
Colophon

Daniel Quinn

An embellishment sometimes added on the last page (usually recto) of a specially designed and produced book . . . including the facts of production.

The University of Chicago Manual of Style

This book was handset in Saracen, so-called by its creator, Giovanni Cappelini (1762–97), because he felt it embodied the “wicked subtlety” of that pre-Islamic desert people. Although classically balanced and charged with virile grace (rivaling the productions of such contemporaries as Bodoni and Didot), it is not a common choice for designers, who tend to think of it as “Saracen Truncated.”

Type designers are notoriously superstitious about the way they work. For many, every new font is born from a single letter, which imposes its personality on the entire family. For Cappelini, this virgin mother was always the lower-case g, which strictly supervised the upbringing of all the rest. Another letter, the third-to-last in the English alphabet, came to be in a similarly special category for Cappelini because his mother was English and he was the third-to-last of her children. Because he considered this character to be the “key” to the font (of course a punning reference to the Greek chi it resembles), it had to be “turned” (cut) last of all, so as finally to release the font to the waiting world. Fanciful as this may sound to modern ears, this was a perfectly serious matter to Cappelini—quite gravely serious, as matters turned out.

A few days before he was to set about “turning the key” on Saracen, he paid a visit to the foundry where the font would be cast for him. While waiting to speak to the founder, he came across a proof sheet of a new font created by one of his rivals, Antonio Ristavo, a minor talent but a facile imitator. Cappelini froze in horror as he saw, right in the middle of the sheet, a character that could be mistaken for nothing but the key character of his new font, Saracen. For a terrible moment, he wondered if Ristavo might have hit on precisely the form of his character by some unthinkable miracle of coincidence. But the merest glance at the rest of the font showed this to be impossible. To a professional’s eye, Cappelini’s character stood out like a falcon in a flock of crows, and not even a miracle of coincidence could have put it there.

Cappelini raced across the city, burst into Ristavo’s workshop, thrust the proof sheet in his face, and demanded an accounting. Too startled to do anything else, Ristavo just laughed—an unfortunate misjudgment, for a moment later he lay dead at Cappelini’s feet, felled by a single furious blow.

Ristavo’s laugh had blown the mystery away like a cobweb. The appearance of Cappelini’s character in Ristavo’s new font was a typographer’s gibe, a coded message only the cognoscenti could decipher. In plain, it stated: “Cappelini isn’t the only man in this city with a key to Cappelini’s door!”

Minutes later he confronted his wife with the proof sheet. She gazed at it dumbly, without comprehension. He dragged her to his workshop to show her the drawings for the character. As by degrees she gradually awakened to what had happened, she turned pale. Although plainly innocent of all complicity in the theft itself, she nonetheless recognized that her infidelity had been laid bare beyond doubt or evasion.

“Ristavo has betrayed us both,” she told her husband calmly. “I trust you will at least kill him first.”

“He is already dead,” Cappelini informed her.

In that era, a type designer in his workshop didn’t have to reach far to lay his hand on a razor-sharp blade. After writing a brief confession, which included a final request, Cappelini used the same blade on himself.

The “key” character for Saracen was never cut, save by Ristavo, and it was Cappelini’s last request that this be thrown into the melting pot (along with the rest of Ristavo’s font) to provide metal for the first casting of Saracen—thus giving Cappelini the last word in every sense.

One graphic designer spoke for all when he said that, “by some incalculable magic, Saracen is capable of imparting to a page an air of ineffably delicate savagery.” This means (among other things) that it’s never going to become a default choice for run-of-the-mill books, like, say, Century Schoolbook or Times Roman. But the chief reason for its rarity is that, for the sake of a benefit that seems to them so trifling, not many authors are willing to revise their work to meet the constraints of a twenty-five character alphabet; indeed, more than one has suggested that the vacancy might easily be filled by an import from some other font, but of course a barbarism of this sort could never be countenanced.

◇ Daniel Quinn
<http://www.ishmael.org>