

BOOK SIGNING: THE VIEW FROM BOTH SIDES OF THE TABLE

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MY LOVE AFFAIR WITH THE WORLD OF BOOKS begins with the fundamental fact that I am an ardent reader. My love of reading, however, has branched out to other areas of the book world: book buying, book collecting, the collecting of signed books, and book selling. In this article I would like to focus on my activities as a collector of signed books.

I began my collection of signed books in one of two ways. I primarily collected modern first editions of Canadian fiction, poetry and drama, as well as modern firsts of British, American and international fiction. I would occasionally come across a signed book in a used or antiquarian bookstore, and I gladly paid the premium to own a signed copy of a first edition. For what bigger thrill is there than to buy a book by a favourite author actually personally signed by that author? Later I started browsing thrift stores to locate copies of books for my collection and there, much to my delight, I would occasionally find an actual signed copy of a book.

Then, however, I was visited by one of those delightful epiphanies that occasionally come to one out of the blue. I asked myself the following question: instead of stumbling across the occasional signed book and then generally paying a premium price for that book, why not buy the books unsigned and then take them to an author's reading and have them signed on the spot? It sounded like a great idea, but was it really so easy? Well 1900 signed books later I can safely report to you that it is in fact a relatively easy and pleasant thing to do.

The first step in pursuing signed books is to purchase first editions in good condition of the books that you collect and would like to have signed. It is better to do this in advance, for if you wait for the day or even the week that the author is reading you will probably end up paying a higher price for a book than if you purchased it well in advance. There are many good places to find books for reasonable prices: remainders at large chain bookstores like Chapters and Book Warehouse; used books at second-hand and antiquarian book sellers; and excellent bargains at local thrift stores like the Salvation Army, Value Village and the SPCA. Avoid books in poor condition, those with ugly remainder marks, and book club editions. Many hundreds of the books I have purchased were collected in anticipation of an author coming to Vancouver some day for a public reading. In my case that means focusing primarily on Canadian writers

since these are the writers who show up in Vancouver most frequently. However, since Vancouver is an international destination, it has also paid me to stock up on a certain number of British, American and international titles as well.

How do I know what readings are scheduled to take place in the Vancouver area? Well when you actually get down to it, the sources of information are rather plentiful. The local newspaper, *The Vancouver Sun*, for example, lists author readings at least twice a week, once in a weekly arts supplement called "Queue" on Thursdays and then again in a weekly book section on Saturdays. An excellent source of information, and of author readings, is the Vancouver Public Library. They produce a monthly brochure of programs for the coming month, and many of these programs feature author readings, poetry, fiction and non-fiction. I have also learned to check local websites of other libraries and bookstores, for example the North Vancouver District Library and Women in Print, a store that sells new books. One of the best venues for hearing authors, though, and for getting books signed, is the literary festival. In the Vancouver area and environs alone we have the Vancouver International Writers Festival, Word on the Street, the North Vancouver Writers Festival, the Victoria Writers Festival, the Jewish Book Fair, and the Sechelt Festival of the Written Arts.

Attending author readings is satisfying in many different ways and I highly recommend them. The first pleasure is in actually hearing the author read his or her own works. For many works there is no better reader than the author. After the reading I can often continue to hear the author's voice when I subsequently read their newly published works.

A second pleasure is in meeting authors after the readings and chatting briefly with them. The vast majority of these meetings are very pleasant indeed. I have only been rebuffed somewhat by a few authors out of the many hundreds of authors I have met. And even those encounters were not that odious. I placed a stack of books in front of one famous Canadian poet whereupon he immediately bellowed out: "I AM NOT SIGNING ALL OF THOSE BOOKS!" I calmly said, "Well why don't you just sign a few?" He replied: "OKAY, BUT I AM NOT SIGNING ALL OF THOSE BOOKS!" After he signed four titles I packed up quickly and then silently slipped away. Another famous Canadian writer, a novelist, looked up at me wryly and quizzically after I placed copies of

his books in front of him for signing and he asked rhetorically: “I’m going to make you a wealthy man, aren’t I?” I chuckled somewhat nervously and deferentially, but then lo and behold he proceeded to sign every book without any further ado.

Of course a third pleasure involves the profit motive. If you check any book on the Advanced Book Exchange (ABE), and list those books in descending order by price, you will invariably find signed first editions and signed advanced reading copies at the very top of the food chain. It is a simple fact — getting the books in your collection signed by the authors of those books adds significantly to the value of your collection!

My encounter with so many authors led me to reflect on what book signing must feel like from the other side of the table. So imagine my delight when I discovered three separate articles written about book signing from the author’s point of view.

