The mask unmasked

Up Route 28 a couple of hours, just north of Cooperstown, is a room in the Fenimore Art Museum, home to our state's Historical Association, that haunts all who enter it. On pedestals are busts of our nation's Founding Fathers and early heroes... Jefferson and Madison, Monroe and Clay. And in separate cases are the mechanisms the sculptor, John H. I. Browere, used to create his 22 bronze portrait busts between 1823 and 1833: actual life and death masks.

What is it about masks? From an early age, they fascinate us. We can put on a piece of molded plastic and be a president or a bear, a fantastic alien or a simple, unknowable mystery. As we grow older, we start to appreciate the term's deeper connotations: masks as metaphor, as personality traits and states of being. Finally, they can capture our likenesses for posterity, albeit unlikely since the advent of photography.

Wendy Klein, a masterfully-accomplished local mask maker whose clients include the famous Cirque du Soleil, and husband Brent Robison, creator and publisher of the Prima Materia collections of local writing, have just put out a handsome volume that explores this phenomenon beautifully. The Other Face: Experiencing the Mask, is a collaborative collection of stories, poems and essays that, at 72 pages with richly redolent illustrations, captures its subject with the succinctness of a good poetry book and invites treasured re-readings... not to forget gift-giving.

The couple, who also published the book last month through their new Bliss Plot Press (inaugurated last summer with the publication of Simone Felice's novel, Goodbye, Amelia), explain that the work grew, quite naturally, out of Klein's own mask-making. It turns out that in addition to her custom work for clients like the circus, she has for years made the rounds of Renaissance Fairs, New Orleans' Mardis Gras, and other retail opportunities where she sells her wares face to face. And those encounters have inevitably raised questions about the nature of masks, their cultural roles, their underlying meanings.

"In the process of showing and selling my work I'm thought to be a so-called 'expert' on the subject. This is far from true," the willowy artist writes in the new book's two-part introduction (the other half being by Robison). "For me, this compilation of writings has brought with it a kind of revelation. It's not only as an editor that I read each word carefully and more than once. It's as an artist that I let myself absorb these passages."

In private, Klein says she feels the new book would be a perfect item for her to offer to customers who want to know more about what they're buying.

The actual parts of The Other Face include exquisite quotes from writers ranging from Borges to Camille Paglia, from Nietzsche to Carl Jung. There's a great, psychodrama-short story (involving psychoanalysis, no less) by New Paltz Times writer Mark Sherman. An entire chapter from the mask-work of all times, Robert Lewis Stevenson's Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Two enigmatic yet deeply probing poetic sketches by Sparrow. A Michael Perkins poem. Several academic essays on the history of masks, their meaning, and their uses. Best of all, a dark snippet of a tale from Barry Yourgrau about a young boy who steals, and wears, his father's head.

"This book, our little work of art, is full of masks but it is also full of truth," Robison writes in his half of the introduction. "I hope you'll read it with an open heart, and receive wisdom."

Or at least the diving board for a sea of conjecture and wandering thoughts, as good a form of deep entertainment as I've ever found. Chalk this up for my artist friends' holiday present lists.

"Man is least himself when he talks in his own person," reads the small but elegant tome's opening quote by Oscar Wilde. "Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth."