

Episode 4 / Times New Roman

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Producer: Inger

Designated Designer for this week: Anitra

Non-Designated Designer for this week: Jason

Special Guest Contributor: David Spears

Episode Summary

In this episode we examine the history of that most ubiquitous of typefaces, Times New Roman, which is much more interesting than Times New Roman itself, honest. Anitra volunteered to do the typeface history for this episode so she can then bore for Australia on printing technology. Jason will try to stay awake.

You can find the show notes and transcript set in Times New Roman at: <https://www.anitraland.com/podcast>

If you'd like to share your own views on Times New Roman, or the pod, email us on designsleuth@yahoo.com or leave us a message on speakpipe.com/thesiswhisperer

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Our Producer Inger is on twitter as [@thesiswhisperer](#)

Anitra: Welcome to The Type Pod!

I'm Anitra Nottingham, a former book designer, former typography teacher, and former co-chair of a graphic design school. I'm now a learning experience designer, but I'm a type nerd and I always will be.

Jason: I'm Jason Phillips, formerly a book designer and typography teacher. I'm a sometime illustrator and artist. In my career I've never strayed far from type and it will always have my heart.

Anitra: We are whipped into shape by our producer Inger Mewburn, professor at the Australian National University and editor of the Thesis Whisperer blog.

Jason: We are designers and friends who went to the same design school. But we didn't meet until we worked together at Oxford University Press, where we honed our type skills, became friends and developed a mutual hatred of the typeface Goudy, all of which still burns strong 25 years later.

Anitra: Each episode we deep dive into one typeface, finding out the sometimes surprising history behind the design and the designer, we admire (or not) its anatomy, ponder its uses and cultural impact.

Then we ignore all of that and talk about our feelings.

This episode we are talking about Times New Roman, so a transcript of this episode set in Times New Roman is available to download from the show notes. We've also been joined again by David Spears, our special guest. Hi David, please introduce yourself.

David: I'm David Spears, a former student of Anitra's. I'm a designer in Washington, DC, a typography teacher, and I recently learned enough type design skills to be dangerous.

Anitra: By the way, David is being very modest. He was, by far and away, one of the best students I ever had. And he's a very good typographer.

David: Thank you.

Anitra: You are most welcome.

Jason: Hi, David and welcome back.

OK, so we are going to talk about Times New Roman, but we will try to not make it as boring as Times New Roman, right, Anitra?

Let's get started. Who designed Times New Roman, when, and why?

Anitra: You can thank, or blame, Times New Roman on typographer and historian of printing, Stanley Morison. Morison is a giant in the world of typography, but most likely you have never heard of him.

The *Encyclopedia Britannica*, from which I surprisingly found decent information, describes his career in glowing terms and only coyly mentions in the last line that he was a member of its board of editors. Just one of the many publications he contributed to.

Morison was born in 1889 and came from modest origins in Essex. He only had an elementary school education because his father left the family, and he had to go to work. He worked as a clerk for seven years and was self educated, which he did by going to the library.

His interest in typography was sparked when he read a supplement in *The Times* on printing. He answered an ad in that same supplement, which was called *The Imprint* and got a job there as an assistant in 1913.

So the place where he made his most famous work – *The Times* newspaper – inspired him to become a typographer. I like that symmetry a lot. Also can I just say how easy it sounds to get a job as an uneducated white guy back in the day?

Morison learned typography from working at *The Imprint*, then a publisher, Burns and Oates, Pelican Press and Cloister Press. In 1923 he got a gig as 'typographic advisor' – a job title I covet honestly – for Monotype Corporation.

Now Monotype is a 'type foundry', and in that name you can hear the echoes of the material origins of typography. The work he did there was to translate the old printed samples into new 'cuts' of typefaces for machine printing, which used 'hot metal' typography.

The typesetter would type in 90 characters, about a line – into the machine which was called a "lino type" – which would cast that line out of a blob of hot metal called a slug. A bunch of slugs which were arranged into lines of text on a page. Much quicker than doing a letter at a time like they had to for a traditional printing press.

Once the page was printed, the metal was melted down and reused. Interestingly the impurities that rose to the surface during this process was called ‘dross’ – which is an insulting term for bad writing – I love that!

Times New Roman was designed to work best with this machine. Although *The Times* used a better grade of paper, so it wasn’t as good for other newspapers – too finely crafted, according to Louis Blackwell.

