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This is about the "old way" that fulltext used to be produced.

The Book Becomes: From Collector to Author

by Jack Walsdorf <walsdorf@bnamf.blackwell.com>

This is the story of two books and the twelve years that went into producing them. Along the way you will hear of divorce, birth and death. You will hear of encounters with publishers, and printers. You will also hear small bits about computers. Finally, you will hear even smaller bits about the forty-year-old Smith-Corona, all twenty-seven pounds of it, as it steadfastly waited for these twelve years to pass, waited for me to bang away at the worn keys, trying to bring the two books to life. My story begins in 1975, and it begins with a book, *Bland Beginning*, Julian Symons's third mystery. First published in 1949 and now, more than 45 years later, still very readable and enjoyable, and of equal importance, still in-print. In my very first letter to Julian, dated April 13, 1975, I mentioned that I had been asked by a friend if I had ever read "that story about T.J. Wise, the English forger of first editions of the Victorian poets, called *Bland Beginning*?" I had not, so my friend gave me a paperback copy. I, in turn, loaned it to someone else and never got it back! My letter to Julian continued: "Thus began my own quest for Symons. Each catalog I got, each book store I went into, brought forth the inquiry for *Bland Beginning*. Then a week ago I saw that Gollancz was to reprint this work. I sent off an order to Blackwell's in Oxford, only to find three days later, that a local secondhand bookstore had the 1st U.S. edition for sale. I bought it at once, and my quest can end." Before the ink had dried on the main body of my letter I added this P.S. "Lest you think I can now rest easy, with my copy of *Bland Beginning* in hand, I will tell you that I have just finished reading your brother's *The Quest for Corvo*, which I enjoyed greatly. Now I will have to find your biography of your brother!"

And so with these few simple sentences, was begun my own personal quest for all things relating to Julian Symons. In the intervening twenty-one years my quest has taken me to bookshops all over the U.S. and the U.K., not just mystery bookstores, but general used bookshops as well, for the wide range of Julian's interests and talents — poetry, social history, literary biography and mystery — has involved looking into many corners and searching many subjects.

For the first ten years I was a perfectly happy book collector, no more mad or passionate than most. If you want to find out what makes truly passionate collectors tick, take a look at *Nicholas A. Basbanes* wonderful book *A Gentle Madness*, a book he so appropriately inscribed for me: "for Jack Walsdorf—one of the gently mad." [For Ellen Duranceau's review of this book, see *ATG*, v.8, #3, June 1996, p.40-41.] Basbanes quotes one collector of the madness: "When you buy books, you buy some to read, some to own, and some for reference. You want to possess the books, you want to own them, you want to hold them. Perhaps you even hope that you will read them." My own madness for Julian continued unabated for the first ten years. While giving over some small efforts in my pursuit of Julian, I was also finishing off my *Oryx Press* bibliography, *William Morris in Private Press and Limited Edition*. But with that book finished and published, my silly mind turned to other pursuits.

My letter to Julian, dated August 5, 1984, gives an early indication that the book madness had set in, for I wrote "One of the things I hope to do while in England is to complete my Julian Symons Collection. As things now stand, I need only five English editions to make my collection complete. Right now I have two full J. S. shelves, with 102 hard-bound and 61 paperback editions. I should soon be in a good position to do a Julian Symons bibliography. Want to help me on it?"

There it is, the dual signs of book madness, the words "COMPLETE" and "BIBLIOGRAPHY." The road to hell may be

paved with good intentions, but the road to book hell is paved with words like "complete" and "bibliography."

With the kindness I was to always associate with Julian Symons, he tried his best to both help me and dissuade me in my foolish thoughts of a bibliography. His first letter to me on the subject, dated August 13, 1984 said: "Two shelves full of JS books makes you the premier collector. And yes, I'd be happy to help with a bibliography, if that suggestion is seriously meant, which I doubt." He compounded these sage words with further discouragement on October 15, 1984: "About that projected bibliography: I do just a little have a feeling that you may be taking on more than you expect ... But if you are SINCERE in your determination to do a lot of work (and I'd love it if you were), then one way of starting would be to send me a list of

continued on page 30

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From Collector to Author
from page 29

everything you know and/or possess. I would then add things you may not know about." Julian adding: "but, you may say, if you wanted easy going you'd never had the idea anyway!"

