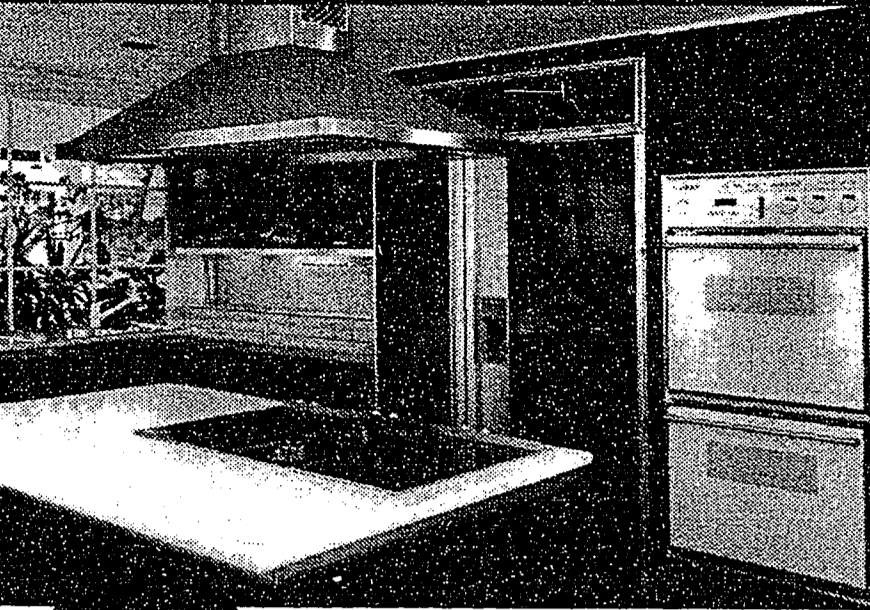


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Wood Carving by Bill Roberts

Jack-of-All-Facets in New World of Publishing

By DENISE MOURGES

IN 1975 Byron Preiss passed up a career in television for a new field, book production.

"I wanted to put together visual books which I could design, choose the content for, edit and deliver to publishers," said Mr. Preiss, who heads Byron Preiss Visual Publications Inc. in Manhattan. "In the 1970's publishing was still a very conservative business. Fifty percent of the publishers I met with said, 'Just give us the manuscript, we're supposed to do the rest,' and threw me out of their offices. But the other half had the spirit of the 60's and wanted to do something different."

The 38-year old entrepreneur, who has residences in East Hampton and Manhattan, has been involved in producing hundreds of handsome and innovative books that many publishers have released.

"I bring elements together," he said. He has brought together science-fiction writers and space scientists ("The Universe," Bantam), Jane Goodall and Chinese naturalists ("The Secret World of Pandas," Abrams), Isaac Asimov and a production designer of "Star Wars," Ralph McQuarrie ("Robot Dreams," Berkley) and Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe and Epic Comics.

"But I don't just drop a finished book on an editor's desk," Mr. Preiss (pronounced price) said. "An editor's relationship with me is more like an editor's with an author, combined with an agent."

