



Frog Hollow Press Victoria, B.C.

Kuldip Gill

“We needed a cover and decided it would be fun to have a face like that of Dylan Thomas,” said Caryl Peters, the proprietor of Frog Hollow Press, as she opens the first page. “I’ve brought samples,” and she handed me a three-page manuscript of illustrations. I was interviewing Caryl Peters in Victoria, B.C. where the press is located. Beside the first illustration, she had written “final drawing.” I asked, “What’s this...?” Caryl said, “I thought I’d show you the design process for the cover of Stephen Bett’s poetry chapbook.” I was intrigued. We had planned an interview about her letterpress; she was prepared to talk about drawings. I wasn’t surprised since I know that Caryl Peters’s pairing of art illustration and text is eloquent. It speaks to the clear vision she achieves by combining art, and ideation involved in letterpress book creation.

Stephen Bett’s book, *Trader Poets*, is a post-World War II criticism of poets, couched in Don Cherry’s hockey language. The author asked for a hockey theme cover. She considered hockey cards but nothing there inspired her. Tom Henihan, the editor, suggested a caricature of Dylan Thomas wearing a tux, for the core study. She agreed, and “getting the tux off Dylan was the first step!” It took a number of stages to get the image right. They added skates and a hockey stick, and because he looked too lean, they fattened him up, gave him shorts, stripes and a maple leaf. When the author saw it however, he thought it looked too much like Dylan Thomas. Someone else said, “remove the features and just add two question marks for his eyes.” Many more changes left an image with chubby cheeks and the costume, messed up hair, simplified features and black sunglasses. “That’s how it turned out!” she laughed as she returned to the funny illustration.

Caryl showed me a selection of bookmarks, a small handmade book, and chapbooks, as well as poetry broadsides. The press focuses primarily on these items.

She locates the illustrations and designs for the press materials through research on the web, or from design books. We talked about the cover of my chapbook, *Ghazals: Rai and Sohni*, which features a Sikh woman and man, in a long poetry sequence. Caryl Peters considerably modified the original illustrations from classical Indian art. Next, she placed the book, *Almost Forgotten*, by Tom Henihan, before me. The hand-coloured blue cover which features a tree and a tower in a landscape, printed in



purple ink, is remarkably set off by the same illustration on white paper on the inside half-title page. The two images appear in sharp contrast because of the different coloured papers.

Once she finds an image through research, Peters retains the main components and adapts it. Ideally, she prefers a simple pen and ink drawing; whatever you want the ink to pick up has to be raised for the letterpress method. For the actual printing she sends away a camera-ready design to have a magnesium plate made. The printed illustrations are then hand-coloured. The process was also recently used for a broadside which features a hand-coloured art nouveau illustration. A beautiful set of two poetry broadsides, printed for Lorna Crozier and Patrick Lane, feature a matching border design. As a private press, Caryl Peters showed that a small letterpress proprietor must have a very diversified skill set. In addition to the press work itself, a knowledge of illustration, editing, marketing and collaboration are among the many attributes one must possess to be successful as a letterpress owner/operator. The others are humor, and patience — Caryl Peters has them in good measure.

I asked how she got started with letterpress work. When she arrived in Victoria in 1995 Caryl Peters was looking for something that would be keenly interesting. A small sign in the window of a paper shop on Fort Street caught her eye. For fifty dollars she could take a course and learn bookbinding! All of her life she has passionately loved books. She signed on for the course in Japanese stab binding, and then another in how to bind hardcover books. The books are made by collating pages, then binding them by hand with needle, and thread. As her skills developed she began to make a few books for friends, and then for sale. More courses followed and she taught herself to do Coptic binding from book illustrations. The bookmaking styles and designs are clean and distinctive, often minimalist, modern, and occasionally, expressionistic. She is a book artist. Caryl Wyse Peters is a member of The Alcuin Society, the Canadian Bookbinders & Book Artists Guild and the Fine Press Book Association.

