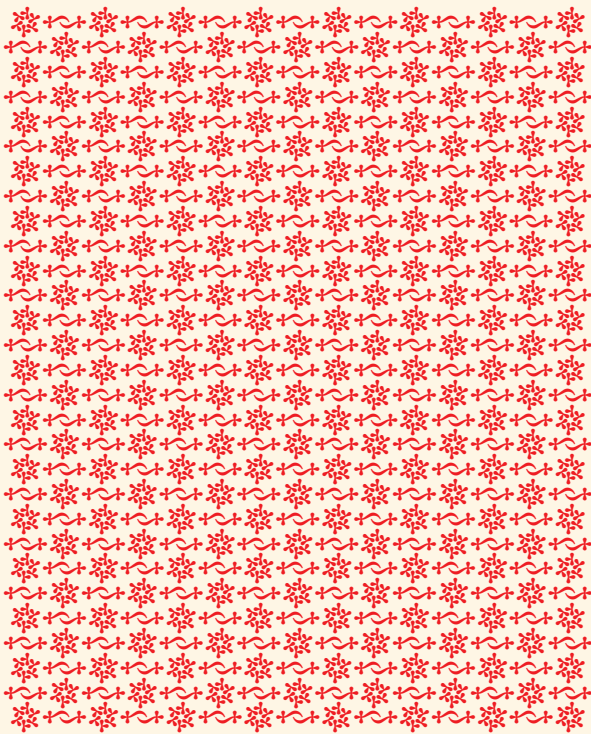


MRS EAVES

A TYPEFACE DESIGNED BY
Zuzana Licko
 BASED ON THE DESIGN OF
 BASKERVILLE



a font for Mrs. Eaves

ZUZANA LICKO'S
 BASKERVILLE REVIVAL

STORY BY

correy baldwin

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When Zuzana Licko released Mrs Eaves, her revival of the Baskerville typeface, in 1996, she opened her type specimen catalogue with a fictitious, playfully nonsensical letter written to Voltaire from the typographer John Baskerville:

“Tell me, shall I put on my finest waistcoat and wade through the rivers held open by brasses, or shall I lay down in a fresh bed of italics and wait?” implores a passionate Baskerville. “Seriously, there is an alphabet of buttons sewn directly to my heart. Let me explain: I want to dazzle her face in a fury of letters read clearly as a landmark. But I am just a man, a more or less tender thing, yet I will make letters for her to wear like the widest broaches! Yes, broaches!”

It was a rather mischievous way to mark a fairly momentous occasion: the launching of one of the first digitally created traditional typefaces—and a soon-to-be much beloved one at that. But Licko, like Baskerville himself, had always had an irreverent streak.

The letter wasn’t completely fanciful; Baskerville, an admirer of Voltaire, had indeed written to the French author, keen to print his work. He never got the chance—though in a way, his typeface did.

The “her” of the fictional letter is Sarah Eaves—Mrs Eaves—Baskerville’s housekeeper turned printing assistant turned wife.

Baskerville had hired Eaves as a live-in housekeeper around 1750, when he was setting up his printing and type business in Birmingham, England. Eaves’ husband had abandoned her (along with their children) prior to her being hired by Baskerville. When the estranged husband died in 1764, Baskerville and Eaves—by then romantic and lifelong partners—wasted no time, getting married less than a month after the funeral.

After Baskerville himself died in 1775, Eaves, by now a talented printer in her own right, continued running his shop, printing his unfinished projects. Eventually she oversaw the sale of Baskerville’s shop and foundry, selling it to the French printer Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, who set out publishing Voltaire’s complete works using Baskerville’s lead type. Baskerville’s wish to have his typeface grace the words of Voltaire had come true, in the end.

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A Modern Design

Sarah Eaves likely would have remained a historical footnote if it weren't for Zuzana Licko's tribute to her, in the naming of her digital typeface. Baskerville may have feared he would become little more than a historical footnote himself: though now regarded as a pivotal figure, he was vastly underappreciated in his day, and his work derided.

"To a great degree," as Licko has said, "the critics were wrong." Baskerville was a highly innovative printer, developing not just a new typographic aesthetic, but smoother, whiter printing papers and darker printing inks. His typefaces, however, were heavily criticized, and he saw only modest success during his lifetime (mostly in America).

