

THIS ISSUE DAVID MASON, of David Mason Books in Toronto, agreed to take on the *Amphora* bookseller Q&A survey. Mason has been in business for over 30 years, selling a wide range of collectable contemporary and antiquarian books. His specialties include modern first editions, 18th and 19th century English and American literature, and Canadiana.

*Most booksellers have had at least one mentor who showed them the ropes or served as a model for what a bookseller should be. Did you have anyone like that?*

"I had two mentors: Gerry Sherlock of Joseph Patrick Books and Marti Ahvenus of the Village Book Store in Toronto. I worked for Sherlock for two years (not nearly long enough) and had my first office above Marti's store, so I got to study a good bookseller in action every day. I have since come to believe that the apprentice system is essential to be a proper bookseller."

*What is the most prized or notable book you have handled during your career?*

"There are two candidates: a first edition of *Ulysses* inscribed by Joyce to Cyprian Beach, the sister of his publisher, who typed one of the chapters for him, and a presentation copy of the first edition of *Origin of the Species*, one of less than thirty copies known with a presentation."

*How can you tell a knowledgeable collector from a novice?*

"It takes only a minute or so to spot the neophyte but a bit longer to assess just how knowledgeable a person is. What can't be so quickly ascertained is the depth of passion in a person, to my mind, a far more important attribute than knowledge. After all, a good dealer can help guide a collector to the necessary knowledge level, but a passion for books is what I look for."

*What's the most overlooked or underappreciated opportunity in book collecting right now?*

"I'm not telling. I buy extensively in several areas myself which I consider vastly undervalued. There will always be areas that are not yet fashionable, which can be pursued by the astute cheaply. I do urge my clients not to succumb to the frenzy of 'flavour of the month' collecting. The Internet seems to be decimating the trade in modern firsts by demonstrating how common are some books once described as scarce. All that's needed is imagination and passion."

*Where are all the young collectors these days?*

"It would be interesting to know if the closure of so many bookshops in the last 10 years or so is responsible for the current dearth of new young collectors. I strongly believe that collectors are born but there are two things the neophyte needs: guidance and good used bookshops. Even with the proper instincts you need to learn how to be a collector. There is no better way to learn than by buying books, and there's no better place to teach yourself than in a bookshop. Unfortunately the bookshops are disappearing. Where is the young collector to learn?"

*What will bookselling look like in 50 years?*

"I don't know, but I despair. All the signs are gloomy. The Internet provides data but not the experience to properly assess it. The triumph of ignorance. I see an excess of information but a dearth of real knowledge. I'm just as glad I won't be here."

*It's been said you cannot be both a book collector and seller — something has to give. Do you collect books for your own enjoyment?*

“Utter nonsense. The opposite is true. You can't be a good bookseller if you don't collect. Neither, in my opinion, can you be a good librarian, archivist or even a good scholar if you don't frequent used bookshops and collect books. I collect in many areas. I buy books in some subject areas for eventual resale, I buy some books because I want to own them for a while, and I buy some because I must have them.”

*What's the last book you bought for yourself?*

“I would estimate that I buy anywhere between 10 and 50 books for myself every week. One of the nice advantages of being a bookseller is also a serious occupational hazard. Which is, you can always justify buying anything you want by saying ‘I can always sell it at that price if I don't want it.’

The danger is in spreading yourself too thin or, even worse, believing the mistaken assumption that just because you were stupid enough to buy a book some other fool will come along to get you off the hook. That said, the last big book I bought for myself was a very rare proof copy of what I consider to be the greatest political novel of the 20th century, Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*. It cost more than any book I ever bought for myself, it took me only seconds to decide to buy it and I haven't had a moment's regret.”

*What do you like to collect for yourself?*

“I often start a collection based on a single book that I want to own but which reason and economics tell me is stupid to buy. By deciding to begin a new collection I justify my own foolishness. Of course, it's also a lot of fun.”

*When you go on vacation, do you end up spending all your time scouting for books?*

“A book scout scouts anytime, and anywhere he can. A book scout is always on duty.”

*What's your favourite city for scouting books?*

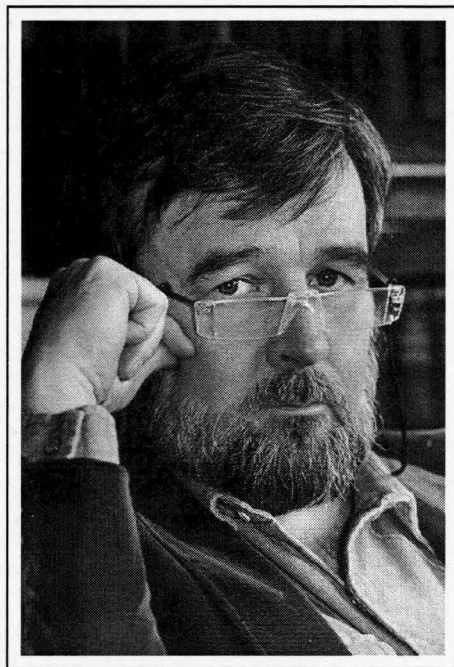
“Whatever city I happen to be in, especially if it's for the first time. In Canada my favourite book city would be Victoria, although there have been some sad closures and moves in the last few years.”

*Has there been a book you wish you hadn't sold?*

“Thousands. Especially those I sold to people who didn't deserve to own them.”

*Finish this sentence: Customers who ask for a discount are ...*

Presumptuous.



*David Mason*