

Reimagining the Future of the Book

RICHARD CARTER zooms in with Toronto designer and printer Deborah Barnett on how technology has accelerated change in the world of letterpress.

WE ARE LOOKING into a window and seeing the other. Between us the screen of our laptops conjures the feeling we are in the same room, but she is on the other side of the city, and I can see her new digs in the background. Deborah Barnett gives me a tour.

There are boxes, books, doorways, machines, and—she smiles and points—high ceilings.

Zoom is the perfect place to talk. It is right on the cusp of a communication revolution accelerated by the pandemic—a conversation, yet not in the way we are used to. Anyone joining video meetings over the past year has learned to make quick decisions—video or not? Fake background or not?—and peer at a person as uncomfortable as they feel themselves.

Deborah, hair dyed bright red, does not seem uncomfortable. She plunges straight in.

“When you handset type,” Deborah says, “you care about the relationship between each character.”

Deborah has been a letterpress printer and designer for more than 30 years. In the late 1960s, she was a founding member of Dreadnaught Press in Toronto, which printed high-quality poetry chapbooks and broadsides until the 1980s. Now she directs Someone Editions, a letterpress literary chapbook publisher, and works as the college printer at the Kelly Library Print Studio, University of St. Michael’s College, in Toronto.

TRANSITION POINT

When Deborah first took up letterpress printing in the late 1960s, letterpress faced a challenge. Print options promising faster production with cheaper labour, machines, and infrastructure were becoming more and more popular. Phototype and other pre-digital printing and output solutions promised so much efficiency that publishers began selling their ‘hot’ type and printing equipment cheaply, and enthusiasts like Deborah and the Dreadnaught team picked them up.



Deborah Barnett in the Someone.ca storefront atelier (ca. 2011–2016) where print projects by the participants were offered for sale, delivered in presentations, and explored in collaborations. (Someone Editions photo)



Printing the laser-cut vellum sheets that would become covers for Cumhdach’s 5th-century limp binding, a glueless form of early medieval binding that wrapped pages in vellum to protect them. Cumhdach (Kelly Library Print Studio, 2019) is a modern example using leather tackets to bind the vellum covers. (Sheila Eaton photo)



The completed Cumhdach (Kelly Library Print Studio, 2019) with medieval-style limp binding. The leather tackets fix the vellum to the board cover and hold the inner signatures in place. (Sheila Eaton photo)

“All the money, energy, communications, style, ethos—the design *geist* of that time—was focussed on digital and its possibilities,” says Deborah, referring to the 1970s and ’80s. “Digital type offers the opportunity for layout to be really fast. So we weren’t dealing with editing tools or wood-cutting tools or human error in the same way. When you made an error in a digital file, you corrected it instantly. The speed to press and the product’s speed to market was increased enormously with the efficiencies inherent in digital process.”

The founding members of Dreadnaught Press—Elizabeth Abraham, Deborah Barnett, Robert MacDonald, Ross MacDonald, and David Jang—focussed on high-quality limited-edition letterpress chapbooks and broadsides.

Hand-printing increased in cost, letterpress printing became exclusive, and by the 1990s the marriage of lead and paper seemed reserved for wedding invitations. Letterpress still popped its head up in select places—a poetry chapbook, a greeting card, an invitation, or broadside—but anyone wanting to reach many readers quickly would likely choose laser printing. Newspapers, magazines, and major publishing houses depended on the speed and efficiency that digital options provided and letterpress, once the future of publishing, now looked to be a chapter in its history.



A photopolymer plate on a bedplate at the Kelly Library Print Studio. (Deborah Barnett photo)

This prediction, a sensible guess at a time of swift technological change, has proved both correct and mistaken. Laser printing squats atop the market for efficient everyday printing. Yet letterpress survives. Over the past decade, in fact, the older printing method has cultivated a corner of the communications garden and begun to thrive. A key reason for this resurgence is technology. Adapting photopolymer plates for letterpress isn’t new exactly, but in the early 2000s it gained momentum among letterpress printers because you could now create less costly plates from a digital file.

