The idea that form follows function was put forth most strikingly by the German Bauhaus group of European designers, artists, and architects in the 1920s, who saw design as a meeting point of technology, art, and social reform. Alan Bartram explores the development of modern book design as influenced by this integrated approach in Bauhaus, Modernism & the Illustrated Book. There was a utopian strain to many Bauhaus efforts, although Le Corbusier, the visionary architect who can be seen as an influence on typographers and designers, also recognized the need for joy. Bartram takes the stance, adapted from designer William Morris, that book design must work architecturally to be truly beautiful. He ably makes the case that modernism is the basis for an emerging tradition that avoids overreliance on historical styles.

The body of this volume is reproductions of book designs with commentary. Bartram, an author of numerous books about books, a typographer, and a designer in his own right, is not shy about identifying shortcomings, but is equally comfortable praising. Some of the discussions of typography may seem arcane, but he makes his points in measured and clear prose. This is an entertaining, illuminating, and very attractive book. If some books seem inherently more beautiful and user-friendly than others, this one will help readers understand why.

REVIEWER: R.K. Dickson is a long-time contributing editor to TBR.