Designing

Book design has many meanings. There are artist books, literary books, informative books, coffee table books, slick expensive books, publishing house books, bestsellers, and so on. The book I have been working on, *A Light in the Window of Idaho: Boise's Public Library 1885-1995*, a book to commemorate the library's centennial anniversary, is low budget, non-profit, historical, informational, commemorative, and will be, I hope, attractive in its design. It was to make this specialized book a physical reality. As it turned out, I had agreed to design a book that was not yet written. Regardless, I also took it upon myself to go beyond where I had gone with the technical aspects of the design.

My first challenge was to come up with a size format, and other specifications for the book. It had to be both affordable and desirable. Budget dictated some looking for. For the fabrics, I was sent to Boise's Public Library, 1895-1995, to hunt down the authentic period fabric that could produce a distinctive look provided the editor and myself with a cover. I knew, however, that I and Textiles in Boise. She generously produced the editor and myself with a tour of her personal collection of vintage fabrics and textiles, and offered her expertise on what would be accurate examples of fabric for each period. Recalling the title of the book, I decided that light fixtures came to dominate the design. As it the extensive research that was conducted in the writing of the book, I had to hunt down the authentic period fabrics that were to be used as backgrounds, and reference material for my light fixtures. The Idaho Historical Society was very helpful in pointing me in the right directions. I was given access to their collection of hardware catalogs from the early 1900's where I found the lamps I was looking for. For the fabrics, I was sent to Barbara Edney, a member of The Society for the Preservation of Fashion and Textiles in Boise. She generously provided the editor and myself with a tour of her personal collection of vintage fabrics and textiles, and offered her expertise on what would be accurate examples of fabric for each period. It even had a hand in establishing the Idaho State Historical Society. Its members' work reflected a...
Caxton...

The goal of the business was simple. A book must be well written, interesting and authentic. The physical forms of Caxton books are a pride of the firm. The types are easily read, the paper is long-wear- ing and opaque, and the bindings are sturdy and attractive... We like to make them with loving care and use the best paper we can afford—good heavy paper with a real printing surface and some weight.

Manuscript began pouring in as their staff worked diligently, the presses rolled. By 1286, Caxton brought out five titles. The following year, it was five more. In 1330, this output doubled. Over the next six years, over 100 new books were released, and Caxton admitted that quantity of books was "too many for our resources."
The plant had to be moved into larger quarters and the staff increased to eighty. Operating the intricate machinery were local townspeople, who learned the process on the job, often using the trial and error method. None of the staff was especially trained for their work prior to their Caxton employment. Printing requires highly skilled workers, usually found only in great industrial centers, but Caxton was committed to hiring local people. The company trained these people to become expert binders and printers, with a broad knowledge of the trade.

The lean years of the depression hit the firm as it did everyone else. Profits went into a tailspin. Sales slumped from a half million to less than two hundred thousand. The company managed to stay in business, however, and no employees were laid off.

In the midst of the depression, a new manuscript, written by a native Idahoan, came in. It had been turned down by a number of literary eastern publishers, and the book's frankness made even Jim Caxton wary. He sent the manuscript to an eminent western writer, asking his opinion. The answer came in no uncertain terms: "This is powerful and brutal and ought to be published. But it's not for Caxton to undertake. If you print this, the people of Idaho will probably drive you from their borders!"
The stringent words must have been the "scat"! J.H. needed to forge ahead, for he decided to publish the book.

Until this time, Caxton's business focus was the region of interest. Caxton's decision to publish this novel by Vardis Fisher, in Tragic Life, brought nation-wide recognition for both author and publisher.

Merlin... 

Rick Anderson

enough type to set two pages, press them, redistribute the type into the case, and reset two more pages.

For personal reasons that book, called No Wild Dog Howled, pressed in an edition of 200, still is my favorite. The press work wasn't all that great, as I struggled with the idiosyncrasies of my worn-out press to output consistent impression. I learned how to set a book on my own, with the help of suggestions from Tom and Barb Rea. And I can remember sewing up that first copy in the kitchen and envisioning more books to come.

Nearly all the reviews of our books now comment favorably on the press work. But the type and design of a letterpressed book should not overshadow or intrude too obviously in a collection of poems. As Holbrook Jackson states in The Printing of Books, "Self-effacement is the etiquette of the book printer." Letterpress is a subtle art. In no other kind of printing is the concept of "presentation" more acutely palpable than in letterpress printing, where printer sets his metal type into paper in a more physical, cultural, active sense. Experiments with type are tempered by tradition. They are physically much more demanding and challenging, and it shows in the finished product. Choice of typeface, choice of color, choice of size, choice of design, and choice of material are crucial.

In letterpress the partnership of poet and printer seems so much more vital, perhaps especially these days since letterpress is a choice form of printing and no longer the standard. Today I select manuscripts of poems to publish with which I feel I can collaborate with the poet, and I want poets to feel that sense as well. I want poets to be involved in the kind of work. Merlin does best when working for consideration. I receive manuscripts directly from poets who have no idea what Merlin does, poets who blindly submit form-letter queries in hopes of landing another publication. I really return these submissions quickly.

In the spring of 1987, I met Harry Duncan, the master printer and publisher of Cummings Press of the 1930s, and, later, of Abastor Editions at the University of Nebraska-Dakota. After hearing of my work and of my heroes. Knowing my interest in letterpress, my brother in Omaha has given me a plane ticket to attend one of Duncan's final lectures/demonstrations before he retired. During his lecture he committed his life to printing the works of non-famous poets, most notably William Carlos Williams.

He published a small chapbook by the

NEWS FROM THE CENTER

... concludes, next issue

and... concludes, next issue

I want poets to know the kind

... concludes, next issue

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Redneck...

The late Joe Singer of Mother of Ashes Press in Harrison, Idaho, printed it for a year or two until I purchased my own press from a fellow in Idaho Falls who had used it to produce a magazine called "Tragic Life." Joe continued to operate the press in Twin Falls while attending the College of Southern Idaho following my divorce from Cass County rancher/farmer Jim Reedy. I remarried in the summer of 1987, and moved to a small town and an underground student newspaper which was the CPSI President Meyerhoff—not the content, mind you, but the fact that I published and distributed it without "permission"—I had been hired by the Milwaukee Public Library where I attended and graduated from Marquette University, all the while continuing to publish and print Redneck. My husband, Jay Shaw, attended the graduate program in English during this time. That marriage dissolved a year ago and I found myself on the road again printing my press nearly 2,000 miles back west (where I belong) accompanied by two of my four kids and two cats named George and Max. The press is currently sitting in poet Vaelz Bird's garage in Pocatello where I choose I am able to rest is too much too small to contain it.

As I said, sort and type manuscripts for my 25th anniversary issue. I am finding out what my expensive degree in English has prepared me for 25 years. I am especially interested in food stamps. I need to attend "job preparedness" sessions. During one of the classes, I was in-