

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

Winter Blues & Signature Finds

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Despite the recent economic downturn and resulting overall decline in the book trade, a number of marvellous volumes continue to trade hands at a pretty penny and auctions that greatly exceed initial estimates. One fine example of how some titles seem to be virtually recession-proof is Ian Fleming's classic *Casino Royale*. At a recent PBA Galleries auction of Fine Literature, a very shelf-worthy first edition in a lightly worn first-issue jacket commanded a price that was just edging past \$20,000 when bidding stopped, nearly 35% higher than the top-end estimate. Also, just a few weeks into 2009, ABE Books has already reported a number of books that have sold through their site at five-digit prices (including a copy of the Golden Cockerel's masterpiece, *The Four Gospels*, illustrated by Eric Gill, at nearly \$15,000). Another title that has continued to climb in price year-over-year to reach new heights in 2009 is the limited-edition, asbestos-bound printing of *Fahrenheit 451* signed by Ray Bradbury on the limitations page. An exceptionally fine copy brought in an amazing US \$12,000 at a recent Profiles in History auction after realizing only half that in a 2008 Heritage Auctions sale and \$4,500 the year before in a PBA Galleries auction. A little veracity seems to be lent to the adage that even in hard times, quality still commands the price deserved.

While high-end collectables seem to be weathering the storm, a number of Canadian booksellers have started distributing catalogues via e-mail in order to generate sales. These e-catalogues seem to be gaining ground on the more traditional paper catalogues, as they are relatively easy to create, edit and distribute at virtually no cost. A fine example of this versatility is the wonderful John Updike memorial catalogue Spadina Road Books of Toronto was able to distribute within a few days after the great author's passing. The catalogue was a very classy offering containing a number of signed and limited edition copies of Updike's classic works. David Mason Books has also begun to venture into e-catalogues, inserting some rather esoteric and interesting groups of books among the standard catalogue

fare. One recent group of listings highlighted a number of books on Africa that are often looked over as "religious twaddle," having been authored by Christians, but actually contain excellent and authentic social history narratives of African tribes. Two titles from the catalogue caught my eye for both their interesting subject matter and striking covers: Alexina Harrison, *The Story of the Life of MacKay of Uganda Told For Boys By His Sister* and Rev. John H. Weeks, *Congo Life and Jungle Stories*, both priced at a modest \$85. For those interested in 19th-century Africa, Mason's e-catalogue (www.davidmasonbooks.com/oclists/oclisto3.htm) is worth taking a look at to discover similar esoteric titles and sub-genres.

As seen with the Bradbury title, quality signed editions cannot only withstand hard times but also make for extremely exciting, and profitable, finds while out scouting. One story that sticks with me is that of Toronto bookseller Steven Temple, who once received an old, heavily mildewed and worn volume signed by Oscar Wilde that a book scout found in a box destined for the landfill. The book turned out to be a copy of the signed limited first edition of Wilde's *Poems* dedicated to his wife's brother who had visited him while in Reading Jail.

I haven't had the similar good fortune (yet) of unearthing my own signed rarity but I have picked up my fair share of signed books from the bottom of rummage sale bins. One find that comes to mind is a signed first edition in jacket of Pierre Berton's *Klondike*. Upon closer inspection, the book turned out to be an association copy that Berton inscribed to Canadian poet Mona Gould who wrote, among many other poems about WWII, the famed, "This Was My Brother," in honour of her brother who died at Dieppe.

Despite the expectation that an author's signature will instantly add value to a book, this is often not the case. Still, it never hurts to flip through the first few pages of even the less appealing copies while hunting through the stacks for hidden gems. It might uncover a highly sought-after name scrawled across the page.

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