

WRITING WITH A BENT NIB



The information in this article is culled from Randall Hasson's forthcoming book, *Teaching America How to Letter: Ross George, William Gordon, and the Story of the Speedball Textbook*, which will be published by Letterform Archive.

A TWO-PART ARTICLE WITH RANDALL M. HASSON AND MICHAEL CLARK

The Speedball Pen and the Lettering Artist by Randall M. Hasson

The Origin of the Bent Nib

The early twentieth century was a time of change. In the arena of retail sales, advertising and marketing developed rapidly, giving birth to many of the selling principles and techniques that are still in use today. The storefront, for the first time, began to be dominated by large, plate glass windows, and a whole industry emerged that was centered on techniques for effective window display. One of the most important aspects of these *show windows* was the display card that advertised a retailer's goods. These cards were temporary and had to be produced rapidly, and no window was considered complete without them. These "silent salesmen," called *show cards*, became the surrogate voice of the shopkeeper.

A natural outgrowth of the sign painting trade, show card writing soon developed into its own specialized genre. Show cards were initially large signs, on full (22 x 28 inches) or half sheets of bristol board. As

the marketing and design of the window display evolved, these cards became smaller, and the brushes of the sign painter were difficult to use in making the resulting smaller letters. Show card men turned to the traditional broad-edged pen for the smaller copy. They used lowercase letters, which were faster to write and easier to read. As the metal nib became more prevalent in the trade, the divide between the methods of the sign painter and of the show card writer became broader – show cards were written with the single-stroke method of forming letters, as opposed to traditional methods of outlining and filling in letters.

Commercial letterers wrote these cards with a certain rhythm: the best of them adapted the whole-arm-movement techniques of penmanship from Spencerian and Palmer methods. This rhythmic aspect was vitally important to the character of the show card; the most desired type of

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz
opqrstuvwxyz&z
Xanadu

Introduced in 1915, the A-Series was the first of the line of Speedball nibs. Its square tip resulted in a uniform line and could also be turned over to execute serifs. These examples are of a writing style termed *Spurred Gothic*.



The show card above is an example of pre-Speedball work from 1914.

Top: The titling for this article was written with a Speedball A-Series nib on a rough surface of unprimed canvas.

lettering was that which had a "swing" or a "kick" to give it life.

Graphic trends in Europe had an effect on American lettering in the early twentieth century. The bold display typestyles of the German Expressionist movement, such as Rudolf Koch's Neuland (1923), became popular with the public in the larger retail city centers, along with the "modern" clean-lined and sans-serif typefaces that originated in England. In the printing trade, these bold, uniform letterform styles were broadly classified as "gothic" letters, meaning letters with strokes of uniform widths. Hence we have sans-serif typefaces called Franklin Gothic and Copperplate Gothic. Because show card writers were closely allied with advertising, they adopted the general nomenclature of the printer to avoid confusion in their classifications of lettering.

However, Edward Johnston's typeface for the London Underground (1916) and Koch's Neuland and others like them were difficult

to replicate quickly by hand at small sizes using the tools that were available in the early century. To help show card men write these alphabets, William H. Gordon and Ross F. George, using modifications to existing nibs of the time, invented a nib with a bent tip. Bending up the tip of a pen nib resulted in producing a flat marking surface that would give a consistent, uniform stroke of even width in any direction, regardless of pen angle. A double reservoir was added to allow for more letters to be written with a single dip. In 1915, after over a year of testing and modification, they introduced their nib design to the lettering world as the Speed-Ball pen.

Speedball Nibs – Square and Round

The bent pen nib was introduced, in four marking shapes, over a ten-year period from 1915 to 1925. The original Speedball nibs featured both square and round variations of the marking tips, giving the

DENNEINEJEGLICHEKUNST
ODERWERK...WIEKLEIN
SIESEIEN*
SAMDAS SIND ALLE
SAMT GNADEN*
WIR
KET SIE ALLESAMT DER HEI-
LIGE GEIST*
ZU NUTZ UND
ZU FRUCHT DER MENSCHEN
+ WARE ICH NICHT EIN PRIE-
STER*
UND WARE UNTER
EINER VERSAMMLUNG*
ICH
NAHME ES FÜR EIN GROSSES
DING*
DASS ICH SCHUHE MA



Rudolf Koch's Neuland and Edward Johnston's Underground are examples of "gothic" or uniform-width typestyles that lettering artists in the early twentieth century were trying to replicate, which led to the development of the bent nib.

