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Confessions of an Out-of-Print Bookseller

Peter Tafuri

*Frost Pocket Farm Books, frost@teisprint.com*

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THE NICEST PEOPLE IN THE BOOK BUSINESS

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Confessions of an Out-of-Print Bookseller

by Peter Tafuri (Owner, Frost Pocket Farm Books, PO Box 285, Fleetville, PA 18420; Phone: 570-945-3138; Fax: 570-945-9338) <frost@teispire.com>

The giant upon whose shoulders all booksellers with any claim to fame have stood was Vespasiano da Bisticci; his clients read like a who’s who of the Quattrocento, including Cosimo de’ Medici, founder of what became the Laurentian Library, and Nicholas V, who essentially created that of the Vatican. It was the Golden Age of scholarship, when the great humanists such as Poggio Bracciolini, the inventor of italic script, and Panormitano, who sold a farm to purchase a manuscript of Livy, scoured the earth for the lost works of antiquity, bequeathing to posterity most of the remaining Greek and Roman classics. As for myself, I would be quite content to rise to the level of the big toe of one of those dwellers on the Parnassian heights of the book world, for I am naught but one of the legion of Internet book dealers. So, fair reader, if a few grains of your time, which no treasure may ever buy back, can be spared, then take hold of the thread and follow me through the labyrinth of the on-line used book world.

My troubles began at the age of seven, when struggling through the boring “books” and “sees” of Dick and Jane, a neighbor gave me a copy of Roy Chapman Andrews’ “All About Dinosaurs.” I taught myself to read literally overnight. I knew not a single person who could distinguish between a brontosaurus and a brachiosaurus, yet here, before my eyes, a barely imagined world was revealed. One book followed another, and when I got my first summer job, as a messenger in Manhattan in 1967, the real problem began: a universe of used bookstores, and a bit of discretionary income, was laid before me. I mustn’t belabor this; suffice it to say that by the mid-’90s I had probably read at least 5,000 books, had I don’t know how many times that many, was in the midst of what may be euphemistically called a mid-life, mid-career crisis, and living in a rural part of Pennsylvania. It was then that my long-suffering wife brought me a brochure for a week-long out-of-print book seminar. While I had dabbled a bit in book selling, this seemed to be the key to the door of the more serious thing. I went, and to be brief, it proved invaluable in learning the nitty-gritty of the trade, plus a bit of inside gossip, such as the need to have a good memory, be well read, (so far, so good), and the impact of the Internet, which was hardly discussed in the regular sessions. Among other things, it seemed there was some worry about too many people getting in on the game, killing both supply and standards.

Newly armed with a dangerously little bit of knowledge, and a respectable set of the standard dealer’s reference works, I began by building several rows of shelves on the dry second floor of our barn, in keeping with the important lesson, “If you can’t find a book, you don’t have it;” then sorting through dozens of boxes of previous acquisitions, weeding out all the now obvious junk, researching and pricing what looked promising, and finally shelving it. I also began earnestly answering ads in AB Bookman’s Weekly, and running a few myself. It was very labor intensive. Also, thanks largely to the efforts of my cyberphile spouse, I started listing on the then new sites of Interloce and Bibliofind. After around a month or so of almost con- continued on page 24

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And so it began.

Remembering the laments back at the semi-

nar about the increasing difficulty of finding
decent stock, I went on a buying rampage,
driving sometimes hundreds of miles a day,
often seven days a week, going to every auction,
estate, library, rummage and yard sale, flea mar-
ket and antique shop I could find out about.

In hindsight, that was the most important thing
I did, since it enabled me to acquire a large in-
ventory at a reasonable price while it was still
possible to do so. Those days, like much of my
hair, are gone forever.

Assuming the reader is not yet contemplat-
ing dropping my thread and going out the es-
cape hatch, I shall shorten the journey a bit and
head quickly to the center, i.e., the current state
of things. Suffice it to say, I went into the black
in my third year, which I attribute to effort and
a bit more learning, much the hard way.

As time passed, so did “AB Bookman,” and
into the vacuum rushed ever more on-line sites
and sellers, with eBay being the elephant in
the ointment. Thus, as my odyssey continued, I
soon ran into the anticipated Scylla of shrinking sup-
ply. Book mania was gobbling up the world.

