



## The Quality of Response: Kim Merker and the Literary Fine Press

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Editor's Note: This article was first presented as a talk at the September 19, 1995, opening of an exhibition entitled *Fine Printing in Iowa: The Work of K.K. Merker, 1957-1995* at The University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City.

It is always a pleasure to return to Iowa City and the University, to visit familiar places, old haunts that remain, old friends, and a community of excellent bookstores. A ten year residency in Omaha has provided good fortune and comfort, but I still miss Iowa City and its inimitable buzz of writing and book arts activity. I am especially honored by this invitation to launch the celebration of Kim Merker's thirty-five year career as a fine printer with this fine exhibition recording his years of printing in Iowa, his contributions to our collective literary tradition. It offers the felicitous opportunity to review his life's work and acknowledge my debt to Kim as both printing mentor and professional colleague. Thus, my thanks to the University Libraries, and the Library Friends for enabling me to publicly honor my friend, my teacher Kim Merker.

My introduction to this exhibition will not provide a scholarly, thorough, or definitive assessment of Kim's remarkable oeuvre, for I am not a scholar, serious critic, or astute collector of contemporary fine presses. The logical and appropriate party for such an introduction is Sid Berger, Special Collection Librarian at the Rivera Library at the University of California-Riverside, who assembled an excellent traveling exhibition of Stonewall and Windhover Press books in 1993, and is one of the very few scholar/collectors to possess a complete collection of Kim Merker's work. Perhaps it will be possible to invite Mr. Berger to provide a post-script to this event next spring on the release of his *Bibliography of*

*the Printed Works of Kim Merker* from W. Thomas Taylor Publishers in Austin. This bibliography promises to be an excellent contribution to the world of letters surrounding American private press printing. Sid has labored on it for over ten years and each title bears not only a thorough, descriptive listing but commentary from Kim, gleaned in extended interviews over the period of their long professional friendship.

What I am able to share, however, are my evaluations as a literary letterpress printer with a deep admiration of Kim's distinct typographic style, his devotion to and advancement of the printing arts, and his graceful interpretations of modern literature. The best way to relate this appreciation is to begin at its inception, when I met Kim nearly twenty-five years ago in Champaign-Urbana, an encounter that changed my life in significant ways, and no doubt rescued me from impending prairie madness. I had arrived in the rambling, hyphenated University town with my English grad student partner (and eventual husband Skip) as a recent migrant from an advertising design job in Chicago. I had moved with that youthful devotion to following one's heart which followed a man. As an unemployed graduate, knowing not another soul there, I filled my days by reading under continual gray skies offering perpetual cold drizzle. If the surrounding landscape had not been so rural and so incredibly flat, I would have sworn we had moved to the Northwest, since the sun did not come out once in our first twenty days there. A month into the lonely relocation, Skip returned from campus announcing he had met Kim Merker after a Jonathan Williams' poetry reading. In conversation he had learned Kim was a printer of poets, on sabbatical from The University of Iowa, filling a residency at the University of Illinois Center for Advanced Study. When Kim discovered that I had printed two small collections of poetry as a student of Walter Hamady at the University of Wisconsin, he urged Skip to send me into his studio/print shop. In later reminiscence of this, Kim insists that I had also rescued him, for apart from artist Doyle Moore, few in the university community shared an interest in letterpress printing with its arcane rituals of process, its even then outmoded equipment. My eagerness to resume printing books lead to an apprentice arrangement with Kim that spring and summer, which he claimed kept him in the shop, distracted from the lure of poker games.

Those months together in leisurely but fruitful production were, in retrospect, near idyllic. Soon, we were joined by Christine Frey, a dynamic woman devoted to living up to her Norse goddess namesake, but equally intent on learning fine printing as an adjunct to her English Ph.D. pursuit. Our convivial trio worked most afternoons at typesetting and on the production of Henry David Thoreau's *Huckleberries*, which Kim later completed in Iowa City. Together we printed *Poikilos* by Tom Meyer, which bears a joint Stonewall Press imprint with Doyle Moore's Finial Press even though I do not ever remember Doyle working on it. The hours of impassioned discussion about poetry, printing, and politics while serving as Kim's "paper monkey" molded my education in the fine press tradition.\* Walter Hamady had rekindled my love of poetry and provided that initial spark toward pursuing the inky black art with an introduction to typographic principles and the visceral pleasure derived from the letterpress page. The example of Hamady's own exquisite books of assertively arranged type on palpable handmade papers had resolved for me my vacillations from one medium to another in art school. I hoped to make books that might one day elicit such responses in the beholder. It was Kim, however, who educated me in the tradition we each were part of, passing on as all good masters must the central concerns of the discipline, reinforcing the essential commitment to workmanship. By this I refer to the notion of workmanship over the well-worn, imprecise term "craftsmanship," evoking the sense British designer David Pye articulates, wherein the application of technique in making yields a quality of result that is not predetermined, but rather dependent on the judgment, dexterity, and care that the maker exerts over his or her work.

