THE PURSUIT OF BOOKS:
A BIBLIOMANIAC'S CONFESSION
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Read Before "The Egyptians," April 20, 1967

The new Random House dictionary defines a bibliophile as "one who loves or collects books" and mania as "excessive excitement or enthusiasm; craze." A bibliomaniac is therefore one who loves or collects books with excessive excitement or enthusiasm, or the extent of being at least slightly crazed. Such a one I have been, I confess, for some thirty-three years. What follows is a sharing with you of a few of the things which I have enjoyed during that period, along with a few examples, I hope not immodest, from my library. For I hold with Wordsworth, in the phrase which I adopted years ago for the motto of my bookplate, that "Books, we know, are a substantial world, both pure and good."

Bibliomania is a virulent disease, and takes many forms; but they all have one symptom in common. Books gravitate to the avid collector like iron filings to a magnet. Such a one, placed alone in the center of the Sahara desert, would produce a book from somewhere and start reading. His first move upon visiting any new city is to check the pages of the classified telephone directory under the heading "Book Dealers-Used and Rare," and he seldom leaves without a package under his arm. His favorite reading is book catalogues, and the postman knows the way to his house. His problem is to keep from acquiring books, for not only are the dealers' descriptions so deliberately enticing and the feel of the old binding so exciting, but friends give him books, periodicals send him books for review, and it seems that everyone he ever knew has suddenly turned into a promising author. At this point the problem becomes one of mere space, and space is always limited. It is all very well to say, as some collectors are forced to do, that for every new book acquired an old friend must go; but if the world discarded its generations everytime a new edition came along, where would any of us be after fifty? Better to have a patient wife who will only smile and wonder as the shelves creep along the walls upon which she had planned.
to hang pictures, and, in my own case, into the dining room
and two of the bedrooms. He who possesses such a spouse is
singularly blessed.

And so by these methods over a period of years I have ac­
cumulated some 4000 volumes, each in one way or another of
some significance to me, although certainly at least in the ag­
gregate meaningless to anyone else. But who, you may ask,
needs 4000 books? Who, indeed; and the answer of course is
no one, if books are considered merely as a source of informa­
tion. Who needs five copies of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales;
and yet should I be deprived of the pleasure of owning the two
stately volumes of the Rockwell Kent edition or the quaint
typography of (a facsimilie, I must admit) the Klem­
scott merely because I already own three others? Who needs three
copies of Moby Dick, but must I throw away the one I read
so avidly as a boy upon acquiring the aluminum case con­
taining the Lakeside Press set? Is my signed Tess to be substi­
tuted for my illustrated Tess, or either of them for the copy in my
set of Hardy's complete works? To ask these questions is to
answer them. For the collector, a book is an object which may
take a variety of forms. He collects the forms which interest
him.

Nevertheless collecting books presupposes a certain amount
of reading. I have not read all of the books in my library, and
I never expect to. But I have read a large proportion of them,
and not a day goes by without my adding at least a few pages.
People ask me how I do it; the answer is easy. I seldom read
a magazine and virtually never look at television. I keep a
dozen books by my chair and dip into them as occasion per­
mits, even if only for a few moments to read a page or two.
It is surprising how quickly they go. Thirty minutes a day
mean a three hundred page book in a fortnight. But if you
wait until you can have an hour or two of uninterrupted read­
ing, that time will never come, particularly if you have children
of the age of mine.

I am not a particularly rapid reader, but by this means I
have managed to get through quite a few volumes since my
grandmother stopped reading aloud to me. I suspect that I
have read about as many of the books in my library as the av­
erage collector. Tolstoy is said to have had fourteen thousand
books in his personal library when he died. The average book
contains, let us say, three hundred pages. Assuming that he read at the rate of five pages per minute, which is the most that trained speed readers can attain after years of practice, he would have to read continuously eight hours a day for five years to make his way through such a collection; or, if you assume that he began reading at the age of seven (and he lived to be eighty-two) then at least half an hour each and every day of his entire life. Considering that he led a full and adventurous life, wrote one of the world’s longest novels as well as two others and a shelf full of shorter pieces, and spent most of his later years arguing with his wife, it is doubtful that he did either.

