

“Printing what we want, when we feel like it!”

MICHELLE HOGAN-WALKER and CHESTER GRYSKI pay homage to the life and work of Newfoundland’s Tara Bryan.

NEWFOUNDLAND RECORDED key losses from its book arts scene this year. The dynamic yet independent spirit of Newfoundland—captured in the title of this tribute, taken from the business card of late artist and printer Tara Bryan—may not be dampened by the losses, but it is diminished.

Tara Bryan’s death in September was mourned by many and ranks among the most personal of the losses. Originally from Texas, she embraced her adopted home and quickly set about facilitating connections with the candour and friendliness that’s a hallmark of Newfoundlanders and Texans alike. She helped build the book arts community, making it a welcoming and supportive place for those who found themselves within it.

She might well be said to have set the stage for the likes of Beth Follett, who relocated

her Pedlar Press from Toronto to St. John’s in 2012. In Newfoundland, Follett said she found a level of support for her publishing venture that she never experienced in Ontario. A month after Bryan’s death, Pedlar Press announced it would cease operations at the end of 2020. Follett wanted to pursue her own writing but the financial challenges of running a small press in the current publishing environment also factored into her decision.

The following tributes from Michelle Hogan-Walker and Chester Gryski tell something of the legacy, not only in books, but in the less tangible gift of community that Bryan leaves, and which can so easily be lost if unappreciated.

~ Peter Mitham, editor

Tara Tidwell Bryan RCA 1953–2020

Book designer, printer, painter, musician, teacher, initiator, friend.

MICHELLE HOGAN-WALKER pays tribute to an undaunted puzzle seeker and solver.

TARA BRYAN DIED TOO YOUNG on September 29, 2020 but this is not an obituary. Instead, I want to introduce you to the clever mind, determined hands and generous heart behind her beautiful book works and to give credit to the woman who brought book arts and letterpress printing to Newfoundland.

While it may seem odd to separate the work from the maker (Chester Gryski will speak to the books directly), it makes sense because there are so many aspects to Tara, who was more famous as a painter of huge canvasses

of beautiful light-filled icebergs and imposing landscapes. Tara always said she was unable to do just one thing at a time, and her busy creativity won her renown in circles beyond her brilliant work as a book artist and printer.

Tara exhibited her book works around the world, including the Oxford Fine Press Book Fair and the prestigious Codex in California in 2015, and Oak Knoll Fest xx in 2018. Her books can be found in the British Library artist’s book collection and in many public and private libraries. During her lifetime there were 150 solo



Tara at her table at the Grimsby Wayzgoose 2019 chatting with Nancy Jacobi, president of the Japanese Paper Place. It was taken by Tara's great friend Brian Gillam. After the day of crowds and excitement that is the Wayzgoose, Brian and Tara walked near the escarpment and had their last in-person talk.

exhibitions of her paintings. She was artist-in-residence at the St. John's art gallery The Rooms in 2012 and painted on site a 244 × 396 cm canvas. "Aftermath (cracking up)," one of her iconic iceberg paintings, was selected as the image for permanent placement in gray scale on the exterior facade of the St. John's Convention Centre.

Tara kept a sporadic online blog describing the everyday problem-solving processes in her studio and the entries are great fun to read (<http://tarabryan.com/blog/>). She provides a fascinating inside look at how she worked, for instance, about her Kafkaesque paper issue plaguing her Kafka book *The Great Wall of China*, she remarked, "Finding a way through is what it's all about."¹ On finding the balance between words

and page design, images in words and physical pages for the *Façades for Mark Rothko* book, she noted, "We are diurnal beings who require light to see, physically and metaphorically."²

Tara's dear friend Marnie Parsons has written a beautiful piece about Tara that highlights all the local events and connections Tara made for the printers, book artists and writers' communities in Newfoundland.³ When Tara and her husband George Jenner arrived in Newfoundland in 1992 she employed her considerable energy and inspiration to create, connect, inspire, be inspired, and to help others to do all these things. Edible books at tea parties on April Fool's Day in St. John's, for example. Fun! Food! Humour!

Collaborating with others gave her great

joy. She enjoyed putting the different aspects together as a designer. She played music also, as a violinist and pianist, with friends and in public.

