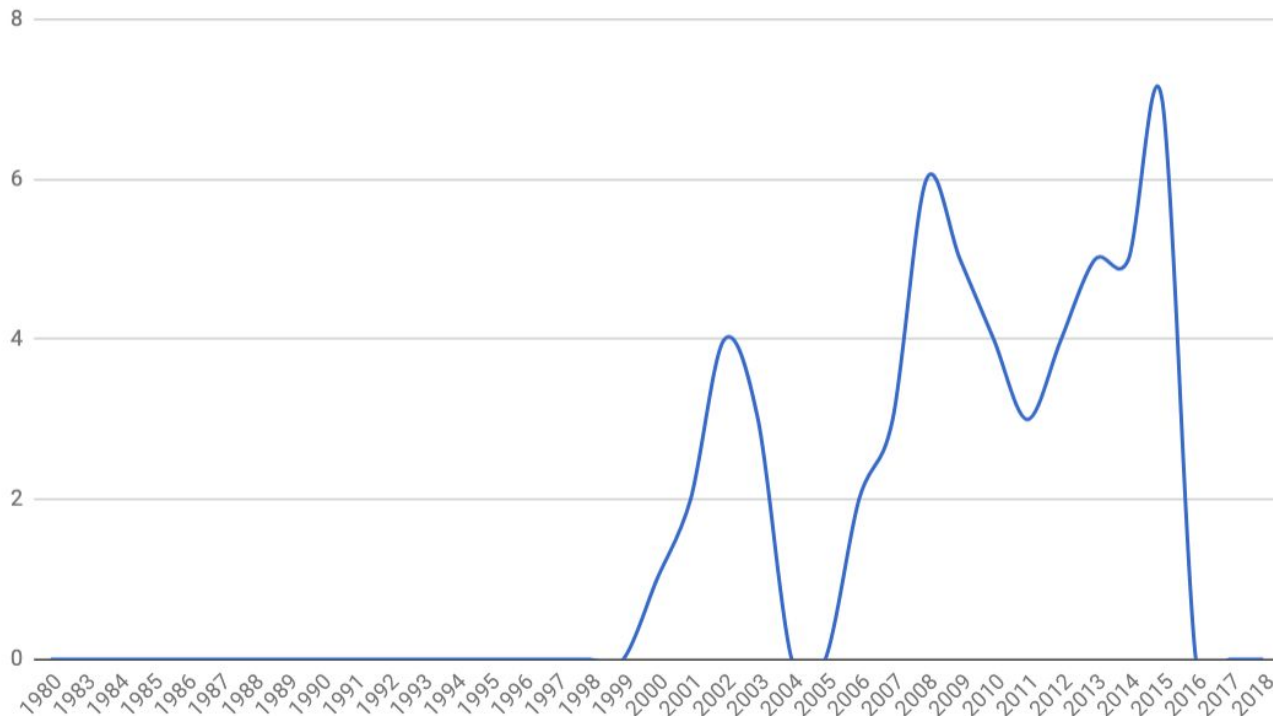

Number of wins per year from 7 designers

Legend: Andrew Steeves — Peter Cocking — Jessica Sullivan — Tim Inkster — Gordon Robertson — CS Richardson

Analysis: Designers

Tim Inkster and Gordon Robertson

— Tim Inkster — Gordon Robertson

Analysis: Designers

Andrew Steeves

[line chart with x-axis years from 1980 to 2018 and y-axis from 0 to 8]

Steeves recused himself from the Awards after winning 7 awards for books published in 2015

(Instagram post)

