



# Charlotte the Bold

*A young collector takes on Dumas and wins. The inaugural winner of a national contest explains how she graduated from Archie comics.*

By Marlene Chan



Two of the musketeers in Alexandre Dumas' book *The Three Musketeers* are named Athos and Porthos. What is the name of the third musketeer?

- a) Cardinal Richelieu
- b) Planchet
- c) D'Artagnan
- d) Aramis

The answer to this million-dollar question almost stumped the hero of the Academy Award-winning film *Slumdog Millionaire*, but Charlotte Ashley would have had no problem getting it right.

The 29-year-old Ashley took first place in the inaugural edition of the National Book Collecting Contest, the brainchild of bookseller, collector and Alcuin Society member John Meier. Sponsored by the Alcuin Society in partnership with the Bibliographical Society of Canada and Antiquarian Booksellers' Association of Canada, the competition is designed to encourage Canadians under the age of 30 to collect books and learn the basic principles of bibliography. Ashley, an environmental studies graduate who writes about books in Canada on her blog [charlotteashley.wordpress.com](http://charlotteashley.wordpress.com) and hopes one day to become a dealer in rare books, took top honours in the contest for her work on Alexandre Dumas *père* and the eloquent essay she prepared detailing how she's gone about developing her collection and where she hopes to take it in the future.

Sitting on the garden terrace at Madeleine's Cherry Pie and Ice Cream, near the corner of Bathurst and Dupont Street in Toronto, Ashley talked to *Amphora* about the approximately 80 books she's acquired since starting her collection 15 years ago, at the age of 14. The collection, containing both English and French editions, includes 37 of the 250 books Dumas is estimated to have published, from travel diaries to romances, a cookbook and plays.

Over the years, Ashley has honed her skill in selecting books for her collection and developed an appreciation for bibliography. Indeed, she admits to being a cataloguer in a small way since the age of seven or eight. She collected Archie comics and organized them in various ways, not realizing that this could be a vocation.

Having obtained a bachelor's degree from the University of Toronto in environmental studies, what she calls her "intellectual interest," Ashley is now working towards a master's degree in Book History at the University of Toronto by first obtaining her second bachelor's degree in Book and Media Studies. Her dream is to become a rare book dealer. She is very much in love with the archaeological aspects that go into determining a book's value. Her passion lies in what she terms the forensics of books.

"There is certainly that aspect of having gorgeous books on the shelf, but I have been always more of an analytically minded person," she said. "Having a book in your hands and having to learn everything you can about that book by looking at the paper and the binding and the typescript ... it's a very analytical kind of approach to books but something I really enjoy."

The book collecting contest garnered Ashley not just recognition for her efforts, but a cash prize of \$2,500. It's money she'll use—no surprise here—to further develop her collection.

One of her budding interests is the literary and graphic novels being produced in Toronto and surrounding municipalities. This new collection has its roots in her reaction to the treatment of cousins Mariko and Jillian Tamaki, authors of *Skim* (Groundwood Books /House of Anansi Press, 2008), a graphic novel shortlisted for the 2008 Governor General's Literary Awards administered by the Canada Council for the Arts. The nomination recognized only Mariko as author for her work on the text, ignoring the



equal contribution of Jillian Tamaki as author of the images that tell the story in pictures.

Ashley objected, and is building a collection that she hopes will demonstrate the importance of graphic novels as literary works in both text and image. She believes, in common with the many graphic novelists who sent an open letter to the Governor General's Literary Awards, "The text of a graphic novel cannot be separated from its illustrations because the words and the pictures together ARE the text."

Ashley's graphic novel collection to date has focused on winners of Canada's annual Doug Wright awards for graphic novels, the output of Montreal publisher Drawn and Quarterly, and works her local retailers felt had merit.