The most poignant of these articles was written by talented, young Canadian novelist Russell Smith. It seems that he was lured to an Ontario book fair with the promise that his publisher would be able to sell books directly to the public: “the public would be informed and courted and they would show up in hordes with their chequebooks ready.” The sad truth, however, was that the public stayed away in droves:

“...there was a public, a little one. A few dozen families, I would say, over two days. The little advertising that had been done for the event (I didn’t see any, but I was told there were ads somewhere) billed it largely as a family or children’s event.... I personally sold one book — to an author who was ‘signing’ his own book at another table.”

This leads Smith to this summary observation about author book signings:

“There is nothing more embarrassing, more poignant than an author sitting alone in a mall concourse or an exhibition-space corridor, his pen ready, while the kind of person who spends a Saturday afternoon at a book fair — a person in a motorized wheelchair, usually, with a Canadian flag on an antenna and a stuffed bear on the handlebars and a lot of collector’s buttons on her ski jacket — rumbles up, stares in non-recognition and buzzes away.”

The second article, subtitled “OK, You Wrote a Book, But How Many Times Can You Stand to Write Your Name?” chronicles a problem at

the opposite end of the scale. The article from the *Village Voice* was written by American crime writer Lawrence Block who recounts the trials and tribulations of a book promotion and book signing tour for his 2003 book *The Burglar on the Prowl*. As Block explains the dilemma:

“Writing the book, that was the easy part. Now it was time for the heavy lifting. It was time for me to start signing my name.

Lawrence Block, Lawrence Block, Lawrence Block. Over and over, on book after book. On the title page, in the space the designer was thoughtful enough to provide for that purpose. Again and again and again. Actually, the book signing began before the book went on sale. In February, I drove out to the HarperCollins warehouse in Scranton, where I signed around a thousand copies of *Prowl* for booksellers who’d ordered them. On March 16, I flew out to San Diego. I spent the next five days in Southern California, where I did events at five libraries and six bookstores and more drop-in stock signings than I could possibly remember.”

Block’s experience with *Prowl* subsequently forced him to reflect on the mania for readers to pursue signed copies of their books:

“How the hell did this happen? Not to me, that’s my problem, but to the business in general? When did signed books become such a hot ticket? Over the past decade, collectors have come to regard an unsigned book as. . . incomplete. “I still have it,” you’ll hear someone say, “but it’s not signed.” If the author is still alive, the sentence ends a little differently. “But it’s not signed yet,” the collector will say.”

Block sums up his puzzlement and frustration at the phenomenon of book signing in the following way:

“Why I sometimes wonder, does anybody want a book signed? I have a whole wall of books by friends, and it never occurs to me to ask them to sign them.

My wife, who has an abiding passion for hagiography – we have a surprising number of editions of *Lives of the Saints*, not one of them signed – has her own theory. As she explains it, a book signed by its author is a second-degree relic, not as precious as a finger bone, but on a par with a pair of cast-off sandals. I like the explanation, but how long before the bastards start wanting the damned books signed in blood?”

A possible future for Block is summed up rather nicely in an article entitled “Why I Stopped Signing My Books,” written by American novelist Larry McMurtry in the July/August 2003 issue of *op* magazine. McMurtry actually does continue to sign the occasional book but not to the same extent that he once did in his writing career. The first reason for cutting back was a purely physical one, wear and tear on his right hand:

“I signed my name clearly for more than a quarter century, from the beginning of my career in 1961 until the post-*Lonesome Dove* deluge in 1987 or so. Those last were vexing years; my signature certainly deteriorated, and yet my right hand struggled on until a book tour with my collaborator Diana Ossana for our novel *Zeke and Ned*. We were, I believe, in Oklahoma City when my right hand suddenly had enough. It became a free agent, consenting only to perform a single jerk, producing a mark on the flyleaf that rather resembled a triangle. Since 1997 when this occurred, I’ve been careful not to ask too much of my right hand. It will, if not hurried, produce very decent signatures, perhaps as many as five in a day. Mass signings it won’t do, and if I push it much beyond five or six signatures it’s apt to produce a flash of temperament and start making triangles again.”

The other reason McMurtry gives for now limiting the number of books he signs cuts right to the heart of why authors write and publish books:

“I suspect, now that I’ve had five years in which to think about it, that my right hand was more moral than I and perceived the corruption in contemporary book signing quicker than I did. Until *Lonesome Dove*, the public valued me as a writer. Because of that book — the *Gone with the Wind* of the West — I moved into the sports-hero category. Before *Lonesome Dove*, people came for the books; now they only come for the signature, hustling me as they might hustle a ball player leaving a ball park. But I am not a ball player, and my worst book is a better thing than the best sports card. Or so I believe. I have signed many thousands of books — probably at least 30,000. And the more I think about it, the more wrong it seems. For the signature slowly but steadily slides attention away from the one thing that really deserves it: the book — that is, the creation — itself. The creation may be good or it may be bad, but no signature, legible or otherwise, can increase its meaning one whit. *Basta!*”



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