By 2005, Blackstone Press in Vancouver was using photopolymer plates and, by 2009, Coach House Press in Toronto was making its own in the pressroom. Word spread quickly through Toronto’s growing hand-printing community. Designers discovered they could design texts on their laptops in any digital font or size they chose and send that file to a platemaker supplier. Once the plate had arrived, they could position it for accurate register, add the ink, and print—without any limitations on font or size.

“It was easy, it was inexpensive,” Deborah says, “and it allowed me to use letterpress printing equipment previously designed to print lead, wood, and various other metal plate configurations in a new way.”

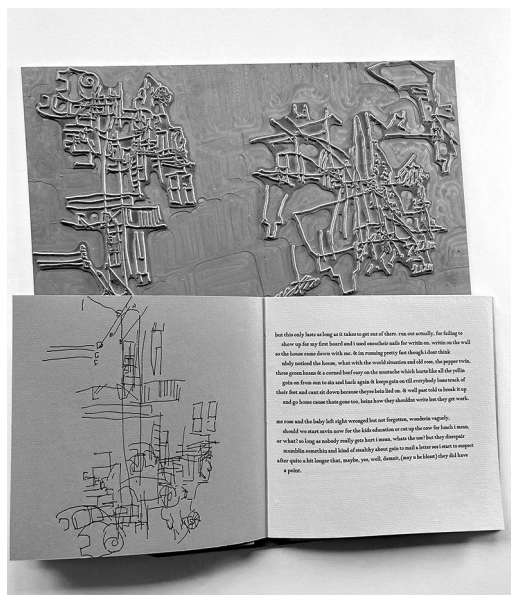
FREEDOM TO INVENT

It wasn’t the first time Deborah had experimented with plates. One advantage of working at a small

press like Dreadnaught was the freedom to invent. Creativity mattered more than efficiency.

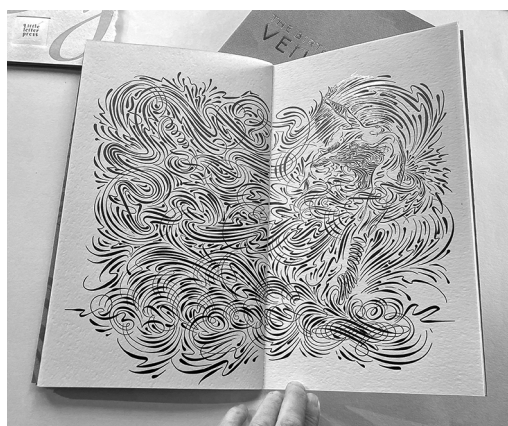
“We were all learning how to use this old equipment to do new things,” she says. “So instead of wood cuts, we were using magnesium plates; instead of flush-left layout, which would have been more familiar, we were doing poetic, designed indents.”

Take, for instance, the magnesium plate used for image reproduction in Bob Snider’s *how they brought the good news from fair to middling* (Dreadnaught, 1975), held along with other Someone Editions and Dreadnaught Press materials at the John M. Kelly Library:



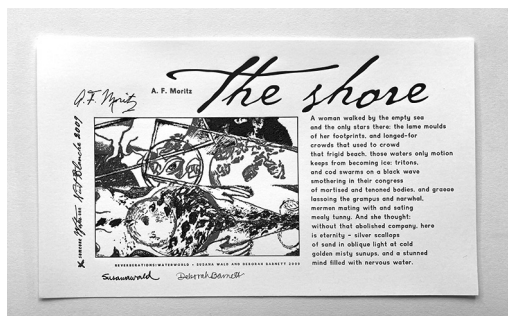
While the text on the right-hand page was handset character by character, the image on the left came from an acid-etched magnesium plate. These plates allowed letterpress printers to create high quality images and graphics without depending on woodcuts or hand-engraved steel or copper.