Duncan Major described Tara's role as a teacher to me when I asked how it was possible that such an exacting craftsperson such as Tara could also be a kind and encouraging teacher. (She taught everyone from kindergarteners to adults.) Duncan said: "Her talents in teaching, it tears me up. She was helpful and instructive, but never overbearing or demanding. She allowed students to blossom in their own time, in their own way. Her philosophy on teaching was acute and beautiful."

PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

I don't remember not knowing Tara Bryan. In Ontario since the late 1970s we have had two big annual printers' events, the annual book arts fair in late fall at what was then known as the Ontario College of Art, and the Grimsby Wayzgoose on the third Saturday of April. Tara would come to show and sell her work at these shows. I remember her hilarious cards and cleverly designed books. I still have one of her old letterpress notecards in my desk drawer: *The Fickle Finger of Fate*, with a cut out of an index finger pointing that you can spin to land on *Loves Me* or *Loves Me Not*.

My husband George Walker and I had been visiting the East Coast for a quite a few years, always flying straight to Nova Scotia to visit Andrew Steeves and Gary Dunfield at Gaspereau Press's Wayzgoose and open house for a weekend in October whenever George had a new book published by *Porcupine's Quill*. We first met Marnie Parsons on one of the Gaspereau visits.

In 2007 Tara invited George to St. John's to speak at an event for writers the Book Arts Association of Newfoundland and Labrador hosted over the Thanksgiving weekend and I tagged along. It was an inspired if not risky choice on Tara's part to invite a wood engraver of wordless graphic narratives to address a room of writers, but it worked. Tara arranged for us to stay with people who didn't know us, Anita and Will, who left their house key in their mailbox for when we arrived in the wee hours. They are members of the Newfoundland book arts and

art community and opened their spare room and their lives to us because we are fellow book people. There were a lot of cultural celebrations while we were there, including a writers' awards ceremony called *Fresh Fish*. Now I realise that Tara would have had a hand in establishing most of the events. This was our first introduction to St. John's and to Newfoundland. I could see right away why Tara loved the people, the land, and the light here in Newfoundland. The rocks around St. John's seemed to me to curl up at the horizon into a stone bowl on edge protecting the land from the sea and the sky.

Tara invited George back the next year to teach printmaking at St. Michael's Printshop in St. John's and he billeted with Marnie Parsons for a whirlwind week of printing and music and art in time for their wayzgoose celebrations. This included a big goose dinner at Tara and her husband's house with a vegetarian "goose" fashioned specially for those who eschewed real goose.

During this visit George also helped Tara and Marnie by tuning up their printing presses in their respective studios. Tara's was at TJ's Autobody Shop where she had a long room with space for presses and other equipment and a corner for painting which was also the book assembly area and bindery. Her printer's devil, collaborator and friend Duncan Major, described for me the treasures that could be found on every horizontal surface in the shop, including Post-It notes with intricate math calculations as Tara disliked using a calculator. (She had a bachelor's degree in musical composition from the University of New Mexico, and had the blessing of a sound mathematical brain that is given with highly developed musical abilities—and also very handy for all the calculations needed for making books.) After the type had been locked up in the press and all the inking issues solved and bugs worked out, Duncan could start the printing. Tara would retreat, paintbrush in hand, to the painting corner and after a while they would check in with each other. "She'd paint, I'd print," recalls Duncan. "We'd check in. Does this painting look done? How is this printing? Coffee time?"

WIDE HORIZONS

In 1987, defending her MFA at the University of

Wisconsin-Madison, Tara included two book works in her painting thesis show *Enclaves and Ephemera*. She studied typography with Walter Hamady, a very tough and exacting book design professor who often referred to the book as “the Trojan horse of Art.” She studied book binding with Jim Dast who was conservator of University of Wisconsin library, and typography with Phil Hamilton. She also found time, somehow, to study papermaking.

My first books in grad school were published with the imprint Pterodactyl Press (I liked the homophonic Ptero/Tara and the extinct raptor/obsolete printing connection), and when I moved to New York in 1987, I changed the press name to walking bird press.

