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ON THE JOB

He always judges a book by its binding



LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

Paul Parisi on the bindery floor at Acme Binding's Charlestown plant.

By Cindy Atoji Keene | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MARCH 31, 2017

A good book disappears in your hand. Unless it's poorly made. Then the stiff binding, the loosely glued pages, and the creased spine become a ugly distraction. "If the book fights you to work with, it's no fun," says Paul Parisi, president of Acme Binding in Charlestown, founded in 1821. That makes it the oldest continuously operated book bindery in the world. "Good binding is attractive, appealing and fun to be around. You'll keep the book in your life because you love it so much," he says.

Parisi talks about books as if they are animate objects — old friends that hang around on bookshelves. Indeed, he wrote the standards for how library books should be made so they are sturdy and durable enough to last for years. While others are looking to exit the industry in the age of e-books, he continues to put money into the family-owned business. "Many people think print is obsolete, but I think the future is strong," says Parisi, 63, who employs 150 people in a labyrinth-like 100,000 square-foot plant where machines systematically bind, fold, cut, perforate and box. Parisi spoke to the Globe about what it's like to bind thousands of well-made books a day.

"I am an odd duck. When I walk into a book store, I immediately start looking at the bindings; how the pages open, what the cover is like. I'm a avid student of book-binding structure, having been involved in all aspects of book-binding since I was a boy. Making a book is a very involved process — you don't just push a button and a book pops out. We can produce thousands of books or just a single copy. We take pride in quality, even though one could say, 'What does it matter if you make a bad book? It's not like brain surgery or a tight rope walker if a mistake is made.' But it matters to the person who owns that project. One example: We bound a Dr. Seuss book — an advance copy was being flown out to his widow. We were

not the printer of the book but found that his name was spelled wrong in the title page, with four — and not three — S's in Seuss. Immediately we fixed it, although we didn't have a part in making the error. My father used to say to me, 'If you have time to do it over again, then you have time to do it right the first time.'

"On any day, thousands of books are in process, whether it's a memoir or thesis, art, history, children's, travel, text book, directory, journal, or oversized book. I designed every piece of equipment in the company, including software. I learned to do everything by hand but was eager to automate and make things more efficiently. Now Acme prints on demand, does library binding, scans and reformatting, [and] offers book storage. We are all over the space in the book world.

"I tell people that the three greatest inventions of all time are fire, the wheel, and the printed book. Literacy, democracy and capitalism are all closely intertwined with the freedom to put thoughts and ideas into print. The book is central to that. Books are an absolute treasure, [and] under-appreciated.

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