

Chapbooks Make a Return

JOHN STEIL tries his hand at a historic, democratic form of bookmaking that is enjoying a comeback thanks to accessible, less expensive technology.

I'VE ALWAYS BEEN a lover of books. When friends ask me where to meet, especially ones who are notoriously late, I'll offer up a bookstore or a pub—and at the pub, there will be a book as well as a pint. I can easily disappear into a library for hours. So, when a colleague introduced me to *Amphora* years back, my appreciation deepened as I learned about the art and craft that go into a “well-made book.”

I work full-time as a planning consultant, a job that requires a lot of travel and long hours. But I am also a printmaker, painter and poet; I like to create things, things frequently present in the many great books I've seen—books that inspired me to try my hand, however humbly, at producing one I could share with friends.

However, I had only a limited amount of technology: a scanner I bought for less than \$100; a slightly more expensive digital camera; and my laptop, loaded only with Microsoft Office, purchased at a discount through my employer. And a stool at my kitchen counter, which also serves as desk, printmaking studio and workbench. I don't even have a printer.

I had ideas to communicate but I had, to say the least, no concept of how. I reckoned my

skills were less than those required to do the amazing work often featured in *Amphora*. Then, on a Saturday-afternoon stroll along Vancouver's Main Street, I walked into the Regional Assembly of Text. This little shop has focused on various aspects of text since 2005. Among its offerings is the Lowercase Reading Room, a storage closet transformed into a library housing hundreds of chapbooks in a space measuring less than 9 by 3 feet. “If you happen to make books, they are always welcome on the shelves of the lowercase reading room,” says their website.

LABOURS OF LOVE NOW PART OF LITERARY MAINSTREAM

That was my introduction to chapbooks, small inexpensive books that originated in the 16th century. The name was derived from the peddlers called chapmen who sold them. During the 17th and 18th centuries, chapbooks were common vessels for popular and folk literature, from poetry to street ballads and legends, for histories, myths and, really, anything to entertain those who couldn't afford books.

They were ephemeral, but many were collected. McGill University's Rare Books and Special Collections Library has over 900 British and American chapbooks published in the 18th and 19th centuries. Magdalene College at Cambridge houses the chapbook collection of Samuel Pepys.

With the advent of mimeographing and subsequent improvements in photocopying and desktop publishing, the genre gained new life in the 1960s. Contemporary chapbooks remain cheaply produced, typically in multiples of four small pages folded and saddle-stitched (stapled on the spine).

Usually they are do-it-yourself productions, but fine printers also find them a convenient way of showcasing their skills. The content is



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*Lowercase Reading Room at the
Regional Assembly of Text.*

often poetry, giving budding authors a chance to demonstrate their own skills, too.

Printed in small runs, chapbooks are labours of love rather than money-making enterprises. Originally sparked by the spread of printing and literacy, the chapbook is now driven by artistic intentions and access to inexpensive technology.

Historically an object of scorn among defenders of the printing and literary arts, not to mention morals, chapbooks today are seen as part of the mainstream of literary publishing. In Canada, Meet the Presses, a Toronto-based collective, offers the bpNichol Chapbook Award for excellence in Canadian poetry published in chapbook form. The award is named for the poet who said, “Supporting small press is supporting literature on the cutting edge. Small press is the guardian of literary culture and free speech.” And south of the border, the Poetry Society of America offers annual Chapbook Fellowships.

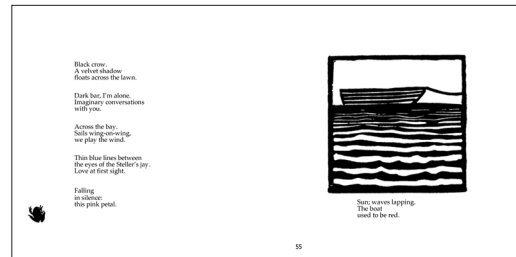
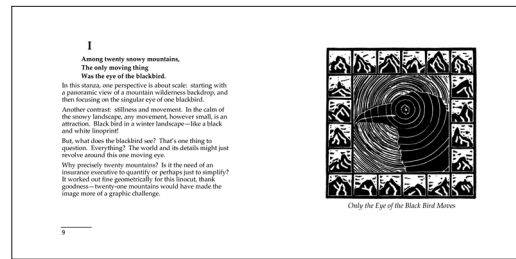
While some printers lavish a host of book artistry on their gems, chapbook publishing is a democratic means for people to participate in the book arts. Production levels are basic, employing the fonts available on personal computers for layout, and a digital printer or photocopier for reproduction. Some would call it the democratization of bookmaking.

LINOCUTS AND POETRY ALIGN IN SMALL STAPLE-BOUND PRODUCTIONS

So, knowing what was possible, what have I done with my knowledge?

My most recent chapbook, *A Bowl Full of Birds*, includes about 30 linocuts based on a year of haiku writing. It’s fat for a chapbook—56 pages—but linocuts are a very simple graphic technique that requires the artist to simplify the world in black and white. In my mind, linocuts and haiku are aligned: few words, few colours. The linocuts are only intended to be evocative of a particular haiku. Since frogs made frequent appearances in traditional Japanese haiku, in *A Bowl Full of Birds*, a frog jumps up and down the page in what amounts to a “flip book.”

An earlier chapbook illustrates Wallace Stevens’ famous poem “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” a poem that has haunted me since university. Stevens, a Pulitzer Prize winner, is



13 Ways of Looking at Black Birds (top) and A Bowl Full of Birds (bottom).

someone I regard as the greatest American poet ever (he also fought knuckle-to-knuckle with Ernest Hemingway in Key West). My linocuts aim to evoke the poem but, as a visual artist, I hoped my linocuts would add another dimension to each of his stanzas—another way of seeing. And the chapbook does so across 40 pages just 5 × 5 inches square.

I love great books, both the content and the package, especially when they make one and one into three. Striving for the best is certainly inspirational, and artists, writers and craftsmen should continue pushing the edges and creating pieces that combine both worlds. However, let’s also appreciate a continuing popular craft, centuries old, that gathers words and illustrations in book form, even though the press is a humble Canon copier and the binding a staple.

~ John Steil is a planner, painter, printmaker and poet. He is co-author of *Public Art in Vancouver: Lions Among Angels*. His chapbooks include *13 Ways of Looking at Black Birds* (2011), *A Bowl of Birds* (2012, 2014), *Accidental Haiku* (2013) and *Counting to a Thousand* (2014). Raised in Edmonton, John lives in Vancouver. His online portfolio may be viewed at www.johnsteil.com.