

Jana Pullman
Narrator

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Interviewer

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BB: My name is Betty Bright, and today, July 6th, 2015, I am interviewing Jana Pullman at Open Book, in downtown Minneapolis. This interview is being conducted on behalf of Minnesota Center for Book Arts' 30th Anniversary Oral History Project, which has been financed in part with funds provided by the State of Minnesota, through the Minnesota Historical Society, from the Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund.

BB: Jana, thank you for visiting with us today. As a way of introducing you, at least briefly, you operate Western Slope Bindery, which specializes in the craft of fine bookbinding, conservation and repair. You have exhibited internationally, and teach widely including throughout Greater Minnesota with the MCBA on the Road program. Among other honors, in 2013 you were recognized as the Book Artist of the Year by the Friends of the St. Paul Public Library. To further set our context, could you please describe the work you do at Western Slope Bindery?

JP: I do a lot of repair. I work with individual clients, everything from family bibles to various book objects from individuals who collect, to working with some people who are online dealers in book art [who are] interested in trying to improve the condition, because a book that is more functional with the covers attached is easier to sell than one where the boards have started to separate.

BB: And how would you describe your artistic practice as it relates to the materials and processes of book art?

JP: Well, the tradition of fine design bindings is unique, one-of-a-kind bindings that you have created a special cover for. And for that I am always interested in the history of books. I do a lot of history. I love to look at old books to see how different artisans have developed designs, and designed different tools, and whether I can replicate some of that, especially when I am doing gold work. And then the other big influence as an artist, since a book is a whole unit, I love to take illustrations from the book because a pictorial cover to me is always a more dynamic appearance, so I try to find an illustration that I can replicate in different techniques on the cover, and every once in a while I go for a more

traditional, Art Deco, geometrical pattern. It depends on the book and what the presentation should be, because the content of the book always influences what I do.

BB: Thank you. Let's change our focus back in time and to MCBA. MCBA was incorporated as a non-profit in 1983 and opened its doors to the public in 1985. You mentioned that you moved to Minneapolis around 1997, but I am not sure if that was your first contact with MCBA. Had you visited here before that?

JP: Yes, actually when I was working with my graduate program, part of it was in the University of Wisconsin and part in the University of Iowa. 1986 was my first visit to Minneapolis to visit a friend over the Thanksgiving holiday, and she told me about the Center. She knew I was interested in printing and book arts, so that was my first time to find out about the Center and visit. The next year while returning to Wisconsin we took a field trip to Minneapolis, and of course the Center for Book Arts was one of the highlights of that trip, as well as visiting the University and their printmaking program, their papermaking program at that time.

BB: Were there early interests or a particular background that may have positioned you to respond to the idea of a book arts center?

JP: Yes. I started out as a printmaker; I did mostly etching and lithography, and it was my very last semester when a one-time class was offered on teaching letterpress. And the first thing that the instructor did was take us to the special collections library—this was at Brigham Young University—and pulled out the artists' books. I had never heard of an artist's book before, and realized that this was a better place for my work to be in, because the idea of a book, where people would be holding your work, they would be relating it to a text, they would be able to see it in a series, it would be filled with many images; it just felt like a much better relationship than having that print on the wall behind glass where people would stand away from the work. So right there, from the first moment I saw artists' books, I realized that is where I wanted my work to be presented. And that is what influenced me later when I looked for a graduate program. I wanted a program that taught letterpress and papermaking, which brought me out to the Midwest, and then I began my program in Wisconsin.

BB: You began your program in Wisconsin, and then you went to Iowa?

JP: Iowa. There was an exchange program with the Big Ten where you could spend a year away and have that be part of your program. So I spent first year in Wisconsin working with Walter Hamady and Jim Dast who was the book conservator and privately taught bookbinding for the art students. And when I realized that Timothy Barrett was down in Iowa, I joined this program that allowed me to go down there, and also Kim Merker, who was the Director for their Center for the Book and started Windhover Press. Also when I got down to Iowa I met Bill Anthony, the book conservator who taught

classes. So I was able to work with some of the top people in the country. I had no idea, other than hearing of Tim's reputation, so it gave me a really great foundation.

