



# from Fiction to FINE ART

## ANDREA SPALDING'S BOOKWORK SCULPTURE

By CHERIE THIESSEN

Photos by David Spalding, except as noted



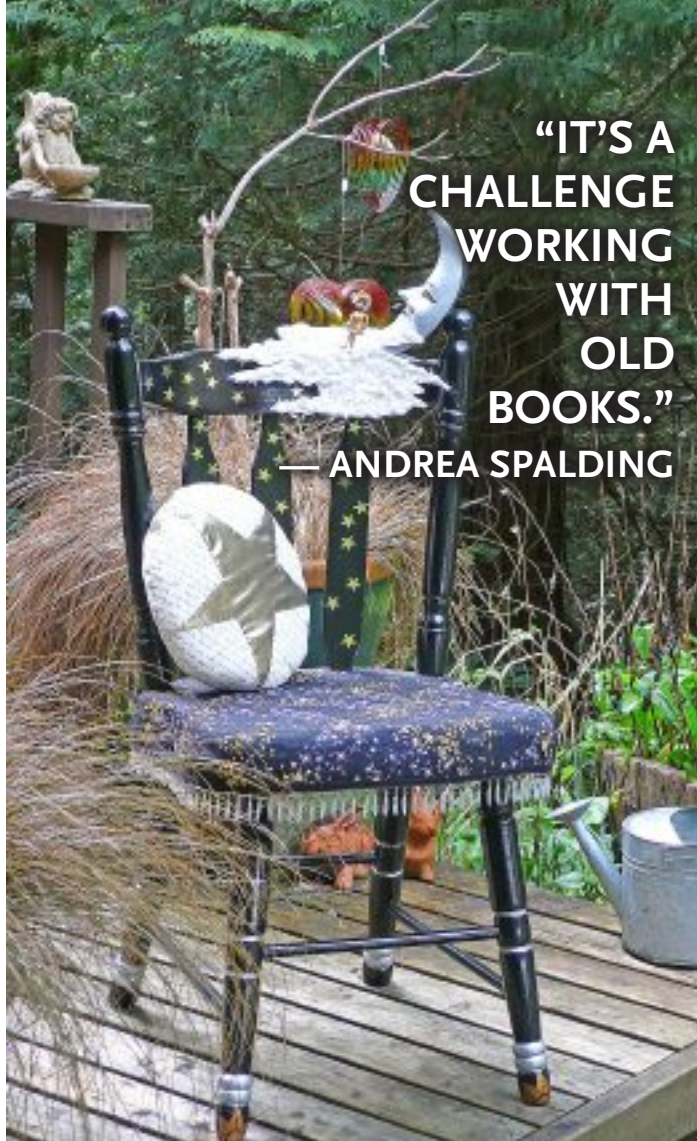
Above, from top: Book art projects in progress; Andrea Spalding tries out some new glue.

Andrea Spalding, a well-known author of over 30 books, attacks Jack and the Beanstalk with scalpel and exacto knife. She's carving out the book's insides, cutting up the pages and violating a venerable tome. How can a writer and a passionate lover of books turn on her medium so violently? "Both David and I are passionate about books," says the assailant. (David is her husband and partner, himself a respected author and talented musician) "and it distresses us considerably to see perfectly good books discarded and going into the landfill now. So, when I visited my family in England a few years ago and saw people creating art from books, I was immediately enchanted and saw an art form I could really enjoy working in.

"It's a big thing over in England and Europe and I became inspired by one of the artists, Maggie Cullen. Because it's such a new art, no one is very good at telling you how to do things, so you have to figure out techniques for yourself. I like that kind of a challenge."

So the paradox is explained: the book isn't being trashed, it's being creatively recycled. Spalding reads the book, intuits its meaning, and then reaches in and pulls out its heart and creates a whole new body around that. In order to give the book's printed pages fresh life in the new world of e-books and Kindle, she's transforming them into sculptures, where instead of gathering dust on bookshelves in libraries, bookstores and homes, they're admired in museums, galleries and on coffee tables.





**“IT’S A  
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**— ANDREA SPALDING**



Above: Some of the 30 books Andrea Spalding has published over the years.  
At left: Andrea's special chair at her Pender Island property. (CHERIE THIESSEN PHOTO)  
Below right: Night Circus piece.

“We were a folk duo called Brandywine and we’d been performing some music programs for adults at music festivals across the country before we were offered the show, which aired every Saturday morning from 1980 to 1984. There are a lot of middle-aged ‘kids’ out there who still remember us.”

Somehow in between all this, the artistic couple also managed to fit in three children, all fairly close together in age and all devoted to their parents.

The love affair with Pender Island started 35 years ago when the family came to visit friends who had bought a farm on the island and fell in love with the Gulf Islands lifestyle. They bought a secluded chunk of property and camped on it every August for the next 10 years, before finally building their dream house overlooking Captain Passage.

Since publishing *The Most Beautiful Kite in the World* 20 years ago, Spalding has established herself as one of the country’s foremost writers of children’s literature. But in 2002, a serious car accident resulted in a brain injury that stopped the author from doing many things, one of them being sustaining a story.

“I’m unable to hold the thread. Even picture books are difficult and take me a long time. At that time I totally identified myself as a writer, and even though I won an award for my last children’s book in 2011, *Sealsong*, I thought, ‘OK I can still do that, but it was such a struggle.’”

But how did it feel to tear, rip and stab into a book for that first time?

“Terrifying,” says Spalding. “I had to fight with myself. I’d read a book, get an idea and then not be able to go through with it because the book wasn’t damaged enough. And David, who has spent his whole life collecting books, was really uncomfortable with it.”