UTSRQ PONM

A casual Roman

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N

O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N

O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

Left: A variety of styles and weights written with the A-Series (square) nib, inspired by lettering of the early twentieth century.

Below: Samples of early Speedball nibs: square, round, and oval.

Bottom: Charles Rennie Mackintosh's lettering in the Glasgow Style, a part of the Arts and Crafts movement. The lettering directly to the left is the author's contemporary interpretation.



letterer options for the look and feel of the lettering, based on the beginning and endings of the strokes. Later designs included a traditional broad-edged nib as well as a nib in an oval shape that made thick and non-hairline thin strokes.

The physical approach to using this style of pen is different from that of a broad-edged pen. With bent nibs, the pen must be held at a lower angle to the writing surface (like holding a pencil), creating a more natural writing position that keeps the bent part of the nib in full contact with the marking surface. This adjustment in holding the pen is the reason the first Speedball textbook was produced: letterers of the time had trouble making the pen work – they held it in the traditional ways they held a brush or broad-edged pen.

Traditional calligraphy provides a variety of historical hands – Italic, Uncial, Black-letter, Roman – that are mastered with a broad-edged tool. Now, one hundred years after the invention of the Speedball nib, there is a revival of interest in looking back on, and working with, the vintage styles of commercial lettering artists of the 1910s, '20s and '30s. These include a wide variety of lettering that a calligrapher, using traditional tools, would not normally execute because these styles were not designed to be written with a broad-edged tool. The facility with which the professional letterers developed these styles, however, can provide inspiration to the contemporary lettering artist.

Writing with Speed

The main purpose of the first nibs that had flat marking tips was to make uniform-width strokes for gothic or monoline letters. But they also answered the need for letterers to economize their time: letters made in a single-stroke method with minimal or no touch-up allowed the show card artist to do more work in less time. One thing to keep in mind when looking at show card lettering of the early twentieth century is that, for the most part, you are looking at examples that were written with a high degree of speed. This accounts in part for the extremely fresh and spontaneous feel of the lettering, especially show card lettering of American artists.

These letterers worked with what we would consider astonishing speed. An excerpt from a 1914 trade journal gives some idea of how fast they had to work: "To hold his job in a Chicago store, a card writer must be able to turn out interior cards (say a quarter sheet) with two lines and a price in about 20 seconds flat."

Exploration with a New Tool

Aside from simply replicating historical monoline letterforms, the bent nib provides an opportunity for fresh exploration after one has become familiar with its use. Beautiful effects can be achieved by not keeping the entire bent part of the nib flat and in consistent contact with the marking surface. A well-timed lift at the end of the

L K J I H G F E D C B A
 S T U V W X Y Z

stroke with a round (B-Series) nib can, for example, provide a brush-like effect to an alphabet with a tool offering a little more control. Lifting the nib to a high angle so that the thin edge of the nib is in contact with the paper will provide a contrasting thin, or even hairline, stroke. Ruling pen-like effects on rough paper, with a bit of splattering, can be created with these pens and will give the calligrapher ideas from which to push concepts of letter innovation and experimentation.

Speedball A-Series Nib

All of the examples on the previous pages, and the Mock Brush Script shown on the opposite page, were executed with the Speedball A-Series square nib. It is an interesting tool to work with, and for a calligrapher used to a broad-edged tool held at a constant angle, it is almost like learning lettering all over again. The continual rhythm of the changing of the pen-to-paper angle requires careful attention from lettering artists who are used to holding a broad-edged pen at a consistent but steeper angle to facilitate the thinnest hairlines. Serifs, for example, are accomplished by turning the pen over to use the thinnest edge – a thin edge that might have a bump where one of the three tines doesn't line up perfectly. At the beginning or end of a stroke, the pen needs to be “rocked” to get a squared finish. One learns to turn the nib in the direction of the stroke to keep a

uniform line, as in each of the strokes of a capital letter A. Learning these basic principles leads to comfort with the pen, leading toward innovation: making the pen do what you want it to do. The Mock Brush Script is an example of a high degree of pen manipulation. The pen is held on a diagonal, resulting in squared entry and finishing strokes, at top and bottom. The pen is lifted and a corner is used, in rhythm, to draw the thin upstrokes that connect with the next letter. On the entry strokes of rounded letters, the pen again begins on the corner and is slightly rotated as it curves around the top, while the nib is gradually placed flat – as on the lowercase letters a, c, e, and o.