This legacy came to Kim through Harry Duncan, who many of you know as not only the spirit guiding the Iowa school of fine printing but also as the dean of American fine press printing. I was familiar with Duncan's reputation but not his work, and it was there in Kim's relocated print shop that I absorbed through explication, example, and more probably osmosis, the lessons of a 500 year tradition refined and transformed for the modern sen-

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\* An apprentice, or assistant to the printer who places the sheet of damp paper on the press and removes it when printed.

sibility by Harry Duncan. Kim came to printing much as I had, by filling a university requirement, his the fine arts studio component of the Iowa Writer's Workshop curriculum in 1956. In his apprenticeship that followed, and through the years Harry printed in West Branch, Kim maintained a formative relationship with the master literary printer. Kim continues to be Harry's most prominent, accomplished disciple and the most eloquent advocate of the Duncan approach.

The distinct, potent, and recurring memory I have of those pivotal sessions as an apprentice is of Kim reading to me, or both of us, all of us, from the poems he loved and achieved resonance with. His own deeply resonant, smoke-tinged voice rolling out the refrain from Weldon Kees' exercise in recurrence titled "Round" has never left my musical repository:

... Cezanne  
*would break out into the quiet streets of Aix and shout, "Le monde, c'est terrible!" Royal Cortissoz is dead. And something inside my head flaps like a worn out blind.*

When Kim read to us, I think he experienced the pleasures of writing as well. This in the sense put forth by Vladimir Nabokov who when asked about the pleasures of writing suggested that "the pleasures of writing correspond exactly to the pleasures of reading; the bliss, the felicity of phrase is shared by writer and reader: by the satisfied writer and the grateful reader, or—which is the same thing—by the artist grateful to the unknown force in his mind that has suggested a combination of images and by the artistic reader whom this combination satisfies."

Our shared experience there, and in the work put forth through our discipline, was that of artistic reading, wherein both act and art evolve. Throughout years of printing practice, typesetting has proved, for me, and I think for Kim as well, to be the most aesthetic way to read. Building the text, letter by letter, word by word, line by line, places one closer to the mind of the writer and implies an act more engaged than the rapid glide efficacy dictates in standard reading. The printer devoted to his literary text inhabits the work (in most cases the poem), and, to extend the metaphor, gives that work a home, an environment where both the physical words and spirit they embody dwell. In so doing, the typographer/printer not only records the text, that message to no one and everyone, but records his response to it.

Once seduced by the notion of response, I recalled printing historian Sandra Kirschenbaum's excellent essay for the 1992 exhibition *Letterpress Works: Printed Responses to the Written Word* at Cooper Union School of Art. Sandra asks, "What gives life to literature?," and answers her query with "response." The response she addresses is not film interpretation, theatrical staging, dramatic performance, or critical analysis, but the fine book, the "printer's book," what brings all of us together here today. She suggests these efforts reflect the Buddhist way, where the task is served and never the master; printer's books carry with them the inherent dignity of their task, which is service to literature.

Sandra goes on to point out the contradictions arising when we swing to the publishing industry notion, whether alternative or corporate, of service to literature; namely to disseminate as many copies of an author's work as possible. By this measure, hand production may actually be a disservice because editions are necessarily limited. But she emphatically asserts that *one may serve as great a good by affecting not the quantity but the quality of response to a work of literature*. Such quality of response is abundantly evident in this collection of Kim Merker's fine printing career in Iowa.

At present, one must be cautious in applying the word quality to anything of true merit or value; the term is so often misused, overused, itself degraded in the ceaseless hawking of everything from vinyl wigs, to faux chocolate, to digitized howls. However, in observing and examining these books spread before us, the meaning of quality emanates from each display case. These book objects, to use a prevalent description in book arts circles, transcend the simply utilitarian but consistently evoke the archetypal significance of the book as embodiment of thought, of creative idea. Kim's books are what Kirschenbaum calls "the perfectly crafted reading instrument through which the author's thought is conveyed to the mind of the reader." They verify Edward Lucie Smith's appraisal of "the complexity of the craft aesthetic, which demands at its highest a union of the beautiful and useful, of what is practical and psychologically satisfying." This is, of course, a rephrasing of the Duncan philosophy, espoused in *The Doors of Perception*, his collection of essays on book typography. In discussing the founding of the Cummington Press in 1939, Duncan states "the appropriate book, we thought, should become the text, and therefore exist as it communicates." That ideal is not only the

modus operandi of Cummington and Windhover, but one of the few dictums applicable to both sides of the contemporary artist's books/literary fine press dichotomy.

