

Book-ish

Picking up a new book creates a visceral reaction, a shot of low-dose adrenaline, a spark that spreads quickly across the neural grid: weighing the heft, smelling the ink, thumbing the paper, admiring the binding, dust jacket and design. The best part comes last, pacing through a work of sterling scholarship or succumbing to the hypnosis of first-rate fiction. When the last page is turned, there's a small measure of achievement that's intrinsically human, the personal pat-on-the-back of a mind suitably watered and fed.

As the club's name attests, the love of literature is encoded into our DNA. I'd wager that reading books hovers very close to the #1 shared pastime of our membership. It would be interesting, though impossible, to calculate the total number of books read collectively during our nearly one hundred lifetimes, much less all the volumes read by all the members since the Literary Club was established. This zest for the written word and delight in examining their conveyance is a cultural high-water mark. I'd respectfully challenge the always-quotable Ben Franklin by asserting that an active mind, a reader's mind, is as equally important as some bedtime ritual to become healthy, wealthy and wise. Well, perhaps not the wealthy part, although readers do soon become rich in similes, alliterations, and letters, both inked and epistolary. There is a definite link between literacy and a long life, as again, the average age of our membership bears out this correlation. If nothing else, keeping one's nose in a book while we were young shepherded us away from schoolyard bullies and playing in traffic, whereas a dozen years later, a daily regimen of reading steers the more mature reader from bimbos, booze and gunplay...unless you like the hard-boiled detective tales from Raymond Chandler or Dashiell Hammett.

But as with all hearty appetites, verily I say to you, it is a slippery slope on top a mountain of books, and oh so easy to slide down the back side to become, inserting a gasp of incredulous horror here...a bibliophile. Moreso, developing an appreciation for any author's oeuvre can lead a well-intentioned reader to drive a stake through the heart of a normal existence by frivolously exclaiming "I'd like to read this book again." Be forewarned, my friends, something wicked this way comes. The innocent notion that one day, some day, there'll be time to re-read a favorite book while surrounded by the accumulated and ever-multiplying stacks of not-yet-read books is the mildest form of madness known as book collecting. Put another way, reading is the gateway drug for bibliomania.

Still and all, bibliomania is a relatively jolly, non-carcinogenic, semi-social, and almost never fatal affliction. Granted, if unchecked, it can lead to the many levels of hoarding, malfeasance and skullduggery, same as other obsessions. But, no pun intended, but aside from forming a small-boulder-sized depression in the middle of one's favorite reading chair, most bibliomaniacs are pretty tame. That is, until the bell tolls for you. When you increasingly find yourself paying attention to things like first editions, the colophons of distinguished publishers, turn-of-the-century typefaces, and well-reviewed works by seemingly unknown authors, it's true, quicksand awaits.

Bibliomania isn't even close to more bizarre pursuits, like Howard Hughes filling shoeboxes with his clipped toenails or Johnny Depp collecting Barbie dolls; the longer you think about the latter, the more warped it becomes. Here's really weird: the 3030 airline boarding passes kept by K. Umlas Kamath from India. Ratchet up another notch, consider the 6902 airline sickness bags collected by Niek Vermeulen from Netherlands. But both of those oddball collections fit neatly into

a few boxes, while books fill shelves, mound on floors, rise to cover the walls, and at some point, morph into libraries.

It's easy to quickly get in the weeds when courting book smarts. A growing fascination with the crucial elements of book production happens first; noticing the sewn headbands of nicely bound volumes, the thick, stiff paper upon which a well-preserved squiggle will engage a reader's eye, and mind, centuries after the ink dried. Some embellishments are purely laudatory, such as embossed leather covers or gilt-edged pages; others a function of the printing and binding process over time. For example, a different kind of budget than tonight's program pushed Messers Scribner and Knopf, as well as the Harper Brothers, to keep the deckle edge of untrimmed pages for their respective growing literary imprints. Said another way, the deckle edge saved money by not requiring the book block to go through one more stage on the production line in order to have the edges trimmed to a flat, even, uniform appearance. Nowadays, though, it costs extra to add the deckle edge, so it's a design feature employed to suggest quality by harkening back to the days of Penn Warren, Welty, O'Neill, Parker, Hemingway, and scores of other leading 20th century writers.

Clearly, I'm rationalizing to accredit my perhaps excessive gathering of books at home, at the office, in a storage facility...or two. But not all of them are calculated upon the teeter-totter of short supply and high demand that determines a value for so many collectors. Sure, there are books on the shelves from the 1700s, first editions of Poe, Fitzgerald, and Grant's two-volume memoir, signed copies from Solzhenitsyn, Allan Eckert, Henry Roth and more. But there are also battered mass-markets, pages all but falling out, that tickled my teenage angst courtesy of Vonnegut, Salinger, and Kerouac.

