





charles knowles

Enduring Prints a Half Century On

By Brian Cohen

“At Putney, Charles’ talent for art found full expression. These three years were joyous years, the best of his life. . . . there were so many wonderful plans! At least eight books were lined up . . .”

—Virginia Wendt, *Charles Knowles’ mother*





Senior Exhibitions

Putney has since made room in its program for ambitious senior undertakings. Senior Exhibitions are an opportunity for seniors to design and complete a two-month independent project, drawing upon the breadth of their educational experience at Putney and bringing together skills and experience from a variety of disciplines. Senior Exhibitions encourage students to show mastery through independent learning across the curriculum. A key component of the Exhibition is a final presentation to the school community at the end of the semester in which an outside evaluator, a practitioner in the field of the exhibition, reviews the student's accomplishment with faculty sponsors.

As a 17-year-old Putney senior, Charles Knowles, who had never before cut a woodblock, was the artist, designer, and printer of *The Psalm Book*, a folio of nine large woodblocks of his favorite Biblical psalms. Fifty years later *The Psalm Book* remains an extraordinary achievement among 20th Century artists' books.

Charlie, as he was known, was born on August 4, 1939 in Denver, CO. From an early age he suffered from chronic degenerative disease of the kidneys and was not expected to live past childhood. Between the ages of three and six Charlie was almost continually in the Children's Hospital in Denver. Ill health left him socially isolated, and he further suffered from hearing loss. Drawn to art, he discovered Putney and entered tenth grade in the fall of 1954.

At Putney, Charlie found a second home and close friends. In *The Type of Person That I Want to Be*, an essay he composed within weeks of arriving at Putney, Charlie wrote "Putney's curriculum does not include only English and Geometry, it has another lesson that public school can never teach—how to live with others, and consequently yourself . . ." He loved Friday Night Sing and Sunday Evening Meeting, became immersed in music and art, and sought at Putney "a beautiful life full of happiness for myself and others." A close friend from Putney, the artist Jon Hendricks, recalls redesigning the literary magazine with Charlie. Charlie was "a misfit, awkward, gangly, but wonderful—with an independent mind."

Charlie's achievements at Putney were all his own, but he was helped along by two key Putney figures of the 1950's. Both Jerry Pfohl, who taught art from 1956 to 1959, and Bob Treat, who taught history and was director of admissions from 1955 to 1964, supported Charlie in his ambitious, if not somewhat presumptuous

senior project. Charlie had been a clumsy and not always motivated student. Jerry Pfohl, a painter who now lives in Acworth, NH, recalls kicking Charlie out of his evening activity for clowning around. Offered the possibility to return to class when he got serious, Charlie said he wanted to create a book on the Biblical psalms that meant the most to him, and he came back to class, settled down, and got to work.

When he did get serious, he worked like crazy. Charlie had worked as a printer's devil (assistant) at the *Register-Call* in Central City, CO in the summers of 1955 and 1956, so he knew his way around a print shop. Between his own persistence and Bob Treat's more diplomatic intervention, Charlie got permission to work at Brattleboro Printing Company, located down an alley on Elliott Street. Jerry Pfohl drove Charlie to town several times a week to work on the book. Charlie showed Jerry how to set type on a composing stick, and Jerry helped Charlie distribute his type (put it back in the case). At one point Jerry looked at Charlie's messy, ink-smudged printed sheets coming off the large Washington hand press and asked him if that was how he really wanted his finished pages to look. Charlie responded that he thought it showed "character." Jerry questioned that assertion, and taught him how to print without fingerprints.

Charlie worked 12 to 14 hours a day into Project Week on *The Psalm Book*, going "full throttle." According to Jerry, Charlie was aware that he didn't have a lot of time to complete his work. In the spring of his senior year, as he was finishing the book, Charlie wrote in a 35-page essay called *The Hand Turneth: A Study in Creativity*, "Death is an overseer. It holds the whip hand that drives men to creation." He quoted Ecclesiastes 9:10, "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with all thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest." Jerry Pfohl,



