

*Collections abandoned*

I SELF-IDENTIFY AS A COLLECTOR of modern firsts, that is, contemporary fiction. Little of my collection was published prior to the 1960s, and my substantive author collections typically represent writers who achieved prominence in the 1970s and '80s. The collection is deployed in three alphabetic sequences in different areas of the house. Capacity limitations impose a hierarchical approach: the good stuff upstairs, the interesting stuff on the west side of the basement and the "do I really need this?" stuff on the east side of the basement.

The movement of an author's works among the three areas is dictated by space constraints coupled with new acquisitions levels. The movement of a collection can be up or down as an author makes a better impression with a new work or fades in interest or simply with the passing of time. In this column I reflect on collections that leave the house entirely (and my wife wishes to chime in at this point to make it clear that this doesn't happen with nearly enough frequency).

Collecting enthusiasm wanes for a variety of reasons. These include a growing disenchantment with the work itself or with an author's development and recent output. One American modern firsts collector was legendary among dealers for his rigorous parameter of only collecting living authors. Die and you are out!

Taste changes with age. I followed a stereotypical pattern (for male readers at least), reading and collecting science fiction (and some fantasy) early on. (Since my mid-30s, with very few exceptions, I have found it increasingly difficult to read science fiction and impossible to read fantasy.) Within these genres, my early collecting efforts had a bias towards the experimental and literary. J.G. Ballard, Angela Carter and Thomas Disch were three authors (all now deceased) who continue to occupy significant shelf space in the collection and (in the case of Ballard and Carter at least) have widespread acceptance as important writers and visionaries. Their work has withstood the test of time and changing preferences.

Others did not. A collection of Philip José Farmer is long gone. Assembling it was both fun and a learning experience that ranged

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from engaging with the arcane worlds of early pulp magazines to LA porn paperbacks and a publishing bibliography. In the end, though, the credibility Farmer deserved, primarily for introducing sexuality into the hermetic world of sci-fi, was outweighed by the quantity of lesser work occupying shelf space. Finally I acted on the opportunity to use the collection to acquire a small number of desired titles (and free up much-needed space).

In the context of Farmer, the realization that a collection will be forever incomplete becomes a nagging irritant sometimes best addressed by surgery. My collection lacked a key book, a very limited hardcover edition of a U.S. mass-market paperback. Neither pretty nor textually significant, all it had to offer was extreme scarcity. Late in my Farmer phase, I was offered a fine copy for (if memory serves) US\$900, and this was back when the exchange rate mattered. I declined and the dealer observed, "Well, I guess that means you are not collecting him any more then." He was right, as it turned out, although I denied it at the time.

It is off-putting when a publisher or author decides to cash in on collecting enthusiasm by producing manufactured rarities: editions that



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exist for no other purpose than to separate collectors from their money. This is by no means a new phenomenon, but the cost implications prompt continuous reappraisal of commitment to an author. Here is a fairly recent example from one of my authors, Julian Barnes. London Review Bookshop Limited Editions issued a signed limited first edition of *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* (2008) in a total of 125 copies, 100 quarter bound in leather with patterned boards and a cloth slipcase at £170 and 25 in full leather and a solander box at £290. The sheets for these editions were from the Cape trade edition, with a separate limitation leaf inserted. These are in fact handsome productions, lovingly produced, but they do test a collector's will, especially when it is not uncommon to face four or five such productions for collected authors in a year.

Not all limited editions of new trade titles are as pleasing as the Barnes, and this can lead to forgoing a collection to avoid supporting exploitative publishing practices. I bailed on collecting Charles Bukowski in reaction to how his work was strip-mined by his publisher, especially after his death. He was and is more important as a persona than as a poet or novelist, and his good work got lost under a deluge of inferior writing. I have never regretted trading my Bukowski for a proof copy of *Under the Volcano*, again opting for quality over quantity.

It is quixotic to think that anyone can comprehensively identify contemporary work that will endure. A Nobel, Booker or Pulitzer Prize is no guarantee of acceptance by future generations. Who of the still-active and high-profile boomer-generation British writers Martin Amis, Julian Barnes and Ian McEwan is likely to be read and valued 50 years from now? I actively collect and read all three. Arguably Amis has both had the roughest critical ride in the past decade and been most focused on issues of current interest. But then his new novel, *The Pregnant Widow*, is being hyped as a return to form, and I for one am pulling for him to deliver a great novel. As of now, I am happy to carry on collecting him and the others, even if I balk at the price of a tempting limited edition every now and then.

~ Paul Whitney is city librarian at the  
Vancouver Public Library.