B-Series and D-Series Nibs

Similar principles apply to the round B-Series nib. Some manipulation of the nib and the use of natural pen lifts can result in a softer letter, with a feel like that of a brush at small sizes. Because it is a metal nib, there is a higher degree of control, but there is less flexibility than a pointed brush. This nib

is also the traditional tool of the cartoon dialogue letterer. The D-Series nib is an oval shape that gives letters a distinct characteristic that echoes the 1920s: a blunt serif. Like the other bent nibs, this nib provides possibilities for manipulation, but it is best on lowercase Romans for a vintage feeling. (Unfortunately, the oval-tip, D-style nibs are no longer made.)

Contemporary Lettering

Some of the finest examples of these contemporary applications are provided by Michael Clark. In much of Michael's work, what looks like ruling pen is actually achieved with the bent nib. Both square and round nibs seem to provide a launching point for much of his creativity. He achieves brush lettering-like effects with both, as well. Many lettering artists have looked at and admired his work, but were not sure how to achieve it.

In the next section of this article, Michael will divulge a few of his secrets.

mock brush script
pen manipulation

Simple script with a round B nib
utilizing natural entry & exit strokes

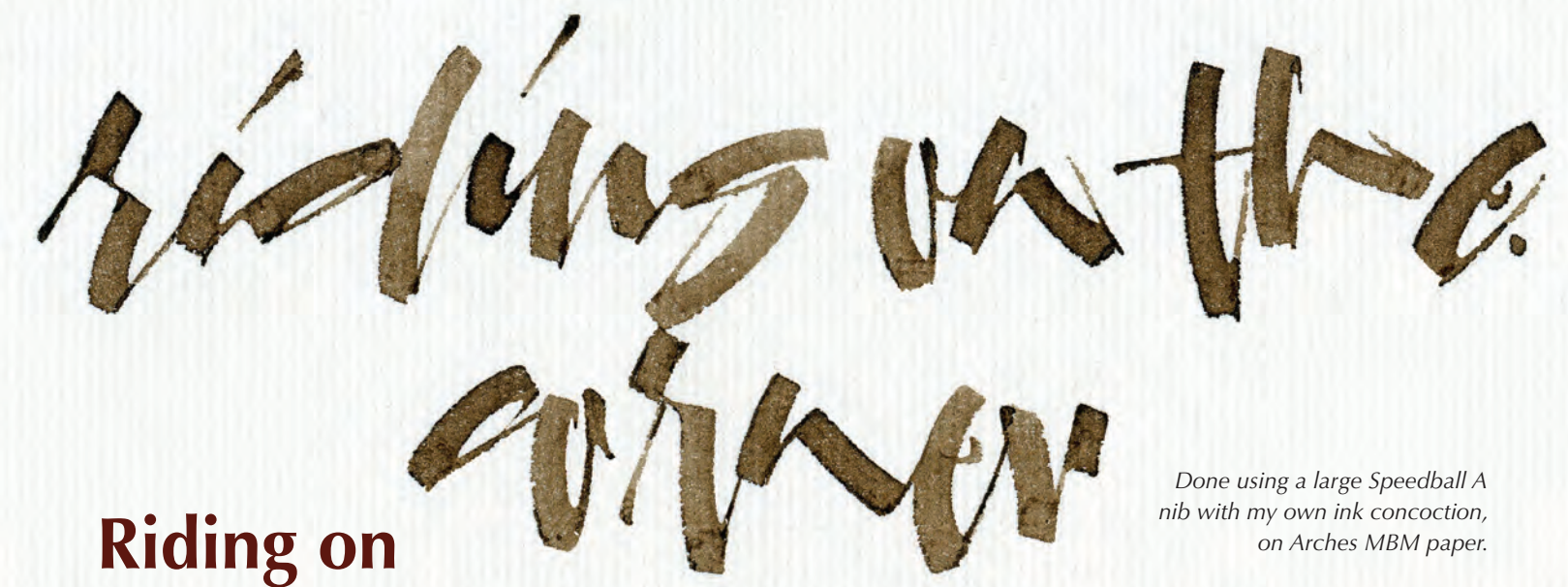
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

Mock Brush Script is an example of the A-Series nib being used with a high degree of pen manipulation and writing rhythm.