The Birth of Venus, Cock-Swallow (Someone Editions, 2019), by David R. Carlson and Rei Misiri, illustrates the magic of photopolymer plates. The image below would have been immensely challenging and time-consuming to create from woodcuts and costly to print from magnesium etchings. But by using photopolymer plates, Deborah combined low cost and speed without sacrificing visual quality.



Deborah created the split-fount red/black impressions on two sheets, careful to match the graphics and colours across the centre when sewn, and to register with the spread’s gold stamping accent. (Deborah Barnett photo)

The Shore (Someone Editions, 2009) by A.F. Moritz, Susana Wald, and Deborah Barnett, owes its striking font variation to a photopolymer plate. The languorous, handwritten feel of the poem’s title sprawls like the sea itself, while the neat, tidy text of the poem wades beside it like the clear, tiny feet of a sandpiper. Both are digital fonts, in layout first, and then rendered via photopolymer plate process.



Computer-generated photopolymer plates have injected new life into the centuries-old practice of letterpress printing. Yet technology is only half the story. The other half is maybe best explained as a cultural phenomenon.

In his essay “The Laws of Media,” philosopher Marshall McLuhan argues that everything human beings create—art, science, shelter, ideas, tools, language, software, clothing—is an extension of

the “physical human body.” Over centuries, media vary. Some, like a blacksmith’s anvil, fade out; others, like assembly-line production, gain traction.

In short, explains St. Michael’s College Book and Media Studies professor Paolo Granata, media take part in an ecology—a web of interactions with one another over time. A 20th-century handwritten letter, for example, sprouts in a context of other media such as newspapers, popular fiction, television, and radio, chaffing against one another like flora and fauna in the wilderness: feeding, breeding, struggling, thriving, and dying.

McLuhan’s expression of this idea—encapsulated in his tetrad concept—is that each medium enhances, obsolesces, retrieves, or reverses. For instance, McLuhan writes, when Gutenberg’s printing press became commonplace, it enhanced printing speed and efficiency along with the agency of the individual; it obsolesced slang and dialect in favour of standard grammar; it retrieved the written word as speech for all; and—recently—pushed to its limit, it has reversed into its visual and tactile appeal. Deborah and Kelly Library archivist Simon Rogers produced *A Tetrad* (2019) at the Kelly Library Print Studio as a letterpress tribute to McLuhan and his tetrad theory.¹

“When a new medium pops up, the older medium turns into a form of art,” says Paolo. As laser printing cornered the market for conveying information quickly, letterpress became important for its aesthetic qualities, he says: “the smell of the ink, the texture of the paper.”

A NEW STANDARD

Typesetting was dull and laborious a hundred years ago, Paolo says. Now, it’s fancy—and instead of disappearing, letterpress has assumed a new cultural role with a fresh take on perfection.

Throughout the history of letterpress printing, reproducing words and graphics in two dimensions as perfectly and efficiently as possible was always central. Now, laser printing has achieved this ideal.

“Traditional typesetting seems very precise,” she explains, “until you realise that you can achieve more precision in digital. In around 2000, there were discussions going on all the time about how fine you could kern a

letter combination. Well, in digital, there is effectively no smallest kern that can be applied to fit a couple of characters together.”

This reflection is sobering.

“The measure or value of a book used to be found in how perfectly it was crafted,” she says.

Crafted perfectly, books could last longer, be churned out faster, and reach more readers. Communicating as widely and clearly as possible was paramount, and a book’s breadth and clarity depended on perfection.

“The decision to make the fine press focus on perfect printing is a natural evolution from where print came from,” Deborah says. “Everybody was working on the machine that would generate just a little bit nicer printing, right? But this approach is completely archaic now. It’s not the same world anymore. Precision is now normal. It’s not special.”

To make her point, Deborah recounts that when printing for Someone Editions’ print services customers, she noticed they sought out printing setup sheets that were overprinted and still in the process of being put into register.

“People wanted our waste sheets—the mistakes,” she says. “They wanted the type that’s not yet properly aligned, that sits on top of the other type, it’s in the wrong position. Right. So why would they want that? I believe they wanted a human connection.”

