Oregon Trails-Fact From Fiction

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Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7789
The arrangement for newly received books at my public library is straightforward, fiction on one side and non-fiction on the other. I start with the fiction even though I almost never find anything of interest save for the other. I take it from the shelf and open it randomly. It’s an epistolary novel and not a good sign. But wait, it is not just a series, 2016). I take it from the shelf and Bibliophilia bestseller lists and am ready to New

Although it is pitched as a novel, it is a kind the book is also what held my interest. And it with faint praise but what frustrated me about levels. Saying that it is interesting is damning that I did. It’s an interesting book on several

There are novelists who teach in order to make lectually curious and isn’t even acquainted — Bibliophilia (by N. John Hall, David R. Godine, 2016). I take it from the shelf and open it randomly. It’s an epistolary novel and not a good sign. But wait, it is not just a series, 2016). I take it from the shelf and Bibliophilia bestseller lists and am ready to New

As a novel, Bibliophilia is not very good. There are novelists who teach in order to make money but most professors of English are not novelists and if they were, they probably wouldn’t be any better than Prof. Hall. His approach, a series of letters among a novice book collector and seasoned collectors and booksellers is a clever way of talking about one’s favorite and not so favorite authors and books and to explain several facets of book collecting. As the Kirkus reviewer succinctly stated, “A how-to guide disguised in a disposable novelistic setting.”

If read carefully and thoughtfully, Bibliophila seems like a good introduction to the perils of book collecting but an annotated version would provide more thorough advice that would not be the misleading tale that unfolds in the book.

After selling a collection of letters between his grandfather and several famous Victorian novelists, including Anthony Trollope, for $400,000, Larry, for that is our rookie’s name, decides, seemingly out of the blue, to become a book collector. He is in his late 60s, as I remember, retired, and living in New York City. He seems not to be intellectually curious and isn’t even acquainted with The New Yorker Magazine until one of his correspondents tells him about it. He has read and liked Trollope. He has also read some Dickens and Hardy. His first impulse is to read all of the works by Trollope but to do so, he would need more than a measly 400 grand. So with some reasonable advice, he switches to a select few Victorian authors but even with only 400,000 clams, he is still restricted in what he can collect. As he narrows his field, he learns about first editions (this book offers no help in determining a first edition, the misleading story of Alice in Wonderland notwithstanding) and then about signed and inscribed copies.

My take on Larry is that he had more money than sense, he read very little despite having a literate and presumably literary grandfather who knew, at least in the epistolary sense, gifted Victorian novelists be able to correspond with such literary giants suggests a love and deep understanding of their works or a desire to learn more about their creative processes. I get no sense that Larry really loves Trollope but he wants to collect books and why not Trollope. Why not indeed!

Larry lives in New York City. New York City where there are still a number of good book shops including antiquarian dealers who are knowledgeable about rare books and fine literature. Larry seems never to have visited them and even after he decides he wants to collect books, he writes to a friend in London for advice instead of visiting local bookshops where he could have learned a lot just by browsing and even more by engaging the owners.

Larry buys several Victorian novels, three-deckers, before learning that some are not first editions, despite high prices. One of the authors, however, was inexpensive but also unknown. The late advice that Larry got about her was that because she was unknown, her books were not ever going to be worth much, that is, they would not go up in value. Larry and his collaborators, while later on acknowledging that it takes a few years for a book’s value to increase, really saw Larry’s purchases as investments, something that I doubt Larry’s grandfather considered when corresponding with the famous writers. And it seems strange that Larry’s grandfather would not have owned the works, in first and other important editions, when they could have been purchased at retail prices. That would have saved Larry some embarrassment and money, too, for he would have inherited a collection that he could have admired and maybe, on some rainy day, read some of the books that he didn’t know.

And as for the unknown Victorian novelist, after spending good money on her book, he never read it or tried, as far as I can tell, to find out if she had written other novels. If he liked her writing and there was more to be had, why not collect her comprehensively? But, as you will see for yourself if you decide to read Bibliophilia, Larry is continually steered to famous, if not popular, writers.

After he is introduced to The New Yorker, he finagles a tour of its offices through a friend. He is star struck and accepts the advice to collect New Yorker authors. Here he does show some sense and narrows the field to those writers he reads and likes. Finally, his correspondents are educating Larry along their own biases and inclinations.

Larry learns about bibliographies but seems to have used only a couple. He is never introduced, beyond what is in the bibliographies, about the perils of identifying true first editions beyond a discussion of Alice in Wonderland, a good beginning if followed by more examples.

Larry, over a year or more of confusion, is told that autographed, or better, inscribed, copies of first editions are worth more and those with dust jackets and inscriptions increase in value by factors of five or ten. He finds a bookseller, the one who bought the cache of Victorian letters, who specializes in autographs and is willing to let Larry trade in his uninscribed books, at full value, for the much more expensive signed copies.