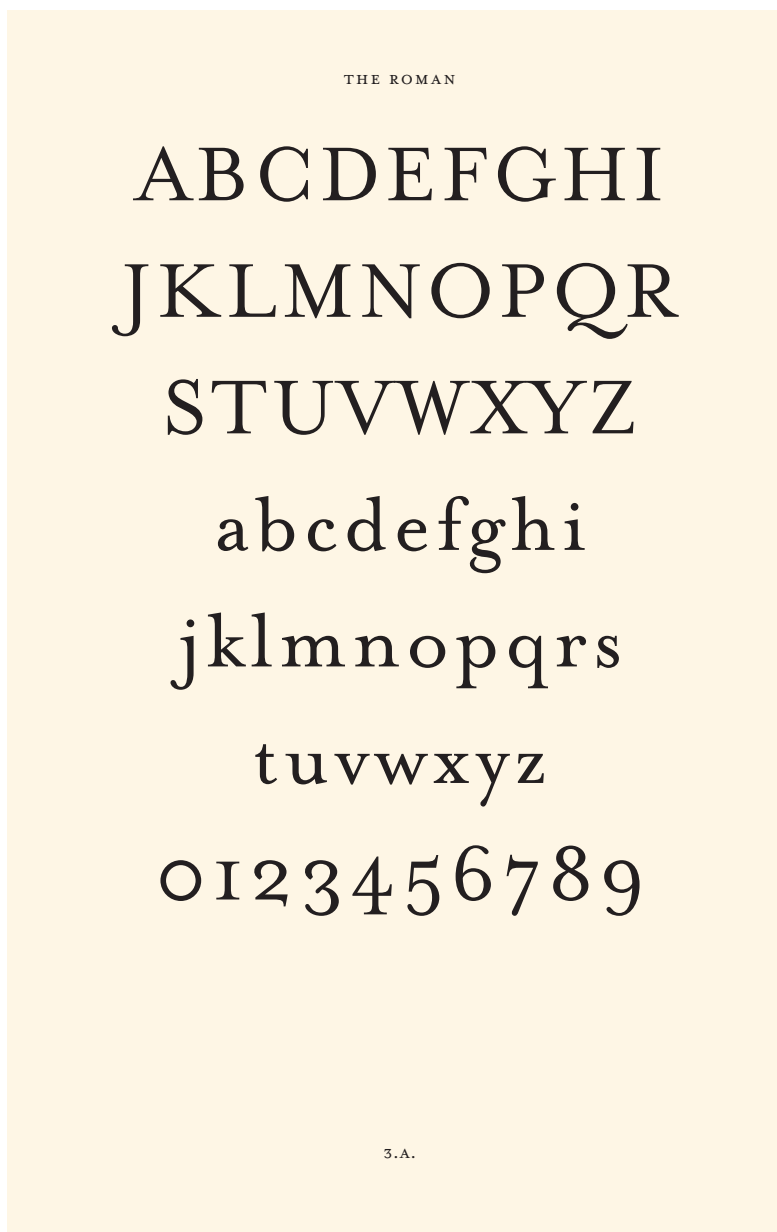
The resistance to his work was, perhaps, understandable. Prior to Baskerville, a "humanist" style of typography had dominated for roughly three centuries, ever since type designers influenced by the Italian Renaissance rejected the dense, heavy Gothic (or "blackletter") type used in 1456 by Gutenberg for his original moveable type. They replaced it with something much more loose and open: typography that aimed to mimic natural handwriting. Humanist letters were lightly tilted, with modestly modulated thick-and-thin lines, as if written by a broad-nibbed pen. These letterforms established the mould for all typography that followed.

In other words, Baskerville was messing with a good thing.

In his shop in Birmingham, he adapted and altered these humanist typefaces to create a radically new aesthetic, and a wholly new approach to type design. Essentially, his designs allowed typography to begin divorcing itself from the calligraphic tradition. After Baskerville, letters began to look (and act) much less like written letters and more like intentionally designed forms, made up of independent typographic elements.

