Sowing Serendipity and the Devil’s in the Details

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If there’s one lesson that long-time book dealers and collectors convey when describing how they seek material, it’s what I’ve been noting in this column for years: The role of serendipity in making great finds. If you think “serendipity” a synonym for “chance” or “luck,” think again. Serendipity is the kind of dumb luck you foster: You place yourself in the right position to make great finds by being in the right kinds of places (which are often the least likely kinds of places) at the right time (which frequently means relentlessly and inconveniently). Serendipity doesn’t just strike: You have to get in its path. Think of a highway. You are a deer, serendipity a Mack truck: The more often you get caught in
those headlights, the more often you become bibliographic roadkill. At least this time it’s a good thing.

Every year a book or two is published about rare books, maps and documents but intended for the mass market. Often these titles fall into the true crime genre that so captivates the public: The Island of Lost Maps, The Man Who Loved Books Too Much, The Map Thief, Thieves of Book Row and other tales of robbery and forgery, most of them reviewed in this column. Some are general guides to collecting, others are semi-scholarly studies that nevertheless capture the public imagination such as Nicholas Basbanes’ A Gentle Madness: Bibliophiles, Bibliomane, and the Eternal Passion for Books. Rebecca Rago Barry’s Rare Books Uncovered: True Stories of Fantastic Finds in Unlikely Places falls into this second category, and explores the adrenaline rush of “great finds” during the course of fifty-two entertaining chapters, each only several pages in length. She notes in her introduction, “it is a collection of tales from living booksellers, collectors, librarians, and other seekers about their best find in a surprising place – ‘best’ and ‘surprising’ being rather subjective terms, I allowed for items with artistic, financial, or sentimental value….”

Barry does a solid, workmanlike job of telling these disparate tales. She presents them potluck style, a smart move that pulls you along. It’s a fun read easy to put down and pick up later, knowing you won’t lose the thread. Book lovers will find plenty to exclaim over and autograph enthusiasts will not be disappointed – and continually the twain meet and converge. It’s an appealing blend of tales from collectors, librarians, dealers and scouts, ranging in interest level from astonishing to somewhat forgettable (fortunately much more of the former than the latter). A couple of representative stories will convey the flavor:

“A Prewar Stockpile in Brussels” opens Rare Books Uncovered with a bang -- the tale of well-known English book
scout Martin Stone and the recently closed (2008) Belgian bookshop Librairie Tulkens. Tulkens packed up and stored their inventory upstairs at the start of World War One, unpacked it at war’s end, then did the same with much of their inventory in the 1930s – but never unpacked it. Sixty-plus years later the shop closes and Stone finds thousands of parcels wrapped in brown paper. “All were published pre-1933 and yet were in stunning condition, having sat protected and undisturbed in Tulkens’ upper floors and back rooms since the 1930s. ‘I would pull out a parcel… and inside would be four pristine, brand-new copies of the large-paper edition of the A&C Black book on Paris, fine in the dust jacket…. These were books that were just fresh as a daisy, as though they had been published yesterday, but the date was 1899 or 1903, and some of them were in multiples. It was just extraordinary.'”

“A Revolutionary Manuscript Filed in the Attic” is another eye-opener, the heart-warming tale of the cash-strapped Morris-Jumel Mansion in Manhattan, a historical house museum of distinguished lineage owned by the city and its oldest private residence. In 2013 an archives intern sorting through uncatalogued colonial paper in the home’s oven-like third floor attic stumbles upon a several page manuscript shoved among documents from a colonial physician. The alert scholar thinks its contents ring a bell – not the Liberty Bell, but she had dislodged a draft of “The Twelve United Colonies, by their Delegates in Congress, to the Inhabitants of Great Britain.” This notable essay “was an appeal for reconciliation and a last-ditch effort to avoid war… It didn’t do much good… the document was printed in the summer of 1775, and until now, no manuscript existed, and even the authorship was undetermined.” The fortuitous discovery was identified as the handwriting of Declaration of Independence signer Robert Livingston, with corrections in the hand of fellow signer Richard Henry Lee. The value estimate
of $100,000-$400,000 thrilled the museum’s administrators – the mansion was sadly in need of restoration – but the $912,500 auction hammer price realized left them speechless.

