

# WHY DESIGN REQUIRES A GOOD CHAIR: REFLECTIONS ON LEARNING A TRADE

*Andrew Steeves*

I HAVE A PINE ADIRONDACK CHAIR by the woodstove in my house, a chair I built myself by disassembling a similar chair on my father-in-law's deck and copying the pattern. This chair is in many ways my geographical ground zero, the place from which my days begin and end. I have a more conventional office at the Gaspereau Press printing works – with a drafting board, a desk, computers and the work-related half of my modest library – but most of my important work is done in this chair. The room is lined with bookshelves, but it's a more common room than a study. It's the first room off the front door and serves as the house's main thoroughfare; it is only after dark when the traffic quiets down – the children in bed and the dog snoring before the fire – that this room becomes my own.

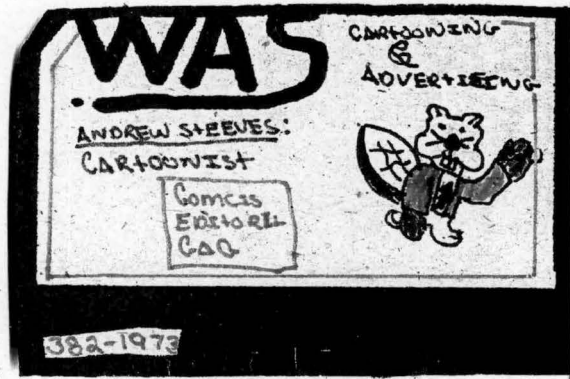
On many evenings I sit down in this chair to handwrite letters, record the day's events, read, edit manuscripts, talk with guests, or to rough out designs on a laptop computer. This is the place where I do my thinking. It is the place from which I attempt to put the world in context and to understand what is happening around me.

And much has happened. Over the past eight years, I've more or less fallen into the dogsbody profession of printer and publisher, cultivating a keen interest in typography and book design. It is a profession for which I have no formal training – or, more truthfully, it is a combination of professions for which, I believe, there is no formal training possible. It is work for which I have developed a deep love.

There were many experiences that quietly prepared me for a life in publishing and book design. They are, on the whole, unexceptional experiences, as most truly formative experiences are.

I grew up in New Brunswick, and, while there were books in my home, we were not what you'd call literary people. I spent more time with the set of *World Book Encyclopedia* that dominated the living room bookshelf (curling up on a rainy day with the letter M) than with novels, and by grade four I was a dedicated reader of *Time* and *Maclean's* and the local newspaper. CBC Radio was also a presence in our home, and I used to sneak a small radio to bed and listen to the news reports on the Falkland wars and serialized readings of Farley Mowat's *And No Birds Sang*, W. O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind* and Orwell's *1984*.

Much of my childhood revolved around the tight triangle of school, church and family. When I wasn't playing road hockey or cruising the



woods behind our house with my brothers, I was drafting and drawing. My father was an engineer, and he

spent my early childhood working for my grandfather's construction company. From an early age I was familiar with blueprints and the notions of scale and perspective, and I spent many hours with pencils, triangles and T squares putting those things that my mind could imagine down on paper. Architecture was an early interest, though I preferred loosely rendered ink drawings and lettering to rulers and 2h pencils; I wanted to be a political cartoonist. I sent the cartoons I drew to the magazines which I read, and although no one at *Maclean's* or *Time* offered me publication, I got my first position in journalism – as the cartoonist for my junior high school newspaper – on the strength of a rejection letter addressed to me from *Newsweek*.

For several summers, with the help of the Xerox machine at my father's office, my brother James and I published a newspaper in the tiny community where we summered – a handlettered affair with a circulation of a dozen or so households, complete with articles, interviews, cartoons and maps. I remember how seriously we took this venture, how we knocked on doors to conduct a survey of cottagers during the federal election: What did they think of John Turner's chances? Or Ed Broadbent's?

I continued to draw cartoons through high school, but avoided art classes altogether. Art was my older sister's territory, so I never considered art as a possible field of post-secondary study. Besides, I had always felt there was a disconnect between my mind and my hand; I could see things in a much more refined way than I could ever draw them, and this frustrated me.