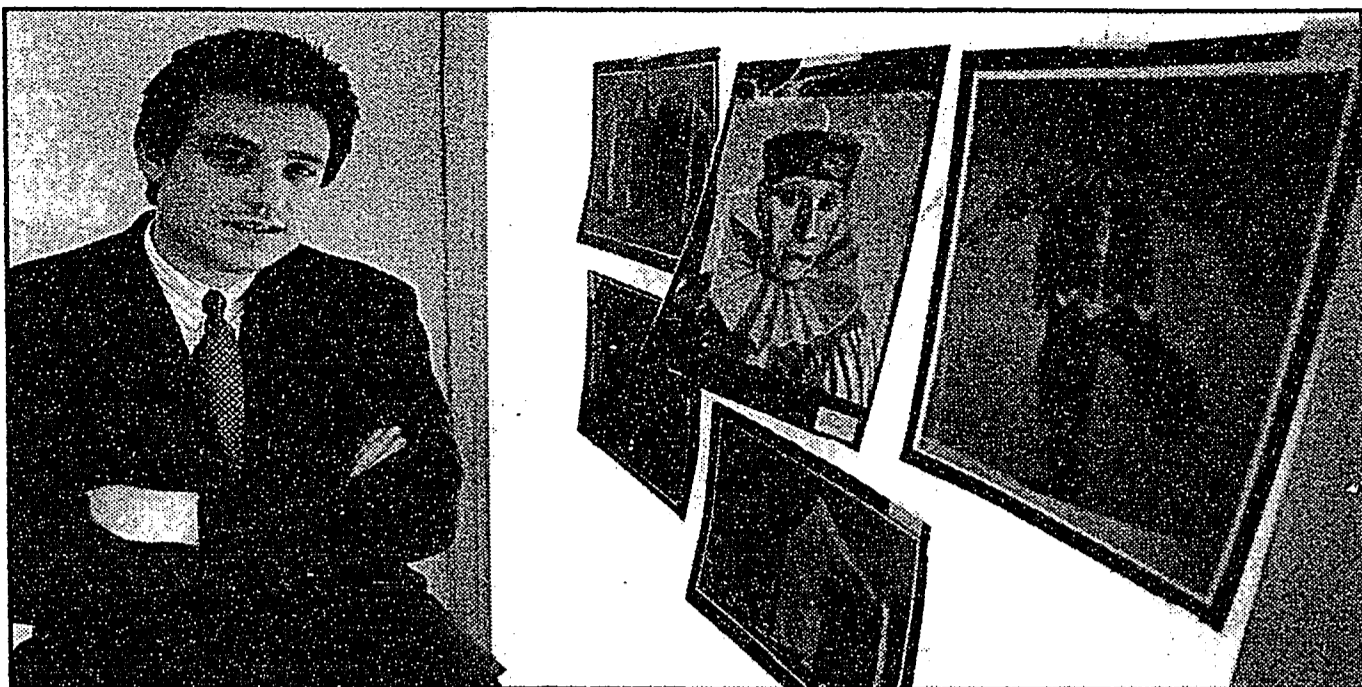
Work With 'Sesame Street'

He credits learning his trade to working in 1971 with the Children's Television Workshop between earning his B.A. at the University of Pennsylvania and a master's in communications at Stanford University. "As an associate editor for C.T.W.'s products division," Mr. Preiss said, "I turned elements from 'Sesame Street' and 'The Electric Company,' a TV program for older kids, into toys and print."

He also worked on children's productions for NBC-TV.

In 1976, Pyramid became the first publisher to release a book from Mr. Preiss's company, which has grown from a staff of three to 19.

He said the book, "Chandler," his homage to the writer, did not look like anything else on the market. "It was a completely illustrated private-eye novel," Mr. Preiss said, "and its success helped to break ground in America for graphic novels, which are what these comics are called. In Japan, 25 percent of the books sold are 'comics.' People read them on their way to work. And in Europe illustrat-



Philip Greenberg for The New York Times

Byron Preiss, founder of Byron Preiss Visual Publications Inc. in Manhattan.

From assembling and delivering books, moving into the electronic age.

ed books for adults have been treated as an art form since the 1960's."

Although he was not involved in publishing "Maus," Mr. Preiss attributes the new respect graphic novels have earned to the book written and drawn by Art Spiegelman. The book, which won a Pulitzer Prize in April, documents what Mr. Spiegelman's Jewish family, represented by a family of cartoon mice, experienced in Europe during the Holocaust.

"Art Spiegelman really turned around the notion that visual storytelling was something just for kids," Mr. Preiss said.

Creating juvenile books, however, is still a source of pride and pleasure for Mr. Preiss, who has found a ready audience in his 3-year old daughter, Karah.

Four Songs by Joni Mitchell

"She loved 'At the Zoo,'" said Mr. Preiss, who is married to Sandi Mendelson, co-owner of Hilsinger/Mendelson, a public-relations firm.

Wanting to share his cultural touchstones with a younger genera-

tion, Mr. Preiss produced "At the Zoo" with humorously illustrated lyrics of Paul Simon's song. The book has sold more than 50,000 copies since Doubleday published it last year.

Last month Scholastic Inc. released "Both Sides Now," the first of four Joni Mitchell songs that Mr. Preiss is producing as children's books.

"Joni was charmed that her songs have been taken to heart by children all over the world," he said. "So she was very open when I approached her on the idea."

The deal was closed when he showed Ms. Mitchell, who is also an artist, the work of Alan Baker. Mr. Baker's delightful images of two caterpillars' turning into butterflies beautifully convey the timeless lyrics of "Both Sides Now." The book will be followed by "Circle Game," illustrated by Mark Graham, who lives in Port Washington; "Big Yellow Taxi," and "Chelsea Morning."

Mr. Preiss said he had loved books since he was a child in Brooklyn. "Tom Swifts" were my favorites," he recalled, "because the stories were filled with exciting things that didn't exist like computers, space stations and going to the Moon."