Simple Script utilizes the B-Series (round) nib in a casual, rhythmic manner, with pen lifts that provide a degree of line variation.

Above and Below: These alphabet samples are executed with the D-Series (oval) nib and are highly characteristic of 1920s lettering.

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz



Riding on the Corner

Exploring
Brush Forms
with Speedball
A and B Nibs

by Michael Clark

One has to dig deep in order to identify the real impetus for any obsession. Mine was the direct result of envy: envy of Sherry Bringham, Carl Rohrs, and a few other wielders of the brush. I was never looking for the genteel forms of the pointed brush; I was looking for the cadenced (as well as the erratic) rhythm of the brush forms that I had witnessed by these two and the likes of Karlgeorg Hoefer. But I'm not skilled with a brush, so I became obsessed with making brush strokes with a steel pen. This obsession led to a twenty-five-year odyssey.

I started with the broad, angled tip of a Magic Marker and found success when I pushed the stroke down and to the left, maintaining a curve so as to emulate the differently angled terminal of brush-formed letters. (Most people do not even take note of this difference between pointed-brush lettering and that of the chisel-edged pen.) My next step was to cut a Speedball Elegant Writer at the same cant as the tip of the Magic Marker. This allowed me to letter on a smaller scale (Figure 1). I've found that this lettering requires a bit

Done using a large Speedball A nib with my own ink concoction, on Arches MBM paper.

