

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

This is the best of times. A worst there isn't, not if you are lucky enough to earn your living by dealing in books. Nevertheless, a quarter-century after establishing our rare-book enterprise, I felt chained – not, like Prometheus, to a rock but to my desk. (The only gods working my liver over daily were the heavenly beings in my wine cellar disguised as bottles). I longed to get back out to where the fun has always been – hunting down books.

When you get right down to it, much of mail order bookselling is a passive endeavor. You wait for books you have bought to arrive, for letters and phone calls to be answered, for catalogues to return from the printer, for orders to come in. Oh, and you wait to be paid.

Instead of saluting books that marched daily into Santa Barbara like an invading army (this force clad not in khaki but motley cloths, boards and, to be sure, pristine dust jackets), I decided to go AWOL for good and resume marching to my own tune.

So here I am, back where I was in 1970, unsalaried and, if you will pardon the expression, raring to go.

Six months ago I traveled as the representative of Joseph the Provider / Books to a distant place. There I considered the acquisition of a few extraordinary books. More recently, with a wallet full of new business cards announcing me as Ralph Sipper / Books, I journeyed to an equally exotic venue in quest of – you guessed it – more books. And this time, more than just a few.

Books, Butterflies and the Bear

High up on an Alpine rise that overlooks Montreux, the centerpiece of the Swiss Alps, the son of Vladimir Nabokov lives in an unprepossessing condominium whose exterior belies its ritzy ambience. Waiting for the doorbell to be answered, I look down on majestic Lac Lemman and the yellow-shuttered twin edifices of the Palace Hotel where Nabokov and his wife lived out their last years in the midst of Old World tranquility. Close by is the small cemetery where their ashes repose in the same urn.

I have crossed the Atlantic at the invitation of Dmitri, the Nabokovs' only descendant, who now manages the family affairs.

Dmitri himself constitutes an Alpine presence. As the door opens, I look up to a Swiss bear who stands six and one-half feet tall and seems almost as wide. Here is the kind of power forward screen an NBA shooting guard would give his off hand for. For all his burliness, though, the son has turned out like his sire, being an economy size blend of erudition, formal courtesy and independence of mind.

Dmitri believes that the time has come to release into the world of those to whom such things matter the extraordinary family copies of his father's books. Several years ago Nabokov's literary papers were sold to the New York Public Library. Now being made available to me (for a price, of course) are the very copies Vladimir presented to his wife. Each volume has been lovingly inscribed with multilingual sentiments that are both verbally playful and intimate. Several of the books also bear the author's holograph corrections, attesting to his legendary editorial fastidiousness.

Nabokov's is among the most desirable and rarest of modern autographs. He signed books only for persons he knew and not too many of them, at that. Only J.D. Salinger's signature comes to mind as being of comparable importance, value, and scarcity. Furthermore, these fabled copies, which have been celebrated in print and whose existence has been known to collectors, are adorned by exquisitely rendered multicolor drawings of butterflies that in themselves are *objets d'art*. Nabokov avidly roamed the world in search of rare butterflies and published respected scientific papers on lepidopterology concurrently with his literary compositions.

Thrilling as the copies are, it soon becomes apparent that their acquisition will sprain the prospective buyer's solvency if not downright fracture it. The Bear, you see, is not unaware of what he has. Still, he is worldly enough to realize that he needs the help of a professional to move along these beauties at state-of-the-art prices. So begin 48 hours of intense negotiations, with the visitor at a jet-lagged disadvantage.

Dmitri is an engaging fellow, a Harvard graduate whose graceful English locutions interact mellifluously with continental inflections. During the course of the day he converses easily in Italian with his housekeeper and in Russian with his assistant. My host employs other foreign tongues in the course of answering the intermittent ringing of the telephone, but I am not really paying attention.

I am pondering how to swim back with at least a few books in tow and yet not drown in red ink. Inside my wallet is a bank check drawn against our line of credit. The full meaning of earnest money dawns on me.