In response, around 2009, Deborah began rethinking her approach to perfect printing.

“What if a print isn’t perfect?” she asks. “Is there a problem if it’s not perfect? Is it interesting if it’s not perfect? Perfect has long since been achieved by digital. Digital does perfect really well. So why do people care now about letterpress when we could have digital?”

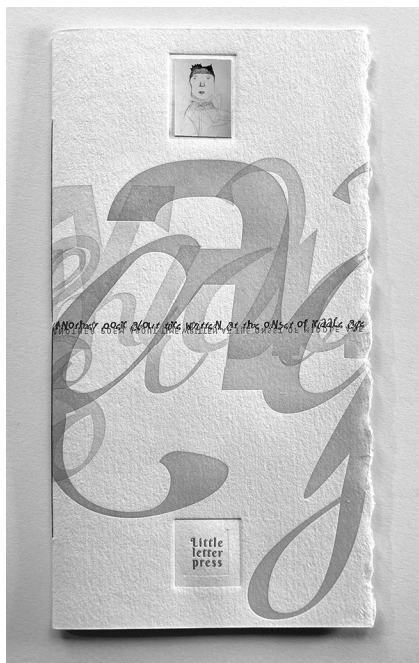
Deborah answers her own question: Beauty.

“Letterpress type is also easier to read because it’s ink on paper with a distinct separation, a solid edge to the character,” she says. “No one can see the pixels in the very, very fine digital printing that we’re able to accomplish but they exist, and the characters’ distinction from the ground they are delivered on is mostly undiscernible.”

Unlike laser printing, letterpress edges into the paper. The result is greater contrast, figure to ground, and deeper clarity—an effect not

possible with a high-tech computer printer's smooth output. Pushing inked shapes into paper, a letterpress forces tiny shadows around the impressions, enhancing the contrast between ink and paper. "With letterpress there's an actual impression," Deborah says. "There's a little shadow that's created along with a depression where the letter begins." The letterforms take on a three-dimensional life of their own in consequence. "It has fabulous effect," Deborah continues. "And it's got a human feel to it that you may not be able to pick up easily in photographs, but people know that there's something special about that printing, and they say so. People seem to love it. They can clearly identify that letterpress printing is different."

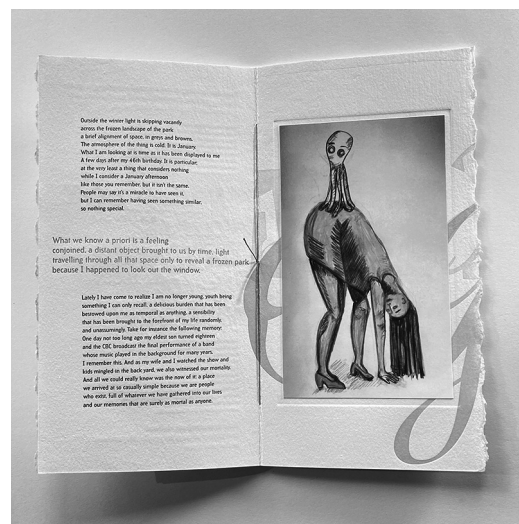
She shows me *Another Poem About Time Written at the Onset of Middle Age* (Someone Editions, 2018) by Jay MillAr, Deborah Barnett, and Natalia Moskwa. Deborah points to the rectangular image at the top. "Observers may not know how to achieve that blind debossed rectangle: it doesn't have ink on it at all," Deborah says. "It's pushed into the surface. And [readers] want to touch it. I've seen people follow the impressions with their fingers. I think they find hand-printed material unusual and interesting because it's dimensional visually—not flat."



A smartphone, laptop, or tablet screen, for instance, is flat: you distinguish letters just by colour contrast, not physicality. What's more, as you'd expect in battery-powered devices, light is constantly bouncing off their clinical glassy surfaces and brimming up behind them. A traditionally printed book feels very different.

