

The Day I Found John Updike At a Hadassah Garage Sale

BY RICHARD ELMAN

I began to collect old books, particularly first editions, when the books I'd once written started going out of print. It astonished me to discover that books my publishers had been all too willing to sell in bins for the price of a pack of sugarless gum were now being peddled by dealers for many times their original retail value. My first novel, a handsomely printed university-press production that retailed for \$2.50 in 1958, was offered to me for \$100, signed.

While I was making the rounds of old-book stores, as well as thrift shops and charity bazaars, I also renewed a passion, begun in college, for buying books of poetry. I first wrote as a poet and always found a book of poems beautiful to hold in my hands. A wall of such volumes was more wealth than I could ever imagine: I loved the soft texture of the creamy laid paper, the stark print, usually hand-set, and the handsome elegance of initial-letter colophons.

When I was traveling in Central America, or moving from flat to flat in Manhattan, maintaining a poetry library was as difficult as keeping a woman. I became a throwaway-paperback reader, and my books lay packed in storage, giving off the acrid whiff of mold. Back on Long Island, with more room for books, my old passion returned. During one two-week period I bought an early edition of Marianne Moore containing poems she'd not included in her *Collected Poems* (about \$5), plus an early copy of *Hound and Horn*, a Twenties and Thirties literary magazine including more of her early poems (\$2). For \$6, I also purchased a finely preserved first-edition pamphlet by Kenneth Fearing, who later went on to write mysteries, one of which, *The Big Clock*, became a Ray Milland movie. A small Hogarth Press edition of C. Day Lewis edited and printed by Virginia and Leonard Woolf (\$12.50) and the complete works of Thomas McGrath (\$7), our only true (and much underrated)

*And Saul
Bellow at the
Laundromat*

Marxist poet, were the other jewels in my collection.

In those days, maybe seven years ago, prices for such items were still relatively modest. My usual limit was \$10 per book, and when I found something I liked, I often learned within a matter of a year or so that I could unload it, if I wished, for as much as five to ten times the original price. The business of collecting modern first editions was then beginning to boom.

Now it's big business. Some books that once could be had for less than \$100 now sell for thousands. The big collectors are Vanderbilt heirs and the sons of furniture merchants. They buy and sell by phone and by telex. They maintain vaults and temperature-controlled rooms, and they buy up entire estates of scholars, poets and fellow collectors, then sell them to university libraries and to other Vanderbilt heirs. Once a gentleman's preserve, the "game" of book collecting is now lamentably subject to the hype of overcommercialism. Stimulated by tax lawyers and certified public accountants, even curators of the wealthy university collections are behaving like those fat cats who go after horses, white truffles and pre-Columbian chamber pots.

Fortunately, there are some, like Bob Wilson of the Phoenix Book Shop in New York's Greenwich Village, who are in it primarily for love of books and poets. Phoenix is supplied in large part by the personal libraries of the poetry community in New York and elsewhere. It's even published small collections and broadsides under its own colophon.

For those with few resources but a genuine love for books, collecting can transcend commercialism. As the world-famous collector A. Edward Newton once observed, "It's a great game. Anybody with ordinary intelligence can play it: There are indeed people who think that it takes no brains at all. No great amount of money is required, unless one becomes very ambitious. It can be played at home or abroad, alone or in company: It can even be played by correspondence."

Newton dealt largely in books at least a hundred years old. Beginners interested in less exotic tomes should try local thrift shops and old-book stores. Books in these places are usually laid out, if at all, on large trestle tables or metal shelving; some are still in the cartons in which they arrived. Books with dust jackets in good condition are worth more than those with- (continued on page 154)



(continued from page 152) out. First editions of once unknown authors can be especially valuable, as can the works of the recently deceased. Former public-library books are, generally speaking, worth little.

I usually start by examining the shelves as far above and below eye level as possible. This is where precious items are apt to be overlooked. Then I go through cartons. I once found a first-edition *Great Gatsby* and a *Paterson*, by William Carlos Williams, in a carton of books left outside a Salvation Army shelter in Syracuse, New York. A dealer friend who claims he's never made a killing off old books nevertheless found a first edition of Ernest Hemingway's first novel, *The Torrents of Spring*, in an outdoor bin in York, Pennsylvania. He purchased it for 10 cents and sold it shortly thereafter, thirty-five years ago, for \$65.

Many of the book collectors I've run into are interested in anything but literature; they opt for the history of aviation or baseball, or *Dave Dawson With the R.A.F.* or *Bomba the Jungle Boy*. Those who care for literature, especially what we call "modern firsts," are a very special breed. They are charting for themselves the very roots of the modern sensibility. Joyce is important to them, but so are Harriet Monroe, Gertrude Stein and Wyndham Lewis, among many others.