There are, however, examples of compulsive reading, just as there are examples of compulsive eating and drinking. This of course defeats its own purpose, for reading must be either informative or pleasurable (or preferably both) and this type of reading is neither. A striking example occurs in Thomas Wolfe’s interminable novel “Of Time and the River,” where his alter ego Eugene Gant, upon being exposed to the books in Widner Library at Harvard (which incidentally contains four million) goes on a reading binge with the same gusto he brought to every other activity in life:

“He read insanely, by the hundreds, the thousands, the ten thousands, yet he had no desire to be bookish; no one could describe this mad assault upon print as scholarly: a ravening appetite in him demanded that he read everything that had ever been written about human experience. He read no more from pleasure—the thought that other books were waiting for him tore at his heart forever. He pictured himself as tearing the entrails from a book as from a fowl. At first, hovering over book stalls, or walking at night among the vast piled shelves of the library, he would read, watch in hand, muttering to himself in triumph or anger at the timing of each page: ‘Fifty seconds to do that one. Damn you, we’ll see! You will, will you?’—and he would tear through the next page in twenty seconds.”

Let us turn however from the quantitative to the qualitative aspects of bibliomania. The pursuit of rare volumes has long been one of man’s hobbies. Probably it began in the days before printing, when a book represented many hours of tedious and meticulous work, and its possession was a symbol of learning and power which placed its owner above the
common run of men. In recognition of its value and importance, the medieval book was frequently illustrated or illuminated by pictures in brilliant color and gold leaf, making each of them not only unique but a work of art in itself. Especially was this true in the case of the Book of Hours, a prayer book for the canonical hours and special occasions, where the elaborateness of the illumination was considered to be to the greater glory of God. Such books, where they still exist today, are the treasured possessions of museums and art galleries; but fortunately through the medium of modern colortype processes we can all own and enjoy them in facsimile, although a good reproduction may represent a considerable investment in itself.

With Guttenberg’s invention of the means of printing from movable type books ceased to be unique and the modern publishing business was born. Editions were limited however by the mechanical capabilities of the press, and the intervening years have taken their toll, so that of the famous forty-two line Guttenberg bible printed sometime before 1456 and thought to be the first book produced from movable type, only forty-three copies are known to exist today. In addition there are fourteen of the so-called thirty-six line bible, which while probably later is therefore even more rare. Most of them are in museums, and it has been thirteen years since one changed hands; but in excess of three hundred thousand dollars would be a fair estimate of price if one should. By way of contrast, a First Folio Shakespeare, printed almost two centuries later in 1623, would bring about a hundred thousand dollars, and poor copies have gone for as little as twenty thousand dollars. Even such bargains, however, are out of the reach of most of us. Of course, there is always the chance that you will turn up among a stack of old books in the attic a Guttenberg Bible or a First Folio Shakespeare, but the odds are against it. However it does sometimes happen. In 1943 A. S. W. Rosenbach, probably the greatest book dealer the world has ever known, who is said to have maintained in his little book shop in Philadelphia an inventory more valuable than Macy’s, received a letter from an unknown correspondent in Ireland saying that he had a copy of the Bay State Psalm Book, the first book printed in the United States of which at that time only ten copies were known to exist. He offered to forward it
to Rosenbach for inspection by his daughter who was coming to America soon, if he was interested. Rosenbach, without much hope but willing to follow any lead, cabled in reply to send the book along and promptly forgot about it. A month or so later there appeared in Philadelphia Miss Weatherup of Belfast with a small parcel wrapped in paper which she delivered to Dr. Rosenbach. With trembling fingers he opened it, quite sure he would find nothing but a worthless book, yet nevertheless full of hope and anticipation. And then he held in his hand the eleventh known copy of the Bay State Psalm Book. True, the title page was missing, but there was no doubt of its authenticity. Trying to control his voice, the Doctor asked Miss Weatherup the price. She had no idea; he would have to cable her father. He did, and the answer came back promptly and succinctly: “150 pounds. Weatherup.” And so the eleventh copy of the Bay State Psalm Book, and the only one in private hands passed into the Rosenbach collection, where it is to this day. The Doctor never sold it; but in 1946 he purchased another copy for the Yale University Library. The price was $146,000, at that time the highest price ever paid for a single volume at auction.

