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Restoring the story: Local bookbinder nurses books back to life

EMMA SCHKLOVEN Mar 22, 2017



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Zahna Soule repairs a book in her studio on Wednesday, March 15. "To say she's meticulous is an understatement," says Danny Givens, owner of Givens Books, where Soule has worked since 2008. "[She] considers it a passion of hers. It's not just a job, she puts her whole self into it. I've rarely seen someone that takes this much pride in a particular task."

A worn green book, its corners fraying and cover cloth peeling from the board of its case, rests on the wooden desk in Zahna Soule's studio.

Among the accoutrements on a nearby sheet of newspaper lie tweezers, scalpels and a syringe.

It looks almost like the preparations for a surgery.

"I actually feel very protective of these books that I take in for repair. They're like wounded children ... that you're doctoring," Soule says. "Having a book in disrepair and sorting out what the solution is to repair it ... having a book that in the end is transformed, it's like being a hero of books."

Her bare feet padding softly on the hardwood floor, Soule returns to the desk, dips a paintbrush into a mason jar filled with a viscous white liquid and carefully applies it to the underside of the upturned cloth near the worn book's spine.



Zahna Soule applies adhesive to a book with a paintbrush in her studio.

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Softly, she taps the adhesive-coated fabric back into place and smooths it before running her fingers along the edge, checking for ridges.

"You're going to lose some of this," she says softly, almost contemplatively, as she touches the shabby spine. "But it's already so faded."

After working as an optician in Lynchburg for three years following a cross-country move from California, Soule decided to leave eyewear behind.

She took a job at the White Hart in 2007, in part because of the now defunct Inklings Bookshop, which extended into the café from next door.

"I think there is something about holding a book and reading," she says. "You enter into another world when you are here. You can have adventures, experiences. ... If you are a tactile person, the feel of a book is nice. There's just something very comforting and almost nurturing about a book."

Through the coffeehouse, she met a man who introduced her to bookbinding and she enjoyed it so much, she started taking classes at Cat Tail Run Hand Bookbinding in Winchester.

And so began Soule's new career in nurturing books back to life through her business, The Book Mender.

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Book Repair 09

Zahna Soule injects adhesive into a book's board to repair a frayed corner on Wednesday, March 15.

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Within her first three days of work at Givens Books, Soule had a customer.

"I answered the phone and the person was calling to see if we, Givens, [do] book repair. I said, 'No, Givens does not, but I am learning book repair.'"

It is through the bookstore that Soule meets many of her clients. Givens and his other employees even recommend her when customers ask for someone to take a look at their tomes.

"It ties to what we love and do," Danny Givens says. "It works out beautifully that Zahna, who works for us, also does book repair. ... It just dovetails beautifully into the book business. And because we trust her — we wouldn't recommend someone we didn't trust, but we know she's very good at what she does."

Books come to Soule in varying degrees of disrepair.

Some have frayed corners, torn pages or rips in the binding. Others come in without cover material, with splits in their joints — the flexible part where the cover meets the spine — or even with the book block separated from its cover altogether.

A few have even come in after someone else has tried to repair them with duct tape, which often makes Soule's work harder because that adhesive must be removed before she can make any repairs.

Book Repair 11

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"I've had some great adventures with repairing people's books," she says. "It's been infinitely satisfying and is wonderful to encounter damage that is such, you're wondering, 'Well, how do I solve this problem?'"

After searching fruitlessly for someone to repair a 1943 edition of "The Joy of Cooking" inherited from his mother, Roanoke resident Dana Smith brought it to Soule.

"It's the one that was given to my mother when she got married," Smith says. "It was always on the kitchen counter when I was growing up and it was the mainstream cookbook for our family."

When the book arrived on Soule's workbench, its back was held together with tape.

"It was a gooey tape," says Smith. "Somebody had tried to glue it and tape it and fix it, all those temporary measures. It was a big cleanup."

A year and a half later, Soule's repairs have held up and Smith says he plans to preserve the book and pass it on to his son.