Baskerville got rid of the tilted axis that was reminiscent of handwritten letters, standing his letters firmly upright. He was also fascinated by contrast and definition. His letters were crisp and sharp, featuring an intense contrast that was no longer gently modulated like the lines created by a nib pen.

The books he printed were ruthlessly criticized by his peers, particularly for the high contrast of his typefaces. "[One] gentleman ... said you would be a Means of blinding all the Readers in the Nation; for the Strokes of your Letters, being too thin and narrow, hurt the Eye, and he could never read a Line of them without Pain," wrote Benjamin Franklin, the American printer and politician (and, eventually, founding father), to Bask-



"When drawing a revival, I try to question the form of each character and element according to my own sensibilities, as though I were drawing it as an original design."

—ZUZANA LICKO

↑
Type specimen booklet, 1996.
Mrs Eaves typeface designed by Zuzana Licko.
Booklet designed by Rudy VanderLans.
Essay "The Letter" by Brian Schorn.
32 pages, self cover, 5.5 x 8.5 inches.
Free download available from emigre.com.

THE AARDVARK

Deconstructivist theorists

HERO GÖGGLES

We be freeky and flippy

SUPER SCHOOL

I find energy sticky

AMBIENT LAVA LAMP

Scruffy Poetry sprees

THINK VANILLA

Affinity with happy gifts

3.D.

“I think Mrs Eaves was a mix of just enough tradition with an updated twist. It’s familiar enough to be friendly, yet different enough to be interesting. ... It makes the reader slow down a bit and contemplate the message.”

—ZUZANA LICKO

erville. Franklin *was* a fan of Baskerville’s work, and considered such criticism “prejudiced.”

Baskerville’s treatment of letterforms as designed forms, rather than simply a reflection of handwritten script, opened the door to modern type design. The designers who first picked up the mantle—Bodoni and Didot, in particular—fully abstracted the letterform, severing it completely from calligraphy. Nothing they created would seem remotely out of place today.

Baskerville’s typefaces were what is called “transitional,” a bridge between one major style and another. Another transitional period came in the 1980s, with the popularization of the personal computer. Type design was about to go digital.

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The Digital Age

In 1984, a freshly graduated communications design student from UC Berkley named Zuzana Licko bought the just-released Macintosh personal computer—Apple’s first—and began using it to design digital typefaces.

While at university, Licko had met, and later married, Rudy VanderLans, a graphic designer and photographer. VanderLans had just started a design magazine called *Emigre* with two friends (all three were Dutch émigrés living in the US), in order to explore the burgeoning field of digital graphic design. Licko became involved as well, providing low-resolution bitmap typefaces, designed on her Macintosh computer. The first of these, Oakland (later renamed Lo-Res), is considered the first original digitally designed typeface.

As exciting as the first Macintosh was, the computer was hampered by limited resolution and basic software. “It was a relatively crude tool back then, so established graphic designers looked upon it as a cute novelty,” Licko later recalled. “But to me it seemed as wondrously uncharted as my fledgling design career.”

Both Licko and VanderLans saw great potential, and creative challenge, in the Macintosh. What might good design look like on a digital medium? “It was such a big break with how design was made before, that it felt like we were inventing an entirely new way of communicating,” Licko has said. “It was an exhilarating time.”

Licko noticed that other typographers were simply trying to recreate old typefaces on the low-res digital platform, with disappointing results. It was, as Licko has said, an “impossible” task, one that created “hideous emulations of the original”; all typefaces, at such a low resolution, became virtually indistinguishable. For Licko, the only interesting approach would be to design type *for* the computer, rather than in spite of it. She chose to embrace the bitmap.

Her low-res typefaces were heavily pixelated, but also original, even playful—and always functional. They became a prominent feature of *Emigre* magazine, which itself began to establish a cult following. As it did, however, it also became increasingly controversial, garnering both praise and intense criticism. In 1991 the respected Italian designer Massimo Vignelli called *Emigre* “a factory of garbage.” Digital had divided the design world.

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Mrs Eaves

Licko may have been considered a postmodern designer, even a renegade, but the truth was she had never forgotten the value of traditional typography. She had not abandoned classic type design; she was merely testing its possibilities on a radically new medium.