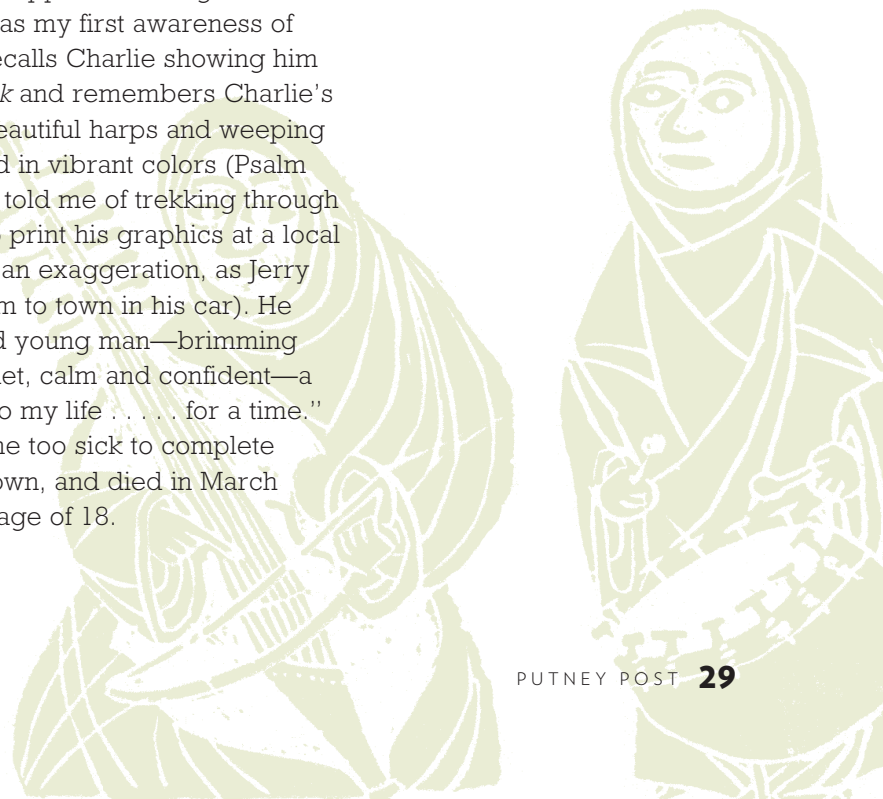


who admits to some frustration with some of Charlie's more exasperating character traits, recalls the concern of director Ben Rockwell that Charlie was working too hard. Pfohl remembers Rockwell coming to the door of his apartment in spring of 1957 telling him that Charlie's illness was terminal, a fact known only to Rockwell and Charlie at that point. Later, while trimming a piece of wood spacing at the print shop, Charlie cut himself rather badly. Jerry panicked and, shaking badly, backed into another car while driving

Charlie off to Brattleboro Memorial Hospital. Charlie turned to him and calmly said, "It's OK. I'm not dead yet."

The Psalm Book was completed by the end of Project Week in June of 1957. Charlie presented the completed prints to Bob Treat, who had been so helpful in getting the book underway. Charlie let Bob pick out the first set of prints, and asked him for only \$10 for the entire book. Bob said, "I can't just give you \$10. How about \$20?" Shortly before his death, Bob, who died in early June of this year after an extraordinary career as an educator and community activist, and his wife, Mary Lou, let Putney know that they were leaving a rare gift to the school: the original art work from *The Psalm Book*.

Despite his worsening illness and the self-imposed, almost compulsive pressures of completing *The Psalm Book*, Charlie found time to pass his academic classes and apply to college, and was accepted at Brown University. His freshman year roommate was Gregory Floyd who, by coincidence, was head consultant to the search committee for a new Putney director in 2006. Gregory recalls, "Charlie was shy, a bit gawky, with a quick smile and a very engaging manner. We swapped boarding school stories. This was my first awareness of Putney." He recalls Charlie showing him *The Psalm Book* and remembers Charlie's depiction of beautiful harps and weeping willows printed in vibrant colors (Psalm 137). "Charlie told me of trekking through winter snow to print his graphics at a local press (a bit of an exaggeration, as Jerry Pfohl drove him to town in his car). He was a splendid young man—brimming with talent, quiet, calm and confident—a nice addition to my life for a time." Charlie became too sick to complete the year at Brown, and died in March of 1958 at the age of 18.





FORMER PUTNEY TEACHERS MARY LOU AND BOB TREAT STAND IN FRONT OF ONE OF CHARLES KNOWLES '57'S PRINTS, WHICH THEY'VE GIVEN TO THE SCHOOL.

Ten copies of *The Psalm Book* were printed. One remains in the collection of the Houghton Library at Harvard University. The book was featured in a major 1961 exhibition *The Artist & The Book 1860–1960* at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, by far the most significant exhibition of illustrated books in the United States to that date.

I first saw framed pages from *The Psalm Book* hanging in the Library Building when I came to Putney in 1985. I was struck by the size (each of the eighteen sheets is 26" x 19⁵/₈"—the book is nearly 40" wide when open), by the simple power of the pages, and by their unaffected evocation of the meaning of the text. Each page touches a distinct emotional note. Charlie chose authoritative wood display type for the numerals heading each sheet, and printed the text of the poems in a solid, workmanlike nineteenth century typeface. He printed on colored paper, and mixed his own colored inks. The woodblocks are forcefully carved, possessing a penetrating grace. My own favorite, Psalm 142, depicts a lean figure printed in white on dark blue

paper, enclosed by black dolmen (here he allows the grain of the wood to show, looking almost like stone). It is a moving image of despair and entreaty, longing, and faith.

For more information:

The Psalm Book of Charles Knowles, introduction by Philip Hofer, foreword by Katherine Kuh, New York: The Viking Press, 1962

The Artist & The Book 1860–1960 in Western Europe and the United States, Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1961

Copies of *The Psalm Book* are in the collections of the Houghton Library at Harvard, The Museum of Modern Art in New York City, the Israel National Museum, and the National Gallery in Washington.

<http://web.sfts.edu/>

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