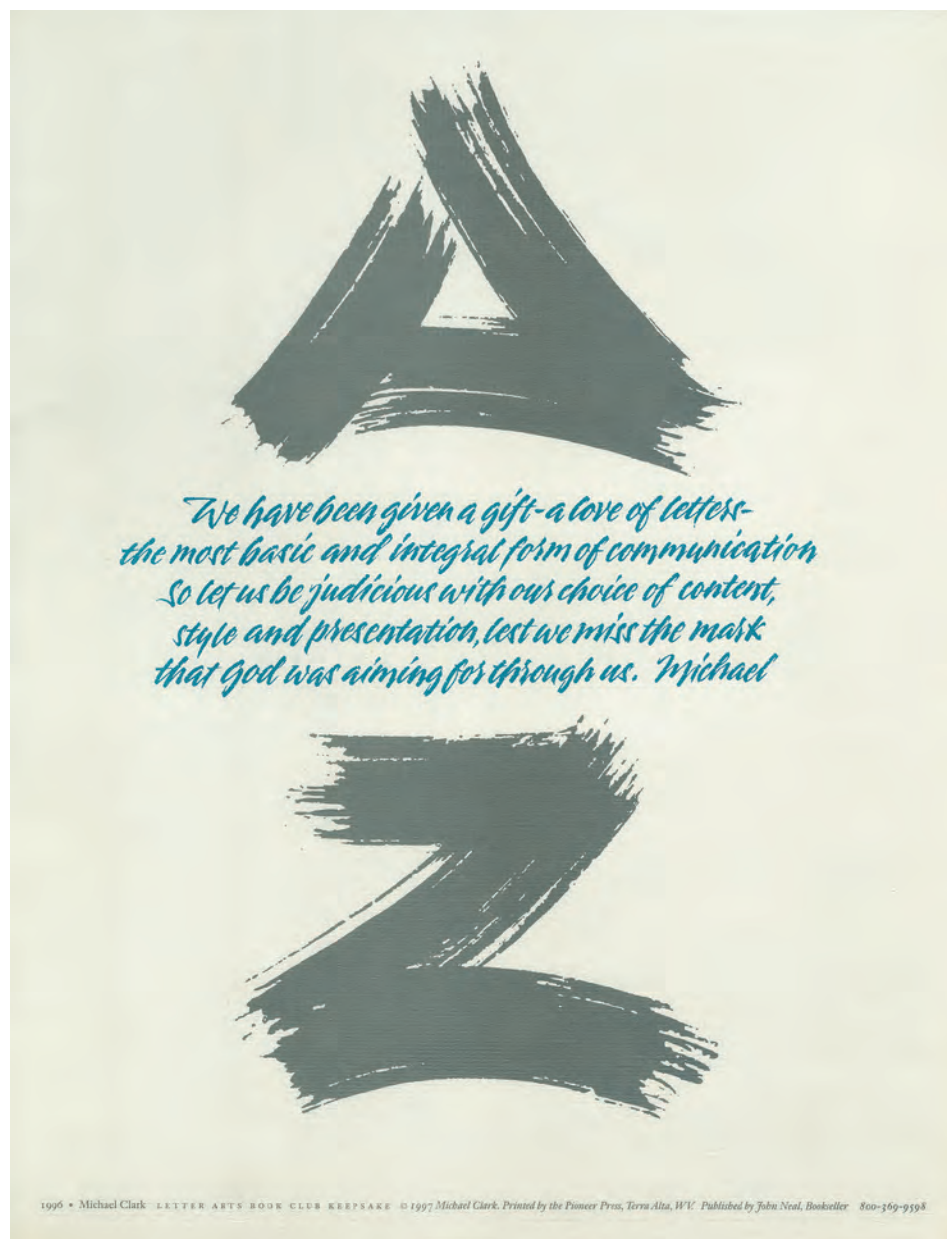


Figure 3. John Neal Bookseller 1997 Keepsake. The original artwork was done in gouache on Lana Laid paper. I paired the small lettering of the square Esterbrook Drawlet nib with large letters done with a tool that I had recently fallen in love with: a stencil brush, using it to make monoline brushstrokes.

of warm-up; the curves (which is what the whole alphabet is comprised of) can get out of hand if you are out of practice and not in synch. When done well, you can hear the rhythmical noise of these push strokes as they are being made on the rough surface of a paper like Arches MBM. It is both soothing and energizing. After I finish a piece like this, I feel like I have been an orchestral conductor leading the pen in a symphony.

Not long after my experiments with these tools, someone gave me a square-tipped

Esterbrook Drawlet bent nib. In 1990, I was thirty-eight and brimming with energy; I remember walking to my studio and loading the pen, and then not stopping for days. The nib was seductive, but I immediately noticed the odd sharp angles and corners of the lettering done with the nib.

The first job I did with the nib was a tribute to my father, a Christmas card with a Scripture from Isaiah (Figure 2). It was while working on the card that I realized I did not have to settle for the sharp terminals;

I could round them off by touching them up. Then, I realized the round Speedball B-Series nib would give me the result I was looking for. (I am a bit slow on occasion.) The next time I used the Esterbrook Drawlet nib commercially, it was for the John Neal Bookseller 1997 Keepsake (Figure 3). In between, I had used the Speedball B for primarily the same thing: a faux brush look. With some touch-up, I could even make solid strokes look like dry brush (but that is a whole other article).

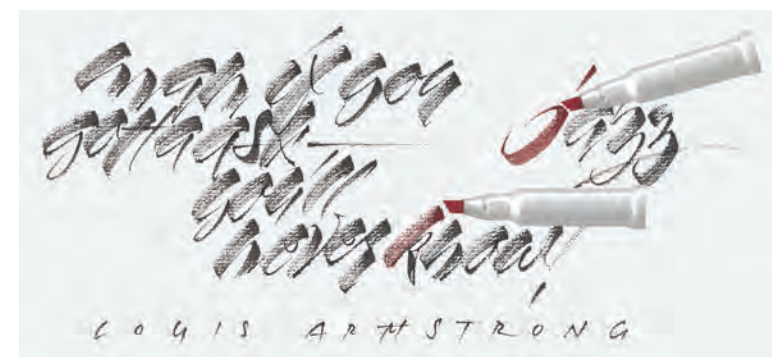


Figure 1. Lettering done with a specially cut Speedball Elegant Writer. Unlike most lettering, the strokes here are pushed down instead of pulled.

