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THE FIRST HALF OF 2011 has been a rough time for lovers of print books and bookstores. There's every indication that, to paraphrase Robert Fulford's encapsulation of the long-standing lament of Canadian publishers, "Things are bad, they are about to get worse, and then they will get truly dreadful." Fine independent bookstores are closing across the continent, Borders is in bankruptcy protection, and Chapters Indigo has informed publishers that their shelf space devoted to books will be further reduced by up to 25 percent. While Chapters Indigo's first-quarter sales were down 7.7 percent (presumably not due to a decline in candle and glassware sales), Amazon announced that its e-book sales in April 2011 were higher than all print book sales combined. The following month, according to the *New York Times Magazine* (without attributing the figures), North American print book sales were down 25 percent while e-book sales were up 169.

The sharp and accelerating decline in sales of print books has not been as pronounced in Canada as in the United States, but indications are that the trend lines are the same, with a 12- to 18-month lag north of the border due primarily to the later availability of e-readers.

Against this backdrop, it is little wonder that the viability of the traditional trade publishing business model is increasingly being questioned. Whether due to the emergence of more agile and less infrastructure-heavy e-book-only publishers, or authors pursuing increasingly successful digital self-publishing models, there is a legitimate concern for a collector of modern first editions that the supply of physical books may start to shrink. But then, looking at the stacks of remainders in bookstores, fewer new titles may be beneficial as long as the worthwhile books continue to appear.

Yet there are glimmers of hope for lovers of print amid all of the screens being read around us. In this column I'll discuss a new publisher producing both beautifully designed and interesting books: Visual Editions.

Launched in London in 2009 by Anna Gerber and Britt Iversen, Visual Editions has published two books so far: a new edition (the 123rd by Visual Editions' count) of Laurence Sterne's *Life and Times of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* and *Tree of Codes*, by the young and highly praised Jonathan Safran Foer. A bit surprising, perhaps, for a press devoted to print on paper book design, they have a thoroughly modern website (www.visual-editions.com). The press blogs and tweets (@visualeditions). A "production porn" video on the manufacturing of *Tree of Codes* was mounted on YouTube.

While expressing admiration for fine press and artist books, Visual Editions aims to avoid the aura of elitism too often associated with visually interesting books. Happy to see such work sitting in glass cabinets, the press aspires to mass-produce books with high design and production values that get read on public transit—in their words, "durable and robust, not precious or niche." With backgrounds in graphic design and advertising, Gerber and Iversen are well on their way to living up to their tagline, "Great looking stories."

Visual Editions retained a design studio, APFEL, to resurrect the *Tristram Shandy* spirit it felt had been lost in many of the available cheaply produced editions. Printed in black and fluorescent orange ink, the trade paperback embraces Sterne's inventiveness and visual sense of humour. While the press's edition of *Tristram Shandy* served notice that a new publisher with an interesting vision and design sense had arrived, *Tree of Codes* provided the critical and commercial (relatively speaking) breakthrough for the press.

In hindsight, Foer was an obvious choice for Visual Editions. His second novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), plays with design and typography in ways very reminiscent of *Tristram Shandy*. When approached by Gerber and Iversen with a "sort of love letter," Foer expressed interest in using die-cut techniques: "A die-cut book by erasure, a book whose meaning was exhumed from another book." He decided to work from Bruno Schulz's *The Street of Crocodiles*, a book he had proclaimed as his favourite and for which he wrote an introduction for the Penguin Classics edition. Foer's vision was to "sculpt" a new work

from the novel by removing text and have the remaining words tell a new story beginning with the title: *The sTreet of Crocodiles*. Visual Editions described the end result on its website as follows:

It's a paperback book on the outside,
that when opened is a sculptural object.
A sculptural object that has a story, that
you can read. That kind of tactile, sensory
experience you just can't have on a screen.

Moving from the author's vision to the finished book presented the publisher with many challenges, which are recounted on the press's website. It looked at first as if no printer could accommodate the requirement for extensive and unique die-cuts on every page of a 134-page book. Die Keure in Belgium finally agreed to take on the book. The production cycle of *Tree of Codes* takes three months, with different stages carried out by different companies in different countries.

The YouTube video "Making of *Tree of Codes*" (bit.ly/eA6zqV) is a fascinating compression of those three months into three minutes and effectively captures the complexity of the printing process. The video is supplemented by website images of jammed paper feeds, indicating that it was by no means smooth sailing once the printer was on the job. And the challenge is ongoing: the first printing of *Tree of Codes* sold out in six weeks and the book continues to sell at the not insignificant price of £25/US\$40. The solution to the supply problem has been to put an ongoing production schedule in place that results in monthly shipments from the printer to the publisher.

The resulting book is undoubtedly amazing as an object, and the emergent text is intriguing and poetic in a surreal sense, if it does not provide a riveting linear narrative. Sample sentence: "half-naked, half-animal, half-shameless, half-hoarse with shouting, mother was lying in a patch of yellow in the still broken only by the ticking of a clock motionless like a glove from which a hand had been withdrawn."

Visual Editions signed a two-book contract with Foer, so presumably we can expect another intriguing production from him. The press has also announced a new edition of a book in a box, *Composition No. 1*, by Mark Saporta,

originally published in Paris in 1961. I encourage *Amphora* readers to spend some time exploring the Visual Editions website and, even better, to support this commendable new publishing endeavour by purchasing one of its books.

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~ Paul Whitney is a library consultant and former City Librarian at the Vancouver Public Library.

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