Is Larry a successful collector in the end? I would say no for several reasons. Does Pock- etful of Money Larry get his just desserts? At least partly and depending on whether you like Larry or not.

As a primer on book collecting, I might assign a grade of C minus if I were feeling generous. As a cautionary tale, I might move it up to a C if I knew that anyone reading the entire book would consider all the mistakes that Larry made and would patch them together into a coherent quilt.

Aside from learning which books and writer the author of Bibliophila, likes and dislikes, through Larry, what lessons should the reader take to heart?

• Collect what you love, not what might make you a profit later on;
• Do some research about your author or subject using the Internet and websites such as Abebooks.com;
• Look for and consult bibliographies;
• Visit and introduce yourself in local bookshops within driving distance;
• Visit the rare books or special collections department of a university library in your area;
• Decide how much you can afford in relation to the low and high ends of what you want to collect so that you can buy at each end as necessary to complete your collection;
• When dealing in high(er) end purchases, choose a bookseller who belongs to ABA, AABA, or other such organizations with stated ethical values and rules;

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but have been set in perfect alignment by God. Bayle provides eight numbered objections to the theory, each of which is several paragraphs in length, yet he concludes with his typical good humor and says that he is convinced that Leibniz will “smooth out the rough places in his theory” because “no one is able to travel more usefully or more surely in the intelligible world than he.” 11

Bayle’s arguments and criticisms in the Dictionary did not go unnoticed by those whom he discussed. For example, Bayle’s comments in “Rorarius” as well as in other entries discussing the problem of evil, i.e., the question of how an omniscient and omnibenevolent God could allow for evil in the world, prompted a response from Leibniz in his Theodicy, the only philosophical work published during his lifetime. 12 Bayle also influenced future generations of philosophers. David Hume shared his skepticism about the limits of reason, and his depiction of the distinction between primary and secondary qualities was taken up by both Hume and Bishop George Berkeley. 13

One of the most fascinating things about Bayle as a philosopher is that even though he introduced a lot of himself in his Dictionary, discerning his actual philosophical and theological positions is notoriously difficult. At various points, he has been described as an atheist, a skeptic, a secret adherent to Judaism, and a fideist, i.e., one who thinks that faith is incompatible with reason. Enlightenment thinkers saw him as an early ally that he didn’t see himself as taking a position on theologies at all. 14

For the reader looking to learn more about Bayle and his thought there are several options. Elisabeth Labrousse is a major figure in 20th-century Bayle scholarship, and while the serious scholar would be advised to consult her two-volume French work, her brief and accessible Bayle is highly recommended. 15 Labrousse provides an overview of Bayle’s life and argues that as a philosopher he was far more interested in understanding other theories than expounding his own. Richard Popkin’s The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle is a sketch whose tactic was to “analyze and dissolve any theory on its own terms,” all with the ultimate goal of finding the limits of reason. 16 Thomas M. Lennson’s Reading Bayle is a wide-ranging investigation of Bayle’s thought structured around concepts like “integrity,” “toleration,” and “providence.” 17 Todd Ryan’s Pierre Bayle’s Cartesian Metaphysics: Rediscovering Early Modern Philosophy focuses on Bayle’s views on metaphysics and looks at Bayle in relation to major philosophical thinkers (Descartes, Locke, Leibniz, and Spinoza) and major issues in metaphysics (mind-body dualism, causation, and mechanism), with the hope of arriving at a “satisfying interpretation of Bayle’s thought as a whole.” 18 Walter Rex’s Essays on Pierre Bayle and Religious Controversy focuses on Bayle’s views on religion and examines three of his writings, including the controversial Dictionary entry on David. 19 Finally, Ruth Whelan takes a historical approach in The Anatomy of Superstition: A Study of the Historical Theory and Practice of Pierre Bayle, and seeks to understand Bayle by situating him in the context of the theories and writers to whom he was responding. 20 Ultimately, working to resolve the so-called “Bayle enigma” and discern Bayle’s true philosophical positions (or if they even exist) is a noble pursuit for professional philosophers and for those interested in the history of philosophy, but the Dictionary’s value for students — especially undergraduate students — lies in the strength of Bayle’s arguments, his wit, and the approachable style of his writing. 21 His method of taking arguments on their own terms and then examining them from within is a model of clear philosophical thinking. It was for this reason that Voltaire called him the “greatest dialectician who has ever written.” 22 Those looking for a traditional reference work that provides concise entries on all the well-known thinkers of Bayle’s time will perhaps leave disappointed, but readers wishing to observe a great mind in action will undoubtedly be impressed and will delight in exploring this truly unique historical reference work.

Endnotes
10. Ibid., 213.
11. Ibid., 254.
18. Rex, Essays.
20. Lennson and Hickson, “Pierre Bayle.”

*Editor’s note: An asterisk (*) denotes a title selected for Resources for College Libraries.