By the 1990s, *Emigre* began to shift toward more editorial content, requiring typefaces that would be better suited for lengthier articles. Meanwhile, computers and design software had advanced, allowing for more sophisticated, vector-based design. For Licko, it was the perfect opportunity to revive a traditional typeface.

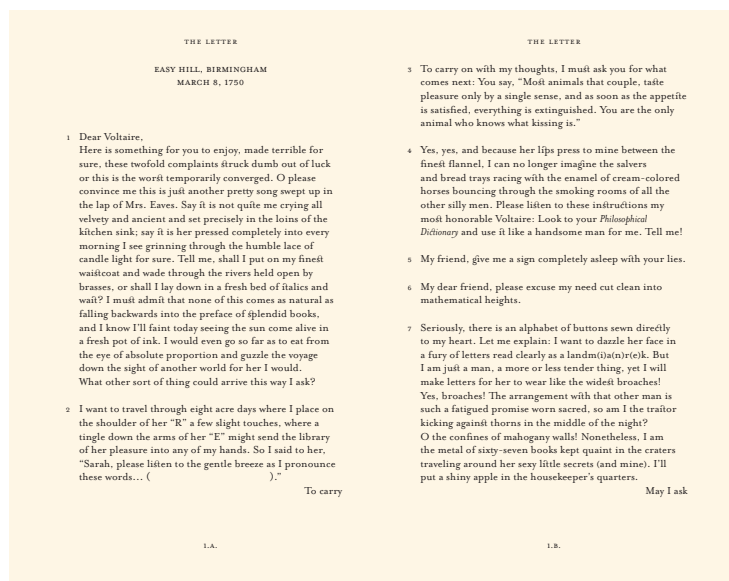
For her, Baskerville was the obvious place to begin. It was a typeface she had long admired, but now she felt an affinity with the typographer John Baskerville himself—an experimental typographer, creating transitional type that would link two eras of design, and who faced deep criticism for doing so: these were things she could relate to. Or as Licko wrote: “From personal experience, I could sympathize.”

Licko was also a woman working in what was still very much a field dominated by men. When reading about Baskerville, she came across the story of Sarah Eaves, and was intrigued. Sarah not only worked alongside Baskerville, but had the talent, confidence and business acumen to continue working his shop after his death. And her fruitful partnership with Baskerville surely recalled her own with VanderLans.

Licko had found her next project. She set about designing a revival of Baskerville’s typeface from 1757, calling it, in fitting tribute, Mrs Eaves.

As Licko studied previous revivals of Baskerville’s type, she noted that each had been modelled on the original lead type, rather than the printed letters themselves—something that only served to accentuate their much-criticized high contrast. This “uncanny polished tightness,” Licko knew, was prone to continue in the digital era, with the flatness of computer screens.

Baskerville’s letterpressed text, on the other hand, had always been slightly heavier, and softer, due to the natural bleeding of ink on paper and the physical imprint



of the lead type. *This* was the look that attracted her to Baskerville, so Licko took the printed letterforms as her model.

“With Mrs Eaves, I wanted to reinterpret Baskerville in a warmer manner, with less contrast, so it would be more fluid,” she said in 2010. “Actually, if Baskerville saw my design, he might not approve because he strived for the contrast.”

Licko also peppered Mrs Eaves with elegant ornamental ligatures—multiple letters joined into a single character—giving Mrs Eaves a personal touch and a slightly different character.

Mrs Eaves was launched in 1996, becoming not just the most popular typeface sold through Emigre Fonts (the type foundry run by Licko and Vanderlans), but one of the most loved modern typefaces. But more than this, Mrs Eaves helped legitimize digital typography: it was a digitally created typeface that also embraced traditional typographic principles. Digital was no longer divisive.

In this sense, Mrs Eaves is considered, like Baskerville’s original, a transitional typeface, a link between two eras—ushering in a new world, with reverence to all that came before.

“Sarah,” Baskerville whispers in Licko’s fictional letter, written to launch the Mrs Eaves typeface: “Sarah, please listen to the gentle breeze as I pronounce these words...”

“Prepare yourself: I’m running through a grassy field of letters masquerading as perfection, as the famous transition, and she with all my affection woven deep into stars. Sincerely, Baskerville.” **1**

emigre.com