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Confessions of an Out-of-Print Bookseller

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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@teisprint.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 "looks" and "sees" of **Dick and Jane**, a neighbor gave me a copy of **Roy Chapman Andrew's "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 cyberphilic spouse, I started listing on the then new sites of **Interloc** and **Bibliofind**. After around a month or so of almost con-

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people profile

BORN & LIVED: Born in Brooklyn, NY; lived in Queens, Staten Island, Paris and NE Pennsylvania.

EARLY LIFE: White collar working class Italian-American family; somewhat nerdy kid, educated in Catholic schools, who spent too much time reading and not enough watching television.

FAMILY: Wife, Narda, 1 dog and 2 cats.

EDUCATION: Bachelors in history and biology from St. John's University; 2 odd years at University of Paris; MS in Counseling, University of Scranton; miscellaneous other follies.

FIRST JOB: Messenger and office boy in downtown Manhattan.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: Selling books, attempts at writing, collecting junk.

IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE TO: Cook, garden, read, walk in the woods.

FAVORITE BOOKS: Herodotus, *The Histories*; Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*; Dante, *Divine Comedy*; Ignazio Silone, *Bread and Wine*; Aldous Huxley, *Island*; Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*; Sir James Frazier, *The Golden Bough*; that's enough for now!

PET PEEVES/WHAT MAKES ME MAD: General state of the world.

PHILOSOPHY: Stoical nihilism.

MOST MEANINGFUL CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: Going into the black after two years.

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: Own and live in a villa overlooking the Tyrennian Sea.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: If the bookselling world is saturated now, it will be super-saturated then, as everyone with a computer and a box of moldy books they pulled out of a cellar will try to get rich quick. This, coupled with whatever pent-up demand is still left almost certainly being completely filled, easily available digitalized texts and ever declining literacy (how many kids have you seen reading instead of playing a computer game?) will result in what may be termed a shakeout/shakein cycle. As people give up bookselling after realizing they can make more money in an hour working at McDonald's than in a month peddling paper, others will jump into the pseudo vacuum in the market because it has become such an easy business to enter; it will be correspondingly more difficult to succeed.

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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.

And so it began.

Remembering the laments back at the seminar 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 market 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 inventory 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 contemplating dropping my thread and going out the escape 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 supply. 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 try to sell books, far fewer, and lower quality ones, were to be found at most 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 choicer 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 slugfest where even the barbarians who sacked Rome would have been shocked at the lack of even the most rudimentary 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 increase 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 lowest price; the next to come along cut that price in half yet again, and so forth in some perversion 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 bells and whistles also started appearing in the form of even 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 current free for all. At the other were long, rambling de facto essays explaining plots, characters, 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, an ex-library, a first edition, a paperback or a hardcover. Please call or e-mail for more details."

And so we have the **Minotaur**. The nature of the beast is decreasing supply at higher prices on one end, increasing supply and falling prices on the other, a hodgepodge of descriptions, and an ever more crowded field. Regarding the latter, I will say, perhaps too judgmentally, that far too many online booksellers haven't any real idea of what they are doing. This can occasionally result in some real opportunities for the astute customer, since something simply described as an "old pamphlet" and offered for a dollar might turn out to be a previously unknown work of, say **Thomas Paine**, whom the dealer presumably never heard of; more often than not, it means no research has been done, the seller doesn't know how to and/or can't be bothered accurately describing the book, or they may not even have it.

I find prices at either extreme suspect. Unless the business exists solely as a tax write-off, it is almost impossible to survive by selling anything for under \$5, and pricing something of which there are dozens of copies going for \$5 or less at \$500 is at least a yellow alert for a possible insurance scam, pump and dump scheme, or maybe just delusions of grandeur. Grotesque errors in spelling, grammar and syntax speak for themselves, and say less for the seller. I could carp on forever, but to the crux — what do I do to survive and at least try for my little toehold?

To begin at the beginning, while I already may have more books than I will live to process, I still spend a day or so a week, at least during the summer season, poking around at the occasional sale, with the main difference, as lamented above, being that instead of hundreds of books, I'm now usually lucky to get even a bag full; it's the thrill of the hunt, rather than any hope for a trophy. Book selling is probably the easiest business in the world to nickel and dime oneself to death in, since even though there are not nearly as many books overall in the usual venues as there was just a few years ago, there is more than enough junk; the most important thing to know is what not to buy, which is almost everything one sees. Some seem to concentrate on mint condition best sellers; specialists look in their fields; I look for what bitter experience has shown to be sellable in the past (like betting systems based on old racing forms, no guarantees about the present), or the less obvious things that a hopefully non-dangerous bit of knowledge points to.

For example, I was recently rummaging through a box of sheet music at an antique shop. Forgotten musicals featuring stars of the '20s, nicely decorated covers from the 19th century, or original **Gershwin** tunes may seem promising, but if one recalls that at one time playing and singing along at home was popular entertainment, then it becomes obvious that rare as these things may look, they are, in fact, quite common, and the online market is super-satu-

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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 virtually 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 sort of thing that 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 bookselling 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 a coal ship he 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 by 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 to look for, and the description is too bare-boned to form an accurate idea; is the tear half an inch or half a foot? Is the edge completely chopped 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 it to say that I measured and listed the lengths of the tears, etc., gave a decent synopsis of just 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 obscurities 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 come along, start 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 in question done a bit of research, he or she would have seen the real value, since several of them are Abolitionist, predate 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 collectible market, or not wind up another target for **Zeno'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 à la **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 about all 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 customer always notified. If I'll be out for more than a few days, I put everything into a vacation mode on the two sites I'm now 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 \$150 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 sold. I refunded the money without comment. 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 cancelled check." I found this odd, since if 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 bounced 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 eighth year in the virtual labyrinth of online bookselling does, and far more important, grasped hold of that thread, ever so slender, with which to find your own way when 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 Brodat? What about the description, or lack thereof? None to speak of, little about condition, a call-us-for-further-details, a long, rambling Proustian discourse on a \$1 copy of a 20 year old bestseller, or a disjointed, apparently unconscious example of stream of consciousness to name a few yellow alerts. Calling everything a 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 rigeur, but it 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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accepted only under certain conditions are not signs of buyer friendliness. Do they have a phone number? Say who they are? Make grandiose 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! 🐢

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>
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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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