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Oregon Trails — Jack Walsdorf: Bookman Nonpareil

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On Sunday, July 9, 2017, the book world lost a great bookman and I lost a friend when **John “Jack” Joseph Walsdorf** died of a pulmonary embolism in Portland, Oregon, his home for most of his lifetime. Portland is where **Jack’s** wonderful museum of a house is but the real world that **Jack** inhabited was the boundless, joyful, beautiful world of books, glorious books.

Readers of *Against the Grain* and attendees of the **Charleston Conference** probably know of **Jack** and his **Booklover’s Road Show**. **Jack** the serious book collector was also an entertaining showman. The sum of **Jack’s** talents and his character are best described in the words of **David S. Zeidberg**, curator of Special Collections at **George Washington University** in 1980, in his Foreword to *A Collector’s Choice: The John J. Walsdorf Collection of William Morris in Private Press and Limited Editions*. “**Jack** combines humor, enthusiasm, purpose, knowledge, and generosity.”

I first met **Jack** in the late 1970s when I was buying books for a living as the acquisitions librarian at **Boise State University** and **Jack**, working for **Blackwell North America**, was in the business of selling books to libraries. I wish that I had a memorable story of our first encounter but I don’t. It is almost certain that we met at either an annual or midwinter meeting of the **American Library Association** and that when we met, our conversation must have drifted from the business of books to books as things to be read and appreciated most fully by collecting them.

I never got to see the displays of **Jack’s** collections so I had to imagine them through the three inscribed catalogues that **Jack** presented to me. I have recently re-read them along with *On Collecting William Morris: A Memoir*, **The Printery**, Kirkwood [MO] and am in awe of him and what he accomplished. When friends or colleagues questioned **Jack** about how he found time to collect, write, and catalogue while gainfully employed, he would reply that everyone gets 24 hours a day but how we spend that time is an individual choice. **Jack** made the most of his time.

Happily, I got to stay in **Jack’s** house a couple of years ago and was introduced to all of **Jack’s** collections, not just his **William Morris** items. Every room in the house was filled with books, even the bathrooms, and squeezed in among the books were other collections including WWII memorabilia and typewriter ribbon boxes, a bit of history that is associated with how book manuscripts were converted to a type form. **Jack** didn’t collect the actual ribbons but he used them in his manual typewriter, preferring it for his correspondence and eschewing email except to read it.

Jack, as anyone close to him can tell you, was more than a collector. He was a reader,

a scholar, and an author of bibliographies of **William Morris** and **Julian Symons**. For more about **Jack** as an author and scholar, I refer the reader to <http://themorrisian.blogspot.com/2013/04/the-morrisian-interview-series-2-john-j.html>.

“January 30, 2004. Dear **Tom**: Just a quick note thanking you so very much for your very nice article in *ATG* covering our joint talk at the **Charleston Conference** and also my **Booklover’s Road Show**. You are very kind to give me such a good review and I too, hope that someday a show (in full) can be done in your area. Again, thanks **Tom**. It was nice doing our book talk together. See! There are still a few book people around. All the best, and a very Happy New Year in 2004.” [signed] **Jack**

This *ts* [typed letter signed] is but one example of **Jack’s** thoughtfulness. It’s a letter that I treasure but one that, had it not been written, I would not have expected because **Jack** had already expressed his thanks in person and in the best way possible by inviting me to go book-hunting with him during that same **Charleston Conference**. The bookstore [I can’t recall the name] we spent some time in is no longer in business but the memory of our joint venture lives still. And as was his wont, our book hunting excursion was followed by a meal, this one in the evening at *Fish*, a restaurant that, unlike the bookstore, is still going strong.

In 2006, **Jack** was invited to Austin to perform his **Booklover’s Road Show** at the annual dinner for the **Scarborough-Phillips Library Advisory Board**. It was such a big hit that he was invited back in 2010 and was even more enthusiastically received. Sadly, like that nameless Charleston bookstore, the library of that name, the board, and the annual dinner are no more but **Jack** and I were there for that final celebration of books and those who read them. Thanks to **Jack**, they collectively and figuratively left in a blaze of glory. Thank you, **Jack**, for the memory.

During that first visit to Austin and **St. Edward’s University**, **Jack** had dinner with me and my wife. He learned that she enjoyed the mysteries written by **Phillip Margolin**, a Portland, Oregon author, and she learned that **Jack** knew **Margolin**. A short time after **Jack’s** return to Portland, my wife was pleasantly surprised to receive a package of **Margolin** books, each one signed by the author. Several years later, **Margolin** named one of his characters after **Jack**. Remembering that meal in Austin, perhaps, or perhaps

just a thoughtful, generous memory, **Jack** had a copy inscribed for my wife and surprised her with another package.

During our 2006 book hunting, we were in the rare books room of the **N. Lamar Blvd. Half-Price Books** when **Jack** discovered a copy of his **William Morris** bibliography. He suggested to the young woman at the desk that he was the author of the book and that if he signed it, it would double the value of the book. Would she like him to sign it? She shrugged her shoulders and said, “I guess so.” **Jack** removed the book from the slip case, took out his pen, and signed the book before replacing it in the slip cover and the book shelf. She never doubted him, never asked for credentials, and probably never mentioned to anyone that the asking price should be increased.

Three book-hunting tips from **Jack**:

- Don’t neglect those bottom shelves where hidden treasures might be lurking;
- If you are going to collect an author, invest in a bibliography of the author’s works;
- Carry a small flashlight to help uncover sleepers on the top and bottom shelves and dark corners.

I want to end this inadequate tribute to **Jack** with an example of how kind and thoughtful he could be. He and I, thanks to **Jack’s** endorsement, are members of a bibliophile society that sponsors book-collecting awards to students at **Reed College** in Portland, Oregon and **Oregon State University**, Corvallis.

On April 26, 2017, at the awards ceremony in Corvallis, **Jack** was the presenter of the three prizes for best essays about what the students collect and why. After his opening remarks, **Jack** introduced each student and read excerpts from the essays and contributed his own encouraging, supportive comments about the collections. The third-place winner was no less extolled than the second-place and the first-place winners. **Jack’s** eloquence elicited glowing expressions on the faces of the essayists and moved the audience, too. **Jack’s** detailed attention to each essay, each young book lover’s subject, made a special occasion especially touching and memorable.

Jack, old book-loving friend, thanks for the memories. 🌿

