

English prof explores the social life of ink

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Imagine hundreds of people lined up at a department store in New York City, along with 50 police officers to prevent them from crashing the doors. What might cause such excitement? The new iPhone? An appearance by J.K. Rowling? Or perhaps the hottest new release for X-Box?

In this case, it's 1945, and people can't wait to get their hands on the latest technological innovation - the "Reynolds Rocket," a miracle pen that carries its own ink well and will, according to the manufacturer's claims, write for years.

In the end, however, the Reynold's Rocket was a huge, leaky failure, and for a while it looked like the idea for a ball-tipped pen was dead in the water. But then one Marcel Bich in Paris bought the rights from its inventor, the Hungarian Ladislao Josef Biro (a Jew who had been forced to flee the Nazis to Argentina). Bich improved upon the design and, five years later, released the pen under the first three letters of his last name: BIC. And so was born the cheap, disposable writing instrument with which we are all now familiar.

Such stories lie at the heart of *The Social Life of Ink*, the latest project by University of Alberta English professor Ted Bishop, who two years ago enjoyed some popular success with *Riding with Rilke: Reflections on Motorcycles and Books*. The creative non-fiction work was short-listed for the 2005 Governor General's Award and made *Playboy's* list of top 20 best reads of the year - not something every academic can brag about.

In this latest book, funded partly by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Bishop aims to trace the uses and significance of ink through the ages, from the art of the Chinese ink stick which reached its zenith during the Ming dynasty, to the so-called 'Blue Koran' of the 10th century, to the mysterious ink used by Gutenberg, to the ink used today in the proliferation of tattoo art.

"Like my previous book," writes Bishop in the chapter breakdown, "this one will take readers into the library and out on the road: to print shops, ink factories and tattoo parlours; from Buenos Aires to Calcutta to Mainz to New York City."

And sure enough, he plans to travel to those exotic locations in search of the ever-elusive ink road.

He plans to visit Istanbul for an interview with Nobel-Prize-winning author Orhan Pamuk (whose novel, *My Name is Red*, concerns book illustration, ink and murder) and Hui-chou, the ink manufacturing centre of China. He will also take calligraphy lessons from his Chinese partner's aunt.

Bishop came up with the idea for a popular history of ink from a conversation with Bruce Peel curator Jeannine Green, who told him there simply was no comprehensive book on the subject. "There are trade manuals on ink, books on pigment and lots of books on calligraphy, but nothing that really talks about ink," said Bishop.

"I don't know how I got from that conversation to where I am now, but I'd already had this idea that the growing interest in tattoos seemed to coincide with the rise of digital technology, and I'd been doing some reading on Guttenberg...and one thing just seemed to lead to another."

Guttenberg's ink, he said, is still largely unexplained - exceptionally

black, with remarkable staying power. It's far more stable than most varieties of that period, and no one really knows why.

"I'd always thought of ink as a kind of monolithic thing - it's either there or it's not," he said. But then he realized that, because of its constantly changing chemical composition, ink seems almost like a living thing.

Though he didn't plan it that way, a mystery lies at the centre of every chapter, he said, from Gutenberg's aforementioned secret ingredient to "the question of whether Fang murdered Cheng over his ink sticks (and his mistress), to why the BIC corporation refuses all interviews."

"Each chapter will combine chemistry, commodity and character, examining the physical substance, the ways in which it circulates, and the personalities, historical and contemporary, who determine and define it."

And just to make sure the study is properly grounded in the material, Bishop said he plans to make ink with one of his English classes next term. "I just hope I don't blow anything up."

Look for *The Social Life of Ink* to come out sometime in 2009 from Penguin.

Source: University of Alberta

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