

# The True Entrepreneurs of Parable: An Interview with Amanda Barry

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**D**esign entrepreneurs everywhere are finding creative ways to make beautiful and useful new products from objects relegated to the dustbins of history. In Devon, England, for instance, Amanda Barry and Nigel Parker started their online business Parable Designs Limited after discovering scores of old wallpaper-printing rollers—the “unsung heroes of the wallpaper printing industry,” as Barry puts it. Back in the 19th century when the rollers were in use, they were painstaking to create: “The necessary skill to translate a design from paper to roller required many years of training,” Parable’s website explains. From such relics they have crafted uniquely decorated candles, lamps and ornaments based entirely on those intricate designs. The serendipitous way that the business has unfurled is fascinating. I asked co-owner Amanda Barry to tell us about it.

**Heller: You create products from wallpaper-printing rollers. Unusual, to say the least! How did you become interested in these objects?**

**Barry:** We understand that an English cartographer bought the American wallpaper-printing rollers from a Chicago mill when he went there to buy paper for his mapmaking. He brought 2,000 rollers back to England with him in 1976.

My partner (in life and business), Nigel Parker, saw them for sale on the side of the road in Buckinghamshire, England, in 1989. He quickly realized they were some form of printing roller, and being a time-served indentured engineer, instantly recognized and fell in love with the quality of workmanship. The rollers cost Nigel a fortune that week just to move them, followed by 20 years of storage. In 2001, Nigel discovered 600 British rollers in the cellar of an old wallpaper factory in Hampshire and he purchased those to add to his already-vast collection. Along with these, he purchased two 8-colorway wallpaper-surface print machines, with ancillary equipment and two screen-printing machines. Nigel doesn’t do anything by halves!!

**Heller: How did your business, Parable Designs Ltd., get started?**

**Barry:** I met Nigel in 1998, and in 2003 we decided to sell both our houses, relocate to the South West of England and rented a warehouse/workshop to get the rollers and machinery under one roof, and so Parable was born! We spent a lot of time at the beginning, cleaning, sorting and researching the rollers. We discovered names on them such as Audubon Chintz (bird design), Gardenia by Park Avenue Wallpaper, Funston Document, Dorothy Draper

and Provincetown Medallion. Designs show images of cowboys, horses and I'm sure I recognized Mickey Mouse's ears on one roller (although Nigel wants me to check that before I declare it!).

**Heller: Once you made this investment, what has been your goal?**

**Barry:** Our aim has always been to produce quality handmade and handcrafted products that do justice to the craftsmen and women that made these works of art. The rollers were only a means to an end and never meant to be seen by the public. We call them the “unsung heroes” of the wallpaper printing industry. The name, Parable, comes from our names—Nigel Parker and Amanda Barry—so *PAR* and *AB*, and the *LE*, limited editions (something we are considering later). And the definition of parable in the dictionary, a story told to illustrate a moral—our moral being to conserve and not throw away.

**Heller: This is very entrepreneurial. How did you set up the mechanics of Parable?**

**Barry:** We began working with a mold-making company, on the feasibility of taking molds from such delicate artifacts with fine relief and casting without seams. We knew that flashlines or seams on these products would instantly destroy their quality and desirability. Although our ideas were proven to work, we needed to arrive at a repeatable process but this company stubbornly refused to listen to our suggestions to combine precision engineering with their own skills. Then in 2006, we had a shock when they went bust with no warning and all the work on our molds and the cost involved was gone in an instant! We spoke to other mold makers but it soon became apparent that nobody wanted to take on what was obviously a difficult mold-making process. Eventually, we decided to try doing it ourselves and so we set about learning about mold-making in the way we needed to do it.

**Heller: This must have been quite costly. As an online business, how difficult or easy is it to sustain yourself?**

**Barry:** On a shoestring budget, we spent the next few years developing our own methods, learning from our mistakes and finally arriving at using our own technology/methodology to produce our own unique products. But then, like many companies in our position, we had products but no route to market. We met the design adviser I mentioned, Kathryn Hughes, at this stage, via a government scheme that helped small businesses get under way. It was decided we needed a brand identity, and so we spent money on our logo and website and it was our website that was seen by researchers for a TV company in autumn 2009. They were filming *Kirstie's Homemade Christmas*, a program on craft, hosted by a popular TV personality over here at the moment, (The Honorable) Kirstie Allsopp. She came to our workshop and was seen on TV making her own candle with Nigel for her Christmas table. The program was shown in December 2009 and we were instantly inundated with people on our website, which couldn't cope with the numbers and subsequently crashed. When it came back online the following morning, we had no idea how many sales we had probably lost but went on to sell 130 candles in the next 24 hours, followed by many more over the next few months.

**Heller: Who, would you say, is your audience?**

**Barry:** We believe our audience consists of lovers of art history who aspire (regardless of disposable income) to own artifacts with such provenance, that shows the skilled artisan craftsmanship of the originals going back to the 19th century and recognizing the part we've played to bring them into the 21st century, from a range of full traditional to modern contemporary options. We want our customers to be as excited by this original concept as we are passionate. All our products will be derived from the original rollers, as well as our more modern artifacts and will appear in 3-D in relief in flat form as well as the original cylindrical form.

**Heller: So, forgive the pun, you are rolling along... Is there anything slowing you down?**

**Barry:** As well as all the UK, we have sent candles to customers in America, Australia, New Zealand, Switzerland, Germany, Spain, Portugal and France, as the TV program was seen around the world. Some of the advice we received from the government body we have worked with here is to speak to companies in America regarding a licensed manufacturing agreement. The rollers we have so far used to make products are the British rollers, so we haven't yet used the American rollers. However, a friend we have made—a retired, time-served indentured wallpaper draftsman—told us that many rollers were a collaboration of design and manufacture between America, the UK and France, and it is not always possible to establish the exact provenance.

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**About the Author.** Steven Heller, co-chair of the Designer as Author MFA and co-founder of the MFA in Design Criticism at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *Iron Fists: Branding the Totalitarian State* (Phaidon Press) and most recently *Design Disasters: Great Designers, Fabulous Failure, and Lessons Learned* (Allworth Press). He is also the co-author of *New Vintage Type* (Thames & Hudson), *Becoming a Digital Designer* (John Wiley & Co.), *Teaching Motion Design* (Allworth Press) and more. [www.hellerbooks.com](http://www.hellerbooks.com)