Paul Maravelas. *Letterpress Printing: A Manual for Modern Fine Press Printers*. New Castle, Del., and London: Oak Knoll Press and The British Library, 2005. 220 pp.; US \$39.95. ISBN 158456167X.

Discovering a passion for letterpress printing is enlivening and exciting: a whole world of possibility and creativity, of careful and thoughtful experiment, of hand and eye, ink and paper, word and letterform, unfolds. This craft, however, has a long history; becoming intimate with that tradition requires dedication, much practice and access to the knowledge of master printers, by and large a generous lot. One way of gaining that access is to turn to some of the manuals available – historical and contemporary – written by long-practising printers.

Paul Maravelas's *Letterpress Printing* is a helpful resource for beginners and a useful reminder for more experienced printers, offering a succinct, informative overview of the basics of letterpress printing. The book has more than 80 line-drawings complementing its information, as well as appendices with glossaries of terms relating to printing and paper, and the dates of manufacture for Vandercook and Chandler & Price presses, two of the most common makes of presses in use today.

With over 40 years of printing experience, Maravelas brings a tremendous amount of practical experience to the writing of this work. He has taught letterpress printing on both platen and cylinder presses, been a student at Linotype University in Denmark and Monotype University in the USA, and studied the history of books and printing; he works in museums, operates a private press from his home, and teaches occasional workshops at the Minnesota Center for Book Arts in Minneapolis.

Thorough if not exhaustive, accessible without being condescending, the book is thoughtfully arranged and designed. Maravelas starts with a basic discussion of letterpress printing, including its differences from other kinds of printing; after this gesture toward definition and history, he moves quickly on to such essentials as measurement, typographical surfaces and different kinds of type, before tackling the steps of printing – from setting type to locking up a form, from inking a press to adjusting makeready. He includes short chapters on how to choose paper; set up, maintain, lubricate, and move a printing press; establish a print shop; and plan projects; he continues with chapters on cleaning and distributing type; editing and proofreading; and safety in the print shop. The layout of the book is clean and quite easy on the eye, with large margins for housing Maravelas's many figures.

As its subtitle indicates, this book is a manual. Its style and tone are crisp and instructive. Those of us who long for a beautifully turned phrase, for a resonant sentence, are not going to find anything like that here; Maravelas's prose is workman-like, but this is a working text, clear and concise. What it lacks in poetry and exuberance, it compensates for in technical understanding. That's not a spurious comment – there is no reason a manual can not be lively and engaging as well as instructive; the style of the book reminds me that Maravelas comes from a technical rather than a writerly tradition. Another indication is his suggestion, in the section on proof-reading, that computer-set texts can be checked for spelling and consistency with spell-check, a suggestion that makes the editor and the ex-English professor in me cringe. Still, the technical tradition he comes from is exceedingly well informed and helpful, and everywhere evident in this work.

If I have any real complaint about the book, it would be its concision. In many respects, concision is a strength of the work, allowing Maravelas to broach many topics in a relatively short book. Often, however, I wanted more detailed descriptions, more step-by-step information about processes. Maravelas's explanation of setting type, for instance, was good and the several diagrams included of the lay of the type case were most helpful, but as a relatively inexperienced printer, I'd have benefited from more detailed discussions of several other processes – the making of photopolymer plates, dampening paper, or adjusting for image problems, for instance. These topics are touched upon, but not in as detailed a way as they might have been. Richard-Gabriel Rummonds's *Printing on the Iron Handpress* (Oak Knoll, 1997) offers the kind of detailed descriptions that bring the many aspects of printing more readily into focus: Rummonds's book, of course, is well over twice the length of Maravelas's. Maravelas chose brevity and breadth over depth – a legitimate and useful choice – but as do all choices, it comes with some inherent limitations.

The real subtleties of printing are learned through trial and error, by rolling up your sleeves and printing. That said, having Maravelas's book to hand as a quick reference for clarifying some of the basics and for troubleshooting will be a great help.

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