Later, Peters began to do a little printing as well, and “...ended up buying a Japanese screen printing’ thing called a gocco — a glorified toy for kids, that does produce print!” The early interest led her to the web where she discovered something called a “letterpress”. Intrigued, she

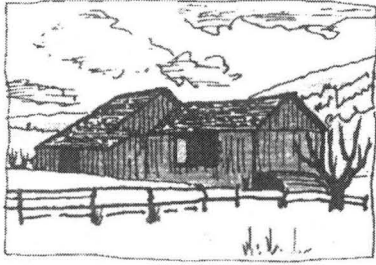


bought a small tabletop press called a “Craftsman,” which is a platen press with a vertical bed. Little did she know that it would require extreme care in setting type. She signed up for a printing course offered in Seattle. Other courses followed until she found Barbarian Press of Mission, B.C. where she took an intensive letterpress course (through CBBAG). “And what a find that was! I still can’t believe what Barbarian Press does in letterpress work—Crispin and Jan Elsted are fabulous people, warm and generous with their time. I worked on a Vandercook when I was there— I decided I needed one.” Caryl ordered her press from Don Black Linecasting in Scarborough, Ontario. Vandercook presses are no longer made, so Don Black buys machines, cleans and repairs them for resale. He also supplies print materials such as dingbats and print ephemera. After a six month waiting period the Vandercook flatbed press she ordered arrived. Once she began to print on it, the press cemented her style of image and bookmaking.

In early 2001, she established Frog Hollow Press, complete with its Mission Statement. Poet Tom Henihan joined the Press as editor in December 2002. Frog Hollow Press uses Bembo, and Spectrum fonts for text, and Centaur for broadsides, in addition to the many fonts used for display. The website for the press, which offers complete information at <http://froghollowpress.com/index.html>, shows other details such as text, display and ornaments.

To find material to print, Caryl Peters contacted a Victoria poet who organizes the Mocambopo Reading Series. Caryl said, “I’m grateful to Wendy Morton who helped me to get started, she’s very generous. Wendy said, ‘Oh! There are lots of people who want printing done!’ She asked me to print a little broadside invitation for her first book launch, so I did that. Then I waited around. She had announced that I was available at the poetry readings but with no result, and finally she gave me something to do. Her own chapbook.” Since then, the press has published thirteen chapbooks, a few broadsides, and an array of other kinds of materials. A considerable output in a short time for a small press.

We talked about marketing letterpress work. In their first year Frog Hollow Press printed books for the cost of the paper. “People got 100 to 125 copies and all they paid for was the paper. At that time it was the most expensive portion of the costs even though the paper wasn’t the



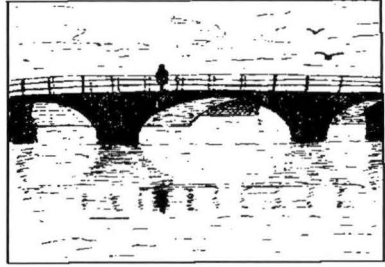
most expensive I could get. Still, it ran to about three or four hundred dollars. And I kept only 10 copies of the book as my share.” Experienced people advised Peters to, “Ask for something in return, don’t work for free since few people appreciate free work.” At the time Frog Hollow Press was only recovering the cost of the materials. She took up a suggestion from a friend and asked for barter items in return, just so that she received “an appreciation.” For her chapbook *An Invitation for Happiness*, Wendy Morton provided her with garden greens, and soups and things; another person gave Peters a loaf of bread and a bottle of wine. “And that was fine!” she enthused. Some people completely forgot the barter agreement. She decided to change her way of doing business from a self-publishing kind of enterprise. She offered the comment, “as a word to the wise for those who might want to go into letterpress — you do not get into this work hoping to make money at all!”

Books and broadsides are now marketed through Frog Hollow Press’s website and through the various catalogues and book announcements that are sent out to booksellers, libraries and other institutions such as library service companies.

On my visit to her studio, the home of Frog Hollow Press, Caryl Peters invited me into the right side of the studio which functions as an office. It houses her desk, composition tables, papers, printed ephemera, books and fonts.

The other side of the studio houses a Vandercook 15-21 press, printer’s accoutrements — various tools, cans of ink, the initial printed sheets, and ruined snippets. The Vandercook press is similar to those used years ago by newspapers to proofread columns of type. Obsolete today, they are mainly in the hands of small letterpress printers and bookmakers. The one in Caryl Peter’s studio is about the size of a laid down refrigerator. It works on the principle of the cylindrical drum which runs over a bed of inked type or engraved plate. It is proof of Caryl’s comment that she loves letterpress work. “It is a physically demanding process — it’s lifting heavy weights — I cut the papers, four sheets at a time, bending over the table top, and it involves other lifting. But, it’s wonderful to work with your hands.” The direct impression records the physical transaction. As stated in a recent article:

The most distinctive quality of letterpress printing, and by which one can usually distinguish it from offset printing, is that the printed image (whether type or illustration) is actually impressed into the paper through the pressure of the press. Not only can you often see or even feel the impression on the back of the paper but, if the lighting is correct, you can see a certain “sparkle” around the edges of the type. That is, because the type is impressed into the paper, the light causes a highlight around one edge of the impression while a shadow appears around the opposite edge. It is this sparkle which gives life to a page of letterpress-printed type: a quality missing from offset-printed or otherwise-printed pages, and even from digital pages.

