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ATG Interviews Nicholas Basbanes

Author, *Patience & Fortitude*, HarperCollins Publishers

by Katina Strauch (Editor, *Against the Grain*)

ATG: Are you a bibliomane? Do you collect books yourself? If so, in what area(s)?

NB: I quote a famous German bibliographer in *A Gentle Madness* by the name of **Hans Bohatta**, to wit: "The bibliophile is the master of his books, the bibliomaniac their slave." By that definition, I prefer to regard myself as a bibliophile, though like Bohatta, I also agree that the line separating the two is fine, and that it is always difficult to know when it has been crossed. I prefer the assessment offered by a friend of mine, who once introduced me to a group by saying, "**Nick Basbanes** may not be a bibliomaniac, but he is surely at risk." Let's just say that I prefer to think of myself as being on the cusp. I love books, they are a part of my daily life, they engulf my house to the tune of perhaps 10,000 volumes, but they are here for their utility as much as they are for decoration. My books are my tools, and though I have a number of collecting interests, the materials I find myself gathering with particular enthusiasm these days are books that can help me in my work. To cite one example, it pleases me greatly to say that of the several hundred books listed in the bibliography of *A Gentle Madness*, fully 95 percent come from my own library. I hope in five years to be able to say the same about *Patience & Fortitude*.

ATG: Was a member of your family in publishing or a librarian? Where did you get your obsession with books and libraries? What was a formative experience for you regarding books? It's so very refreshing!

NB: No, there are no librarians or publishing people in my family. I have loved books all my life. I can't ever remember not reading and treasuring books, and indeed I think I have always aspired to be an author. I was an English major in college and I began working for newspapers immediately, but I always regarded journalism as training for what I perceived to be the main event, which was the writing of an important book. The most significant event in this development, I believe, came in 1978 when I was appointed literary editor of the *Sunday Telegram* in Worcester, Mass., a dream job if ever there was one for a person devoted to books. Not only did I work with books, I had access to virtually every new book published in the United States, and because I immediately embarked on writing a weekly column that featured a personal interview with a major author, I met and spoke with some of the most important writers from around the world on a regular basis. The decision to write a book about books grew gradually out of that milieu.

ATG: What sort of investigative reporting did you do in the 70s? And tell us about the nationally syndicated column on books and authors that you wrote for eight years.

NB: In 1974 I won a first prize from the Associated Press Managing Editors Association

in New England for an investigative series that documented irregularities in the Worcester County Treasurer's office. In another project, I investigated charges of corruption in the Arson Squad of the Worcester Police Department, producing stories that cost four officers their jobs, including a captain. One of my favorite stories determined that a former pillar of the community—a lawyer, former school committeeman, and apparently a devoted family man—had pulled off an elaborate scheme to make the world believe he had died in a drowning accident off Martha's Vineyard so he could run away with his girlfriend, who happened to be the former wife of a city councillor. What made this story of particular moment was that the man's wife—who truly believed him to have been dead—collected close to a million dollars in life insurance payments. My discovery that **John Corbin** was alive and well and living in Florida—are you ready for this—as a law librarian was a sensational story that made national news, and I later covered his trial in U. S. District Court in Boston on charges of having knowingly allowed the mails to be used for insurance fraud. I worked on a number of projects like this, but these were some of the ones I enjoyed doing the most, stories that involved a tremendous amount of research with public documents—following the paper trails and following the money, and conducting hundreds of interviews—that proved invaluable to me when I began researching my books. When I left the newspaper in 1991 to work on my book, I continued to write my weekly literary column, and because it now belonged to me—not the newspaper, I was able to offer it to other newspapers. Ultimately, the features ran in 25 publications around the country, primarily in cities like Salt Lake City, Eugene, Ore., Knoxville, Tenn., Madison, Wis., Des Moines, Iowa, Wichita, Kan., Jackson, Miss., Springfield, Mo., Quincy, Mass., Gainesville, Fla., Tallahassee, Fla., Toledo, Ohio, Columbus, Ohio, Grand Rapids, Mich., Manchester, Conn., New London, Conn., with occasional placements in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, *Milwaukee Sentinel*, all cities where I had determined that there was a decided interest in books and authors, but cities for the most part that were not on the regular publicity tour. Because I lived only 45 minutes from Boston, and because I retained my contacts with the publishing houses, I had an inexhaustible supply of interesting people to interview. My target cities were generally state capitals and cities where there were large universities. I no longer do the weekly features, but I still do a monthly review of children's books that is carried in eight newspapers, the *Orlando Sentinel* most prominent among them.

ATG: What motivated you to write *A Gentle Madness*?