Personally, I find the tales from booksellers among the most
interesting and compelling. Why? First, because handling vast numbers of books all day, every day, for years and decades, most dealers build up a deep well of “great finds” stories, so their tales tend to be among the most exceptional. Secondly because, as a full-time dealer myself since the late 1980s, I can attest that the “what’s it worth” preoccupation that dominates many collector accounts (more on that in a moment) takes a back seat to the simple joy of enlarging our knowledge about some particular subject, of discovering and perhaps correcting some error or misunderstanding in the historical record, of rescuing an unrecognized piece of history from an ignoble fate. Sure, dealers are more aware than others of the commercial value of the objects they handle and appreciate how it helps their bottom line; yet through sheer repetition the intellectual high begins to take precedence over the thrill of turning five bucks into five hundred dollars.

One of the high spots of *Rare Books Uncovered* is “A French Folio in a New England Barn” concerning my ABAA colleague Donald “Rusty” Mott of Sheffield, Massachusetts. Visiting a local basement filled with early books ruined in a flood, Mott checked out the barn and found a tall stack of plastic bread trays. “A piece of red morocco about nine feet off the ground in the uppermost tray caught his eye…. The red leather folio was French, early eighteenth century, and filled with fine, double-page watercolor architectural renderings, including a four-page folding watercolor ‘Plan General de Chasteauneuf.’” Thanks to his exhaustive research, the volume fetched $75,000 – although frankly some other items mentioned found tucked away in his own home take one’s breath away, such as the anonymous Karl Marx pamphlet found packed away in a back room. Rusty’s closing thoughts sum up many dealer’s attitudes:

*The thrill doesn’t necessarily have anything to do*
with money, although that is nice too, when it happens. The thrill is the thrill of discovery, the opportunity forever presenting itself to you to maybe find something and in the process discover something about it that no one has ever recognized before, and then be able to add something, to plug a hole, as it were, in a previously unknown gap of knowledge, no matter the subject. Now, that’s fun.

And therein my unease with Rare Books Uncovered. In a typically-lovely foreword to this book, Nicholas Basbanes (who most of you know from A Gentle Madness) elaborates this ennobling side of book collecting: “If ever there was an impulse to collect that appeals directly to the intellect, it is the urge to acquire and possess books and their various cousins, manuscripts, printed ephemera, prints, and the like.” But alas, so often this intellectual satisfaction angle gets lost to the allure of the Almighty Dollar, and Rare Books Uncovered is no exception. One of the many curses of our Internet era is its instantaneity. A few keystrokes and a collector can usually ascertain approximately what any given item might sell for. Too often the process of discovery, of researching an item’s content to discover where its true significance lies, is simply gone, replaced with the quick thrill of a quick turnaround. This leisurely discovery process applies more readily to documents, manuscripts, earlier books and anything not mass-produced than to most twentieth-century books, but nevertheless this fixation on dollar value is troublesome.

Another unease lies in WorldCat, which I find referenced perhaps a half dozen times in Rare Books Uncovered. WorldCat is a union catalogue (library card catalogue combining many libraries’ holdings) that lists the inventories of more than 70,000 libraries spanning 170 countries that belong to the Online
Computer Library Center (better known as OCLC). In the chapter “A World War II Comic Uncovered,” for instance, Barry writes, “There are less than ten physical copies of the comic extant, according to WorldCat.” As large and impressive as the WorldCat citations are, references to low numbers of any given item located there are often completely explainable. So fewer than ten OCLC libraries own a copy of a certain comic book. The real questions should be: How many of those 70,000+ libraries even have comic book collections? (Miniscule at best.) How many of those libraries want to own a copy of this comic book and have been actively trying to acquire one? WorldCat citations can be meaningless without further elaboration and are why I for one never reference WorldCat in a catalogue description – it smacks too much of hard-sell for my taste, of trying to boost an aura of ultra-rarity that may or may not be present.

