

REVIEW

Book Binding Ephemera

By Claudia Cohen (limited edition of
30 copies issued by the artist, US\$500).

Reviewed by Robert J. Desmarais

Claudia Cohen is an American bookbinder—trained by Gray Parrot—whose work over the past three decades has encompassed several of the later, super-deluxe Gehenna titles; a number of the Cheloniidae books in the '80s; and perhaps most exhaustingly, the Moser Bible. So one can imagine the kinds of ephemera that might be culled from her scrap bin.

Before I sat down to write a review of *Book Binding Ephemera*, I devised two simple questions to focus my thoughts and to provide structure to my written observations: How does this artifact work as a book? And does it engage the viewer, perhaps encouraging us to contemplate broader spheres of art and design? By applying these questions to the task at hand, I found that I grew to like *Ephemera* for its visual commentary on beautiful books, and I gained a greater appreciation for the myriad design decisions that make books “work” as aesthetically pleasing objects.

At first glance, the sixteen-panel accordion-fold book, with specimens of bookbinding materials pasted on the verso and recto of each page (and both sides), has the look and feel of a “sample book” that one would see in a designer’s showroom. Upon seeing the book unfolded, we are treated to a visual feast of various book clothes, marbled papers, thread, and leather and paper title labels. A few words of caution, though, to admirers of “art books”: *Ephemera* is not an art book per se. In fact, it has little in the way of innovative artistic display, with materials mostly pasted down in neatly aligned rows or circular arrangements. The book works wonderfully, however, as a scrapbook of beautiful materials, and when it is unfolded, I was reminded how well it lends itself to exhibition. Indeed, viewers have seen *Ephemera* on exhibit in the University of Alberta’s special collections library, and many have expressed particular interest in Cohen’s selection of papers, but few have recognized the paper patterns from the illustrious Curwen Press. To remedy this situation, Cohen might have supplied a descriptive listing of the samples as a way of introducing us to some truly exceptional patterns.

Despite the lack of explanatory material, *Ephemera* does a rather good job of inviting us to think about the ways that the inner and outermost

components of books convey meaning and perspective. For example, Cohen uses an exquisite selection of marbled papers, subtly reminding us how important endpapers are in their ability to captivate readers when they make that first entry into the book. And a judicious selection of the author’s own executed bindings is a true delight to behold, leaving many with the impression that books are truly magical. Indeed, when bibliophiles see gilt-stamped titles on leather bindings, we might feel compelled to hold the book, suddenly absorbed more in the book’s materiality than its content. And this is exactly the point Cohen makes so convincingly, that materiality matters. With this awareness, we start to notice patterns, grains, dyes and typefaces, and an appreciation of such matters is, of course, vital to an understanding and appreciation of a well-crafted book.

In summing up my final thoughts about *Ephemera*, I could not resist thinking that I had just indulged my eyes in a pleasurable aesthetic experience, made more real by attending to various physical properties, such as the needle and thread with the tips of my fingers. In effect, I simply reminded myself that books often acquaint us with multi-sensory aesthetic experience. This is perhaps the most commendable quality about *Ephemera*: the way it bids us to consider the physical book, to let its design speak to us, and encourages us to reflect on how books as physical objects have many meaning-producing qualities.

Robert J. Desmarais is a rare books librarian at the University of Alberta’s Bruce Peel Special Collections Library.

REVIEW

The Book of Lost Books

By Stuart Kelly (Viking, 2005, \$34).

Reviewed by Phyllis Reeve

It’s an irresistible notion, one of those byways into which bibliophiles are prone to stray: a virtual bibliography of non-existent books, books which almost existed or might have existed or did exist but subsequently vanished.

Books may be destroyed, like the contents of the Alexandrian library or the manuscript of Carlyle’s *French Revolution*; stolen, like Hadley Hemingway’s suitcase containing the complete unpublished works of her not-yet-famous husband; unfinished, like the forever unsolved *Mystery of Edwin Drood*; planned but unstarted, like Melville’s—or was it Hawthorne’s?—*Agatha*; or simply gone beyond recall, like *The Alexias* of Camillo Querno. We can all make our list of books that might have been.

