

Book Reviews: Memoirs Worth Remembering

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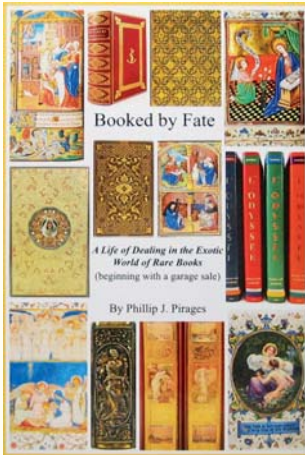
PIRAGES, Phillip J. *Booked by Fate: A Life of Dealing in the Exotic World of Rare Books (beginning with a garage sale).* McMinnville, OR: Phillip J. Pirages, 2022. Small 4to. Hardbound. 335pp. Illustrations. **Hardbound \$25.00, softbound \$16.00.**

WOLF, Clarence. *Fifty Years a Bookseller: or, The Wolf at Your Door.* Bryn Mawr: Clarence Wolf, 2022. Small 4to. Hardbound, dust jacket. xxi, 156pp. Illustrations. **\$25.00.**

It's commonly heard we're in the midst of a new "golden era" of television, with streaming services releasing quality films, drama series, sitcoms and documentaries weekly. (Another commonplace involves endless scrolling, accompanied by wails of "There's nothing to watch!") I posit we're also in a golden age of antiquarian bookseller memoirs, as the steady trickle reviewed in this column over recent years attests.

The challenge of antiquarian bookseller memoirs is for the dealer to find themes in this dense forest – to highlight hills and valleys, map out the topography of the book and autograph landscape in a meaningful way. Without *context*, it's easy for the trees to take over. Lesser memoirs quickly devolve into a dizzying shopping list of colorful persons, unusual places, fabulous books and documents. These are usually interesting in themselves, but lack the bigger picture that makes any such memoir a worthwhile contribution to our knowledge of the trade in rare books and manuscripts.

Antiquarian booksellers are an odd lot. Usually opinionated and always independent, endearing and/or irascible, they range in temperament from the studious scholarly nerd to the gregarious extrovert, rarely falling into the tiresome stereotype of the curmudgeonly misanthrope. To be fair, many display symptoms of all these tempers. Most are died-in-the-wool, ink-in-their-veins bibliopoles (only Latin lends the necessary *gravitas*), seldom seen without book in hand and surrounded by paper. The word “retire” is often not part of their vocabulary. Why, oh why, would you want to cease doing what brings such daily joy and satisfaction?



Phillip J. Pirages’ *Booked by Fate: A Life of Dealing in the Exotic World of Rare Books (beginning with a garage sale)* and Clarence Wolf’s *Fifty Years a Bookseller: or, The Wolf at Your Door* are both delightful accounts of the antiquarian bookselling life, and two more diverging yet complementary careers can scarce be imagined – call them parallel lives a la Plutarch. Phil is a corn-bred Iowan but long-time West Coast (Oregon) specialist in the

choicest of fine and private press books, medieval manuscripts, incunabula and significant early printed books – high ticket fare dealt from this most unlikely of locations. Clarence is an East Coast (Pennsylvania) specialist in outstanding Americana and fine literary first editions – also high ticket fare but as traditional and New England as can be. Both entered the fray only a few years apart, Wolf born into it and Pirages falling headfirst into it. Both began to make their marks in those not-long-ago days of the ‘70s and ‘80s already looked upon with nostalgic those-were-the-days wistfulness, when the post-WW2 book-buying mania had died off but well-heeled collectors still bought in well-established genres and many libraries had robust budgets.

All quite Old School and any dealer will tell you how the market today is, not gone, but very changed.