*Rare Books Uncovered* is certainly geared toward an audience of novice collectors or non-collectors. Barry’s light, breezy style, if a bit wide-eyed at times, is well suited. A whole string of sidebars defining fairly basic terminology (incunabula, printer’s device, book club editions, descriptive bibliography, vellum, private press, etc.) run down the right margin of some recto pages throughout – an odd, distinctly magazine touch that betrays her magazine editing background (Barry edits *Fine Books & Collections* magazine). Why not a glossary at the book’s conclusion?

Occasionally Barry also paints with a broad brush, a natural tendency in this kind of book, which sometimes leads to gross generalizations. “Most booksellers and book collectors have a love-hate relationship with the online auction site eBay… but ask around and you’ll discover that almost everyone is using it.” Well, the truth is that many dealers, myself included, have a hate-detest relationship with eBay and distance ourselves from it. I’ve asked a good many dealers over the past twenty years and
find that just as many say they won’t go near it as those who use it. You just don’t have to dig that hard to see that a large number of people avoid it. And I cringe inwardly when Barry writes (in a clause taken out of context), “first editions of recent titles – constructed of the same poor-quality materials as most other big publishing house dreck….” There are a great many exceptions to this ill-advised statement.

*Rare Books Uncovered* is attractive enough – but just enough. The dense, eye-crossing copyright data faces the title page, strangely, instead of a frontispiece image. The two-page table of contents thus opens left, on the title page verso, a jarring look indeed. Basbanes’ forward in turn also begins at left, another in this series of bizarre touches. The book has no blank free flyleaves whatsoever – the brown endpaper at front is followed immediately by the half-title page and at the rear the final index page is followed by the brown endpaper. In short, there’s not a single blank leaf in *Rare Books Uncovered*. The result of these many idiosyncracies I find rather disconcerting, their effect almost claustrophobic. I suppose the publisher argues that these frugal paper-conserving measures allow them to keep down the cost, yet the retail price isn’t lower than many similar hardcovers. All these comments about *Rare Books Uncovered*’s design may seem petty and nitpicky, but what do you expect in a book whose intended audience is book collectors, book dealers, librarians and other bookish folk? (To give credit where due, the typesetting and individual page layout are spot on – classy, handsome.)

Illustrations are nice and perfectly adequate, consisting of a sixteen-page color photograph section placed three-quarters of the way through the book. But as you charge through these brief and numerous chapters, by the time you bump into these images after page 192 it’s difficult to pair each image up in your mind with its chapter. How enormously more compelling and
impactful it would be to view each “great find” within each chapter at the same time you read about it.

But despite some editorial squabbles, aesthetic issues and philosophic reservations, *Rare Books Uncovered* will give those who’ve never experienced the exhilaration of a great find some sense of the intoxicating effect of books and paper. Here’s hoping that Rebecca Barry brings a whole new generation “into the fold,” striving to rescue unrecognized treasures from oblivion.

*Portraits & Reviews*

In the incredibly detail-oriented world of bibliographical research and textual criticism, G. Thomas Tanselle is a rock star. His top ten hits include *Guide to the Study of U.S. Imprints* (1971), *Introduction to Bibliography* (1991), *A Rationale of Textual Criticism* (1989), *The Life and Work of Fredson Bowers* (1993), along with checklists, scholarly editions and academic articles galore. But Tanselle is also one of those scholarly writers rarely discovered by lay readers. When’s the last time you saw someone stretched out on the beach reading *Textual Criticism and Scholarly Editing* or standing in the supermarket checkout line flipping through *Printing History, Raritan, The Book Collector* or similar scholarly journals to which he contributes? As an antiquarian bookseller and historical document dealer myself, I’ve known of his work for many years and have a book or three of his in my reference library awaiting study – yet this is the first time I’ve tackled Tanselle.

*Portraits & Reviews*, it turns out, is the perfect introduction to a scholar whose voluminous writings consist largely of in-depth bibliographical and textual studies. It gathers together twenty-eight biographical sketches of editors, librarians, booksellers, collectors and scholars published in various venues over the past half century. Tanselle shows himself exceptionally
adept at summing up a person’s lifetime work and placing their contributions in context – which explains why so many of these portraits first appeared as eulogies. This is followed by forty-two book reviews, essays and introductions concerning books and book collecting, bibliographies and bibliographical issues and a host of other scholarly topics. There’s not a lot of direct autograph content in *Portraits & Reviews*, but a fair amount of it
is, well, *autographish*. Whenever there’s discussion of books and those who write or edit or publish them and collectors and lovers of the printed word, autographs in some form can’t be far behind.