It helped, however, when she created a sculpture from one of David’s very old Peterson field guides, picked up second hand for \$5, and sold it immediately. They both got it: she had given the book new life.

Clever stuff indeed and possibly the perfect solution for a writer turned artist. Or perhaps I should write “teacher turned scriptwriter turned performer turned writer turned artist.” Spalding trained as a teacher specializing in art and drama, taught in Britain for a year, and then — newly married — she and her husband immigrated to Canada in 1967 and settled in Alberta.

“I never went back full time into the teaching system, but that teaching degree has been very useful as I’ve taught in all kinds of places and, once I developed as a writer, travelled to schools all across the country under the Writers in the Schools program.”

Prior to her writing career, however, Spalding had already been a prolific scriptwriter, producing over 100 scripts for radio and television. She had also produced and starred in *Storytime with David*, a children’s television show.







Above: Andrea with her book art exhibit in the Salt Spring Public Library display case this spring.  
At right: Butterflies of Saskatchewan in another form.

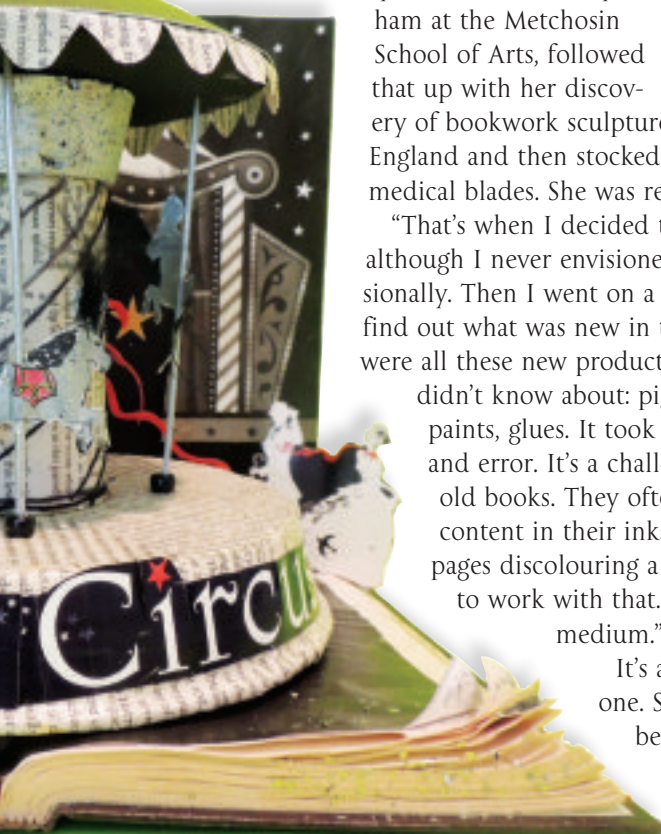
So it may well be that her very last publication, co-written with her husband in 2012, will be her swansong. That was Harbour Publishing's popular Seasonings, Flavours of the Southern Gulf Islands.

"That is when I made the decision to try art again. In Edmonton, I used to make batik wall hangings and sell them, but I was working with hot wax on my kitchen table and my children were toddlers, so that was that. Then a few years ago, as I was creeping toward 70, I thought, 'Crickey, if I want to do art again, I had better start doing it.'"

She started by taking a course on assemblage by Texas artist Beverly Mangham at the Metchosin School of Arts, followed that up with her discovery of bookwork sculpture in England and then stocked up on medical blades. She was ready to carve.

"That's when I decided to set up my studio, although I never envisioned doing it professionally. Then I went on a learning curve to find out what was new in the art world. There were all these new products out now that I didn't know about: pigments, gels, acrylic paints, glues. It took quite a bit of trial and error. It's a challenge working with old books. They often have a high acid content in their inks, resulting in the pages discolouring a lot, so you have to work with that. It's an ephemeral medium."

It's also an original one. Spalding may well be in the forefront of this kind of art in North America.



After her first successful show at Pender's Sea Star Winery, Spalding was amazed at the popularity of her pieces. Now with 10 shows under her scalpel and successful exhibitions at both Salt Spring and Pender libraries, she's keeping her eyes open for tattered old hardcovers that speak to her.

"The medium is perfect for me as I am a visual person and I've lived my whole life with stories, telling them and writing them. I always read the book first and then see what jumps out at me and that is what I create from it. There is always some of the book's concept coming out of it. There has to be something about an old book that appeals to me



first — that it's known and loved, or has a beautiful or an intriguing cover, or images that appeal to me. For example, a friend gave me a hardcover copy of an Australian road atlas with maps and stories in it. Immediately I heard 'Who'll go a waltzing Matilda with me?' going through my head, so I created an abstract piece using some of the pictures that appealed to me and made a collage on the cover of the book. I could see all the adventures a person reading this book would be going on."

Spalding positions the hand she intends to use in her new work so that it's bursting out of the back cover. She's off on another adventure — climbing the beanstalk. ✨



**ANDREA'S ART CAN BE SEEN AT PENDER ISLAND'S POPULAR ART IN THE ORCHARD EVENT AT CORBETT HOUSE ON JULY 25.**

During **September** her work will be on display at the **Central Library in Victoria**, 735 Broughton St.

Her studio is open Friday through Monday mid-**June** to the end of **August**, or call for an appointment: **250-629-2047**.

**Visit Andrea's website at [www.andreaspalding.squarespace.com](http://www.andreaspalding.squarespace.com).**

Visitors to the island can go to [www.bcferrries.com](http://www.bcferrries.com) for ferry times and accommodation packages.

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