

Editors' Introduction: Praise for Handmade Literacies in an Age of the Standardized King

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Michael Joseph and Lissa Paul

This special issue on “*Handmade Literacies*” arises out of our opposition to standardized literacy and our admiration for texts hand-crafted, lovingly designed, and thoughtfully made. In an age of high-stakes standardized literacy education, reading and writing have been hived off as a category separate from literacy. Children are being forced to read texts which have been bleached of all color and life. Philip Pullman underlines the danger in an essay published in the *Guardian* (30 September 2003), expressing his concerns about the deleterious effects of “the brutal unceasing emphasis on testing and marking” in Britain (a shadow of its practice in North America), and the “superficial way of working” to which it leads. As an example, Pullman describes his dismay when judging a short story competition in which the entries “were all superficially bright and competent, correctly spelled and punctuated and all absolutely lifeless”—the result of the drummed-in values of literacy tests.

In an attempt to defend literary life against standardized lifelessness, we’ve coined a new term, “handmade literacies,” and developed this issue of *The Lion and the Unicorn* to explore it. Because we thought that book-artists and book-makers could offer the best signature definitions, we invited authors Jack Gantos and Philip Pullman, and book artists Robert Sabuda and Barbara Henry, to riff—in the improvisatory manner of jazz musicians—on handmade literacies.

Author Jack Gantos opens the issue by sharing one of his private notebook pages—so revealing an imaginative construction prior to its actual construction, a back story to a story not yet written. The pink Post-it™ notes on Jack’s page evoke something characteristic of his writing,

something hidden and revealed, something cancelled and rejected at once on top and underneath. Philip Pullman offers a variation on much the same authorial game in his intimate essay on the making and faking of an imaginative place, in his case, Lyra's Oxford. He renders the vaguely familiar slightly strange (as Russian formalists might put it). The third riff also plays on ideas of making and faking; Robert Sabuda, a paper engineer and artist, refocuses attention away from the mathematical and manual and invites us to listen to the aural and cerebral dimensions. Sabuda listens to the paper he works with and makes it obey the order and structure he imposes—a sensual technique that parallels Barbara Henry's loving attention to the impress of letterforms on a sheet of paper.

"Printing has a secret language," says Henry in her poetic praise to the art of setting type by hand. Her account foreshadows Michael Joseph's intimate story of hand-making a private, hand-picked selection of nursery verse for his newborn daughter Hannah, in which the act of printing becomes a symbol of fatherly devotion. Michael's essay is the first in the series, marking the link between the physical making of the book, and the act of imagining the content. He links the emotional faith and commitment to hand-making with the delicate, precise technical knowledge required to bring the idea into being as a material object.

The remaining essays in the issue demonstrate various kinds of textual remakings which have taken place over the centuries. Each one develops ideas sounded in the introductory riffs—on writing, printing, cutting and pasting, reimagining, overwriting, handcrafting, and individualizing texts. Gillian Adams draws attention to the links between medieval and modern children by describing the kinds of marginalia in medieval manuscripts which seem distinctly familiar despite the gap in space and time: doodles, boxes, practice letters and signatures, and pictures of swords and genitalia unrelated to the text they decorate. Judith Gero John explains how private, domestic advice from parent to child (often recorded in medieval manuscripts) undergoes a transformation through the centuries, into the public domain of the advice book. Andrea Immel writes about a specific scrapbook made by a particular boy in the eighteenth century. The process she describes opens out into a perfect metaphor for the art of book making; the child cuts up existing books and makes a book of his own. Ironically, that act is almost an inversion of Jack's process: the public printed book returned to the private individual memory bank. The final essay by Jill Kedersha McClay ends, fittingly, with teenagers enjoying themselves as they reshape texts to their own design. Jill plays on Bakhtin's time/space ideas of the chronotope. She also, again fittingly, picks up ideas in Michael and Judith and Gillian's

essays: the remaking of something old into something new, the fashioning of the public and standard into something private and individual.

In an age when children are being suffocated and smothered by the emptiness of the timeless present of standardized tests and standardized prose, when idealized prose is described as having a topic sentence and a conclusion, when the excruciatingly bad prose of literacy tests is supposed to pass for good, the essays in “Handmade Literacies” celebrate the individual, the messy, the defacing and remaking of texts, the loving, the forbidden, the joyous and the inconclusive.