

Jim Rimmer's colleagues and students offer a peck of reminiscences

He took pleasure in creation—for its own sake

Writing in 2008 of his latest type design in the opening paragraph of an article for the renowned typographical journal *Matrix*, Jim Rimmer explained the impetus of the project:

In a conversation with the late Christopher Stern of Sedro-Wooley, Washington, the subject of the Elizabeth type came up. He asked if I knew of it and its italic. I said I did, and had always admired it. He suggested: “You should design and cut a typeface something like it” (a simple request).

I agreed that it would be a nice kind of letter to attempt, if it were not to be a copy of the Elizabeth type. What came out of our discussion was a type bearing no resemblance whatever to the famous Bauer design, but one that I hoped might work in the same situation. A few months after our conversation Chris fell ill, and after a short and devastating fight with cancer, died in November 2006.

I have included this passage for a variety of reasons, perhaps the most poignant being that shortly after finishing the design, cutting and casting of what would become the typeface Stern, Jim himself fell ill, and after a similarly short and devastating fight, he, too, succumbed to cancer.

More important to this brief commentary, however, is the spirit and playfulness of Jim's explanation of the type's inspiration. To design and cut a typeface, these days, is not only anything

but a simple request, it is an all-but-unheard-of activity, requiring decades of experience and skill as well as a discipline and patience of massive proportions. Then there's the array of necessary equipment that has been obsolete and impossible to find for 60 years. You would also need, and Jim's comments above make this plain, a colossal sense of confidence equalled only by a humility

that understands such efforts to be, in the grand scheme of things, entirely pointless.

Although there was a brief rush of sales for the typeface Stern when it was released in 2008, requests thinned out quickly, and as far as I know the only publications set and printed in Stern are a series of broadsheets I produced through Greenboathouse Press in 2009. The world is not much interested in metal type, and these days even letterpress printers are relying more and more on polymer plates, which cut out the long and fickle hours of working with hand-set metal. Yet that, ironically,

is what makes Jim's work all the more important.

In North America there *might* be half a dozen people still cutting original type designs, but the lack of a market for such work is hardly the issue. Those who still engage in this stuff are a breed concerned only with the challenge and small rewards of attempting a task for the sake of the attempt, as a process of discovery and experiment, wholly absorbed in the minutiae of the moment and the beauty in an act of creation. Jim would likely find that comment sentimental and flowery, but I'll let it stand. He'd forgive me for the sentimentality, with a wink and a nod.



A linocut portrait originally incorporated in a typographic broadside printed in 1987, paying tribute to Jim's typographic idol, Frederic Goudy.

~ Jason Dewinetz is proprietor of Greenboathouse Press in Vernon, B.C.

A disciplined inventor of remarkable typefaces

When Jim Rimmer passed away at the start of this year, he had spent almost six decades in the printing trade—many years involved with commercial design and illustration, type design, typesetting, printing, binding, restoration and repair of printing machinery—and a lifetime teaching, mentoring and inspiring many people.

I first met Jim in 1983 at his cluttered, very printerly studio on East Hastings Street. His passion for printing was almost overwhelming. He didn't sneer because I came from east of the Rockies and was virtually ignorant of matrix making and typesetting details. Anyone who shared his "affliction" for type and printing was welcomed as a friend.

For Jim, printing was what you did with your entire being. Self-taught as a designer, Jim observed carefully and absorbed information. Among his heroes was Frederic Goudy, whose designs and working methods he admired. But Jim's typeface designs were entirely his own: energetic, contemporary, distinctively beautiful. His inventiveness was most evident in the cutting of his own metal typefaces, initially using filed-down sewing needles with incredible skill.

"I suppose everyone feels that they are breaking never-before-covered ground when cutting their first letter," Jim wrote to our mutual friend Paul Duensing after an early success in type cutting. "It's Gloat City around my house these days. I can't remember when I've felt such a creative lift..."

Jim's enthusiasm for the printing craft and his persistence and determination spread to others. He loved helping people solve technical problems. He willingly helped move presses, cast sorts, and gave advice freely and joyfully.