Those essays in the portraits section (the first third of this book) concerning booksellers often of course have autograph content. While a graduate student at Northwestern University in the 1950s, Tanselle was grateful to befriend someone who could relate to his arcane research topic, Chicago bookseller Jerrold Nedwick. From him he purchased “a copy of Amy Lowell’s *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*, which had been presented to Eunice Tietjens by the author…. It turned out that he had many other presentation copies from the Tietjens library, and in the following weeks I got (along with commentary from him) books signed by Edgar Lee Masters, Harriet Monroe, Sara Teasdale, Louis Untermeyer, Alice Corbin Henderson, George Cram Cook, and Arthur Davison Ficke, to name a few.”

Nedwick’s ability to humanize these figures truly moved and affected Tanselle, and it shows in this brief but touching 1967 eulogy. Peggy Christian ran a bookshop I’d never heard of in Los Angeles from the 1940s through the 1980s. Even in this two paragraph eulogy from 1987 – shortest chapter in this book – Tanselle gives us a memorable image: “Those who encountered her there… could not help but learn from her example – her love of bibliographical problems, her persistence in pursuing them, her thoughtfulness and generosity, and her uncompromising adherence to high standards, in scholarship and in the rest of life as well.” And what bookseller can’t relate “to the examination of books that were interesting bibliographically though unrewarding financially”? Another one-pager is Tanselle’s 70th birthday tribute to the late great English bibliopole Anthony Rota, from whom he purchased “copy no. 3 of Shaemas O Sheel’s *The Blossomy Bough* (1911), with a presentation inscription to
Mitchell Kennerley.”

And of course the legendary English bookman John Carter, whom Tanselle befriended later in Carter’s life, is not only profiled but his name recurs more than any other throughout Portraits & Reviews. This heartfelt essay opens with a description of choice signed and association copy “Carteriana” in Tanselle’s own library: “In the east-wall bookcases of my living room are two and a half shelves devoted to John Carter, and the equivalent of at least two or three more are represented by stacks of books elsewhere.” If you’re saying “John who?” do yourself a favor and read ABC for Book-Collectors, Taste and Technique in Book-Collecting, An Enquiry into the Nature of Certain Nineteenth-Century Pamphlets or just about anything with his name attached to it. I’m enticed by Tanselle’s mention of “my plan to write a biography of John and an assessment of his work, accompanied by a list of his voluminous writings… I have a substantial mass of material… I have not given up the idea of paying homage to him in this way.” In 2004 Donald C. Dickinson published John Carter: The Taste & Technique of a Bookman, reviewed in this column, but Tanselle’s “take” on Carter would be interesting and quite different than Dickinson’s.

Collector/scholar colleagues also crop up amongst these portraits. Gordon N. Ray, one of the first lengthy portraits, profiles this fascinating academic who once gave a talk titled “Books as a Way of Life” and “was always, at heart, a bookman.” Overachiever doesn’t begin to describe this English professor’s vast achievements as educator, scholar, writer and collector – just the list of governing boards of institutions on which he served boggles the mind. Scholars such as Ray often use items in their collections as fodder for their writing. Tanselle mentions a couple of projects “both inspired by manuscripts in his collection – one on Tennyson, using an annotated copy of Maud… and one on Trollope, building on Trollope’s own 1867
list of his books (given to Ray by Trollope’s granddaughter).” Ray’s book and manuscript holdings were deep, his dealings and friendships with dealers nationwide and overseas extensive. Tanselle paints a portrait of this extraordinarily accomplished figure not soon forgotten. Other chapters cover such colorful collectors as Harrison D. Horblit (whose collection of material from the man generally regarded as the most acquisitive collector of all time, Sir Thomas Phillipps, 1792-1872, included mounds of manuscript material), Mary Hyde (who amassed the greatest Samuel Johnson letter collection in the world), William H. Scheide, William Matheson (Tanselle dedicates this book to his wife Nina) and others.