"In my experience, when people encounter hand-printed pages, they're intrigued," Deborah says. "The connection seems physical as well as visual. We've become familiar with digital output as print, where the 'ink' is toner and graphics are composed in rosette patterns of CMYK or RGB pixels. So, when you see the ink pushed into the surface of the paper, it has a look and feel that we're not expecting."

An impression affects you, even after you turn the page and see the reversed indentations of thoughts on the other side. The left-hand page below is a good example:



By deepening the impression, as Deborah has done here, a printer can deliberately make one page appear quietly beneath the next one, creating an almost invisible, layered ambiance and tone. Traditionally known as strike-through printing, this effect doesn't always work. Sometimes printers prefer kiss-fit impressions, where ink skips lightly over the paper, to deeper ones that firmly muscle in. But in both cases, a greater or lesser depth of impression helps create a range of effects.

"In newer, photopolymer-supported deep-impression printing, I would suggest that we

can continue to experience what we read on the other side of the page,” Deborah says. “Like ‘affect’ in visual art, the previous page content adds an echo underlying, interfering, or disrupting the desired reading experience to amplify the meaning of text and image we present.”

A NATURAL IMPRESSION

But a key attraction of deep-impression letterpress work is not just the clarity of the ink and the intensity of the impression, but the intangible feeling that a human being has made it. Slight errors and inconsistencies somehow feel more natural.

When most people think of printing, they likely think of the Epson in the basement office corner, hotly herding paper with a fragile inkjet shuddering.

“You hardly need a person involved,” says Deborah. “So why letterpress? Because its making is physically present and that is now unusual for print, and using it suggests that this communication is somehow more distinct and more precious than the usual ‘print’ we encounter.”

Besides the beauty of letterpress and the care innate to the trade, there is something harder to pin down that attracts people, and that is the idea of the book itself—from the bound medieval manuscript to the modern hardcover.

Thanks to the Internet, you can store and find information in a universally accessible slag heap. Shakespeare’s plays, UN data, personal blog posts, multimedia, and articles—any image, text, or video can be bookmarked, saved, or linked for when you need it.

Books are reassuringly different.

Unlike multimedia, whose longevity depends on power grids, digital access, and microchips, well-made printed volumes last for centuries.

“They have a tangible reality that may live longer than us *and* our children,” she says.

The book, Deborah says, has become a symbol of knowledge, history, preservation and—most of all—humanity. Amid the harried flux of modern life—a “heap of broken images,” as T.S. Eliot once put it—a book serves as a touchstone at a time of haste and upheaval, and much of its power is communal as well as personal.

“For people who were read to as children,

carefully wrought books and print are connected to the stories that ignite their dreams,” Deborah says. “People are often very connected to their books. They share what they’ve been reading, and sometimes they keep them and pass them to others, seemingly forever.”

Standard book production has changed from the press of inked characters to the electric sear of toner, but despite this evolution and the fast-paced culture we live in, people are drawn to books. Yet there’s a difference. Books have lost their primacy. For one thing, watching television and film arguably takes less effort than reading; but more importantly, the Internet has opened a vast hallway of communication and information doorways such as blogs, podcasts, streamed videos, and social media. Films, once available only at the cinema with hot popcorn, queue up on your favourite streaming service and play at the click of a button.

A book, in short, is one among many media—yet ceding its place at the head of the table doesn’t mean it has lost its seat. Books are still printed, after all, and if examples as diverse as a medieval codex printed in Carolingian minuscule script and a well-made chapbook typeset on a C.M.C. Jobber Platen Press can convey a human connection, and offer reassurance, then the essence of a book is as fluid as culture itself.

A book is “a vehicle to carry ideas and knowledge forward,” Deborah says. “And just because history created the book the way it did doesn’t mean it has to remain in any fixed form. The concept doesn’t have physical boundaries, and words are not necessarily a part of a book, either. A book might be empty on purpose. And a book might be comprised of only images.”

