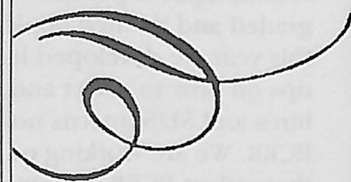


## ON LOVING THE BOOK: CONNOISSEURSHIP AND THE ARCHIVIST

by William F. Meehan II



In *Uncatalogued*, the second installment of her mysteries for booklovers, Julie Kaewert (2002) takes her protagonist, British publisher and book collector Alex Plumtree, to supper at the home of his schoolboy friend Martyn Blakely, who is the newly appointed vicar of the local church. Blakely's invitation is motivated by practicality more than anything else: he needs help moving several piles of books stored and forgotten in the attic, where he will set up his office. Within moments of entering the a-framed room atop the house, Plumtree discovers a large volume bound in a style he identifies as thirteenth century with the words "Parish Book / Christ Church Cheneys" stamped in gold leaf on the cover. It is, to their joyful amazement, the record book of Blakely's new parish, to which his and Plumtree's families have belonged for several generations. Plumtree, awed by the book's leather cover, medieval binding, and vellum leaves, utters, "Wow" (p. 115). Blakely removes his sweater and prepares a "little nest" in which to place the book and protect it from the dust on the floor. He "delicately" and "reverently" turns the pages, where the listings date to 1340, and allows, "Lovely, isn't it?" (p. 116).

Connoisseurship is a quality usually associated with the special collections librarian rather than the archivist. After all, special collections concerns the care of rare books and manuscripts considered treasures, while the archives involve the organization and management of material consisting of records. The items in the archives, however, share an essential characteristic with the holdings in special collections: the preservation of cultural heritage, where the past comes alive, where to touch a rare book in special collections or a purchase order or memo in archives is to touch history. But the idea of connoisseurship, of taste, is associated with special collections and not the archive, I suggest, because of the books. Handling rare books lends an intellectual turn of mind to the activity and imbues the hallowed space with an aura of esoteric scholarship. Talking about a rare book, moreover, involves subtle judgment of condition, importance, binding, provenance, paper, title page, printing and publishing history, and rarity. This is what distinguishes the work

and the worker in special collections. It springs from a love of books that the archivist, too, can experience.

I'm referring to more than the reader who loves literature: I am referring to the lover of the book as an artifact, as an object with tangible properties. The content between the covers no doubt gives a book its importance. Glancing across the spines of books in the fiction section of a library stirs thoughts of intriguing plots, notable characters, and memorable dialogue. It is in this meaning that the power of a book is known; for sure, a novel's revelation of the enduring human condition can change a reader's life. That is what good literature does. That's why these books are grouped under the heading "great" and continue to fill course syllabi. But librarian Lawrence C. Wroth (1994) explains,

To love the contents of a book and to know and care nothing about the volume itself, to love the treasure and to be unmindful of the earthen vessel that loyally holds and preserves it, is to be only half a lover, deaf to a whole series of notes in the gamut of emotion. The book-lover, more richly endowed, broods over the hand that fashioned the volume he reads ... [and] Because of this quality of sympathy there comes to him a greater abundance of enjoyment, and he is able to smile when the half-lover says harsh things about his doddering interest in the outsides of books... (pp. xvii-xviii)

The lover of books, that is, enjoys the content as well as the object. The lover of a book pulls a title down from the shelf and sits quietly with it to marvel softly at its physical properties, which are as intellectually fulfilling as literary quality is to the lover of literature. Holding a book can summon a trusty sensation of comfort and awe, for there is a certain reassuring feel to some books that is as unforgettable as a winning novel's protagonist. Cliff Janeway, the fictional cop cum rare book dealer in the bibliomystery novels of real-life antiquarian book dealer John Dunning, knows that "Sometimes all it takes is the touch of a book, or the look on a woman's face, to get a man's heart going again" (Dunning, 2004, p. 127). Whereas a great book elicits insight into timeless verities of the human

condition, observing a book considered grand can evoke responses similar to beholding fine art: it leaves one speechless, or nearly. Think of Alex Plumtree. And such beautiful objects, John Keats lets us know, bring endless pleasure.

But beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so the feeling that develops with connoisseurship is important. What exactly is connoisseurship? It is the talent, acquired from taste and honed by experience, to distinguish relative quality. It derives from the French "to know," especially with art and matters of taste. In his *Taste and Technique in Book Collecting* (1970), the famed British bookman John Carter provides the long-standing reliable definition: "All it means is the ability to distinguish good from bad, the significant from the commonplace, in the same kind, with some concomitant satisfaction in the exercise of that ability" (p. 8). To discern, "with preference for the best and experience as [a] guide" (Carter, 1970, p. 9), a single-malt imported scotch whiskey from an ordinary American blend, or a first-state *Ulysses* printed on Dutch paper and signed by Joyce from a second state on an inferior French paper and not signed, is far from snootiness. Nor is the refinement of taste, in the considered opinion of R.W. Chapman (1950), "the release of a freakish or morbid curiosity" (p. 16). Instead, writes Chapman, this temperament "has its roots in the historical imagination [which] serves in its turn to sharpen, in the collector's mind and heart, his Sense of the Past" (p. 16). Carter (1965) believes that a book might appeal to the eye, intellect, or imagination, but the constant is connoisseurship.

