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Oregon Trails-Fact From Fiction

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Oregon Trails — Fact From Fiction

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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 occasional *Library of America* volumes. I recognize the usual suspects from the *New York Times* bestseller lists and am ready to move to the other side when a title catches my eye — *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 of letters, they are all email letters. Despite the intriguing title, I put the book back on the shelf and continue my usual routine.

The next day, I was back. How could I not read a novel called *Bibliophilia*? I am glad that I did. It's an interesting book on several levels. Saying that it is interesting is damning it with faint praise but what frustrated me about the book is also what held my interest. And although it is pitched as a novel, it is a kind of mystery novel, too, in that there are clues dropped early on that allowed me to guess how it would end, at least in part. "I could have told you so," I wanted to shout.

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, *Bibliophilia* 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 collect 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. To 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 Pockettful 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 *Bibliophilia*, 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**.

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 who provided an “arsenal” of arguments that they could use against theologians and other traditional thinkers. **Bayle** described himself as a historian comparing arguments “for and against something, with all the impartiality of a faithful reporter,” which perhaps indicates that he didn’t see himself as taking a position on these topics at all.¹³

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.¹⁴ **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* presents **Bayle** as a skeptic whose tactic was to “analyze and dissolve any theory on its own terms,” all with the ultimate goal of finding the limits of reason.¹⁵ **Thomas M. Lennon's** *Reading Bayle* is a wide-ranging investigation of **Bayle's** thought structured around concepts like “integrity,” “toleration,” and “providence.”¹⁶ **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.”¹⁷ **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**.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

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.²⁰ 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.”²¹ 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

1. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edited by **Edward Craig**. London: Routledge, 1998.*
2. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edited by **Edward N. Zalta**. <https://plato.stanford.edu>.*
3. *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <http://www.iep.utm.edu>.*
4. **Rex, Walter**. *Essays on Pierre Bayle and Religious Controversy*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965, X.
5. **Labrousse, Elisabeth**. *Bayle*. Translated by **Denys Potts**. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, 40.
6. **Lennon, Thomas M.**, and **Michael Hickson**. “Pierre Bayle.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Accessed January 26, 2017. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/bayle/>.
7. **Bayle, Pierre**. *Historical and Critical Dictionary: Selections*. Translated and edited by **Richard Popkin**. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1991, 339.*
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9. **Bayle, Historical**.
10. *Ibid.*, 213.
11. *Ibid.*, 254.
12. **Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm**. *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*. Edited by **Austin Farrer**. Translated by **E.M. Huggard**. La Salle: Open Court, 1985.* Originally published: London: Routledge & Keagan Paul, 1951.
13. **Bayle, Historical**, 396.
14. **Labrousse, Bayle**.
15. **Popkin, Richard**. *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle*. Revised and expanded edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, 288-290.*
16. **Lennon, Thomas M**. *Reading Bayle*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999.
17. **Ryan, Todd**. *Pierre Bayle's Cartesian Metaphysics: Rediscovering Early Modern Philosophy*. New York: Routledge, 2009, 5.
18. **Rex, Essays**.
19. **Whelan, Ruth**. *The Anatomy of Superstition: A Study of the Historical Theory and Practice of Pierre Bayle*. Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1989.
20. **Lennon and Hickson**, “Pierre Bayle.”
21. **Gottlieb, Anthony**. *The Dream of Enlightenment: The Rise of Modern Philosophy*. New York: Livelight Publishing Corporation, 2016, 156.

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

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- Don't buy impulsively;
- Learn many “rules” about book-collecting so that you can be confident when you choose to break them.

Poor **Larry**. I don't think that he ever got real pleasure out of his collecting. Instead, he

was content to assemble collections that he could show off to friends and other collectors. If that is your goal, then by all means go that way but remember that it is possible, and I think desirable, to do both and when you show your collection(s) to friends and other collectors, your passion will shine and your audience will bask in your light. 🌿