If the subtitle of Pirages' *Booked by Fate -- A Life of Dealing in the Exotic World of Rare Books (beginning with a garage sale)* – doesn't convey the bemused detachment of its narrator, the lengthily subtitled table of contents surely will. From the opening "In the Beginning" chapter ("*It started in the bedroom; or, fate steps in my path, my life as a bookseller begins, and I meet my first hero*") to the closing "The Office" chapter ("*Sticking together; or, my employees endure the ups and downs of business with me, including the weight of scholarship, quick changes of address, and a runaway safe*"), there's the pleasing voice of an 18th century Tom Jones-type narrator, a genial and self-deprecating host who spins this antiquarian adventure. In addition to the quaint subtitles breaking each of the eleven chapters into parts, Pirages occasionally injects wacky "Imaginary headlines" from a wide range of newspapers – typical is "Visiting Appraiser in Hazmat Suit Plunges to Death in State Library." These reel you in like *National Enquirer* headlines in the checkout lane.

Phil's academic background in English literature shows often and lends flair to his writing. His deep bow in the introduction to Jay Walker ("the remarkable inventor, entrepreneur, and collector... Known to the public for his connection with Priceline.com and increasingly for his magnificent Walker Library of the History of Human Imagination") reminds you further of the flowery dedication to a royal patron that prefaces many a 17th and 18th century volume.

Having studied arcane yarns ("*comic plays produced in London during the first ten years of the Restoration*" was his dissertation), Pirages knows well how to weave one. "*I play a central role in this narrative,*" he explains, "*but the story really isn't so much about me as it is about the exotic, often fascinating, frequently amusing, occasionally romantic world of rare books – a world that features a blend of history, mystery, eccentricity, and duplicity... given its distinctive combination of curious events and extraordinary personalities, of diverting adventures, and of growth in understanding, my recounting of one pilgrim's*

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wide-eyed progress... is nevertheless worth hearing as an account of struggle and achievement."

Pirages' fortuitous *Eureka!* moment came in the mid-1970s when, fleeing a "feral home life" in Iowa and finding himself a graduate student in Michigan, he attends a house sale to outfit his bare home. Instead he buys a 17th century architecture book for \$35, researches it and manages to sell it for \$1000 to the dean of architecture booksellers. Fate rang Phil's doorbell – from the name of the city where he bought this book (Parchment) to meeting the specialist dealer at his lofty home "with fine columns and grounds that suggested its occupant was both cultured and rich" in Bucks County, Pennsylvania – and he flung the door wide open. "Phillip J. Pirages Rare and Distinctive Books" (today Phillip J. Pirages Fine Books and Manuscripts) takes the front seat and academia the back, an inauspicious beginning on "*a ping pong table under a naked bulb in the basement.*"

Booked by Fate, like any good bookseller memoir, is brimming with the litany of juicy anecdotes we expect in such accounts. Let's explore some that show Phil's learning curve as he loses his "*mercantile virginity*," pays his dues and sometimes learns the hard way before becoming a leading light in his field.

It's always enjoyable to observe novice dealers discovering their niche -- determining their specialties and eventually finding their rung on the ladder. Those sometimes dicey early years make the difference between floundering and flourishing. Pirages writes, "*So, what kinds of books did I want to buy?*" He set his sights high:

I formulated a list of desiderata early on... (1) incunabula... (2) private press books because of their connection with the lost grandeur of early printed books; (3) fine and historically interesting bindings because... I could appreciate their beauty.... (4) books with visually arresting illustrations.... (5) medieval and Renaissance illustrated manuscripts because of their glittering beauty and association with a distant time.... In addition, I felt a very strong attraction to nearly any kind of book in almost any field when found in spectacular condition.

Aspirational as a mission statement should be, ambitious and high-minded. Would that every neophyte dealer penned such a document with specific, aggressive goals!

The best dealers seem to turn what may have been missteps into learning experiences. Why Pirages doesn't beg off an invitation to visit Indiana from two questionable Bible booksellers with absurd website claims ("*one or the other [whom] had seen a catalogue of mine*") baffles. Why is evangelicalism often accompanied by all that is tawdry, cheesy, grotesque? Phil's description of these Hoosier hucksters, their backgrounds and business practices, must be read to be believed – so over-the-top weird you just can't make this stuff up. "Most informative for my education as a bookseller," he recalls about scouring their inventory,

the... book room provided me with my first experience of volumes being sold by the pound. Big Bibles were \$30,000, vast Bibles \$45,000, colossal Bibles \$75,000.... The correlation between weight and price was unmistakable. And those prices were clearly laden with such hefty profit margins that a purchase by someone like me was virtually impossible.