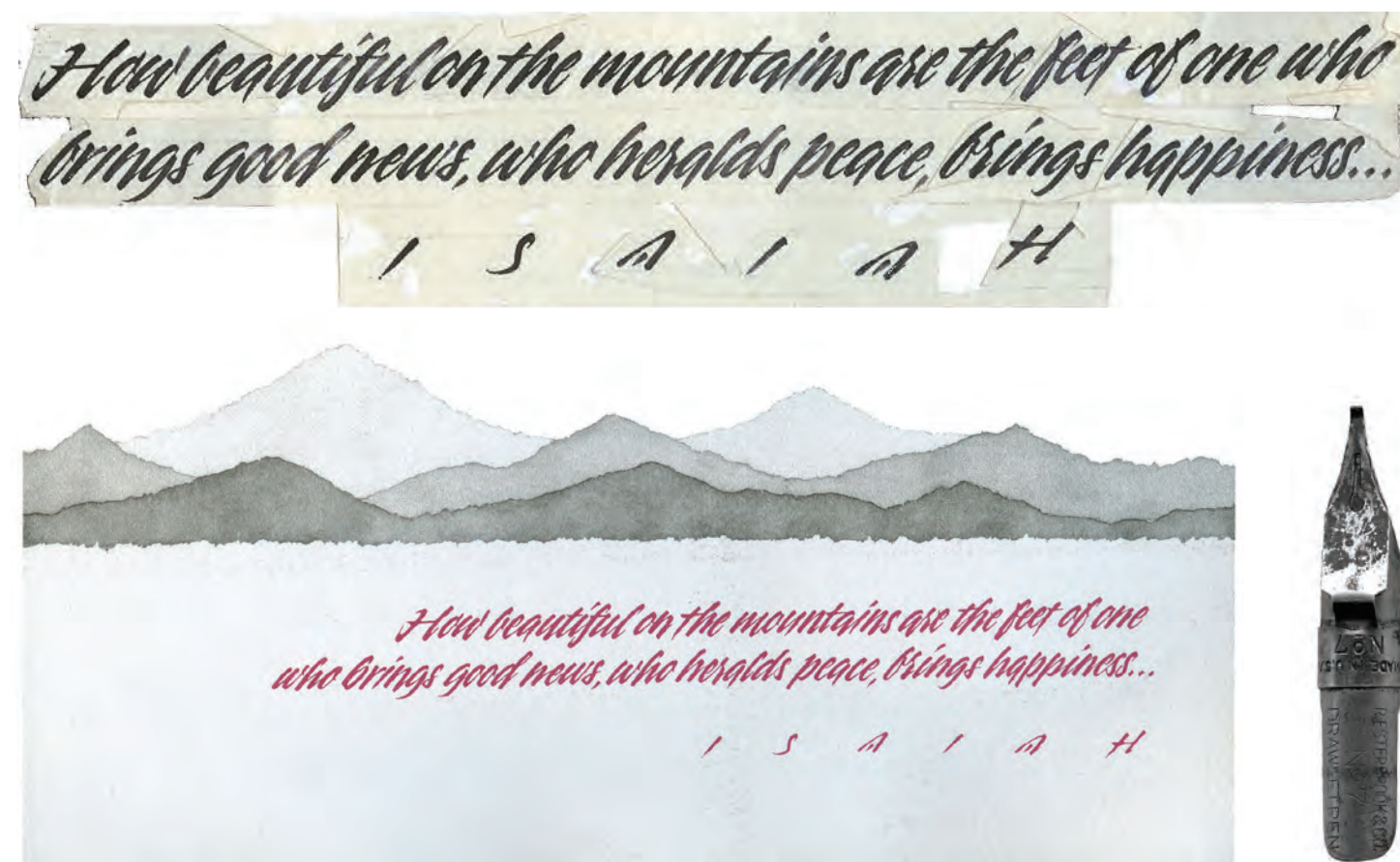


Figure 2. The lettering below was done very quickly, after warm up, with an Esterbrook Drawlet nib. The finished card and the Drawlet nib are shown, along with the lettering. The x-height is 3/16". For the finished artwork, I would have normally (back then) enlarged the lettering 200% and done touch-up with a 3X0 Rapidograph pen, and, yes, I did the chiaroscuro, for better or worse. For those of you who do not know, I flunked the only drawing class I ever took.

Master Folk Artists

Figure 6. Original roughs for Pooper Black, which is based on titling I did while in the South Pacific. In developing the font, I restrained the letters too much.

abc defghijkl
mno pqrst
hmu vwxy23

Speedball B-Series Nib

As the past has grown more distant, I have lost track of chronology, but I know the rationale of each word or phrase in my lettering back then, and how each helped in the understanding and development of my bent nib forms. As I had with my other pen work, early in the '90s, I sought lighter and lighter forms. At this juncture, I had started manipulating the bent nib pen unmercifully. For example, notice in Figure 4 how I am "turning and lifting," primarily as I am stroking the ascenders and descenders. I remember a demo I did at the 2003 international calligraphy conference on manipulating a Speedball B pen to create variations of thicks and thins. This fellow behind me said, "You can't do that with that pen." I looked at him and said, "I just did." It was Walt Glazer, who is the CEO of Speedball Art Products Company. A couple of years later, I created a heading and tagline for an article by Glazer in an issue of *Scripts* that I designed. (*Scripts* is the journal of the Washington Calligraphers Guild. Glazer's article was on the future of Speedball.)