Monotype, by the way, still exists today. It’s very likely you have one of their digital typefaces in your computer right now. It was also while at monotype that Morison commissioned a young Eric Gill to make Gill Sans, the ‘British Helvetica’ – we covered Eric Gill’s career in previous episode.

Morison was also typographic advisor to Cambridge University from 1923 to 1959, and editor of *The Fleuron* from 1926 to 1930. *The Fleuron* was a deeply nerdy and beautifully typeset journal of typography.

David: The name ‘Fleuron’, by the way, is the technical term for a floral ornament typographers use – like the ones you find in the Zaft Dingbat typeface set.

Anitra: So now you know. Morison suggested this title because “typography is very stiff and not absolutely free in the public mind from technical connections. The Fleuron possesses just that note of historical and romantic feeling which we need to express.”

Suffice to say Morison had a very storied career with a lot of roles on the go at once. And I think I have established that Morison was a practitioner of, and deeply steeped in, what we like to call ‘fine’ typography of the kind that is modest, self-effacing and beautiful.

This is hardcore typography, the best and most classic kind of western typography you can get. It’s the kind of typography that post modernist designers like David Carson said terrible things about. Jason, we grew up as designers with postmodernism but we both love this kind of stuff now, right?

Jason: Definitely. And I’ll confess that while Carson was all the rage when we were at college, whenever we were strongly encouraged to emulate him in type assignments I always felt like a fraud. I found more of a natural affinity with someone like Beatrice Ward, who worked alongside Stanley Morison, and wrote a famous essay called the ‘Crystal Goblet’.

Her whole thesis was that the best typography was ‘transparent’, using the analogy of the plain but functional crystal glass versus the showy gold-chased goblet.

She defined modernism in typography as asking “not ‘how should an object look?’ but ‘what must it do?’”. As opposed to David Carson, who would present you with a deconstructed mug, and say, “here, drink from this.”

Anitra: So Stanley is kind of like the Frank Sinatra of typography, he’s an icon. Not as famous as Frank obvi, but every educated designer knows and respects his work (except possibly David Carson.)

Jason: So that’s who, now why?

Anitra: In 1929 Morison joined *The Times* newspaper as staff (he was there until 1960, actually) and he designed Times New Roman as a “new roman” typeface for the paper.

Louis Blackwell in *20th Century Type* claims Morison was brought in because he complained about the original *Times* typeface being “inadequate” and having a “sloppy sense of typographic

discipline”. I just love this, what does that even mean? Like, was Morison so respected that he could just say anything and people would be like, “Yes! I see the lack of typographic discipline – let’s change it!”?

Jason: We all want to be Morison and have some things we could just say and people would make them true. I keep suggesting to Inger she could drop my register about an octave, but she just gives me this annoyed look whenever I bring it up, so we’ll just move on.

Anitra: Times New Roman is a “revival face” of Plantin which was designed by Amsterdam printer and typographer Christophe Plantin in the 16th century. And why they call it a revival, is that back in the day typefaces were bespoke things made by one print shop.

There were no technical drawings or anything to easily reproduce the same thing somewhere else although they copied each other a lot. At Monotype Stanley Morison would take classic typefaces and “revive” them for modern printing techniques.

The same thing happened when typefaces were converted to digital – which is also called a “cut” of a typeface. I like this symmetry too. The reason Times New Roman is so ubiquitous today is that it was one of the first to be converted to digital and comes pre-loaded in computers as standard. So it’s always been a “machine age” creation when you think about it.

I should more correctly say Morrison led the project to design the new typeface for *The Times*. The guy who actually did the work and drew the letterforms was Victor Lardent, because he could “do a lean and hard line”, which is just one of the many design specific sayings that sound a bit rude out of context.

David: The first time the typeface was used was October 3rd, 1932. Fun fact: it only got one letter of complaint when it was introduced. They did not have Twitter back then. Interestingly, there is some controversy about the origin story.

Jason: Oh? Do tell.

David: Mike Parker published some findings in 1994 that suggest the design was based on one done in 1904 by the amazingly named typographer Starling Burgess. It wasn’t until 2007 that *The Times* accepted this and started saying “possibly also” to the official history. *The Times* is probably lucky that Twitter wasn’t around in 1994 as well.

