

# WISE TO THE FORGER'S TRICKS

DETECTING BOGUS SIGNATURES AND INSCRIPTIONS

IN COLLECTABLE BOOKS

*Guy Robertson*

**W**ARNING: The first edition that you were about to buy from a local bookseller contains a phony signature. Like most attempts at forgery, it is clumsy and obvious to anyone familiar with the author's genuine handwriting.

Look closely at the ink and the nib width. The forger has used a ball-point pen to fake Charles Dickens's handwriting. Dickens did not live in the Age of Bic, nor was he familiar with the style of handwriting taught in North American elementary schools during the 1950s. But the bookseller has accepted that signature as genuine, and wants twice the usual price for the book. You express misgivings about the signature's authenticity. The bookseller swears that it is Dickens's. Not wanting to spoil your relationship with him, you politely refuse the book and change the subject.

A month later you spot an entry for the book in another bookseller's catalogue. The price is even higher than before. The description mentions "a superb signature on the flyleaf". Curious, you telephone the bookseller and confirm your suspicions. You also learn that she has just sold the book to the special collections department of a university library. Evidently the librarian in charge of the purchase is a Victorian scholar, and thrilled to obtain a signed Dickens for his collection.

Of course a knowledge of Dickens's characters and syntax does not translate into expertise regarding his handwriting. Hence many sophisticated booksellers and buyers fall for forged signatures and inscriptions. If the forgery is exposed, the matter is often hushed up. In some cases, the owner will continue to treat the book as if the author's pen had actually graced it. The truth is sometimes too embarrassing to acknowledge.

Forgery is probably as old as pictographic writing. It took only one crooked scribe to understand the advantages of faking a sign or seal on a clay tablet or papyrus; thereafter the crime spread wherever literate cultures flourished. Most forgeries occur during financial transactions—on wills, property titles, and correspondence related to trades and other deals. Occasionally the media report a spectacular forgery in the art market, a bogus Rembrandt or Rubens, or a piece of sculpture from a suspicious workshop. Literary forgeries hit the headlines less frequently.

Reports of phony signatures on flyleaves appear rarely, hidden away in obscure collectors' newsletters and journals. It is reasonable to assume that literary signature forgery is an unpopular topic among those who derive pleasure and income from collectable books.

Over the past five years, however, as stock markets fall and investors look desperately for safe investments, one hears more about suspected frauds on bookshop shelves. Criminals have discovered that they can buy an early edition of Robert Frost or Wallace Stevens for under \$50, then with less than an hour's research in the local public library, they can scribble a passable signature on the flyleaf and title page and sell the book for \$500. The buyer of such an item could be a private collector, a bookseller or a library. Investors plunge into the shark pool of eBay and surface with the crudest attempts at signature fraud.

Recently in Toronto, a bond salesman discovered forty volumes of Beat poetry for sale on eBay. Each was signed on the title page by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, or Allen Ginsberg, or Gregory Corso. A closer examination of the signatures reveals that the forger made no attempt to copy the poets' genuine signatures. In fact, the signatures are clearly written by the same hand, with no difference in vowel shapes, loops or spacing between letters. The same ink appears on every title page, evidently from the same pen. The salesman was delighted to pay just over \$15,000 for the collection. The real value, based on the availability and condition of each volume, was under \$500. As in other investment strategies, bonds would appear to be the safer investment, although the salesman suggests that some day his Beat books could appreciate in value as forgeries. He might be right. Forgery collectors exist, although they usually prefer more deft attempts at signature duplication.

Forgers are especially adept at sending their products across borders. American and British buyers have bought works by Margaret Laurence that she signed years after her death — about which the buyers were unaware. Margaret Atwood remains above ground, and according to European dealers she spends much of her time scribbling inscriptions to men identified only as Helmut, Jean-Claude and Franz. Either she is terribly fond of Franz, and has inscribed dozens of copies of *The Blind*

*Assassin* to him, or she knows and respects multiple Franzes and wants them all to own her Booker-winner. The mystery might never be solved, even by Atwood.

Some forgers are highly skilled. In fact, librarians and booksellers who know how to detect a bogus signature or inscription admit that many of the better forgeries will never be brought to light. An artful forger's work is convincing not only because of the amount of time he has dedicated to mastering an author's signature style, but also because he has succeeded in imitating that author's psychodynamics. Essentially, the forger must develop an ability to mimic the mechanics of jotting down the author's signature and, at a deeper level, imitate and implement the author's mental state as it would be during the act of holding a pen and pressing it onto paper. Without the right psychodynamics, an act of forgery will not deceive many experts, or even many knowledgeable amateurs.

Sadly, however, there are too many prospective buyers for what are sometimes called "bad signings" or "fraud copies", no matter how patently false they are. Booksellers wince when they describe a collector's reaction to being told that a prized first edition of Henry James or Edith Wharton has been inscribed with a felt pen less than a year ago. Sometimes the collector refuses to accept the bookseller's verdict. The collector might then visit a rare book librarian and ask for signature authentication. Even with a sample of James's or Wharton's real signature in front of him, the collector might still refuse to admit the truth. But the book might appear shortly thereafter on eBay, or on a bookseller's web site, or at an auction, and the fraud copy circulates until it finds a more permanent place on a shelf in a library or collector's study.

By the way, you'd be wise to examine your other signed Dickens editions. Do you know for sure who held the pen that signed those flyleaves? What to look for before you buy the book:

- Compare the author's handwriting on the title page or flyleaf to an authentic sample, if available. A person's handwriting—and especially his or her signature—changes over time. Use a sample that comes from approximately the same period of the author's life as the signature or inscription in question.

- Look for signs of hesitation within particular words. If a forger has not developed the appropriate psychodynamics, you will find breaks between letters, and sometimes breaks within individual letters—evidence that the forger has lifted the pen in an attempt to copy a letter’s correct shape.
  - Beware of anachronisms. Victorian authors did not use felt pens. John Updike does not use a quill, and does not produce copperplate at book launches. Nor did Hemingway use a purple rollerball.
  - Beware of inappropriate locutions. Tennyson would never inscribe “This one’s for Ed” in a copy of *In Memoriam* intended for Edward Fitzgerald.
  - If it seems too good to be true, it’s probably bogus. Remember the Hitler diaries.
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