Here's the lesson: "*Very often, when booksellers fail to do adequate research, their prices tend to be unrealistically high... But occasionally uninformed price guesses miss the mark on the low side.*" On a hunch, Pirages purchases Ælfric's 1567 *A Testimonie of Antiquitie*, "the first book printed in Anglo-Saxon" -- one of the smallest and thus cheapest books. "*I was able to buy it for \$1,000 (and sell it without difficulty for \$3,500).*" They develop a pseudo-partnership that eventually fizzles. Phil takes away from this and other intriguing partnerships that "*I learned a good deal about how to run my business and how not to, and, most important, I learned I functioned best as a solitary sole proprietor.*"

Always intoxicating are bookseller tales of huge collections bought and sold. Pirages doesn't disappoint. He profiles "a half dozen private and institutional holdings I've handled that

stand out as especially important in my time as a bookseller,” collections that “*provided major opportunities to meet intriguing people, gain exposure to a great variety of material, and advance the stature of my business.*” Fans of Beat poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti will want to read Phil’s engaging account of his finding an institutional home for the poet’s enormous archive of manuscripts, typescripts, notebooks, journals, proof copies and all the assorted stuff that a lifelong archive usually includes. Then there’s the small regional book show where Phil meets an elderly woman whose derelict shag-carpeted home he goes out of his way to visit. “The house was a horror: dirty dishes, furniture covered with stacks of newspapers, stray clothing, garbage” – and a live goose wandering about. But set amidst “*squalor more acute than any unsuspecting passersby could imagine*” were her father’s “*impressive selection of material representing the history of technology, including most of the major works with significant engraved illustrations of machines.*” He makes an exceptionally generous offer, but instead she consigns the books to him and in the end both parties wind up happy.

Remember the moving staircases and vast paneled dining hall of Hogwarts in the Harry Potter films? Remember The Emerald City in *The Wizard of Oz*? Stir in a dash of William Randolph Hearst’s San Simeon castle, toss in a soupçon of *Star Trek*’s U.S.S. Enterprise, fill it with a vast assemblage of world-class rare books and manuscripts on every subject conceivable. What do you have? Billionaire Jay Walker’s private library in Ridgefield, Connecticut – The Library of the History of the Human Imagination. Pirages devotes a lengthy section to Walker, how their relationship came about, their many buying adventures and the numerous book and manuscript treasures he acquired on this favored customer’s behalf. Fascinating reading and if you’ve ever wondered what a bookseller’s most fantastical dreams are like, this is it.

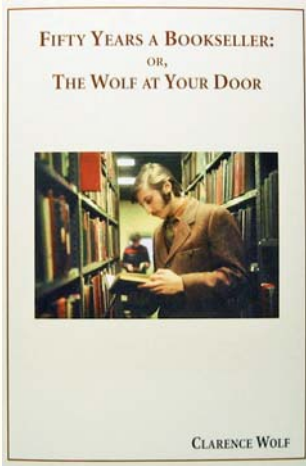
Pirages’ publication in 2019 of *Letters from the 15th Century: On the Origins of the Kelmscott Chaucer Typeface* marks the kind of imaginative entrepreneurial spirit that dots his career – a highlight in this memoir populated with highlights. Each copy of

this fabulous chapbook contains not only an original leaf from William Morris's sought-after 1896 printing gem, but through research and diligence one leaf each from four 15th century printers whose typefaces most influenced Morris's work. Phil's lengthy accompanying analysis shows the serious chops he's developed in this field. This stunningly beautiful production is one time-consuming, labor-intensive project, as you can imagine, and he made it available in several different forms at different price levels. It's just another way that antiquarian booksellers make serious contributions to scholarship – though an expensive undertaking seldom taken on.