In high school, I spent a lot of evenings and weekends doing volunteer work with younger kids, and when it came time to go to university, I enrolled in the criminology program at the University of Ottawa. Within a few days of my arrival I joined the student newspaper, where I became in time both the graphics editor and, later, the production manager. This was the late 1980s, and *The Fulcrum*, indeed the publishing industry generally, was in a period of technological upheaval. When I started at the paper, we were typesetting galleys of copy with old compugraphic filmsetters. These machines generated long strips of text which were cut

into columns, waxed and pasted onto paper flats and shipped to the printer by taxi at 6:00 a.m. every Wednesday, which usually meant a sleepless Tuesday night. In my first year at the paper, I was assigned to help the production manager and was indoctrinated in the oral tradition that constituted training for the operation of the PMT camera – a giant, cantankerous beast of a machine with an on-line film processor. I loved that machine and the technique of trial and error and superstition which learning to use it required. By the time I completed my degree three years later, all of this equipment had been scrapped, replaced by desktop scanners, computer workstations and laser printers. While I was fascinated by the flexibility the new technology offered, I was uncomfortable with the way in which the old machines were simply cast away.

I did a weekly cartoon strip and a lot of illustration while I was at the university paper, but the page designs I did were unspectacular and frequently inadequate. I had not yet begun to investigate the rituals of typography in earnest. The real contribution I made was as a manager, brokering peace between the photo techs and the arts editor and coaxing now *Hamilton Spectator* editorial cartoonist Graëme MacKay – who was then a shy political science student slipping his drawings under the office door in the middle of the night – into the building and onto the staff. On the other hand, the newspaper experience had a significant impact on me. I had begun to learn to love the ebb and flow of arranging ideas in type on a printed page and to balance the finite resources of text, visuals, space and time. The experience nurtured my interest in technology in its many forms – from the pad and pencil to the printing press and all the stages in between – and got me thinking about the ways in which machines can be tools of culture. Most importantly, working on the newspaper put me in a space where the intellectual acts of thinking and writing converged with the physical acts of designing and manufacturing, giving me my first inkling that this junction was where I wanted to spend my working life.

In the meantime, I received a formal education in Criminology and then, for reasons I've never wholly worked out, in English Literature. I was taking writing quite seriously, and the poetry I was writing was getting published in literary journals. For my graduate thesis, I arranged, edited and annotated a collection of letters written by the poet Alden Nowlan, introducing me to yet another aspect of balancing the resources

of text, space and time. Work was hard to come by, but I was cobbling together bits of freelance writing and editing, covering the town hall beat for a small Ottawa Valley weekly and preparing executive summaries of the morning news for members of Parliament at a media monitoring company. While the rhythms of newspaper production had been comforting, filing copy as a freelance journalist felt isolated and detached from the physical process. This was not the life I wanted. Knocking on doors to ask strangers about their murdered neighbour convinced me that I was not cut out for full-time journalism.



About this time, my wife and I decided that we wanted to live in Nova Scotia, and much to the distress of our families we pulled up stakes and moved from Ottawa to Wolfville. We had lived in Wolfville for a year while I had worked on a graduate degree at Acadia University. We had no real plan, only the knowledge that this place offered the pace of life we desired and the hope that the details would work themselves out.

For the first year, I did manual labour on a farm and worked in the produce department of a local grocery store. I continued to write and took what editing work I could find. These were uncertain times. I heard a CBC Radio program about Dennis Lee and the early years at Anansi Press in Toronto, and I remember thinking that literary publishing might be the place where my varied interests could find a collective focus. Within a year, Gary Dunfield and I met and founded Gaspereau Press. That same year, my wife and I bought a little house in Wolfville, and I stuck this Adirondack chair in the corner by the woodstove.

I've written elsewhere (see *The Devil's Artisan* no. 51) about the first few years of the press and will not repeat that here, other than to say that Gaspereau Press has grown out of a shared sense of self-reliance and curiosity, out of a desire to work at that juncture between the intellectual and the physical worlds, where it is possible to ensure that the way a book is manufactured makes as significant a contribution to the culture





as the literary content the book carries. Somehow, the mix of life experiences recounted above prepared me for the task of learning to edit, design and publish books, an occupation which has brought me great personal satisfaction. They are skills that are the result of careful observation and reading, of conversation and reflection, and of much experimentation and practice. They are skills that are nurtured by the conviction that the task is worthy of the effort, and that the effort affords its own rewards.

The question I'm most frequently asked by those who encounter the work of the press is *Where did you learn to do this?* It's a practical and well-intentioned question, but sometimes it seems too close a relative of *Will this be on the test?* It hopes for an organized program of study, a reading list or a manual to be followed, like a well-marked road, to the result. I want to reply, *You just follow your nose.* I want to say, in as Thoreau-like a fashion as I can muster without laughing, that I studied it *everywhere*; or, to put a finer point on it, *here*, by the woodstove, in my Adirondack chair.

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