



Georgina Parfitt 26-01-14

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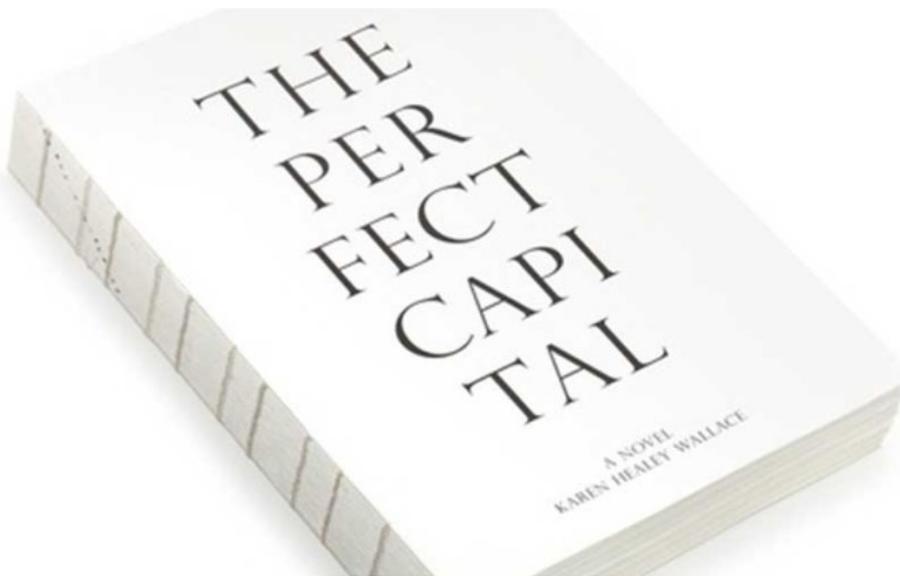


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THE PERFECT CAPITAL KAREN HEALEY WALLACE

A self-published novel about love and lettercutting which is inspired by Eric Gill and designed to his principles.



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Inspired by the typography of Eric Gill, *The Perfect Capital* (Acorn Independent Press) tells the romantic story of a modern letter cutter called Maud. The self-published manuscript was designed with some of Gill's ideals in mind, including the spacious margins and the simple cover and uses Gill's own font, Joanna. As Healey Wallace says herself in her 'Note on the Typography' epilogue, the novel provides "a unique opportunity for the narrative and visible language to work together".

As well as a novel, this book is a carefully designed object. It provides a talking point.

When placed on a coffee table, it invites a different discussion depending on the angle from which it's viewed. Even though it's bigger and weightier than your average contemporary novel, it's also fragile. Its cover is whiter than it should be, with a spine exposed like a pressed accordion with all its knots on view. It has the appearance of nudity.

But it isn't a relic or a draft. Picking up a copy of *The Perfect Capital* isn't like picking up a first edition wrapped in cellophane, though it does have a translucent cover that barely veils the inner pages conventionally kept a mystery. In fact, it's minimal and modern.

As an object, *The Perfect Capital* tells us about the contemporary state of literature, about mourning bibliophiles, the scope of the internet, uncertainty. Or is that just what we *want* to read in it? To judge the book in relation to its literary moment, to judge it at all and find its merits, we still need to evaluate the novel inside.

Maud has recently separated from her husband, who was an expert letter cutter and taught her the art form with paternal care and discipline. We first meet Maud when she is “stroking a church” in Sloane Square to investigate an inscription. Hanging around the monument in the dark, she is confused for a prostitute by high-flying, womanising businessman Edward, and for some reason agrees to go home with him.

Edward soon finds that Maud isn't his normal sort, but is strangely drawn to her vulnerability and her independence. As their relationship heats up, they must reconcile their different lives and conquer the culture of divorce and infidelity that seems to be plaguing London's family homes.

Maud's artistic discoveries are woven through this romance plot: in churches, on tombstones, in her memories of working with her husband, and her attempts to clarify

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to others what she finds so absorbing about the curl of a C and the instability of a W. Partly as a result of this, it becomes harder to judge this novel solely on the basis of the text, or rather, without considering the effect

of the text's appearance upon its meaning. This is where Gill's voice is heard, rising up confrontationally against Maud's modern romance.

