

When I inaugurated Ninja Press in 1984 it never occurred to me that it would lead to the kind of investigative bookmaking that I am engrossed in today; an approach to book design that I want to talk about in this essay. I had no specific literary agenda at the outset but now, after nearly thirty years of designing, printing, and binding books, the abiding interests had remained, in the main, contemporary poetry.

My first publication, *Close To the Bone*, was modest in size, about five inches square. It consisted of eighteen three and four-line poems by the previously unpublished California poet, Betty Andrews. It was a collection that was small enough not to overwhelm my lack of experience. I'd already had three years of bookbinding practice behind me so my focus now was simply on how to accomplish the presswork.

I had come to bookwork circuitously. I wanted to make books for the photographs I was producing, using nineteenth century techniques: hand-coated platinum, cyanotype, and salted paper prints. I'd been photographing for years when I lived in New York, spending many hours in the darkroom. That experience paralleled my work and life as an actor. Both skills require the kind of practice, discipline, and experience that I brought along with me as I entered into the printer's world.

It was when I began work on *Walking* by Henry David Thoreau that I discovered the joy of research. But, in fact, it was a rediscovery. I began acting when I was fifteen. I was on intimate terms with in-depth research as I worked on the background for a character in a play in which I had been cast. Now I began the practice of research again as I worked to tease out a book design for *Walking*. The results of that work turned into a close scrutiny of the original manuscript. That, in turn, led to publishing the essay as it was originally written for the first time. Unapproved editorial alterations had been made to the first publication of the essay in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1862, just a month after Thoreau's death, and every subsequent publication thereafter contained those same alterations. The pleasure I found in this substantive work cannot be overstated.

Of the number of books I published before 1995, none approached what was to become my ideal book: a work that both embodied my personal encounter with the literature, as well as one that extended the reader's perspective through its tactile and visual form. With *The Real World of Manuel Córdova* by W.S. Merwin, I moved closer to that ideal.

*The Real World of Manuel Córdova* is a long, single poem consisting of forty-three fourteen-line stanzas. Upon reading it for the first time I knew I wanted to spend deep time working on it. As it turned out, I would.

William Merwin was inspired to write this poem by events in the life of Manuel Córdova-Rios; extraordinary events that took place deep in the jungle at the headwaters of the Amazon River in 1907. In 1971, writer and expert on tropical forestry, F. Bruce Lamb, gave an account of his meeting with Manuel Córdova in his book, *The Wizard of the Upper Amazon*. In it, Córdova, as told to Lamb, documents his life as a captive at the beginning of the twentieth century among the Amahuaca, a remote band of very fierce tribesmen who were living in

back of beyond on the border between Brazil and Peru. His account includes descriptions of the use of *ayahuasca* (*Banisteriopsis caapi*), a powerful hallucinogen that the men of the tribe took ritually to induce realms of experience where telepathy, clairvoyance, and a shared consciousness were provoked. As an old man, Córdova, a little known outside his own country but famous as a *curandero-ayahuasquero*, a visionary healer in Peru, attributed his powers to the training he received during his seven years with the Amahuaca.

After a first reading of Lamb's book, I began to scrutinize it thoroughly. From additional sources I learned more about *Banisteriopsis caapi*; how the complex electrochemical circuitry of the brain reacts to these kinds of tryptamines. I got picture books of Amazonia to sense its visual scope. I wanted a pastiche of information that would heighten my sense of the jungle: a swooping cloud of parrot color; the churning power of the river; the undercut of a riverbank; the impossibly dense saturation of jungle hues. I bought tactical pilotage charts showing the river systems with vast areas marked 'relief data unreliable' and, by finding the rivers mentioned by Manuel Córdova to Lamb, I marked out the area that was controlled by the Amahuaca. I went to the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of Ethnology Bulletins for more details on the Amahuaca. I studied their face and body paint for design element ideas and even made a first book cover model using one of their face paint motifs. I looked at pictures of plants and animals that Córdova had described. Design ideas using these jungle colors took up residence in my head. I found myself awash with information but with no certainty of direction. What was becoming clear was that everything about this story within the poem was 'other.' I had to make a book in the same vein.