BB: When you made that decision to move, was MCBA a factor in your decision to move to Minnesota?

JP: Well, that is it. After graduation I returned to Utah, and I worked at the University of Utah doing book repair for their general collection for about 3-1/2 years. And when an opportunity came to return to the Midwest to work with Tim Barrett, I became his paper apprentice, and I was a full-time papermaker for four years. At the end of that time my partner and I knew that we would have to find a new home, and began to explore throughout the Midwest to see which places to move. After months of debate and research, we realized that for both of us, Minnesota was a better choice. For me, it was a community where it was very supportive of the arts, and I knew the Center. I had been following the Center for years; I knew the classes that had been taught there, knew about some of the people, and so I knew there would be a community I could join when I came here. So, 1997 is when we moved to Minneapolis.

BB: In 1997, late 1990s, that was a period of transition for MCBA. Amanda Degener had stepped into the role of MCBA's Artistic Director, and Board President Jay Cowles was acting in the Executive Director role as MCBA reconfigured itself to move forward. So as you joined MCBA's community during that critical transition I wonder if you have any memories of the artists' community. How did you begin to form your community at the Center? Who did you get to know first, and how did all that happen?

JP: When I first came here, I had met Amanda previously, and of course Bridget O'Malley who was [Tim Barrett's] former paper apprentice [and then ran Cave Paper with Degener]. When I came to the Center it is when they had just brought in Peggy Korsmo-Kennon as the new director. I talked with them about being able to do some classes, and they let me begin teaching here. And that gave me the opportunity to meet a lot of the people who were here, and also as I began to teach, broaden my experience with various people. And so I have been teaching classes consistently since the fall of 1997.

BB: The interesting part of that first center is that it was an open space, but if you were involved in one studio, you pretty much lived in that space unless you happened to interact with artists from other studios.

JP: Yes. That is when I first met Denny Ruud. I am trying to remember some of the printers. Is that when Chip Schilling was working?

BB: Chip Schilling might well have been working.

JP: I remember the first few years, when I met him. In the office, who were some of the people?

BB: Pretty much Peggy. Mary Jo Pauly [Artistic Director] would have been the person you have the most contact with because she was curating exhibitions. And there was a program person.

JP: And Julia Welles, she was working in the office, so I worked with her because of teaching, she was in charge of adult classes.

BB: Let's step outside of the building for a minute as we think historically about the city of Minneapolis, and how much it has changed since MCBA opened and since it moved. The neighborhood around the McKesson Building and that original site, what was that like? Are there memories or thoughts that come to mind as far as the space and how it felt?

JP: It was always an issue of getting there early to get parking, and encouraging the workshop participants on how they could get there. The space itself: I did a lot of papermaking and binding classes, and it was nice to use those studios, and [binder] Denny Ruud had made several different presses and punching jigs, so it was really nice to work in the space. Having access to some of the larger equipment, the board shears and paper beaters made a lot of the classes very fun to work with. And I didn't do a lot of stuff downtown; MCBA was the reason I would come to that neighborhood.

BB: So, you didn't necessarily associate downtown Minneapolis with an arts and cultural hub at that time?

JP: No.

BB: In 2000, as you know, MCBA partnered with The Loft Literary Center and Milkweed Editions to move in as joint tenants in Open Book, where we are conducting this interview, and this is in the Downtown East neighborhood. Were you involved at the time of that site selection and that early renovation on this site?

