

Worlds within Words - the hand printed chapbooks of Graeme Hobbs

I talked to the artist and writer Graeme Hobbs this summer about his beautifully printed chapbooks and related works, all hand produced on an Adana in his studio on the border of England and Wales.

Hobbs has a gentle curiosity in exploring the world around us. Through his astute interplay of words and images he brings to our attention small connections and details that we would often not notice ourselves. I asked him about his working practice in selecting subject matter and his love of classic literature:

"I have been making chapbooks for over twenty years now, their content – stories, re-tellings, making new content from old – are mostly inspired by chance finds of images, photographs, objects and words. My books have taken inspiration from sources as diverse as magic lantern slides, stereoscope transparencies, rusting tools, pious Victorian annuals, an Edwardian photograph album, the instructions from a 78 rpm record sleeve, marbled paper – you name it, anything to stimulate my imagination into channels it might not otherwise go. I also play with the notion of the book form, for example my chapbook – *Simenon (Si ou Non)* – in which the opening pages of three Simenon novels were re-ordered into endings, and three endings into openings, leaving the reader to figure out which is the correct version, which came about entirely because I wanted to devise a book that opened from both sides and needed content to suit.

Over the last few years I have worked almost entirely in letterpress – I have an Adana 8x5, and very recently, added an Adana Quarto platen press; I enjoy the exacting simplicity of the craft, the occasional need for ingenuity and the pleasing tangibility of the results. The approach remains much the same though, hence the name of my press – *fallowpages* – a space for often unexpected ideas to take root and flourish. Its occasional limitations can also be a spur to creativity; not having enough type at the time, I printed *Ours was an Age of Certainties* – an anonymous, broken fable set in a time of privation – in a ‘restricted type’ version as a lockdown project. The sentences of the story fracture on the page, with the fragmented sentences then printed in full on the next. The connection between content and form was perfect, and something I wouldn’t have reached without the constraint. It was printed on 60-year-old book paper extracted from a publisher's blank 'specimen book', which I disbound, halving the pages and using the existing crease. It was then sewn into a cover of waxed paper that resembles old leather.

Apart from an evident deep love of words I wouldn’t lay claim to any particular themes in my work – although revealing the unconscious and hidden stories latent in existing narratives does seem to be a bit of a constant. I did this with *Oupire*, my treatment, by excision, of Sheridan Le Fanu’s tale of vampiric infatuation, *Carmilla* (1872), teasing out the unconscious themes and poetry in its pages to produce a telling gloss on the original, and *The Collier and the Foss*, in which the story of redemption for a prodigal son becomes something quite different through the complete re-ordering of the words of its telling. The connection between human and cosmic scale is also something that intrigues me and features now and again, as in the prints of *starstuff*, with text by Carl Sagan printed on tracing paper overlaid on marbled paper, and *Stars and Atoms*, which intertwines short texts by H.D. Thoreau and A.S. Eddington.

Recently I've just taken a monthly market stall in my hometown, Hay-on-Wye, so at the moment I am busy printing ephemera on literary themes as befits living in a town of books. They include hand-coloured prints from vintage image blocks with letterpress printed texts by Thoreau or Robert Walser for example, which are a lot of work but look lovely when finished, and an Orwell-related print. Once I have produced enough items for this new venture, I can concentrate on letterpress chapbooks for a while; I have a new edition to make of *Are You Mr. Ivanov?* (a poem sequence based entirely on the dialogues found in a 1960s Russian language tutorial record), I have commissioned some type appropriate for printing a collection of pithy 18th century proverbs and I also have a story called *A Singular Door* to print as soon as I can work out what to do with the cover!"

If you visit Hay-on-Wye, do look out for *fallowpages*, a fitting place to discover these treasures for yourself. <https://fallowpages.art>