

NEWS & NOTES

Richard Hopkins

My favourite news item about books and reading over the past while:

Picture a book lover in a Kamloops, B.C., bookstore getting his favourite author to sign a book — from her home in Toronto. Sound like a science-fiction scenario? Perhaps it's fitting then, that **Margaret Atwood**, author of futuristic fantasies *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*, has invented a prototype remote autographing device that has the potential to revolutionize book signings.

Atwood hit upon the idea for the machine after a strenuous tour for the paperback publication of *Oryx and Crake* that took her all across the United States last April.

"I thought, there has to be a better way of doing this," she says. "I am now an old-age pensioner, I cannot keep doing this. I can't keep eating Pringles from the hotel minibar and keep getting on the plane at four in the morning."

The machine, created in consultation with computer experts under Atwood's newly created company Unotchit Inc., is still in the development phase, but at the moment it will comprise two units. The first will consist of a screen, where the author can see and speak to the book reader in real-time, and a tablet on which the author will write the inscription.

The second unit will be with the book reader, and will also include a screen to communicate with the author in real-time, and will have a flat book holder as well as an electronic arm and pen that will scrawl out the autograph.

The system will allow the inscription to be edited or spell checked before being committed to paper and the quality of the signature should be identical to

one done in person, Atwood says. The book reader will also be able to keep a record of the onscreen interaction with the author for posterity.

The autographing system is not meant to replace traditional readings or festivals. "It's an in-bookstore enhancement device," Atwood stresses. She expects the device to be ready for use in the next six to eighteen months. The production cost of the machine hasn't yet been determined.

"I applaud anybody that tries to think out of the box about these things and comes up with a truly original idea, but it's a wait-and-see thing," says Doug Pepper, president and publisher of McClelland & Stewart.

"It has to come out, they have to perfect it, get the kinks out of it, and people have to learn how to use them and accept them. It certainly would be easier on the authors, and in terms of saving money, I would hope so — we're always into saving money. One of the costly things in any marketing budget is touring." (from *Bravo!News*)

The book collector in me immediately poses the following question. Will a differential value arise in the book collecting and book selling markets for books signed in person versus books signed by remote delivery? I can see it now: book sellers catalogues with the designation "signed in person" or "signed by remote electronic device"!

And this item, written by Katie Robinson in a local New Westminster, B.C. newspaper, the *NewsLeader*, about our old friend, and master book craftsman, **Jim Rimmer**:

Jim Rimmer is a collector. He doesn't collect stamps: he doesn't collect old cars; he does however, collect old-style printing presses. Rimmer is also a legend among letterpress printers and publishers across North America.

When Johannes Gutenberg invented movable type in the 1400s, it was known as the black arts because the church did not want the population literate. But it changed the world and Rimmer wants to make sure that part of history stays strong.

He's mastered every craft related to making books. And he's designed and cut seven metal typefaces through a process that involves using files and engravers to cut each letterform for use by letterpress printers.

The hobby started as a career in 1950, at the request of his father. But he didn't want to be a tradesman. He wanted to be an artist. "I used to draw cowboys and Indians in the margins of my math books," Rimmer said from his backyard Pie Tree Press workshop in New Westminster.

His father didn't believe an artist could earn a proper living, so he encouraged his son to become a tradesman. Rimmer hated it at first, but soon changed his views. "Printing has an ambience of its own," he learned. "It's artistic in a different way."

Twelve years into the apprenticeship, though, he was forced into a new career with the changing of technology. He drifted towards graphic design, which provided employment in the layout departments of various newspapers, including the now-defunct *New Westminster Columbian*. His retirement five years ago, though, allowed him to drift

back to his roots of printing.

He spends his days creating limited edition books, which have included Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* and a collection of poems by Pauline Johnson. Now he's working on Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer*.

By the time he finishes the 280-page *Tom Sawyer*, he figures he'll have more than 3,000 pounds of metal type. The fonts used will all be custom-designed from scratch. No computers are involved in the creations. "I do it all the old fashioned way using a pen and paper," he said. "It's such a thrill when a new letter comes off the caster that nobody's ever seen before." Rimmer contemplated evolving with computer technology, but in the end he just couldn't do it. He couldn't see any magic coming out of computers.

His magic is developed in the sun-filled workshop casting the metal and labouring over the presses, all the while feeling the warmth rising off the casting and engraving machines. "The time disappears in here," he said. "I've got so many projects on the go, I'm afraid I won't live to 110 to do them all."

He's already worked on the *Sawyer* book for close to three years and figures it will take him another year to complete. Then, he'd like to custom-create a metal type for the Cree language, as there isn't one that exists anymore. But he wants his version to be more modern, with added character and style, than what used to be available.