Interestingly, the pages of *Booked by Fate* are dotted with occasional boxes containing boldface text in smaller typesize. Whenever Pirages mentions in passing a bibliographic term, printer, collection or any other odd tidbits with which the general reader may not be familiar, this explanatory text makes a welcome clarification. From the first (explaining *American Book Prices Current* and its use) to the last (details on one home/office after he moved out), these boxed elements will prove useful to those readers who are neither dealer nor collector – and those who wish may skip over them.

A gracious tribute to the many faithful employees who have helped Pirages along the way over the decades finishes up *Booked by Fate*. I hoped for comments summing up his career and what the future may bring for his business and the antiquarian book and manuscript world in general, but they never materialized. The book closes out rather abruptly, as if the author simply ran out of steam.

Booked by Fate is nonetheless a wonderfully instructive and well written chronicle of one dealer's path to the height of his profession. In a field where the paths to success are as many and divergent as there are fields of specialty, Pirages is a stellar example of one dealer finding his way and overcoming challenges.



An equally entertaining memoir that couldn't be more different than Pirages *Booked by Fate* is Clarence Wolf's *Fifty Years a Bookseller: or, The Wolf at Your Door*. (That subtitle a fun nod to the phrase if a slight misnomer, for Wolf's business never seems on the verge of financial ruin.) *Booked by Fate's* colorful glossy pictorial paper over boards suits it as nicely as does *Fifty Years a Bookseller's* classic black cloth with gilt lettering and traditional dust jacket.

Clarence Wolf is as close as you get to being “*Born in a Bookshop*,” to cite Vincent Starrett. Cousin to Dr. A.S.W. Rosenbach's cataloger and related to “*Dr. R' himself through Rosie's uncle Moses Pollock, Wolf's father was the partner of George S. MacManus in a business that began in Philadelphia in the 1930s.*” “*Perhaps books are in my blood*,” he notes – indeed! “*It's the only thing I've ever done, and for that matter ever really seriously considered.*” That's a rare statement in a field where dealers enter from every background imaginable – academia, finance, you name it – and at any age, but relatively few (myself included) begin in their twenties. In Wolf's case he stepped into it in his teens and was running it by age 23, a claim no one can make in the rare book and manuscript business.

Any dealer or collector wanting to learn and grow in this vocation or avocation can do no worse than reading and absorbing memoirs such as Wolf's. The best dealers, those who have made a mark, tend to be born teachers as well, and enjoy showing their early struggles, their failures along with their successes, what works and what doesn't.

Fifty Years a Bookseller is a bit scattered in its approach, but for the most part Clarence devotes the bulk of it to “*The Philadelphia Book World*” (7 chapters), with smaller sections devoted to “*Trade Routes*” (4 chapters) and “*Friends*” (4

chapters).

“*Philadelphia Booksellers*” lies at the core of this memoir, fond reminiscences of the handful of book people and bookshops that informed Clarence’s early years. “In 1968, when I joined my parents at the bookshop,” he writes, “the Philadelphia area had a number of booksellers. There were ten bookshops in the city, and of those, six were ABAA dealers, five within one mile of us.”

One of the oldest would not have felt out of place in *Oliver Twist*. Meyer Furman “was stooped and stood barely five feet tall. He wore an old blue coat several sizes too large and a shirt that had seemingly been deprived of soap for ages. He always wore a hat that tilted back on his head, was a bit hard of hearing, and had the most ill-fitted false teeth.... His trousers were held up by string that served as a belt, in which he kept a large pair of scissors....”

One exciting early find for Wolf occurred at William H. Allen’s shop, where “there were alcoves, back rooms, and a basement. In order to access one part of the shop, you had to walk through a room where Mrs. Allen hung her laundry. I always tried carefully to avoid being wrapped in one of her undergarments.” There he found “a book by James Buchanan that he had inscribed to John Campbell, a controversial and fiery Irishman who, during the Civil War, was a Copperhead. This was priced at \$15, a fraction of what it was worth. I was so excited that I bounded up the stairs, failing to notice the low beam in front of me, which I hit with such force that I saw stars....”