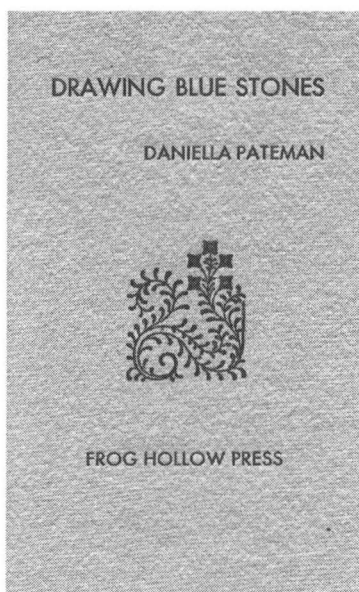


Along with growth, and the development of expertise, Frog Hollow Press recognizes that only the finest of papers, inks and other materials are worth the work involved. A wide variety of papers, both mould-made and handmade, and their colours are considered before selecting those most appropriate for a particular text and book design. She orders these from a variety of international sources including Germany, France and India. “Paper choice is one of my passions — I’ve spent a lot of money on paper.” A book aficionado, Caryl Peters says, “paper is unforgiving— a slight movement and you’ve made a crease.” In order to get perfect printing she must choose those papers that will take the ink the best.

Inks are so important that the Press has recently ordered them from a specialty house in Wales. At the press, I saw the inks — they are purchased in pound and a half tins. Great care is taken with colour of inks. Very subtle gradations of a colour make a difference in type. For instance a plum black was used recently to print my book *Ghazals: Rai and Sohni*. Ivy black will be used on one of the books in 2004.

At the press I see numerous versions of the same text and image on various papers, with a variety of inks. Trial runs that the letterpress proprietor devotes to the process and for the finished product. With Caryl Peters, it indicates the punctiliousness of her approach to letterpress work.

She acknowledges that poetry lends itself to the letterpress process very well. In the future the press plans to publish a series of broadsides. Another wonderful project “just negotiated with an editor and the estate of a writer, to print the works in what I hope are going to be called



20th Century Masters — Master Poets will begin soon. This excites me — I hope to do one or two books a year.” It will cut into the contemporary work of the press, but will reintroduce writers whose work is out of print.

There are curses and rewards in running a private press. The curse, if there is one, is the cost in time and money of the laborious process. It is difficult, if not impossible, to recover costs of letterpress work.

The rewards — in personal desire and satisfaction — bring out Caryl Peter’s passion for letterpress work. The book! “A book should feel good in the hand and is worth nothing if you can’t comfortably hold it...you should be able to walk around with it in your hand.

Tom Henihan, the editor of the press, feels it should actually fit in the pocket! Well that’s not always possible, but I think he has a point, poetry should be portable.” As a proprietor, Caryl Peters wants a book to have consistency, the aesthetics are crucial: the size, the match of the paper, text, and the inks — if too dark on the page they can spoil it.

For Caryl Peters the end of a book project is a great satisfaction, and also a moment of sorrow, “when you’re holding the first copy in your hand—because it’s the end of your process with that particular poet, and the end of that intense period you’ve spent on it. Then, you pick yourself up and you start getting started with the new one. There’s a letting go, once it’s out of my hands it’s no longer my book, it’s the poet’s book. That’s the period of the empty-nest. I bridge this by cleaning up the press room so I have a new start for the next.”

Dr. Kuldip Gill, a social anthropologist, is currently an MFA candidate in the Creative Writing Department at UBC. She is the author of two poetry books, Dharma Rasa, Nightwood Editions, 1999; and Valley Sutra, forthcoming Beach Holme Press, Spring 2004. In 2003 she published the chapbooks, Cornelian, Turquoise and Gold, Colophon Books and Ghazals: Rai and Sohni, Frog Hollow Press. She is working on her first novel: Santi.