He has ten of his own projects he'd like to start on, as well as a half a dozen other special-edition books, in addition to the Cree syllabus. "I've got to start making some choices," he said. "I'm 70: I think I've got to trim the list a little bit."

News and notes from the Alcuin Chair, **Howard Greaves:**

Howard loaned me two interesting publications that came to him as a result of his membership in the **Penguin Collector's Society**: *Penguins Progress, 1935-1960* (published on the occasion of the Silver Jubilee of Penguin Books) and *The Penguin Collector* for December 2004. "The Penguin Collector's Society was founded in 1974 by a small band of enthusiasts meeting in Richmond, Surrey [England]. When the first newsletter was published, membership stood at 38; today there are over 400 members worldwide." If you are interested, please visit the Society's website www.penguincollectorsociety.org.uk or write to the membership secretary Tim Graham at 18 The Tynning, Bath, England, BA2 6AL.

Howard also sends along these squibs from the March 2005 newsletter of the **Friends of the Vancouver Public Library**, *Bookmark Newsletter*:

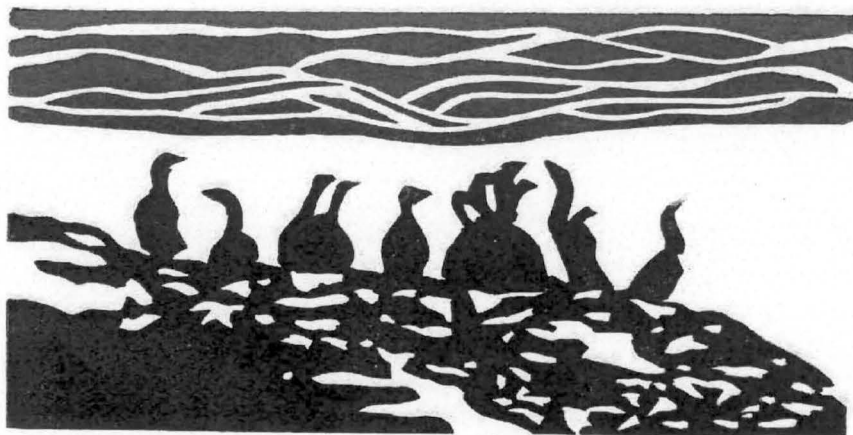
"Never lend books, for no one ever returns them. The only books I have in

my library are books that other folk have lent me." (**Anatole France**)

"I object to publishers: the one service they have done me is to teach me to do without them. They combine commercial rascality with artistic touchiness and pettishness, without being good businessmen or fine judges of literature. All that is necessary in the production of a book is an author and a bookseller, without the intermediate parasite."
(a rather cranky **George Bernard Shaw**)

Nancy Pearl, a Seattle librarian and author of *Book Lust* (which gives reading recommendations), has a Rule of 50: "If you're 50 years old or younger, give every book about 50 pages before you decide to commit yourself to reading it, or give it up. If you're over 50, which is when time gets shorter, subtract your age from 100 — the result is the number of pages you should read before deciding whether or not to quit. If you're 100 or over, you get to judge the book by its cover, despite the dangers in doing so."

For those of you who supplement your print collection and reading with



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online access to information, the following three **websites** may prove to be of some interest:

(1) **"The Age of Bede and Alcuin: A Bibliography"** on the website of the University of Leicester where Section E focuses on Alcuin of York (www.le.ac.uk/hi/js73/Special%20subject.spsj8.html)

(2) **The Rare Book Society** was founded in 2004 to unite all those who care about old and rare books (and other printed or manuscript material) – their history, their care and preservation, their collection and especially their study. (<http://www.rarebooksociety.org>)

(3) **The Centre for the History of the Book** was established in 1995 as an international centre for advanced research into all aspects of the material culture of the text – its production,

circulation, and reception from manuscript to the electronic text. Book history is an area of interdisciplinary enquiry, drawing on the methods of bibliography, social history, literary criticism, and cultural theory. Its specific objects of study include literacy and reading practices, relations among publishers, authors, readers, and media production technology: www.arts.ed.ac.uk.

We warmly welcome all these new members to the Alcuin Society:

1. Carmen Jensen, Montreal QC
2. Taylore Bernshaw, Richmond, BC
3. Ron Woodward, Vancouver BC
4. Jane Steed, Calgary AB
5. Deborah Wills, Waterloo, ON
6. Jane Henderson, Victoria BC
7. Rhonda Gaidica, Vancouver BC
8. Briony Morrow-Cribbs, Clinton, WA
9. Stephen Warren, Victoria BC



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