



Graphic designer  
Spencer Levine with  
his kelpie, Bruno.

# BY THE BOOK

Spencer Levine makes a good first impression.

When Spencer Levine heard he was a finalist in three categories of the PANZ Book Design Awards, he had to tell his dog Bruno. The kelpie, Levine's sole companion at his design studio in Wellington's CBD, knew his master's smile spelled good news.

"He's a non-verbal communicator, so there was a bit of tail-wagging." After winning the title in 2009, Levine is again up for the Awa Press Young Designer of the Year – to be announced at an awards ceremony in Auckland on August 25. You've got to be under 35, so at 34 Levine just snuck in. "I'll become a fully fledged adult on my birthday

in September, so my fountain of youth is definitely about to run dry." But his flair certainly isn't. Chief judge Sharon Grace describes Levine, who's been shortlisted three times this year for his cover work, as a "very talented designer". As a reader who often chooses books by their covers, Levine believes a book's jacket can make or break a title. And the

cover of *Eep!* (Gecko) makes it. "This children's book leaps off the shelf with its bright, humorous cover," said the judges, who pronounced it a finalist for the HarperCollins Award for Best Cover. Here, Levine manipulated two black-and-white interior illustrations into a single image of an adoptive mother looking up at her "bird-girl", then added bold, simple colour and type that suited the title and tone. Some covers – like *Eep!* – take only hours or days. But they can also take months. That's true of *Blue Smoke: The Lost Dawn of New Zealand Popular Music 1918-1964* (AUP), one of two books designed by Levine (co-nominee Katrina Duncan illustrated both interiors) that's up for the Random House New Zealand Award for Best Illustrated Book. Without looking too busy, the cover had to fit in that titular "mouthful" and enough black-and-white photographs to signal the book's scope and depth. So Levine kept the design as simple as possible by sticking to two elements: the yellow ribbon "belly band" which unrolls over a background "montage" of photographs. (The effect recalls the famed cover of the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's* album.) Far less time-consuming was *Group Architects: Towards a New Zealand Architecture* (AUP), also up for Best Illustrated Book. For this, Levine used an interior photo that represented the influential architecture firm's fresh, understated style. The other two books in his young-designer portfolio, both from Te Papa Press, are *Brian Brake: Lens on the World* (a dream gig for Levine as Brake is his photography hero) and *New Zealand Fashion Design*. With the latter, where simple text is set against a pink dress, you can see Levine's less-is-more approach. "You've not got much time to get the idea across, so if it doesn't need to be there, get rid of it." Levine learned his craft over nine years working for sizeable design studios before going solo in 2008. "It gives me the mental space to work creatively." It also lets him cherry-pick and work on projects he loves at his own pace. Careful organisation keeps "home-work" at a minimum, and family time with partner Kristy and their two-year-

old daughter, Paige, at a maximum. While Levine also designs CD covers, posters and corporate logos/reports, publishing makes up 80 per cent of his work. That's largely non-fiction covers, though he's keen to design for fiction, which he reads every day. "It's lovely to put a book on the shelf and think, 'I've read that' instead of just closing a file. I'm never going to write a book, but I have a real love for them as objects. And I love helping bring them to life."

SARAH LANG

## The Wow Factor

Ever picked up a book then put it down again because of a blah cover? Ever been seduced by a cover to scan that first page and buy the book? That wow factor is one thing the judges looked for in the 2011 PANZ (Publishers Association of New Zealand) Book Design Awards – announced in Auckland on August 25. While we often applaud our authors, New Zealand's only book-design competition gives designers a chance to shine. "Focusing on excellence can only help our book designers want to produce their best," says chief judge Sharon Grace, a noted magazine/book designer and one of three judges on the panel. From a record 136 entries spanning 33 publishers, judges chose three finalists in each category: best illustrated book, best non-illustrated book, best typography, best educational book, best children's book and best cover.

Although the awards are all about the design, and not the production budget or the writing quality, a winning entry will do more than just catch the eye. A lack of consistency between the book's crust and its filling is why some entries failed to make the shortlist, says Grace, who's disappointed in the lack of typography entries. But these are mere quibbles in a strong showing that bodes well for New Zealand book design. "The creativity and ingenuity is of such a high standard that they'd stand up against the best-designed books anywhere in the world."