NB: As I said earlier, I was working with books and authors on a daily basis; add to that the fact that I had become a collector, at first of books that had been inscribed to me by the

people I was interviewing, people like **John Updike**, **Norman Mailer**, **Toni Morrison**, **Arthur Miller**, **Joseph Heller**, **Louise Erdrich**, **William Kennedy**, **E. L. Doctorow**, **David McCullough**, **Jane Smiley**, **Robert B. Parker**, and so on. In 1988, I wrote a long feature article for *Bostonia*, a magazine devoted to Boston cultural life, about 1,200 years of book collecting in Boston. This seemingly preposterous premise developed from the 350 years books had been collected by **Harvard**, the 175 years at the **Boston Athenaeum**, the 150 or so at the **Boston Public Library**, the 200 at the **Massachusetts Historical Society**, the 175 at the **American Antiquarian Society** in Worcester, and so on, and my angle was to tell it through the fascinating stories of the individuals responsible for building the collections, so many of them delightful bibliomaniacs. Indeed, the title of the book is drawn from an epitaph written about **Isaiah Thomas**, the great American patriot, printer, and founder of the **American Antiquarian Society** in 1814, that he had "been touched early by the gentlest of infirmities, bibliomania." I had a tremendous response to that story, and it was my wife, **Connie**, who said to me, "you know, this just could be the book you were born to write." And that is when the proverbial light flashed over my head; within six weeks I had written a proposal, acquired an agent, and sold the idea to a New York publisher.

ATG: Your new book is called *Patience & Fortitude* — named after the two lions outside the New York Public Library. Is it a sequel to *A Gentle Madness*? *A Gentle Madness* is more about book collectors, but *Patience & Fortitude* is more about librarians, correct? Can you tell us more about both books?

NB: I like to think of it more as a companion volume, but as I state in the dustjacket blurb, it is my hope that the new book flows seamlessly out of its predecessor. Without meaning to sound pretentious, I nevertheless regard what I am doing as a corpus, in the sense that it is a continuing work. *A Gentle Madness* concentrated on the timeless impulse to gather, collect, preserve, and pass on books. True, these people are generically known as collectors, but I see them as much more than that. I see them as people who save elements of our culture, history, literature, and heritage that otherwise would be lost forever. So the first book is also about booksellers to some degree, and there is one lengthy chapter about the **University of Texas** at Austin in which I describe a fabulous case of what I call "institutional bibliomania." I called that chapter "Instant Ivy," and it tells how in a period of about 15 years the library there went from being a pretty good university library to one of the world's best in the field of 20th century literary manuscripts. The new book picks up from where its predecessor left off, expanding the focus to include the much broader concept of book culture, with particular emphasis

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sion on the “book places” that have evolved over the centuries to contain these essential artifacts, and to tell the stories of the people who have been their architects and custodians. I also have a lengthy section on “book people,” authors, booksellers, bookmakers, readers, and, yes, some more collectors in a chapter I call “Madness Redux” among them.

ATG: *You have done a lot of interviews for both *A Gentle Madness* and *Patience & Fortitude*. How do you decide who to interview? How do you set up the interview? How do you frame your questions?*

NB: I have built up a tremendous network of sources, and I combine what I learn from these people with my instincts for knowing a good story when I see one. I keep my eyes and ears open. I am old-school in the sense that while I do many telephone interviews, and while I have no compunctions about using the Internet to scout out information, I still believe that I have to conduct face to face interviews with all of my primary subjects, and that I have to see the places I write about and absorb the ambience. I prepare carefully for all of my interviews, and I do like to know in advance how I am going to begin the conversation. But once we start talking, I like to let the interview follow its own course. You have to determine before you start, of course, exactly what it is that you want from a person, which means that you really have to know everything that you can about the individual and the individual's work before you sit down to talk. More often than not, it means you probably know already the answers you are going to get. The real fun is when they surprise you with the unexpected, which happens more often than not.

ATG: *What was your most interesting interview? I found your discussion of your time with Stephen Blumberg fascinating.*

NB: I really have a very paternal attitude about all of “my” subjects. Once I write about these people, I consider them “mine.” Like both of my daughters, I love them all equally.

ATG: *Do you like librarians? Do you have any anecdotes to tell on/about libraries and/or librarians?*

NB: I love librarians. I unhesitatingly place them in company with firefighters, nurses and Coast Guard men and women, people whose reason for being is to help others unhesitatingly. I refer you to the second paragraph of my acknowledgments in *Patience & Fortitude*.

