

# Pens and ink still have the write stuff

## Digital world is full of wonder, but handwritten word endures, says U of A prof

BY ELIZABETH WITHEY, EDMONTONJOURNAL.COM MARCH 11, 2012



U of A Prof. Ted Bishop with the ubiquitous Bic pen, a fountain pen and a gall nut (a wasp's nest used to make ink) in his office in Edmonton on March 9, 2012.

**Photograph by:** John Lucas, edmontonjournal.com

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EDMONTON - Is the inkwell about to run dry?

Ted Bishop says no.

"I don't think ink is dead," says the Edmonton writer and English professor, who has spent several years researching the hidden story of ink around the world. Despite the craze for iPads and e-readers, Bishop is convinced the coloured fluid in ballpoint pens and printers will endure as a means of communication.

"More and more, as our interactions become digital, there's this longing for the tactile, the actual," says Bishop, who will give a series of public talks about his research at the University of Alberta this week. "The status of the handwritten note has greater social import than it did, say 20 years ago, even five years ago."

Bishop's research project, *The Social Life of Ink*, feeds a love of literature, travel and language. With a generous grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, he has circumnavigated the globe on one inky adventure after another, visiting Hungary, China, Argentina, Switzerland, Uzbekistan and other locations.

He has spent an afternoon with the daughter of the late László Bíró, inventor of the ballpoint pen, visited a Chinese factory that makes its ink with the same method used during the Ming dynasty, and stood at the vacant lot that was once the original Bic pen factory. He has also seen the world's oldest Qur'an.

"Even for an infidel, this was a thrill," Bishop says.

The research began when Bishop looked into how some small, private presses had published books by Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. He asked a librarian for the go-to text on ink, and was told there wasn't one.

"That's kind of where the seed was planted. I thought, I'll write it."

Bishop's initial intent was to create a "commodity biography" telling the life story of ink — its origins, its ability to create cultures, unite civilizations, decree wars and marriages — as well as discussing whether it is doomed to drown in the digital revolution.

But Bishop found himself struggling to ignore all his experiences on the road. The book he's working on now is a character-driven narrative that weaves together research and travel anecdotes. He hopes to have the manuscript complete by 2013.

Bishop is experienced at this sort of creative non-fiction. He's the author of the bestselling memoir *Riding with Rilke: Reflections on Motorcycles and Books*, which was a finalist for the 2005 Governor General's Award for Non-Fiction and won the Edmonton Book Prize.

This week's public talks promise not to be dry, in either sense of the word. Audience members will get to grind an inkstick and smash a gall nut, a tree growth whose tannin-rich contents can be turned into gorgeous golden brown ink, the colour of "a toasted marshmallow, you know, when you do it just right." Gall nut ink was used to write the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Bishop is definitely a fan of handwriting — he calls his fountain pen addiction "a secret, shameful habit" —but he isn't anti-technology. He like his Kindle e-Reader as much as the next guy: "You can turn the pages with your elbows as you're eating an enchilada."

Despite the Internet and mobile devices, he believes real writing, real ink, will endure. A few years ago, laptops were invading his classrooms. Lately, he has noticed more and more students taking notes the old-fashioned way, even using fountain pens.

"People are buying pens and inks because it actually is something permanent," he says. It's one of the reasons we like to get a book autographed, he adds. "Ink on a page testifies to a bodily presence

at a particular place at a particular time.”

The Social History of Ink lectures happen this Tuesday, Thursday and Friday at 3:30 p.m. in Lecture Theatre 1 of the Humanities Centre at the University of Alberta. All three talks are free and aimed at a general audience. A wine and cheese follows Friday’s lecture.

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