Imagine your life being diverted by a line; follower that line into a hostile political and social environment, surrounded by people whose language you do not speak, enduring an unimaginable style of teaching, and working tirelessly and fighting to learn about that line from a man reluctant to teach you, in a society that nearly forbade him to teach at all. After slowly gaining his willingness to take you on, you must come to your own study and you do. That must be some line.

After the line becomes part of you and is brought home, you find your fascination with it is growing large. From your soul, you can express all your visions of nature, art and music, as the same time as it is breaking past the limits of the line's traditions, now limiting room from two cultures, the one of your hand won education, as well as your home country's. But still, you and your passion for the line persist.

Please excuse the overly dramatic opening, but this actually does describe Fabienne Verdier's fantastic adventures and her commitment to her art. She was a rebellious French student when her enchantment with the line forced her to follow it to the Orient. She graduated from the Ecole des Beaux Arts (School of Fine Arts) in Louvain in 1995, but was disappointed with her education. "The way we were taught to represent things," she said, in an article in Quo Thi magazine last year, "citing geometric construction in the line of perspective, vanishing points. It was like a skeleton. It was too rigid. All those things trapped us. . . . It seemed dead." She was awarded a scholarship to study traditional landscape painting in China at the Shichuan Fine Art Institute, but in the early 1990s, this was a dangerous endeavor even with the seeming approval of the scholarship. Mao's Cultural Revolution had driven many traditional artists and teachers into disgraced retirement and the few allowed to teach and practice were in precarious standing. "It was a great, great tragedy," she said in the Quo Thi article. "It took me a lot of time to find the last old scholars who hadn't been rehabilitated. And they were afraid to teach me anything at all because I was a foreigner, and because I was a woman on top of that. There were no women who practiced that form of art." She was treated with suspicion and her fellow students ostracized her, and were even encouraged by the Communist Bureau to do so by a notice on her door.

She met calligraphy master Huang Yuan, but had to work for weeks, for months, for years, to complete copying and learning them for him daily, before he would agree to teach her. "He told me he accepted to monograph this art so that, would be understand special Chinese culture, because of what he saw in my exercises, in my capacity. Then he added that if I wanted to learn, it would remain a year or nothing. The culture was so complicated, it was the same way it would work. So I suggested he taught me what I was getting yourself." She traded in her Western way of painting on a vertical canvas and made a 90º shift — painting with a vertical brush on a horizontal surface (usually the floor) and has worked that way ever since.

During her two years in China, she managed to find other artists to teach her as well, but Huang Yuan was the only one approved to do so. The rest of her education there was candelabra and her teachers were all 60 to 100 years old — the revolution wanted to dismiss the tradition of the Fine Art School and let them die out. These were the last masters.

Chinese writing is a form of abstraction founded in medicine (for page 22). In the context of the world, she says, "When I paint a tree, I become a tree. When I paint water, I become water. The same with recondite forces, it's something self-generating, I feel it powerfully in my heart, it comes out in abstract form." Later in the film, she relates what Huang Yuan told her: "You must allow yourself to be filled with the essence of what is alive within you. Perhaps one day you will be able to take from your brush and you will have something to say."

Huang Yuan had started her training by allowing her to make only a single stroke, and never quite approving of her results. He was teaching her to capture the qi, the vital energy of what each stroke represented, "I was perplexed by a form of simplicity that was so complex." After she returned home to France, Verdier

WC: [Hudson House was on East 44th Street. It was in the same building as Continental Type Founders (important, early manufacturers of English type), which was of interest because Continental was run by Melbert Cary, who was the man who suggested that I go to Offenbach and work with Koch. Cary’s widow became, again, a good friend. Cary’s massive collection of printing books, at the Rochester Institute of Technology, which became The Cary Library, is in the same building as Typographic Service, also one of the outstanding type houses that is for hand composition in New York. Cary had opportunities to work for various clients of Hudson House doing outside work. He also did some things for the Catholic Church through their liturgical art society, because those who were running the society had approached me about doing work for them, and I felt that Oscar would be even better in that area. He had become a Catholic when he married Margaret, and would know certain things about the requirements that I could not understand as well. But they were interested—in the liturgical arts people—in what I had experienced because Koch was very active in church art and did a lot of work with it, and in fact was given a doctorate for his work with church art.

Q: Through Warren’s concern with lettering I became very much interested myself and worked for a long time as a letter writer, freelancing with book publishers. I had become particularly interested in lettering—in letterforms and the evolution of the alphabet. When I started freelancing, I did more lettering than anything else. One of my first regular clients was Henry Quinn, art director of the House of Morgan Company.

