

Introduction

Bookbinders tend to be diverse and likable people. They are quirky, earthy, unconventional, traditional, innovative, intelligent, and creative. Most bookbinders today make a living by working at an institution—a library, museum, university, or one of the few large binderies in America. Some, however, are independent bookbinders in private practice: general bookbinders, book conservators, book restorers, book artists, designer bookbinders, edition bookbinders, and box-makers. It is a life of hard work and perseverance, and it holds the risk of uncertain finances. On this variable income, bookbinders have to pay themselves a living wage, maintain a workspace, equipment, supplies and tools, and provide their own health insurance. “You have to be a little bit crazy,” was Czech master bookbinder Jan Sobota’s reply when I asked him what advice he would give to someone interested in making private practice bookbinding a career.

Each independent bookbinder has a “story”—significant, fascinating and unique, that reveals the path that unfolded, leading them to bookbinding and sustaining them as they continue their craft. What was their life path that brought them to bookbinding? Where did they learn the craft? What made them choose private practice? How do they ensure a living? How hard do they work? After years of bookbinding, do they still like what they are doing? What do they really like about being a bookbinder? What do they dislike? Where do they get clients? What advice would they give to someone interested in becoming a bookbinder? What common threads do these folks share? I was curious about the lives of independent bookbinders.

Why did it interest me to find out about the life of private practice bookbinders? Whenever I went into my studio to bind I found myself in a joyful place, and time had no meaning. Teaching bookbinding energized me and introduced me to fascinating people. I was in a transitional period in my life. Could I try bookbinding as my livelihood

instead of as the supplemental income it had been for the last 20 years? I knew that the life of private practice bookbinding was hard work, in addition to being financially risky. Would I have the skills and character to create a successful business? I decided to make some discoveries about the life of bookbinders. I would call it the *Aunt Jessalyn Project*, after my great aunt who had just passed away and left me some money that would fund my project.

I would interview independent bookbinders, taking a human-interest angle. Much has been written about certain bookbinders' techniques and bindings. I wanted to know about the people themselves and the lives they led. I asked independent bookbinders I knew and respected if I could visit and interview them. In addition to hearing their responses to my questions, I also wanted to see where they worked, to get a fuller sense of their lives—and to record my images and impressions as I interacted with these people and their work.

I was warmly welcomed by every bookbinder I approached. Not only were the visits themselves remarkable and moving, the process of revisiting each bookbinder, as I listened to his or her interview, and transcribed it into text, was almost as inspiring as the face-to-face interaction. Time-after-time I was motivated by their optimism, caught up in their joy in the creative process of bookbinding, celebrating the fact that they live life, doing work that they are passionate about. This, I think, is the strongest thread that links them all—they are passionate about the work they do.

The *Aunt Jessalyn Project* reinforced my perception of bookbinders as amiable, interesting people—intelligent creative, passionate and skilled. These people are an inspiration—their work helps keep alive the art and craft of private practice bookbinding in America. I extend my respect and gratitude to these fine bookbinders and fascinating individuals.