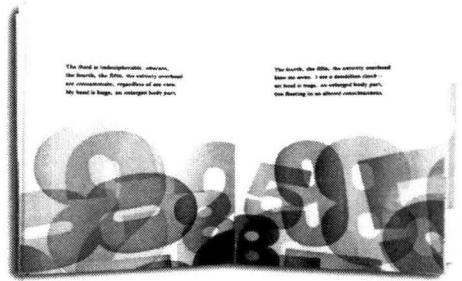


POPPY PRESS

Richard Hopkins



The genesis of this article was the Alcuin Society's 2001 Canadian book design competition. The First Prize winner in the limited editions category was Poppy Press Publishing of Victoria, B.C. for P.K. Page's *Alphabetical/Cosmologies*. Poppy Press also won Third Prize in the poetry category for Linda Roger's *Rehearsing the Miracle*. Impressive for a private press only a few years old!

Mind you, the press' rapid rise should come as no surprise given the combined talents of poet and editor Rhonda Batchelor and engraver, designer and printer Alexander Lavdovsky. Rhonda was actually responsible for the precursor to Poppy Press in that she and her late husband, the poet and historian Charles Lillard, started the Hawthorne Series of poetry chapbooks under the Reference West imprint in 1990. In all, more than 100 titles appeared in this series, including award-winning ones by Theresa Kishkan, Susan Musgrave and P.K. Page. Batchelor continued the work until Lillard's death in 1997, but finally wrapped up the venture in 2001. "The Hawthorne books had a certain proletarian integrity," says Rhonda, "but when you come down to it, they were desktop publishing," rather than examples of fine bookmaking.

Enter Alex Lavdovsky. Rhonda and Alex met at a dinner party in 1999 and they discovered that they both had long been "enthralled by the book arts and the challenge of making literature physically beautiful." And so Poppy Press came into being. Explaining the company's name, Lavdovsky starts with the technical, pointing out that the two words in the name have five letters each. "On the spine of a book, if one word is longer than another, it doesn't feel good." But the Czech-born engraver can also wax poetic: "Poppies are wild and they're unruly, they come and go. That's how we're shaping up. If we postpone a launch it's so it will be a really nice work."

Rhonda Batchelor's writing and publishing background brings a useful set of skills to the partnership. As a poet herself, and an experienced editor, she carries a level of trust and credibility with other literary writers. She has experience working with emerging writers as well as authors with national and international reputations. "Writers trust us," she says, "since we have made a commitment to pay homage to the work, by treat-



ing it very carefully and tenderly, giving it special treatment.”

None of this would be possible, of course, without the other set of artistic talents represented by Batchelor’s partner Alex Lavdovsky. Alex was born in Czechoslovakia where he learned the art of letterpress and engraving. Following further studies he pursued a career in printmaking and painting. He lived in Finland and Sweden before coming to Canada in 1974. He is an honorary member of the Linners and his art is held in private collections around the world. Apart from his art he has operated Classic Engraving Limited in Victoria since 1978.

As to Alex’s considerable talent there could be no finer evidence than the words of legendary Canadian poet P.K. Page. Alex’s books “are simply gorgeous,” asserts Page. She continues that she was “astonished” by Lavdovsky’s “genius” at putting images to her words in two of her works, *Alphabetical* and *Cosmologies*, Poppy Press’s first published works. “This is a very sophisticated mind at work,” says Page.

The judges of the Alcuin Society book design awards agree with this assessment. *Alphabetical/Cosmologies* took first prize in the limited edition category for 2001 and evinced these enthusiastic comments from the judges:

“All the judges felt this was an outstanding production from every angle, far and above the best item in the category. We threw a number of superlatives at this text and still found things to praise. For us, this was the highlight of the year; a beautiful design married to the writing of a fine poet. Everything worked well together in both volumes. The type and the spacing were assured and accomplished. The use of colour was superb, subtle but sensitively handled and effectively controlled. For some of the judges the blue tonalities in *Cosmologies* were rather understated, but all agreed on the beauty of its cool tones. The use of colour in *Alphabetical* was also very subtle, but suddenly a single note of pale yellow would resound to great effect. ‘Wonderful! Wonderful! Wonderful!’ was, in the end, all we could say.”

The judges also had many encomiums, along with a few critical suggestions, for a second Poppy Press title, *Rehearsing the Miracle* by poet Linda Rogers, that took third prize in the poetry category.

I will just report the positive comments here:

“Here was another nicely conceived design The cover jacket and illustration were letterpress and were immediately attractive, as was the embossing on the half-title page. The lovely colour linocut, the well-placed illustrations, and the carefully set type all provided pleasant transitions and pacing for the reader.”

To this date the following books are available from Poppy Press:

P.K. Page. *Alphabetical/Cosmologies*.

Sold only as a set each volume is perfect-bound by hand, featuring quality archival paper as well as letter-press printing. Traditional wooden type has been used in the creation of the illustrations for both books as well as the embossed slipcase. The books are designed by Alexander Lavdovsky who also contributes an original fine-art print with each volume. The edition is limited to 500 numbered sets of which only 200 are signed by both author and artist. Numbers 1-200 (signed by author and artist) are \$190.00. Numbers 201-500 (signed by the artist only) are \$125.00.



He Looks After © 2003 Alex Lavdovsky



Fairy Tale © 2003 Alex Lavdovsky

Linda Rogers. *Rehearsing the Miracle*.

Alice Major. *No Monster*.

Barry Dempster. *Living Well*.

Marilyn Bowering. *Life Line*.

These limited-edition volumes are designed by Poppy Press and printed by Classic Engraving. All books are perfect bound and feature archival quality paper and letterpress printed/embossed covers as well as jackets. In addition each book includes an original fine-art print, numbered and signed by a guest artist. Only 250 copies are available for sale from each pressing. This series of four books can be obtained by subscription only, with prepayment accompanying the order for a set. Price for the set of 4 books is \$150.00.

Prices for all these books include shipping and handling within Canada. For further information about Poppy Press, including ordering information, see their website at <http://www.poppypress.com>, or write to Poppy Press Publishing Ltd., S123A 645 Fort Street, Victoria, B.C., V8W 1C2.



A Girl Transformed © 2003 Alex Lavdovsky



Metamorphoses © 2003 Alex Lavdovsky