JP: Actually, I was on one of the committees. They had recruited a lot of people from the community to make suggestions for the studios. So I was helping them with the bindery and paper studios. I remember when we first came to this building, when it was still the old electronic warehouse, and seeing some of the space and knowing the possibilities. It was quite interesting and then it was a lot of fun to work with the architects. And to discuss some of the concerns we had, in papermaking of course knowing the floors would have to be taken care of because of the water, and setting up the beater rooms so that we could reduce some of the noise of the machinery, and knowing that once those rooms were opened up to the light when the windows began to be put in, it really transitioned beautifully. I liked the fact that they wanted to preserve a lot of the old, so these

wonderful old stone walls, the bricks, [and] some of the different architectural elements that they incorporated into the design I thought were wonderful, because it gave it an artistic sense but it also acknowledged the history of the space.

BB: Garth Rockcastle ran the design [team], and interestingly from that same firm, Meyer Scherer & Rockcastle, Jeff Scherer designed MCBA's first space, in the McKesson Building, so we were fortunate to have that same architectural firm work here. So you took one of those hardhat tours? What was the space like?

JP: Well, at that time you know you could see that there were areas that needed a lot of repair, and it was full of boxes and storage, to see some of the sizes of the space. The neighborhood at that time did not seem very interesting.

BB: Tell us about that.

JP: It was an area where there didn't seem to be a lot going on. There were some warehouse spaces near by. There was some concern about the security of the building and the individuals at night, so that is one of the reasons why the coded system to get in was pushed. Because it did seem a little desolate in some areas, and knowing that people would be here late at night working on their own projects, particularly with the Co-op members. At the same time, it felt like a great way to enlarge the space and give us more opportunities in the communities.

BB: Did you attend the grand opening in 2000?

JP: Yes.

BB: Do you have any memories about that day and night?

JP: It was just so wonderful to see it in a more completed state, and also [see] the excitement of the community. And I loved the idea that there was now going to be this connection with other organizations. I had heard about the Loft but didn't really know much about them—and also Milkweed, and so to have it be a book building was an interesting idea, and that was the evening where I made a connection with all that.

BB: Do you think MCBA's identity has changed because we have now moved from a solo space to a shared space? Do you sense any change in that community and how people interact with one another, and just the feeling or the vibe of visiting MCBA now, now that we are in that shared Open Book space?

JP: I see all the organizations still as individual organizations but there is that connection. I teach an introduction to bookbinding class very regularly, usually three to four times a year. And most of the time I have a few individuals who are writers, and they are people who have taken classes at the Loft and now they want to be able to produce their own

book. And so it is this interesting connection with the community. One of the things that has always intrigued me about the book arts is that collaboration with people, that I can interact with writers. I don't see myself as an author, and so being able to connect with them is always a wonderful opportunity, and on a book project to have that completed in the end and the fact that most books are a collaboration of several people is a really great thing for me.

BB: What needs has MCBA in particular filled for you, and have those needs changed over time as you have progressed in your career as an artist and a teacher?

JP: The community support. When you are an artist you don't want to be totally isolated, and it is always helpful to have other people to have conversations with, to have encouragement, support, see potentials of other projects that they may be involved in, and also the access to some of the equipment. I did one time purchase a board shear, but I could not get it into my studio which is in the basement of my home, and so having it only in a garage is not a terribly practical solution. Also, the presses and some of the other equipment [are helpful], and sometimes just having this space: when I am working on a big edition, to be able to come in and have access to those tables and be able to go through some of the process. And I love teaching, it has always been a passion of mine, and also I like taking classes, so having the opportunity to participate with different visiting artists and classes, because it is always wonderful to see someone explain a process, and even if it is something I already know how to do, I learn a lot watching someone else do the work. And also as an instructor watching someone else explaining a process, it is like, oh, I should remember to do that, I should also include that part in my presentation, so I feel like I am constantly learning things. And I am constantly encouraging students to look for opportunities to work with other people either in a classroom or individually in collaboration, because it is another way to learn a process. I always say, you want to always have a Plan B, because you run into little glitches, little difficulties, materials that are not cooperating when you are working on books, so it is nice to have someone else that might have an answer for you.