Her keen interest in the solitary pursuit of book collecting has also spilled over and drawn others in, most notably her husband Imshan Poolar, a philosophy specialist at the University of Toronto. Their shared enthusiasm for books began very early in their relationship with a common interest in folk tales, including *The Ballad of Tam Lin*, but with his wife's encouragement, Poolar is now collecting books on magic, or in his words, "things that violate

### *Cash prizes go to three collectors*



*Book collecting contest winners Nassem Hrab, Vanessa Brown & Charlotte Ashley with the Bibliographical Society of Canada's Dr. Carl Spadoni.*

Announced in 2008, the National Book Collecting Contest aims to promote interest in book collecting and bibliography among collectors under the age of 30. Sponsored by the Alcuin Society in partnership with the Bibliographical Society of Canada and Antiquarian Booksellers' Association of Canada, the first competition attracted 33 submissions from across Canada. Three winners were chosen for cash prizes.

Toronto collector Charlotte Ashley received the first-place award of \$2,500 for her work collecting Alexandre Dumas père, discussed in her essay "The Works (and Quirks) of Alexandre Dumas père."

Vanessa Brown of London, Ontario, received the second-place prize of \$1,000 for "The L.M. Montgomery Collection in the Forest City," a discussion of her work collecting Lucy Maud Montgomery.

Nassem Hrab of Toronto, whose collection of comics and graphic novels is detailed in "The Complexities of Ordinary Life: Autobiographical Comics and Graphic Novels," received the third-place award of \$300.

Recipients received their awards during the annual general meeting of the Bibliographical Society of Canada in Toronto at the end of June. The Bibliographical Society of Canada has published the winners' essays online.

A second contest is tentatively scheduled for 2010–2011.



laws of physics.” His collection began with the work of J.R.R. Tolkien (one of the first books in the collection being a leather-bound copy of *Tales of the Perilous Realm*, a birthday present from Charlotte) and now includes a 14th edition of L.W. de Laurence, *The Great Book of Magical Art, Hindu Magic and Indian Occultism* (1939), and others.

Her other interests can’t crowd out Dumas,

however, which Ashley considers a lifelong project, as is any collector’s first love. She can’t forget him any more than a serious Dumas fan could forget the name of that third musketeer—Aramis, in case you’re wondering.

~ Marlene Chan is a contributing editor of *Amphora*. She lives in Montreal.

## The Works (and Quirks) of Alexandre Dumas père

CHARLOTTE ASHLEY explains how she developed an affinity for works by the legendary 19th-century French writer—and what propels her interest—in this essay that topped the National Book Collecting Contest.



It began when I was 14 years old and read *The Three Musketeers* for the first time in my life. I thought it was the best book I had ever read. “I am going to read every word this man has ever written,”

I told myself, not sure at the time what it was I was swearing to do. At that time the only work of Dumas’ of which I was

aware was *Musketeers*. I was sure Dumas must have written at least a few other books, however, and I swore I would own them all. My copy of *The Three Musketeers* comprised two small

blue cloth volumes from J.H. Sears and Company, ancient-looking books to my inexperienced eyes. I imagined a future in which I owned a whole shelf of similar romances, bound in leather or cloth with intricate gilt-tickled spines: my Dumas collection.

Today, I have over 75 books bearing Alexandre Dumas père’s name, covering 37 of his more than 250 works. That his *oeuvre* would be so big was an unexpected surprise, but a welcome one. From the point of view of a young person without much disposable income, but who nevertheless loves nothing more than to spend long hours scouring the shelves, boxes, basements and hiding places of used bookstores, collecting the works of a prolific but popular author like Alexandre Dumas is a perfect project. His works range from the

staggeringly popular and ubiquitously available (*The Three Musketeers*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*) to the completely obscure (*Charles the Bold*) and include plays, short stories, travel diaries, histories, romances, a cookbook and more. The most popular of his works are so widely distributed

and reprinted that they can be easy to find and inexpensive, while his more obscure works are harder to locate but remain relatively inexpensive by virtue of being less popular.

Once the scope of Dumas’ oeuvre had become clear to me, I established some collecting rules. Setting about to collect first editions of all his works in the original French was prohibitively expensive and, in any case, not very interesting to me. I did not want to buy books found and arranged by booksellers, sold to me at the fair price. To me, it is the bookseller who has done the collecting in such cases, and I am doing nothing but buying. I take much greater pleasure in locating the books myself, putting together a hodge-podge little collection of books found one at a time in bookstores all over the world.