Fully two-thirds of Portraits & Reviews consists of essays, intros and book reviews, and while Tanselle’s portraits demonstrate his skill at appreciating and memorializing those whose life and work intersect his own, his reviews display a keen analytical mind equally adept at critiquing weak writing, faulty reasoning or poor logic – always in the most gentlemanly way. And while many of these reviews and essays concern hairy bibliographic issues in the most academic sense, they are bookish in a way that many bibliophiles will find slow slogging.

It may seem odd to be reviewing book reviews, some of them more than forty years old, but reference works (whether how-to’s, memoirs, bibliographies, exposes or whatever) are the life-blood of any great collection, so any tool that guides you toward good ones or cautions you about bad ones is invaluable for the collector. Tanselle’s “A Gathering of Book-Collecting Books,” for instance, considers a half dozen books about books published in 1976 and 1977: Richard Booth’s Book Collecting, Maurice Dunbar’s Fundamentals of Book Collecting, Margaret Haller’s The Book Collector’s Fact Book, Salvatore J. Iacone’s The Pleasures of Book Collecting, Jack Tannen’s How to Identify and Collect American First Editions: A Guide Book and Jack
Matthews’ *Collecting Rare Books for Pleasure and Profit*. He examines the how-to phenomenon, citing handfuls of similar titles in the process (such as Jerry Patterson’s *Autographs: A Collector’s Guide*), and sums up their purpose thusly: “Some of these books serve a useful purpose, but others are unnecessary and have been published… primarily to tap an increasing audience of inexperienced collectors seeking information about books.” More specifically, he remarks that “Two of them, despite a number of flaws, are at least respectable, if hardly distinguished, examples of their genre; but the other four are so obviously inferior that one wonders whether there is any point in enumerating their shortcomings.” Ouch. But, ever the gentleman, Tanselle elaborates:

*The temptation to dismiss them summarily is strong; after all, any collector or bibliographer of modest experience will be able to see their weaknesses at a moment’s glance. But these books are intended for beginners, who are not always in a position to recognize misinformation, shallowness, and shortsightedness (though they can note sloppy writing and execrable production). The matter is of some seriousness, because introductory books can be a powerful force in shaping the attitudes of new collectors.…*

What’s extraordinary about this lengthy multiple book review is this: The reader knows from the reviewer’s opening comments such as the above that he doesn’t like the books he’s about to review, but Tanselle resists the urge that reviewers often don’t resist – to ridicule these books mercilessly. Reviewers love to skewer new books and films and readers enjoy reading scathing reviews, but Tanselle is simply too kind and polite for that. But don’t think for a moment that he withholds his criticism.
No no – on the contrary, he offers up the most condemning of remarks in spades and at great length. Just don’t look for quotable zingers here. My point is that Tanselle critiques in such a genteel, considerate and thoughtful manner that these authors might still just shake hands with him and thank him for such constructive criticism. Now those are reviews from which we can all learn (especially the book reviewers among us). And these reviews still have the power to teach today’s new collectors how to think about current how-to-collect handbooks as they continue to be published.

Stylistically, *Portraits & Reviews* may present challenges to some. If you’ve ever read, say, nineteenth-century German philosophers and enjoyed it, you have a good sense of Tanselle’s writing style. Dense, substantial, and above all long paragraphs abound – they’re actually the rule, not the exception. Flipping through this book, it’s striking how many paragraphs run almost one full page in length, many running more than one page. His writing couldn’t be further from the light, Hemingwayesque journalese that prevails among many writers today. So if this isn’t your cup of tea, be forewarned. This isn’t a criticism, as I find this meatiness refreshing, just an observation and a head’s up. Some may find his style pedantic – to which I respond that collecting is by its nature a meticulous, precise, exacting pursuit. By the way: Did I mention that Tanselle paragraphs are loooong?

*Portraits & Reviews* will surely prove one of the more challenging but also more rewarding books of recent years in the book and autograph-collecting realm. This half century’s worth of writings about the scholarly study and pursuit of books and bibliography and manuscripts may only tangentially touch upon autograph material, but let’s hope it introduces G. Thomas Tanselle to many who might otherwise not be exposed to him.