



The Perfect CAPITAL

REBECCA WALLERSTEINER explores love and lettering with Chelsea-based author Karen Healey Wallace

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Meet me in Brompton Cemetery at 5pm, and bring a torch”, Karen Healey Wallace instructed me via email so, on a bleak, wintry afternoon, I arrive at the cemetery armed with a torch (and

personal alarm, in case of encountering a vampire, or worse; I'm already spooked). It's easy to spot Karen, tall and slim, carrying a Books Are My Bag bag. She leads me through a forest of tombstones, shining her torch into the undergrowth as we stumble past demure angels with broken wings and crosses galore until Karen stops in front of a circular headstone. “I cleared some nettles from plot AD earlier this week. Look how smooth the Portland stone is.” When I touch it, it feels chalky. Delicate letters by the 20th century sculptor Eric Gill are cut into the memorial, still beautiful 100 years after they were carved, and it is his typography and art which have inspired Karen's excellent debut novel, *The Perfect Capital*.

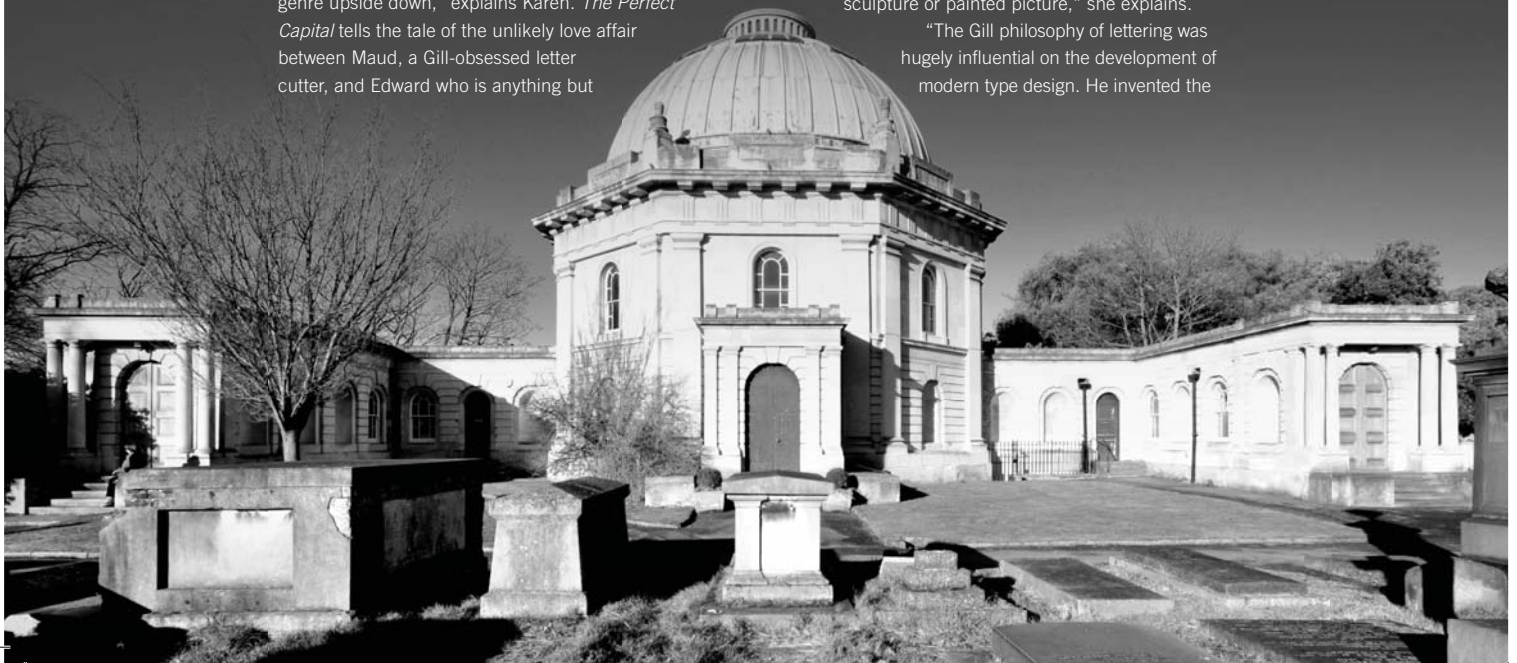
“Traditional love stories start with a shy kiss leading to something more intimate but I wanted to turn this genre upside down,” explains Karen. *The Perfect Capital* tells the tale of the unlikely love affair between Maud, a Gill-obsessed letter cutter, and Edward who is anything but