Dmitri jumps up. He is late for lunch in nearby Gstaad with William Buckley. Would I like to join them? I decide to remain in continued consideration of the books and watch the Bear fold himself into his Ferrari, part by large part. Years ago Dmitri was a racing car driver on the Italian circuit, an impetuous one apparently. He has the scars to prove it. He is also a basso who has shared the opera stage with luminaries including Luciano Pavarotti. In addition, he is a no-nonsense mountain climber, and has translated a good number of his father's books from Russian into English.

I am personally able to bear witness to his discriminating interest in fine cuisine and wine. By the end of the second night, with a small army of depleted goblets as witnesses, we finally reach an accommodation. It is one a.m. Swiss time and I am loath to calculate how many times zones my lightly pickled body is removed from California. My good host offers to drive me back to the hotel.

Our Lucullan debauch has left the Bear, I believe, in need of hibernation, and after glancing again at his racing scars, I announce my intention to walk the serpentine mile or two back to town. I can still hear Dmitri's booming Goudonovian tones as I round the first corner, imploring me to avoid the treacherous *culs de sac* enroute. The collar of my light corduroy jacket is pulled up in a pitiful attempt to keep the 30-degree temperature from turning me into a mini-mountain. By the light of the full moon I make out the Palace Hotel and employ it as a lodestar to guide me home.

Freezing, exhausted and knowing I have overspent myself, I am nonetheless exhilarated. I can hardly wait to get home in order to catalogue the books.

Books, Books and Books

Not long after driving northwest from the Dallas / Fort Worth airport, traffic thins out radically. I am heading into the country of the relatively few. Over the next two hours, in the words of a song I like, "the road don't bend, there ain't no twist." The air conditioning unit in my rented car is striving valiantly to

keep the 100-plus-degree heat from cooking me like the chicken-fried steak I hope to be tearing into that evening at the Texasville café in Archer City.

You may know Archer City by other names. In his novel “The Last Picture Show” Larry McMurtry called it Thalia, but that unlikely Olympian appellation with its evocation of beautiful Muses and Graces was further altered by McMurtry and director Peter Bogdanovich in their movie adaptation of the book.

Those outside the book trade may not be aware that in addition to a distinguished literary career McMurtry has been a book dealer for as long as I have – more than 25 years. A couple of years ago he suggested to me and a small number of colleagues that we might wish to travel to Archer City and see for ourselves the many books he had quietly been herding from all over the contiguous 48 states into this remote hamlet of 1,500.

Larry explained that he had been buying large quantities and in some cases the full inventories of some 15 bookstores. “Fragments and remnants,” he termed them. He estimated that by now some 300,000 volumes had been shoehorned into three large buildings he owns on the town’s main street. If Larry’s figures are correct the math works out to 200 books for every man, woman and child in these unbookish parts. Think of it another way. Archer City’s ubiquitous ranches are probably populated by more cattle than John Wayne encountered in all of his oaters put together. And what with your average tome weighing in at about one-and-one-half pounds – well, podnuh, that’s a lot of paper on the hoof.

Why am I, an allegedly picky rare book dealer, making this pilgrimage? For a number of reasons, none of which I seem able to justify entirely as I hang a left at Bowie, just 45 straight-as-an-arrow miles from the promised land.

When I told Larry that I was coming he let on that several other book dealers had been there recently, naming a batting order of such rare-book sluggers that I thought it unlikely there would be many sleepers left to drive home. Still, I am carrying a thick portfolio of want lists – serious collectors’ desiderata as well as books I am looking for personally – in order to further my buying opportunities.

I am on this dusty quest, though, for a reason far more compelling than locating specific titles. I want to know if I can

still find books in the most honorable way: one by one. And in the most unpromising of places, where others may have left behind treasures unknown to them. What I am really doing is journeying back to my beginnings as a bookman, a time when a little knowledge and lots of persistence were my only assets. Approaching Archer City it occurs to me that I can do much better in terms of potential profit by attending an ABAA book fair or by calling a few rare-book contacts for one of the 50 or so modern literature highspots everyone seems to want.

