I understand that you consider yourself a booksmith. What exactly does this mean?

A booksmith is a person who designs a book, does all the typography as well as any calligraphy that might be needed for it (though I often bow to better calligraphers if I need a style I am not proficient in), designs the bindings as often as not, and does the illustrations.

How did you begin your career as an illustrator and booksmith? And more specifically, what led you to do engravings?

I came to illustration “through the back door,” you might say. I was trained as a painter in oils. During my second year in college [1959] I saw a wood engraving by the late painter and sculptor Leonard Baskin, was smitten by it, and determined that one day I’d try my own hand at it. Ten years later I did, and as it happened I had left my home state, Tennessee, and moved to Massachusetts to teach. I landed in a town next to the one where Baskin lived. Eventually, I met him and was introduced to his printing shop, the Gehenna Press. It was there that I saw handmade books for the first time and again was smitten. I subsequently learned how to set type, how to know and choose good papers, how to run a printing press, and ultimately how to engrave wood. I had never thought about illustration in the least until I saw those fine books of Baskin’s. I printed my first book in 1970 from handset metal type, printed on handmade Italian paper on a 12 x 18 Chandler Price printing press.
While engraving is my medium of choice, I also work with various drawing media and techniques as well as watercolor. I seem to be drawn to unforgiving media, except for my love of the pencil. Its simplicity, immediacy, and “correctability,” make it an ideal tool for solving problems and for thinking one’s way through an entire book.

**Do you connect personally to the Western theme of *Cowboy Stories*? Were you asked to illustrate certain moments in the stories, or did those come of your own choosing?**

I have always been a fan of Western movies—ever since my childhood days with Hopalong Cassidy, Gene Autry, and Roy Rogers—but had read little Western literature until I undertook this collection. And I have to say that I was quite taken with it. There was a lot more really good writing than I had supposed. And when it came time to do the engravings, I went back to my collection of books on the Western film as my basic source, resulting in what I think of as a personal paean to the genre.

Much larger manuscripts were sent to me than were finally in the book. My “choices” were certainly noted with all due seriousness and certainly did influence the final content, but my editor had as much input as I did. The choice of what scene or character to represent within each story was my own.

**How do you begin work on a project? What is your daily routine like?**

I always begin by reading the text, not once but three times. First I read it for sense. Then I read it a second time with a notepad, making notes and a comprehensive list of possible illustrations (and those are always the subjects that appeal to me most, like the figure, animals, nocturnal scenes, faces, and the grotesque). I read it a third time with my notes and lists and try to find a thread that runs through the entire sequence of images and even though that’s an easy sentence to write, finding that thread is most often an elusive act.

As far as the day-to-day routine goes, I rise early, around seven or so. I make coffee and feed the animals (two English mastiffs and four cats). I read for an hour or two, mostly news and politics, and then settle in to work. I work till lunchtime and take a break. After lunch I go back to work until six or thereabouts. I then shut down the studio, fix dinner, come home and watch a film or something on educational TV (I hate network TV with a passion), and afterward sleep until seven the next morning when I get up and repeat all the above. This I do seven days a week excepting the days I teach at Smith. And of course, my day is often broken up by family affairs, meetings, doctors’ appointments, and the like. This is my schedule for 50 weeks of the year usually, though in the past few years my wife and I have been traveling more than we used to.
There was a leak in the canteen

The engraving illustrations for *Cowboy Stories* are particularly eerie, and certainly suggest darker tones than do the title of the book. “There was a leak in the canteen” (p 133) features three menacing vultures hovering closely over an open canteen and a human skull that seems to be grinning. Each of your illustrations, like this one, is visually stunning yet gruesome at the same time. Is this a conscious attempt at illustrating the stories?

I have a bent towards the grotesque. To the strange, if you will. I have been very much influenced by two people who were masters of the grotesque: Flannery O’Connor and Leonard Baskin. I have also been influenced by the early Quattrocento [fifteenth-century Italian cultural and artistic movements] painters, engravers, and others of that ilk from all periods.

I can’t really think of a relationship directly to the spookiness in *Cowboy Stories* except as it relates to the movie experiences I had as a kid. Back then they were all black and white, and I was often scared to death by them, especially the horror films, notably *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein*. So, the “film experience” for me as a small child was in and of itself a spooky event.

**Did you have a favorite moment in *Cowboy Stories* or *Scary Stories*? Do you prefer one book to the other?**

I have to admit that in *Cowboy Stories* I most enjoyed (if that’s a proper verb in this case) Annie Proulx’s story about the man-eating horse, “The Blood Bay.” Likewise with Truman Capote’s eerily disturbing tale about the evil little Miriam (in *Scary Stories*). I suppose the character of the two stories reveals my penchant for the grotesque and bizarre.

About my liking one book over the other, I have to say “no.” But in that I am always the fondest of my most recent work, I have to say “yes.” *Cowboy Stories* trumps *Scary Stories* on that one note.