perfect. The story starts late at night with Maud studying a memorial plaque on the Holy Trinity Church, dressed in a tiny skirt, revealing top and high heels. She meets playboy-banker Edward who mistakes her for a prostitute and a few minutes later she goes home with him. What follows isn't an artistic 'Shades of Grey' that you might expect, though *The Perfect Capital* is a very physical book. Why does the usually prim Maud abandon herself so recklessly to the undisciplined Edward? And what attracts him to the mousy, unmaterialistic woman who is so different to his normal lovers?

The novel sets out to answer these questions.

The love story is woven through Maud's artistic exploration of Gill's inscriptions carved into Chelsea's churches, buildings and tombstones, and letter-cutting becomes not just a background but an analogy for the search for perfection in an imperfect world. Following in Maud's footsteps we leave the sombre cemetery and walk to the Holy Trinity Church off Sloane Square. Here Karen points out Gill's very first public inscription carved on the church's entrance door. “Gill never made a model but carved directly into the stone. He believed that a good piece of lettering is as beautiful thing to see as any sculpture or painted picture,” she explains.

“The Gill philosophy of lettering was hugely influential on the development of modern type design. He invented the



Joanna and Perpetua typefaces and we encounter his letter-forms almost every day,” explains Karen. Although you can still see many examples of Gill’s work around, he isn’t talked about much – perhaps owing to recent colourful revelations around his sexual transgressions; these, understandably, now cloud over discussions about his artistic achievements. He was, though, indisputably an outstanding sculptor and a leading voice in the Arts and Crafts movement, exploring religion and philosophy through his essays and exquisite letterforms. Karen’s favourite Gill letter turns out to be ‘R’ which “delicately combines a straight back with a bowl and curl”, in contrast to the cumbersome junctions of a ‘W’.

Born in New York, Karen has lived in Chelsea her entire adult life so it is not surprising that her novel displays such an intimate knowledge of the area. She met her husband when they were working at Saatchi & Saatchi in the 1980s and they have four children ranging in age from 13 to 25. Weekends are spent farming wheat at the family farm in Northamptonshire. “Farming is

The Perfect Capital tells the tale of an unlikely love affair between letter cutter Maud and Edward

like writing – one year the harvest can be good and the next it fails – but in the long run things tends to balance each other,” she explains. Which authors does she admire? “I love Alice Munro, whose stories are beautifully constructed and quietly powerful. Hemingway and Edith Wharton are other personal favourites.”

In my opinion, *The Perfect Capital* would make an excellent present for book lovers. It is a carefully designed work of art, as well as being a riveting read; I for one couldn’t put it down.

“My book has been designed and typeset according to Gill’s principles of book design,” says Karen. She has used his Joanna typeface and wide margins so that you can hold the book without covering the page with your thumb, making it is pleasing to hold and to read. Everything about the novel suggests hand craftsmanship, from the heavier than normal paper to the spine title pierced by thread. It was shortlisted for Best British Book in the British Book Design and Production Awards, and for Best Editorial Design in the Design Week Awards 2014.

Karen self-published *The Perfect Capital* through Acorn Independent Press and personally took it around local bookshops to sell it. “John Sandoe was my first sale and the first local bookshop to stock my book, which is now also stocked by Waterstones and Daunts,” she says. Getting bookshops to stock it was a huge challenge as there are approximately 3,275 physical books published every week in the UK, all vying for shelf-space. Thankfully for book lovers Karen has succeeded and is writing a second book inspired by her love of music. Rather like a Gill inscription, *The Perfect Capital* is a controlled and sexy, powerful and witty debut novel with a surprising ending. ■

The Perfect Capital, by Karen Healey Wallace (published by Acorn Independent Press, 2013) is available from local booksellers including John Sandoe, Belgravia Books, South Kensington Books, Waterstones and Daunts, as well as on Amazon

Photography: Robert Stephenson