Virtually everyone, it seemed, was on the Net,
either trying their hand at making big money
selling on their own, or via someone who would
try for them. As it became easier and easier
to test, sellers, far fewer, and lower quality
ones, were to be found at the top sales. Whereas
in the past I could easily fill a half dozen or
more boxes at an average sale, I was now lucky
to get a decent bagful, and luckier still to be
able to turn my back and not have the choice
morsels mysteriously vanish from it. Auctions
became free for all. Overall, the buying scene
went from a relatively leisurely and courteous
affair to a virtual slughfest where even the bar-
barians who sacked Rome would have been
shocked at the lack of even the most rudimen-

tary decorum.

The Charybdis of ever falling selling prices
was also growing in force. At first it was a few
dealers who seemed to have gotten the bright
idea that grotesquely underpricing would in-
crease their sales and destroy the competition;
they were soon followed by what I call the “half-
wits,” whose strategy was to sell at half the low-
est price; the next to come along cut that price
in half yet again, and so forth in some perver-
sion of Zeno’s arrow, with the result being that
soon books were being listed for a few cents,
although there may be someone out there who
may try ten books for a penny. More bids and
whistles also started appearing in the form of
ever falling apart books being hyped which
often cost more than the book itself, or on-line
photos of thousands of 25-cent books, and other

gimmicks to lose time and money.

Then there were descriptions, or the lack
thereof. At one extreme such minimalisms as,
“G yes G,” which may have passed in the “AB
Bookman” days when it was mostly a bookseller
to bookseller 50 cent a line business with real
standards, but utterly meaningless in the cur-
rent free for all. At the other were long, ram-
bling de facto essays explaining plots, charac-
ters, themes, existential significance and relation
to quantum theory, of some paperback romance.

My favorites were the ones to the effect, “This
book may or may not have significant defects,
such as missing pages, mold, or a bad smell.
It may be a book club, a first edition,

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stant work, a $10 check arrived. Excited, I

pulled the book off the shelf; packed it, and

got it to the post office just before closing
time, which didn’t thrill the clerk too much.

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rated. However, there was one item that stuck out, “Hobson on the Merrimac;” illustrated only with a plain black and white photo of a man in a military uniform. My otherwise virtuous useless liberal arts education came into play. The copyright was Boston, 1898, the year of the Spanish-American War, so I assumed it had something to do with that rather than the famous ironclad, and the man in uniform was not the man to look for, neither would be on the cover of music about the river. If my educated (pardon the presumption) guess was right, it fit into the niche market of military ephemera, as opposed to the boundless emporium of music. It went for a dollar, which may not seem like a lot, but hark back to the caveat, viz., that book selling is the easiest business in the world to nickel and dime oneself to death in.

Next came research. Several checks on the usual book sites came up blank, but further research brought up the solution to the puzzle. Richmond P. Hobson was a hero of the war, and the Merrimac was the coal ship that sank in the mouth of Santiago Harbor in an effort to block the Spanish fleet. Now, what price to ask? In 1998, coinciding with the 100th anniversary, Spanish-American War items were hot sellers, and I sold enough of them to make an educated (vanity again) guess at $45, based on perceived rarity and desirability plus the now fairly considerable amount of time I had invested. (Many sellers seem to forget the old aphorism about time and money.) Curiously, another check on the book sites brought up a copy this time, a 1904 reprint going for $25. It was offered by a much larger and much better known dealer, so their price was probably right, but I found it odd that their description was such as to make it difficult for a military collector to find it: “Spanish-Amer. War... Composed in honor of Hobson. Edge frays, one tear.” I doubt too many people would do a key word search using the abbreviation; Hobson is too common a name. One would wonder the description too bare-boned to form an accurate idea; is the tear half an inch or half a foot? Is the edge completely chapped up, or merely nicked a bit? Is the paper brittle? I know who the dealer is, and trust their reputation, but would the public at large have any idea? Looking at the questions raised, I tried to answer them all in my listing, which is a bit long to quote verbatim here. Suffice to say that I measured and listed the lengths of the tears, etc., gave a decent synopsis of what Hobson had done on the Merrimac, and explained the piece’s significance in the context of the times. Whether or not I’ll sell it is another issue, which, in turn, raises another point.

