PORTRAIT BY **DEBORAH FEINGOLD**
PHOTOGRAPHS BY **ROSS MACDONALD**

**Ross MacDonald in his workshop**

**When Ross MacDonald was asked to fabricate two Cuban lottery tickets for a 1930s Havana café scene in HBO's *Boardwalk Empire*, he had no idea what they should look like. But he started rooting around and eventually located a *lotería* ticket from that period. He also unearthed an article in an old *Collier's* magazine describing how Cubans would consult a dream book for help picking lucky numbers. The lotería vendors would then clip those choices from sheets of uncut tickets they hawked at cafés and bars.**

# MAKE IT TO FAKE IT

Ross MacDonald's handmade paper props — including lottery tickets, postage stamps, first editions, even toe tags — help bring history to life.

**BY ANN FARMER**

Excited by these findings, MacDonald went to work recreating the lottery sheets and a fantastical dream book, rendering them so historically accurate that even the most nitpicking viewer would be convinced of their authenticity. "The people I work with, they know I'm a little obsessive," says MacDonald, an illustrator, designer and author (of children's books and humor pieces). He specializes in paper props and has devised thousands of them for television, film and Broadway.

His barn workshop in Connecticut is filled with nineteenth-century printing equipment, two antique clocks that gong hourly and other vintage ephemera. That's where he hand-printed the morgue toe tags for Cinemax's *The Knick* using a period font and old lead type. It's also where he drafted ten different portraits of Adolf Hitler for a set of stamps in HBO's *The Plot Against America*. For FX's *American Crime Story*, he crafted an entire picture storybook supposedly written and illustrated by fashion-designer siblings Gianni and Donatella Versace. For NBC's *Parks and Recreation*, he hand-wrote the 1817 Pawnee Town Charter in cursive, using an antique quill pen on German paper stock that he'd painstakingly aged for hours.

"You see these things," he says, and "they might flash by in milliseconds sometimes." But they still need to look exactly right. Their verisimilitude is not only key to the quality and look of

**(*At left*) MacDonald's barn workshop in Connecticut; (*below, top*) a Cuban dream book used in an episode of *Boardwalk Empire*; (*below, bottom*) morgue toe tags from *The Knick***

a production, but it's also vital to the actors who must believe in the props to do their best work. "In fact, a flaw could easily hinder a performance," according to *Prop Man: From John Wick to Silver Linings Playbook, from Boardwalk Empire to Parks and Recreation*, a 2022 photo book of MacDonald's props that also features his personal essay and lengthy interview, with text by Steven Heller.

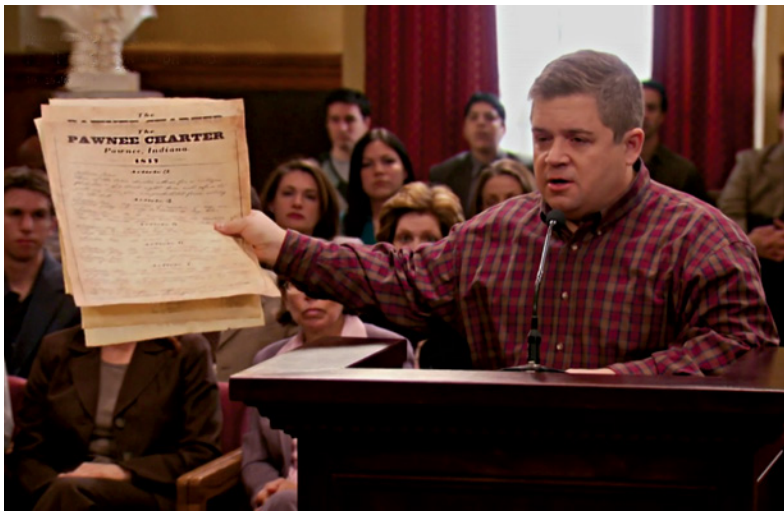
More recently, he helped set the tone for the first season of HBO's *The Gilded Age* by fastidiously replicating engagement books the moneyed set once used to schedule their bustling social calendars. The show's prop master also asked him to contrive another prop germane to the 1880s lifestyle. So MacDonald fashioned exact cardboard facsimiles of old Vulcan matchbooks — right down to the winged horse illustration on the cover.