Between 1987 and 1992, I took courses at the Center for Book Arts in New York City. Through their Work-Study program, I was able to work in the letterpress area in exchange for taking classes and I had the good fortune to take classes with Carol Barton, Hedi Kyle, Barbara Mauriello, Scott McCarney, Susan Share, Carolyn Chadwick and other inspiring books artists. In one of these workshops, I met Zahra Partovi, binder for Vincent FitzGerald & Co., who was looking for an assistant. I worked part-time with Partovi for about a year, then began teaching Art at Rockland Country Day School in Congers, NY.

—Tara Bryan⁴

Tara grew up in Texas under enormous skies and land stretching on forever. She told me once about her family home which would fill up with water in springtime every now and then and the family would drag to the second floor everything from the first floor until the water subsided and then they would put everything back in place. I wondered why Tara’s family wouldn’t move to a house that didn’t flood. Thinking about it for a few years now, I conclude that this is where Tara learned to be undaunted. They loved their home and didn’t mind if things got tough or weird—they would just deal with it and find a way to carry on.

In Tara’s writing about her childhood, she

described a family with lively discussions around the dinner table and what sound like quite liberal views for Texans. Her teenaged observance of faith on Sunday mornings (replacing church attendance) became a time she would consciously share kinship with a world of people she imagined doing the same thing: baking bread. Much later, in 2013, she developed the idea further in her accordion bookwork *Make Bread (not bombs)* in reaction to bombing of the al-Mutanabbi Street booksellers, one side of the book devoted to bread, the other to bombs.

While she was teaching English in China for a year in Sichuan Province, she was also a student of calligraphy and classic ink painting. Over the year she travelled the length of China, drinking in the landscape. For years she must have turned these experiences around and around in her mind as a puzzle. In 2017 in her book *The Great Wall of China* written by Franz Kafka and accompanied by an essay written by Vihanga Perera in 2013, she eventually transformed the experience to fit its enormity in your hand. Illustrated by Duncan Major it is a formidable 235 cm etching that folds out from a 34.4 × 17 cm accordion book.

Tara was elected a member of the Royal Canadian Academy in 2012 for Book Design. She describes her “simmering of ideas” in her RCA profile:

I am a voyeur in the Old French sense of being *one who lies in wait*. I watch for aural, visual and tactile experiences that surprise me and stop me dead in my tracks. I collect them and let them simmer until I find just the right concept or process or presentation to translate them into material objects. I aspire to make books whose structures refer to and enhance the text, books that entice the viewer to explore them. I hope to pass on my sense of play and wonder through the intimate act of touching and reading a book.

Elsewhere she observes:

I love the tactile experience of holding and reading a book—the intimacy created between the viewer and object. The creative process in making books is also quite different from the act of painting, in my experience. I continue to

make books because the process uses a different part of my brain than painting, and gives me a chance to combine verbal ideas and interesting materials in work the viewer can touch.⁵

Her unusual talent for capturing the enormity of a thing while somehow at the same time making it a small enough thing to hold in your hands . . . *The Great Wall of China*; our childhood magical impossibility: *The Rabbit's Hole* from *Alice in Wonderland*. Our own fear of Death in *World Without End*, a tunnel-book listing hundreds of dates on which it has been predicted that the world will end. She showed us the enormity of the relationships of ancient peoples to sacrifice their children to the gods in the burial mounds in the collaborative work *L'Anse Amour/L'Anse aux Morts* (2008). In *Façades for Mark Rothko* (2018), when she thought of Rothko's paintings, she made faceless prints with uncarved inked wood blocks arranged to balance the text, to hinge the words of the poem. To a musician sound is important, and with the sound of the poet reading his poem aloud in his rich baritone voice, she fell in love with Crispin Elsted's poem first as it sounded. Showing the light in her paintings and in her book designs, she illuminates the meaning.

Tara was undaunted and unbowed by huge landscape. As a Texan, she was at home in enormous skies and an endless-seeming landscape rushing to the horizon. Her icebergs are huge paintings, almost as big as life size, portraits of ephemeral, fragile things that overwhelm and awe. Any retrospective exhibit of her painting must also include her book works, which also demand a catalogue in their own right.

There are so many things to say about Tara. She is like an iceberg herself, so much to take in, so much light and reflection, so much unseen under the surface. And ephemeral, as we all are but choose to forget. Our time here is finite. Tara has left us with so many riches that she made with other artists and with poets, but she has left us.

