The most surprising thing about *Problem Solved* by Michael Johnson is that it isn’t really a book about graphic design. Rather, it is about clients and what they want from designers. While most graphic design writing focuses on an individual designer, historical period, or type of media, *Problem Solved* is a sort of psychoanalysis of the field. In much the same way that a therapist looks at behavior as a manifestation of a deeper condition, Johnson discusses individual pieces of graphic design as evidence of their deeper motivation—the client brief. In a Jungian twist, he uses this analysis to articulate archetypal problems, grouping diverse projects (regardless of media, form, success or failure) according to the underlying challenge they pose for the designer.

Each chapter of *Problem Solved* begins with an archetypal problem on black paper. The bulk of the chapter is composed of examples of projects that address that problem on white paper and ends with a related case study of an individual designer on grey paper. The best parts of the book are where Johnson focuses on how engaging with the client is an essential component of the design process. In describing what he calls “the charity begins at work problem,” Johnson writes, “Blue-chip clients with generous budgets may buy the respect of their creative consultants, but they can’t buy their love...Enter the charity clients—seemingly grateful for your time and expertise, initially respectful of your understanding and infinite patience. But make the most of it—it may not last for ever.” It is refreshing to hear this kind of transference and projection between client and designer discussed so bluntly. The charity client initially projects onto his designer the same noble qualities that he prides himself on; unfortunately, this establishes a structure through which his insecurity and self-doubt can also be transferred. A successful designer, like a successful analyst, acknowledges and consciously manages this exchange of emotions.

Johnson also relates the kind of war stories that interns love to hear their bosses reveal at the office party. For example, in the chapter devoted to “the paradigm shift problem,” Johnson describes how Robert Brownjohn stripped to the waist and projected slides on his “rather ample belly” in order to convince producers of the James Bond films to let him use projected type for a title sequence. These anecdotes about the nexus between client and designer are fascinating and well told. Johnson touches on the range of ways that designers persuade, cajole, acquiesce to, and resent their clients, and because he is essentially more interested in the problems than the solutions, he is free to talk about failures as well as successes. This immediately sets the book apart from the laudatory hero-worship (or worse yet, self-congratulation) that characterizes so much design writing.

Unfortunately, the book’s structure prevents it from making a broader argument about what these individual examples add up to. The black page, white page, grey page system makes the book easy to navigate but it forces Johnson to return to square one at the beginning of each chapter and consequently the book doesn’t have much of an arc. He never moves past the idea that the material result of the design process (the ad campaign or the whiskey packaging) is the ultimate goal that designers are working toward, despite the fact that his own examples imply a more novel idea: a model of the designer-as-analyst. Johnson tells stories about how designers engage with their clients’ problems on a personal level, but he never breaks out of his system long enough to discuss what this says about design in general.

In his introduction Johnson says he wrote *Problem Solved* for a beginner audience, which might explain why he stuck to such a rigid format. But in a more loosely structured book he might have been able to situate the designer/client relationship within the wider context of a designer’s work. For example, when a young man with an asymmetrical haircut sits down at his G4 to crank out a yoga flyer, he has more on his plate than the client’s problem. He has to engage with materials, technology and format. He has to negotiate the problematic history of yoga flyer design. And to make a truly great yoga flyer he may have to draw upon his own ideas and work towards satisfying himself. Without examining the interplay between these competing concerns, Johnson reduces the problem/solution model to a tool for the post-rationalization of design. Clearly, problems and solutions are narrative devices that help designers make sense of their work after the fact (just as archetypes help recast chaotic experiences into the ordered structure of myth) but Johnson leaves the question of how this model fits into the process of making graphic design largely unanswered.

The designer-as-problem-solver is an old metaphor. Early modernists used it to convey a purely rational process, invoking its mathematical origins. Michael Johnson uses the same metaphor to explore the interpersonal nature of the design process. Is it the times that have changed or design practice itself? Do designers actually solve problems or are they in the business of convincing people (including themselves) that they do? Is there a designer-as-analyst model for graphic design? In spite of its title, *Problem Solved* raises more questions than it answers.