That books have lost their primacy may be irreversible; but their fate is not. If you think of a book as a fixed thing, then you are right to announce its doom; but if you think of it as a medium full of possibilities, then books may survive for centuries to come, even if they are no longer the kings and queens of thought and knowledge.

“The future of the book embraces what I think publishing will become,” says Deborah. “A multi-verse expression of selected techniques and effects that will contribute layers of interpretation and understanding to texts. The outcomes of



Deborah Barnett's studio, Rogers Road, Toronto. (Deborah Barnett photo)

book-makers' explorations will remain books in their work to share content and concepts. But their form, behaviour, style, and function will shift in design to meet the preferences of its readership. It will keep changing with innovation. In publishing, we'll continue to employ digital printing. And that's great. But we will also create these unique handmade objects."

Although letterpress is no longer a standard medium for print communication, it fulfils a human need for tactile care and connection at a time of global efficiency and abstraction. But what happens when experienced printers leave no one to take their place?

In the spring 2021 issue of the *Letterpress Gazette*, Ottawa printer Stephen Quick points out that, without a guild, the Canadian letterpress trade lacks a comprehensive strategy for ensuring younger printers are properly trained and standards are met.

Deborah acknowledges the problem. In response, she has been nurturing an idea she calls The Someone Editions Letterpress Dojo. For most people, a dojo is a martial arts studio where students learn techniques from hands-on practice with peers and teachers, but Deborah hopes to

extend this idea to letterpress. Based at a university or college, Deborah's dojo would exist as an experiential course of studies—both academic and practical. Students taking the course would ground themselves in basic letterpress print studio operations. Those who complete their first qualification earn a white belt and, afterwards, if they wish to continue, they can pursue advanced training in old and new letterpress techniques. The more advanced, the higher the belt. More experienced students would mentor first-years, Deborah explains, and the studio could defray part of the cost of returning students' tuition by completing real-world fine print projects at low-end prices. The first clients, she suggests, would likely be university or college staff.

The University of St. Michael's College already encourages students to learn about book history and communications through its undergraduate Book and Media Studies program. In support of this program, the Kelly Library offers students hands-on experience investigating historical books, manuscripts, and letterpress printing. It also operates—in a limited capacity—the Kelly Library Print

Studio, where Deborah has introduced students to lead type, typesetting, binding and printing.

Sandwiched between trades like carpentry and automotive school and the scholarly efforts of academia, letterpress weds a love of making with an appreciation for knowledge. A hands-on course like the Dojo, she says, would be unique—and a boon for students seeking a real-life sense of the equipment and processes in book history; for anyone who concretises learning with touch; for those who produce artful, community-based communications in small print runs; and for tomorrow’s publishers who, Deborah imagines, will adapt and use many media and effects in their works.

Deborah pauses. She recalls her youth in the late 1960s when she stumbled by chance on the Toronto letterpress world.

“I wouldn’t have known that it was going to be as extraordinary an adventure as it has been

for me,” she says. “But ever since my earlier years, when I started printing fine text on really beautiful, fine French paper, I have wanted my work to explore type and words as concepts and as materials. I aim to connect with how we read, suggesting that whatever we read, no matter what material or form it’s in, we try to understand, and I think there is no more important a gesture for our shared future than trying to understand.”

1. Deborah Barnett, Natasa Krsmanovic and Simon Rogers wrote about *A Tetrad* in “From Platen Press to Pixels,” *Amphora* 181 (Spring 2019), 14–18. See also <https://kellyexhibits.ca/kelly-portfolio/a-tetrad/>.

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~ Richard Carter is a librarian at the John M. Kelly Library at the University of St. Michael’s College. He lives in Toronto.



WELCOME NEW MEMBERS!

The Alcuin Society wishes to welcome the following new members:

Sherrill Anderson, Vancouver, BC

Mary Carty, Victoria, BC

Brendan Edwards, Harrowsmith, ON

Christopher Kunch, Fountain Hills, AZ

Alex Lavdovski, Victoria, BC

Fiona Lucas, Toronto, ON

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