After the 1984 printing conference of the American Typesetting Fellowship in Washington, at which Jim gave a brilliant presentation, he was elated by the acceptance of his work by ATF members. Within a month he had cut his Fellowship typeface to honour the group. Jim wrote, "There is so much hard work involved in making a font of mats, and working fairly steadily it's possible to do only about two fonts a year." Yet this hard work and time commitment never stopped Jim

from creating some remarkable typefaces.

Jim celebrated friends, family and occasions by naming many of his proprietary metal types after them. His metal version of Carl Dair's Cartier Roman is a wonderful homage from one brilliant creator of letterforms to another. I'm deeply grateful that Jim cast some of his beautiful proprietary faces for my private press and that he entrusted me with their use.

Jim was extremely modest about his talents, but occasionally he felt the sense of typographic isolation and public apathy. Fortunately, he received well-deserved recognition at the occasional talks he gave in Toronto, in Kentville, and at the 2006 Rimmerfest in Vancouver.

Jim's memoir *Leaves from the Pie Tree* is his outstanding printing achievement: a book that reflects the rich, joyful life that he lived. For more than 25 years he dreamed of producing his own edition of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* using his own type design cast in metal, with his delightful multicolour linocut illustrations. That he was able to complete this book is a magnificent, major accomplishment.

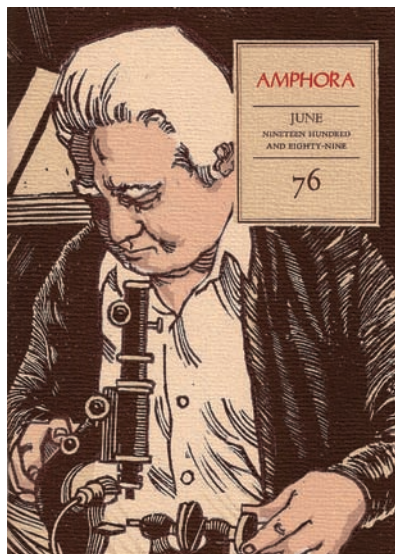
In his last letter to me Jim talked of planning a new typeface with roman, italic and small capitals, with the roman for hand-setting. His self-discipline and decades of knowledge engaged him to the end. He has left behind memories of a gentle, gracious friend who would never consider giving back less than 200 percent to the world of books and printing. We will remember Jim for a life well lived and a craft supremely well served.

~ William Rueter is proprietor of the Aliquando Press in Dundas, Ontario.

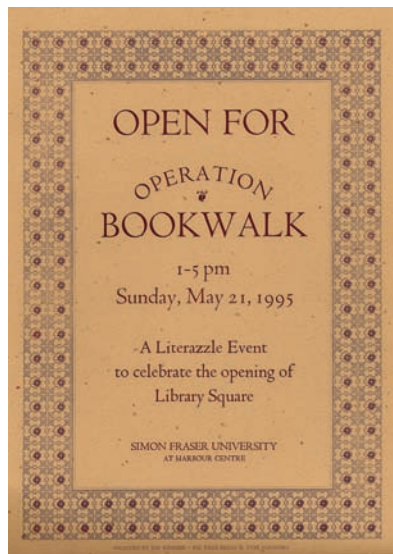
Mentorship with a letterpress master

I met Jim Rimmer when he was 43, almost a youngster, in 1977. Jim was an exceptional graphic designer, as his repertoire can testify to. Although at that time, perhaps, some of his contemporaries did not know of Jim's first true love—hot type and letterpress. It was these mediums and later the art of relief printmaking that most often informed his style.

LEFT: Cover to *Amphora* 76 (1989): a linocut portrait of Goudy made & printed by Jim Rimmer (each *Amphora* cover at the time was an original linocut print). The issue also had a 3-page article by Rimmer about Kaatskill, a new face he'd design. Issue 76 was set in it as well.



RIGHT: A broadside designed and printed by Jim Rimmer (showing the influence of Gerald Giampa's love for printer's flowers) for a guided walk to downtown Vancouver booksellers in 1995.



I was 26 when he kindly allowed me to take up a corner of his studio with my first press. I recall Jim often being frustrated with the business of commercial art. In reality, I think he was frustrated with the finite quality of time and survival—you know, food and shelter! Jim had a family, a house and responsibilities. And Jim was a very responsible and practical person. Although Jim never referred to himself as a printmaker or an artist, he knew he needed to practise and produce his own craft full time.

