

A Voyeur in Seattle



THE LENGTHY LIST of exhibitors at the annual Seattle Antiquarian Book Fair this year struck me, a collector “in training,” as almost overwhelming. The fair’s website announced that “91 Book Dealers from 16 States, Canada and England” were registered to exhibit October 12–13—a weekend that coincided, conveniently, with Canadian Thanksgiving.

What strategy could I use to tackle that many dealers’ booths? I wondered. Noting which dealers listed ephemera and “books on books,” I savoured such fertile business names as the Kelmscott Bookshop (MD), Asian Steppes Antiquarian Books (CA), and White Fox Rare Books and Antiques (VT).

The Seattle Center Exhibition Hall was easy to locate and a well-appointed venue for what’s billed as “the Premier Pacific Northwest Rare Book Event” (no apologies there to the Vancouver Book Fair just a couple of weeks earlier). The hall was neither a barnlike facility like St. Lawrence Market in Toronto, where I once attended a paper collectibles show, nor the high school cafeteria of the Litchfield Book Fair described by Lawrence and Nancy Goldstone in *Slightly Chipped*, their follow-up book to *Used and Rare*. (This Connecticut couple, also novelists, entertain readers with tales of their book-collecting excursions.)

After making the trip south from Vancouver, I was buoyed by the venue’s cushy carpets, the lively buzz of book talk, along with the concession stand and small eating area off to one side. Ah yes, strategy. To be honest, I really just wandered—a voyeur in a hall of delights—stopping to look at what caught my eye. Since modern firsts are not

my thing, I paid them scant attention and spent a pleasant afternoon perusing shelves of older non-fiction, leafing through bins of ephemera, and chatting to the mostly avuncular booksellers.

At Back of Beyond Books (UT), specializing in regional and natural history titles of the Colorado Plateau, I learned that the store’s name derives from one of author Edward Abbey’s most well-known fiction titles, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*—a copy of which was prominently displayed in the glass showcase. The novel’s lead character, Seldom Seen Smith, was an outfitter who named his company—and his hideout—“Back of Beyond.”

In another aisle, at Gregor Rare Books (Langley, WA), I spoke to David Gregor about his singular category “Paris in the 1920s.” Besides operating a bookshop, Gregor is a published author and teaches seminars on strategic book-selling and book collecting “for fun and profit.” Another Langley bookseller, Priscilla Anne Lowry, was also at the fair: Lowry-James Rare Prints & Books specializes in the works of John James Audubon and other natural history artists.

To freshen an old saying, sometimes you have to leave home to find...booksellers in your backyard. That’s how I felt upon encountering Voyager Press Rare Books & Manuscripts, of West Vancouver. Bernhard Lauser’s colour catalogue listed intriguing items including an unpublished treatise on French Indochina (1931), an archive of Roman excavations in Wales (1940–65), and U.S. naval documents about the first submarine lost at sea (1915).

In addition to Voyager Press, many other sellers featured books on travel and exploration.



And dealers such as Seattle’s own SeaOcean Book Berth and the Ten Pound Island Book Company (MA) covered any and all maritime subjects.

According to organizer Louis Collins, who runs an eponymous bookshop in Seattle, the

fair attracted “the normal total of visitors”—just under 1,500. When I asked him by e-mail about any noteworthy transactions, he responded:

“One pretty interesting item I know sold was a limited signed Salvador Dali *Alice in Wonderland*—one of 250cc—priced at \$16,000.”

In this sea of fine books, no doubt there were many more notable sales. My own purchases were minor by comparison but treasures nonetheless. They included a press pass and souvenir ticket to the Golden Gate Bridge Pedestrian Day (1937) and a tourist brochure for Victoria (“Follow the Birds”), also circa 1930s, both well illustrated.

I couldn’t agree more with Erica Hayes, who blogged about the fair on Rubber Ducky Copywriter: for one who loves rare books and other old paper, attending the Seattle fair was “a visit to paradise.” Or, in the words of sci-fi and fantasy writer Rosemary Jones, “It’s a bit like being let into Ali Baba’s cave.” Definitely worth the trip. (All photos courtesy of Ed Smith.)



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Louis Collins (middle) with book fair attendees.

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 ~ Naomi Pauls is a non-fiction book editor based in Vancouver, B.C., and has been associate editor of *Amphora* since 2005.