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Back Talk -- Library Heroes, Patience, Stories with Happy Endings, and Problems Yet Unsolved

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Words... They're Just Words

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ping carts full of books. He came into my store nearly everyday and left with at least twenty books. He nearly paid my rent for 15 years. But he was like a plague. When a tag sale was advertised in the paper he would call the homes and beg to come early. He had usually cleaned things out the night before I pulled up at 6 a.m. He was always trying to sneak into booksales early. He even went so far as to hide the night before at the biggest book sale of the year at the Public Library. He pretended to be a volunteer helping to sort books and when it came time to close he slipped under one of the tables and slept there all night so he could be first in the morning. He spent the night hiding books in the bathroom and under the staircase. When I reported him to one of the ladies running the sale she just said "He's paying for everything. What's the problem? The money all goes to charity. Now hurry along and buy some yourself".

He did have deep pockets and he never worked at anything other than buying books. His father had owned half of Storyville and when it was shut down after World War One he had taken over most of the other "Houses" in the surrounding Parish. **Anatole** was an only child and even after his father's death he continued to receive cash payments every Monday morning from his father's lawyer. From some old timers who knew the family I learned that **Anatole** hated his family and that he retreated into a world of reading and book collecting to run away from the rough criminal life that surrounded him. His collecting became more and more obsessive as he grew older. After his wife died and his children moved out his collecting became truly monomaniacal.

A doctor who had made a house call mentioned finding books everywhere in the house. Even the oven and bathtub were overflowing with books. There simply was nowhere to walk or move. He slept on the fire escape for weeks since he couldn't get into the house anymore. That's when he began buying old warehouses south of Canal and filling them too. When he had bought everything in New Orleans he travelled to England after World War Two and tried to buy everything there too. Then he hired agents to keep the books coming after he returned home.

His two sons had left the old man to his bibliomania as long they got their cash in the mail every week, but when the gravy train stopped, they made a beeline for New Orleans and to their father's house. From the time the sons got there he had been reduced to simply sitting with a blank stare while he muttered

over and over "They're just words...just words." He had developed what appeared to be Alzheimer's or some kind of dementia and they were going to have to move him into a home.

From his son **Felix**, the one that answered the phone, I learned that the two sons were all that was left of the family. Neither of them gave a damn about the collection. It was all just so much pulp as far as they were concerned. They had grown to hate everything about books from long weekends driving around the country being left in the car while their dad bought more books. **Felix** said he was trying to get on the **NASCAR** circuit and he was in a hurry to get back to Daytona. He told me that his brother worked at a gambling casino in New Jersey that he got into through some family contacts. **Felix** told me that when the cash from his dad stopped coming in they called the family lawyer. They were horrified to hear that **Anatole** had sold off all of his properties in order to continue his orgy of book buying. The sons were hoping that the money from the sale would pay off some of their gambling debts and bankroll a new race car for **Felix**. They were hoping to get millions, but they couldn't figure out why anybody in their right mind would want this stuff. The old man's muttering in the background only proved to them that books were a waste of time.

"So how much are they worth?" was the first thing that **Felix** asked me after I had been in the warehouse for about five minutes.

"I've only had time to scan the shelves. I would need days to just get a feel for what's here."

"Do people really pay good money for this stuff?" he asked with a slack jaw.

"The old man sure did. There's gotta be some other wackos out there," piped up **Louis**, the other son.

"I'll have to have some time. I probably can't even afford this. I'll get you an appraisal and you can put them up for auction."

"We don't want to wait. We want the money now."

"I could talk to some of the heavy hitters in New York and see what I can put together. Give me the catalogue your dad put together and I'll try to see what kind of dollars we're talking. I'll get back to you in two days if we don't get hit with that hurricane."

As I went to leave the old man grabbed my hand and blurted "They're only words...only words."

"Yeah we know pops" snarled **Louis**.

It was sad to see the old warhorse so demented. He couldn't even get out of his chair anymore.