Short of such a windfall, the only way to obtain rare books is to beg, borrow, buy or steal them. Avid collectors have from time to time adopted all of these methods. There is even one recorded case of murder to obtain a volume thought to be unique. I quote from a usually reliable source:

“It was in the valuable library of the monastery at Poblet, near Tarragona, just a century ago, that Don Vincente, a Spanish monk, developed his unholy love for books. Years of religious training did not prevent him from seizing every chance to plunder his own and other monastery libraries which were thrown open in a political upheaval of the time. As confusion spread, he found opportunities to take the books he coveted most, and then vanished. But sometime later he appeared in Barcelona, the proprietor of a bookshop. The one volume he had worshipped at a distance and longed to own was a work of Lamberto Palmart, published in Valencia in 1482. It had been in the collection of a Barcelona advocate for years, and at the dispersal of his estate was offered at auction. It was understood to be the only one of its kind known. Don Vincente went to the sale and staked every cent he possessed on it; but a competitor, Augustino Paxtot, outbid him by fourteen pesetas. The ex-monk grew white with
fury, threatening revenge as he left the room. When, a few nights later, Paxtot’s house burned to the ground and he perished with it, several friends recalled Don Vincente’s threats. He was reported to the police, his shop searched, and the rare Palmart volume found. Even when he was arrested, Don Vincente made no effort to deny his guilt. All he seemed interested in was the fate of the little book which had brought disgrace upon him. During the trial his lawyer, making a valiant effort to save him, announced that another copy of the Palmart volume had been found in a Paris library, a few days previous to the alleged crime. It could not be proved, he argued, that the copy in question was the one recently auctioned. But Don Vincente, hearing his book was not unique, burst into violent weeping and showed no further interest in the trial. Alone at night in his cell, and before the court during the final days of his trial, his only words of regret were, ‘Alas, alas! My copy is not unique.’

While I cannot vouch for the authenticity of this story, Flaubert thought enough of it to make it the basis of his first published work, written before he had reached the age of fifteen.

Most of us, however, prefer more conventional and legitimate methods of acquiring books, and normally this means through dealers. I have known a great many rare book dealers at one time or another, and I have gained a great respect for them. In the first place, they know exactly what they have and what it is worth, undoubtedly a great deal better than you do. The chances that you can walk into a bookstore today and pick up a valuable volume for a song are practically negligible. You might as well be prepared to pay the going rate and hope that a rising market will justify your investment. Price, within reason and frequently beyond it, is no object to the bibliomaniac, and modern booksellers do not haggle.

What is of considerable significance, however, is condition, which may result in a wide variation in price. Condition is described in book catalogues in terms of art. “Mint” means that the book is as it left the hands of the printer. “Fine” indicates no blemishes of any kind, while “good” denotes minor imperfections, often undetectable until attention is called to them. “Poor” covers everything below this, while “Ex-library” indicates a copy from a lending library with all of the consequent mishandling. Specific defects are noted: “foxing” means that the pages have become spotted with age,
and "shaken" that the signatures (the sets into which the pages are gathered as in a folio, quarto, octavo, etc.) have become detached from each other. The presence of a dustjacket or slip case will be stated, as well as any defacement by writing or otherwise. All books are impliedly warranted to be as described, with an automatic ten day return privilege for full credit in case of dissatisfaction.

