

# Book Reviews: The Problem with Dealers: One More for the Road

WILLIAM BUTTS

**ZIMMERMAN, Kurt.** *Rare Book Hunting: Essays and Escapades.* N.p.: The Book Hunters Club of Houston, 2021. 8vo. Softbound. 212pp. Illustrations. **\$19.95.**

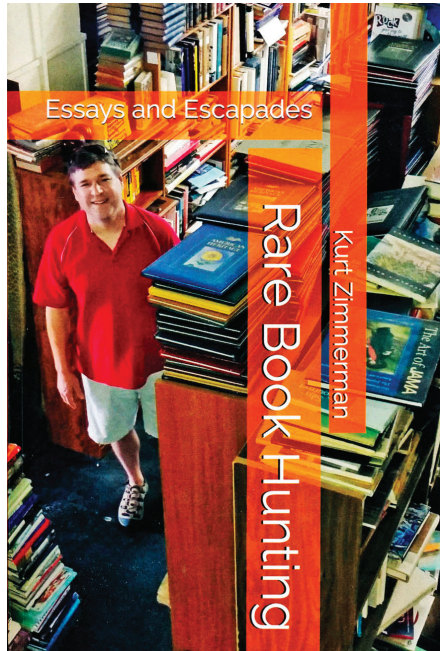
Books about bookselling continue to trickle in, so on the heels of the trio discussed in the last issue let me offer up one more - for the road: The tale of a former bookseller who remains fully committed to the book world.

What sounds more pleasant to any book and paper person than lounging in a book-lined study while a genial and knowledgeable host, mint julip in hand, discourses about favorite titles? At the same time pulling them off the shelf and passing them around, of course – the books, that is. If that bucolic image isn't idyllic enough for you, the volumes held up for your enjoyment aren't just *any old copy* of the title being discussed. They're *association copies*: Copies inscribed by the author when the copy was presented to a spouse, the book's publisher, the book's subject, or someone else of note or intimately connected to the book or its author. Before the vapors set in, read on.

Former auction house rare book director Kurt Zimmerman may have surrendered to the more lucrative siren call of real estate,

but he remains as hardcore (“fully immersed,” says he) about books and autographs as I. Like me, his mind rarely wanders far from old books, pamphlets, letters, documents, paper; unlike me, he must tear himself away daily to handle real estate, with the consolation that it funds the addiction. We are through-and-through bibliophiles as well as bibliopoles (Latin for bookseller) – I avoid the term “bibliomaniac” and its connotation of bug-eyed drooler wearing tin foil cap. We haven’t yet developed a secret handshake by which bibliophiles identify one another, but it’s just a matter of time. . . . picture something sensible akin to Monty Python’s silly walk.

*Rare Book Hunting: Essays and Escapades* is a “best of” selection, with additions, from Kurt’s “American Book Collecting” blog that he has been writing for ten years – the *only* blog this non-blog enthusiast reads without fail. So many of these essays are old friends, as pleasant to reread as a favorite



sitcom rerun is to watch for the umpteenth time. *Rare Book Hunting* reads just like Kurt. No evidence of a Texas drawl, but a certain tale-telling talent associated with Southern storytelling. Straightforward but not simple, often witty, and sometimes comical, but behind that a deep, broad command of his subject matter. It’s an appealing combination, seductive to those already bitten by the bug and those whose latent bookishness is ripe for infection.

Kurt's bookish focus is more centered than mine: Association copies of books about books and American book collecting history. The "Books About Books" section of our open shop used to solicit chuckles from Those Who Just Don't Get It – non-collectors agog that such a category even exists. The truth is that books about books can be a world unto itself, a vast category that can be broken down into dozens of sub-categories. As for association copies - well, so many gems have cameos in *Rare Book Hunting* I'll keep their mention to a minimum lest this review turn into a shopping list.

"My essays and escapades span over thirty years of rare book hunting – an exciting journey that is ongoing," writes Kurt in a prelude. "Many of my friends are rare book people, and much of my free time revolves around bookish pursuits. I can't recall a day without thinking about a book and seldom without handling one." As for the motivation behind *Rare Book Hunting*:

*I'm keenly aware of the many books about books that weren't written - memoirs, biographies, histories – all of which would have added to our understanding and appreciation of the rare book world. A world that has identified, gathered, and preserved culturally significant artifacts in every area of human interest. I recall the hundreds of fascinating stories I've been told by rare book hunters and regret that only a small fraction of these stories will survive. I always encourage people to write them down, to keep them from disappearing, but time gets away and distractions are many. Thus, the reason I want to share a selection of my own stories with you.*

Kurt's first chapter, "Sparks to the Dry Tinder in the Mind' A. Edward Newton and *The Amenities of Book Collecting*," demonstrates two points. First, that Kurt is well equipped to take this old chestnut of a book (a 1918 bestseller), a moldy oldie that shows the collecting mentality of a century ago but isn't much read

any more and inject it with new life and relevancy. I'll probably reread my (single!) reference copy for the first time in thirty years. Secondly, it shows the depth of Kurt's passion for association copies:

*My library currently contains fourteen examples of The Amenities, spanning the dedication copy inscribed to his wife, the copy inscribed to the publisher, to the copy of Eleanor Roosevelt. One favorite belonged to Clifton Waller Barrett (1901-91) pre-eminent collector of American literature whose collection is now at the University of Virginia. Barrett wrote in 1950, "The insidious works of A. Edward Newton... and like sparks to the dry tinder in the mind of the budding bibliophile."*

After choking at the notion of *fourteen copies*, I also noticed and smiled at the adverb "currently" – of course Kurt is open to making it fifteen copies should another interesting association copy surface!

