

Samuel Johnson, Literary Obsession, and Hubert's Freaks

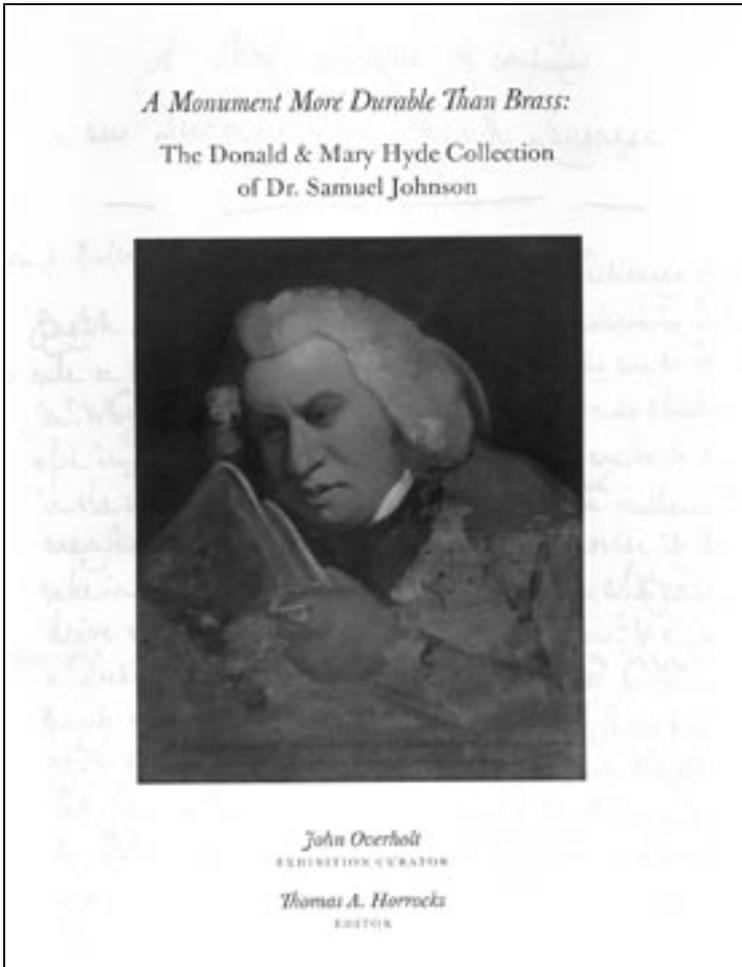
WILLIAM BUTTS

OVERHOLT, John (exhibition curator) and HORROCKS, Thomas A. (editor). *A Monument More Durable Than Brass: The Donald & Mary Hyde Collection of Dr. Samuel Johnson—An Exhibition.* Cambridge: Houghton Library, Harvard University, 2009. Small 4to. Clothbound, dust jacket. vii, 127pp. Color illustrations. **\$35.00.**

BARTLETT, Allison Hoover. *The Man Who Loved Books Too Much: The True Story of a Thief, a Detective, and a World of Literary Obsession.* New York: Riverhead Books, 2009. 8vo. Clothbound, dust jacket. 274pp. **\$24.95.**

GIBSON, Gregory. *Hubert's Freaks: The Rare-Book Dealer, the Times Square Talker, and the Lost Photos of Diane Arbus.* Orlando: Harcourt, 2008. 8vo. Clothbound, dust jacket. 274pp. Illustrations. **\$24.00.**

One of the most memorable moments of my graduate career at Loyola University occurred in a seminar on “Johnson and His Circle.” Our professor, an intense young up-and-comer, was describing Johnson’s pain-filled last days when “dropsy”—fluid



buildup—had the doctor in such agony that he stabbed himself in the calf to relieve the pressure. Stroke, gout and other complications preceded coma and death on December 13, 1784. But what stunned the dozen graduate students assembled was the professor's emotional telling, which so moved him he had to pause mid-narrative to compose himself. None of us had ever witnessed such professorial passion before. It impressed us mightily.

