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## One for the Books

Larkspur Press makes an impression on Kentucky authors, one page at a time

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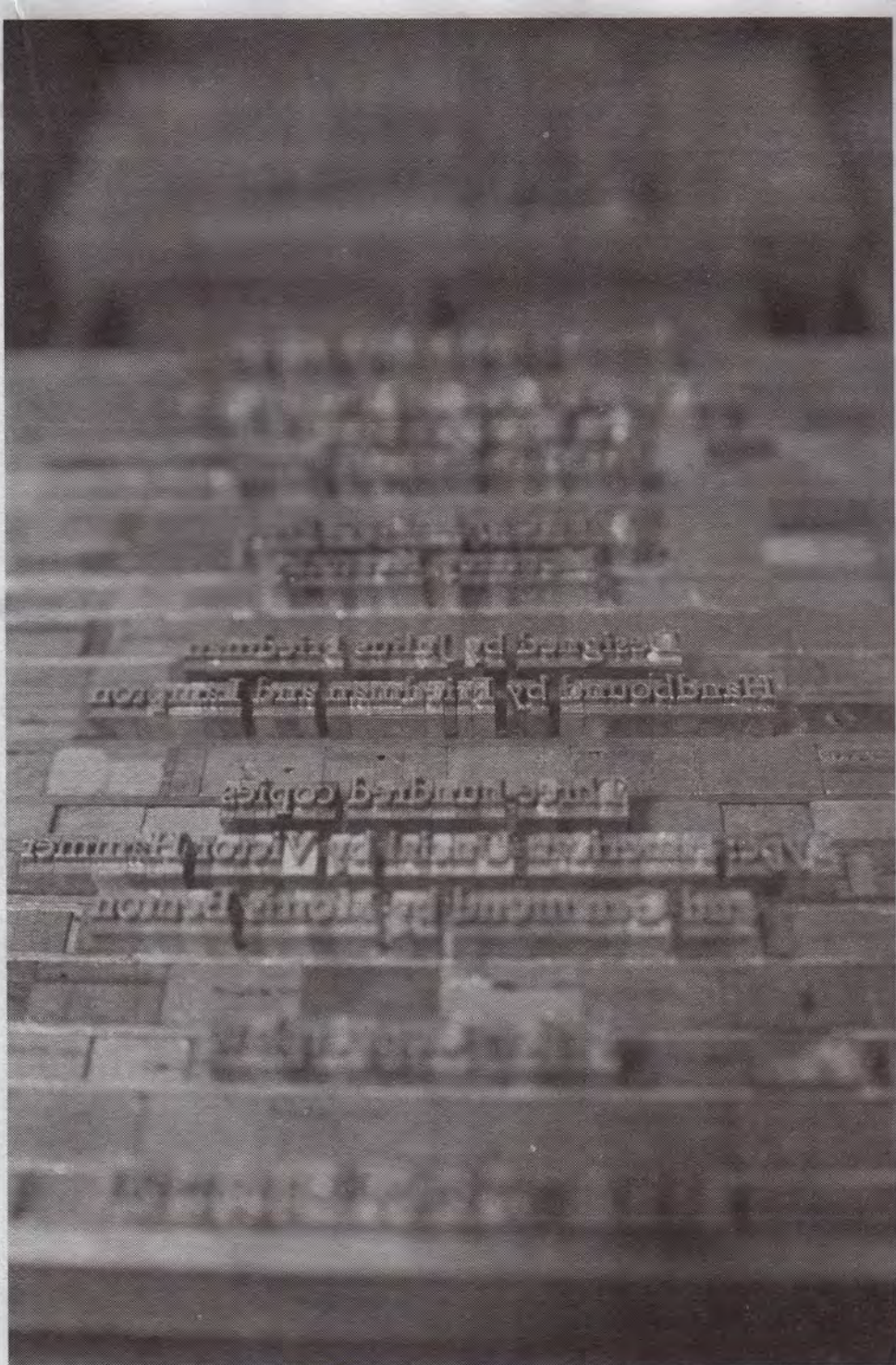
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# One for the Books

With masterful precision and care, Larkspur Press has made an impression on the literary scene

Text by Alex Brooks | Photography by Chris Rosenthal



**M**aybe you've seen his books at Joseph-Beth Booksellers, or the Morris Book Shop, or Black Swan, in distinctive paper wrappers – quaint, but striking, with beautiful art and type on the cover. If you've picked one up, you've probably felt a nice heft; flipping through the pages, the texture feels different, the type jumps out at you. Maybe you've stood there in the bookstore, reading, not wanting to stop. And in the back, there'll be a short sentence or two which says, "Hand printed at the Larkspur Press," a little number pencilled next to it. The Larkspur Press, owned and operated by Gray Zeitz for 35 years now, is a unique local publisher of fine and beautiful books.

Almost as important as the words in these books is the loving way they are manufactured. Larkspur Press sets every letter and every space, one at a time, by hand, with metal type. The lines are composed, then printed, one page at a time, one color at a time, on a vintage hand fed Chandler & Price letterpress, the flywheel spinning, the jaws of the press opening and closing as Zeitz feeds and retrieves each sheet. Everything is done with great care and precision, from the exact measure of spaces between words to the way Zeitz carefully adds a dab of ink to the press every 33 sheets. After printing, the sheets are folded, sewn and bound, all by hand, into the beautiful book you find in the store. Each page has been touched by fingertips countless times; this is publishing on a human scale.



**Top:** Larkspur Press apprentice Leslie Shane binds each book by hand.  
**Bottom:** Larkspur Press titles include works by Kentucky writers Wendell Berry, James Baker Hall and Richard Taylor.