It really doesn’t pay to expound upon the contents of a common title, or one where four or five out of say 25 listings do so, but with the obsequities it is necessary, which gives rise to two immediate dangers. The first is plagiarism; annoying, but not a disaster; the worst is helping to sell someone else’s underpriced copy. As per the hypothetical “old pamphlet” above, quite a few sellers don’t know what they have, and price accordingly, which can create a buying opportunity, but then there are those books which are in more of a gray area. Say someone had our friend Hobson (1898) listed at $10 with no real description, or idea of what it was. It sounds like a bargain, and one possibility would be to buy it and then list the $45 one. The problem is spending $10, and maybe then having three other people discover the same price chopping, and wind up reducing our hero to a $1 special. This is another judgment call. If there seems to be reasonable demand, it might pay to list the more expensive copy, with the pertinent information that justifies the price, let the other get snatched up, and then wait patiently. On the other hand, I have a two volume set of relatively mediocre earlier 19th century Unitarian sermons, which someone has bare bones listed at $25. Had the dealer done a bit of research, or he she would have seen the real value, since several of them are Abolitionist, predating the main movement, and are not cited in any of the histories I’ve looked at. If I had the only set, I would list it at $125 or so with an appropriate description of the contents - the price is justified by the historical significance — but to do so would probably sell the $25 one, with no guarantees mine would go, since it is a bit on the periphery of the collective market, or not wind up another target for Zane’s archers. In this case, it’s probably better to hold off, although it has been four years now!

If all of the above sounds like a bit of hubris, rest assured that it has often enough been punished. While writing this, I got a call from someone looking for a book her daughter had seen online several weeks ago. It was one I had researched a lot Hobson and sold for $85 a month ago; I knew I had deleted it, but just to double check, I looked it up again, and lo and behold, the dealer I originally sold it to had it listed at $1,500!

As for the overwhelming majority of books, which are becoming increasingly common as people ransack the attics and cellars of the land, a good, accurate description of the condition of the book, occasionally a bit about the contents, a few appropriate keywords, a realistic price and crossed fingers are all about that are necessary, although it is amazing how often all but the latter are found wanting when browsing through cyberspace.

Finally, there is customer service, or lack thereof. People are entitled to quick responses, and I try to answer all messages within a few hours, and ship within a maximum of 24, with the customers in mind. If I’ll be out for more than a few days, I put everything into a vacation mode on the two sites I’m on; if just for a day or so, I enter a notice in capital letters in the dealer’s information section. I’m amazed at how often, when I’m buying something on line, I can send two or more e-mails and still not get a response, and it’s surprisingly rare to get a notice that something has been shipped.

As for returns and adjustments, the only policy I have is that the customer is always right. Thankfully, people who read books are the most intelligent, and hopefully ethical part of the public, and more thankfully, from my self-interested perspective, I only get two or three such problems a year, usually for something allegedly lost in the mail. The toughest ones are when the customer is right, even if wrong. I once had a pristine $50 art book returned, without notice, but enhanced by the buyer with a coffee stain on two leaves. Since I had checked every page twice because of the price, I knew it wasn’t there when I refunded and restocked. I refunded and recomment. At the other extreme, when a $9 book I had ordered from another dealer failed to arrive after two months, I sent an e-mail to him, then another, and another, and finally got a response with a delivery confirmation number and a go-check-it-yourself, which I did. It had been mailed, but there was no record of its arrival. Another month went by, and finally, again after several messages, I got a, “Send me a copy of the book and check.” If on the day after the book was mailed, it had obviously been paid for, and I’m certain I would have gotten a quick call from him if the check had bounced, but since my time was worth more than a 37 cent stamp, I sent a copy rather than belabor the point. After a few weeks his check arrived, mysteriously unsigned. More e-mails, and finally a send-it-back, instead of what I would consider the common sense, to say nothing of courtesy, tear-it-up-and-I’ll-send-another-ASAP. Two more weeks and a signed one came. It didn’t bounce, but I’ve boughed that dealer off my list of people I’ll deal with.

