

We follow Bates' career as a commercial illustrator and his collaborations with some of the brightest stars amongst private presses in Canada and the United States. He also gives an account of illustrating books for authors such as W.O. Mitchell and Wendell Berry.

As for Wesley Bates' illustrations, there is a feeling about them that he has one foot planted firmly in the grandest tradition of 19th century wood engraving courtesy of Thomas Bewick, and the other in the bohemian world of 1960s and '70s folk movements and counter-cultures. The marriage of styles works. Music, dance, a love of storytelling and the bacchanale seem to be the underlying inspiration for many of his illustrations. Bates has a designer's sense of space and proportion, but an artist's sensibility. The careful arrangement of elements, a thoroughly practiced hand and an artist's flourish do combine to create works of art in black and white.

Gaspereau has composed both editions in standard proportions, hard bound in cloth with an embossed illustration on the front cover. The similarity hints at (I hope) an extended series of similar books on Canadian private presses. The margins are generous and the type set with care in attractive and appropriate fonts: Dante for Bates and Rimmer's own Amethyst Pro for *The Pie Tree Press*. I like very much the simple and strong title page for *In Black & White*, classic all-caps in black and grey, which dances well with the engraved frontispiece.

If I have any complaint with the design, it might be the utter lack of letterpress anywhere, save the embossed hardcover. For books that so enthusiastically describe the joys of letterpress, a letterpress printed dust cover, or perhaps a tipped-in hand printed illustration would have given the commercial edition, and its readers, a taste of the private press. One illustration – the cover of *A Christmas Carol* in Rimmer's book – is slightly off-register, in my copy at least. For a private-press book that might be damning. However, given the cost of the fine press editions and their limited numbers versus the opportunity to read well-written words and see illustrations and designs by two of Canada's best letterpress artists for \$60 each – and you guess my point. In issuing these trade editions, Gaspereau Press is giving a greater number of private press

enthusiasts the opportunity to read about two remarkable careers.

REVIEW BY LARRY THOMPSON

~ *Benét's Reader's Encyclopedia,  
Fifth Edition*

Edited by Bruce F. Murphy  
(Collins, 2008, \$72)

When silverfish attacked the copy of *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Literature* (1939) that I inherited from my grandfather (who I never met, save through his books), I was devastated. The squat blue book was a quick reference when I was an undergrad at university, and always stood out as a paragon of what a literary reference book should be. Yes, it was old-fashioned and conservative, but it spoke from an earlier generation of what was possible in both its design and content.

When the publicist for the latest edition of *Benét's Reader's Encyclopedia* approached *Amphora* regarding the latest edition of a reference work famous, at least in U.S. circles, it seemed an intriguing concept. With the Internet offering so much information in an instant to curious readers, what could a new printed reference work do better? Priced at \$72 for a hefty 1,210 pages, one would hope the answer would be a lot.

And truth be told, it does offer a great deal, particularly for the casual reader who doesn't want to leave the armchair or sofa to Google some obscure reference in the middle of a book. The catholic embrace of *Benét's Reader's Encyclopedia* allows readers to shift from one book to another as they read.

The most recent edition offers entries on writers from the Asia beyond China, Japan and India, including the Philippines and Malaysia (but overlooks Singlish, one of the new varieties of English that gets a nod in volume's introduction). Hispanic writers from Latin America are recognized, too, as is Alcuin of York (who merits seven and a half lines).

Canada figures in entries on Margaret Atwood, Northrop Frye and L.M. Montgomery, among others.

The design of the book is generally pleasing, with bold-face sans-serif type for the entry

headings and a standard serif for the text. While the text type could be a bit heavier given that each page offers up two broad columns of text, it seems economical enough to pack in the wealth of dates, context and other information pertaining to each subject. One practical quibble that has less to do with the layout than the binding is that the review copy (perfect-bound) was already showing signs of weakness at the spine.

The real test of such a work is in the using, of course. While editor Bruce Murphy claims that the book's "three-dimensionality ... has kept it in print for more than half a century after Benét's death," the boast seems a bit like whistling in the dark. A book must endure physically, but also in the imaginations of those who use it. This, really, is what still earns my grandfather's Oxford dictionary (among other titles) a place on my bookshelf. The best one could hope for is that this new edition of Benét's book opens minds to all the possibilities literature has to offer – regardless of how that literature is distributed in the future.

REVIEWED BY PETER MITHAM

~ *Books about Books: A History and Bibliography of Oak Knoll Press, 1978–2008*  
Robert D. Fleck  
(Oak Knoll, 2008, US\$45)

Part publisher's memoir, part press history, Bob Fleck's history and bibliography of Delaware's Oak Knoll Press should interest anyone who wants a glimpse of how this publisher works. To disclose pertinent facts up front, my interest stems from stories that visitors to the press's bookshop passed along prior to Oak Knoll's publication of my own work, *Robert W. Service: A Bibliography* (2000). My understanding – which deepened as dealings regarding the bibliography rolled along – was that the press was a typical small business with its share of colourful personalities and informal practices.

*Books about Books* confirms some of the impressions, with a raconteur's touch.

Setting the tone for the book is Fleck's candid confession on the first page that he hadn't worked with an established bookseller prior to getting started in the book business, and consequently, "made all the usual mistakes of a novice in the

field." The final page of the history describes the press's transition to a world in which digital media are often included with books and online ad campaigns are *de rigueur* – "unknown technologies when we started." Then there are the stories of meetings with authors attended by the usual glitches travellers encounter, not to mention a few travelling mercies. Fleck tells his tale with a good humour that both entertains the reader and shows gratefulness for his own good fortune.

The bibliography in the second half of the volume is a helpful guide to Oak Knoll's titles. While one might quarrel with the practice of providing separate entries for each edition of a title (printings of each edition are listed in the edition's entry), a brief introduction outlines the idiosyncracies. A bigger issue, given what the press should know about its own operations, is the diversity of information provided in the notes for each title. Many titles include print runs, others add notes on typesetting, paper and the manner of printing. Some include a brief description of the title; others include what could be the blurb from the promotional material.

Nevertheless, the bibliography's 320 entries provide an overview of the output of a well-respected press in a volume that will be helpful in sizing up the contribution of Oak Knoll in meeting demand for books about books.

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