

Kater-Crafts Bookbinders Practices an Ancient Art While Feeding the Hollywood Beast

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Photo by Andra Lim

Kater-Crafts employee Josefina Ramirez practices the art of book making.

In the workshop of Kater-Crafts Bookbinders, Bibles from the 19th century, calculus textbooks and medical journals on digestive diseases sit in stacks, reinforcing the reputation of books as arcane, unsexy, packed with esoteric information. But two shelves tell a different story. Lined up here are menu booklets seen in *Ocean's Thirteen*, a leather-bound yearbook from the TV series *Castle* and books of behind-the-scenes shots from Tom Cruise films, all made by the small, family-run company. At this Pico Rivera bookbindery, Hollywood glitz and glamour meets a dying art. Drama meets down-to-earth.

Here, siblings Bruce Kavin and Judy Howard work with their 25-person staff to restore and craft small orders of books. They also provide key props to Hollywood; books they've made to order have appeared in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Titanic* and *Tron*. Later this year, one of their books will play a crucial role in the film adaptation of *Life of Pi* -- in fact, as many as 200 copies of it may see screen time.

Sitting in an office space (full of books, of course), the two explain how the movie business came calling.

"We never went looking for this kind of work. They find us through word-of-mouth," Kavin says. "Our father started the bindery, and it just evolved that we were able to do this."

Originally founded out of the basement in their home in 1948, the bindery later moved to a quiet road, southeast of downtown Los Angeles, lined with manufacturing warehouses.

As teenagers, both were dragged into the bindery during summers -- Kavin remembers his first job extracting staples from magazines. Both moved on to other lines of work after graduating college, and they sometimes lived far apart, getting together only for holidays. But eventually they both returned to the bindery, where they've now worked together nearly every day for about 15 years.

Their characters are cut from a pragmatic cloth, and when they start gushing, it's always about books. Their relationship centers on professional matters -- their mutual love of books, how to keep the business afloat. But their overlapping jobs have allowed each to understand the other's personality at its best and worst.

Describing their work spats, Howard, 68, admits, "I tend to be more volatile."

Laughing, Kavin, 65, firmly says, "I agree." But he adds that she's a "creative" asset, while she calls him a "gentleman" with insights into every facet of bookbinding.

The books they construct are the product of old machinery and human hands. Even their larger orders, such as special editions of a novel or binding work for libraries, only run up to a few thousand copies.

The bindery uses a sewing machine from 1935 to stitch pages together and a 1960s contraption to round off book spines. There's a linotype machine -- used to print newspapers until about 50 years ago -- that engraves letters onto a metal block.

"It's like a Frankenstein machine from the dinosaur age," Howard says. Many of these machines, Kavin adds, are no longer manufactured because no one's using them.

When they're first hired, most employees have no experience binding books. They show up needing a job, a paycheck -- and they build up their skills over the years.

Erny Liem, 61, has become an expert in restoring old family Bibles in her 20 years at the bindery. "If you damage it, there's no replacement," she says.

In the end, most of Liem's efforts are invisible to the eye: She patches up the infrastructure of the Bible while leaving its exterior intact.

"People wonder why bookbinding costs so much," Kavin says. But after they see the process, he continues, "they say, 'How can you do it so cheap?' "

Howard mentions another common exclamation from customers who last visited years ago: "Oh good, you're still here!"

The digital age has not been kind to bookbinders, but Kavin and Howard have made up for lost business by ramping up specialty orders. They've restored a 325-pound visitor register for the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, dating from the 1800s, and bound dissertations. Each book has a story behind it -- and, in the case of books made for Hollywood, each helps to tell a story.

Life of Pi follows a young boy who's shipwrecked in the Pacific Ocean. On a lifeboat with a Bengal tiger, he finds a manual that provides tips for hand-to-mouth living, such as keeping hydrated with turtle blood, a "nutritious, salt-free drink."

But the lifeboat scenes were filmed on water -- and water and paper don't mix. The bindery created several hundred copies of the survival guide, so a new one could appear in each take.

"We need that stuff to look absolutely authentic, and there are so few people who know how to make anything look good anymore," says Robin Miller, a prop master who's worked with the bindery on several movies, including *Life of Pi*. "You see these things in a huge close-up on the movie screen, in high-definition."

For *Titanic*, the bindery constructed an album, around 4 feet long and stamped with a custom-made template, which was supposed to encase the blueprints of the doomed ship.

"I was expecting it to be sitting up on an easel, but it was lying on the floor," Howard says. The camera passed over the album in a matter of seconds.

At the end of the day, Howard and Kavin are dazzled not by Tinseltown credentials but by the artistry and antiquity of their work. "I like the old equipment, the skill of it, the beauty of the books," Kavin says. "We're not starstruck."