Two days later I called back and went over to 15 Tchoupitoulas. I had gotten the go ahead from a syndicate of auctioneers to offer 2 million dollars for the collection. That worked out to about four dollars a book. A real bargain for the syndicate. They were lusting after a collection that was legendary in the book trade. **Anatole** had spent wildly at New York auctions through his agents there and even though none of the syndicate knew him personally they did know that he had bought only the choicest items. After I faxed a portion of the massive catalogue the syndicate called and said they would agree to buy it sight unseen. A collection of this magnitude hadn't come on the market in decades. They would fly down after the storm to deliver the check.

As I walked over to the warehouse the wind was whipping something fierce, but it appeared that New Orleans had dodged the "Big One" again. When I entered the warehouse the old man stopped me and started his litany "They're words...only words". Wow he was gonzo. He needed to get some professional attention real soon. **Felix** was happy to hear what I had been able to put together. But before I left I wanted to look at some of the books that I had only had time to scan with a flashlight from behind piles of boxes. I wanted to collate a few of the better pieces. Just from reading the catalogue and looking at the bindings I was sure that this was going to be a landmark sale. The syndicate was making out like bandits. Sure there was lots of junk, but that could be sold off or donated to the library for their book sale.

It was too dark to really see much of the collection so I asked the brothers to open up some of the iron hatches on the windows. As they pushed the heavy storm shutters open I reached for a Shakespeare folio dated 1623 on the spine. There were two others just like it sitting on the shelf. My hands trembled as I opened this Holy Grail of all bibliophiles. The light from the open windows had cut into the murky darkness and I could make out what appeared to be shreds of paper falling like snow onto the floor. The weight and heft of the massive tome had turned to air in my grasp. The entire contents were like confetti blowing in the breeze. The binding was intact and beautiful, but that was all that remained. I reached for the other Folios and they too opened up a confetti storm of paper as the wind kicked up from the open windows. I frantically picked up a handful of the chaff and I was struck that all the pieces were black. The white paper around each word had been chewed away leaving only a single word... and wind. The termites! The world's most ravenous termites had gotten to the collection. New Orleans was home to a strain of termites that could devour a whole house in a day. They could consume a living oak. They were slowly eating the whole city.

In **Anatole's** brick warehouses they had devoured only the paper in the books, the ink being poisonous to them. Volume after volume liquefied at my touch. The wind from the storm was picking up the word chaff and spinning it madly out the open windows and into the street. The two sons were struggling to close the shutters and swearing at me, like it was somehow my fault. They had never as much as opened one of their father's books. **Anatole** was screaming "They're only words...words".... Now it made sense. He had gone mad when it dawned on him that his whole collection had become nothing but a mass of pulp. As the gathering wind forced open even more windows **Anatole** jumped up from his chair and began chasing the whirling words, trying to cram them into his pockets, chanting "they're mine...they're mine" as he plunged out the third floor window grasping at the words in the wind.

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those we visited are trying very hard to stay within the bounds of copyright. While some of these libraries had older western language books that appeared to be a bit worse for the wear, others had row after row of nice shiny new books in both English and Chinese. They also seemed to be fairly well managed. I visited China with a delegation of East Asian librarians in 1979 and asked each director what were their three major problems to overcome. The most frequent response was the lack of qualified staff. While the libraries we visited this time still had many relatively uneducated staff members, they also had many young, eager well trained librarians who were well trained and interested in how to become more effective.

I am optimistic about the future of China's libraries. Annually the **University of Hong Kong** sponsors with the help of others a library leadership institute. To each institute will come scores of very bright, animated, and enthusiastic librarians. It is inspirational to see them attack the management problems that their small teams are asked to resolve. There are, of course, all sorts of problems for Libraries in China — especially the lack of freedom to select and read all points of view; yet, compared to the past, the stories being played out in most libraries, seem to be much happier than during the previous 60 or 70 years.

See <http://www.hklib.org.hk/about-us.htm> for more information.

Back Talk — Library Heroes, Patience, Stories with Happy Endings, and Problems Yet Unsolved

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These words pretty well summarize my impressions of the ten or so libraries that I visited over a long weekend as part of the **Hong Kong Library Association** group's delegation to the **Ninth Academic Conference of the Zhejiang Provincial Society for Library Science**. **Hong Kong's Library Association** has a long tradition of taking trips together. The **Association** itself has four main objectives:

- promote library and information services
- communicate with the outside world about these services
- unite and promote the interests of our librarians
- promote professional education and training

These trips serve to accomplish at least the first two objectives and they also serve to facilitate good communication and the development of good personal relationships—in China particularly, and perhaps the world over, personal relationships make everything possible.