But squeezing the last few dollars out of a book is only a short-lived satisfaction. It does not begin to inspire the ecstasy that attaches to the chase itself. If such talk strikes you as naïve, even quixotic, then you have never experienced the edgy anticipation of waiting in line for the doors to a library sale to open to you and a horde of other antsy book scouts, the thrill of sprinting to the sale tables despite the likelihood that you will be disappointed by the selection.

Larry himself is a legendary scout (see the June 14, 1976 issue of *The New Yorker* for Calvin Trillin's hilarious account of being shown the ropes by McMurtry at a Vassar sale). In "Cadillac Jack" Larry articulated a basic principle of book prospecting, "anything can be anywhere," whose seductive truth has kept me digging on many occasions when good sense dictated otherwise.

This grass roots approach is anachronistic in today's upscale book trade, which is tilting toward gentrification and uniformity of interests. Big money books defy the principles of gravity and funnel upwards to carriage trade booksellers who place them with affluent collectors. Price guides, marginally useful as they are, inhibit individual expression and discourage collecting that is not mainstream in scope.

No longer relevant is the kind of specialized knowledge implied by the adage that "an expert is someone who can tell by the wrinkles in the sheets whether it was done for love or money." Love and money really *are* the polarities at work here. I am certainly not opposed to money and I like books a lot (love I reserve for my wife and daughter). Bringing the two into harmony is the rub.

Getting out of the car in front of Booked Up on South Center Street proves a hellish experience. Dante Alighieri has incomprehensibly transmigrated to Texas, bringing with him a Ninth Circle of concentrated fire that defies description. Or maybe

I have lost my way and am really in Larry's of Arabia, minus the camels parked outside.

It is 5 p.m. and Harlan Kidd, who manages the stores when Larry is not there (which is most of the time), shows me around. Learning that I would like to work late, he heads home where cooler climes prevail. He is also smart enough to divine that any fool willing to function in this infernal swelter is too dumb to steal. Before abandoning me to my pleasant agony Harlan gives me the key to Larry's house, which the locals refer to as the Mansion or the Big House. Larry, who had planned to be here, has been detained in Los Angeles, but thanks to his generosity I will have the two-story place with its 14 large rooms to myself for the next two nights.

The Mansion used to belong to Will Taylor, an oilman who became something of a recluse after his son died in an accident. Taylor would lend Larry, who grew up on a nearby Wichita Falls ranch, books from his well-stocked library at a time when there were virtually no other reading facilities available to the precocious young reader. After Taylor died the house was put up for sale, but Larry could not afford to buy it. The Mansion then somehow metamorphosed into the Archer City Country Club until Larry purchased it in the mid-Eighties.

McMurtry has said that he hopes to have 1,000,000 books in Archer City by the turn of the century: "An anthology of book stores past," in his words. Interrogated as to why on earth he would want to succumb to such romanticism, Larry invokes the name of Bertram Smith. For those of us who assembled our inventories by driving cross-country a generation ago and visiting large, general stores, Smith's Acres of Books in Cincinnati was a book-laden way station not to be missed. Few rarities or highspots were to be found, but there were thousands of good books to be had and no remainders to have to paw through, either.

At the Mansion I peel down to T-shirt and shorts, pausing briefly to walk through the rooms. Each one is crowded with books and other eclectic collectibles Larry has gathered from all over the world. Not all the books are first editions in as-new condition, but all are of quality, most of them no longer to be encountered regularly on bookshelves. I would dearly like to buy from this wonderful corpus of literature, history, biography and travel, but know better than to be boorish enough to try.

The house is my ideal of comfort and grace, and constitutes

a frame for the bibliographical wealth it contains. The furniture is predominantly of heavy wood, including an ornate bed from Thailand that arrived disassembled and, I am told, with its own little Thai man to put it back together.

Though I am hardly anxious to abandon the Mansion's cool ambience, I must make my way back to where there are books for sale. On the way out I beat Larry for a beer from the fridge and feel it briefly and thrillingly irrigate my parched insides like a child's pail of water being upended on the sand of a beach.