It's not just about getting the lettering, images and packaging right. MacDonald thinks long and hard about each prop's backstory. How old is it? Where was it kept? Was it stored in a dusty saddlebag? Buried in a coffin? For the Apple TV+ film *Sharper*, MacDonald created exact replicas of 1847 first editions of *Jane Eyre*, making them appear as though they'd been lovingly read again and again. He ripped and splintered the bindings and sanded the covers to achieve the right patina. Hand oils and humidity can affect books, so he'll spend weeks exposing a book prop to moisture, softening the cover

**(This page) Nineteenth-century printing equipment creates authentic-looking documents; (opposite page, clockwise) MacDonald crafted a fashion storybook for *American Crime Story*; he hand-wrote the 1817 Pawnee Town Charter for an episode of *Parks and Recreation*; he created a stamp set featuring Hitler's visage for *The Plot Against America*.**

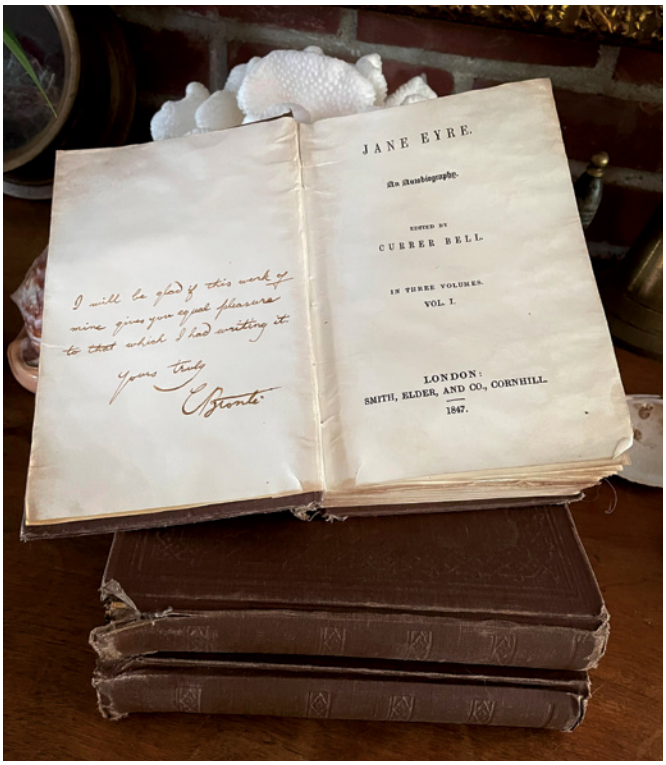
and subtly staining the pages. He also tears and creases the pages so the book looks "like it's logged some hard miles," he says.

While many props serve as set dressing, he's frequently asked to produce what he calls "giant hero props" — items that do some heavy lifting. "They are used to convey something to the audience," says MacDonald, who, for instance, assembled *A Field Guide to Magical Women* for Hulu's forthcoming *Nightbitch* feature. Amy Adams's character stumbles across this thick volume of mythical ethnography at her local library and fixates on it. MacDonald was instructed to include some "hero" passages that she reads onscreen, texts that influence the plot. He drew chimeras and other mythical creatures that likewise steer the storyline. "I wrote the rest of the copy filler," he says,




NBC

(This page) Period engagement books and a matchbox for *The Gilded Age*; (opposite page, from top) the namesake book and documents for *National Treasure: Book of Secrets*; replicas of first editions of *Jane Eyre* for *Sharper*




explaining that he filled the tome with generic material on mythical legends so it looks bona fide from start to finish.

Perhaps the most involved "hero prop" MacDonald ever crafted, though, was a notebook for the 2007 film *National Treasure: Book of Secrets* starring Nicolas Cage. Passed from president to president, the notebook contains each leader's confidential writings on national and international secrets too unspeakable to share with the public. MacDonald had to master each president's handwriting going back to George Washington. He was also charged with concocting loose inserts including news clippings, diagrams, photos, maps and documents stamped "Top Secret." He happily tore into that assignment, plumbing murky topics like UFO sightings, JFK's assassination and all manner of plots and conspiracy theories. By the end of that odyssey, overloaded with inventive paperwork, he proposed enclosing everything in a weather-beaten leather portfolio, something that might have been used in Washington's time. He bound it with a shoelace cord from a century-old leather boot found in the rafters of a Montana barn.

After the film was completed, that "Book of Secrets" was displayed in the Library of Congress (which itself plays a role in the movie). "Most people don't realize what goes into props," MacDonald says. But in this case, people clearly appreciated his efforts. He says one copy of his "Book of Secrets" sold at auction last year for $37,000.