Jim gave me a wonderful gift: he taught me letterpress printing. Consequently he provided me with the means for self-employment through my own press (Winter Lily Press) for 13 years. Now that I am well past the young age of 45 I realize that I also gave a gift to Jim. He got to teach me letterpress printing! He absolutely loved teaching. I was probably his first serious student.

The best times of my three-year, five-days-a-week mentorship were during Christmas. For six weeks we were in letterpress heaven printing our wares — booklets, broadsides, calendars, cards. Jim also printed linocuts of animals and birds on handmade Japanese papers. Then, for a week or so, we would sit in the old East Van Cultural Centre with the rest of the Circle Craft Christmas artisans and enjoy modest sales but heaps of gracious attention. Often Jim would give away his “ephemera,” grating on my young entrepreneurial spirit. It was not too many years later that Jim was able to devote the majority of his time and efforts towards making his

own amazing letterpress books and creating some of his most beautiful type designs.

There is no doubt Jim was one of the most talented in his field. His ability to master so many aspects of his craft is highly unusual. But for me, it was Jim's dedication to his work and prolific output that astonishes most. You see, Jim was not a letterpress jezebel like myself; he stuck to his first love. He committed a lifetime to producing, developing and creating a remarkable body of work. I feel fortunate to have known him. He was a really decent guy, wickedly funny, no fool, confident, generous, and as it turns out, very persistent.

~ Denise Carson Wilde, who now devotes herself to painting, lives in Langley, B.C.

Letterforms that represent an astonishing life

I first encountered Jim Rimmer in late 2000. I was looking for someone in Canada who could cast fonts of metal type for me, and Wesley Bates had suggested that I contact Jim. I had only just begun to experiment with letterpress printing and I didn't really know what I was asking for, but Jim had an easy manner about him on the telephone, just as he had in person, and he quickly put me at ease. That conversation set the pattern

BAND HEAD REACH MASTER Adversary Bells
Huck & Tom, the scourges. 1234567890 ff fi fl ffi ffl &
ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ&
Hannibal Oldstyle, by Jim Rimmer ♠ Pie Tree Press

Mats completed as of April 29, 2001

A sample of Hannibal Oldstyle, the face Jim created for his final book, The Adventures of Tom Sawyer. This records the date of completing the "mats" (matrices) from which the type was cast, and is probably its first printed appearance.

for the many that would follow, covering a broad range of topics—printing, typography, type design, binding, metalworking and woodworking. By the end of that first conversation, Jim had promised to send me samples of the metal types he could cast for me as well as a catalogue of digital typefaces he was putting together for his newly minted Rimmer Type Foundry.

Jim's catalogue of digital types arrived a short time later, but despite the active relationship that developed between Jim and our Gaspereau Press—a relationship that involved countless telephone calls and e-mails, transcontinental visits, the adoption and promotion of many of Jim's digital typefaces by Gaspereau, and the publication of a trade edition of Jim's memoir—I never did manage to acquire even a single font of Jim's metal type. Jim and I talked about his casting type for me often enough, but in the end I always resisted becoming his "client" instead of his colleague, declining to create yet another obligation standing between Jim and whatever project he was hard at work on at the time. Don't worry about it, I'd say. We'll get to it later, when you have more time.

Time ran out for Jim this winter, and with his death the door also closed on the prospect of my ever printing from fonts of his metal type. There were moments following Jim's death when my grief was mixed with a tinge of selfish regret: How stupid I had been never to have had Jim cast me type. This sentiment dissipates quickly when I recall how much I've learned from Jim, not only about letters and their design and arrangement, or about typesetting and printing, but also about work ethic and craftsmanship, about grace in the face of adversity, and about joy. These

are the types of things that can transform a life into something truly astonishing. These are the things Jim and his letterforms represent to me.

~ *Andrew Steeves is the co-owner, with Gary Dunfield, of Gaspereau Press, Printers & Publishers, Kentville, Nova Scotia.*

A national treasure

"I'll meet you at about 2:30 tomorrow, Jim, at the Long Harbour ferry terminal. I'll be wearing my yellow hat and a pink carnation."

"Ha ha, very funny, Pete. I'll be wearing my skimmer and carrying two heavy bags."

