
The stated aim of Jen Lindsay’s new book is that it is a guide to fine binding, that is, creating or rebinding an item as a leather-bound book (including leather-jointed endpapers, gilt edges, and doublures). She is encouraging towards novices tackling such an ambitious project as a means of progressing in their self-education and professionalism. Bookbinders at all stages of development will find something of interest in reading this book, which could inspire future projects or make a little more clear in their minds what they are attempting to accomplish and how. As a novice bookbinder myself I found it interesting to get expert-level explanations and clear instructions about many advanced ways of bookbinding that I might wish to attempt.

The book’s contents are divided up according to the logical sequential stages of the construction of a leather-bound book, including: preliminary work; making the leather-jointed endpapers; edge treatment; preparing for sewing and sewing the text-block; rounding and backing; preparing and facing the book boards; sewing the endbands (headband and tailband); spine linings, setting the slips (tapes); paring the cover; preparation for covering; covering; putting down leather-jointed endpapers; preparing the ground for doublures; and preparing and putting in leather doublures. Interspersed between the instructions are explanations of the reasons for each operation. The instructions in red print and the explanations in black roughly evenly divide the book. This organization works very well: the book is less a technical tome than a user-friendly manual in the manner of a cookbook with its itemized lists of “have ready” materials. *Fine Bookbinding*, in fact, is designed to be used as you work. The red print frequently has italicized phrases, sentences, and paragraphs for important insights into the process, as well as for emphasis and warnings. The 65 stages are clearly visible in the margins as one flips through the large square pages, and the sections are divided by black papers, all of which contributes to finding your way through the book accurately and with ease. The illustrations are small and black and white but serve their purpose and are preferable to the hand-drawn illustrations that are common in books on bookbinding. On the first read-through the rationales behind the operations held my interest most and I skimmed over the technical, hands-on instructions, but I imagine once put to use as intended, the latter would rivet your attention. I would recommend the whole be read through first.
The two thoughtful quotations from T.S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf – on the way in which artists feel their way through to an act of creation, guided by, and rebelling against, technical convention and experience – subtly reflect the philosophy that permeates this guide. Well written and always informative, it contains suggestions for good work practice and for the evaluation of one’s work, which will encourage bookbinders to treat their creations with a professional seriousness, consciously placing their projects within a wider context of craftsmanship. These suggestions, however, do not overwhelm: the book remains primarily a guide. For the same reason the history of books and bookmaking is not dwelt on, as it would excessively inflate the handy volume. In the structural and aesthetic considerations on endbands I found much information that I have not encountered in other guides of this sort and it has given me the confidence to make informed decisions on their use in any future project of mine that might include them.

The expertise supplied on the matter of choosing thread, needles, leather, and various other tools and materials was, for me, alone worth the price of the book. The appendices on creating paste were also helpful. The list of material suppliers and the bibliography (here printed on gold paper along with the index to distinguish it from the working text) are always important features of an instructional book such as this, and Fine Bookbinding has both; unfortunately the suppliers listed are all British (with the exception of one European). The bibliography, which includes out-of-print classics, is divided by subject and is a valuable checklist of must-haves for all bookbinders.

Anyone interested in bookbinding will certainly find this modest-looking book with its plain cover to be a useful reference, and more experienced fine bookbinders will find it a convenient and easy-to-use guide. The author’s enthusiasm for the subject was a delightful feature of the book and it did in fact stimulate me to think about the craft in a different way, emphasizing the respect that a book artist should hold for him- or herself, as in former times. The author’s long experience in bookbinding and tutoring (at the Roehampton Institute of West London and the City Literary Institute in London) is evident not just in the expert knowledge of materials and techniques involved, but in her ability to impart this knowledge in a detailed and straightforward manner. Much thought has been put into the design of this book to maximize its ease of use, and I cannot think of how that feature could have been improved.

ALEXANDER MACLENNAN
Carleton University
Erratum


Means and Purposes:

A Suggestion to Our Members and Friends

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_I give, devise, and bequeath to the Bibliographical Society of Canada the sum of ______ which shall be held by the Society as an endowment, the income from said endowment to be used for such of the Society’s purposes as its Council in its discretion may determine._

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