A full year passed, with no progress on the project, except many letters between us and a continuation of the book buying madness. On October 1, 1985 another letter from Julian and another warning: "The difficulty of doing any serious bibliography of me, if you were ever unwise enough seriously to contemplate anything of the kind, is emphasized by one of the items crowding my desk. This is a bibliography of **Len Deighton**, for which I've written a Foreword. The number of my forewords and introductions alone is formidable. Be warned."

Not being the brightest person, I didn't take his warning. We jump ahead another two years, to May of 1987, when I'm writing: "Thanks for the off-print of 'Orwell's Prophecies.'" There is no way that I would have ever found this and I am delighted to add it to my J.S. Library. I know you think I will never finish collecting Symons stuff, and perhaps you are right. I really do intend on writing that J.S. Bibliography — the question is when? At last count I have 197 items, and hardly a month goes by that I don't add one or two more."

Finally, on May 2, 1988, some four years after I first mentioned the words "Julian Symons Bibliography," I wrote to Julian: "I am happy with how my Julian Symons collection is coming along, and I saw a publisher (**Southern Illinois University Press** — Carbondale) last week about publishing a bibliography of the works of Julian Symons. He seemed interested and said I would hear from them after they had an editorial meeting on the subject." I had met with **Kenny Withers**, the Director of the SIU Press at the suggestion of **Otto Penzler** of the **Mysterious Press** in New York.

I was in Carbondale visiting SIU on company business and called on Mr. Withers, mentioning my Symons collection and he asked what I intended doing with it. I said: "Write a bibliography, you interested in publishing it?" He said "Perhaps" and then nearly two months passed before I heard from him. I wrote of this to Julian on September 24, 1988, adding: "Question: Would you still be interested in my doing this (your) bibliography?: Please see enclosed photos of the current Julian Symons-Walsdorf collection. It is growing. I have added perhaps 60 vols. in the last year of Julian Symons short stories in collected works. Also, if you are interested in having me do a bibliography, would you still be interested in writing an author's paragraph on each major work, saying something personal about the title, how or why you wrote it, or how you feel about it now?"

To this question Julian gave this somewhat tongue-in-cheek reply on October 8, 1988: "Thanks for this amazing, superlative, unparalleled Julian Symons collection shown in the photographs. They astonish, delight and horrify me. How much, too much, I have written." He then added as yet another warning: "I'd be delighted if you felt you could undertake doing the bibliography, should regard it as a remarkably generous tribute on your part. And yes, I'd write something about each major item ... Let me try to summarize my feelings. I think for the sake of your sanity, the Bibliography should be confined to (i.) Books and pamphlets (ii.) Contributions to books, in the shape of introductions and articles. All this on the assumption that Kenny's chums at SIU Press say yes." And as an afterword to the above, Julian added in a PS "Reading over the above, do hope I've not sounded pompous or dictatorial — my only desire is to be of use — feel free to ignore everything that seems stupid." In January of 1989 I wrote telling Julian that the project was on, meaning that I, and my wife Bonnie, would start writing the book. All was encouraging, with the now very large Julian Symons collection on hand, taking up some thirty-three feet of shelf space in my up-stairs hallway. I also wrote Julian that "Bonnie had not found a job as yet, and she had agreed that while she is at home, she will help

with the book. She is good on the P.C., which will make doing the book and index a good deal easier."

To this Julian replied: "Greetings to Bonnie. We're so very pleased that things seem to be under control, and I'm delighted that she will be helping with the Bibliography. What's a P.C.? You see how ignorant I am?" Understandably, this, coming from a man who still wrote first drafts using a biro [a pen] and working in longhand, writing to a man still mired in the antiquities of a forty-year-old Smith-Corona manual typewriter.

Early in January, 1991, I wrote Julian suggesting titles for the book. I wrote: "My first choice is Julian Symons: Master of Crime, or Julian Symons: His Life and Works, or Julian Symons: Fifty Years and Fifty Books. Which, if any, do you like best? Any title ideas?" Two months later he replied: "A title for your book. I really prefer Life and Works because it doesn't pin me so much so closely to the board as simply a crime writer." He then continued: "My only news is criminal news. In May I get something called the **Cartier Diamond Dagger**, awarded here every year, the presentation made at the House of Lords, plus a party there. I say 'get', but it's far too valuable to be left even in the care of a crime writer, and is whisked back into the Cartier vaults, the recipient fobbed off with a pair of diamond cuff links." Julian closed off this 1991 letter by saying: "And also in May a new, and good, book of mine is published, *Death's Darkest Face*. You will receive a copy in due course. My last hurrah? Perhaps."

