

COLLECTION BUILDING 101

When Sir Edmund Hillary was asked why he decided to scale Mount Everest, he famously replied, “Because it is there.” Not too long ago, I decided to build a book collection for exactly the opposite reason – because they are not there – “they” being the first books of authors I plan to include in a selective catalogue that will eventually be offered for sale.

An overriding justification for taking on such a quixotic pursuit is the deep satisfaction I experience each time I acquire a title that qualifies for inclusion. The satisfaction obtains because the rigorous standards I am imposing upon potential candidates emphasize importance, rarity and fine condition. So it will be a long haul before I reach the summit, which is fine with me. I am in no hurry because I mean to have the best copies of the best books I can find (and afford)!

In an early story, Dashiell Hammett’s *Continental Op* talks about a case he is taking on: “You want to do it as well as you can, otherwise there’d be no sense to it.” Years later, when Hammett willingly went to jail for refusing to name names during the Cold War, he was assigned to the cleaning of latrines, a job he took as seriously as the fictional detective did his. In other words, you do work for yourself, not others. I humbly submit that such a mindset guides me in this project.

A perusal of our inventory revealed that a number of significant first books already were in our possession. For example, within sight as I compose these words is a jacketed copy of William Faulkner’s rare first book, “*The Marble Faun*,” that he inscribed upon publication to a young woman of whom little is known. Just who Katherine “Sunshine” Lawless was or what her relationship with Faulkner was remains a mystery, but it is an established fact that the aspiring author gave her one of the two original typescripts for this slim volume of poems.

Another key title in the collection is Ernest Hemingway’s “*Three Stories and Ten Poems*,” which was published in Paris when the author was 24 in an edition of 300 copies. Despite its modest limitation, “*Three Stories*” has never been a scarce book because Hemingway established his literary reputation early on and maintains it to this day. Thus it is an expensive book, one becoming more so all the time as new collectors begin to buy the first editions of this groundbreaking prose stylist and charismatic

figure.

Like many first books this small paperbound volume manifests little of its author's best work, but first books have traditionally appealed to collectors in the same irrational way Biblical sires favored the first fruit of their loins. One can trace this bias by looking at memorable first book catalogues of past years. I studied several such compilations in quest of information that might prove pertinent to my own research, but it soon became clear that many of those older entries had become as passé as last year's hemlines. Some of these lapsed reputations will come around again in the fullness of time, but many authors who once flew high have come down to earth for good when it comes to demand for their books. What a bookseller strives for, then, is a state of equipoise between current fashion that affects sales today and one's deep-rooted conviction of an author's essential worth. Putting it another way, you acknowledge critical consensus without abdicating the personal taste that has come out of a lifetime of reading.

What I needed from the start to help me find books for the collection was a comprehensive want list. I compiled mine by hand on a lined notepad for no better reason than this is how I have always done it. No Googling for this unreconstructed relic. There are more reference books on our premises than books for sale because these are tools that I use daily. And I like having them on hand just when I wish to consult them.

So on I plod, referring to one volume or another in search of help, much like St. Exupery's Guillaumet, who struggles out of the wreckage of his downed mail plane in the frozen mountains of Argentina, and limps on badly burned feet for five pain-wracked days to safety. "What saves a man is to take a step. Then another step. It is always the same step, but you have to take it." Now, making a want list isn't quite that dramatic, but you do go about it incrementally, adding book after book until you have accumulated a substantial pile. And once you have your list, you begin to amass books in the same slow but steady manner.

It is a given that the books I seek or, more precisely, the copies of the books I seek will not for the most part be readily available. To find enough of them, I will need the help of others. Particular others. In such a case, contacts with colleagues are crucial. One of the main reasons I continue to exhibit at book fairs is that I enjoy being in the company of other booksellers: bantering with them, exchanging information while being giddily aware that

I am amidst other elsewhere-unemployables.

Some of these dealers I have known since becoming a bookseller, and it is to our mutual advantage that I let them know about the collection. I am happy to report that my colleagues – unanimously – have been delighted to help. (And, not so incidentally, take my money.) More tellingly, however, they will turn up titles that, industrious as I have been in the composition of my list, I have overlooked or don't know about. Knowing more books or knowing more about a particular book, is to be a better bookseller.

For example, a little-known first book is Charles Olson's "Spanish Speaking Americans in the War," which was issued by a U.S. Government agency in 1943 and precedes what is generally considered his first book, "Call Me Ishmael," by four years. It is a 24-page photo essay that Olson co-wrote with painter Ben Shahn when both were working for the Office of War Information and about as far away as one can imagine from the innovative Olson theories on Projective Verse that he would postulate years later.

Some authors' first publications are not books but scholarly offprints of magazine articles. These are often issued in mimeograph format and, having been produced for the author's personal use, are not for sale. Thus, Walker Percy's first separate publication is not "The Moviegoer," but a philosophical disquisition that precedes it by seven years and which tellingly manifests the moral and intellectual underpinnings of Percy's first novel and the others to come. I believe that offbeat publications such as these enhance the kind of collection I am building. And while they are not major works, they lend another dimension to the collection proper. Seen in another way, rarities such as these illustrate the latitude available to a collector in the shaping of his assemblage, an opportunity, really, to improvise his own cadenza to an established opus.