Patient reader — for who but the patient would still be reading — it is my hope that your time has been well spent and you have gained a glimpse at what a wanderer in his eight year in the virtual labyrinth of online book selling does, and far more important, glimpsed hold of that thread, ever so slender, with which to find your own way dealing with the monsters which may lurk there. To summarize, in hopefully plainer language: Anyone with a computer and a bag of books can be a bookseller; as the ubiquitous saying goes, no one knows you’re a dog on the Internet; the problem is avoiding getting bit. First, it makes sense to think cents. Is a price super low? How can someone spend the considerable time it really takes to provide a photo of a 10 cent book, or send it in a free Brodart? What about the description, or lack thereof? None to speak of, little about condition, a call-us-for-further-details, a long, rambling Proustian disquisition. Is it a book, or is it a 20 year old bestseller, or a disjointed, apparently unconscious example of stream of consciousness to name a few yellow alerts. Calling every first edition, or somehow using the term and/or signed (the implication being by the author) just to have it come up when specifically searching for a true first or autographed copy are red flags. Browse the inventory a bit—does the seller seem to know a bit about books in general? One of my favorites was a complete works of Virgil in Latin, “P. Vergili Maronis Opera,” with the description, “Opera music, but words only, no music, looks like it’s in Italian.” Do they accept credit cards, preferably directly? Not de rigueur, but at least means they have had some sort of rudimentary credit history done. Look at their terms. Disclaimers about not being responsible for lost parcels, or returns...
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Libraries and the Online Book World: Where We Have Been and Where We Are Going

by Richard M. Weatherford (Founder, Alibris, PO Box 5, Southworth, WA 98386; Phone: 360-871-3617; Fax: 360-871-5626) <richardw@alibris.com>
www.alibris.com

Since the earliest days of printing, libraries have been important customers of printers and publishers and of sellers of used and out-of-print books. And for more than 500 years, the relationship has not essentially changed. Publishers, printers, religious institutions, schools and universities, government institutions, and individuals, among others, would produce books in all their various forms. They would then offer these directly to customers or through intermediaries, like booksellers and publishers. Even before Gutenberg began publishing books in quantity, there was a lively trade in used and newly produced books.

The common belief these days is that computers, and computer networks (Internet based and private) have changed all that. Many people think that the Internet, and its various methods of selling and exchanging books, is altering how booksellers and publishers and their customers do business. That is simply not so. The machinery may be different, but the process has not fundamentally changed. Why? Because it doesn’t need to change.

A Brief History of Pre-Internet Online Database/Information Sites:

The first serious attempt to create a book listing service was Interloc. I formed it as a company in 1983 and produced a business plan based on the used auto parts network model. The plan was reasonable, but the concept of an electronic marketplace for out-of-print and scarce books was too new to get funding, so Interloc was put on hold. But only on hold - the idea remained fresh and continued to develop.

There were several halting, unsuccessful attempts to create a computer driven system that would link buyers and sellers of out-of-print books, but the first one to show some signs of being successful was BookQuest in 1989, which was the first dialup service to have more than 100 bookseller subscribers. BookQuest

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accepted only under certain conditions are not signs of buyer friendliness. Do they have a phone number? Say who they are? Make grandiloquent claims?

It would be nice to always know whom you are dealing with. I receive enough thank yous and hope-to-do-business-in-the-futures to be led to think most customers would be happy to buy something from me again. Sadly, unless I can come up with another book for them about the land snails of the Andaman Islands, I suspect I won't, but I try to treat everyone as if I had ten shelves full.

While I'm certainly negatively skewing the income figures for people with Master's degrees, I do honestly enjoy my work. Last summer at a flea market I found, scattered in a box which seemed to contain everything including parts to a kitchen sink, some typewritten sheets for “A Proposed Handbook on the Natural and Human Resources of the San Joaquin Valley” by a committee at a college there. No information was available anywhere about it; it was possibly the only copy of this snapshot of the area on the eve of the development boom. Happily, it was purchased by the type of customer I most wanted it to go to, a library in that area. O immortal Vespasiano and Poggio! Smile down from the heights! 🙏

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