Kim, even with his more recent books that bridge the categories of *livre d'artiste* and literary fine press, remains the devout adherent of the book as vehicle for text. His voicing of this through type selection and typographic dexterity is evident throughout his design career, where the proportion of text to margins conforms to the canon of the medieval scriptoria. Classical clarity amplifies literary intent. Classic clarity is always evident, but the urge to make these books reflect personal typographic and design style is also manifested. I am particularly fond of Kim's use of the square and horizontal book formats. It is as if he has pulled the formal restraint of the classical vertical codex down into a relaxed setting for modern experience. This setting enhances the very understated typographic acrobatics Kim practices.

Sid Berger has pointed out in his reviews of Merker typography, the careful balance of color values on the black and white page, as well as the thoughtful resolutions of textual features that might mar his overall page scheme. You see evidence of this in *Voluspa*, W.H. Auden and Paul Taylor's translation of the Old Icelandic, where footnotes are printed on a fold-out and tipped in rather than distorting the unified page design by being printed with the text. Kim effectively uses fold-outs in other books as well, where dual language versions of poems appear, as in *L'Homme Qui Se Ferme, A Poem* by Guillevec.

Typographic eloquence abounds in this extensive survey of Windhover books, but with the title page of *The Names Of The Lost*, by Philip Levine, Kim displays particular acuity as he evokes a subtle, yet paradoxically forceful interpretation of the poet's central metaphor. Superimposing the title over names extracted from the poems, the names themselves over-printed to a nearly illegible blur, is a stroke of typographic genius. This prelude to the remembrance of war dead will elicit the reader's own references, be they of the Holocaust, the disappeared of fascist Brazil, or the ongoing horrors of Rwanda and Bosnia. I often direct my students to this inspired design solution as an example of typographic structure reinforcing textual meaning or poetic metaphor.

Illustration is used sparingly, but ingeniously, in Merker books. From the earliest Stonewall volumes to the current monumental



C O M P A N Y

By Samuel Beckett

With 13 Etchings

By Dellas Henke

issues, Kim only uses images when they are right. The illustrations of Roxanne Sexauer, John Roy, Ellie Simmons, and Peter Reddick animate the text and compliment both its meaning and the graphic specificity of the letterpress process. In the last decade, Kim has issued large scale works, closer to the *livre d'artiste* genre, that reveal true illustrative power. The Dellas Henke intaglios interpreting Samuel Beckett's *Company* possess both quirkiness and grace, considerable comforts in the disenfranchised modernism Beckett depicts. When Henke enters the collaboration for H. D.'s *Within the Walls* it is as if he is submerged within the text, tracing irregular image frames that elicit Merker's best shaped typography. In their graphic dance, a virile homage to the great wood engraver and book designer Eric Gill, the printer and

that only have the slightest chance of survival? I asked myself that, last night, with that acute sense of silence.

Then, in that soft *sound* of silence, I asked myself again, as I have a thousand times, why I should worry and what does it



matter? If I am blitzed, I won't care what people make of my old pages and anyway they will be blitzed with me. But there was another answer in that silence, as of snow falling on snow.

I have had through the years, dreams of a book, a book that I have written. But this writing would merge, like pictures in a picture-book, into dreams. I have written down some of those dreams, as they occurred during the years, but I can't now (racing with time) look out the old notebooks and re-type the dreams. But the substance of the dream was the book, over and over. But this book had to be alive, that is what it was. The papers that I turn over, in the light of that dream-book are dead. Pages I

A Page from *Within the Walls* by H D with wood engravings by Dellas Henke (1993).

the illustrator join their author to achieve that rare symbiotic choreography all good bookmaking aspires to.

Peggy Sunday accomplishes the remarkable as well with her syncopated woodcuts that vitalize Amy Clampitt's *Manhattan*. Few artists reach this capacity to extract such delicacy and verve



from the sinew of wood. Kim's placement of Sunday's multicolor woodcuts in an oversize vertical environment, situated in balanced tension above the wiry, elegant Van Dijck type, suggests an eccentric stateliness suited to the complex sensibility *Manhattan* exudes. This inspired collaboration gave us one of the most notable fine press books of the late twentieth century. In offering these studied compositions on spreads with very generous margins, Kim confirms his own assessment, offered as catalog commentary for Richard Minsky's major exhibition *Book Arts in the USA*:

My game is not to stretch the page, or redesign the concept of bookishness; rather, admiring the formats of the Italians, I play with these, trying to make my variations contemporary while rooted, still, in the past.

