

Romancing the Press: Typesetting the Mobile Library bookplate with the Ferrymead Printing Society

Dust everywhere, missing the one letter I need, searching amidst the din of the Heidelberg press. Prying open heavy, splintered drawers of type, backwards mirrored spelling mistakes. Inky fingerprints all over clean paper, dropping entire drawers of type, tourists watching, 'are the letters actually lead metal?' My stories about typesetting are not high res, glossy or perfectly creased and cropped.

The act of typesetting—or 'letterpress'—is one of the best ways to re-visit the history of graphic design. To be able to hand pick, and physically manipulate the spacing between each letter, to consciously pluck each compositional element from its historical context is a practical history lesson for a designer. After the experience of typesetting, simply tapping away at my keyboard or pushing pixels around with a computer programme felt like I was starting a design process half way through, and not acknowledging the backstory.

When it then came to considering how to produce a bookplate for *A Mobile Library*, the same thoughts occurred. When I pick up a book to read, more often than not, there is no bookplate carefully glued to the inside of the cover. Bookplates were common when books were treasured not only because of their stories and illustrations, but for the sheer amount of physical work it took to generate the book itself.

The intentional move backward in time, from my laptop to the letterpress workshop, was magical—and scary. The process is fantastically unforgiving. Type is easy to manipulate on a digital screen, but to physically move blocks of metal type and crank them through a press reflects a time when printing was a very physical act of *making*. Printers of the past would have never found it as harrowing or difficult as I do now. Graphic design was not then a glamorously separate practice, but rather a means to an end.

The bookplate for *A Mobile Library* is a letterpressed stamp on a slip of round-edged paper. The design exists as the original hand-printed letters, a digital file, the physical stamp, and the final inked-print on paper. As a designer, to be able to work in all areas of production is an opportunity that doesn't come around very often. Like the act of book-making (in the era of letterpress technology) it requires attention to all elements in the process throughout, and acknowledges the role of design goes far beyond just the printed word.

In the end, the cuts, bruises, mistakes and frustrations that come with stepping backward is an inky tribute to the process that allows us to pick up and read an old book in a library today, and appreciate how it came to be.

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With thanks to The Ferrymead Printing Society, Christchurch. You can visit the Print Shop at the Ferrymead Heritage Park seven days a week. For more information visit <http://www.ferrymead.org.nz/>.