1. Tara Bryan, "Kafka, Chapter 2 ('The best laid schemes o' mice an' men / Gang aft a-gley')," *Tara Bryan* (blog), June 30, 2017, <http://tarabryan.com/kafka-chapter-2-the-best-laid-schemes-o-mice-an-men-gang-aft-a-gley/>
2. Tara Bryan, "Façades for Mark Rothko by Crispin Elsted," *Tara Bryan* (blog), April 29, 2018, <http://tarabryan.com/facades-for-mark-rothko-by-crispin-elsted/>
3. Marnie Parsons, "Tara Bryan RCA (1953–2020)," *billie* (blog), November 13, 2020, <https://billiemag.ca/tara-bryan-rca-1953-2020/>. See also: Deborah Kogan, "Exploring Uncharted Territory: Book Works by Tara Bryan," *Ampersand* (Fall 2008), 1–6, <https://www.lizmenard.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Tara-Bryan-article-Ampersand-Fall-2008.pdf>.
4. Tara Bryan, "About walking bird press," <https://tarabryan.com/about-walking-bird-press/>.
5. Tara Bryan, "About walking bird press."

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~ Michelle Hogan-Walker is an artist and former vice-president of the Arts & Letters Club of Toronto, founder of BOUND Book Arts Fair and partner in George Walker Books & Art Private Press, Toronto, Ontario.



Tara Bryan and some books from walking bird press

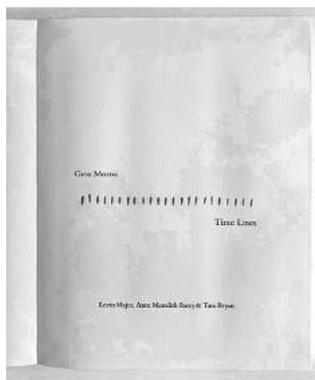
CHESTER GRYSKI offers a personal appraisal of Tara Bryan's major works.

TARA BRYAN WAS A printer and bookbinder, and also a painter. Her studio in Flatrock, a town a short distance north of St. John's, Newfoundland, provided space for her Vandercook and type, space to print and bind and also to continue her painting.

She printed her first book in 1985 while in graduate school and published it under the Pterodactyl Press imprint. She adopted the name "walking bird press" in 1987 for her printing activity when she moved to New York to study at the Centre for Book Arts. However, the first item I found with this imprint is *In The Hands Of The Wind: Sixteen Linocut Prints by Ann Bowman and Tara Bryan*, which was published

in 1993 after she had moved to Newfoundland. She has created both unique books and books in multiple copies. The last appeared in 2019. Prior to her death on September 29, 2020, Bryan made approximately 50 books, broadsides, tunnel books and other book creations in multiple copies plus 13 unique books. Of these, I have examined 25 of the books and broadsides in multiple copies; I will limit myself to these, as I have not seen or handled the unique books but only read Tara's descriptions of them.

In looking overall at the book work of Tara Bryan, several points stand out. First, the fact that you see others involved in the making of the book, especially two of the major books. Second,



Top: Cover and pages of Gros Morne Time Lines. Bottom: The book opened up to reveal the various linocuts and text blocks.



her frequent use of the concertina (or accordion) fold in her book structures. Third, two of her major books tell of Newfoundland and Labrador, the place she moved to and made her home.

Gros Morne Time Lines published in 2000 was her first major book. Gros Morne is that area on the northern tip of the west coast of Newfoundland. Tara's collaborators were fellow Newfoundlanders Kevin Major, an award-winning author who wrote the text which is his reflection on the land, and Anne Meredith Barry, who like Tara was a visual artist, an elected member of Royal Canadian Academy, and who provided the coloured linocuts and drawings which illustrate the book. This book format is a concertina fold in 24 panels with each panel 30.5 × 22.8 cm. While it sits comfortably on one's lap, it is stunningly displayed when positioned so that all the panels are visible. There is a rhythm to the linocuts with the reds and blues and yellows balanced against the text blocks in black and with the dingbats variously positioned on the pages.

Tara Bryan has stated in *Gros Morne Time Lines: Exploring the relationship between visual art and the written word against the backdrop of personal experience with one of Canada's most stunning and prized heritage landscapes* (2005), a video collaboration between CBC and Parks Canada:

I really like collaborating with other people. It's really interesting to do it with books because the boundaries you start out with are very clear—the writer writes, the illustrator illustrates, and the printer prints, the binder binds. You start out with really defined jobs but over the process of the

collaboration everybody has ideas. Kevin [Major] and Anne [Meredith Barry] were great to work with.

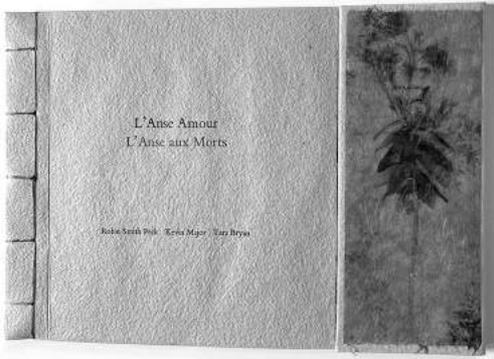
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We took proofs of the type and Anne's drawings and photocopies of her little individual sketches and we had them made into dingbats . . . Kevin got the first stab at it—sort of organised things; organised Anne's big images with the text the way he thought they should go together; and then Anne got to play around with that and then I made the final decision.¹

There are two editions of *Gros Morne Time Lines*. The first edition limited to 75 copies was published in 2000. It was selected for the Canadian Bookbinders and Book Artists Guild's Art of the Book exhibition in 2003, and was included in the Uncovering Artists' Books exhibition at the Grimsby Public Art Gallery in 2016. A second, unlimited edition, was published in 2007 at a reduced size and printed offset.

The other example of a text located in Newfoundland and Labrador and of Tara's collaboration is *L'Anse Amour/L'Anse aux Morts* (2006). *L'Anse Amour*, formerly called *L'Anse-aux-Morts*, is a Maritime Archaic burial site on the Labrador coast. The text is Kevin Major's reflection on the young boy buried there, and on the site itself. It is printed on gampi paper. The 23 prints in digital, relief, *chine collé* and stencil by Robin Smith Peck that are spread among the pages of the text are of the plants in the area and aspects of the site. They are printed on Canson Vellum and Mingeishi Awagami Kozo paper. The book



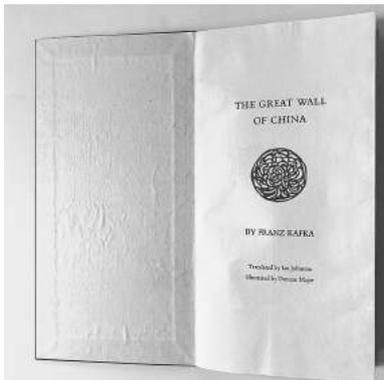


L'Anse Amour/L'Anse aux Morts (2006)

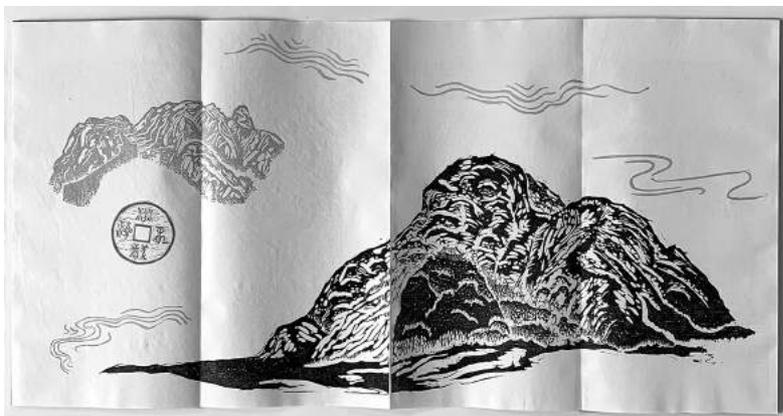
is bound codex fashion. Tara also used Lokta Pinto paper for the endpapers and St. Armand Canal paper for the covers. The various papers make reading the book a very tactile experience.