Cultivating the ability to make a critical judgment informed by the love of books does not require deep pockets. On the very high end, of course, in the world of luxurious botanical and bird color-plate books, hundreds of thousands of dollars are needed, although prices pale in comparison to the art world. But it can be done in the book world for peanuts or its equivalent: the archivist's wage. Organized by a central idea, W. W. Pollard (1911) argues, "Cheap books may yield just as good sport to the collector as expensive ones" (p. 223). Bibliophile and author Nick Basbanes says, "You collect what you can afford. The beauty of books is that you can collect at any conceivable level" (Meehan, 2006, p. 50). Basbanes, who has started book collecting contests on college campuses around the country, adds that, while the students who participate in the competitions operate with small budgets, they learn to make discriminating decisions: "I'm much more impressed by the person who spends next to nothing and rescues something, defines something that nobody else thinks has any value" (Meehan, p. 50).

This is what Lester J. Capon (1976), a past president of the Society of American Archivists, is getting at when he frowns on archivists who "wait for the manu-

scripts to fall into their laps, never looking beyond their duties as 'caretakers'" (p. 429) and urges they go "in new directions to collect sources hitherto unappreciated, whether old or recent" (p. 429). Books, moreover, do not have to fall under the indescribable and misunderstood label "rare." "By the term 'rare book,'" writes legendary librarian Lawrence Clark Powell (1939), "I mean something rather special; some quality of age, or scarcity, or research significance, or beauty, or association, that sets a book apart from its fellows" (p. 98). Mixed with interest, imagination and motivation, connoisseurship, then, is a knack that ultimately depends on and derives from three questions: Does the book fit the unifying theme of the collection? Does it meet the criteria of condition? Is it affordable?

The librarian and the collector, it is obvious, have similar temperaments, but they fashion a symbiotic relationship with another lover of books: the antiquarian bookseller. The third member of the trinity in biblio-adventures is a curious blending of professor and entrepreneur. They are rare birds who sing the praises of books, in all their endless variety. Discloses Heribert Tenschert, a former professor of Romance languages:

When I get offered a book, I see it, I feel it, I browse through it. I smell it. I get in touch with it. ...What I shamelessly believe is that you have to fall in love with the book first. It is physical as well as emotional. You have to fall in love with the book, and then you have to develop this passion into a lasting love. (Basbanes, 2001, p. 270).

Noted Parisian bookseller Pierre Berès follows a similar approach to a volume: "You have to sleep with the book, to live with the book. You must handle the book, you must not be afraid to have intimate contact with the book" (Basbanes, p. 264).

Appreciating this sensation involves what author Richard C. Altick (1987) in *The Scholar Adventurers* calls "[a] devotion to books." Writes Altick:

Such devotion extends not merely to their content but to the sheer physical sensations of handling them, taking pleasure in their binding and typography and paper. There is a certain temperament, evident to a degree, probably, in every reader of this book, to which the dry odor of the stacks of a large library is heady perfume. (p. 13-14)

Alex Plumtree understands it, when he acknowledges the "smell of history" (Kaewert, 2002, p. 33) that adds to his enjoyment of Samuel Pepys's copy of Newton's *Principia* and when he senses the "subtle aroma of the books" (Kaewert, p. 73) in the stacks at Rauman Rare Books Library at Dartmouth College. And our biblio-detective hero on the front range of the Rockies knows how it can carry him on a magic carpet

to cloud nine. After coming across, in a bookshop, a pile of rare and scarce copies of Ayn Rand's three novels in "near perfect" condition and worth several thousands of dollars on the market, Cliff Janeway "sat [in his car] fondling the merchandise, lost in that rapture that comes too seldom these days, even in the book business" (Dunning, 1996, p. 122).

Not all archivists will be so fortunate to stumble upon such a treasure as did Alex Plumtree in the attic at the Parish Church or to come across a "find" in a book shop, but fostering connoisseurship through a greater appreciation for the book increases the likelihood that archivists will be affected by the material in their collections: an old and historic record, that is, can make quite an impression on the archivist who understands the allure of an artifact. Archival material might not be rare in the same way that any Shakespeare Folio is rare, but it is genuine and often one of a kind, a piece of cultural, historical, or literary heritage. "The outstanding feature of the Archive," writes Hilary Jenkinson (1944), "is that it is by its nature unique, representing some measure of knowledge which does not exist in quite the same form anywhere" (p. 356). A range of ephemera useful to the study of printing and advertising, old business, municipal, and corporate records, letters and frequently literary manuscripts and notes—all turn the archive into more than a repository, particularly when the archivist cultivates connoisseurship that begins by becoming a lover of the book—a bibliophile, with an emphasis on -phile (Carter, 1970).

Archivists sympathetic with the sensation a book's physical properties can awaken, might begin to view their holdings more as a fine collection of unique material with appealing tangible features. The consequence will bear directly on an archivist's daily responsibilities, as well as on our fine profession. And if there is any dithering or doubt, a snippet of a conversation between Janeway and rare book collector Rita McKinley, who appreciates the connoisseurship she spots in the former cop, might persuade:

McKinley: You have very good taste.... I guess it proves that a bookman can come from anywhere. Even a librarian has a chance.

Janeway: You don't like librarians?

McKinley: I used to be one. They're the world's worst enemies of good books. Other than that, they're fine people. (Dunning, 2001, p. 205)

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