

**Interview with Francis Hunter in 2017 as part of the Post-Digital Book Arts Project:**  
<http://pdba.usask.ca>

**Please introduce yourself, and describe either your first memory with a book, or an early memory with one, that you feel helped you get started.**

My name is Frances Hunter. I'm a book designer principally, but I also make and think about creating books that might be called artist books, or maybe not. The first time I really remember making a book — and it was a horrible failure — was at Emily Carr University. They had a one day class on putting together a little hardbound book, and when I came home and looked at it, it was just such a mess. I obviously needed to know a lot more about it. I think that's where it started, the handmade aspect of it.

**How old were you?**

Oh it was not very long ago, probably ten years ago. Maybe more...fifteen?

**Have you been involved in the designing of books longer than making your own?**

No. I've been a graphic designer for probably twenty-five or thirty years, but it's only in the last ten or fifteen years that I focused on book design. I went to Simon Fraser University — They have a Publishing program there. I took book design classes with Peter Cocking. I took as many as I could: cover design, book design, publication design... I decided at that point that it was what I preferred to do in terms of graphic design.

**Could you describe what a typical day at work is like for you?**

Working at the moment means being at the computer. I work mostly with regional publishers who send me the text and graphics for each book. I also get a very particular detailed description of the book. For instance: exactly how many pages, the size, etc. Often the cover has been designed and the advertising is already started, so I have to work out a design that will fit within those pages. The books are every imaginable kind of book. The sizes range from a larger sort of coffee table size, to smaller books. I've worked on books on photography, the environment, poetry books, guide books, and books for children, as well as others.

So most contracts come from two or three regional publishers, but I also do projects for self published authors. Some of them are memoirs. At the moment I'm working on a book for the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, which is the first time I've done an art book. I've been working with some really experienced writers and editors and wonderful paintings and illustrations.

**How did you become interested in graphic design before?**

Probably necessity. I was a weaver and I worked from home, but at some point I needed to have a more income-producing job. So, I went to Camosun College and took a communications diploma. It was a two year program. It was just when computers were starting, so we did a little bit of layout in

Page Maker. We also spent hands-on time on an offset press, processing film, burning plates — a basic introduction to printing and publishing. We also learned television and radio production. Out of that came an interest in graphic design.

### **How did your interests in the book arts develop? Did you have influences from other artists or book artists?**

Well its still developing, particularly as I work with the Canadian Bookbinders and Book Artists Guild (CBBAG) on their magazine, Book Arts arts du livre Canada (<https://www.cbbag.ca>), which is now in its 8th year. I had to learn more about book making and the different book arts. Artists' books in particular are a major interest for people who belong to CBBAG (pronounced cabbage), so I had to start looking into who was bookmaking in Canada, and who the international leaders are. One thing that I did that was very useful was to go to Codex.

(<http://www.codexfoundation.org/book-fair-and-symposium/>) Its a biennial international book fair, with its symposium in Berkeley, and a book fair in Oakland. People come from all over the world and have stands where they show artists' books, fine printed books, and all kinds of printed matter. It's where you see the best of the best, and you get to see an overall picture of the field. I think all those things excited me to try to do that myself, and to hopefully break away from the computer. You can go in so many directions, with it. You can use the computer to some degree, (maybe to make the plates from which the letterpress printer will print your files) or you might hire a calligrapher to work with you, or maybe you could marble the papers, if it suits that book. Right now I'm leaning towards handmade paper, so, I'm thinking of projects that work with that.

### **Is handmade paper harder to work with? Does it have more limitations than machine made paper?**

No, not at all. Paper can be whatever you want it to be.

### **How do you size paper? What do you use to make paper?**

Some of the paper I'm making from local Daphne fibre is extremely thin yet strong! Daphne is an invasive plant in British Columbia, so I go into the woods and I cut it. These pages are from old envelopes, some Daphne, and mixed recycled paper, from office leftovers. You can make paper of any weight or feel that you want. It's just a question of knowing what the project is and then creating the paper that will suit that project. You just use fibres that get the effect you're looking for. For instance, if you wanted it to be very soft, you'd probably use more cotton because it's softer, but you wouldn't use that if you were looking for a paper with a bit of a crackle to it.

If the Daphne paper were to be sized it could be useful for printmaking. There are different ways to size paper. I avoid animal based solutions. You can use soy milk, and other substances to brush onto the pressed paper, or there's internal sizing available, used during the processing of the pulp..

## **What kind of challenges do you face while designing a book?**

Well it mostly depends who you're working with. If you have a publisher who is working with a client that has a marketing person in their organization, then they already have a brief about that book that includes the audience. Sometimes the author will have requests concerning the design or function of the book. For example: this book of photographs that were taken by the author. They had a number of requests for the way they wanted their photos displayed in the book. So, when working for a trade publisher, you need to take all those things into account. Also, the book is already determined in its size, material, and budget. That will immediately tell you the restrictions. You can't just all of the sudden say: I want to put in some vellum pages, do this or that, or overprint in silver or something. It's not going to happen. So working with a trade publisher is very different than creating a book for yourself, or a private client who has said just go for it.