Other anecdotes of those long-gone years are many and memorable. Sessler’s, Walnut Street Books, Bernard Cornwell Carlitz, Samuel F. Kleinman of Schuylkill Book & Curio Shop, Wolf’s cousin Edwin Wolf II of the Rosenbach Company and later the Library Company of Philadelphia and others all fill these chapters – and I only wish they were longer.

Among the beloved bibliopoles Clarence profiles is the dignified Bill Baldwin of Baldwin’s Book Barn in West Chester. “It was well maintained,” he recalls, “handsomely decorated, and filled with good books – both rare and collectible ones.” Most importantly to Wolf, “Bill Baldwin loved books, worked

hard, and took great pride in his establishment.” Bill died in 1988 and his non-bookish son took the reins. “Tom Baldwin was unsuccessful in several attempts at different business venues. He sold cars, was a restaurateur and, I believe, had an antiques business.... At times he could be an insufferable poseur, as well as a shameless name-dropper. Despite these traits and some questionable business practices, he could be charming.” But Tom reneged on a \$100,000 archive of Humphry Marshall letters Clarence was buying from him, costing Wolf a tidy \$15,000 commission. “Three years later, I got my revenge.” For \$1,000 Clarence buys from him a bound volume that turns out to be “278 partially printed early Pennsylvania mortgage forms... unknown to historians and bibliographers, making this a major [Benjamin] Franklin discovery. This was Franklin’s first government printing and an enormous find.” One of the country’s leading Franklin collectors gladly paid \$150,000 for it, “the crown jewel in his Franklin collection.” Most dealers can tell versions of this cautionary tale about a shop that changes dramatically with change in ownership.

Wolf’s account of architecture specialist Geoffrey Steele dovetails nicely with Pirages first bookselling experience noted earlier. “He was a gentleman in the truest sense of the word,” he writes, “and was universally admired.” Clarence and Steele buy a massive collection of architecture books together. “There were several thousand books of which 500 or 600 constituted the rarest and most valuable part of the collection.” They sell the less valuable to a Baltimore college and “Over the next twenty years... Every January we would get a check and a neatly typed accounting of the books sold the previous year. Geoffrey was as scrupulously honest and old school as they came.”

Any chapter whose title includes the word *caper* sounds enticing, and “The Kirkbride Caper” delivers. In 1971, a pair of young thugs offer Wolf primo letters of psychiatric pioneer Thomas Kirkbride and others by Benjamin Rush. He smells a rat, confirms that rat and sets up a sting operation with the police to catch them with the stolen goods in his shop. They are arrested “at *gunpoint!* ... it took me a while to regain my

composure.” Having arranged a similar sting operation in Santa Monica myself years ago, I know well what an adrenaline-pumping moment that is.

Most non-dealers are unaware how often dealers are thrust into a position of acquiring inventory about which they know little or nothing except for a gut feeling. Clarence learned early on that a dealer need have (a favorite phrase of mine) “the courage of your own convictions.” In his case it began with a routine house call and “a painting of Philadelphia’s waterworks, probably done around 1840. Someone had done a needlepoint over the painting.... It was in an old frame and was covered in thick glass.... He wanted \$500 for it... a fair amount of money to be spent on something that I was essentially clueless about.” But the painting spoke to him, and after reframing the shop asked \$3,500, selling it to an antiques dealer at a show for \$3,000; that dealer then turned it around for \$12,000. “It wasn’t at all sour grapes,” Wolf concludes, “in fact, quite the contrary, because it proved to me that if you feel strongly enough about something, you have to rely on your instincts. Lesson learned....”

Among the closest colleagues and business associates Clarence profiles in the closing section is my friend the late great David Holmes, whom many in the autograph world knew as an autograph dealer focusing on 19th century British authors but earlier on was a formidable dealer specializing in 19th century British literature. “In the past, the MacManus Company had specialized in nineteenth-century American literature,” explains Wolf.

