

A Treasury of Letters

HEATHER DEAN interviews book artist TRISHA KLUS about her latest creation, a whimsical clutch of correspondence with the mark of authenticity.

BRITISH COLUMBIA lettering and paper artist Trisha Klus has a deep love of letters and the written word that reveals itself in works where the text often becomes part of the images. Texture and structure are very important to her as she seeks to create art, including artists' books, that tell a story in a graphic and meaningful way.

Her latest work, *Famous Lost Letters: A Collection of Philatelic Ephemera from the Royal Gosland Post Office* (2015), began with imagining correspondence sent to the characters of popular nursery rhymes. This became the basis for an intricate artist's book comprised of letters and a stamp album, an epistolary and philatelic marvel issued in an edition of 10. The collection was recognized as most popular display and awarded a silver ribbon at the Victoria Philatelic Exhibition in 2015. Klus recently took time to discuss the project with *Amphora*, providing insight into her inspiration and artistic approach.

In your latest artist's book you are exploring the "other side of the story" of familiar nursery rhymes. You've included, for example, a report card for Mary from "Mary Had a Little Lamb" and a legal contract between Humpty Dumpty and the King. Where did the concept for the book come from?

It occurred to me one day that if Gail Ladybird (she seemed like a Gail to me) was living in today's world, she would be crucified in the press and arrested on any number of charges—abandonment, failing to provide adequate care for her children and more. She left her children alone, the house burned down and one child went missing. What a terrible mother! And yet this is a children's nursery rhyme, one that is read to the little darlings at bedtime. I loved the silliness of that and started thinking about other nursery rhymes, about how they might be perceived in our world. The ideas started flowing from there.

What attracted you to reimagining these familiar tales?

I enjoy absurd humour, the type that involves bizarre, unexpected situations. Let's face it, people file lawsuits for all sorts of silly reasons, so why wouldn't Humpty Dumpty sue the King?

How does this book continue and depart from your other works?

I like to make books that entertain me, make me smile and that require me to be a participant. Therefore, many of my books incorporate pockets with notes to discover, hidden pages, fold-outs, pop-ups and inclusions (maps, charts, etc.). *Famous Lost Letters* is probably my most extreme book yet! There is a lot for the reader to discover. I don't think it has departed from my previous work so much as it has evolved.

The book is in fact a collection of ephemera with extraordinary details—not just letters and postcards but also stamps, seals, cancellations, cheques, photographs, and so on. How did you go about determining the form and structure for this piece? How important was authenticity for you?

At first *Famous Lost Letters* was only going to be a collection of correspondence. But I found that more would be needed to create a better narrative, to provide context. So I wrote the story of how Martin Kettle found the collection. And since he was a philatelist, I decided he needed a stamp album for his collection. Then I realized that not everybody remembers their nursery rhymes, so I included them for reference (as postcards, in keeping with the philatelic theme). Now I had a bundle of letters, a packet of postcards, a booklet and a stamp album. A custom box of some sort seemed to be the best way to contain everything. Designing the box to present all of these in a logical order was the next challenge. I wanted the reader to discover the



story in a certain sequence. By using layers and hidden spaces, I think I was able to achieve this. Authenticity is crucial. I do a lot of research for my projects and aim for the right look and feel. I don't want the work to look "cutesy." So when I designed the faux postage, cancels and slogans, I tried to make them look "real" at first glance. I even used a vintage Rosback perforator to make the perforations. Only upon closer inspection would one realize that it was all a bit cheeky. When the *Famous Lost Letters* collection was shown at a recent philatelic exhibition, one of the viewers had looked at three or four of the envelopes before he realized they weren't real! That was the best compliment for me.

The book represents a whole world unto itself, with fictional places (Gosland, Storyville, Meadowvale) and people (Martin Kettle, whose collection this presumably belonged to, and nursery rhyme characters). Tell me about some of these places and personalities.

In some ways the people and places are no different from ones we know in our world. Some of the addresses may be more or less desirable than others. For example, Humpty Dumpty lives at 11 Wall Street, Lesser Castle Hill while the King's address is The Castle, Upper Castle Hill. For other addresses I tried to suggest a connection to the character. Georgie Porgie lives at 101 Lovers Lane in the town of Snogg (I do like a pun). The personalities of the characters

show they are human. They're not all bad but they have moments of poor judgment, make mistakes, and are sometimes a bit greedy. I just happened to capture the moment when they were less than perfect. There is more opportunity for humour in those situations.

For such a complex artistic undertaking, this book has a wonderfully playful feel to it. Tell me about your process of writing the correspondence and realizing it in paper. How does humour inform your work?

The letter writing was the easiest part. The stories just came to me. The challenge was to make them all look different. The size, shape, style and materials to be used were all considerations so that the context, tone and content were in sync. For example, a letter from the King would not be written on standard copy paper in a commercial A2 envelope. It would be on a special, heavier-weight paper with decoration hand-drawn by the King's scribe, and placed in a regal-like packet sealed with wax. Alternately, a letter from the local social services office would use a business letterhead, printed on recycled paper to show how environmentally conscious they were and sent in a standard business-sized envelope. Duplication or rather the desire to avoid it was another consideration. I wanted it to look like a typical mix of letters one might find in any bag of mail. Therefore both commercial



Famous Lost Letters: A Collection of Philatelic Ephemera from the Royal Gosland Post Office (2015).

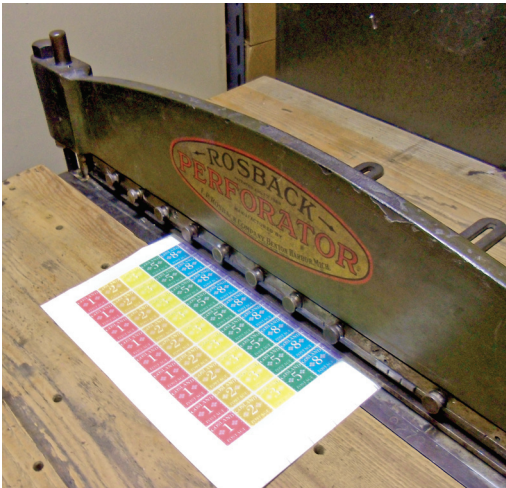
and handmade papers and envelopes were used in a variety of sizes, shapes and colours. The text was printed digitally as well as by typewriter and by hand to add diversity and interest. The content was also varied; there was a mix of letters including an invoice, a chain letter and personal correspondence. Using humour was a natural fit for the rhymes.

The book includes a number of mysteries. First with Martin Kettle's discovery of a much sought after lost mailbag from the Royal Gosland Post Office and then with his mysterious death by meteorite. Will your future projects resolve this last mystery?

I worked on this project for more than two and a half years and was quite relieved when I had completed it. I am not ready right now to continue that story, but you never know. I do have a list of ideas for another "Lost Letter" edition.

~ Heather Dean is associate director of University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and an ex officio board member of the Alcuin Society.

~ Trisha Klus is a lettering and paper artist specializing in calligraphy and hand-bound artists' books. Formerly an officer and one of the first women aircrew in the Canadian military, Trisha is now happily settled in Cobble Hill, B.C.



A vintage Rosback perforator was used to make perforations on the faux postage.