I used to order books by mail from book catalogues, but I stopped long ago. The reason was that I wasn't getting any books. Each item in a rare book list is unique in that dealer's stock, and when his one copy is gone there isn't any more. So it is a case of first come, first served. Today within minutes after a catalogue arrives in the mail (and I have arranged with my dealers to have them sent air mail special delivery) I am on the long distance telephone placing my order. In this way I have managed in recent years to buy about five hundred in getting what I want.

This method will not work, however, in the case of one of the most fruitful sources of rare books, including American first editions—the English dealers. Here the collector in this country is at a distinct disadvantage, but there are some advantages as well. Prices are generally lower, and the customs department is most generous in classing books as works of art and permitting them to enter duty free.

Catalogues are not the only source through which books can be purchased. Of course the book themselves are on display in the stores, but most of the business is done by mail, the turnover is very rapid, and the old days of leisurely browsing are gone forever. Most dealers will take your want list and conduct a search for the elusive volumes, usually with ultimate success. In this they cooperate through the Antiquarian Booksellers' Association, which also sponsors an annual exhibition and publishes a joint catalogue. Then there are the auctions, where private libraries are sold, and which are the source of much of the stock of rare book dealers. Few of us will ever have the opportunity to attend an auction at Sotheby's, or any of the other great auction houses in person, but there are agents who will gladly place your bid for a commission, usually ten percent. And certain auction houses permit direct mail bidding, with the book going at a fixed percentage over the second highest bid. Comparative prices
a pre-determined number of copies. These are then carefully numbered so that each copy can be individually identified, and in many cases each copy is signed by the author or illustrator as a guarantee of its authenticity. In the case of special editions, the type is then disbursed so that no more copies of that edition can be printed. In other cases, subsequent editions, although printed from the same plates, are on a lower grade of paper and in an inferior binding and are of course unnumbered and unsigned. These special limited editions are sold from the beginning at a premium price. They may or may not enhance in value depending upon the success of the book and the author's reputation.

One of the strangest stories of an edition of this type concerns T. E. Lawrence's "Seven Pillars of Wisdom." Lawrence did not wish to publish it during his lifetime, but he wanted a few copies printed for friends. However, he was determined that no one other than himself should know how many copies existed. Accordingly he had the sheets printed and folded at several different printers, then gathered the signatures himself and took the complete sets to be bound by several different binderies. It was only after his death that the total number of copies was established at 201, of which many lack certain illustrations. A copy is currently being advertised in New York at $2,000.00.

This same work has the distinction of having the highest price tag ever put upon a newly published book. Lawrence wished to have it copyrighted in the United States as a published work, but he did not want it to be actually available to the public. However, the copyright laws require that at least ten copies be printed, two given to the Library of Congress, and the rest offered for public sale. This was duly accomplished, the minimum number of copies being offered—at $100,000 each. There were no takers. Recently a copy sold for $250.00, or one fourth of one percent of the original asking price, the biggest remainder discount on a book in the history of publishing.

Authors autograph their books for many reasons, and in some cases this adds to their value; but if they do so too freely, the point is lost. Laurence Sterne, after the appearance of the first two volumes of "Tristram Shandy" had produced a horde of imitations, autographed every copy of each of the remain-
ing volumes to show that it was by the original author, and so unautographed copies of the later volumes are the rarer. The story is told of one modern author who while browsing in a second hand book store ran across an autographed copy of one of his books and with prideful anticipation took it to the owner to inquire the price. "Well", the proprietor said, "ordinarily it is seventy-five cents; but some darn fool has written his name in it, so I'll let you have it for half a dollar."