Analysis: Designers

Peter Cocking, Jessica Sullivan and CS Richardson
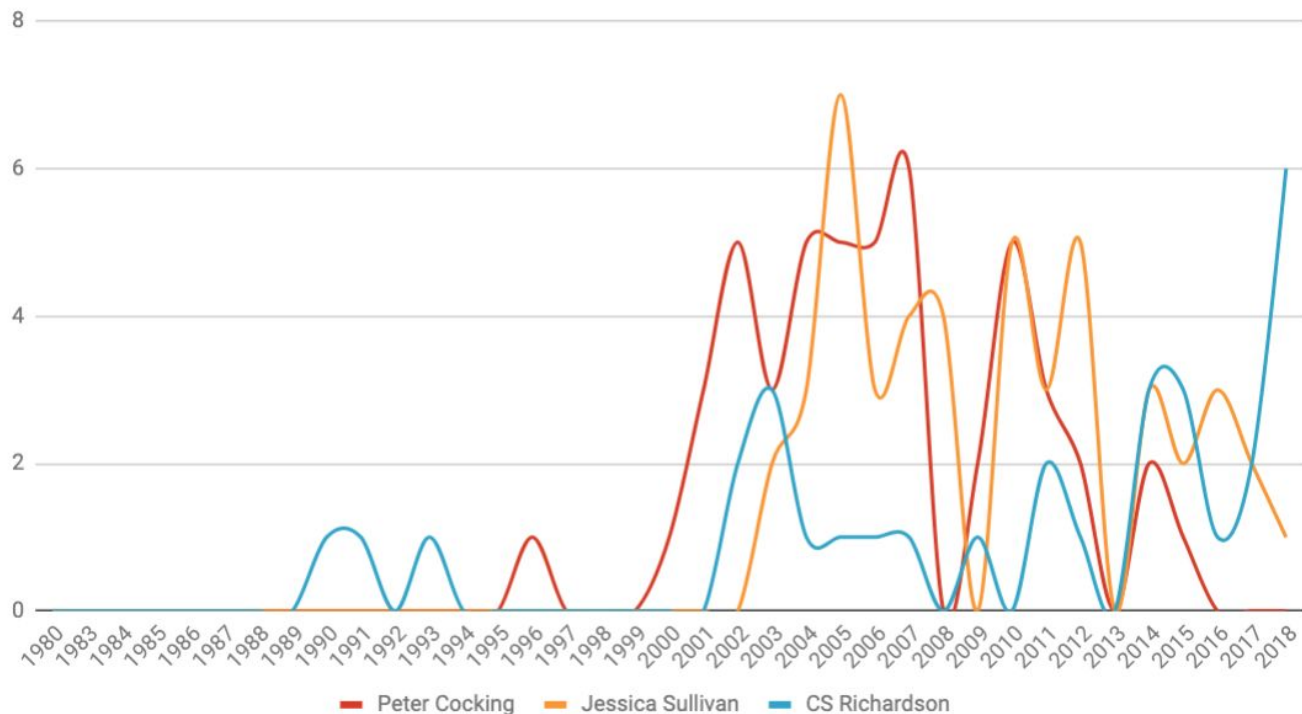
The Analysis: Publishers

- 1,137 named publishers across 1,074 award citations
  (accounts for co-published books)

- 298 individual publishers

Number of wins	Number of publishers	Number of awards	Percentage of named publishers
1	172	172	15%
2-5	81	238	21%
6-9	19	140	12%
10-20	18	256	23%
More than 20	8	331	29%

The Analysis: Top 10 Publishers

Publisher	Number of Wins	Percentage of all named publishers
Douglas & McIntyre	107	9.4
Gaspereau Press	52	4.6
Coach House	32	2.7
Simply Read	30	2.6
University of Alberta Press	30	2.6
The Porcupine's Quill	28	2.5
Greystone	27	2.4
Kids Can	25	2.2
McClelland & Stewart	20	1.8
Tundra / Random House	19	1.7