What about this 18th century British critic, essayist, poet, biographer and lexicographer, often referred to by cognoscenti simply as “Dr. Johnson” or occasionally the “Great Cham,” incites such heartfelt devotion? It’s one of those names any educated person is expected to know, yet few these days except academic types have any solid idea who he was or what he wrote. If you’re a Johnsonian, as I soon became, the attachment is difficult to explain: For me, Johnson perfectly embodies that rich and complex long-ago age, his various writings at once forceful, intellectual and elegant yet still accessible and down to earth. Slog your way through James Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* (go unabridged) and dip into a few of Johnson’s *Rambler* essays and his poem *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. You’ll either become a convert or you’ll scratch your head.

If the latter, spend time with Overholt and Horrocks’ *A Monument More Durable Than Brass*. Mary and Donald Hyde’s legendary Johnson collection, recently bequeathed to Harvard’s Houghton Library, occasions this remarkable assemblage of primary Johnson material. And talk about timely. In 1909 New York’s Grolier Club hosted an exhibition to celebrate the 200th anniversary of Johnson’s birth. In 1959, New York’s Pierpont Morgan Library followed suit on Johnson’s 250th anniversary. And finally in 2009 the Houghton Library marked the 300th anniversary—in the process acquiring many of the choicest artifacts from each of these two previous landmark exhibits—and fittingly, the Grolier Club then hosted the same exhibit.

Attorney Donald Hyde (1909-66) and philanthropist Mary Hyde (1912-2003) began collecting Johnsonalia in 1940, a time when the gettin’ was—well, not good, but *extraordinary*. Among other high-flying dealers, they bought Dr. Johnson material from another doctor: “Dr. R,” the legendary A.S.W. Rosenbach. When James Boswell’s Malahide Castle and Fettercairn House in Scotland began spewing astonishing trunkfuls of the choicest Johnson manuscript and other rarities no one knew existed, the Hydies were there and their deep pockets served them well. Donald died from cancer in 1966, but for the next 35 years Mary (Viscountess Eccles since her remarriage in 1984) continued assiduously adding to the collection. In 2004, her collection and \$15 million endowment landed at Harvard.

Editor Horrocks’ introduction makes vivid this remarkable

collecting couple. He also reminds us that “The treasures on view in this exhibition comprise a mere fraction of the magnificent Hyde Collection. And what an impressive fraction it is. Overholt presents an astonishing array of books, manuscripts, prints, ephemera, and art that... represents sixty years of painstaking effort on the part of Mary Hyde Eccles....” Scholar James Engell’s essay “Perdurable Johnson” reviews Johnson’s broad literary output, while William Zachs’ “The Hydes Collection Johnson” is a how-to case study about creating a first-rate literary collection when price is little object. For instance, at the auction of famed collector A. Edward Newton’s library in 1941, the young couple “acquired a volume of letters and petitions compiled by Johnson on behalf of the condemned prisoner William Dodd for \$850, the manuscript of Johnson’s *Consideration on Trapp’s Sermons* for \$275, the copy of Boswell’s *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* given to his son Alexander for \$65, as well as Johnson’s silver teapot for \$650.” Mary Hyde’s gigantic Johnson-related personal correspondence, while not part of this exhibition, is described because of the 65 years of aggressive collecting it chronicles. It “puts their activities in a context that reveals the ways collectors collect and dealers deal.”

As with any exhibition catalogue, the joy lies in the items illustrated and their descriptions and the benefit in the library of known authentic exemplars every collector and dealer should always strive to build and maintain. While almost no exhibition catalogue illustrates every single item, *A Monument More Durable Than Brass* certainly doesn’t disappoint in its generous sampling of high quality color illustrations.

Page after page after page of the choicest, the rarest, make it difficult to choose which to highlight. What a thrill to behold Johnson’s holograph translation of a Horace poem, accomplished at age 17. “Many of Johnson’s earliest surviving compositions are translations of Horace from Latin into English, written while Johnson was at Stourbridge Grammar School,” we learn from Overholt’s caption. Among other early gems are two of his diaries – “the earliest to have survived”—the first labeled *Annales* “a simply accounting, in Latin, of the major events in his life,” 1731. The second, labeled *Libellus*, dates 1729-34, and begins movingly with (in Latin) “I bid farewell to Sloth, being resolved henceforth not to listen to her syren strains.” (A shame that this