## **Do you get that, once in awhile?**

I haven't had a lot of people who have wanted to explore anything particularly different. There was one artist catalogue, but that was a little more unusual, in comparison to the people that I continue to work with. Artist Roberta Sutherland wanted a number of special effects in her catalogue. We were able to, because she wanted to invest the time and had these ideas. We could follow every one of them, but this was an unusual project. Usually, I've found it's when I do my own books that I can start from scratch, and consider absolutely everything about it.

The challenge is actually in having so many choices. Sometimes a restriction is actually quite useful. Otherwise you can go on forever, exploring different binding, different ways to print it, and different kinds of paper to make. I'm sure other book designers have a lot more opportunities like that. I just haven't had a lot of them.

## **So what have some of your favourite projects been?**

I really like to handmake something. I think it goes back to being a weaver, and going back to the the physicality of things. I get more fun out of that than I do on the computer. That being said, even when you get one of these books back from the printer, you're glad. You're usually just relieved to see there's nothing hugely wrong, but you don't have that feeling that you get when you pick up something that you made,. It belongs to you a little bit more.

## **What is it like to work in the book design and art field?**

Commercial book design is a terrific field to be in. It's tremendously interesting. You become a better reader, and you work with excellent editors. You see the proofs that are edited, and it's fascinating to see where the changes have come from. You get to know proofreaders and indexers and people who work with photography. It's just a really good career. I'm surprised that more young people don't pursue it. It's not an extremely well paid field compared to graphic design. Graphic designers can charge out a much higher rate per hour than someone that works for a trade publisher, but, personally, I think it's more satisfying than designing business cards, or advertising. It's worth it. Definitely.

### **How has the internet influenced what you do?**

One example: I wanted to work with a typeface by Rob MacDonald— he's an important Canadian type designer — for this art book, partly because it's about a Canadian artist. However, to buy the whole font family would have been fairly expensive, but you can now subscribe to fonts online through fonts.com. Every month you pay something like fifteen dollars, and you can use that typeface for as long as you keep up your subscription. I didn't have to lay out a considerable amount, which would have come out of my pocket for that commission. So the internet, you could say, gives you a lot of opportunities, and can introduce you to many tools. I think that the only problem I see with the internet is that it can be very overwhelming. You see so much wonderful work online. It can be a little discouraging to compare yourself to. There are many people doing wonderful work in book arts and book design, and sometimes I find it a bit discouraging. Maybe that's just me. Others will be invigorated by it.

### **Do you use the internet as a tool for building connections in the book arts community?**

Do you follow something called the book arts listserv?

([https://listserv.syr.edu/scripts/wa.exe?A0=BOOK\\_ARTS-L](https://listserv.syr.edu/scripts/wa.exe?A0=BOOK_ARTS-L)) It's a listserve where every day, there are postings from book arts around the world. It has everything from conservation, to artists books, exhibitions coming up, people's work, and questions. It's a very interactive place. You can post answers to questions, or just read the postings, go online and look at other people's work, even network, yes. There are other sites, of course, and blogs, and interviews. I personally find it a little bit hard to pay a lot of attention to that. It's very time consuming. You could spend half your day everyday and find fascinating stuff!

### **Do you think we are seeing a resurgence in craft book making in Canada?**

Well, I suppose we are seeing a resurgence. I question it a little bit in Canada. I know in the States it seems to be alive and well. There are US companies that deal in artists books, and exhibitions that have a call for entry for artists books, and awards for them, and there are universities and colleges with book arts programs, but when it comes to Canada, it's not so obvious that it's thriving, is it? What you can find are institutions who are purchasing artists books and building their collections, and using them to teach with, which is happening more and more at universities. Maybe it is still emerging, but some things happened a long time ago. University of Alberta, Bruce Peel Library, for example, has special collections of artists books. haven't heard of a lot of initiatives in Canada to do things like JackPine Press does, for example. JackPine is remarkable in that way, but I don't get the sense that there's a huge groundswell. There is fine press, which is different than artist books. There's always been a market in Canada, and a following of small presses.

### **Do you not consider fine printing a form of artist book?**

It's not usually under that umbrella. Its related, for sure. Fine press printers have an established path for their work, and there are people that collect their books. A lot of those fine presses go to

sell their works at Codex and they go to Europe too. There are book artists that are incredibly successful and do the same, but their work appeals to a different audience. I would like to see more happening in Canada. Every five years, the Canadian Bookbinders and Book Artists Guild organizes a travelling exhibition, and this is the call for entry for 2018. *Frances hands over a brochure*. (<http://artofthebook18.ca>) There are eight categories. It travels for two years to every province. This will bring new book artists out of the woodworks. It also has a fine press category, and many entries include printmaking. That's an interesting area. A lot of printmakers are beginning to use the book form, and publish their work, and photographers too.