Book scouting requires a mindset as well as a rhythm. You can go along the shelves slowly, taking care not to miss such crucial things as an authorial inscription in an otherwise undistinguished candidate. The flip side of this painstaking method is to zip along in the full knowledge that you will miss a good book here or there, but that you will see several times as many books in the same time period.

I opt for a synthesis, going into overdrive when the binding seems all too familiar or otherwise unpromising, and braking sharply when something prickles the back of my neck, much like the little man inside "Double Indemnity's" Edward G. Robinson, clueing him in that something is not kosher with the insurance case he is investigating. This is not so much instinct as learned behavior, the *déjà vu* of one experienced. Good scouts really are like good detectives. They know when something of interest is close by, even if they cannot articulate how they know.

The three stores I will be working are all airless and not optimally lit. I need to psych myself up for the physical ordeal to come. I do not (as the high-strung Bill Russell was known to do before Celtic games) throw up in purgative preparation, but I do promise myself that I will hold to my objective, which really is simple. I mean at least to make eye contact with every book.

So I climb the ladder to the topmost books and work my way down shelf by shelf until I am at floor level, where I reach for a much-needed footstool as my lower back reminds me it is not nearly as limber as it once was. I repeat this drill again and again and again until 1 a.m., surprised that time has gone by so fast. Out of the thousands of volumes scanned, I have culled perhaps 15.

Back at the Mansion, I eschew a badly-needed shower, fall into bed and, as they say, sleep the sleep of the dead until 6 a.m., when an uncharacteristic and perverse burst of early morning

energy propels me to my feet. I pull on the same T-shirt and shorts over aching muscles, secure in the knowledge that no one is here to discern my, shall we say, less-than-mint state.

Midway between the Mansion and the bookshops is a convenience market in front of which a group of truckers and ranchers are taking in their caffeine, chatting by the headlights of their idling semis and pickups. I bring my coffee container to the checkout with proffered dollar in hand only to have the bill handed back to me by the matronly clerk: “Why, honey, coffee’s free before 7 a.m.,” she smiles. It dawns on me that I have stumbled upon a highly evolved society.

Over the next 18 hours I will dig out another 40 books including a lovely copy of a Frank Lloyd Wright book from the display case, some McMurtry proofs that I can immediately place and some film books I believe Larry has underpriced by a Texas mile. I decide to pass up two middle-period Ezra Pound letters that are priced \$2,500. They could have been bought, but I choose not to swing at this shoulder-high fastball and instead opt for a John Updike paperback original that will set me back \$3.00 (less discount).

Harlan and I have a quick lunch at the Texasville Café, where the walls are decorated with newspaper clippings describing the 1971 filming of “The Last Picture Show” in this town back in 1971. Back at work I force myself to go over an entire wall of proof copies that Larry bought from the heirs of the late and beloved bookman Frank Scioscia. The proofs have not gotten any better since the last time I saw them at Frank’s several years before, the choice plums having long since been plucked by others.

At five Harlan and the rest of his young crew of book clerks leave. I fleetingly consider going somewhere cooler and less print-oriented, perhaps down to the dam where Lois and Sam the Lion once skinny-dipped. Instead I walk a block back to the most stifling and book-crammed of the stores and keep slugging away. Hours later I come across a row of books that look eerily familiar. A sickening feeling pours over me. I went through this section *yesterday*. As if there were not enough books to see, I am repeating myself much like the neighboring cows who, too are in the process of chewing their cud twice.

Finally at midnight I bring all my stacks from the various buildings back into the main store. They will be shipped to me. South Center Street is deserted as I head back to the Mansion. I do

not sleep as well as the previous night because I am anticipating rising at 5 a.m. in order to be back at the airport in time for my flight home.

On the way out of town I decide to pass up the free coffee and drive right by the convenience store, not far from where Billy dutifully swept the street in front of the pool hall in “The Last Picture Show.”

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