exhibit's 1731 letter from Johnson to Gregory Hickman, "his earliest surviving letter," made the exhibit but isn't illustrated here. Another beauty not illustrated that brings Johnson to life is a routine 1597 Greek Bible that Johnson supposedly used to beat bookseller Thomas Osborne, who had hired Johnson to catalogue the library of Robert Harley, Earl of Oxford. "Certainly it does come from Robert Harley's library, and with its thick wooden boards, it would make a formidable weapon," and a tantalizing contemporary inscription inside claims "This is the identical book with which Dr. Johnson knock'd down Osborne the bookseller & bought by me at Harleian sale.")

The exhibited items are logically grouped chronologically, giving portraits in objects of "Young Johnson," "Johnson in London," "Dictionary Johnson," "Johnson's Household," "Boswell's *Life*," "Johnson and His Books," "Johnson and His Circle," "Later Johnson," "New Acquisitions" and "Johnson as Icon." It's a most pleasing mix of documents, books, personal items and portraits – well arranged, beautifully photographed, handsomely and affordably presented.

Other favorite illustrations and items are so humble and touching they bring the formidable larger-than-life Dr. Johnson down to earth. There's a reading list he compiled for a young friend entering the ministry, a gracious act from a literary lion to a young man "lately returned from his army service in America... The list shows signs of wear and folding, and may have been carried by Astle for some time." There's a rough little printer's proof of Johnson's chapter on Alexander Pope from his monumental *Lives of the Poets* (1779-81)—naturally filled with his inked corrections in the margins. "The proofs owe their survival to the novelist Fanny Burney," Overholt tells us, "who asked Johnson to have them saved for her, when they would otherwise have been discarded by the printer after use." And possibly nothing thrilled this tea-slurper more than one of the exhibit's few three-dimensional items: Johnson's silver teapot, a 1765 beauty, which Overholt aptly describes as "one of the most evocative of his household possessions" despite a sordid history of having been sold "even as Johnson's body was being autopsied." Its later history makes up for this, though, since in 1927 its new owner A. Edward Newton "offered a few favored guests a Johnsonian communion of sorts by serving tea from it at his home," and, in

the introductory Zachs essay, we learn of one Chicago woman who offered to *give* the Hydes her one Samuel Johnson letter “in exchange for a cup of tea served from Johnson’s silver teapot.”

Several superb Boswell artifacts grace *A Monument More Durable Than Brass*. There’s a poignant excerpt from his diary in 1785, penned shortly after his friend Johnson’s death. He records a dream in which he encountered “my much respected Freind [sic] Dr. Johnson. I saw him distinctly sitting in a chair opposite to me in his usual dress.... He then said in a solemn tone ‘It is an awful thing to die’....” Another delightful favorite, as bizarre as it is humorous and humble, is an illustration of a rudely torn out upper corner from one page of Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language*. Why this detritus amidst such glorious fare? Because, as Overholt informs us, “Even the greatest works may sometimes come to an inglorious end. Boswell’s note on this scrap of the *Dictionary* records that ‘Matthew Henderson found this in a Littlehouse [i.e., a privy] at Edinburgh & twitted me with my Great Friend’s Work being Wastepaper.’”

If *A Monument More Durable Than Brass* and Samuel Johnson still aren’t your “dish of tea” (to cite Johnson’s ditty to his favorite beverage) and fail to stir your collector’s passion, keep in mind: The greatest Samuel Johnson treasure of all... the Holy of Holies to Johnsonians... *has never been found*. All of Johnson’s letters to Boswell, numbering more than two hundred, plus Boswell’s replies (as published extensively in his *Life of Johnson*), “have not been seen since Boswell’s death... their whereabouts remains unknown.” And if that spectre isn’t enough, there’s even a guaranteed buyer for this cache afoot: Harvard University. “Such were Mary’s persistent thoughts on the matter,” writes Overholt, “that in her will the terms of the Harvard bequest stipulated that funds from the principal of the \$15 million endowment could be invaded to secure the Johnson-Boswell letters were they ever to come to light.” Surely *that’s* worth getting excited about?