Figure 4. Lettering done in green and blue watercolor with a Speedball B3 nib. The ascenders and descenders reflect the severe manipulation of the pen.

It's the
season
to be
jolly

Figure 5. I did this title/logo and tagline for an article in the Washington Calligraphers Guild's journal, *Scripts*. Although I love the quietness of the Speedball logo, I am proud of the tagline.

Speedball

WRITING THE FUTURE'S HISTORY

The word,
and each
of its
constituent
parts,
is, after all
both
container
and content.

The word
and each
of its
constituent
parts,
is after all
both
container
and content.



Figure 8. A logo in a mixture of Pooper Black and Sneaky. Yael Miller of Miller Creative provided creative direction.

Figure 7. Left is the original lettering for my typeface Sweezy; right is the digital version. Not shown are the font's many alternate characters and ligatures.

Over time, the forms of my manipulated Speedball B lettering solidified, and I began to dream of fonts. The font Pooper Black was the first, finished in 2005 (Figure 6). It was conceived while I was in the South Pacific working on a project. It took five years to develop my Speedball-B3-lettered roughs into a font, as I worked on refining the letterforms to give the font continuity. (The font's title is a play on Oz Cooper's notoriously popular Cooper Black type and on the day-to-day care of an infant that had somehow snuck into our house.) Sweezy (Figure 7), created with the 5.5 Speedball B, was next, in 2009, at the insistence of the type foundry. Then came a connecting version of Pooper Black called Sneaky, completed in 2013 (Figure 8). Its creation involved a lot of computer fiddling, and its forms have less to do with pen work.

Figure 9. Lettering done with a large Speedball A nib, combined with typeset letters from my font Monumental Titling. I had the design printed on tee shirts and a coffee mug.

HIJKL

STUV

WXYZ

Speedball A-Series Nib

Along the way, the B nib became my favorite, but the Speedball A nib is capable of rendering forms with dramatic contrast between the thicks and thins (Figure 9). Similar to the square Esterbrook Drawlet nib, it is, quite honestly, the most fun nib in the world to write with, because it makes you think. It brings an exuberance laced with anxiety. The A nib is much like the folded pen in what it produces. I think it is a showstopper of a tool – which Randall’s examples in his part of this article amply prove.

Retouching

Most of my work is for print or the Web, and all of it is retouched. There is a bit of trickery and chicanery involved in the letterforms, but never too much. *PEACE HOPE & JOY* (Figure 10) is a prime example of touching up. It was done with a B nib, and, as you may guess, I had to sharpen the terminals. The “dots” were done with an A nib and repeated throughout. (Notice, if you would, the Mission-inspired “chair” that I included as the **H**.) Everybody doing this kind of work touches up; it is just that some do not want you to know it. That is why this work is called lettering and not calligraphy.

Whether you choose the A, B, C, or D (if you can find it) nib, the rapture is there. Retired, I now use B-style nibs to do bookmarks, just to promote the printed book (Figure 11). My wife and friends have switched to electronic book readers, and I tell them, “Stick this in your Kindle.” Alas, they do not appreciate a finely printed book.

Michael has published a number of small books of his lettering, and some are still available for purchase. Contact him at typerror@aol.com for more info on his books, tee shirts and coffee mugs.



Figure 10. I did these letters with a Speedball B nib and then squared off the terminals using a Rapidograph pen, before Photoshop effects were applied. The square dots were done with a Speedball A nib.



Figure 12. This logo for a design group in Washington, D.C., was done with a 5.5 Speedball B nib.

Figure 11. Two bookmark designs, both with tempus fugit; carpe diem, Latin for “time is fleeting; seize the day.” The top one is done with A and B nibs, the bottom with two different sizes of B nibs. In the pieces, the form of each subsequent letter is determined after its preceding letter is made. To me, this sort of play is all about secondary rhythms and contrast.