So why does a reader, no matter how sympathetic or how kindred a spirit, find one's attention flagging and enthusiasm dampened by tedium? Stuart Kelly is an addict, and he administers an overdose.

The first manifestation of his affliction hit early. While still a beginning reader, he felt compelled to possess complete sets of books: first the Mr. Men series of children's books, followed by Dr. Who novelizations, and, as he approached his teens, Agatha Christie in uniform-edition paperbacks. Progressing to the classics, he made his horrifying discovery that he could never own some complete sets, that 73 of Aeschylus's 80 plays were irretrievably lost.

Thus at the age of fifteen he started compiling a List of Lost Books. "This," he writes, "would be of the impossible and the unknowable, of books that I would never be able to find, let alone read." Eighteen years later his list grew into this book. He is still only 34. The list could continue into sequels ad infinitum. One must be grateful, for his sake, that he was able to bring the book to fruition, rather than allowing it to stray into a more and more complicated and less and less publishable *Key to All Lost Books*, like Mr. Casaubon's imaginary unwritten masterpiece.

As it is, he lists more than eighty authors and their lost, unfinished, unstarted or illegible books, working chronologically from Homer's *Expedition of Amphiarus* to Georges Perec's *Beds I Have Slept In*. But his obsession does not extend to uniformity of format, so the entries vary in length and are subject to attacks of digression. And there are too many of them.

Besides the more esoteric projected works, the likes of Widsith the Wide-Travelled, Ihara Saikaku and Franz Kafka, he includes most of the expected losses, like Shakespeare's rumoured unknown plays or the conclusion of Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*, but not, although he mentions Aristotle frequently in relation to other authors, the Comedy section of the *Poetics*. Perhaps he feels this has been adequately covered by Umberto Eco. He is oddly irritated by Coleridge's opium habit, which he blames more than the Person from Porlock for the allegedly incomplete poems. Yet he relishes the "drug-addled hallucinations" of William S. Burroughs. In short, Kelly exercises his right to pick favourites.

As will his readers. My own is the exciting tale of the loss after Dante's death of his as yet unpublished *Paradiso*. The frantic efforts of his sons to reconstruct it according to his compositional, numeric and cosmological rules will strike a chord, greatly magnified, in anyone who has inadvertently struck the "delete" button on their keyboard. Its miracu-

lous recovery is achieved under the guidance of Dante's ghost, like a celestial nerd. This is one of the few entries with a happy ending.

I truly lament the non-existence of *Literature and Export Trade*, by T.S. Eliot.

The Book of Lost Books is self-indulgent and opinionated, often funny and provocative. It comes handsomely bound and jacketed, and the witty iconic drawings by Andrzej Krauze, whose cartoons appear frequently in the *Guardian Weekly*, are worth the price on their own.

Phyllis Reeve lives on the eponymous island of Malcolm Lowry's unfinished novel October Ferry to Gabriola.

REVIEW

Penguin by Design: A Cover Story, 1935–2005

By Phil Baines (Penguin Books/Allen Lane, 2005, \$35). Reviewed by Peter Mitham

Paperbacks are workhorses, whether for the publishers who print them by the millions for mass-market distribution or for the reader needing a reliable but cheap copy of a text for study or leisure reading. Whatever the audience, they've made texts available that otherwise might have been more expensive than the reader considered reasonable.

My own collection of books, the best of which I consider aesthetically pleasing but functional rather than collectable, has many paperbacks. A worn copy of William Cobbett's *Rural Rides*, acquired in exchange for some books I no longer wanted, accompanied me through the Baltic states. Wickham Steed's wonderfully opinionated yet hugely instructive *The Press*, for all its unassuming presentation, was a benchmark in my education as a writer for newspapers. And, of course, there are the stacks of books from my student days, with their uniform black spines topped with a band of purple, yellow or red, indicating their place as classics of Greek and Roman, European or English literature. And all of them Penguins.

Graphic designer Phil Baines' history of Penguin Books goes a long way towards explaining how these books worked their way into my collection, claiming my affections as much for their appearance as their content. Baines chronicles the development of Penguin through the evolution of the covers of its books, a tack that highlights the market pressures influencing the business of twentieth-century publishing as well as the designers whose work gave Penguins a popular resonance. Their popular appeal helped the Penguin list set the