Literary Obsession

Autographs and books... books and autographs... the two are so intertwined, so integral a part of each other, that they’re inseparable in my head. Issues concerning one affect the other. Virtually all books begin as manuscript material, after all. Tales of theft, of forgery, of malfeasance involving books and autographs

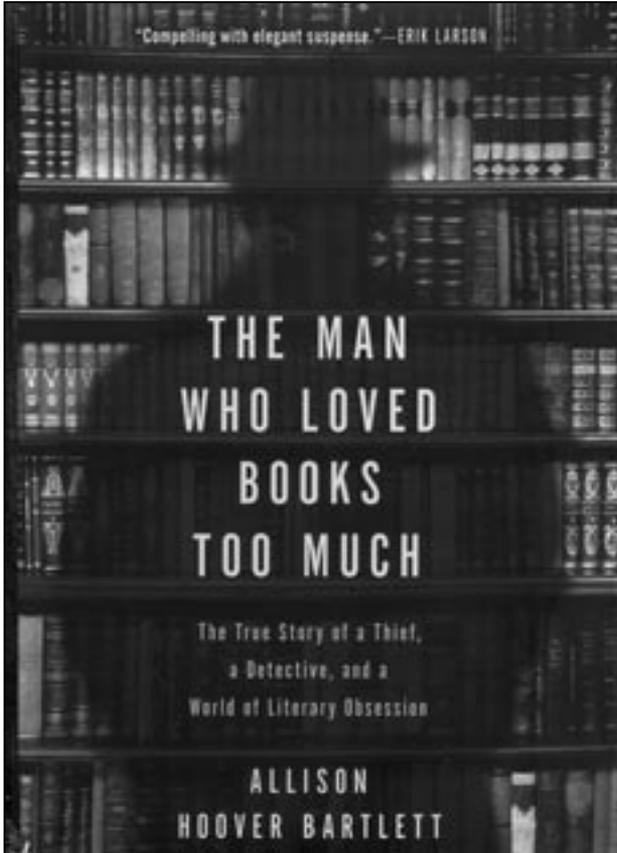
rarely occur entirely separate from one another. All grist for the autograph collector's mill.

The latest "buzz" in the old book world involves Allison Hoover Bartlett's *The Man Who Loved Books Too Much: The True Story of a Thief, a Detective, and a World of Literary Obsession*, which was greatly anticipated by this dealer. As a member of the ABAA (Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America) and its overly-active online chatline I followed many of the events chronicled in Bartlett's tale almost as they occurred, and I know some of its players.

John Gilkey of California is the man who loved books too much, and no garden variety shoplifter or burglar was he. Gilkey's modus operandi worked well in its day (the first few years of this century): He would telephone a rare book dealer, order a spendy title and give a credit card number stolen from the Saks Fifth Avenue in San Francisco where he worked seasonally. He'd arrange for a "friend" (usually himself, sometimes his father) to stop by and pick up the book. Sometimes he would have the book mailed to an address which later turned out to be a hotel. Only a month or two later would the fraud be detected, when the irate credit card holder would find unauthorized charges on a bill.

Today Gilkey's m.o. would meet far less success. Dealers are much better attuned to credit card misuse—thanks in part to Gilkey himself—and are likely to verify that addresses given over the phone are the address of record for any given card. If they're not, the dealer will insist the telephone order be able to at least provide that address for verification.

Physically, Bartlett found the 37-year-old Gilkey unremarkable. "He is of average stature," she writes, "about five-foot-nine. His eyes are hazel-brown, his hair dark and thinning, his fingers long and nail-bitten. The cadence of his quiet, calm voice reminded me of the children's television host Mr. Rogers." But mentally Gilkey intrigues Bartlett, and this is the driving force behind *The Man Who Loved Books Too Much*. He's one of those book thieves who steals not to sell on eBay—more on that later on—but because of his deep-seated psychological need to be surrounded by rare books. Childhood fantasies of having a fabulous private library compel him—books that will show off his supposed wealth, refinement and erudition, none of which



he possesses. “I used to watch those British Victorian movies, you know, Sherlock Holmes. I loved those movies where a gentleman has an old library, wears a smoking jacket.”