The poem evokes the very essence of the mythological journey; of going forth and coming back changed. It is an arduous journey, both through time and through terrain. The poem also describes an interior journey into the dream world. I had flooded myself with information because what poetry does not impart is information. Poetry is a door to the ineffable. My job, however, was to make a container to hold the indescribable. That very physicality requires detailed, precise planning using materials found in the everyday realm.

I had purchased a few sheets of a handmade Japanese paper, *kakishibu*, several years before and stored it away. It is a mulberry or *kozo* paper that has been treated with fermented unripe persimmon juice and then smoke cured. The juice has a very high tannin content that, when exposed to the air and dried, turns a deep reddish brown. Only later did I learn that the tannin process rendered the paper nearly waterproof, making it unsuitable for letterpress printing. *Kakishibu* is not used in the book arts much but rather laminated together and cut to make stencils for *kimono* fabric dyeing and *katazome* (stencil patterning). I had fallen in love with a paper whose like I had never seen, didn't know anything about, which would end up giving me a hellish time on the press, but which I was determined to use.

I began setting the poem in type, setting it flush left, just as William Merwin had written it and as I first read it in its original publication in *The American Poetry Review*. (It was subsequently published by Knopf in a collection of

Merwin's poems entitled *Travels*.)

The type I chose was Victor Hammer's Samson, his second uncial type design, created for his first book, John Milton's *Samson Agonistes* in 1931. (Historically, uncial letters were used widely by scribes in European manuscript writing from the fourth through the ninth century.) Hammer's Samson was cut and cast by Rudolph Koch's son, Paul, in Florence in 1926-28. Then, in 1969, R. Hunter Middleton struck new matrices for machine casting from the original punches. Samson is designed without capitals and with short ascenders and descenders. The letterforms are like beads on a string and of exceeding beauty though, at first glance, some letters are difficult to distinguish from one another. Using this type face would slow the reader down. It would also take the reader out of the present-day, a further amplification of the "otherness" I wanted to emphasize.

With photocopies of several pages from Victor Hammer's *Samson Agonistes* beside me as I was setting type, I discovered that the fit of some of the letter-forms from my cases of the Monotype-cast version of Samson were not nearly as close a fit as were Hammer's. In fact, gaps appeared routinely between certain pairs of letter. I am not completely certain who cast this type. As is increasingly the case with diminishing resources for type, I acquired the Samson in quite a roundabout way. Finally, I ended up kerning several hundred letters by sawing and hand finishing with a tiny file to make a letterfit that compared more favorably with Victor Hammer's close, impeccable setting.

The next decision I arrived at was prompted by an aerial shot of the Rio Purus meandering through the tight green toward the Amazon River. As *The Real World of Manuel Córdova* embodies the very essence of 'the journey,' it spoke to me of mapping; a mapping of the psyche as well as of the land. And with that aerial picture of the brown serpentine meanders of river in dense green jungle lodged firmly in my mind, it came to me that I should use the navigational maps of the Amazon I'd been studying somewhere in this book to echo that powerful journey. Maps meant folds and folds meant accordion. It would be an accordion book and the river would run down the left side of the poem.

Now the books had its dimensions. It would consist of eleven 13x17-inch panels, each with a tab to attach the panels together, making the book fifteen feet long. Each of the fifty-six folds, which act as stanza breaks within the poem, was less than 3 ½ inches apart, making the overall book size 3 ½ inches high by 13 ¼ inches wide when closed; an unusual size.

As soon as I began setting the type, I made photocopies of the river map, the pilotage charts I had purchased, to see what it would look like with the proofs of the type I was setting. I cut out the little river squiggles and when I lined them up along the bit of text I had set, I found that the river image didn't match the visual weight of the type. It was too slender and delicate. Then the idea occurred to me that I had, in fact, the perfect-looking river map, one that I had used for years when I rafted in the Southwest. But I thought I couldn't possibly use a map of the Green River through Desolation Canyon in Utah in place of the Amazon, even though the meanders of the river are so similar; the only difference being

the elevation of the terrain.