The first aim of my Dumas collection was simply to own one copy of everything Dumas ever wrote, regardless of edition or condition.

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Because of this seemingly simple aim, my collection contains several books which might not be considered “collectable” to another book lover. Penguin Classics’ new (2007) edition of *Nutcracker and Mouse King / The Tale of the Nutcracker* is a widely available paperback with no especially collectable features, but it is the only edition of this work that I have ever seen. Similarly, the Librairie Générale Française 1973 pulp edition of *Les Mohicans de Paris* looks better suited to an airport newsstand than a beloved collection, but it is the only copy I have ever encountered. Unremarkable or damaged books are placeholders in my collection. They will serve until I find a more pleasing edition to replace them.

To that end, the second aim of my collection is to own a collectable copy, one in French and one in English, of every work by Alexandre Dumas. What constitutes a collectable copy is really something which suits my fancy. First editions and first translations would be nice, or any other landmark in the history of the publication of the book. But in their absence, nice editions will do. Older cloth-bound editions, well put together and in clean condition, will suffice. My goal when selecting better copies of books to replace placeholder copies is to secure a book which not only looks, aesthetically, pleasing, but which might have a story behind it. My copy of *The Eighth Crusade* published by Hurst & Co. is a good example of such an edition. *The Eighth Crusade* is, in content, the latter part of the romance more commonly published as *The Whites and the Blues* (*Les Blancs et les Bleus*). To the best of my knowledge this text was only published as *The Eighth Crusade* twice, and this Hurst edition is the last such publication, published in the first decade of the twentieth century. So it is not the first English edition, but it will most likely be the *last*, as these chapters are now routinely included in *The Whites and the Blues*.

The third aim of my collection is to own an ideal copy, in English and in French, of each of Dumas’ works. This final step of upgrading my collection would involve collecting those elusive first editions and first translations. This will surely be a lifelong effort. Some more obscure works have had few editions printed and translated over the years and can be generally found for reasonable prices in bookshops. But the important editions of Dumas’ big works—*The Three Musketeers*, *The*

*Count of Monte Cristo*, *Queen Margot* and others – are generally priced in such a way that I don’t hold out a lot of hope of ever owning them. Still, I have collected editions which come close enough that I am proud to own them. My 1846 Bureau de L’echo des Feuilletons edition of *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo* represents the dream to me. This two-volume octavo is not the very first publication of *Monte-Cristo*, but it is the first edition of this text, corrected, revised and with a new epilogue written by Dumas. This edition appeared within a year of *Monte-Cristo*’s first publication, and during Dumas’ lifetime. My copy is horribly dilapidated—badly foxed, dirty, barely bound with loose leaves at both ends; the spine is torn and tattered and the endpaper is stamped by a bookseller. But ugly though it is, it represents the final stage of my collection. I am not likely to ever have the money or the luck to have a clean, well-kept copy of this book, but I do have this copy to remind me what I’m looking for.

This is a collection gathered not just because of my great love of Alexandre Dumas, but out of a love of the form of the book. In pursuit of interesting additions to this collection I have visited bookstores in remote corners of three continents and in order to learn more about my subject—the book—I have visited libraries, private book collections, book fairs and exhibits all over the world. What began as an act of fandom has evolved into a serious interest in all aspects of the art and practice of book collecting. I end this essay with the hope that my interest and involvement is part of a greater community, and that my generation can sustain the pursuit in the years to come. Too often recently I have seen favourite booksellers close up shop or move their businesses online, a move which takes them out of view of budding enthusiasts. I hope the future of book collecting will maintain its past and continue to bring satisfaction and delight to those of us who participate.

~ The full text of Charlotte Ashley’s essay and the essays of the other two winners are available at the Bibliographical Society of Canada’s Web site, [www.library.utoronto.ca/bsc/newseng.html](http://www.library.utoronto.ca/bsc/newseng.html)