Robert Benchley points out another drawback in asking authors to autograph their books. Ernest Hemingway, whose second book, "In Our Time" (not to be confused with the later volume of the same name published in New York), was printed in Paris in 1924 by Harry and Caresse Crosby's Black Sun Press and is today worth its weight in ten dollar bills, was an old friend of Benchley's and unexpectedly dropped in for a visit one day. The rest is in Benchley's own words:

"More to interrupt his lion-hunting story than anything else, I brought out my copy of "In Our Time" and suggested that, in memory of happy days around the Anise Deloso bowl at the Closerie des Lilas, it might be the handsome thing for him to inscribe a few pally sentiments on the fly-leaf. Not, as I took pains to explain to him, that I was a particular a'mirer of his work, so much as that I wanted to see if he really knew how to spell. Encouraged by my obviously friendly tone, he took a pen in his chubby fist, dipped it in a bottle of bull's blood, and wrote the following:

'To Robert ("Garbage Bird") Benchley, hoping that he won't wait for prices to reach the peak

from his friend,
Ernest ("-------") Hemingway"

The 'Garbage Bird' reference in connection with me was a familiarity he had taken in the past to describe my appearance in the early morning light of Montparnasse on certain occasions. The epithet applied to himself which was unprintable except in "Ulysses", was written deliberately to make it impossible for me to cash in on the book. Then, crazed with success at defacing "In Our Time", he took my first edition of "A Farewell to Arms" and filled in each blank in the text where Scribner's had blushed and put a dash instead of the original word. I think that he supplied the original word in every case. In fact, I am sure of it.
On the fly-leaf of this he wrote:
'To R. (G) B. from E. (−). H.
Very valuable. Sell Quick'."

Benchley adds that he never tried to sell either book.

This type of autograph accompanied by a personal inscription is called a presentation copy and when couched in more acceptable terms, may be quite valuable, depending upon the importance of the author and the recipient. If the book is associated with some particular event in the life of the author or of some other person of prominence, whether autographed or not, it is an association copy. Association copies have a particular interest to collectors, and there have been some remarkable finds in this field. For example, shortly after the turn of the century, one lucky browser at a Paris bookstall picked up for a few francs Montaigne's own copy of Plutarch with his annotations in the margin. Shortly thereafter in the same happy hunting ground, another bibliophile found Napoleon's copy of Caesar's Gallic Wars. There are still many such finds to be made. All that is required is patience, knowledge, luck, and the acumen to recognize them when they come along.

Some people collect fine bindings, but I have always thought that this was for decorative purposes rather than for the books themselves. To me, an original binding surpasses anything that Zaehnsdorf or Riviere could produce. Nevertheless, books are sometimes damaged and have to be rebound, and it is appropriate that the bindings should be sturdy and attractive. Books have been bound in many materials, including human skin (which is said to resemble soft morocco), but leather is by far the most popular. Leather bindings can be quite ornate, with head and foot bands, tooling, and inlays of ivory or other materials. One subdivision of the collection of fine bindings is the collection of books from the libraries of noble families bearing their crest or coat of arms upon the binding. Napoleon is a special favorite for this purpose, due to his habit of carrying a book with him wherever he went, reading it in this carriagge, and throwing it out of the window when he was through, thus furnishing a steady supply of such volumes for the general market.

There are various other specialties which some bibliophiles collect, such as books with fore edge paintings—that it, books
with pictures painted on the unbound edge of the leaves so that they appear only when they are spread in a certain way. To me, this is not book collecting. If a man wants pictures, he should hang them on the wall where they belong, not have them on the edge of his books where they can do nothing but interfere.

Others collect miniature books, which at least has the virtue of conserving space. The smallest book printed in type was published in 1958 and is less than one-half inch square. So far as I am aware, no one has ever collected oversize books but for the record, the largest ever printed is 6'10' high, a foot thick, and has an outspread of 9'2". It weighs a quarter of a ton and has a 12 horsepower engine attached to turn the leaves. It is bound in—what else?—the hide of a single Texas ox.