Where it started. In 1975, the goalie from our high school soccer team and I were invited to visit a college in Chicago, so we clambered on Amtrak's Lake Erie Limited early one frozen morning in downtown Cleveland, all aboard to Union Station in the City of Broad Shoulders. My first error: taking along library copies of *1984* and *Brave New World*. My second error: reading them back to back before disembarking seven hours later. Those two stark and powerful works massaged deep into my brain by the click-clack, rocking back, and forth, and back, the rhythm of the rails. Walking out onto city sidewalks crowded with pedestrians, more in one block than were in our entire graduating class, with another block just beyond, just as jam-packed, every person in a hurry, almost faceless behind sunglasses, hats, and scarfs. It shook me to my core - clearly Big Brother had already deprogrammed these hordes. I finally settled down, but I was a changed mind nonetheless. Upon return to my small-town library, I asked the librarian if she could reorder new copies for the shelves. She said she could call them lost or damaged, which would I prefer? Definitely damaged, I said, and laid a \$20 bill - big money back then - on the counter. They were the first two books for which I resolutely knew: I had to have these.

Collectors often are magnetized to find the small first printing of title from an author upon whose brow fame suddenly smiled a book or two later. Since the publication of *The Firm* in 1991, John Grisham has published over thirty books at Doubleday, each title with at least three million copies in print, total sales over 275 million copies. But *The Firm* was not John's first book, that was *A Time to Kill* published three years earlier by Wynwood Press, with a first printing of 5000 copies. There are only half a dozen copies of the original hardcover in the open market, topping out at \$4400 for a signed edition. There is also only five copies this "book club" edition which came out later, in a slightly smaller trim size and only worth a tenth as much. Who knew, except for Stormy Daniels, that one inch less drop one's value so dramatically.

Inventory control buyers at mystery bookstores took this mania a step further. It must have been their category of specialization manifesting as a macabre MO, but they were infamous for ordering at least one copy of every book presented to them because who knew when the author would suddenly meet a clichéd grisly end, that the price would jump twenty-fold on that first edition which had never been opened, much less read, or barely cared about, before then.

Book collecting started well before the printing press, as the monks' quills and brushes produced illuminated manuscripts that were works of art from the start. Again I respectfully tweak the nose of history, by swapping the Library of Alexandria in place of the Lighthouse of Alexandria as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Although long gone, it is still regarded as the greatest gathering of rolled manuscripts ever, estimated to have up to 400,000 scrolls before numerous fires destroyed the archives. Thomas Jefferson's personal library at Monticello became the foundation of the Library of Congress. I offer these two examples to show that done right, books live far, far beyond our lifetimes and that book collecting can ascend from bibliomania to establishing a public treasure.

What's the highest value book still in existence, you ask? The Codex Leiseter, handwritten by Leonardo DaVinci, bought by Bill Gates for 30 million dollars. The irony here is that Mr. Gates' company expended a lot of effort to limit the number of typefaces used online to less than a dozen, which puts his literary largess 180 degrees away from Microsoft's attempt at expulsion of individual expression. Fittingly, it was Gate's doppelganger, Steve Jobs, whose commitment to maintaining centuries worth of fonts available to Mac designers to offset the software industry's push to restrict the flowery and formal scripts of yesteryear.

Books by and large resist elevating the mistake as a plum to the collector. Baby boomers are the last generation with a nominal exposure to philatelic, that is, stamp collecting, and numismatics, aka coin collecting. There were special notebooks designed to hold collections of both these interests, and very often, what drove the attraction to a certain stamp or coin was a mistake, like the American flag on the pictured ship flowing backward or a dime with a date error. My theory is that with >300,000 new titles published in 2017, each a safe bet to have at least one, if not ten, errors in the text, simply having a comma that's mistakenly printed as a semicolon does not drive collectors to an acquisition. But when a snafu hits a bestseller, that becomes a story. One example I was very near to – in 1988, Bantam Books published this copy of Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*. The first printing of 40,000 copies shipped briskly, the book rose high on bestseller lists around the country, and like Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, it became that year's bestseller than nobody actually read. About 5 months after publication, a reader contacted the editor-in-chief, asking how we could have possibly missed the fact that many of the illustrations were wrongly shuffled throughout the book, and that the table of contents was missing. Uh-oh, our knickers were showing. We tried to quietly recall the 40,000 copies – no go. We rushed a corrected edition into print, this one with a navy blue jacket to easily identify right and wrong. The open market value of incorrect silver edition currently tops out at \$2000, whereas you can get your very own used copy of the editorially correct blue-jacketed version for \$5. I wonder if Tom Bennett would take this one in exchange for the next four years of dues.

Confession time – I do not long to own DaVinci's Codex. To spend time in the Morgan Library on E 36th St. in NYC is an opportunity to marvel at the magnificence of beautiful books as well as the greed to own over two dozen copies of McGuffey's Readers, as well as multiple copies of

a hundred other titles, all under lock and key. While admittedly an admirer and collector, I don't want to own books just to squirrel them away. Like a bike, you can only ride, or read, one at a time.