BB: If we look at the inverse of that, how you might have shaped MCBA's community in turn, [those influences include] teaching throughout those years, your interest in history, and contemporary interpretations but with historical craft. Has your involvement evolved over the years? You have had a continuum of teaching, but has your involvement changed in other ways, or have other aspects come into play?

JP: Oh yes, over the years it has been a different influence on me. Also MCBA has always been a wonderful resource for me because they will give my name out to people for different projects; it has helped to give me a better reputation across the country, because when I am out there proposing a class for another organization or another Center, when they see my history [with] MCBA it assures them that, yes, I can do that workshop, yes, I have that experience doing these kind of things.

BB: I want to touch on the neighborhood of Open Book, because we talked about the nature of the neighborhood when MCBA first opened in Open Book. It has been fifteen years now. Could you comment on how that neighborhood has evolved? What are the differences today from when Open Book first opened?

JP: Oh yes, when they first opened, across the street was a small little gas station, the liquor store, I can't remember the name...

BB: Liquor Depot.

JP: Liquor Depot. And other than that it was just a big empty muddy parking lot, and there were a lot of open areas, and it was quite isolated—yes, there were some businesses still close by. But now, when you see all of the buildings that have gone up, all of the condominiums, how much the neighborhood has shifted, it has a totally different look and feel. Of course now traffic and parking is a little harder because of the increase, but it has been quite a shift.

BB: Do you feel from your own involvement at MCBA over the years that MCBA's mission or its vision has shifted, or has it stayed constant? What are your impressions of the role that MCBA has played in our local book arts community over thirty years?

JP: I think that it has grown stronger, its focus has not really shifted; they were always interested in promoting different aspects of the book arts. Now of course with the Certificate program it has given those people who are willing to take the time to go through that a very strong foundation for their work in the book arts. It has always had some very interesting exhibitions but of course now they have [grown] bigger and they have more work coming in from around the country than they did in the past. I see it only gaining strength. It has always been focused around teaching and promoting the craft.

BB: I know that you have exhibited nationally [and] you have taught across the country. Do you feel that MCBA's role has played out in the larger book arts field in the US? Do you get a sense of the impact we have had across the country? How do you talk about MCBA when you are teaching in Utah or somewhere else?

JP: Most people have heard of the Center. I have done quite a bit of teaching in North Carolina and in Tennessee as well as out west in Utah and elsewhere, so these people don't always travel to the Midwest but they are familiar with the Center. Over the years as different people have moved on and taken on roles in different places, I think the influence has spread in that way too.

BB: Do you think there is something characteristically Minnesotan in the fact that MCBA started in the Twin Cities and has remained relatively strong over thirty years? Is there a Midwestern or Minnesotan aspect to that phenomenon, or not?

JP: Well, I am not sure. I think it has been a supportive community, and the fact that there is funding and support for the arts here, which you do not find in other regions around the country. But interest also [comes from] the outside community. People are supportive of books and do seem to know of the Center even if they are not necessarily interested in learning the crafts. I think the community as a whole is very supportive of the arts.

BB: We can end with a question from a perspective of thirty years. Do you feel that MCBA has [created] a legacy [in] the arts, be it the book arts or the arts in general in Minnesota? If so, what might that legacy be? What has MCBA given back to the community?

JP: When you think about all of the artists and the various books that have been produced here, the different letterpress as well as different bindings and things that people have done, it has promoted a lot. Winter Book always focuses on authors that are from the area, and any time you are encouraging artists it is a good thing. It has also helped keep the interest in books more active in this community, because you get to see all the variety and how artists interact. One of my favorite things while I am here at the Center [while] I walk through the gallery, is to occasionally have impromptu conversations with people. And people who are not familiar with this, when they see some of the work that is here and to be able to explain to them what is going on and what the ideas are of some of the other pieces in the shows, it is really, you can tell, it is opening a new window in their world.