But the notion of actually holding down a job and *buying* those books never crosses Gilkey’s mind. In his twisted infantile mind, booksellers are mostly cheats and in cahoots with each other to keep the books he deserves away from him; to “get” (Gilkey’s word for “steal”) the books from them is thus his right. Never does he display the slightest sense of guilt or remorse. Bartlett repeatedly attempts to deconstruct the mind of the book thief, trying to comprehend his psyche.

I wondered what fed this skewed perspective of justice. While many collectors build images of themselves through their collections, most of them do not cross the line between coveting and stealing. It was not just a collection Gilkey was building but an image of himself for the world.... The leap between a collector and thief is a huge moral and ethical one. But for Gilkey, who repeatedly crosses the line, having not paid for the books—having acquired them for free, as he would say—adds even more to their allure.... his satisfaction was always fleeting: the more books a collector gets, the more he wants....

Bartlett returns to this repeatedly, trying to make his motivation sink in. Once, interviewing him in prison, she makes the telling observation that “For Gilkey, ‘fairness’ seemed to be a synonym for ‘satisfaction’: if he is satisfied, all is deemed fair; if not, it isn’t.” Later she ruminates, “Gilkey is a man who believes that the ownership of a vast rare book collection would be the ultimate expression of his identity, that any means of getting it would be fair and right, and that once people could see his collection, they would appreciate the man who had built it.”

Gilkey’s thefts began in 1997 (a first edition of Nabokov’s *Lolita* for \$2500 from Bauman Rare Books) and escalated from there. Other specific thefts are chronicled: A first edition of Thomas Hardy’s *The Mayor of Casterbridge* from Brick Row Book Shop, a signed Thomas Mann *Joseph in Egypt* and Frank Baum’s *The Patchwork Girl of Oz* from Heldfond Book Gallery, a first edition of Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* from Royal Books, others.

Enter Ken “Bibliodick” Sanders, the colorful Salt Lake City bookseller and head of the ABAA’s security committee. Sanders is a rabid pit bull when it comes to book thieves, so when ABAA colleagues in California began e-mailing him about stolen books, he saw a pattern emerging. His e-mails detailing these thefts became a regular feature on the ABAA chatline, always concluding with Ken’s caution to “Govern yourselves accordingly.” Eventually, with Gilkey’s tactics known, a “purchase” from Gilkey was detected by dealer Ken Lopez and, with Ken Sanders coordinating and a helpful Palo Alto detective, a sting operation was set up. Gilkey was nabbed when he tried to pick up the package UPS had left at the Sheraton Hotel. Raiding Gilkey’s government-subsidized apartment in Treasure Island, detectives

“found books in the kitchen, on the bookshelf, in the bedroom, on counters, on dining room chairs. Some of the oldest items were an illuminated leaf from a Book of Hours, circa 1480, encased in a plastic sleeve; a land deed from 1831; and a signature of Andrew Jackson. Along with the books were coin collections, stamps, documents, baseball cards, posters, and autographed photographs.”

A brief slap-on-the-wrist stint at San Quentin Prison followed, then a few-month sentence for stealing a postcard signed by composer Johannes Brahms. Bartlett’s interviews continued, but she always suspected that his attempt to steer clear of books was just a facade. Gilkey was evolving, it seemed, though he remained the same narcissistic personality filled with superficial enthusiasms and passing curiosities. “He thieved across genres the way a distracted reader might peruse shelves in a library,” she muses, “running his finger along the spines, stopping at whatever caught his eye, then moving on.”

Gilkey also casually collected autographs, by the way, as well as “snuff bottles, musical instruments, baseball cards, crystal, coins”—though clearly neither seriously nor knowledgeable. He remarks “that he has Stephen King’s, Anny Perry’s, Princess Diana’s, and Ronald Reagan’s,” which suggests these are likely in the form of signed books. One doubts he’d have any knowledge base on which to gauge authenticity.

Indeed, signed books pepper *The Man Who Loved Books Too Much*. When Bartlett strolls the ABAA’s famed New York book fair, trying to understand bibliomania, among other treasures she gapes at are “a valuable copy of *Molecular Structure of Nucleic Acids*, Watson and Crick’s first and second DNA article offprints, signed (\$140,000).” In the course of meeting and interviewing various dealers and collectors about Gilkey, Bartlett is shown and learns about different types of books. One collector teaches her about association copies. “Several of them were by lesbian authors, with author-to-lover inscriptions.”

