

Against

by Heidi L. Everett

It would seem that taking today's digital generation back in time to learn handset letterpress goes against the grain of new trends in reading and writing.

Unlike the quick flick of fingers and abbreviated language shared in text messages or the electronic ease of digital books like Amazon's Kindle and the Sony Reader, students learn the painstakingly detailed process of paper making, typesetting, and book binding.

"Right now our society is undergoing a tremendous change, and the book is at the center of it," explains Theresa Vann, adjunct associate professor of history and curator of the Hill Monastic Manuscript Library.

"Books used to be the primary means of storing and retrieving knowledge. But now, the technology



the Grain



of the internet has changed the way we find information. The internet is digital, virtual, electronic, but we still think of information in book terms – we speak of web ‘pages,’ which have ‘fonts’ and ‘typefaces.’ Students need to know how books are made so that they understand how this physical format continues to influence the organization of virtual information.”

Mind your Ps and Qs. If you’ve ever wondered where that phrase comes from, spend some time in the Welle Book Arts Studio, a truly hands-on part of the Literary Arts Institute of the College of Saint Benedict.

“They are easy to get mixed up,” explains Rachel Melis, book artist and assistant professor of art.

Rachel is busy weaving her fingers through case upon case of movable type letters, hand-carved ornaments,

and dingbats used in traditional letterpress. The large- and small-scale pieces of metal and wood – some as narrow as a paperclip – were the original fonts and symbols that we now find in our computer’s drop-down menus.

Rachel demonstrates how traditional typesetters had to select a typeface and size, pick the right letters and punctuation one by one, and pull thin strips of metal and wood for spacing (in techno terms . . . the leading, spacing, and kerning).

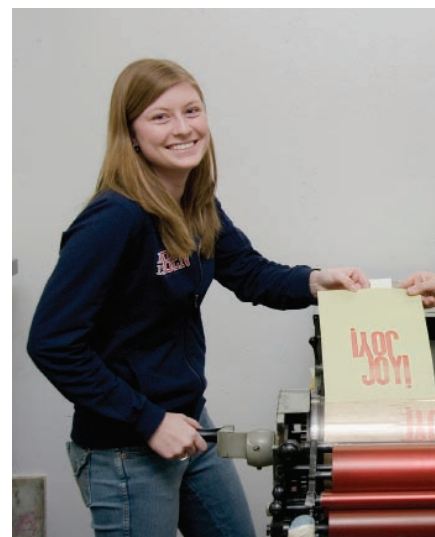
“The phrase *out of sorts* comes from running out of letters or typeface to finish a project,” she says.

Once the letters, spacing, and punctuation are selected, typesetting gets tricky. Students have to format their quotes, paragraphs or pages backwards in order to achieve a readable mirror imprint on the press.

Typesetting is only part of the eye-opening process for students.

“Readers take the final form of a book as the inevitable form,” explains Cindy Malone, professor of English. Her students create their own books in English 315: Editing and Publishing. “Making a book calls attention to the endless decisions that shape the physical form of a book into a container that fits the content,” Malone says. “The coolest thing about the Welle Book Arts Studio is the possibility for combining basic elements of paper-making, typesetting, and bookbinding in creative and unexpected ways that offer surprise and delight as well as a deeper understanding of the material in a book.”

Rachel adds, “You also get really good at reading things backwards.”



What joy! Senior Jessica Berg (far right) creates a holiday card during a class visit to the Welle Book Arts Studio of the College of Saint Benedict. Rachel Melis, book artist and assistant professor of art (far left), routinely shares her love of paper making and book arts with students in history, English, and art classes.



Jill Derouin '08

Cowboys and Indians is a hand-bound, leather-covered artist book.

I wrote a very concise and blunt history of Cowboys and Indians based on readings from my human relations education class. Each page is illustrated with a stereotypical symbol.

This book is meant to spark interest and encourage people to want to learn the facts.

Perfect Sense

A student's reflection on book arts

Essay by Elyse Rethlake '09

Photos by Jessica Handwerk '08

Students judge books by the cover in Dr. Cindy Malone's English class. They judge the paper, the binding, and the font, too.

English 315: Editing and Publishing traces a manuscript through the publishing process, from acquisitions to the editorial and marketing departments to the release of a shiny new book. In addition to guest presentations by professionals working in the publishing field, students explore book arts, from the down and dirty work of papermaking, to the time-consuming precision of hand-set letterpress printing, and finally to the aesthetic – and essential function – of bookbinding.

In the process of making a book, students are bound to change the way they look at, feel, and read books.

*Elyse Rethlake '09 had this to say in her essay about reconnecting with F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic, *The Great Gatsby*.*

Books used to be as good to me as the neatness of their covers. If the cover tore or bent, I was devastated. The book was no longer pristine; no longer flawless.

I never made a mark in my books. I never highlighted or circled or drew little pictures. Growing up, my books were never stacked in various places around the room. They didn't hold up creaky furniture or lie scattered on my bed. They were never chairs or a table for tea parties with my stuffed animals. I never loaned them out to anyone for fear they'd never be returned - or worse that they'd be returned smudged or ripped. Rather my books stood upright in perfect uniformity according to height in a large bookcase in a corner of my room.

I did not realize at the time how much I lacked in my relationship with books. My books may have made an impression on me, but I left no clues in the book about myself, the reader. My relationship with books was completely one-sided in which I left books exactly how I found them and became depressed the minute a book lost its perfect, unused look. Before taking a class on the bookmaking process, my life with books – while I enjoyed it – was far from what I now know it can be after spending a semester getting reacquainted with books.

My first inkling that my stand-offish approach to books might be wrong hit the moment I put my hands into pulp. Making paper is a messy and chaotic process. Unless I dove into the pulp with my hands and let it run through my fingers, paper would not

Chelsea Pettit '08

Goblin Market by Christina Rossetti combines child-like fantasy and innocence with strikingly dark and sensual imagery. Though it is no longer considered a children's poem, it retains a fairy-tale feel. To capture this, I used a combination of colored and black and white illustrations. A dark, floral velour cover captures the poem's balance of light and dark imagery.

Illustrations by D.G. Rossetti, Laurence Housman, Warwick Goble, and Brian Froud.

have been made. This experience was eye-opening and was the first reminder that the finished product I see on bookshelves does not start out neat and tidy. Typesetting was the second experience that changed my view of books. The deep involvement in not only tracking down each letter but then painstakingly putting them into place helped me to feel wholly connected with the words. After the first copy went through the press, mistakes were found and corrected. These mistakes also shattered my need for books to be perfect. Rolling the paper through the press helped me feel joined to the work, as if I placed a part of myself in it as the type rolled through the ink and onto the paper.

Another large part of redefining my understanding of books comes from the book arts projects that all students completed. All of my books at home are rectangle hardcover and paperbacks. To take a literary work and characterize it through the book form helped explain the variety of book types. Unusual book structures showed me that if books themselves can be works of art, then it is wonderful if I, as well as all other readers, leave parts of myself in the pages whether through circling or drawing or dog-earring the pages. I may not have ever come to this conclusion without the experience of a bookmaking class.

I have made strides since taking the class. I lent *The Ice Queen* and *The Red Tent* to two well-deserving friends. I began to reread favorite authors with a pen in hand: ready to make comments on their words and leave my own thoughts for future readers. Occasionally a book can now be found on my bed, and the world did not end when my mother's tea dripped across the inside cover of *Gone with the Wind*.



Brittany Carlson '08

Mowlana Jalaluddin Rumi's poetry is subtly profound – he makes existential claims grounded in simple observations about life and the world around us.

Unfolding each poem against a stark white background forces the reader to slow down and take time for quiet reflection. As each poem is revealed, so is the colorful paper hidden with each page.