WC: We are now getting toward the end of what I call my lettering period with the production of this book [Chappell’s Anatomy of Lettering, written as a tribute to Koch after his death]. I could feel that I had enough of the alphabet. And the establishment of my relationship with Robert Robinson is just around the corner. I’m tracking at the League, wood engraving and decorative design. In the fall of 1914, Robinson came to New York, and we discussed what was next, and he said that they were building the Fine Arts Center at Colorado Springs, so he wanted me to come out there and be his assistant. In June 1915, South and I left New York and lettering and headed to Colorado Springs. In the meantime, Oscar had come to work with [freelance] with me, and I turned over my Women’s House Companion lettering and other typographic work to him.

A little later Oscar was seriously ill, and he was with me [Robinson], too, in 1920, he went out and spent at least a year and a half there.

Q: I presume that Oscar gave up this connection with Women’s House Companion to do this?

Well, yes, he was doing quite well, because he’s a productive worker, and he needed to work as much at night in the daytime, and also he was really social with painters and typographers that got together. He was well known.

Q: Manuscript writing wasn’t popular in the ‘30s, but it has become as in recent years. W. A. Dwiggins, one of the chief exponents of good letterforms, was really more interested in design than lettering, so he had a wonderful feeling for letterforms as element of design—he writes biautiful hand. I think that Dwiggins’ work for Knopf through the years is one of the things that made Knopf an outstanding publisher. Dwiggins’ feeling for design is magnificent.

There’s another American calligrapher, John Benson, who practically nobody outside of the small group of letter enthusiasts knew—a young man in Rhode Island. His shop typography has been consistently productive since the mid-19th century. He is also teacher at the Rhode Island School of Design, and it is really a wonderful thing to see.

Those people were not active in New York publishing at the time I started, which was one reason there was a chance for a young man like me to come in and get “the breaks.” There were never any real problems in my career. We never made a lot of money but we always got along fine. A lot of my income came from jockey work as a matter of fact. I should think the majority of us did practically no advertising; and the rest of the time was spent on book design. I did some illustrations—got to think I was pretty good—and in 1930, I went out to work with some man who was in Colorado Springs, again as an assistant to perform myself, you see, so that I could be a good illustrator.

In one of the letters, I was able to get a year or so of about a year and a half, he pointed out to me that I ought to stick to book designing.

[In a 1915 letter to Grace Long, Oggy wrote, “How I envy you in the West! Perhaps the happiest view of our life was 1930 and 1931 in Colorado Springs with Beardsley and H. R.,” which was included in the introduction of this book.]

WC: Then, after returning to New York from Colorado, Oscar became involved with several publishers, and one of them was Crowell, and his friendship with Robert Crowell lasted throughout Oscar’s life and rather late in his life. He did that book on lettering for Crowell. That book was published in 1948 by Thomas V. Crowell Company. Chappell must have been referring to the third edition here, which was published in the last year of Oggy’s life. Crowell published all three.

Q: At that time, the ‘30s, lettering based on traditional forms was pretty much unknown. The first book I knew about general consumption, which was intended to indicate to letter artists where the forms came from, was a thing I did in 1910, and published by Haren, a book called The Alphabet Since Bock. Everybody knows that the letterforms originally were something different from what they are now, but nobody had the facts down in terms students and
allow the facts before that on this they vary himself -
that since Eisenhower was going to trim the budget and all that sort of thing, and make government free of government spending, they were afraid that they couldn't afford to pay anything for design, so I gave them my time. The essential publication of the Federal Reserve - the story of what the Federal Reserve System is all about - has a little note at the back thanking me for donating my services.

WC: In 1968 or 69, Oscar was asked to do part of The Times project on the history of printing, and we were to do it together, but Oscar backed out at the last minute. The subject was A Short History of the Printed Word, a book that was commissioned by The New York Times. The man who started the book division for The Times put him that name Alvaro Laron. He has been in the book business very long time and like many others, he started out with Alfred Knopf. I was to do this with Oscar. I wanted Oscar to be in it, but Oscar backed out and felt that he was too involved with the Book of the Month Club to even think about it. But both (Knopf and Glaser) kept after me, and so I was essentially paid and had to undertake it.

One of the things that would make this different from the kind of books that I would've done on my own would be handling all printing, not just books. In other words, when we did newspaper and magazine, Who started the first magazine? And it breaks your head - especially when you find out what did. Have you any ideas?

Q: Benjamin Franklin!

WC: Speaking of Knopf I remember one case where he said, "You know, there's only one thing I can't get into their heads down at the production department - if I'm going to lose money on a book, I'd rather lose money on a good-looking one..."