

## *Astonishing accomplishments*

WISŁAWA SZYMBORSKA, reviewing a new edition of the works of Montaigne in Polish, works through the many ways in which forces might have conspired to prevent the existence of both the author and his essays. Where once she lacked any surprise in their magnificence, as a mature reader she marvelled that fate had conspired to let them see the light of day not only in Montaigne's own tumultuous generation but even so far as her own (you can read this gem of an essay, and others, in *Nonrequired Reading: Prose Pieces* [Harcourt, 2002]).

Our own generation has brought its own dangers to text. A few days after typing these words, the world will remember the destruction of Sarajevo's library by Serbian artillery on August 25, 1992. We read regularly of cultural landmarks and their books destroyed in lands controlled by Daesh, known in the West as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Digitization projects have also prompted libraries closer to home to deaccession and trash books and other print materials deemed superfluous. Last fall, I received dozens of *Amphora's* earliest issues from a New Brunswick library culling its holdings (the VHS tapes I noticed during my visit remained in demand, I was told).

Acts of gods and markets also threaten the printed word: fire claimed the venerable B.C. publisher Sono Nis on August 4, destroying its entire inventory and putting an end to its 48-year history. A few days later, "going out of business" signs appeared in the window of Mayfair News, perhaps the last independent magazine shop of consequence in Vancouver. Business was simply too slow, and the proprietor's international freight office more lucrative than magazine sales.

While it's still possible to receive print via post, it costs U.S. publishers five times as much to distribute magazines in Canada versus south of the border. During this summer's

threat of job action by Canada Post, subscribers to many magazines were encouraged to download the digital edition. People love the printed word, but pixels reach them in a flash.

Bear all this in mind as you read the articles that follow, which make a case for the persistence of texts and the book arts.

Marlene Chan discusses efforts to reassemble the Durham Priory library, scattered at the dissolution of the English monasteries in 1540. A century later, in the 1630s, artisans in China were printing books in colour using woodblocks—an art form revived in the early 20th century and now, as Maribeth Graybill notes, once again facing an uncertain future in the digital age.

Papermaking has had its own curious history in both Asia and North America, with factory-made papers becoming the norm. Yet traditional workshops such as Montreal's Papeterie Saint-Armand have kept the practices of earlier ages alive, applying generations-old knowledge to produce papers for a variety of specific uses. Canada's currency may be plastic, but there's still money in traditional workmanship.

Kicking everything off is Tom Smart's article on the work of Toronto's Michael Torosian. While images dominate screen-based communications, Torosian works steadily to present photographs in book form in a way that continues to resonate. Similar to Saint-Armand, he takes the book arts in a direction that testifies to both its excellence and its relevance.

"I took these for granted," Szymborska says of the grandeur of Montaigne's *Essays*, words that so often describe our appreciation of the book arts. "What foolishness. Now the existence of anything good fills me with astonishment. And . . . everything in them amazes me."

~ Peter Mitham, editor