BB: I think we will end with that. On behalf of MCBA's artist community, its board, faculty and the thousands of Minnesotans who have participated here, I would just like to extend our sincere thanks, Jana.

JP: Well, thank you, it has been quite fun.

BB: Jana, you have been involved with ten of MCBA's Winter Books over the years. The Winter Book is the annual publication created on-site by MCBA's artist community. I was hoping that we could look at some of your bindings or work with the Winter Books. Would you mind introducing us to some of your works?

JP: The first piece I did was in 2001, *Icewalk*, by Judith Guest. My first experience with the Winter Book was as the printer. It was interesting; at the time we were working with a design firm on many of the books, and Mary Jo Pauly was the Artistic Director, and so I printed the pages, and then as the printer I was obligated to do the chapbook, so, just a simple pamphlet stitch, this is a single signature. It was really interesting to work on this because when we were doing the binding we got together with a group of volunteers, because there were a hundred or so copies that needed to be done—no, two hundred copies of the chapbook. And Judith Guest came that night because she wanted to sew the book with us. It was really fun. She talked with us that night about her experiences as a

writer. It was wonderful to spend that evening with a group of people and at the end to have that big project completed. That started my influence.

JP: The next year I printed again, and this is *The Mystery of the Jeweled Cross*, by Larry Millett, and they wanted it to be a smaller format. This one is a longer text, and at this time, the first two books were printed using monotype, which means individual lead pieces—you receive them but they always had to be modified [in their] placement, arrangement of the page, so there was a lot more work involved. But it was still a nice experience to go through. And they wanted to have a more traditional look. This copy [is] one of the standards that was done. I didn't find a chapbook edition that I would have put together. But it was a really interesting experience to go through. Also, when you are focused on a smaller format, it requires different things.

In 2003 was the first year that I did the binding for the deluxe edition. And for a deluxe edition I usually have to do thirty-five, and this is the slipcase for the book, with handmade paper by Mary Hark. I always like working with other artists on these, and this one was a bound leather edition, and this was the very first time I did a leather edition. Most of the other bindings before this had been one-of-a-kind, leather-bound books, and of course the repair of leather, which is a totally different thing. So, [for this I] produced thirty-five, and this one is called *Winter Reader*, and the author is Louise Erdrich. It features images for the different stories by various papermakers in the community, and being a papermaker, of course I was thrilled to work with these pieces. This one is Amanda Degener's and it focuses around one of [Erdrich's] short stories. This one is Bridget O'Malley. Let's see if we can find all of them. Rebecca Alm, Mary Hark, and Jeff Rathermel. It was fun to work with, first of all, such wonderful stories, and then to be able to focus around the artwork. Mary Jo Pauly was the Artistic Director at the time, so she asked people to propose what they would do. I looked for different materials that I could focus around, and color schemes, with the title *Winter Reader*. I wanted blues and golds to distinguish the winter. Of course in Minnesota we have to have our winters.

I printed one more edition, *The Grammarian's Five Daughters*, by Eleanor Arnason, and [for] this one they chose a long format, and so I was able to incorporate polymer plates, because there was a series of illustrations that was presented, and there was no way I could reproduce that in metal type. This was the last one I printed, 2006. After that I have continued to do the deluxe edition. Do you want to go through all of them?

BB: Why don't you choose a few favorites, if possible!

JP: This book is one where I did not only the deluxe edition but I also did what is referred to as the standard edition, because at that time, the person who was going to do it had to leave the project, and so I stepped in to assist. The standard is clothbound, using a Japanese decorative paper. This is a book by Louis Jenkins printed in 2004, the illustrations are by Chandler O'Leary, and it was also printed by Sara Langworthy. It was a fun collaboration because Sara and Jeff Rathermel, who was [MCBA's] Artistic

Director at the time, we got together and started talking about formats, styles, things we wanted to do.