Anitra: Times New Roman wasn’t designed to create an identity for the newspaper like typefaces are today. It was just designed to be readable and save space. Now that I have laid out Morison’s bonafides, I feel bad about saying this, but this typeface is... not his best work.

It’s biggest sin visually is that it’s narrow and I think a little too contrasty, but it’s otherwise really, perfectly fine. As Matthew Butterick in his delightful *Typography for Lawyers* says, it has nothing “objectively wrong with it”, it’s just a “workhorse” and gets the job done. Which is a solid description.

Jason: Which is probably both the best and also the worst thing you could say about a typeface.

Anitra: The problem really is that it’s such a default typeface that it’s very boring. Like it’s actually designed to “disappear” and just “carry the information” so I guess, job done, Stanley?

Jason: So that’s the who and why. What else was going on at the time, Anitra?

Anitra: Morison was born in 1889 and died in 1967, so just think about the massive amount of technical and social change that he lived through. He was born the year the Eiffel tower was inaugurated, and died in a year that in some ways parallels 2020. 1967 was a year of massive student protests challenging the status quo and the Vietnam War, a similar moment to the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020.

Admirably Morison was a conscientious objector and was jailed for the duration of World War 1. Which is pretty hard core, because the pressure to join up was immense at the time.

The world starts to be very recognisably modern post war and around the time Times New Roman was made. Art Deco was the dominant art style. Some other things that happened in 1932: *A Brave New World* was published.

David: I love that book.

Anitra: Hitler ran for election, and later that year the Nazis took power because he couldn't accept the results – sounds familiar.

Locally, in 1932 the Sydney Harbour Bridge was opened, and it's the year of the 'Emu War' which you should totally look up because it's the only "official" war that happened on Australian soil, and it's ridiculous.

But you can see there was lots of news going on at the time! No wonder *The Times* needed to cram more on each page!

Jason: Thanks Anitra, you've really brought Morison and his work to life. Not sure even you can resurrect Times New Roman, though.

Now for our next section, Anatomy, where we briefly check out the body of our typeface for this episode. The body is the various bits that make up the letter forms, some of which are named after body parts. For instance, the horizontal bar of a capital 'T' is an arm, and so is the top horizontal stroke of a capital 'F'.

Anitra, what do we need to know about Times New Roman's body?

Anitra: Like we classify the plant and animal kingdoms, we have a classification system for describing type, called Vox. Times New Roman in the Vox Classification system falls under 'Transitional' – I read a snide comment on a medium post about the Vox system, that this category was made to explain Baskerville. Lol. We will explain that when we get to Baskerville.

Times New Roman has all the things, bold and italic fonts. The bold is very bold and harder to read than usual bold fonts, which is why your sub-headings on your essays always looked like crap.

Times New Roman is a serif typeface, serif is latin for 'feet' which are the little bracket-y bits on the ends of letterforms. Actually wait, Jason we realised as we were researching that we got this wrong! The actual serif bit is called a "bracket" but what and where does 'serif' come from?

Jason: Okay, we're going to digress for a bit here, so bear with us, David. We're going to talk about the BIG LIE, which isn't on the same scale as a sort of intergalactic lizard overlord sitting around a pizza place and throwing ballots into rivers lie. I think it's more just a conspiracy of laziness, because basically when you're learning about type anatomy you're learning that letterforms have things like arms and legs and ears and eyes. We were certainly told in college that 'serif' means feets and 'sans serif' means no feet, and that's how you distinguish different type. And you think, okay, 'feet' that

fits in with all the other anatomy stuff I'm learning about. And as this is the only time as a designer I'm going to sound like a doctor, I should really just run with it. But in fact it is a great big lie! There's a bit of discussion about where 'serif' actually comes from, but it's not French – which I was told – and it's not Latin. The most likely candidate is actually the Dutch word 'schreef', which means a stroke, and makes a lot more sense than 'feet'.

Anitra: So there you go. But it is the sort of thing you just unquestioningly take on board. I certainly did that and passed it on to my students. So this is our opportunity to correct for the record that, yes, 'serif' has nothing to do with feet.

Let's get back to Morison. In *Typography for Lawyers* Matthew Butterick – who would be amazing to get on the pod someday because his book is just great – talks about how Morison recognised that Times New Roman maybe isn't all that good looking in his "typographic" memoir *A Tally of Types*.