Fun if anecdotal book and autograph lore, the kind of lightweight fare that appeals to general readers, is interspersed throughout *The Man Who Loved Books Too Much*. For instance, “a dealer told me the story of a famous prank. There was a pair of books, one by Hemingway, another by Thomas Wolfe. Each has written a long inscription to the other. A knowledgeable dealer

had to inform the unfortunate owner who had just paid a pretty penny for them that the inscriptions were not authentic, and that the value was not what he had hoped. Later, another dealer discovered that they were spectacular forgeries: Wolfe had written Hemingway's inscription, and Hemingway, Wolfe's."

Unlike this wonderful 1930s tale (which I don't believe to be true for a number of reasons), another tale, this time from Ken Sanders, harks to the 1980s and I'm confident is true. Ken arranged a book signing for an Edward Abbey book he'd published featuring R. Crumb illustrations:

Two hundred people were standing in line for autographs. There were Crumb and Abbey, dutifully scribbling their names. One guy walks up to Crumb and says, 'Mr. Abbey?' And Crumb, before he answers, looks over at Abbey, and they exchange this glance. Crumb looks back to the guy and says, 'Yes?' And he signs that copy of the book 'Edward Abbey'! Then he passed it to Abbey, who signed it 'R. Crumb'! I would kill for that copy....

Other side trips into the old book world emerge as Bartlett emerges herself in it. She quickly learns the general consensus among serious dealers about eBay when Ken Sanders expounds that "any law enforcement person will tell you eBay is the largest legalized fence in the universe," a sentiment expressed by yours truly in this column many times. And just as quickly she learns about that other eBay farce: Certificates of authenticity. Once again she quotes Ken Sanders: "...because of eBay, now everyone wants a certificate of authenticity... no legit book dealer or autograph trader that I've ever known in my life would ever offer a certificate of authenticity. That's a warning bell right there, the mere offering of one. That's become a popular paradigm on eBay. It's what's allowed predators to be so successful and grow so large." Amen.

One autograph tale that does *not* appear in *The Man Who Loved Books Too Much* warrants mention here: Just before the Bartlett book was published, *before the author had signed one single copy*, certain online booksellers were advertising signed copies for sale.

Ultimately, *The Man Who Loved Books Too Much* left me vaguely unsatisfied, for it offers no satisfying resolution. Gilkey is on

the loose and seems unrepentant, and in the end I don't feel that Bartlett came closer to understanding bibliomania. Unless you're in its clutches, it's as difficult to articulate as it would be to explain colors to the blind or sounds to the deaf. Bartlett's continued digging to get at what makes Gilkey click seems to get her nowhere. These are beautiful, gorgeous *books* he craves! Who *wouldn't* want them? But say that to a non-bibliophile and they just scratch their head.

In the end Bartlett emerges as a wide-eyed neophyte when it comes to books—expected, I suppose, when a journalist takes on a specialist topic. Would that she had been mentored more deeply in the rare book world, perhaps a crash-course apprenticeship. The acknowledgments, other than thanking Sanders and one other antiquarian bookseller who appears in the book, doesn't mention fine tooth-combing of the manuscript by serious dealers. So when Bartlett makes such statements as “first editions can still be found in the open stacks” of public libraries, I cringe inwardly and reply “*So what?*” Of course tens of millions of first editions are in public libraries; why wouldn't they be? She clearly still feels that the phrase “first edition” lends a special mystique and potential great value—a common rookie mistake—and doesn't seem to realize that those first editions are mostly dirt common, besides which the ex-library factor (Dewey Decimal numbers on the spines, pockets, stampings, absent dust jacket, etc.) has destroyed most of any possible value. And when she cites pie-in-the-sky valuations by collectors without questioning or verifying them, again I cringe. And when her “Note on Sources”—which tell the reader loads about any book—consists of an astonishingly paltry NINE titles (good titles each, to be sure), and she remarks “there are several fine memoirs by and biographies of individual collectors,” once more I cringe. Books about collectors is a large and rich field, with scores of famous and exceptional titles—but “several”?