Another chapter I find particularly refreshing is "The Hunter for Early American Women Bibliographers." If you've never wondered (as has Kurt) "Who was the first American women [sic] bibliographer to compose a bibliography and have her name on the title-page?" here's your chance to find out. "I'm a collector drawn to new paths, he notes, and I commend this commitment to neglected areas of bibliographic history and willingness wherever it leads. Best of all, I'm pleased to see that this unexpected jaunt into this worthwhile area includes my personal favorite, Margaret Stillwell. Her delightfully titled memoir, *Librarians Are Human: Memories in and Out of the Rare Book World*, which I had devoured at the suggestion of Joel Silver, director of Indiana University's Lilly Library. Her *Incunabula and Americana, 1450-1800: A Key to Bibliographical Study* (1931) and *Incunabula in American Libraries: A Second Census of Fifteenth-Century Books*

*Owned in the United States, Mexico, and Canada* (1940) make for entertaining if arcane reading even if early printed books aren't your normal fare. Kurt lists 27 pre-World War Two bibliographies compiled by women that he has turned up, with lively anecdotes about some of these compilers.

Also especially satisfying is the chapter "A Bookman's Holiday with Vincent Starrett," for this Chicago journalist, historian, bookman, Sherlock Holmes authority, poet and more has devotees in each of these diverse areas – many of whom seem unaware of his other accomplishments. Of course Kurt owns fine association copies, mainly of Starrett's book collecting titles: *Bookman's Holiday: The Private Satisfactions of an Incurable Collector* (inscribed to famed Chicago collector Abel Berland), *Penny Wise and Book Foolish* ("Starrett's own annotated copy"), his first book *Arthur Machen: A Novelist of Ecstasy and Sin* (inscribed to bookseller Frank Morris, at whose shop he spent much of his money), *Persons from Porlock and Other Interruptions* (inscribed to bookseller Walter M. Hill, his first publisher), *Buried Caesars* (inscribed to its publisher, bookseller William F. McGee of Covici-McGee), *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* ("Starrett's own copy of the first English edition, 1934, with his bookplate, signature, and scattered annotations. A mighty association copy indeed and a particular treasure to me") and *Born in a Bookshop: Chapters from the Chicago Renaissance* (inscribed to a noted "Sherlockian").

Other chapters offer up tributes to such figures as library science leader Donald C. Dickinson, author of the reference Kurt often cites, *Dictionary of American Book Collectors* as well as *Dictionary of American Bookdealers* – inscribed and extra-illustrated copies of which rest behind me as I write this. And legendary late bookseller Peter Howard of Berkeley's noted Serendipity Books and an especially heartfelt profile of Americana giant Bill Reese (William Reese Company, New Haven).

These sixteen essays are followed by a half dozen "escapades," lengthier personal narratives. The highlight of these is the fifty-plus

page “Auction House Adventures,” Kurt’s chronicle of working at California Book Auction Galleries (1995-97). My own books-about-books reading is a very distant second probably only to Kurt’s, but I can attest that first-person accounts following “a day in the life” at a regional book auction house are almost non-existent. Even accounts of life with the Big Boys (Sotheby’s, Christie’s) are seldom seen. These places have a reputation as grist mills that run through a lot of younger people who burn out and move on, often to careers in other fields, so their mention is brief and fleeting. But Kurt’s detailed account of memorable finds, painfully gut-wrenching “ones that got away” and the day-to-day nitty-gritty challenges of putting together quarterly “fine book” auctions a year aimed at \$500,000 per auction in a tiny department with sweatshop working conditions and an uncaring upper management – it’s eye-opening. Those who know auction houses only from their classy catalogues and tasteful show rooms will be taken aback at how down to earth it is behind the scenes.

“The Super Bowl of Books” is Kurt’s chronicle of attending the 45<sup>th</sup> California International Antiquarian Book Fair in Pasadena in February 2012. Wonderfully enjoyable to this exhibitor is his breathless, two-page, stream-of-consciousness *single-sentence* (!!!) describing one of its three days. He notes midway “the stomach growls and the Zman must eat, and drink, and I do, hastily” and finally runs out of breath at the close - “Nicole asks if I’m planning to be at the show all day tomorrow and my jalapeno burger is going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes.” It’s not lost on this reviewer (who shares a birthday with James Joyce) that Kurt closes *Rare Book Hunting* with the two-page “A Moving Experience” – another single-sentence burst that may not rival Joyce’s famous 4,491-word sentence in *Ulysses* but brings this book to a fitting and pleasurable close. I doff my hat.

Since no review of a book about books would be complete without comment about it as a physical object, let me just observe that *Rare Book Hunting* is attractive (despite print that’s not quite as

black and crisp as you'd expect) and properly priced. In the no-book-is-perfect spirit, it would benefit from a little editorial finessing to clean up Kurt's chronic comma misuse and to catch blunders such as two paragraphs on page 64 that are repeated almost word for word on pages 71-72. But I nitpick over issues easily fixed. If a hardbound edition comes to pass – fingers crossed – let's hope these are resolved.

Even if you've never given a thought to association copies, books about books and book collecting, died-in-the-wool collector and book educator Kurt Zimmerman takes this specialty area and makes it exceptionally lively and appealing in *Rare Book Hunting: Essays and Escapades*