



## **Interview with Bruce Kennett**

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KENNEALLY: From its nature as a nonessential object and by dint of all the work involved, a book is a labor of love. And just as with any romantic obsession, the relationship of author to printed word may be cause for frustration and elation. Patience and persistence, though, will usually see you through.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book. Once upon a time, an author pursued a publisher like a besotted suitor. There was little choice if a book was ever to have any chance to connect with an audience. In the digital age, of course, self-publishing is common and affordable. According to Bowker's annual report on ISBNs issued to self-published authors, such titles climbed to more than 1 million in 2017. Online publishing costs usually run from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars per work.

But what if your book concerns the absorbing life story and voluminous work of a seminal figure in graphic design and bookmaking? The printed object must seek to match its subject matter in presentation and production. How to pay for such a treasure, where to find the audience? Well, now there's Kickstarter for that. Bruce Kennett, graphic designer, photographer, and teacher, has lectured and written for much of his professional life about William Addison Dwiggins, an American type designer, calligrapher, and book designer who is credited with coining the term graphic designer. After a Kickstarter campaign that raised \$200,000, Kennett wrote and designed *W. A. Dwiggins: A Life in Design*. He joins me today from his New Hampshire studio to share the story of his exquisite tribute and the exasperating labor that went into it. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Bruce Kennett.

KENNETT: Thanks for having me on, Chris. I'm excited to share the story with your listeners.

KENNEALLY: Well, it is a captivating story, because it is one – as I say in the introduction, a kind of a tale of devotion. You are devoted to the subject but also to bookmaking itself. And through a career that goes back a number of decades, you've been involved with publishers of all types, but here you became the publisher through the Kickstarter campaign, and I wanted to talk to you about that



to learn a little bit more about it. What was interesting to me was you started with what sounds like a fairly substantial figure for the goal of \$50,000, but that eventually grew, and it was in fact a kind of a Kickstarter to you to really make this book everything you wanted it to be. Tell us about that.

KENNETT: Yeah, the way that crowdfunding works, if you don't meet your goal, all of the supporters' credit cards are not charged and you're left with nothing. So we knew that it was going to cost more than \$50,000 to produce the book. We were conservative, wanting that seed money to be gathered up so that we could use it, and we knew that we'd then be able to marshal our forces and get some more funding beyond that. But I was over-the-moon happy that all over the world, people were so eager to see the story about Dwigins that within the first couple of days, we had raised that initial chunk of money.

And what to me is so great about this system now – and there's a parallel in music, really. One of my best friends is a composer and pianist, and instead of signing with a conventional record label, she's gone on to record her own albums. I do the design. She works with a variety of producers. And she now markets those on her own. What's so great about this crowdfunding model is that titles that might not appeal to a mainline publisher are eminently suitable for this. You have to gather together the people who want to read the book. But in the end, you're delivering directly into the hands of the reader a publication whose every quality you can control if you care about those things. And that was what was so great for me was being able to supervise the printing, use really high-quality paper, produce most of it in New England, and so forth.

KENNEALLY: Right. And it seems to me, too, it's about that relationship with the eventual – well, we call him or her a consumer – the fan. That's very important, too. They've invested in the work. And when they see their investment realized, it must be gratifying for them to have been a part of it.

KENNETT: Absolutely. And whenever I run into somebody who was a supporter of the project, I say to them thank you, because if you had not done this, the book could not have been created. The money was simply not there to do something of this scope, and Dwigins' career warrants a book of this scope. Even this – it's just under 500 pages, 1,200 pictures – that's only the tip of the iceberg of the things that he created. So this model allowed us, with that ownership of all of these supporters from these 43 countries all over the world, to develop it and print it with no holds barred, highest quality in every respect, and all of those people made that possible.



KENNEALLY: And it's not something that you've discovered on your own. Kickstarter today is one of the largest publishers in the world. It's remarkable.

KENNETT: And it suits perfectly a niche audience, where a publisher in New York who might not ever see a return on the investment of publishing a book, somebody who has a very particular idea and who has a group of people with whom they share that interest – those people can all band together and do it.

Now, if I can digress a little bit about changes in short-run color printing, it used to be that if you wanted to do a book with color in it – say, a family history – and you came to me – I'm a book designer – if you came to me and said I want to do this, whether you wanted 10 copies or 2,500, I would say the price is going to be the same, because plates have to be put onto a big four-color offset press. All these variables meant that unless you had a big run, you couldn't participate in this. But now there are color presses that are like very, very fancy color Xerox machines. And suddenly, the possibility of anyone producing a book, even in full color, has come about – that the average person now doesn't have to own the printing press to be able to do beautiful self-expression.

KENNEALLY: That access to that technology means that a book like your own can be produced at a fairly grand scale, but not for a grand cost.

KENNETT: That's right. And there are still issues of readability. People have to think about what paper it should be on. But it has – the democratization of publishing is really dramatic, just as the arrival of the personal computer meant that people could do their own typesetting, which for me was a great boon. As a book designer, I would often return proofs to the typesetting company and say, you know, could you please adjust this and this and this? And I was very finicky and picky about it, and I would use up a certain amount of social capital with these guys asking for all of these adjustments. Well, now that I have the personal computer and am doing my own typesetting, I can make as many of those adjustments as I want.

KENNEALLY: Well, let's talk a little bit about W. A. Dwiggins and your particular lifelong fascination with him. You first discovered him when you were a very young book-builder of your own, back in your early 20s.