As for Gilkey's psychopathic, compulsive need to acquire these books by stealing them, there too I find his motivation not terribly mysterious or intriguing. Gilkey simply lacks that gene or whatever the mental facility is that prevents most of us from falling into thievery. You have to accept that he's simply a criminal, and the object of his compulsion happens to be books. It might as well be tires or tongue depressors or Pez dispensers.

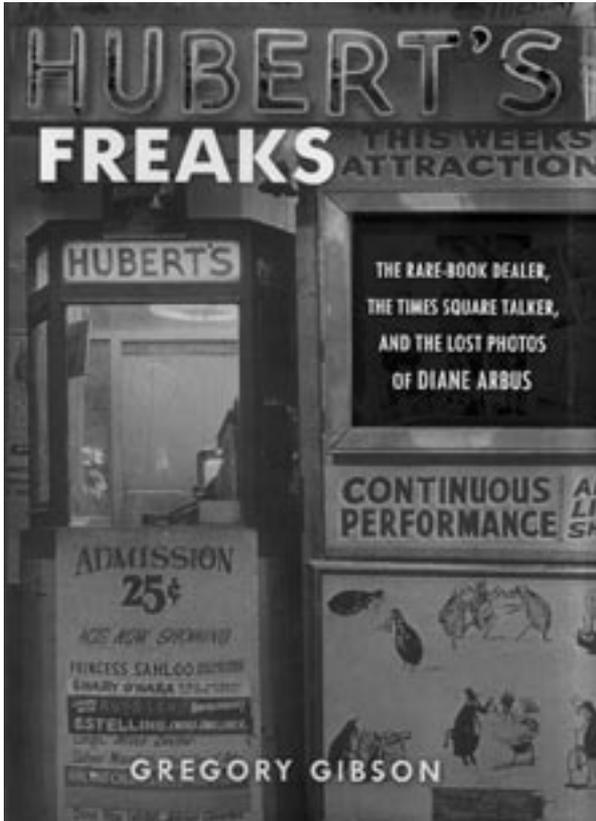
Why Bartlett or the publishers wouldn't include illustrations in *The Man Who Loved Books Too Much* baffles this former book editor. After reading about this guy for almost 300 pages, it's perfectly natural to want to see a picture of him. In *my* book, any nonfiction book needs pictures. I want to see one of the mugshots made at the time of any of his arrests. I know Ken Sanders and some of the other dealers involved, and I visited Heritage Bookshop before it closed and some of the other bookshops mentioned—but if I didn't, I'd want to see what they look like too. Surely there are also police photographs of the book-filled Treasure Island apartment they raided... images of some of the choicer books Gilkey stole and were later retrieved... on and on. This book should anticipate that curiosity and satisfy it.

Despite these criticisms, Bartlett's *The Man Who Loved Books Too Much* remains an entertaining read that pulled me along, a fun true-crime page-turner about a second-rate criminal. Just don't read it expecting any great enlightenment about the innermost motivation of book thieves.

Hubert's Freaks

Observation: I'm struck by the uncanny similarities between the previous title and Gregory Gibson's *Hubert's Freaks: The Rare-Book Dealer, the Times Square Talker, and the Lost Photos of Diane Arbus*. It's a popular new type of nonfiction book, a formula that publishers find works: A journalistic descendent of Truman Capote and Tom Wolfe, part investigative journalism and part quasi-history, aimed at an intelligent well-educated audience that nevertheless wants fun, smart writing on a quirky niche subject—nothing too heavy. There's always a catchy and intriguing main title—*The Man Who Loved Books Too Much*, *Hubert's Freaks*—and a three-part descriptive subtitle that clarifies and lends a somewhat academic feel to it. In the case of the Bartlett and Gibson books, they're even the same size, the exact same number of pages and a similar price.