I do love books. More precisely, I love them more when the whole package comes together: brilliant, brave writing; careful editing; the paper and boards and binding reflecting the publisher's intent to find a way to match the authorial work to last through time and showcase words and phrases strung together like rare stones on a necklace that dazzles the light passing through. Most importantly, to return to the very magic of Gutenberg, printed books aspire to reach and teach the masses.

When touring publishers and printers in Moscow, Marrakesh, Amman and Budapest during USIA cultural exchanges in the 1990's, I was humbled to see hands-on devotion and bottom-line sacrifice to make books available to a population just released from dictatorship and state control that determined what could be printed, distributed and read. As we were leaving Bucharest, a young man handed each of the four of us a copy of the first book published by his small press. At that time, a book in Romania cost the equivalent of a month's wages. For him, this was a staggering sacrifice. But it was written in Romansh, so we couldn't penetrate page one. I tried to explain that his gift was incredibly generous, but we were just mongrels. It wasn't until I got to that last word that his expression of hurt lightened. We had spent five days in his company, he guided us through the revived post-Communist literary landscape, we had indeed bonded, but for the one-language Americans, it was just a block of recycled wood products. For his countrymen, it was freedom.

Carl Upchurch's name may not be familiar to you, yet after tonight, I hope you'll never forget it. His childhood, sadly, played out in countless American cities over the last half-century. Growing up in the inner city of Philadelphia, poverty pushed him into a downward spiral of truancy and crime, eventually landing him in prison.

Locked in solitary confinement, his only "furnishings" were a sink, toilet, metal bed and a low table. A copy of Shakespeare's sonnets propped up a bent leg of the table. Taking up that book, Carl taught himself to read, first learning the phonetics of the letters, then educating himself to what the words meant. His immersion into the world of words and writing thus began, as did the turnaround of his life. In short, reading not only changed his life, it saved his life.

Convicted in the Womb is neither a polite nor an easy book to read, especially the first few chapters in which he chronicles his early years. But the truth was a metamorphosis for him as a reader and a citizen and spokesperson for the oppressed.

Oddly, Carl didn't feel he was the hero of his book. Progressing from convict to college grad to social activist, he claimed the most inspiring person he ever met was the librarian who every week endured the jeers and worse of other prisoners as she walked down the long corridor to Carl's cell, intent on delivering to him another stack of books.

When he asked his daughter what she thought of his photo on the cover (which the casual browser might interpret to be a fearsome or combative pose), she said, "I think you look like you're afraid, daddy." To which he replied, "I am."

The year of publication I brought Carl out to the Denver Publishing Institute for a day to address the students, as well as a dinner for the university staff the night before. The restaurant was

in a tough part of town, so when Carl entered the doorway, his extra-large frame filling the space completely, his skull cap and dashiki equally attention-getting. It was a wonderful cross-cultural evening, and everyone in attendance came away enlightened and enthralled. The high point was when, to close the dinner, Carl recited Shakespeare's 18th sonnet in a rumbling timber that seized the very air. There was not a dry eye in the room when he finished. When taking his back to his hotel room later that night, I thanked him and expressed my admiration for his oration. His response: "Do you want to hear another? I know all 154 by heart."

Heart it is, and heart is what fills his book. I will collect and share as many copies of *Convicted* that I can get my hands on. The value of a used edition is less than \$4. The value of his story is, as MasterCard states, priceless. Hardened by life on the streets, his insights given form by his growing fluency, are staggering, forcing the reader to set the book down to process the revelations, ultimately grateful for the gifts that literacy brings.

Those stone tablets, those papyrus rolls, those hand-drawn, hand-lettered medieval manuscripts – they talk to us. Still. Although not as rare, books set into type or digital files, can tell us, directly from the author's hand, and head, and heart, what not only they looked to chronicle, but what they thought, what they wondered about in terms of future years, what their humble hopes for a life away from the peat smoke and the dungeons and the battlefields. If only they could see us now as we can see them.

Let's close by raising an existential question of modern life: what invention has most benefited mankind: the wheel or the book? Which invention has gifted and lifted the world's population the most over the course of time? Certainly, the wheel has carried people farther than previously conceivable...up until the airplane. But I for one would say that books have carried man farther and higher than both machines, and in the process, knit countries and generations together, shared aspirations and achievements around the globe, familiarized readers to cultures hidden time zones away...and at the same time, provided a forum for the solo writer to puzzle and parse his thoughts on paper. Very often, it's the act of pondering, picking the right way to word a thought, putting it on a page, that leads to the very clarification of what we're all struggling to say and think up, right up until the very second it was writ. And once writ, shared. Books have built the world's scientific and artistic communities, created a contextual foundation for understanding ourselves as well as other times, nations, and aspirations...while never omitting an individual's point of view. All of that, printed in black and white and protected between two covers.

This is why I collect books.