BB: Is *Distance from the Sun* the title of this one?

JP: Yes, *Distance from the Sun*. This is the deluxe, and I wanted to mirror some of the look of the other book on the box, and this one incorporates a copper plate, so trying different materials as well as featuring again some handmade paper by Mary Hark. The binding is what is typically called a quarter bound, when you just do the spine, but you can see it is a little more than a quarter, so trying some new design elements of how you can shift, because normally you would have the leather be small, but knowing that I would have to balance it, I used one of Chandler's images that is in the piece, and this one you can see has some of the hand-colored illustrations in the deluxe edition. It is always wonderful to see the different elements for the standard, the chapbook, and then the deluxe. It was a lot of work between all the bindings.

Finding different designs. This is the year that Bryan Thao Worra was the author [*Winter Ink*, 2008]. And he is originally from Laos, if I remember correctly. So I did some research on colors and schemes as we began to plan this one out, and realized that greens and reds were common colors in a lot of art that we saw, so that is why we chose that. And with this one, another Asian magazine I have talked about different designs for slipcases. So this one has a small folder, which presents some of the poems and some of the artwork that is in the deluxe edition. But then it also has another folder that has the book. Wanting to [continue] with more of an Asian theme, I did suminagashi [marbling] on a silk fabric to create the appearance for the cover, and since Brian had talked about how he used blue inks when he wrote some of his poetry, we realized that [it could relate to] *Winter Ink*, and incorporated some of that. So it is an Asian side-sewn binding with a hard cover, and printed on Japanese papers, but then the artwork focuses on artists doing work with inks and it was interesting. You get that wonderful translucency, and it was fun to work with different materials than what I had worked with on the other editions, and also some of the design. Paulette Myers-Rich was the printer for this one.

Last year's book, for 2014, we did *The War Between the Water and the Road* by Will Alexander. Now, Will is a friend and an author who specializes in young adult literature. My wife Catherine and I actually proposed Will to Jeff [Rathermel] as a possible author. So we were very pleased that he thought it was a good idea. Will had just won the National Book Award for one of his novels, and when [he was selected], of course I immediately volunteered to do the deluxe because I wanted to highlight [his work]. So again a clamshell to hold the different elements, and in it we first have the pillowcase which is a concept in the story, that holds the pirate coloring book. And in it we have some of the beautiful illustrations. Will had experience teaching English and Writing for the art students at MCAD [Minneapolis College of Art and Design], so Jeff was able to recruit several MCAD illustration students to produce some of the artwork for this one. So this was a really wonderful bonus for the deluxe, and actually I did not make the

pillowcase; Jeff did that with the assistance of a friend. And then there was a small pamphlet, which incorporated one of the elements of the story, a poster: Was this your cat? Those were little added bonuses.

And the book itself: when I first began the design, I realized that I needed to relate to the conflict. The story is about the conflict between the water and the road. So what I wanted to do was set up a color element between the water and the road, so, blue and gray, and by having that angled line I thought it would help introduce that conflict. Then, [finding] a decorative paper. I had done some marbling in the past, and realized that to be able to produce enough for an edition of thirty-five, I incorporated some help with Sue Bjerke and Sally Powers, and we produced the two styles of marbling—one that had more of the blacks and grays, and one that incorporated the blues. And one of the images in the book shows the breakup of the road, those potholes we see each spring after the winter, where the water has won, and there we are, an example of the illustration in the piece. So it was a way to highlight the front of the book, because the book itself is a little narrow to put a title down a spine. But it was a lot of fun to work on a project like this, and it is also fun to know that you are working with a friend, and also with the artists and the friends in the community, but when the author is someone I know personally, I really wanted to make sure I did a good job for Will.

BB: Just wonderful, Jana. Thank you so much.

JP: Well this has been really fun, and needless to say, I am very happy to be part of the community of MCBA.