Which is why he and his staff were stymied when, in 1990, they began revamping the "Tom Swift" series for Pocket Books.

The Gifts of Isaac Asimov

Mr. Preiss said: "The problem was what to do about the science, because the things that were great in the 50's were old. So we brought in cutting-edge stuff like microscopic worlds and virtual reality, which will probably be the new technology of the 21st century. Everything that influences our culture and dominates our commerce comes from technology. I couldn't articulate that at 8 years old, of course, but I certainly took part in science fairs and read science fiction."

Mr. Asimov, who died last year, is one of Mr. Preiss's favorite authors. "Not only did Isaac write the greatest science fiction," he said, "but he also did something in nonfiction that no-

body ever did better. From the 1950's on there was virtually an explosion of technological developments, and Isaac had the rare gift of explaining them to us in a way we could understand. He was a nice unassuming man who happened to be a prolific genius. He wrote something like 400 books."

Mr. Asimov was an early explorer of futuristic concepts like automated life, computers, artificial intelligence and robots. "Isaac coined the word 'robotics,'" Mr. Preiss said. "Now we're using the newest technology to bring out 'Isaac Asimov's Ultimate Robot' on CD-ROM."

A CD-ROM disk looks and works like an audio CD. But CD-ROM's are made for personal computers, not stereo systems. One CD-ROM, which stands for read only memory, can hold 10,000 pages of information stored as text, music, animated images or any combination of those.

'Build Your Own Robot'

Last month Macintosh began shipping the first computers with CD-ROM drives, which are laser decoders like those in CD players. Previously a drive had to be purchased separately and connected to a serial port.

This year Mr. Preiss, who has designed many works of educational and interactive software, formed Byron Preiss Multimedia Licensing Inc. to produce and market CD-ROM's.

"Electronic books are what they're called," he said. "'Ultimate Robot' will have all of Isaac's great writing on robots and robotics, but will also be interactive. You'll be able to build your own robot."

Designed by Mr. McQuarrie of R2-D2 fame, it will be released early next year. By the fall it will be joined by "Gahan Wilson's Haunted House."

"It's a funny, scary electronic book," Mr. Preiss said. Well known for his macabre cartoons, Mr. Wilson lives in Sag Harbor, as does Dan Weiss, with whom Mr. Preiss was a partner for "My Teacher Flunked the Planet" (Pocket Books), which has been on The Publisher's Weekly juvenile best-seller list since June.

With 80 books and electronic books scheduled for production next year, Mr. Preiss said he had no regrets about nipping his broadcasting career. "I saw that doing a TV show meant basically doing the same thing every day, which I find boring," he said. "Producing books has allowed me to keep myself entertained, as well as others."

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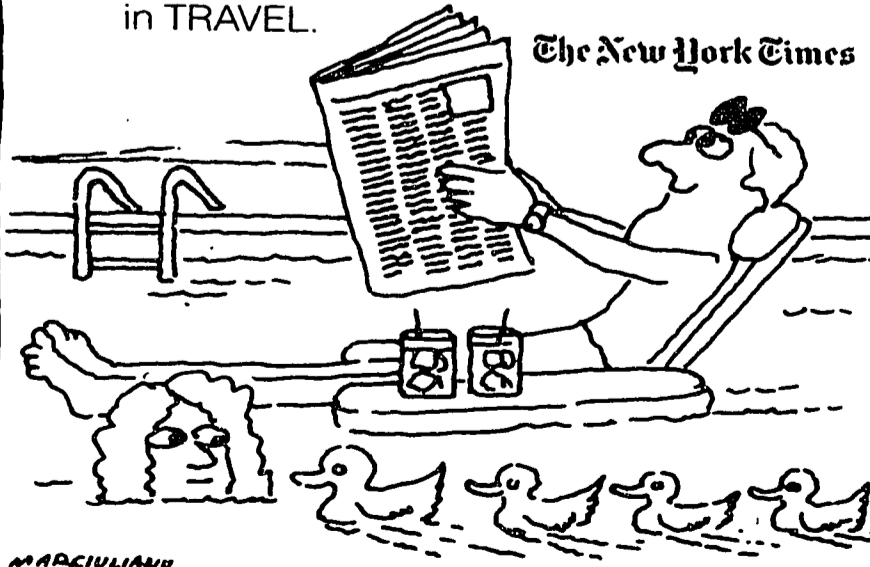
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