After many months of phone calls, we would finally meet in person. My journey into the printing world had really started a year earlier, in 1995, when, at 45 years of age, a job injury had set my ship onto a new course. My wife Mona and I had persuaded the Workers' Compensation Board to pay for my 14-step recovery program in letterpress printing.

There was Jim walking off the ferry onto Salt Spring Island: short, polite and well spoken, with the look of a bright-eyed jazz musician.

Mona and I had arranged for him to come to our place for two one-week visits to teach me, in an abbreviated way, the trade in which he had immersed himself for five decades.

Fourteen years earlier, in 1982, during our Literary Storefront days, Mona had one of her poetry books published by Jim McIntosh of Colophon Books. Her book, *Releasing the Spirit*, was printed by none other than Jim Rimmer.

A few months before Jim arrived, I had gathered together a number of presses. A Vandercook sp15, a Heidelberg Windmill, a 10 x 15 C + P, a 5 x 8 Pearl treadle press, and a Maxim guillotine along with all the necessary bits and pieces to run a press room, including 160 California job cases of font.

The Vandercook, given to me by a friend in a lump of a hundred rusty pieces, I'd cleaned, oiled and reassembled. I hadn't a clue what this machine would do. "It's a what? A press, you say? Do you put the grapes in one end and wine comes out of the other?" I'd never before heard of the term "letterpress printing."

After a hearty English breakfast that first morning, Jim and I headed to the pressroom and lesson number one began with, what else? Typography. This led to setting type and, with some quiet jazz in the background, he began to teach me the new language of the print shop. Point, pica, leads, quads, em and en spacing, furniture, quoins, make-ready, set-off [whoops], tympan, registration, .918 of an inch, J and U, the last letters. There was a lot to learn.

During the second week of tuition, Mona and I kept our kids home from school for one day while we all learned some book-binding skills; the boards, the sewing of signatures, the quarter leather cord-bound books, the careful gluing and labelling.

Jim also introduced me to the wonderful world of linocuts and the printing of my own illustrations.

His energy and imagination were boundless. So many people were touched by his genius and generosity. Jim Rimmer—a national treasure.

~ Peter Hasse and partner Mona Fertig are the proprietors of Mother Tongue Publishing, formerly (m)Öthêr Tōnguê Press. They live on Salt Spring Island, B.C.

Who's afraid of a little lead?

I did not know Jim well, but knew that he was always there as a generous mentor to all, including myself, who wanted to print. Several years ago during an Alcuin Society tour of Jim's studio, 12 of

us watched as he cast type on his Monotype caster. I asked him about the outline that resembled the crime scene outline of a body but was on the door behind him. He told us that two weeks earlier, he had been about to cast some type. The molten lead had, unbeknownst to Jim, formed a crust not unlike a pie crust with some moisture under it. The skin popped and lead went flying, burning Jim's face in tiny spots. Two weeks later his face was completely healed, but the outline of Jim remained in lead on the door behind him! Needless to say, the 12 of us took several steps backward away from the Monotype caster. As you can imagine, we received a warm smile from Jim.

~ Andrea Taylor is an artist and the proprietor of Cotton Socks Press, in Vancouver, B.C.

A generous teacher

My partner Adrian and I only met Jim Rimmer a few times, but that was all we needed to recognize the true generosity of spirit he embodied.

When we acquired our Vandercook press in 2007 (and stared admiringly at it, wondering how it worked), Jim offered to give us a private letterpress printing lesson, in our home (!). He immediately recognized the press, since many years prior he had a printed on it himself, at his print shop a few buildings west of ours on East Hastings. He spent the entire day with us, teaching, sharing and printing. After we had covered the fundamentals, his message to us was simple—play, enjoy and ... just print.

Jim was one of those rare creatures who genuinely loved his work. The dedication, humility and patience he showed while practising and teaching printing absolutely inspired us. Through his love of this labour, he inspired a love of life in those around him, and, as Kahlil Gibran wrote, "To love life through labour is to be intimate with life's inmost secret."

Thank you, Jim.

~ With Jim's help, Jennifer Van de Pol and Adrian Robertshaw, in 2007, started Strathcona Press now located in Cedar, B.C.