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Kim Merker, Hand-Press Printer of Poets, Is Dead at 81

By **PAUL VITELLO**

Kim Merker was a chain-smoking New Yorker with literary ambitions when he went to Iowa in the mid-1950s to study poetry. He became a wordsmith of another kind.

For four decades, using presses he operated with his own inky hands, Mr. Merker was a designer, typesetter and printer of some of the most beautiful books made in America in the late 20th century. Almost all were vessels for poems that he found promising, interesting or indisputably excellent — and about which he was usually right: some of the young poets he published went on to achieve renown.

Within the artisanal movement called fine press printing, which celebrates bookmaking as it was practiced before mass production, Mr. Merker had few peers.

“He was the best of his time,” said Eric Holzenberg, director of the [Grolier Club](#), perhaps the oldest bibliophilic club in North America, which has many of Mr. Merker’s books in its collection on Manhattan’s East Side.

Mr. Merker, who died of cancer on April 28 in Iowa City at 81, founded and ran two hand-press publishing imprints until 1999, when a stroke ended his work, which was conducted at the handle of a letterpress.

Stone Wall Press, which he started in 1957, mainly published young poets, but also the occasional work by more experienced hands, like Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams and Cecco Angiolieri, the brilliant but debauched Italian Renaissance poet and friend to Dante. Ten years later Mr. Merker founded Windhover Press at the University of Iowa, where he had been enrolled in the Writers’ Workshop before becoming a printer and teacher of printing crafts.

Windhover served both as the official press of the university and as a working laboratory for teaching the handicrafts of book production — a role Mr. Merker formalized in 1986, when he founded the university’s [Center for the Book](#), an interdisciplinary program for students of design, papermaking, typography and the preservation and history of books.

Fine press printers practice a version of the process invented by Johannes Gutenberg in the 15th century and employed until the late 19th century. Mr. Merker learned printing at Iowa from the printer-publisher [Harry Duncan](#), who was considered the dean of the postwar hand-press revival.

Producing a book the old way, Mr. Merker told his students, was a puzzle of a million choices: the composition and thickness of the paper, typeface, ink color, page size, lines per page, margin size, amount of flourish on the title page, the relative size of lowercase and capital letters.

He described the process, one student recalled, as “building the text, letter by letter, word by word, line by line,” until the printer “inhabits the work, gives that work a home.”

Though neither *Stone Wall* nor *Windhover* were profit-making, both were influential in recognizing and publishing good poets early in their careers. Philip Levine, Mark Strand and James Tate were largely unknown when Mr. Merker printed early collections of their work in lots of 200, by hand, one sheet of paper at a time.

All three went on to win [Pulitzer Prizes](#), and Mr. Strand and Mr. Levine were both chosen [poet laureate](#) of the United States.

Mr. Merker also published early poems by W. S. Merwin, Donald Justice and Robert Dana; a 1960 collection by the avant-garde poet Weldon Kees, which helped restore his stature after it had fallen into obscurity; poems by Theodore Roethke, Gary Snyder and Denis Johnson; some of Pound’s last poems (“Drafts & Fragments of Cantos CX- CXVII”); Mary McCarthy’s translation of poetry by Simone Weil; and the lost but rediscovered foreword, written by the author, to “This Side of Paradise,” F. Scott Fitzgerald’s debut novel.

“If you look at a list of important American poets today, a surprising number of them had their early work printed by Kim Merker,” said [Dana Gioia](#), a poet and former chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts.

Karl Kimber Merker was born in New York City on Feb. 6, 1932, to Herman Karl Merker and the former Mary Kimber. Though the family maintained a home in Great Neck, on Long Island, he grew up in various places around the world, uprooted whenever his father’s military career took the family to a new posting.

His daughter, Meghan Merker, who confirmed his death, did not know the branch of service in which her grandfather served. The father-son relationship was strained, she said, and Mr. Merker rarely spoke of him.

After graduating from Illinois College in Jacksonville, Ill., Mr. Merker crossed the Atlantic in a sailboat with several friends (from England to North America, his daughter said) and lived in Greenwich Village, where he recited poetry to jazz accompaniment in nightclubs and sold brushes door to door, before applying to the Iowa writing program.

Mr. Merker's stroke in 1999 kept him from fully absorbing the digital revolution and its impact on the written word, said Sidney Berger, a fellow printer who wrote a 1997 bibliographic biography, "[Printing and the Mind of Merker](#)." But, he added, Mr. Merker was confident that after surviving more than 500 years, the printer's craft was not about to disappear.

"He just wanted to make beautiful books, and he was pretty sure there would always be an audience for that," Mr. Berger said. "He never wanted vast numbers of readers anyway. A press run of 200 books is grueling enough."