Fortunately not his last hurrah, for *Death's Darkest Face* was followed by an additional four novels and a collection of short stories. And while Julian was accomplishing all this, my life as an amateur bibliographer went on, pounding away at the typewriter, with Bonnie keying in her sections on the computer. Thanks to her powers with the computer, all was made readable. We even managed to do a proper book prospectus in which I gave projections of future sales to Academic and Large Public Libraries, mystery book collectors, used and rare booksellers and the UK market and finished it off by offering my assessment of any known competition, which I ranked as "NONE."

In 1992 we sent out copies of the book prospectus to a number of publishers, **Oak Knoll Books** in Delaware, **Columbia University Press**, **SIU**, **University of Chicago Press**, **University of Iowa Press**, **Kent State**, **University of Michigan**, **University Press of New England**, **Duke University Press**, **The Popular Press of Bowling Green**, **Scarecrow Press** and **Bruccoli Clarke** in Columbia, South Carolina.

Almost as fast as the prospectus went out, the rejections came in. Many were very nice "no-thank you's" but they were "no thank you's" none the less. My friend Kenny Withers at SIU wrote "Sorry to say that since 1988 (when we first talked about the Symons book) we've abandoned our mystery writers series, and, we wouldn't be the best publisher now for the Symons bibliography."

Norman Horrocks, Vice President at Scarecrow Press wrote the longest letter, a full page single spaced, basically saying they might be interested, but a lot of additional work would need to be done to expand the bibliography to cover newspaper and magazine writings. To this suggestion Julian replied to me in June of 1992: "Now that I'm eighty, and that I do much more around the house, I really do have to conserve my literary energies. I don't, to be candid, want to spend any more time on the bibliography, in searching out this and that."

Matthew J. Bruccoli, President of **Bruccoli Clark Layman**, wrote the kindest rejection letter, saying in part: "The Press is simply unable to give your book the editorial attention it requires. Please convey my personal regrets to Julian. It would have provided me great pleasure to help launch this. Let me know if I can help you in any other ways. Your book might be welcome at **Mysterious Press**. If you submit there, mention me to **Otto Penzler**."

All-in-all, ten book proposals went out, four rejects were

continued on page 32

From Collector to Author
from page 30

received, and I had five no replies. Finally, on June 12, 1992 a letter arrived from **Paul Wakeman**, Publishing Manager at **Oak Knoll Books** in New Castle, Delaware. He wrote: "Bob (Bob Fleck, Owner-Publisher) and I have looked over your manuscript and we are pleased to inform you that we would like to publish your book. The time does seem ripe for a Julian Symons bibliography. Enclosed you will find two copies of our contract."

The contract called for me to deliver the manuscript in these terms: "The AUTHOR shall prepare the WORK for press to the approval of the PUBLISHER and shall deliver it to the PUBLISHER, together with illustrations by November 1, 1992. If the AUTHOR fails to deliver the WORK by this date, or the WORK does not comply with the conditions described, the PUBLISHER may terminate the agreement."

It was now June 12, 1992, some seventeen years after I bought my first Symons book, and only eight years since I first wrote the words "Julian Symons bibliography." Not much had happened to me during those years, except my son graduated from high school and college, I was lucky enough to be blessed with a new daughter, I sadly found myself still later divorced, losing both a wife and my co-author on the book, and I had taken a new job at Blackwell North America as Vice President-Domestic Sales — but other than these few things, life went on as usual. I continued to buy books, hundreds more, not all of them relating to Julian. I continued to work on the bibliography, with great spurts of intense energy followed by sometimes weeks of inactivity. Life went on and I pounded away at my old Smith-Corona.

I had, though, also finished the writing of the bibliography. But all of my leisurely work habits were about to change, and like the traditional sucker punch, I didn't see it coming. The day after Christmas, 1992, among the late Christmas cards was an innocent letter from Oak Knoll which talked about the co-publisher, **Robert Cross** of **St. Paul's Bibliographies** in London. The following words jumped out at me: "Our reader thought your manuscript very good, but the St. Paul's reader felt a few things needed tidying up before we can proceed with publication." Not too bad, I thought, as I read on to the following: "Robert Cross has come up with the following remedies to these problems:

1. Get well-known crime-writer and friend of Julian's to write an Introduction. Possibilities would be: **Eric Ambler**, **Harry Keating**, **Patricia Highsmith** or **Ruth Rendall**.

