

Bought for a dollar, sold for a dime

IN AN ASIDE in a *Times Literary Supplement* review last fall, James Ferguson noted that “the fun has gone out of book collecting.” Any book collector can no doubt marshal justification for this observation, but it is the cohort of boomer collectors (myself included) who have fuelled the modern first editions market over the past 40 years who would be most vocal in support of Ferguson’s lament.

With family members repeatedly stating, “We don’t want to have to deal with all these books when you die,” there is an emerging understanding that it may not be easy to dispose of our collections. The harsh reality is that the clock is ticking, and there is a growing realization that many of us have been, in the words of artist Chuck Close in the delightful documentary film on contemporary art collecting, *Herb & Dorothy*, “chasing the same stuff . . . collecting from the same list.”¹

It is common when collectors are scanning the shelves of modern firsts at booksellers to hear “I’ve got that,” or “My copy is in better condition.” Prescient book dealers such as Vancouver’s Bill Hoffer recognized as early as the 1980s that the modern firsts “bubble” was unsustainable given both the vagaries of aesthetic judgment and the underlying reality that so-called rarities are, in most cases, not that rare in absolute terms.

The challenges of dealing with the results of a life of book collecting are not limited to contemporary fiction, of course. As a case in point, see James Wood’s essay “Shelf Life: Packing Up My Father-in-Law’s Library.”² Wood describes dealing with a fine library of over 4,000 volumes of history, primarily on the Middle East, at a rural homestead near Kingston, Ontario, following the death of his father-in-law. In considering the collection, Wood has insights on the motivations of the collector that certainly ring true for me:

As he got older and busier, he acquired far more than he could read. . . . The acquisition of a book signaled not just the potential

acquisition of knowledge but also something like the property rights to a piece of ground: the knowledge became a visitable place.

And:

Libraries are always paradoxical: they are as personal as the collector, and at the same time are an ideal statement of knowledge that is impersonal, because it is universal, abstract, and so much larger than an individual life.

Wood’s attempts to place the library are recounted in painful detail: “It soon became apparent that no one really wants hundreds or thousands of old books.” Both libraries and book dealers were interested in “perhaps a hundred” volumes. One dealer told Wood that the number of second-hand bookshops in Kingston had gone from 12 to four, and the ones who had space didn’t have any money and the ones with money didn’t have any space.

Wood even offered the collection to the Slave Lake Public Library, which had been destroyed by fire, only to be told that only books two years old or less would be accepted. Inevitably “the library was suffering a death by a thousand cuts,” as the more interesting and valuable volumes were taken and the collection’s integrity, along with the motivations and the underlying vision of the collector, eroded.

While each will be unique in its own way, collections of modern firsts tend to be more general in focus, with more common elements, than the collection facing Wood. Just as collectors from previous generations focused on the writers who captured the *Zeitgeist* of their time and generated critical buzz (John Galsworthy, anyone?), boomer collectors are likely to own some ubiquitous contemporary authors. For fiction, think Martin Amis, Margaret Atwood, John Banville, Julian Barnes, Peter Carey, J.M. Coetzee, Richard Ford, Cormac McCarthy, Ian McEwan, Rohinton Mistry, Alice Munro, Haruki Murakami, Michael Ondaatje, Salman Rushdie, Carol Shields, Colum Toibin, David Foster Wallace . . . Such collections, which certainly will have wonderful individual volumes, will also contain numerous books that are readily available. What is the

collector, or the collector's family in the case of procrastination or untimely death, to do?

George Geraghty, a Vancouver-area collector of modern firsts, may have an answer. Geraghty has started an online bookselling enterprise to try to address this conundrum: Book Collector's Books (BCB), www.bookcollectorsbooks.com. Geraghty aims to provide book collectors with a venue to dispose of both high-quality collections and individual volumes, addressing the issues surrounding the dispersal of collectible books, and to put books "into the hands of people who will enjoy [them] as much as I have."³ Geraghty envisions a site that will include a wide variety of volumes distinguished by both the quality of the listings (a minimum price of \$100 per entry has been set) and the rigour brought to the catalogue listing (each listing will include a detailed description and multiple photographs of the volume). Listings are free and a commission is charged on sales. The listing requirements are explained on the site. The challenge BCB faces will be to carve out a credible presence in the competitive and often unreliable

world of online bookselling and attract buyers and sellers of high-end books of all kinds.

BCB's site is live and still very much under construction, but Geraghty welcomes inquiries at info@bookcollectorsbooks.com if any *Amphora* readers would like more information. I wish Book Collector's Books every success. We boomer collectors are going to need all the help we can get handing off our collections to a new generation.

- 1 *Herb & Dorothy*, DVD, directed by Megumi Sasaki (New York: Arthouse Films, 2009).
- 2 James Wood, "Shelf Life: Packing Up My Father-in-Law's Library," *The New Yorker*, November 7, 2011, 40–43.
- 3 Full disclosure: Geraghty has invited me to list books from my collection on BCB, which I intend to do—whenever I can find the time, that is.

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~ Paul Whitney is a library consultant and former City Librarian at the Vancouver Public Library.

