

Taking the Measure of *Nox*

OURS IS AN AGE IN which challenging and innovative work is pushed to the margins, increasingly ignored by mainstream publishers and not stocked by big-box retailers. Every now and then a book appears that counters this trend and restores your faith in trade publishing. *Nox*, by Canadian poet, translator and literary theorist Anne Carson, is such a book. Published in spring 2010 by New Directions, *Nox* is a wonderful example of innovative book design and production as well as being a moving reading experience.

Carson's writing has been hard to pin down for her publishers and readers. In the 1995 proof copy for *Plainwater*, her publisher Knopf describes her as a "Canadian, a classicist, an unforgiving intellectual, Anne Carson is a poet—she prefers to be described as an essayist." Got that? Her breakthrough book *Autobiography of Red* bore the subtitle *A Novel in Verse*. Genre confusion continues with *Nox*, promoted by New Directions as poetry and described on the cover as an epitaph. In a pre-publication interview with *Publishers Weekly* the author stated:

I guess it's a memoir because it's about memory, but I kept calling it an epitaph, which seems a more dignified form to me, because memoirs tend to be mostly about the memoirist and their salvation from some calamity or suffering.¹

Nox had its origins with the death of Carson's older brother in 2000. With the exception of an occasional phone call or postcard with no return address, he had been out of touch with Carson and their mother for 20 years. He fled Canada facing drug charges and travelled under an assumed identity. He died one week before they were to meet in Europe after he reconnected

with his sister. After visiting his widow after the funeral, Carson started a scrapbook (the term inadequately conveys its power) on her brother, filling a blank book with text and taped-in, glued or stapled photos and letter fragments. *Nox* is a replica of this work.

What makes *Nox* a truly outstanding publishing event is the magical combination of design, production values and moving if sometimes enigmatic content. The book comes in a clamshell box, and the some 190 unnumbered pages are in a continuous accordion-fold sheet. What is especially notable is the realistic reproduction of the original. Carson credits her friend Robert Currie with the technique, used indicating to *Publishers Weekly* that he

thought of scanning it and then xeroxing the scans. We were in Berlin for a while at a place that had a xerox machine, and he fooled around with it at night, scanning and xeroxing, and lifting the cover a bit so a little light gets in, so it has three-dimensionality. The scan is a digital method of reproduction, it has no decay in it, it has no time in it, but the xerox puts in the sense of the possibility of time.

While admitting to not fully understanding this explanation, I find the result is indeed a remarkable sense of three-dimensionality, as you fully expect to be able to feel the edge of glued inserts or the front and the back of the staples.

What makes *Nox* far more than a novelty is the power of the "narrative." It begins with an elegy by Catullus in Latin, and as you proceed through the folded pages the left-hand side provides a word-by-word translation while the right-hand side has notes, drawings, photos and ephemera relating to Carson's brother's story. This pattern is not uniformly applied; there are some blank pages and others with content spanning two pages.

Taken as a whole, this remarkable work is surely destined to be collected and prized in the years ahead. It would be interesting to know the print run, which will be a significant determinant of future scarcity and therefore value. There is no question in my mind, however, that at a \$37.50

Canadian list price (yes, it is significantly discounted by some online retailers) this is a book to buy. And, yes, there is a limited edition of 100 copies, which differs minimally from the trade edition. The box and accordion sheets are identical to the trade edition with the exception that on the rear exterior of the box the limited edition does not have a price shown and the bar code differs. The limited edition has a paste-down on the back inside cover of the box which reads:

For this limited edition, 100 pages were handset in Lightline Gothic on vintage Whatman paper and printed by The Grenfell Press in March 2010. Each page was then incised with one to three cuts, whose number and placement on the page were determined through chance operations. They were signed and numbered by Anne Carson and Robert Currie, then signed by Leslie Miller and Brad Ewing of the Grenfell Press.

In keeping with Carson's desire for privacy (a number of her books have as a biographical note the single sentence "Anne Carson lives in Canada"), the signatures on the insert sheet in the limited edition are tiny pencil initials. Minimalist or not, I am pleased to have the limited edition in my collection.

While the appearance of *Nox* would appear to dispel my initial assertion that worthwhile books are increasingly relegated to the margins of publishing, I should note that Carson presented the work to Knopf and she stated that the publisher "just didn't get it." Thank God that there are still trade publishers out there, albeit perhaps only smaller ones, who do get it.

¹ Craig Morgan Teicher, "A Classical Poet Redux," *Publishers Weekly*, March 29, 2010, 23.

~ Paul Whitney is city librarian at the Vancouver Public Library.

The Man Who Loved Books Too Much: The True Story of a Thief, a Detective, and a World of Literary Obsession

By Allison Hoover Bartlett
(Viking Canada, 2009, \$32)

PERHAPS THE SUBTITLE TELLS IT ALL.

This is an exciting, well-written book set in the antiquarian book trade with a hero, a villain and a theme of obsessive-compulsive behaviour, most commonly known in our circles as bibliomania or biblioholism.

Allison Hoover Bartlett is a San Francisco journalist who has written for the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *San Francisco Chronicle Magazine*, *San Francisco Magazine* and *Salon.com* on a wide variety of subjects, including travel, art, science, education and crime. Her original article about celebrated book thief John Gilkey, on which the book is based, was included in *The Best American Crime Reporting* (2007).

Perhaps the best tribute to Bartlett's writing style comes from fellow author Erik Larson, who wrote about crime himself in his acclaimed book *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic and Madness at the Fair That Changed America*. Larson read a proof copy of Bartlett's book and had this to say about the experience: "As a rule I approach unsolicited galley proofs in the same degree of delight that I reserve for root canals. This book surprised me. I read the first paragraph and was drawn in, not so much by the subject matter as by the author's cozy, quiet style. ... I found the narrative compelling, and I loved the inside stories about old books."

But if the writing style draws the reader in, so does the story itself. The villain of the piece is the compulsive book thief John Gilkey. Bartlett makes it quite clear from the very beginning that the motive behind Gilkey's obsessive collecting and theft of books was not primarily a financial one but one of true bibliomania. Lacking the funds to achieve his monomaniacal life goal of "owning a rich man's library," Gilkey turned his energies and wits to amassing this type of library by deception and theft. (Gilkey boasted