When looking for firsts, remember that different publishers have had different methods of indicating first edition on the back of

the title page: by writing "first," or "1," or "987654321" with no numerals excised (a fifth edition would be marked 98765), or by indicating nothing, as though they did not expect a second edition to happen in their lifetime. Knowledge of contemporary literature helps. I found a New Directions edition including Tennessee Williams's poems in a junk shop in St. James, New York, published in 1944, when Williams was just beginning his career. I knew it wasn't likely he'd published many books of poems before this, and for 25 cents I had an item I could treasure, or trade off to a dealer for approximately \$100 worth of something else.

I trade or sell my books for two reasons: Either there's something I want and can't afford to get by any other means, or I need to tide myself over during a long and financially unproductive period of writing. My book-collecting balance sheets probably read just about even—I've bought so much more than I've sold, and I'm greedy when it comes to holding on to cherished items. Some of the poets and prose writers in the thousand or so books in my collection will, I hope, have a life beyond mine: If my heirs are not so foolish as to offer them to the Salvation Army, they may realize a substantial sum from another collector or possibly from a university library. My books may be the only thing I will be able to leave to my children.

As I've become more involved with my collections, I've come to know other collec-

tors who have become friends. There's so much to talk about: the books you have and the books that got away. Collecting has also tempered my traditional New York snobbery about books. The area of eastern Long Island where I live varies from upper- to working-class, and I have discovered, to my surprise, that the rarest of tastes do not necessarily occupy the grandest of homes. In a sleazy Portuguese charity bazaar in Farmingville, I recently found a mint copy of the Anglo-Irish writer Elizabeth Bowen's first novel, *The Hotel*, and an anthology of modern poems edited in 1935 by Harriet Monroe and Morton Dauwen Zabel. I bought a "first" translation of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in Lake Ronkonkoma and an edition of Daniel Fuchs's *Summer in Williamsburg* in Huntington Station.

I have also found so many copies of my own books at less than collectors' prices that I've canceled all my back orders. The pleasure is not exclusively literary; it is also going through carton after carton of woebegone and dated dreck and being stopped by a familiar title, or by an odd coincidence of elegant format with puerile content. It is amusing oneself with kitsch and double kitsch, the sudden slitherings of nostalgia, the horror, the poignancy, the comic delight one takes in all the books that failed and deserved to fail. And down there in the cartons is sometimes the rare pleasure of discovering new and superb authors, as yet unknown.

B O O K S

I found Saul Bellow's first book, *Dangling Man*, in a Laundromat outside Langley, Virginia, and John Updike's *The Poor House Fair* at a Hadassah garage sale in Great Neck. I found some early poems by the curmudgeonly Yvor Winters in a bin at Sanborn's Drug Store in Mexico City.

Book collecting is also something I can do when I'm not writing, since it requires little more than desire and curiosity. Actually, very few collectors of any consequence have been writers. I think that the appetite to have this or that conflicts with the generosity of the true poet, the desire to give of oneself to others. When I am writing well, I don't collect at all. When I'm not writing, the books I collect are no real comfort to me; going after them, though, tends to keep me sober and a bit less testy toward those around me.

"Have not the wisest of men in all ages," observed Tristram Shandy, "had their hobbyhorses, their running horses, their coins and their cockleshells, their drums and their trumpets, their fiddles, their pallets, their maggots and their butterflies—and so long as a man rides his hobbyhorse peaceably and quietly along the King's highway, and neither compels you or me to get up behind him—pray, Sir, what have either you or I to do with it?"

Here is a current list of books I'd very much like to find along the King's highway for my library:

- *The Helmsman*, by J. V. Cunningham (Colt Press, San Francisco, 1942). An elegant first book by the great American scholar and wit, whose poetry is often tender but sometimes so scurrilous that he uses initials in order, I suspect, to avoid litigation.
- *The Whale*, by Herman Melville (Richard Bentley, London, 1851). The English edition of our greatest novel and a smaller printing than the later American one, some of which was burned up in a fire. A copy today is worth as much as a Porsche 911.
- *A Season at Coole*, by Michael Stephens (Dutton, New York, 1972). This first novel, scarcely promoted on publication, is a modern comic masterpiece of Irish family life.
- *18 Poems*, by Dylan Thomas (the Sunday Referee and the Parton Bookshop, 1934, one of 250). I'll take one unsigned, for less than \$1,500—preferably a good deal less. The last price I saw quoted was \$2,500.
- *The Sky Changes*, by Gilbert Sorrentino (Hill and Wang, New York, 1966). The author's first novel, about a mismatched couple destined for divorce, is finally being reprinted this spring by North Point Press.
- *Fighting Terms*, by Thom Gunn (Hawk's Well Press, New York, paper wrappers, 1958). A former wife, or mistress, I can't be sure which, sold my inscribed copy by one of our greatest modern poets to a dealer after we'd split up. Inscribed, it should be worth about \$100. ■

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