

Tiny-Book Publisher Is Losing Her Vision

Collectibles: Age-related condition will force closure of Pennyweight Press, which has produced 530 miniature titles in 27 years.

August 25, 2002 | BOB POOL | TIMES STAFF WRITER

In her tiny world, no one looms larger than Barbara Raheb.

The Agoura Hills woman is the nation's biggest little-book publisher. Her leather-bound volumes have thumbnail-size pages with lines of printed type so small that they can be covered by a shirt thread.

Coveted by serious collectors and dollhouse hobbyists alike, the 530 micro-miniature titles she has produced over the last 27 years measure 15/16 of an inch high and 5/8 of an inch wide--about the size of a small matchbox. Many are colorful pop-up storybooks that contain minuscule cutouts of playful animals, trees and characters such as pirates that come to life when pages are turned.

No wonder there were gasps when collectors learned that Raheb was closing her Pennyweight Press publishing house because she is going blind.

"I won't be doing any more books," said Raheb, 69. "I can't see the pages. I can't read the type."

Her vision loss is due to age-related macular degeneration, the leading cause of blindness for people older than 60. Those with the malady find that the central portion of their field of vision is covered by a gray blob. All that is left is peripheral vision.

Raheb's eyesight failed suddenly. She was working on a French-English version of "The Owl and the Pussycat" when the writing in front of her became distorted.

"I was typing the text for it, and the words got real tiny and the sentence seemed to be going downhill," she said. "My eyes felt scratchy."

Doctors discovered that Raheb was experiencing the "wet" form of macular degeneration, characterized by leaking blood vessels in the eye. They used a laser treatment to stabilize the bleeding.

Raheb learned that she was a likely candidate for macular degeneration because she has blue eyes and is nearsighted--so much so, in fact, that in the past she could easily read her little books without eyeglasses.

Those with light-colored eyes and myopia seem to be more often afflicted with the disease than others.

Desperate to continue working, she purchased a \$3,000 electronic magnifier that uses a television camera and TV screen to enlarge text printed in books and other materials. But Raheb was horrified to find that even at 50-times magnification she still could not read the tiny type in her beloved books.

She tried for a time to assemble her miniature volumes by touch.

She set up her boxy Optelec magnifier on the mahogany table beneath her dining room chandelier and painstakingly attempted to hand-color minuscule illustrations on printed galley sheets with watercolors.

In her upstairs workroom, she tried to operate the hand press that stamps the titles on the cover before the pages are hand-stitched to the binding. She devised a template to show her by feel where to position the guillotine cutter that trims the pages. She struggled to properly position the 5-pound piece of marble that presses the finished books into their closed position.

But she couldn't see how her finished books looked. When her sister and niece examined the copies, they decided that about half were acceptable.

To Raheb, that was not acceptable: "I couldn't even cut straight lines. I was through."

Also finished was Raheb's next project. She had purchased a gilding iron and was planning to include fore-edge painting that would be visible on the sides of pages of an upcoming book. That kind of illustration has never been done on a micro-miniature book, she said.

"I had grandiose plans. I'm a very visual person," she said.

These days, Raheb is fielding phone calls and letters from longtime clients who are ordering copies of her old books and lamenting the closure of Pennyweight Press. Her books, which were mostly printed in editions of 300, sold for \$28 to \$250.

"It's terrible. Nobody in the world does what she does," said Joan Lorson, whose Lorson's Books in Fullerton has stocked Raheb's books, including her four-volume, 456-page "The Hound of the Baskervilles" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

While a professional lithographer handled the printing, Raheb did everything else--"typesetting, the coloring, the binding, the layouts and stamping," Lorson said. "It's heartbreaking she has quit."

Closter, N.J., resident Grace Broecker is one of the country's major collectors of micro-miniature books. She owns more than 600 of Raheb's volumes.

"I was devastated when I heard about her eyesight. I couldn't believe it could happen to her," said Broecker--who is in the process of donating a collection of Raheb's books to the Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens in San Marino.

That library already had 50 of Raheb's books in a 3,500-volume collection of miniatures donated 10 years ago by Msgr. Frances J. Weber, an author and expert on miniature books who is a historian with the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles.

"I felt Barbara's books are so unique they should be somewhere people can study them," Broecker said.

Worries about the quality of future books have prompted Raheb to turn down offers to sell her little publishing house. A different owner of Pennyweight Press is something else she can't see.