KENNETT: That's right. My roommate Jeff and I were spending a lot of time in the Boston Public Library, which had a good graphic arts collection, and we met Dwiggins' assistant. Dwiggins had died in 1956, and Dorothy Abbe, his assistant, kept all of his studio goods intact. And in the early 1970s, when the Boston Public Library put on a big new addition designed by Philip Johnson, they set aside three



rooms to hold all of these cool items that Dwiggins had had in his own studio, and we met her when she was installing those in 1972. So for me, it was this real lightning bolt of discovery that – and it was his whimsy and his playfulness and his wit more than anything else. Yes, he’s known as a type designer and book designer, but it was his joie de vivre and his general approach to life that really captured me.

And I began going to Dorothy’s. She was then making her home in Dwiggins’ studio, which he had designed and built in 1937 down in Hingham, a suburb of Boston. I started going to see her, and over the next 20 years, I would make frequent visits there, and we’d spend the day talking about photography or food or various other things, but mostly about Dwiggins.

**KENNEALLY:** Tell us a bit about him. For listeners, he’s a fascinating figure, someone who had sort of receded into the shadows. He was born at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We are now at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But what is remarkable is that the internet has kind of brought him back into the spotlight.

**KENNETT:** Yeah, and I think Dwiggins was – he loved decoration and ornament. And I think in the rush to modernism and the influence of Swiss design in the late ’50s and ’60s, he was a little bit swept aside. He was certainly one of the titans of graphic design in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

He grew up in rural Ohio. He went to school for three magical years in Chicago – the first three years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – at a place called the School of Illustration run by a very famous courtroom sketch artist named Frank Holme. He learned a tremendous amount there, then moved to Hingham, Massachusetts, in 1904 and carried out his work from then on until his death in ’56 doing not only advertising design and calligraphy at the beginning, but then expanding into book design, type design.

He’s very famous in the puppet world for his engineering of marionettes. He loved every aspect of theater. He built two marionette theaters at his home in Hingham, wrote the plays, designed the costumes, constructed more than 50 marionettes. He was an expert kite flyer. He made furniture. He was a true polymath.

**KENNEALLY:** Well, you mentioned him as an ornamentalist and as a polymath. There’s something quaint about such a figure if we imagine him. But he was not someone who was sort of removed from the concerns of daily life. In fact, you’ve told me that his designs were always keeping in mind the cost – the eventual cost of



whatever was being produced, the book particularly, because he really cared about putting books into the hands of readers.

KENNETT: That's right. He was a proletarian at heart, even though he was associated with some of the fanciest limited-edition publishing ventures in the midst of that part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He loved machinery and understood its limitations. And what I respect so much in his attitudes is that – and modern designers and anybody working in manufacturing, for that matter, can pay attention to this – he looked at what the machinery was capable of doing and tailored his design so that it would move through the flow of production with the fewest hiccups possible.

For instance, the linotype machine had great capabilities in many ways for newspapers but wasn't so well regarded for book work. And Dwiggins designed several typefaces for them that suddenly made it possible for them to enter into the realm of book work, because he understood what all of the hidden variables in the manufacturing process of the linotype machine were and suited his designs to those.

KENNEALLY: In fact, he was famous for creating a newspaper font. And what was so remarkable about that particular font was that it was taking into account what is, I suppose, the lo-fi printing of newspapers itself.

KENNETT: Right. And again, if you know that you're going to have very soupy inks that don't have a lot of dynamic range and sort of Wagnerian oomph in the shadows – they're just kind of washed out – and then you have this ground-up wood pulp as the substrate, you don't do very well with halftones. Halftone is the sprinkling of dots. For any of you listeners who don't know what this is, any picture is made up in the newspaper usually of these little dots. Dwiggins would often advocate for using what's called line art, where instead of the dots making something washed out, you used solid black lines instead. So whatever the medium, whether it was stage design for a marionette production or newspapers or the finest quality letterpress production, he would think about those mechanics and respond with his artwork to meet those.

KENNEALLY: It really prompts us to imagine what he could have done in the world of 2018. And you are sort of following in his footsteps, if you will, and have found an opportunity to, I see it, bridge the physical love of books and design and printing and publishing with the digital online world that is one that reaches into every corner of the globe. It's, I think, a very positive story about the evolution of publishing.



KENNETT: And this means, too, that – in the old days, for instance, if I was looking to add a Dwiggins book to my collection, I had to go into musty, antiquarian bookstores. I got to recognize Dwiggins’ style, so I could scan along a shelf and immediately recognize which spines were his, but it was a random act. If I was in someplace like Brattleboro, Vermont, in an old bookstore, I might get lucky. But now I was able to find a book – as I was doing the research for this, I could find books in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, or anyplace. Similarly, somebody who lives in a remote place like that can now have access to all this wondrous material that Dwiggins developed through the gift of the internet in a way that was simply not possible 30 years ago.

KENNEALLY: Well, there’s nothing wrong, Bruce Kennett, with musty, antiquarian bookstores. They can be a pleasant place to spend a Saturday afternoon. But when time is limited and you’re working on a book that’s trying to memorialize this figure that you have been so fond of for so many years, you want to be able to reach to everywhere, and you’ve done a great job with this. Your book is called *W. A. Dwiggins: A Life in Design*. We will link to the page where listeners can learn a little bit more about the book. And we want to thank Bruce Kennett for joining us today on Beyond the Book.

KENNETT: Thank you so much.

KENNEALLY: Beyond the Book is produced by Copyright Clearance Center. Our co-producer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. Subscribe to the program wherever you go for podcasts and follow us on Twitter and Facebook. The complete Beyond the Book podcast archive is available at [beyondthebook.com](http://beyondthebook.com). I’m Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for listening and join us again soon on CCC’s Beyond the Book.

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