Portions of the following are based on an interview with the artist on December 10, 2005.

Comparatively, Mark Twain had it pretty easy. He only needed to deal with premature and unfounded rumors of his death. Deborah Skinner, on the other hand, has been purported not only to have committed suicide but to have become psychotic—and to have sued her father (presumably not in that order). “Admittedly, the facts of my unusual upbringing sound dodgy: esteemed psychologist BF Skinner, who puts rats and pigeons in experimental boxes to study their behaviour, also puts his baby daughter in a box. This is good fodder for any newspaper” (Buzan, 2004, ¶ 2). If he had been an inventor or an insurance salesman, Skinner suggests, there would have been no issue or controversy. The “air crib” that her father designed and in which she slept and played—climate controlled so that she could be warm and comfortable without heavy blankets in mid-winter Cambridge, Massachusetts—became distorted in various accounts into an experimental box or cage with bells and food trays. “My father was always more worried about the rumors than I was. He was concerned that it would get to me, change my self-image, give me complexes. The rumors only annoyed me, as they gave critics extra fuel for attacking my father’s work.”

Deborah Skinner Buzan, the second of two daughters born to Harvard psychologist B. F. Skinner and his wife, knew from an early age that she wanted to be involved with art: “When I was five, my father gave me some Magic Markers. After I’d spent most of the summer drawing with them, he claimed that they were what turned me into an artist. . . . In addition to his interest in fiction, my father had a broader artistic side. He and I took a sculpture course together. He did a good job of encouraging me. He always admired the arts, and that probably made a difference for me.”

As an undergraduate, Skinner studied art history. Following graduation, she spent a year in Florence, painting and doing mosaics. She contemplated graduate study in psychology—“I find psychology intriguing; I grew up with it”—but decided that she was not an academic, and she entered art school in London. “I had a great etching master—terribly strict, but also inspiring. I really appreciated the discipline he instilled and still believe it vital for artists.”

Etching is a multistage printing process in which the artist draws through a wax-coated copper plate. The plate is then submerged into an acid “bath,” which bites into the exposed metal. Ink is applied to the plate, the unetched surfaces are wiped clean, and the plate, with dampened paper on it, is run through a mangle-like heavy press. The paper then picks up the ink from the incised lines, creating the image (see www.artlex.com; Murray & Murray, 1959).

Skinner and her husband moved briefly to Vancouver, Canada. While there, she continued to take art classes and began showing her art. On their return to London, she saw art as her profession and began exhibiting—including at the Royal Academy—and selling her artwork through an agent and a publisher. Following the recession of the 1980s, the art market became more unpredictable. At that time, Skinner began writing for travel and restaurant guides and has continued with this work. She sold her printing press a year ago—though she still has a studio and continues drawing (and selling) landscapes in colored pencil as well as pen-and-brush horse drawings.

Almost all of Skinner’s etchings are in one way or another given a tight edge, as if drawn on and delimited by a screen. “I’ve done landscapes almost exclusively, and a lot with roads going into the distance. It brings the viewer in to the image. England is a magnificent country, filled with farming land, mowed hills, fields cut up, hedges, stone walls. You can see the human influence on the landscape.”

Britons have multiple nomenclature to categorize different sized roads. Byway, the title of the art on the cover, refers to a non-main road. Byway is an aquatint—a form of print-making in which subtle ranges of tone or color, similar to a watercolor wash, can be produced through the use of a porous “ground.” In this aquatint, the softness of color and fully leafed trees on the left form a complement and contrast to the echoing angularity of the branches on the right and the verticality of the wooden fence posts: “I work from photographs for the express purpose of getting a view. I assume this was somewhere in the Midlands. My drawing is stylized, often using trees from my garden, but not all that realistic.”

Skinner describes this as a very horizontal picture, in which the lines of trees emphasize the distance to the horizon. At the same time, the hexagonal edge is repeated and varied within the etching itself, pulling the eye simultaneously and sequentially in myriad directions. This linear, angular representation of trees, field, road, and fence plays with the paradox of fine art: It is both definitively flat and two-dimensional, and at the same time it invites the eye to experience the three dimensions of perspective and distance.

REFERENCES