At this point in the work it struck me that I had to revisit the text of the poem again. Rereading it, after having spent weeks carefully researching Manuel Córdova's seven years with the Amahuaca and trying to decide which of the multitudinous details I should include within the book's design, I found that nowhere in the poem is the Amazon mentioned. Brazil and Peru aren't mentioned. The Amahuaca aren't mentioned. *Ayahuasca* isn't mentioned. Manuel Córdova is only mentioned in the title. I knew too much. Of course I could use my map of the Green River.

So, after copying my mile-by-mile waterproof edition of the Green River Wilderness Desolation River Guide and cutting out its twists and turns, I laid it along the flush left side of the text I had proofed on newsprint. To my surprise, reading the poem again after leaving it to languish in favor of research, I seemed to be hearing the poem for the first time. The poem has the voice of a mantra; a chant. It moves in a continuous circular wave like the serpentine meanders of the river. There is no punctuation, no capitalization. The end of one idea folds seamlessly into the beginning of the next, frequently mid-line. Every line ends in rhyme, magnifying its mantra-like quality. The more I read the poem aloud, the more stiff and conventional the setting looked, sitting flush left on the page. It belied its voice. I immediately began cutting up the proofs, line by line, and then moved each line of the text just next to the river, exactly matching its meanders. The pages came alive.

It was critical now to get approval from William Merwin about the changes I had made. It was with great relief that I read the best three words in his letter back to me, "It's your book."

So, the Amazon became the Green. And my years of whitewater rafting as represented by this map, became the critical turning point in uncovering the overall design principal for this book; maps, rivers, exploration, and the unknown.

I printed the image of the river undulating alongside the poem from photopolymer plates in five colors that gradually intermingle one after the other. I created that gradual color shift by going in with a brayer while the sheet was still on the press, carefully adding the new color by hand.

As for the enclosure, I designed it in a similar manner to some early mariner's map cases I'd seen at Harvard's Houghton Library which were rather wallet-like. It is made from a very heavy cream-colored raw flax sheet, then fastened with narrow alum-tawed goat skin strips and bone closures. I lined the enclosure with *kakishibu* on which I printed a copy of the first map showing the world's currents, drawn by the German Jesuit scholar, Athanasius Kircher, in 1665. I then colored the map by hand with pencil in five colors echoing the colors of the river.

Organizing the various elements of *The Real World of Manuel Córdova* was like herding cats. I steadfastly kept my sights on a book that would elicit careful attention to enter, that could be held lightly and easily in the hand to read, stanza by stanza, or be unfurled to its full fifteen feet to reveal the entire length of the journey. I knew I wanted a book that would conjure forth its subject as well as

exist as a beautiful object in space.

In the intervening years since I finished this book, which was published in an edition of 160 copies, I have come to see that my particular way of working to uncover a book design always entails engulfing myself with information and then—and this is important - winnowing almost everything away. What remains is a book of a size, shape, color, and heft that echoes my personal experience of the poetry it contains. Its structure has become the artifact of my research, giving tactile information to the reader.

It was in this way that I came to make a book shaped like a map in order to map the journey into the interior of young Manuel Córdova's new world. I ran the text alongside the river and organized the folds so that each fold would act as a stanza break. The book could either be read page by page or opened to its full fifteen-foot length to reveal the entire seven-year odyssey. The paper would be leaf-like, leather-like. The typeface would add to the timeless quality of the poem. The book would be housed in an enclosure similar to a map case. It would be lined with a map drawn in 1665—thereby showing the Amazon River both through time and from macro to micro.

This kind of investigative bookmaking is worth whatever amount of time it takes to be able to spiral down to a clear design principle. And it is in this way that I have continued to work because the duration of time it takes, day by day, week by week, is transformative. It is the deep pleasure taken in sustained work that's divided between the rational and the intuitive. Between materiality— and the Muse.

*Carolee Campbell founded Ninja Press in 1984. Primarily focused on contemporary poetry, all Ninja Press publications are designed, handset in metal type, printed letterpress, and bound by Carolee. Her work is heavily influenced both by her extensive experience as a photographer and by her career as a distinguished actor. She is currently working on another single, long poem by W.S. Merwin, *The Lives of the Artists*, due out this summer. Among her many awards is the 2013 Oscar Lewis Award from *The Book Club of California*.*