Jason: And can I just say what a jolly good chaps tally-ho tea and crumpets kind of autobiography title that is?

Anitra: Yes you can. Anyway Butterick says Stanley Morison good-naturedly imagined what William Morris might have said about Times New Roman: "As a new face it should, by the grace of God and the art of Man, have been broad and open, generous and ample; instead, by the vice of Mammon and the misery of the machine, it is bigoted and narrow, mean and puritan."

Which brilliantly captures exactly what I think William Morris must have been like –insufferable – and shows why William is not on my list of historical people who I would like to go to a dinner party with, but Stanley is.

Jason: So William Morris is great for designing your wallpaper, but not so good as your guest-of-honour at parties?

Anitra: Anyway, Butterick says that Times New Roman's italic is "mediocre", which I think is understating it actually, because I think the italic sucks.

Jason: Ouch. Although I'm not sure what else I can add. I certainly can't rebut anything that you've said about this typeface. It's a perfectly functional sturdy font.

If I had to anthropomorphize it, I'd nominate Hugh Grant: forever the slightly weedy, self-effacing, stuttering quintessential British fop, who is the perfect foil for the other more overtly quirky characters in 'Four Weddings and a Funeral', but even by 'Notting Hill' you're thinking, what does she *see* in this guy... – apart from ready access to a pretty park in central London?

Jason: Now to our feelings. Overall impression and best/worst feature of Times New Roman, Anitra?

Anitra: In *Just My Type* Simon Garfield calls Times New Roman "chilly and traditional", and that's the best description I think I have heard of its visual effect. He also mentions Connare, who designed Comic Sans, who once said Comic Sans was successful because "it's sometimes better than Times New Roman". Burn.

I also think the italic is terrible. I looked up what I think, because it's kind of an embodied response, something that's hard for designers to unpick. It's wider than normal italics; the theory is that it filled up the same space as the roman, which sounds like something Stanley Morison would do.

Jason: As a designer I feel like Times New Roman is the equivalent of training wheels. You use them while you have to. And then you don't.

OK now it's time to get right into it, where we throw all caution to the wind and talk about what sort of relationship (or not) you should have with this typeface. Anitra?

Anitra: Like it's a non-choice really isn't it? Times New Roman is the typeface that you get sent the copy in, that you make into something more interesting. I'm going to go with Butterick again here: "If you have a choice about using Times New Roman, please stop."

Jason: I appreciate the history and the intention behind a typeface like Times New Roman, but when it comes to choices, there are simply many other fonts I'd rather use.

Times New Roman has become generic, like Helvetica. You could say it's become a victim of its own success. So I'd actually be a bit concerned about what other people might think if I was designing with it. This may sound harsh, but it's the font you choose when you aren't confident about what you're doing. Precisely because it's reliable and dependable and unchallenging.

Now for our final section: Kiss, date, kill or marry? When we talk about why we would want to be with this typeface (or not).

Is this typeface a one time thing, or do you just go out with it occasionally. Do you never use it, or do you use it so much you worry about yourself? Let's get real.

Anitra: Is this typeface more like family? It's boring, around all the time and you hardly notice its personality anymore because you know it so well? Also, you're stuck with it for life. Not our family obviously, right Inger?!

Jason: Is a 'Sunset Boulevard' scenario too drastic an analogy? The faded star who dreams of being rediscovered, but spends her days locked up in a decaying mansion. And we all know how THAT ended...

Anitra: Thanks for listening! These are our feelings and opinions about typefaces, we're interested in yours. You can email us on the address in the show notes or leave a review on Apple Podcasts – where you can also rate us and make the pod easier to find.

If you want to join us with a question or opinion, a great way to do that is to record it via our speak pipe page. You can find it at <http://www.speakpipe.com>. We'd love to hear from you!

You can find us on...Jason?

Jason: You can email me at designsleuth@yahoo.com

Anitra: And I'm at @anitrannot on all the things and anitraland.com

Our producer Inger is @thesiswhisperer on Twitter

Where can we find you, David?

David: I'm on instagram: @daviespree.

Anitra: Thanks for coming on the show, David.

Jason: Thanks for sticking around at short notice.

David: I've enjoyed it. Thanks for having me.

Anitra: Thanks everyone for listening!

Jason: Thanks for your company!