As to subject matter, some collectors collect a single author, some collect a single type of book such as dictionaries, some collect a single period, and some a single geographical area such as Americana. All that can be said of these is, to each his own. There seems to be one type of specialization, however, which has gone out of style since Judge Woolsey's decision in the Ulysses case. That is pornography and erotica. During the Victorian era some great collections were assembled, and that period produced one of the outstanding rarities of all time in the field. This was a work entitled "My Secret Life," in eleven volumes, published in an edition of only six copies, only three of which exist today, and only one of which is in private hands. Purportedly autobiographical, it deals at interminable length with the adventures of a protagonist known only as "Walter" in pursuing housemaids up and down the back stairs of English country houses. Its recent publication in this country should do more than any court decision possibly could to convince the general reading public of the essential dullness of this type of literature.

There remain only two types of books to be discussed and then I will be done. The first is illustrated books. A book illustrated by a great artist can be a work of art in and of itself; and many a painter, ancient and modern, has devoted his talents to book illustration. Modern color printing gives these illustrations a quality almost equal to the originals. Unfortunately, much of the best work in this field is still being done in foreign countries, principally in Switzerland and, more recently, in
Japan, where the art of print-making goes back three hundred years.

Finally there are the so-called press books; books designed and printed with no thought of economy or utility, but to furnish the most appropriate setting possible for the text which they embody. Beginning with Elzevir and Aldus and coming right down to Bruce Rodgers in our own day, there have always been book designers and printers who raised book production to an art by careful selection of materials, bindings, type styles and sizes, page sizes and placement of the text on the page, and a thousand other details that go to make up the finished product. One of the best known of the private presses was the Klemscott Press of William Morris, where he attempted to embody the principles of the pre-Raphaelite group into book production, with results that seem, to me at least, dubious. For the collector, the best reading in a book is frequently the colophon, where the make up and design of the book is described.

These, then, are the types of books which people collect. But what do they do with them when they have them? They preserve them, with tender and loving care. Leather bindings require oiling, fragile books require protection from rough treatment, and all books must be guarded against their natural enemies, sunlight (which will fade them) and insects. Unfortunately, our peculiar climate makes this particularly important. For this purpose the Solander Case, whose inventor, although he also has an island in the South Pacific named after him, is best known for the two-part container which bears his name, is most useful. But even this will not protect a rare and fragile book from its worst of enemies, the careless borrower. To watch such a one take a new book, break its back by folding it in reverse, turn down its pages to mark a place, set a glass upon it when no coaster is handy, shred its dust cover and smudge its pages with dirty hands, is bad enough when it is his book which he is mistreating. It is unthinkable when it is your own. The bibliophile makes solemn oath that he will never subject his prized possessions to even the remotest possibility of such conduct. The true collector does not lend books.

A book lover does more than merely collect books; he enjoys them. He lives surrounded by them, and to him they exude
an aura of peace and contentment, of quiet dignity and self-confidence, of rationality and reason. When he smiles at them, they seem somehow to smile back. When he takes one down and fondles it, it seems that the caress is returned. When he opens the pages of a new book and begins a new experience, there is an excitement and a thrill of anticipation which is to him unique. When he dips into an old and familiar volume, memories are aroused whose nostalgic reminiscence conquers time and space, and once again the world is new and bright and full of hope. For, as Richard Whitelock said three centuries ago:

“They are for company of the best of friends, in doubts counsellors, in damps comforters, time’s perspective, the home traveler’s ship or horse, the busy man’s best recreation, the opiate of idle weariness, the mind’s best ordinary, nature’s grandeur, and the seed-plot of immortality.”

Finally, a book lover shares his books. Not with everyone, for not everyone is worthy; but with those few who can share with him the joy and contentment which they bring. Tell him his wife is handsome, his children strong and healthy, his house comfortable and his business successful, and he will merely smile modestly and change the subject. But tell him his library is unique and you strike a responsive chord. His eyes brighten, his tongue loosens, and one by one the volumes come down off of the shelves, the slip cases are removed, Solander cases opened, points examined, colophons perused, and when the leave taking finally comes, it is with reluctance upon his part, although perhaps with relief upon yours. I thank you for giving me that opportunity tonight. May you continue to prosper as good companions in the fellowship of books.