

# LIBRARY GOLD IN THE GARBAGE

*Guy Robertson*

A BOOK SCOUT WALKS INTO A BAR AND ORDERS A DRINK. Times are tough; the drink is cheap scotch. But lining the walls are shelves crammed with books, a sight to cheer the scout's heart. He looks closely at a row of battered hardcovers. The bartender says that he found them at a local library sale, and that they provide excellent insulation in winter. The librarian sees old almanacs, bound volumes of *National Geographic*, an introduction to applied geophysics, and an item in a maroon cloth binding with black lettering.

The scout orders another scotch. Might he have a look at that maroon binding? Sure. Does the bartender realize what that binding contains? "Well, sir, if the library don't want it, it can't be much. You like it, you can have it. Go ahead, take it with you. The library dumps that kind of junk all the time. Have some pretzels."

Edward Arnold & Co. published E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* in 1924. Forster signed a few copies of the trade edition on the title page. One of those copies found its way to Western Canada, where its owner donated it to a public library. The library already owned several bright copies of *Passage* in the Penguin edition, so that maroon binding ended up in the annual sale. Nobody bought it even for a dollar. Eventually the bartender picked it up for nothing, just before the library's janitor could toss it in the dumpster.

A first trade edition of *Passage*, signed and in good condition, is worth over \$6000. Do libraries dump that kind of junk all the time? No. But it's safe to assume that occasionally they discard items for which book dealers and collectors would pay substantial amounts. Stories abound about gold in the library garbage, accounts of errant disposal that make scholars and special collection managers wince. Did you hear the one about the British public library that unwittingly used a Caxton as a doorstop? Or the college library in California that accidentally sold its Steinbeck collection to a recycler? How about the public branch in B.C. that put its signed special editions of Evelyn Waugh on the sale table? Those copies of *Black Mischief* and *The Loved One* sold for 25 cents each. The same items are available from reputable dealers for over \$3000 per volume.

To sell a rare book for a pittance is no violation of the Criminal Code; nor should librarians suffer censure for making honest mistakes. But the profession must recognize what has been lost in a system of library education that values "Studies in Leadership" and cyberspace navigation

over bibliography and the history of books and publishing. These days, courses in textual criticism and rare book librarianship may sound quaint. Library school professors question the worth of such topics in the Information Age, during which books in their traditional forms are often predicted to disappear.

The fact is, however, that publishers still produce and distribute hardcopy books, and consumers still buy, read and treasure them. At present, public and academic libraries that provide access only to electronic resources are as scarce as paperless offices and unicorns. Library schools would be prudent to offer more courses on bibliography and rare books. Otherwise, among various negative effects, more gold could flow into the discard bin, and bartenders might continue to serve important first editions along with bad booze and pretzels.

What should librarians do currently to ensure that they can identify the valuable books that come their way? First, acknowledge that any library can be the owner or recipient of such items, which can arrive as gifts through the book return slot or in the mail, or in boxes left surreptitiously at the front entrance when the branch is closed.

Ideally the library will employ someone who is knowledgeable about books, or at least has a sense of what might be especially interesting or valuable, even if it is not an appropriate addition to the shelves. This in-house appraiser can run her eye along a set of spines and pick out that special Forster or Waugh. She can spot an early Margaret Laurence by glancing at the dust jacket, and perhaps recognize Robin Blaser's scribbled marginalia in a volume of poems by Robert Duncan. If she doesn't know exactly what she's examining, she knows somebody who does: a rare book librarian with whom she corresponds by e-mail, a local dealer, an archivist who can verify the signatures of Canadian poets, a Professor of English who has edited the manuscripts of various British novelists.

The appraiser will tell you that a book doesn't have to be scarce to be interesting to a collector. Those who consider an author to be important and who collect his works diligently will acquire all of his editions, from the expensive first printing to the humble paperback reprint that appeared on the shelves of Indigo last month. Theoretically every book—no matter how common or tattered—has its potential collector or reader, but it's not the library's responsibility to hunt down the perfect owner for every item that it doesn't need and want to dispose of. Libraries need to

allow collectors and desultory browsers the pleasure of finding tiny treasures of lesser monetary value on the library sale table, but the appraiser should be able to identify books to sell for good money at auction or through a dealer's catalogue.

In the absence of an appraiser, the library can investigate the prices of books through dealers' web sites, and particularly through [abebooks.com](http://abebooks.com), which offers current information on the stocks of more than 12,000 dealers worldwide. Through this site the library can learn the prices of millions of different titles, editions, printings and states. Librarians have depended on [abebooks.com](http://abebooks.com) to locate out-of-print items that are difficult to find; they can also use it to discover dealers' prices for almost any item.

The library needn't immediately sell or dispose of an item that has appeared on its doorstep. Some libraries display interesting donations in imaginative ways. For example, a library in Alberta received a box of old cookbooks, Sears catalogues and children's fiction from the estate of an elderly rancher. None of the books were valuable or in good condition, but the librarian saw an opportunity to develop an eye-catching display that she captioned "Well-Loved: Books from a Rancher's Household". Front and centre was the Family Bible, opened in such a way as to hide the water damage to the binding and to much of the Old Testament. The book appeared to have been used as much for pressing wild flowers as for edification. Then there were cookbooks from the decade before the First World War, full of recipes for huge sides of beef and enormous creamy cakes. The pages were stained with the finest lard available in 1912. The children's titles included adventure titles for boys, a cheap edition of Huck Finn and a collection of animal stories. The Sears catalogues offered women's fashions from almost a century ago, including high-button boots, bonnets, and undergarments to protect the wearer through the coldest winter. These books were worthless to a modern dealer, but displayed as an antique household library, they were priceless.

Some librarians feel uncomfortable about selling donations to dealers. Even if the original owner has signed a release form allowing the library to do what it will with the donation, there's a sense that the library shouldn't make serious money from the sale of a book. This is taking the non-profit ethic too far. Remember that to sell a book for a

high price is to place it—usually—in the hands of a responsible collector who will care for it, restore it if necessary, and eventually sell it to another collector or donate it to a library that can make it available for research purposes. To be a part of a private collection is an essential stage in the life cycle of many books, which collectors rescue from different kinds of doom. Certainly collectors do not act against libraries or threaten public collections. Many famous rare book collections were originally the property of private collectors such as Folger, Huntington and Pierpont Morgan.

And then there's the money. Think of all the new books that the library could buy with the proceeds from the sale of that signed first edition of Forster's *Passage*. As for our lucky friend the barfly, he kept his copy. After all, to read a first edition is always a joy, and by now he's used to the taste of mass-market scotch.

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