"She really handles and regards these objects with such almost reverence, because she knows what they mean to her clients," says Martha Johnson, director of the Maier Museum of Art at Randolph College. "She's very conscientious."

Johnson took some of her favorite British children's books from the '50s to Soule following a recommendation from a mutual friend.

"We read them so much some of them were just threadbare," she recalls.

She had looked online to buy new copies, but discovered they were out of print. The ones she could find were selling for \$250 to \$350 each.

"We didn't actually repair all of them because some of them were just too far gone, but she was able to do a lovely job with three or four of our books," Johnson says. "My oldest is 20 and my youngest is 7, so the 7-year-old is still really enjoying these books."

Soule remembers that particular restoration well.

"That was difficult because it was so small. It didn't really have a spine. It was one of those books where the pages just kind of come together," she says. "And the cover material was interesting because it was some kind of man-made synthetic that was peeling up. ... It needed color to match it to the original cover material that was still there, so that was playing with different watercolor pencils."

For every job, Soule meets a potential customer at Givens Books and assesses the needs of the repair. She asks the customer how often the book is read, if it is handled frequently or if it mostly sits on the shelf. Do they want to make it look newer cosmetically, or do they want it to keep its older appearance?

The answers determine the type of plan Soule recommends — whether it needs to be a durable repair that can stand up to the constant flipping of pages or one that can remain somewhat fragile, for investment purposes only.

“She took a good, long time assessing [‘The Joy of Cooking’] before she started, and she took extra effort to be assured she could do the job,” says Smith. “That’s important if you’ve got a relic, I’m sure. People want to know the individual has the self-confidence. She studied it quite hard ... took a good 45 minutes to just examine, look and handle. That did impress me.”

Book Repair 02

Zahna Soule assess the damage to a customer's book before beginning repairs.

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If the damage is beyond her abilities, Soule says she discusses the customer's other options — a book is too precious for her to fool around with if it's just for the sake of another job.

There have, however, been moments where a customer insists Soule try a repair even if she is unsure of the outcome.

Once, a woman brought Soule her husband's copy of “Liberty Bible Commentary.” It had broken into six pieces and she hoped to get it repaired for him as a gift, Soule remembers.

When Soule told her it was beyond her capabilities, the customer was adamant: she had to try.

“I think she figured there was nothing to lose,” says Soule. “So we had an understanding. I was going to see what I could do.”

Because of the unwieldy size of the book, Soule says at times she used her torso to stabilize the book while reattaching the sections. One arm would keep the parts aligned, while the other completed the necessary fix.

“I’m really glad she asked and I accepted, because that was a beautiful repair,” Soule says. “I amazed myself because when I had it all together ... everything was perfectly aligned.”

Sometimes mending a book first involves taking it apart further, especially when it comes to more modern books and, therefore, more modern adhesives.

Her biggest advice to book lovers is not to wait until their favorite page-turner is falling apart at the seams.

"I really encourage people to bring me books when they're just starting to fall apart," she says.

Not only does the amount of time and labor affect the cost of the repair, substantial damage compromises the integrity of a book even after restoration.

"It's better to minimize damage," she says. "It's better for the book. It's better for the customer's wallet."

Soule slowly injects another white paste into a ragged corner of the green book with the syringe, allowing the liquid to seep through each layer of the board.

Book Repair 10

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She clamps the edge between pieces of cardboard and wax paper with just the right amount of pressure to force the material into a point that will match its three counterparts.

Too much pressure, the corner will be too thin, and too little, it will be too thick.

The text in her hands, a 1953 copy of "The Rommel Papers," will soon return to its owner and join him on a trip to Europe, where they will visit some of the places mentioned in the book on part of a history tour.

This repair needs to withstand such adventures.

"You can replace a book so easily. You can find it at the bookstore or order it online, even books that are out of print," Soule says. "But it's that specific book. ... They need that specific book and it's falling apart. ... I really love being able to be in a position to bring back to life something that is meaningful to a person, objects that hold meaning and value for somebody."

Book Repair 08

Jay Westcott/The News & Advance

More info

For more information about Zahna Soule and her work, visit <http://thebookmender.weebly.com/>