With Franz Kafka's *The Great Wall of China* (2017), Tara again used the concertina structure. The panel/page is tall and narrow measuring 34.4 x 17 cm and the text, set in 12-point Bembo, treats each panel as a page. The text is printed on one side only of the panel. The other sides of the

panels have a single landscape in linocuts only seen when the book is turned around and opened up to its full 235 cm. The linocuts are the work of Duncan Major (son of Kevin Major), who initially joined Tara's studio in 2000 at age 14 as a printer's devil, setting type, operating the presses and providing other assistance while pursuing his education. After completing his university degree, he established himself as a graphic designer and set up his own private press, Walpurgis Press. He



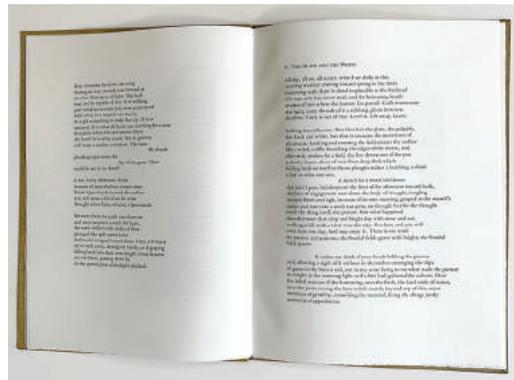
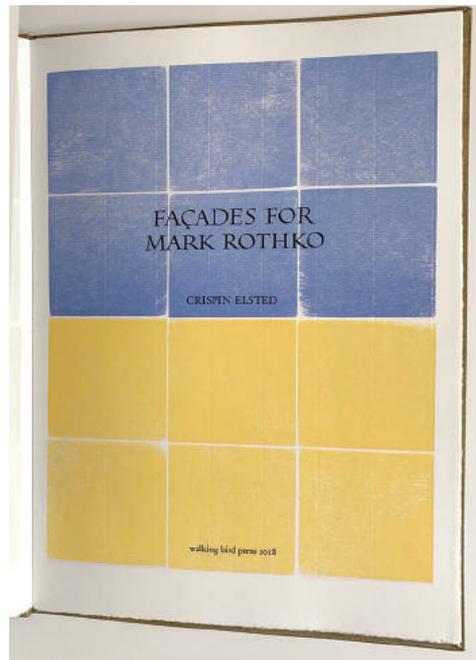
The Great Wall of China (2017)



also continued occasional collaborations with Tara such as the linocuts he created for *The Great Wall of China*, where he is credited as illustrator with no mention of being printer's devil.

In 2018, Tara printed *Façades for Mark Rothko*, the book for which she was awarded an honourable mention in the Alcuin Awards for Excellence in Book Design in Canada. Crispin Elsted authored the text consisting of poetry in which Elsted considers Rothko's paintings, and a final Note of three pages. The design is unusual because it is not a text interspersed with images illuminating the text as might be expected. The page measures 31 × 21.8 cm. The text itself comprises 18 pages in total set in Van Dijck and occupies the centre portion of the book. This portion is pure text without illustration. It is bounded on either side by the endpapers plus three additional leaves in the case of the front and two in the case of the back. Each of the five pages at the front and four pages at the back is printed with 12 maple blocks each measuring 6 × 6 cm in a single colour. These fill the page. Each page is a different colour and the order of the pages front and back differs. A single leaf similarly printed, recto and verso, separates the poem from the Note. The title page is one of the front five but it has the blocks in the top half printed in blue and the blocks in the bottom half printed in yellow. The images, whether considered illustrations or decorations, are a nod in the direction of Rothko but not an attempt to reproduce a Rothko painting. The book is bound with Asahi Bookcloth on two-point boards. Overall, there is a feeling of lightness and not the expected weight of a book of these dimensions.

The remainder of the walking bird press books are smaller and with fewer pages. Eleven use a concertina format. These are without collaborators with the exception of Duncan Major, credited in several colophons as printer's devil. The exception is *The Bears Come to Tea* (2016), where he is credited both as an illustrator and as printer's devil. They are all interesting to handle and read. She has included her own linocuts in some. Two books can be considered tunnel books. Tunnel books require the use of a concertina fold in order to collapse. My favourite is a tunnel book titled *Down the Rabbit Hole*, an allusion to *Alice*



Top and middle: *Façades for Mark Rothko* (2018).
Bottom: Smaller books by walking bird press.