The Analysis: Publishers

Percentage of first-time winning publishers by year
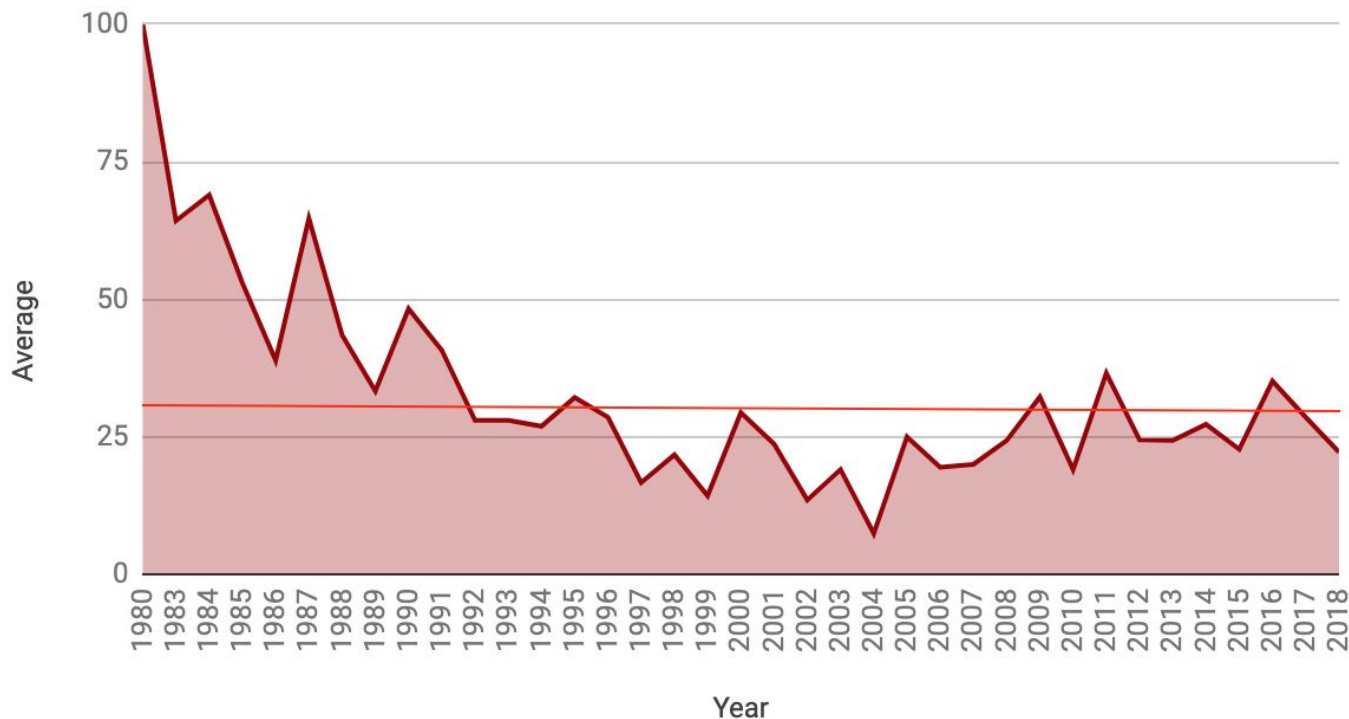
Average of first-time winners overall: 29%

Some Initial Conclusions

- A cohort of repeat winning designers was established in the 2000s and has continued into the present
  - Have the Alcuin Awards contributed to the establishment of this cohort of designers?
  - Does this cohort represent an investment in design by publishers in the 2000s?

- Andrew Steeves' intervention and the addition of a new category (Comics) in 2016 partially caused a new set of designers to emerge, but there is a general trend of new designers beginning to be recognized from the 2010s on:
  - Natalie Olsen (13 wins from 2013), Jennifer Griffiths (7 wins from 2017), Terri Nimmo (8 wins from 2013)
  - Do these new designers represent a new cohort?

Some Initial Conclusions

- Numbers of new publishers entering the competition have declined but remained steady
  - A sign of consolidation in the industry?
  - How aware are relatively new publishers of the Awards?
  - Loss of Douglas & McIntyre in 2012 may be another factor in slight uptick

- Design appears to be valued across a variety of publishing sectors

Thank you!

Grant Hurley
grant.hurley@utoronto.ca

- Alcuin Awards dataset available at on the Alcuin Society website!