2. State at the beginning what the bibliography sets out to cover and what it is not going to attempt to cover.

3. Obtain a detailed report on the bibliographical arrangement, and if you do not have the time or feel you do not want to attempt to implement the suggestions, hire a person to do this."

I could live with points one and two. I asked for clarification of point three. That clarification came on February 15, 1993 in a letter forwarded to me by Julian. Written to him by Robert Cross (Julian and Cross were long time friends, I would only later learn) the letter read: "We are making progress with the Julian Symons bibliography so that I will definitely stock it in this country (the U.K.) and, if Jack is prepared to follow my detailed report on structural changes and additions, I would include the book in my new **St. Paul's Bibliographies** Series."

This letter is followed by a five-page, 38 point report asking for major changes, additions and corrections to the manuscript. Among the finer points: Add a section on short stories in magazines. Change the title. Re-write the introduction. Add a chronology of Julian's life. Add the preface by **Harry Keating**. Cover all U.K./U.S. paperback editions.

I was at my library desk and read and re-read the Cross manifesto in utter disbelief. What he was asking for was a complete and total rearrangement of the book with additions which would eventually add more than one-third to its bulk. All this to a manuscript that I was totally and completely done with.

I was tired of Symons! I was tired of writing. I was tired of my old, tired Smith-Corona!

Six months passed. I made some phone calls, but the letter from Cross and some letters from Oak Knoll went unanswered. The log-jam finally broke in a July 23, 1993 letter from Oak Knoll. They agreed to pay \$2,800 to a Portland-based editor, **Susan Blackaby** so that all of Cross' wishes might be accommodated.

I had never worked directly with an editor before, and had no idea what wonderful people editors were. In my case, Suzie Blackaby turned out to be an absolute angel; patient, tactful, competent, quick and smart. She took charge. In my introduction to the Julian Symons bibliography, I closed by thanking some fourteen people for helping on the book, ending with these words: "Last, but most important, is my special thanks to my Portland-based editor, Suzie Blackaby. Without her help and encouragement, this book would never have been completed." Truer words have never been spoken.

All this effort to publish a 340-page book. I'm happy to say that publication was November 25 of 1996. The presses in Michigan printed 1,000 copies (650 for the U.S., 350 for the U.K. markets).

All this effort, all these words, all the cooperation of friends, librarians, colleagues, booksellers. All this work in the hopes that Julian would see his bibliography. All lost. In an August 24, 1994 letter from Julian, full of bookish news and comments about the bibliography were inserted the following words: "I think I can promise (not quite the right word?) that there won't be many more items to add to the bibliography. I have an incurable cancer, my very pleasant specialist says terminal. I don't doubt he's right, although I don't actually see the terminus buffers at the moment but writing becomes slower and more difficult." And so it was to be on November 22, 1994 I penned a short note of condolence to Julian's widow, Kathleen: "Please accept our sincere sympathy in your sorrow. Julian shall be missed by all of us."

Five months later, in a letter to Kathleen, I remarked: "In your letter you mentioned that it was a great comfort to know so many people loved and admired Julian ... I wonder if you would have any desire to see some of his obituaries, along with notes and comments from a few select writers put into small book form ... I certainly would be most willing to work on such a project, with your advice and counsel, if this is something you might desire." Kathleen was agreeable, giving me a list of some thirty authors to contact.

Twenty-four agreed to work with me on the tribute book and in May of 1996, with the help of **Neil Shaver** of the **Yellow Barn Press** of Council Bluffs, Iowa, we published *Julian Symons Remembered: Tributes from Friends*. Writers such as **Robert Conquest**, **P.D. James**, **Harry Keating**, **Peter Lovesay**, **George Simes**, **John Welcome** and **Robin W. Winks**, along with fifteen others, offered their deeply personal tributes to Julian.

On Friday, November 1, the *Times Literary Supplement* reviewed this book, saying: "Twenty-five friends and colleagues of Julian Symons (1912-94) are brought together here to form a collection of laudatory snippets, all heartening in intention and effect. ...

"Even while he was alive, the first thing about Symons that everyone recognized and applauded was his versatility — that and the incisiveness which led him straight to the heart of every literary matter he tackled. ...

"This short book is beautifully produced and limited to 225 copies — a rare edition celebrating an individual of rare aplomb and integrity."

My time is up, my story of Julian Symons almost complete. There are still the few missing books from the collection that I must find. I am, after all, still the collector looking for completeness. 🐾

NB: This paper was delivered at the 1996 Charleston Conference, November 7, 1996. — KS