Dave specialized in British literature, mostly Victorian and Edwardian literature. It was a perfect coupling. Many of the authors that Dave loved were minor ones and were, to say the least, really obscure. I used to look at the names of the people whose books we sold, hoping that I would recognize one or two. Names like Hubert Crackenthorpe [sic] began to populate our shelves. Despite their obscurity, Dave’s enthusiasm and love for these authors was infectious. This resulted in our ability to sell books and manuscripts....

Perhaps the most memorable of those manuscripts was that of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, found by a Massachusetts carpenter in a steamer trunk while disassembling a barn. "This was a very exciting find, which we were able to sell for \$125,000." Seems (relatively) cheap? "At the time that was a huge price," he notes, "but the manuscript has since sold a couple of times for multiples of that number." Holmes appears often throughout *Fifty Years a Bookseller* and Clarence gives a moving portrait of a dear friend too early departed.

Here and there throughout *Fifty Years a Bookseller*, Wolf's observations on the advent of the internet crop up. It's refreshing to hear this septuagenarian's take on it:

...we started by selling mostly scholarly books, with our focus on local history. This has changed. Among the reasons for the changes are the internet and a general lack of interest in local history. Local histories were previously prized because of their informational value. They, along with other reference books, have essentially been made superfluous because everything they offer may be viewed in cyberspace.... We, along with businesses like Goodspeed's and Tuttle, had sold untold numbers of local histories and genealogies. Today they sell slowly. The same can be said of standard rarities. It's a great time for a beginning collector, because in many cases when you go on line it's a race to the bottom, and prizes may be had for considerably less than would have been the case pre-internet.

Wolf's attitude is quite the opposite of many of his generation who have not adapted to the internet and learned how to effectively use it. "There has never been a time when dealers didn't bemoan the fact that things were becoming less and less plentiful and that in essence the glass was half empty," he points out. "In 1891, William Brotherhead... lamented that after the Brinley sales it was all over." Here's the exceptional part:

I'm much more of an optimist. I believe that if you look hard enough, you will make discoveries.... The secret to my success is simple: hard work. I worked very hard and continue to do so. In addition, my advice is not to depend on any one thing. Keep several balls in the air. I work because I love it and am energized by it. Retirement is not an option....

Elsewhere, he remarks tellingly that “Between 2007 and 2017, we bought Chapel Hill Rare Books’ inventory, two major Civil War collections, and a number of other noteworthy Civil War collections” – remember that the U. S. Civil War is but one of his multi-faceted interests. “In the aggregate we bought over 15,000 books, sold a large portion of them, made a number of friends, and learned a tremendous amount about ‘The War of Northern Aggression.’” And he adds with a twinkle, “Despite all that, I still want more!”

Fifty Years a Bookseller is as memorable as it is different from Pirages’. Clarence Wolf has been at it since the 1960s and continues strong to this day, a testament to the staying power of books and manuscripts and to his own indefatigable nature. One weak note, a pet peeve noted occasionally in this column, is the lack of an index. Having penned a couple of indexes myself, I can attest that sure, index writing can be a mind-numbing chore – but every nonfiction book, without exception, should have one. *Fifty Years a Bookseller* is loaded with persons, places, authors, titles – if you’re researching, for instance, the history of American antiquarian bookselling and need every story about Dr. Rosenbach, you’re out of luck short of scouring the entire book page by page. A nonfiction book without index is like a three-piece suit without a belt.

It’s easy and great fun to read bookseller memoirs such as these by Pirages and Wolf simply for their many tales of exceptional books and manuscripts rescued from bizarre locales and also for the occasional “one that got away” – the former greatly outweigh the latter. And distressing it is to gloss over many a worthwhile element in *Booked by Fate* and *Fifty Years a Bookseller* – auction antics contended with, an abundance of

glorious collections unearthed in off-the-wall places – but gloss I must in the name of brevity. But for collectors looking to up their game and especially any dealer worth his or her salt, these memoirs not only entertain but provide many a cautionary tale and inspiring how-to. Pirages' *Booked by Fate* and Wolf's *Fifty Years a Bookseller* stand as shining examples among the many (not, alas, all) bookseller chronicles covered in this column.