Gibson's *Hubert's Freaks* happens to represent an outstanding example of this evolving genre, and one that should appeal to autograph people for its insights into the rare book and autograph market, the high-end art market, the vetting process for modern art, the acquisition procedures for institutions. But this is superficial stuff compared to what really makes *Hubert's Freaks*



special. It's a fascinating foray into American subcultures—the 20th century freak show or sideshow and its evolution, specifically the role of blacks in that culture, and the varying classes that feed off of it today, be it flea market scroungers, storage facility auction followers or tony Manhattan art galleries. *Hubert's Freaks* is itself a kind of freak show, enticing and guiding the reader along as it offers up slices of the bizarre and the weird.

Gibson himself is a respected long-time antiquarian book-seller, owner of Ten Pound Island Book Company of Gloucester, Massachusetts, specialists in maritime history. He brings to the task a deep and formidable understanding of the rare book world and its dynamics, the psychology of its buyers and its sellers, the workings of the marketplace. Gibson puts this to full use

in capturing the personality of Robert Langmuir, a Philadelphia bookseller enthralled with African American ephemera with an “enormously retentive quality of mind—ADHD plus flypaper” whose many ups and downs – psychological, financial, marital—he chronicles.

Gibson describes Langmuir as “an incurable romantic [who] occasionally saw his life as a long series of bizarre adventures linked by extraordinary coincidences.” From his memorable opening:

On July 6, 1971, while legendary photographer Diane Arbus was curled in a bathtub at the Westbath apartments in New York City, slitting her wrists, Bob Langmuir was traveling out of his body, which was heaped in a roadside ditch in rural Vermont, struggling to maintain its own hold on life.

through a roller-coaster array of personalities and plot twists, Gibson shapes several plot lines deftly and artfully, interweaving almost fifty short chapters, each as sharp and unforgiving as an Arbus snapshot and with chapter titles as snappy as the snapshots: “Yes!!! Fantastic!!! And Fascinating!!!,” “The Old, Weird Bob,” “Deconstructing the Palindrome” and “In Which Bob Proves to Have Been More Stubborn Than Jan Was Angry” are favorites. They entertain and pull you along as effectively as the subtitles in a *Perils of Pauline* silent film.

Not only is there the highly troubled misfit Langmuir, who has a nose for making finds and a paranoid inability to “close a deal,” to establish a price and market his goods, and whose marriage likewise crumbles amidst clutter and prolonged indecision. There’s also the equally troubled New York photographer Diane Arbus (1923-71), whose fame rests largely on her disturbing images of giants, midgets and other natural and man-made oddities. Add to this Hubert’s Museum, an aging tawdry New York freak show and its black “inside talker” (think carnival barker) Charlie Lucas and menagerie of employees. Talk about a tough mix to blend into a unified narrative.

In 2003 Langmuir happens upon an archive of black circus material at a black memorabilia show in Maryland—photographs, papers, ephemera—and after painful negotiations manages to acquire most of it. The name Diane Arbus pops up

in one of Charlie Lucas's date books, and he realizes that the photographs and other papers may have been Arbus material. He realizes with growing excitement that "Diane Arbus's address in the 1963 book... had been written in a different hand from all the other entries. It was printed in capitals, spidery and angular, quite unlike Charlie's rolling scrawl. What else could it be but Arbus's own writing, preserved over all these years?" As Gibson notes, "The mother of all rabbit holes opened before Bob's eyes, and he dove in."

With genuine Arbus prints selling for anywhere from tens of thousands of dollars on up to staggering sums, Langmuir becomes a man obsessed with tracking down more of this archive, researching the potential value, going about the process of "vetting" by the Arbus estate and determining the interest of various galleries and museums. Twists and turns too numerous and too convoluted to consider delving into ensue. Gibson's weaving of these disparate lines is intricate, masterful—a wonder to behold. And in case you're curious, *Hubert's Freaks* does satisfy this Old School reviewer's curiosity and provide a small number of photographs of its subjects.

Hubert's Freaks certainly rates as one of the most unusual titles in this column usually devoted to relatively straightforward autograph studies and mainstream autograph fare. Actual autograph-related content is slim, to be sure, but more than made up for by Gibson's insight into the buying and selling of high-end archives, into the evolving market for vintage photography, into behind-the-scenes machinations at famous institutions. Highly recommended as one of the most unusual, entertaining and informative books you'll find on any autograph collector's bookshelf.