A particular challenge to the completion of a collection like this one (completion in this case being an unachievable ideal) is locating a first book that its author has subsequently repudiated. At a book fair recently I bought a copy of William Golding's first book, "Poems," which precedes "The Lord of the Flies" by 15 years. The only other copy I ever had (some 20 years ago) led me at that time to write to its author for information about what today is a legendary rarity. Golding kindly replied that the bulk of the edition had long ago been pulped and added, "I'm sorry to hear you found a book of my alleged 'Poems.' I had thought them sunk

without trace.”

When I first started buying and selling modern books, I understood it would be necessary to keep up with what was being published. For me, this would take some doing because I am at heart a cultural conservative who is more reluctant than most to honor emerging talent. So, some 40 years ago, I began reviewing books in order to force myself to read contemporary fiction and poetry more closely, though I would much rather have immersed myself in history, biography and, my favorite literary form (when not attempted by anyone under 30), the deceptively simple memoir.

Reading newly issued books enables one to make decisions of purchase in the most satisfying way – by relying on personal taste. And, not to be overlooked, a prescient bookseller can stockpile multiple copies of a promising title upon publication, cellar them like wine and, ultimately – if his judgment proves keen – offer them for sale at vintage prices.

An important consideration in the formation of this collection is the time frame chosen for it. Because many key Nineteenth-Century books are no longer available for the plucking, I am beginning with Theodore Dreiser’s “Sister Carrie,” which is widely regarded as the first modern American novel. Conveniently enough, “Sister Carrie” was published in the first year of the Twentieth Century, obviating the need for me to pursue the next copy of Edgar Allan Poe’s pseudonymously published “Tamerlane” to come on the market. (The last two copies to appear at public auction fetched well over \$100,000 each.)

But my less-than-lavish resources might also be strained if certain Twentieth century high spots become available. William Carlos Williams’ privately printed first book, “Poems,” of which only some dozen copies have been located, would today unquestionably inspire what auction houses like to term “spirited bidding.” Incongruously enough, Joseph the Provider / Books, the rare-book firm I established in 1970, handled what I believe were the last two copies of this rarity to come to light. I purchased the first of these during the setup of a San Francisco Book Fair in the Seventies from Van Allen Bradley of “Gold in Your Attic” renown and reluctantly flipped it on the spot to another dealer because the ignoble balance in our checking account strongly suggested I do so. The second copy came our way years later from New Directions publisher James Laughlin who, after much importuning on my part, agreed to release it to me because I assured him this

rarity of modern literature would become the linchpin for a fine and unusually comprehensive poetry collection.

Today, that copy reposes at Emory University along with 75,000 other volumes of verse that were assembled by Bronx-born collector Raymond Danowski, who oversaw the assemblage of his collection not from the environs of Yankee Stadium, but bucolic Dorset. So unless you believe that the third time is the charm, my burgeoning collection of authors' first books will have to make do with an inscribed copy of "The Tempers," Williams' first regularly published book.

At this time, the collection also lacks a copy of Sinclair Lewis' pseudonymous first book, "Hike and the Aeroplane," even though we had one in stock recently. This is because a serious Lewis collector who learned of the copy's whereabouts contacted me and purchased it. Why did I relinquish the finest copy of this title I had ever encountered? Simple. I am not a collector. Nor do I fancy myself a curator. Putting the matter into emotional context, I am a bookseller who has learned to derive the same pride of ownership that a collector experiences from having his books, even though I no longer have mine.

The way to achieve such a mindset is to shift into the past perfect tense, as in, "I have had." Well, I have had Vladimir Nabokov's rare first book, "Stikhi." Twice, in fact. The second copy was smuggled out of the Soviet Union in the early Eighties where seven decades earlier the author's doting father had privately printed the poems of his precocious teenage son. This copy is a key item in the late Carter Burden's unparalleled collection of modern literature, which his heirs gave to the Morgan Library following Carter's untimely death in 1996, a collection I subsequently appraised for the family with appropriate awe.

One of the reasons the Burden Collection was so outstanding is that Carter took pains to acquire special copies. He liked books that were signed or inscribed, and he loved association copies. He also augmented his collection by inserting an apposite letter here or a manuscript there into a book, thus enhancing the copy further. I do not know anyone who has the appetite (or the wherewithal) to duplicate Carter's mammoth achievement in terms of breadth and sophistication. Still, he can be employed as a model in the same way a mediocre basketball player in the making practices his jump shot in the manner of Michael Jordan.

One of the inevitabilities of dealing in modern first editions is that, more often than might be thought, you get to know authors

on a personal level. Many of the authors I met long ago are or have become famous in the 35 years I have plied my trade. (And more than a few, alas, have passed on.) So, having enjoyed social relationships with writers whose first books I plan to include in the catalogue, I am only a hop, skip and jump from making copies of their books more tantalizing to those of us for whom the individual copy is not merely a text to be read but an artifact to be treasured in its own right. I am thus asking a few individuals to write in my books or to send a letter to be inserted in those copies. I want these authors to say something about the book's conception, or its publishing history, or how their fledgling efforts appear to them today, after a hiatus which in some cases amounts to five decades.

As I write these words, the hope is that I will have enough books in a year to issue the kind of catalogue I envision. Until then, I will be after some of the many that I lack, attending book fairs, reading catalogues, making phone calls, even going online to look for the proverbial needle in the haystack. In other words, book hunting. Which, after all, is how the Renaissance was jumpstarted.

Firsts Magazine, 2006