Some may say the production method is laborious, tedious, or anachronistic, but it is also a reflection of Zeitz's daily life. He doesn't have a computer, doesn't do e-mail, doesn't have a cell phone. Larkspur Press has a Web site, but Zeitz says he's only seen it twice. He doesn't shun technology, it's just superfluous to his lifestyle. "If it wasn't fun, I wouldn't do it this way," he says with a glint in his eyes, and he laughs a rumbling, long-practiced laugh.

He also wants to make the best book possible, with the best materials, design and craftsmanship. His methods produce a book of incomparable quality, unmatched by modern production standards. For example, his books used to be sent out for machine binding but Zeitz wasn't happy with the quality, so now all of the Larkspur books are bound by hand. Zeitz's apprentice, Leslie Shane, sits in the loft of the workshop most days delicately sewing and folding and gluing each heap of pages until it becomes not just a book, but a work of art.

Larkspur Press is located outside of Monterey, Ky., a nice drive if it's not raining. Zeitz's farm is off a short gravel road, over the creek, and then you come to his house, painted a bright purple and surrounded by various plants and trees. And then off to the right his little unassuming workshop, bright bunches of flowers to the left, rows of corn to the right. The studio is small, but packed, stuffed with presses, paper and wooden cabinets of type. Drying pages take over every flat space, spreading out up the stairs and around Shane as she sews pages together.

All of this work, this attention to detail, lends an authority to the writing. "These writers need to be read," Zeitz says. "They're good writers." Larkspur authors are almost exclusively Kentuckians, who might not have had a voice in the national literary scene otherwise. Zeitz says he works with people who are "close by," and when he says this you get a sense that all of the authors and artists he works with are his neighbors, his community. "I do that because it's more fun," he says. "You get to work with someone face to face, and it just seems to be a better way of doing things."

This also means that Larkspur publishes new, unpublished authors. "We have, and we still do, publish a writer's first book," Zeitz

said. "Some of those have been Richard Taylor's first book, Jim Hall's first book, Fred Smock's first book – of poems – and we took a chance on those, and they panned out. We've also done first books where that's been it so far, for that author. And we also do work by well established writers, like Bobbie Ann Mason, Ed McClanahan, Wendell Berry."

This combination of fostering new tal-

ent and featuring established writers has worked well for the Larkspur Press. Every year they print more books, and every year they sell more books, a remarkable feat when more and more text is read digitally. People have been talking about the end of print, or the end of books, for decades, but Zeitz doesn't pay them any mind. While the larger publishing world is in decline, Zeitz keeps printing, one sheet at a time. "I sell

more books now," he says. "It's been a slow rise. But I've never advertised, and more people know about me now."

I would argue that people appreciate his product more in a digital world. Web sites may replace the newspaper, and a text message may replace a letter, but some things we want to hold in our hands. Some things we want to take our time with, appreciate for its beauty, for the human hands

that made it, for that connection.

And for all this, Larkspur Press books are not expensive. Most books have a “regular” and “special” edition. Zeitz tries to keep the regular edition as affordable as possible. “We try to keep one edition cheap enough to buy,” he says, “and the past few years we’ve tried even harder than that by putting out some of the copies in paperback, and still keep up our integrity and the beauty of the book.” Most of these books aren’t any more expensive than comparable mass-market books. On the other hand, the special edition books are printed on dampened hand-made or mold-made paper, bound in more elaborate styles, and suitable for collectors and bibliophiles.

But Zeitz’s heart really lies in publishing the small books that normal readers can afford. “You’re not going to print someone’s first book and only print 50 copies and sell it for 400 bucks,” he said. “No one is gonna buy that. So the subject matter, the whole thing of what you’re publishing, changes. And so when I decided what I was gonna publish, that changed a lot of things. I’m not interested in re-printing something that’s been printed to death. I’d much rather print a new piece of Wendell’s, and make it affordable, and also make an edition that is collectable. And in doing that you also get to work with a lot of different artists.”

Zeitz has been dedicated to publishing the work of his community of artists and writers since he was in college, a student (he says a bad student) of Wendell Berry’s. To get the press on its feet, he’s done other work – raised tobacco, raised calves, labored on farms – but now he’s able to print books full time, as well as employ Shane to bind them. He’s a happy man. He laughs; he’s excitable. He loves books.



**Larkspur Press founder, master printer and guru Gray Zeitz feeds each page through the hefty Chandler & Price letterpress.**

“Poetry” he says, “the best way you get it is through the voice, and the second best is to see it well printed and designed on a page, not to take away from it or overshadow it, but just as a way of getting that poem to you. I haven’t seen any better way than what I’m doing. If what you’re trying to do is to make that poem as accessible as you can to the reader, well that’s what I’m doing. And every bit about it is a whole lot of fun. And I’m surprised every day that I can make a living doing this.”

You can find Larkspur Press products at the Morris Book Shop, Black Swan Books and Joseph-Beth

Booksellers in Lexington, Poor Richard’s and the Capitol Gallery in Frankfort, Carmichael’s Bookstore in Louisville, and True Kentucky in Glendale.

This November, you can meet Zeitz at the Frankfort book fair, where he and Leslie Shane will be manning the Larkspur booth. The Larkspur Press also has an open house every year, the first weekend after Thanksgiving. They host intermittent workshops, with a wood engraving workshop scheduled for this October. To find out more or to be added to the mailing list, call (502) 484-5390. Visit [www.larkspurpress.com](http://www.larkspurpress.com) to view a catalogue of books and ordering information. 