But back to heroes. Heroes are usually thought of brave individuals who risk their lives in the face of danger in behalf of others or a noble cause. In numerous conversations with librarians at some of the historically important but obscure libraries we visited, I didn't really

hear stories of bravery in the face of real physical danger so much as examples of the perseverance and patience exhibited by generations of librarians working in these libraries to provide readers with access to information.

Apparently, just about one hundred years ago government leaders/educators in many Chinese cities decided that their people deserved "public" libraries and scores were established across Zhejiang province at least. China with its several thousand years of history is not a stranger to private libraries established by individuals for their own use, or shared with a restricted circle of others, but libraries open to the public were largely a 20th century phenomena. In the past 100 years these libraries have endured the world's wars, China's own wars including the fall of the Qing dynasty, many battles between rival warlords, the civil war between the Nationalist and the Communist parties, and a string of political campaigns ever since Liberation designed to protect the people from anti-revolutionary points of view.

The survival and success of libraries, for all of their complexities, are inextricably linked to money: with money you buy reading/viewing material, space to house these materials, and the services of people who for a whole host of reasons like to, or have to, work there selecting, purchasing, arranging, circulating, servicing, or managing books and other reading materials. China's many wars and upheavals at times starved its libraries. We visited one library that had begun as the private library of one man who was obsessed with collecting. His library included a nearly unique palace edition of a set of "collectanea." The Chinese for centuries have had a penchant for reprinting the best books within large collections or collectanea. Some of the same books have been reprinted many times but each time the wooden blocks, with the characters carved in relief (and backwards so they print frontwards), can be changed here and there. While there is some overlap, there are also many unique books in each collection. Passionate collectors want to get as many editions as possible. The library we were visiting

had a particularly distinguished collection that had been owned by an emperor and so was the collector's great prize. In the years leading up to World War II, however, the collector's descendants sold the collection off a section at a time to put food on the table and pay for other needs. The Japanese occupation led to looting and by the time the war had ended; only the inexpensive materials remained on the shelves. Yet, other descendants went all around China in search of what had been lost and repurchased a significant portion of it.

Most of the libraries we visited had been turned into museums—you could see the grandeur of the rooms and gardens that their rich owners had enjoyed. But upstairs from the empty rooms, through which tourists ventured, was what remained of the original library. With no air conditioning whatsoever, you can imagine the conditions. Yet, need does produce innovation and the camphor shelving used in these sorts of libraries repelled bugs. Moreover, the books on the shelving we saw didn't actually rest on the shelves themselves.

Rather on each shelf were small square dowels with a thin piece of wood resting on them. The books were then laid on their sides on the thin piece of wood. Thus air could circulate through the shelving and under the books to retard mildew. It wasn't totally successful but these were books that had survived hundreds of years and would probably survive many more. I once visited a university library with wonderful air conditioning installed but the power costs were such that it was only turned on when visitors came to call.

The anti-rightist campaigns, under many different names, of the 1950's through 1976 when Mao's wife and three other accomplices, known as the Gang of Four were arrested, were particularly hard on libraries. I once visited a library which had been protected during the anti-rightist campaigns by the librarians pasting long strips of paper tape crisscrossing down each row of books with words identifying them as corrupt, counter revolutionary, and poisonous. While this tactic might not agree with the **American Library Association's Freedom to Read** philosophy—once the members of the Gang were themselves arrested, the paper tape was removed and these books were returned to service. The librarians who endured all of this travail were and are heroes in the truest sense.

But we didn't just visit old quaint libraries. China is experiencing a library building boom. Cities, counties, and provinces seem to be in competition to build beautiful marble or terrazzo floored libraries with miles of book stacks, computer rooms, and everything else one might want in a 21st century library. While academic libraries were once filled with pirated academic journals, since WIPO academic libraries like

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