

Every Design Tells a Story
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By Nancy Bernard

All student portfolios present a gallery of work. This one presents the work as a book, with explanatory text in a well-paced, editorial design that creates a personal brand for the graduate.



Christopher Morlan graduated from Academy of Art University in San Francisco in 2004. Right out of school, he was hired as a creative director with Crescent Jewelers at an impressive salary. Granted, he was not a typical BFA grad—he had been to two universities and worked in agencies for seven years when he entered design school. But that experience would not have helped him without a stunning book.

And stunning it is. Not because of the design, which is very good, but because of the narrative it creates. It leaves you feeling as though you know the person behind the design. Let's see how he did it.

First, the book has a title: *Storyline*. It's bound like an art-quality book to repeat the story idea—hard panels wrapped in a slightly glossy, silver fabric, and embossed with title text and a silver-foil brushstroke graphic. Its solidity, tactility, and precision give the book an air of permanence—an instant classic. Inside, the endpapers are a plain, solid, chocolate brown. That yummy organic color contradicts the metallic poise of the cover, suggesting that the story is as much about past (brown) as future (silver).

Inside, the design expresses the same duality. The opening spread, with a soft-focus book on a graded field of gray running across the spread, combines the large, simple shapes of modernism with antique and distressed imagery. Look closely at it, and you'll see very subtle floral designs dropped out from the top of the gray field. The cover graphic drops out to point at the tagline, "the most compelling stories are—as yet—unwritten." That's nice copy. It says, "I mean to do great things" in a tactfully indirect way.



The case study continues in well-paced spreads. Full-bleed images are followed by sets of small silhouettes in

neat grids. Morlan creates syncopation within spreads by letting shapes break out of the grid.

After the contents page, a series of case studies on student projects follows. Each is set up like an article in a fine publication, demonstrating design skills while showcasing the work. Again, Morlan combines traditional and contemporary forms. The old-style headline font and the centered layout are comfortably familiar. The distressed chapter tag to the left of the text and the vertical credit lines add some tension. Having the display photo cross the gutter and intrude on the text panel is in the best tradition of Modernist design—a gesture that goes back to Alexey Brodovitch at *Harper's Bazaar* in the 1930s.

And again, Morlan shows unusually good copywriting skills. The first case study is on a mail piece introducing a new, high-attitude line from Hermes. Basic idea: Hermes products are a sensual indulgence. Concept: Titillate the reader with suggestive imagery, but in a restrained, high-design context. Copy: "Knowing Naughty Knots." A nicely paced gallery of images follows. Big against small, square-up against silhouette, a collection of small silhouettes, then a spread with one large image crossing the gutter against three smaller images on the right. This kind of visual pacing is pure best-practices-in-editorial-design. And we're not even talking about the actual project work. (We won't. This review is on the portfolio itself.) The rest of the book goes on in similar fashion, varying the format rhythmically to keep interest up. Case 02, on a line of skin care products from Swiss Army, puts the display photo on the left, and the text on the right. Sometimes the display image is squared up, sometimes it's silhouetted. Sometimes it crosses the gutter, sometimes it doesn't. But the text format stays the same for ease of use.



The layouts for opening spreads strike a good balance between consistency and variation. Though the basic typography stays the same, the images go from left to right, varying among square-ups, bleeds, and silhouettes.



Let's look at the case study on a corporate print system for Genentech, a leader in biotech. It's built around the idea of boundaries—as in breaking boundaries, which is what leaders do. The first spread is calm, with a simple squared-up image and the title, "Clear View to the Boundary of Reason." The words and the image sum up the visual language for the print system: muted tertiary colors, taut, curved "boundary" lines, transparency that breaks down boundaries. The system is explained visually in the body of the presentation, showing you that print items are packaged in clear, etched plastic cases, then showing you the collateral. One spread has a big, interesting lit photo of the plastic case holding print matter on the left, and three little silhouetted spreads on the right. Farther on, this layout is quoted in reverse, with two silhouetted spreads on the left and the case

photo on the right. Again, Morlan is following the classic rules for pacing, but even though you know the rules, and know that they have been consciously applied, the layouts continue to be pleasing. The rules—big against small, squares against complex shapes, bleeding image against images in gridded layouts, arranged in gentle alternating sequences—never fail.

Occasionally we get a little surprise—a purely graphic spread—that punctuates the case studies with character sketches. They all use a horizontal gray field with images of books, like the opening spread, but each makes a different statement. A single green, antique book overlaid with a dropped-out logic diagram of Morlan's experiences says, "This is my life plan." A row of books, paper edge forward, overlaid with dropped-out images of plants and urban landscape, says, "This is my world." A chart-like assembly of images from Morlan's journals, this time over a gray-and-white partial portrait, is overlaid with another diagram to say, "This is how I think." It's clear that literature is as much a part of his life as design. He wants us to know that he is going to collaborate well with writers, if not continue to write himself. This will give him a serious edge over less-literate designers.



Three spreads from a case study on designs for Genentech show how Morlan creates classic pacing in this book.



The final breaking spread introduces trademark design. This time the gray band shows pages of design sketches, with a text block asking, “Who are we?” A simple series of logo designs, two to a page, with generous white space around them, follows.

At the back of the book is the requisite resumé, which repeats some elements from the body of the book—the distressed chapter block with one round corner, a gray field, labeling in the same icy green type as the credits in the articles—but in a flush left, ragged right, blockstyle layout that clearly indicates we’re looking at a new kind of information. Facing the resumé is a more unusual page. It gives credits for the photography and acknowledgements. It’s the acknowledgements that impress me: “I’ve waffled on the professionalism of including expressions of thanks and admiration in a portfolio. But, even as a professional designer, these people have a place in my life. And thus they have a place in my book. So skip this bit if you want to maintain the illusion of this book being anything other than a collaborative process ...”



The case studies are punctuated with graphic spreads using variations on the opening theme to express Morlan's character. As a prospective employer, I wouldn't skip it. I'd like having the assurance that the designer is eager to give credit to others, and has a sense of humility about his own work. Of course, the book isn't perfect. Morlan suffers from some of the typographic habits that tend to turn text into texture. For instance, the case study stories are set in such tiny type that one tends to skip them. The informational copy at the top of each title page is not only tiny, but vertical, so you have to twist the book around to read it. Who will? If you do, you see that they give the class, instructor, design genre, “client,” and colophon. This is the one slightly sneaky thing about Morlan's book. Making the credits hard to read makes it easy to forget that this is all student work, art directed to some degree by a seasoned professional.

The fact that the work has been art directed is a problem with many student books. As one design firm principal said to me just last week, “I don't really know if what I'm looking at represents her real abilities, or the abilities of her teacher. I just hired a new grad with a wonderful book—and so far her work isn't living up to the promise.”

Future grads, heed that warning. But go ahead and make your portfolio a fine piece of design in itself. Build it around a narrative that reflects your design sensibility, purpose, and character. That will tell everyone who sees it not only who you are, but what you are truly capable of—as Morlan's book does.