University of Iowa

From the Selected Works of Sidney F. Huttner

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Annie Tremmel Wilcox. A Degree of Mastery

Sidney F. Huttner

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The University of Iowa permits doctoral candidates to submit ‘creative’ work in place of a traditional dissertation. Annie Wilcox has said that she is the third person and first woman to have exercised this option. She was also the first woman apprenticed to master bookbinder William Anthony, an apprenticeship that changed irrevocably with Anthony’s death from cancer when Wilcox was two years into a five- to seven-year apprenticeship.

The work she chose to submit to her department, an account of her apprenticeship, has now become, in the tradition of the best dissertations, a published book. It is edited by C. W. Truesdale (lightly as far as I can tell from a brief comparison), handsomely designed and typeset by ‘Percolator,’ graced with a frontispiece photograph by Jon Van Allen, and the pages which open each of the five chapters are embellished with delicate line drawings of binding tools by Cheryl Jacobson. Cleanly printed in Canada (firm not identified), it is machine sewn and neatly cased in Linson-covered boards, and opens very well, full flat only in the middle but easily everywhere. That alone would please Anthony, long a student and close critic of the opening qualities of bindings.

It is a surprise to read on the verso of the title page that ‘publication ... has been made possible by a generous grant from the Jerome Foundation; the North Dakota Council on the Arts; and Target Stores, Dayton’s, and Mervyn’s by the Dayton Hudson Foundation’ since the jacket announces the book’s selection as a Book-of-the-Month Club Alternate Selection. If a strong text and a publisher’s courage to gamble once sufficed to launch a book, what resources it takes today to assemble an international crew and associated machinery! But *Degree* seems well launched, not only with BOMC selection but with appropriately generous reviews from *Kirkus, Booklist, Library Journal, Publishers Weekly,* and others. If reviews, or the word-of-mouth of satisfied readers, sell books, copies should fly from the shelves.

Wilcox chose to build her text from found elements – fragments from her notebooks, quotations from books, news clippings, exhibition captions, a condolence letter -- stitched with narrative essays each a few pages long. The result is a chronologically scrambled but engaging account of Wilcox’s training as a bookbinder from, roughly, the day she enters the Main Library (regarded as a 40-hour-per-week staff member, as it turns out) until Anthony’s death. Anthony’s profile emerges; Wilcox comes through in the round. Many binding and conservation techniques are briefly described, but this is not a manual. The dust jacket classes the work as ‘Creative Nonfiction/Memoir,’ accurate enough.
Bill Anthony, Irish and English trained, was himself a link in a line of apprentices, journeymen and masters which reaches back at least to medieval times and continues in his own several apprentices, some of whom now work with apprentices of their own. He was for a number of years the business partner of Elizabeth Kner, a Hungarian trained binder. He had many women binders in the classes he taught over the years, and he held the work of many women binders in high regard.

His offering Wilcox a place in the chain of apprentices had a meaning that Wilcox unquestionably appreciates but does not convincingly explain. Through history, boys were apprenticed in their early teens and rarely had much to say in the matter. The best of them, by talent, hard work and good luck, grew into men with formidable experience of the world. Anthony must have sensed this potential in Wilcox, and her book confirms his sense. In a paradox curiously encapsulated in her title, however, she has used her book arts apprenticeship as the foundation for a work that avoided the core experience of academic apprenticeship – the scholarly dissertation. She has a degree of mastery in both disciplines; but her destiny seems neither that of scholar or master bookbinder but that of another discipline, journeyman writer. Anthony would have applauded her talent, recognized her hard work, and wished her good luck.

--- Sidney F. Huttner