It's rare to hear the name Eric Gill in conversation now without also hearing about his crimes. His sexually deviant personal life haunts any discussion of his work before it's begun. But his was an entirely different existence in print. Through his essays, typefaces and inscriptions, Gill explored religion and philosophy with intellectual fervour, and was dedicated to the art of letters as a leading voice in the Arts and Crafts community.

The effect of Eric Gill on our reading culture is ever present, if subliminal. His invented typefaces, including Joanna and Perpetua, and the household font Gill Sans, of Penguin and BBC fame, have shaped the way we think about design. Whether we know it or not, we encounter Gill's forms practically every day.

His *Essay on Typography* ends with the sobering note that “the only way to reform modern lettering is to *abolish* it.” Gill's object throughout his essay is to show how industrial change has forced the printed letter to become shallower and shallower, until it barely presses the page. He argues that the artistry behind the human-crafted letter has disappeared, replaced by the needs of commerce and the market. “There are now about as many different varieties of letters as there are different kinds of fools,” Gill says. “I myself am responsible for designing five different sorts of sans-serif letters – each one thicker and fatter than the last because every advertisement has to try and shout down its neighbour.”

The Perfect Capital shows us a modern view of the lettercutter's art. At the climax of Maud's drama with Edward she buys a mammoth slab of stone, into which she carves her own epigraph. Her obsession with serifs and sans serifs, openness and balance in

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letters is such an unconventional pursuit for a modern London woman that it's almost an anachronism compared to Edward's money-oriented City career. But Maud's occupation sits in the foreground. Whereas Edward makes an occasional vague reference to “putting together a fund”, Maud's lettering can inspire and educate. It provides structure to the romantic plot and a subplot of its own

to the romantic plot and a subplot of its own. Just when she and Edward come to the make-or-break row that will solidify their fling or turn it to dust, Maud orders her stone slab, sets up her workshop and begins her opus. The narrative rests on the physical outcome of this project.

But though this slab looms large in the imagination and forces the narrative one way and another, the book itself – the other slab – exerts a more secret, more constant power. Each time Maud mentions the form of a letter or passionately describes how she battles perfection and imperfection as she designs her alphabet, the eye refocuses upon the Joanna font that we've been obliviously taking in.

Crucially, Maud's lettercutting doesn't even seem like a job. It appears in stark contrast to the working city, rather as an artistic lifestyle, reminiscent of Eric Gill's Arts and Crafts utopia. It allows Maud to spend time musing on her feelings, sex, the differences between men and women, as if it will eventually all collect and form itself into a conclusion in her stone slab.

In this way, *A Perfect Capital* does seem to be making Gill's point, if under the guise of the now-traditional chick lit plot. It shows that London is mechanistic but also allows human art to be etched into its plates and parts. Things are affected, changed and indented, even in the City of London, whose boroughs and streets map the story sturdily. By the end we are conscious that the whole story can be read figuratively or literally.

"The Bs are not at all like my M. It's completely asymmetrical. Solid and straight on one side, overblown and full of itself on the other, doubly full," complains Maud as she considers what it would be like to take Edward's for her own. She realises her love for flawed, asymmetrical Edward and must accept the joining of their names, for better or worse. The novel wears this allusion on its sleeve, but others are at work in the type, giving the reading experience a subtle furtiveness, as if we are secret scholars of letter cutting too.

The victory of the novel is not its appearance sitting on a coffee table, or even its story (which occasionally feels derivative). It is instead something far subtler: its atmosphere. Healey Wallace does a good job of keeping us grounded, reminding us of each new London borough we experience, each monument. All these locational references are true to life, right up to the inscriptions on the tomb stones in Brompton Cemetery, which are also illustrated with photos, further validating their authenticity. She also grounds us in materials, the sexual body, the stone. But, grounded though we are, the font that follows us around, coming in and out of focus as it corresponds with themes in the narrative, reverberates with the story and makes it greater than the sum of its parts. It reminds us of Gill's bold statements and sheds light on the Arts and Crafts of the twenty-first century.

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