ATG: *How many libraries have you visited? What is your absolute favorite library? Why?*

NB: I don't honestly know how many, dozens to be sure, all over the United States and Europe. One of the reasons I decided to do *Patience & Fortitude* was because of the opportunity it gave me and my wife to travel to fourteen countries and to visit some of the world's greatest repositories. If I had to pick an absolute favorite, it would have to be the **Biblioteca Laurenziana** in Florence, the exquisite temple to books designed for the **Medici** family by **Michelangelo** in the 16th century.

ATG: *A third book-on-books by you, called *Life Beyond Life: The Permanence of Books**

*in an Impermanent World, will be published by HarperCollins in 2003. What do you think that the virtual and e-revolutions are going to do to libraries? Will they survive as we know them? Will print collections survive? How will “the archive for posterity” be preserved in the electronic environment? And will you discuss this in your book, *Life Beyond Life*?*

NB: Every one of the questions you raise here will be addressed in *Life Beyond Life*, and I think I would rather discuss those issues when I am finished with my research and when my writing is complete. But I will say that reports of the death of the book are absurdly premature—to that end I refer you to the chapter in *Patience & Fortitude* I call “In the Stacks,” in which I make pretty clear with careful documentation that the best colleges and universities today are still measured to a great extent by the strength of their libraries. There are some really excellent interviews in there, **Peter Lyman** of the **Bancroft Library** at **Berkeley** being one, and some interesting case studies that should be of particular interest to acquisition libraries throughout North America. Let me note, too, that if the book is dead, and if libraries are superannuated institutions, then why is

it that so many countries like France, England, Germany, and Japan spent millions on new national libraries at the very time that the electronic revolution was evident, and why are these institutions perceived as indelible expressions of national purpose and culture? I do address some of these questions in the concluding chapters of *Patience & Fortitude*.

ATG: *Some personal questions. What do you read in your spare time? Tell us about your hobbies and your family and family life. You have two college-age daughters, correct? Will they become librarians?*

NB: I read all the time, and my tastes are eclectic, with a general preference for good nonfiction. My current passion, believe it or not, is books about libraries, but also archaeology. (In another life, I think I'd like to be a classicist or an archaeologist.) But for idle pleasure, I have to confess a shameless affection for intelligent entertainments by the likes of **P.D. James**, **John le Carré**, **Bob Parker**, **Elmore Leonard**, the late **Ross Thomas**, **James Lee Burke**. I don't think my daughters will become librarians, but that is entirely up to them, of course, and it does please me beyond words that both are appreciative readers and great lovers of books.

ATG Interviews

David Schappell

Director, Corporate Accounts, Amazon.com

by **Katina Strauch** (Editor, *Against the Grain*)

ATG: *We understand that Amazon.com has just launched its long-awaited Corporate Accounts program, which allows libraries, corporations, and institutions the option of using a credit card or paying by purchase order against an established line of credit. We understand that you led the team involved in getting the word out to the library community, so we wanted to sit down with you to help answer questions librarians are sure to have. So — why is this news so important to librarians, and why should they even care?*

DS: We are responding to what librarians have asked us for. Rather than a top-down approach, which requires contracts and agreements and signatures from deans and directors and business offices that can take days or weeks, acquisitions librarians can set up a Corporate Account (www.amazon.com/corporate) themselves in just a few minutes. If they have been buying things from **Amazon.com** using a credit card and want to keep that method of payment in place, that's fine. Or they can apply for a line of credit right on the site, which is usually granted in a matter of seconds, and start shopping. For over a month now, I've been talking to several hundred librarians all across the country, from both small law libraries to multi-branch library systems. I think I can say honestly that they are uniformly delighted with this new free service, as the entire program was designed with the library market in mind. Most of the “early

adopters” — the librarians who signed up immediately — are telling us we did it right.

ATG: *We noticed that Cindy Cunningham (who spoke at the Charleston Conference last year) was recently on the cover of *Library Journal*. You seem to be reaching out to the library market. Why? Is there a slowdown in other parts of your business?*

DS: I'm sure you know that **Amazon.com** is always extremely interested in improving the customer experience for any kind of customer. Librarians have always been among our best customers and they told us they would love to be able to use purchase orders when buying books. We simply responded.

ATG: *We know that some of your competitors—like Barnes&noble.com—are already doing this. Why did it take you so long?*

DS: We know there are others in the space, and actually we think that's fine, as we never expect to be a library's sole vendor, maybe not even primary vendor. And some of the “competitors” you refer to are among our own vendors. **Baker & Taylor** and **J. A. Majors**, for instance, are two of our best book partners. We have many sources for books, music, video, and other items and sometimes librarians find things at **Amazon.com** they simply won't find anywhere else. Our **Amazon Advantage** program, for instance, enables thousands of smaller publishers who are often not sourced by the dis-

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