

TRAVELING THROUGH THE DARK and THE TEXT-DRIVEN BOOK

It's important for me to state at the outset that the books I publish are dear to me. And by books, I'm not referring to the physical structures that we spend so many hours slaving to create. I am referring to the text—the words, and those feelings and thoughts captured in them—that, for me, are the heart and soul of the handmade book.

I realize that this feeling is not universal in our field, that the text does not always come first and that perfectly good books, even remarkably fascinating books, do not begin with a text. I have seen some wonderful books in which the text, in whatever form, is a construct of structure, or services an overriding concept that the book-maker is trying to express.

In these cases, text is no more and no less than the paratextual elements that surround it. It becomes another tool in a long list of tools—bindings, materials, and illustration, for example—taking on a singular, rather than central, roll in the creation of the book.

Then there are those books with no text at all, books that are crafted of pure structure and material, and live gracefully in the physical world without any need for further interpretation or explanation.

It is not my intent or place to argue the merit of one approach over the other, only to try to explain that the texts that *I publish* are dear to me. As the centerpiece of my books, the text is always first and foremost in my mind. In this way, my books are text-driven. The physical apparatus of my books are born through the texts that I've selected and, hopefully, serve as the best possible bridge between text and reader.

Because the text-driven book's purpose is to convey the material, the well-designed and crafted book also expresses that material. I believe that the handmade, letterpressed book is the best medium for this, as it is my intent to express not only the text, but also my affection for it. I want my books to be special because I feel the texts are special. And the ephemeral, tactile qualities innate in handmade books, as well as their predisposition toward limited quantity, strike me as the best way in which to express—in physical form—the specialness of a piece of writing.

However, our medium is a specific one. Its propensities no doubt have an effect on the manner in which the text is to be expressed and its limitations are clear. Not every text that is dear to me would make for a suitable handmade book. Sifting through the pile of possible material, I attempt to answer the question, "Can I express the text, or would the text be hostage to a foreign material and structure?" If the apparatus of the book does not convey and express the text, then it is best to leave that material to find another home for itself.

So, when selecting a text, I have become increasingly demanding. During a publication process in which I must make hundreds of decisions (both big and small) the selecting of the text is the most important. This one decision is the basis for all other decisions and, therefore, should be taken very seriously.

With this in mind, I turn to *Traveling through the Dark*, the text from which our thesis project was created. For me, Stafford's book of poems clearly fits the criteria for which I am searching, although it is difficult for me to explain exactly why. This is because a text that is suitable must be so on many fronts, a certain "perfect storm" of material that fulfils many requirements. In this case I was searching for material of a certain length. The book had to be legally available to publish. It had to be of a certain voice and tone so as to be expressible through the tools available to the hand bookmaker. The writing had to be of high quality. And, for lack of a better term, it had to have a certain "literary status."

Stafford is a poet who is still much beloved, especially in my native Pacific Northwest. When creating books that I have a limited ability to market and distribute, I have found that publishing books by authors who are not just admired but adored is the best possible leg-up in generating interest in the book.

I hope that this doesn't sound overly commercial. We call ourselves "book artists," but the truth in the matter is that most of us are publishers, a special kind of publisher, but publishers none-the-less. When you name your imprint "So-and-so Press," you are taking on the persona of a publishing house. The business of the publisher is to sell their books. That's is the idea behind editing—you want other people to have the book.

However, when you begin to ask an individual or institution to pay several hundred or even thousands of dollars for a single book, things become more difficult. One solution is to do shorter-form books, books that are not such a financial burden and, therefore, are less of a commercial risk for the publisher. With the short-form book, sales and distribution can be optional—the hand bookmaker can choose to venture into the commercial world or to focus solely on craft.

Unfortunately, I have always been attracted to long-form writing. Because of the investment involved in making these kinds of books, not selling them is no longer an option. At best, it's a very, very painful option.

It is here that I again return to the text. It is my feeling, and furthermore, my intent that only those who are interested in William Stafford and his poems will purchase this new edition. Not only is the form and design of my book text-driven, but so is the commercial viability of the publication. Without that viability, the project becomes impossible.

From the beginning of my endeavours, I have put much consideration into the question of how to go about the process of creating handmade books: How do I afford the materials? How do I find the money to create a working studio? How do I find the long hours necessary for creating these types of books? And, finally, how do I sell my books once I have completed them? These are all important questions that we, as bookmakers, must consider—as there is much more involved in the process of making books than just printing and binding.

In order to succeed, we must be schemers by nature, because these many questions require just as many answers. As someone who is new to the medium, I continue to ask myself these questions, as well as alter my course when my answers prove incorrect. But for that latter question—“How do I sell my books once I have completed them?”—a piece of the answer seems apparent: always publish great texts.

We have all been in the situation (or, if you haven't, you will be) when someone thumbs through our books looking at the type and illustrations. He or she spends a quiet minute or two, if you're lucky, and then quickly thumbs to the colophon before putting the book down. In these moments, the book you have worked so hard to create is objectified. I have heard people use the word “artifacts” in reference to our books. And for those who don't read, those who are mere thumbers, that's what they are. The text-driven book holds little interest when the text is not read. And no matter how accomplished we become in our craft, the lives of our books are created through the words. Otherwise we end up with pure ornamentation.

With this in mind we must realize that, despite our lofty aspirations as craftspeople, the text-driven book truly belongs to the text and the reader. As publishers we act as middleman, and as craftspeople our job is that of a framer, or as one of my instructors once told me, “We build the house where the words live.”

It is our duty as craftspeople to believe, with great conviction, that the text we publish deserve the best possible house we can build. But just as important, we must pay close attention in order to intuit those things which the text requires from us. In his essay, *The Form of The Book*, Jan Tschichold states, “In a masterpiece of typography, the artist's signature has been eliminated. What some may praise as personal styles are in reality small and empty peculiarities, frequently damaging, that masquerade as innovations.”

In this statement, Tschichold is railing against the breaking of typographic traditions. But he is also telling us that we must never interfere with the relationship between text and reader. This demands that we hold our artistic dispositions in check, and that we never impress upon our books something that is not necessary.

I feel that my worst blunders, thus far, have derived from those decisions when I deviated from the text into a world of my own amusement. I've regretted the instances when I just *had* to try a certain technique, or in boredom, felt that the expression of the text wasn't enough and sloppily superimposed my own whimsy.

When I look back upon those books (or broadsides or keepsakes) I am left feeling distress and embarrassment. More and more, I am coming to the conclusion that simplicity is best. I don't mean that our designs should be simplistic, just that we should only do that which the text requires. And I'm beginning to discover that a great text requires much less than I had previously imagined.

So, as you examine our new book, you will find *Traveling through the Dark* to be straightforward in its execution. And, I hope, beautiful as well. Ultimately—after the initial moments it will take to

make that checklist of binding, typeface, and paper, and to inspect our craftsmanship or lack thereof—you will be left holding page after page of poems. And should you continue, as readers do, you will be forced to judge our book on the merit of its words. I hope you will find, as Ginger and I have found, the words to be pretty damn good.