**Do you think it's possible for craft bookmaking to evolve into a digital format, and then, is it still craft?**

People have produced one-off books and then turned them into digital books. There have been some famous ones. Do you know Timothy Ely? He makes individual handmade books of exceptional quality. This book by him, *The Flight into Egypt: Binding the Book* is published by Chronicle Books in San Francisco. It is a facsimile of his handmade book

**So it's gone from handmade, to digital to physical book again**

Yes, and it's digital, published as any book would be, and sold in any book store, or wherever.

**Would these have all been hand painted?**

Yes these pages were all painted and hand printed by him. He's an amazing book artist of great repute, and he's a wonderful teacher too. It's a different object because the tactile experience would have been extremely different: the papers, the binding. Everything would have felt differently.

**It's so important. The job of publishers being to make things accessible.**

Exactly. Exactly yes. Chronicle is a wonderful publisher of beautiful books. Anyway that was just an example of the most obvious answer to that question. I guess you could say that taking the poems from one book and turning them into two books is the other way around. You know, it's a version of that, and of course, many book artists use the work of a poet that has already been published and produce something from them that's quite different.

**So, as we are surrounded by all these beautiful handmade books, I need to ask you: do you own a kindle?**

I don't own a kindle. I've never read a book on a device. I was on the train for two days going to Chicago, and it would have been a good way to read a book, but then again, I had a perfectly good paperback along with me which I discarded after I finished it. I work all day on a computer, and frankly, looking at any other screen beyond that is not particularly fascinating. I think there's nothing wrong with it. One publisher I work with turns all the books into e-books, so I have to follow certain styles. For instance, text has to be linked if the book is going to go on to the next stage of being an e-book. Sometimes it restricts the way you design. I tend to not pay as much attention to it as I

should. Ideally you don't introduce things that can create problems when it goes to e-book. There can be refinements that can get lost when it transfers to an e-book. I wouldn't want to do a book that doesn't have some of those niceties, so I go ahead and do them anyway. You need to ask the people who teach book design what some of the ideal workflows are, and how much constraints from e-books are influencing design choices in printed book publishing. I don't honestly know. I only know that I follow certain guidelines. They're not punitive.

### **What kind of significance do physical books have for you? Why are they important?**

Well I have always had books around, as a way to learn about things, to read, to look at things. It's just sort of ingrained. A book is such a convenient thing too: a practical enclosure. I like beautiful books. In the past I've bought several of the books in the Alcuin Awards, just so I can have them as examples. At the bottom of my bookshelf over there, I have a collection of books I've collected just to look at and enjoy that way. They aren't necessarily to read from end to end. Some books are just lovely to pick up. There are so many kinds of finely made books, catalogues, that have a nice tactile feel to them.

When I was at Codex I couldn't resist this book, *Small Elegies* by W.S. Merwin, which is a small press book from Editions Koch, Berkeley. It has numerous endpapers, printed in white ink on black paper, and it's letterpress printed onto beautiful handmade paper. You just kind of enjoy having it and looking at it. There's something to aspire to in work like that — not that I'm a letterpress printer. All together it's a wonderful production. Then there are older books that have wonderful illustrations and printing in them. Another example here would be this book designed by W.A. Dwiggins, a very famous type designer and book designer. I collect different book formats to enjoy them — this book *The Ground* was designed by Tate Shaw, a wonderful photographer and book artist I took a workshop from. It's a very good example of a commercially printed artists' book.

### **Absolutely. It's just so satisfying to even be in their presence.**

Yes. You can pull them out sometimes and think about why you enjoy them, so you can try and do something that might have the same feeling about it. This book here has such a nice shape, doesn't it?

### **It's really unique, elegant, simple. Love how you can tell its handmade.**

Yes you can tell there's been a hand in it. Instead of just having one endpaper, he's run to several endpapers, which is kind of a different idea. It's a nicer way to get into a book, not so fast. You don't just open it up: there's the title, here's the poem.

### **There's some old books that just have a bunch of empty pages at the beginning**

It's a protection sometimes isn't it? Because they know that will protect the inside, but I think in this case it's because it's a very slim book, so the extra pages help to bulk it up a little bit, but also its just a nice way to get into the text.

**Yes it transitions from the cover very beautifully. —Okay, I'm going to ask you one last question, and it's kind of a doozy. It's a big one. (Oh dear) but we've been asking it. What role do you think the book has in society today?**

In society today? My god that is a big question isn't it? Well I think it holds its own. Our grandchildren, little boys who like a lot of physical stuff, when they come into our house, the first thing they'll say is "Will you read to me?" They choose books over Lego or other toys. Books are part of society. I don't see them disappearing. I think possibly, with the digitization of everything, and the emergence of artificial intelligence, that it will probably go full circle. Perhaps people will more and more seek something that they can experience through touch.

**Okay, excellent. That was my last question! Thank you for your time Frances. I'm going to stop the recording——**