The communicating existence made permanent in the successful book implies a symphony of parts, and though the text is always central in Windhover books we cannot ignore the structural components surrounding it. Kim's work persistently exemplifies the tenets of successful book design, carrying forth, again in Harry Duncan's words, "a basic plan that sustains every page and becomingly accommodates each textual feature...at the same time manifesting a coherent architectonic for the whole." If Merker books are consistently responsive to the text, they also testify to an equally sensitive response to the materials chosen. He displays a flare for thoughtful selection and careful employment of material; material possessing a standard of workmanship comparable to his own.

Viewers of this exhibition might best recognize this in the successful binding collaborations apparent from the beginning of his book production career. The sturdy, minimal bindings in the 1960s by Hungarian American binder Elizabeth Kner suit well the understated simplicity of Pauline Aspel's *Traversees*, and *Excellency* by John Pauker. This spirit of joint resolve with the binder is most evident in the works executed after William Anthony assumed the position of conservator at the University of Iowa Libraries. Anthony, also European trained, was not only a consummate craftsman, the exemplar of astute workmanship, but also perfectly suited to Kim's philosophy of dedication to the tradition of one's chosen discipline. These collaborations with Bill Anthony will emerge as significant contributions to the Windhover Press legacy, just as Bill's conservation work here in the library will have sig-

nificance in historical binding. Bill Anthony was a humble, generous, and patient teacher, a gifted artisan, one of the only true gentlemen I have known. I am grateful to Kim for engineering Anthony's position in the Iowa Conservation Lab, thereby creating opportunities to benefit from his acquaintance and tutelage in regional workshops.

This institution owes a tremendous debt to Kim. For all the obvious reasons cited, but equally for establishing the Iowa Center for the Book, a program facilitating the work of prominent book arts practitioners in a modern atelier conducive to both the fostering of tradition **and** to forging a continuing place for the book in whatever the almighty electronic future holds. The impressive works emerging from all wings of the Center over the last decade owe much to the exceptional, superlative papers handmade by Timothy Barrett at the Oakdale facility. These build text blocks or form limp papercase bindings such as those so exquisitely rendered by Pamela Spitzmueller. I drool over these papers, I lust for them! So, of course, I envy Kim's access to a paper mill full of Barrett's loft-dried miracles. We can only anticipate further wonders coming from their fortunate collaboration.

Well, as usual, I got ahead of my story. I will roll back to the end of my summer apprenticeship with Kim, who returned to Iowa City in the fall of 1971. Before parting, however, he negotiated with the University a part-time contract for my teaching a cross-listed course on the Hand Printed Book in the School of Library Science. He also procured, on my behalf, a manuscript from Kathleen Fraser which I edited into a 16 poem collection titled, *Little Notes to You from Lucas Street*, the first release from the Penumbra Press and the only book I have printed on a Washington handpress. In the intervening years, his generosity and support have nurtured my commitment to letterpress printing and literary publishing. In 1972, I moved to the Iowa City area and began an assistantship at Windhover. By then, however, I had made an irreversible commitment to releasing my own books in service to literature under the Penumbra Press imprint. After a failed search for a used press, Kim helped me order a new Vandercook and, though I ceased working in his shop, we maintained contact throughout my fourteen years in Iowa, exchanging finished books, troubleshooting quirky paper and ink problems, confessing professional addictions.

Kim was also instrumental in securing my position at the Fine Arts Press/Abattoir Editions, acting as liaison with the university administration. He graciously wrote letters of recommendation, then and at other pivotal times while seeking grants or promotions, which probably swayed a successful outcome as much as anything reviewed. He has reinforced, repeatedly, my belief that we in the book arts community are, despite all intrigues and temporary misalliances, a very close and spiritually linked group. That as a community of printers, binders, book artists, and book lovers we must continue to support one another to sustain our gifts.

The concept of gifts brings me to that source of recurrent renewal, Lewis Hyde's important work *THE GIFT: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*. Someday, perhaps, some printer will release the artful edition this masterpiece deserves, but meanwhile I continue thumbing my worn trade edition. When it's necessary to define or assess my place in the world, in my art, or in the profane, cynical art market, I seek succor and resolution from the book's profound wisdom. This occasion calls for passing on one of its innumerable gifts to you:

The work of art is a copula: a bond, a band, a link by which the several are knit into one. Men and women who dedicate their lives to the realization of their gifts tend the office of that communion by which they are joined to one another, to our times, to our generation, and to the race. Just as the artist's imagination "has a gift" that brings the work to life, so in the realized gifts of the gifted the spirit of the group "has a gift". These creations are not merely symbolic, they do not stand for the larger self, they are its embodiment, a language without which it would have no life at all.

Let me express my gratitude to you Kim, for sharing your gift and for bestowing your books, your lasting gifts, on this university, our community of printers, and our literary generation.