

An Old Printer Passes the Torch

-- And a Young Designer Takes It

By Ria Raut

Hugh Barclay prints books the old way – the really old way. His private antique printing press, a Chandler & Price model that dates from 1890, is a letterpress printer: every letter, punctuation mark – and even the spaces between words and paragraphs – are set by hand. It takes 12 hours to set a typical page of type. But here’s the thing: when you run your hand over a page of one of Hugh’s books, you can *feel* the type, and in good light you can *see* that the type is raised.

I know all this because I have set one of my poems on this old press, and a part of me is saddened to know that at the age of 83, Hugh Barclay is saying goodbye to the beloved machine that has defined him for the past 46 years.

I first met him in his Kingston paper-filled garage, where the old press sat in one corner – its big wheel silent for the moment, the clickety-clack yet to begin. He is short (shorter even than me) and his pale blue eyes seemed at first to suggest sternness, but I would soon discover his energy and ready-to-laugh attitude.

“It is always good to work with people who write,” he told me. “Printing their work is just so much fun.”

Hugh is retired now, but for many decades he made his living as an orthotist who designed and built artificial limbs and braces for those who needed them. He was also an innovator and inventor who made a wheelchair that tilted backwards, thus improving the lives of people suffering from posture deformities and pressure sores. But in 1972, Hugh started helping students at a primary school in Kingston operate their printing press – Bubblegum Press, he called it. And he got hooked on the process. He bought an old press that year and later relied on a natural gift with machines when the press malfunctioned and he had to take it apart and reassemble it.

Thus was born Thee Hellbox Press (a “hellbox,” I would learn, was a wooden box where cast metal type was tossed after printing, and “a printer’s devil” was the apprentice tasked with putting each one back in its proper slot.) “Minding your ‘p’s and ‘q’s” is an expression that recalls the confusion that could reign over such lookalike letters.

Over the years, Thee Hellbox Press has published some 50 books, all of them with ISBN numbers and all registered with Library and Archives Canada. Some of the writers are seasoned professionals, some are first-time authors. I was one of the latter. I and another young writer, Caitlin McAllister, came to Hugh Barclay through the auspices of the Kingston

WritersFest mentorship program, which pairs aspiring writers one-on-one with veteran writers (in our case, Lawrence Scanlan and Susan Olding) over a six-month period. Our final project was to hand-print our poems in a chapbook we called *Fragments* – the press’s final work. As usual, the print run was small: 40 copies.

The mentorship program carries the name of Marilyn Simonds, the author and former longtime artistic director of the festival who took a special interest in encouraging young writers. In her book, *Gutenberg’s Fingerprint* – about books as they were, are and might be in days to come -- Marilyn spends a lot of time talking about Hugh Barclay and how her own son, an award-winning artist and designer named Erik Mohr, became hooked on this laborious, old-time printing process even while he was helping his mother produce a state of the art digital edition of her book. So hooked, in fact, that he bought the press from Hugh.

And there’s the story. Only a handful of these cast-iron beasts still exist in Canada, and recently Erik did swing by Hugh’s house and (somehow) hoisted that heavy press and all of Hugh’s boxes of lead type and hand-carved wood blocks into a truck. All went to Erik’s farm studio near Peterborough. “I got him addicted to printer’s ink,” says Hugh, laughing at his own words.

In a way, printer’s ink gave Marilyn Simonds the title of her book. One day, Hugh and Marilyn were working in his garage and she came across a page with a fingerprint on it. “What if it was Gutenberg’s?” Hugh asked with an impish grin.

He has been a friend to poets, charitable organizations looking to raise funds, and the Kingston WritersFest for a long time. But Thee Hellbox Press will soon cease to exist.

Hugh Barclay's books, though, will live on. The paper he has always used is thick and acid-free, guaranteed to last for centuries. Asked about the end of his printing days, Hugh Barclay said, "I will miss the chance of being out there and doing something."

Though he does not agree, I think there is a connection between his life in orthotics and his life in printing: two hands on processes, the one about helping those who are moving-challenged, the other about giving voice to the voiceless.