November 2013

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Recommended Citation

DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.4119

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And so it began.

Remembering the laments back at the semi-
near about the increasing difficulty of finding
decent stock, I went on a buying rampage, dri-
ing sometimes hundreds of miles a day, often
seven days a week, going to every auction, es-
state, library, rummage and yard sale, flea mar-
et and antique store I could find out about.
In hindsight, that was the most important thing
I did, since it enabled me to acquire a large in-
ventory 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 escap-
ede 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.

I would be easier now that I have
decided to try to sell books, far fewer, and lower quality
ones, were to be found. In the past I
This could easily fill a half dozen or
more books at an average sale, I was now lucky
to get a decent bargain and luckier still to be
able to turn my back and not have the choice
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 bar-
barians who sacked Rome would have been
shocked at the lack of even the most rudimen-
tary 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 right
idea that grotesquely underpricing would in-
crease their sales and destroy the competition;
they were soon followed by what I call the “half-
whits,” whose strategy was to set at half the lowest
price; the next to come along cut that price
in half yet again, and so forth in some perver-
sion of Zenos’s arrow, with the result being that
soon books were being listed for a few cents,
although there may be some out there who
may try ten books for a penny. More belts
and whistles also started appearing in the form
of even falling apart books being hyped which
often cost more than the boook 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 cur-
rent free for all. At the other were long, ram-
bling de facto essays explaining plots, charac-
ters, 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, 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 lat-
ter, I will say, perhaps too judgmentally, that far
too many online booksellers haven’t any real
idea of what they are doing. This can occasion-
ally result in some real opportunities for the as-
est 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 pre-
sumably 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. Un-
less the business exists solely as a tax write-off,
it is almost impossible to survive by selling any-
thing 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
crime, or maybe just delusions of grandeur.

Gross threats in spelling, grammar and syn-
tax 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 pro-
cess, 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 la-
mented above, being that instead of hundreds of
books, I’m now usually lucky to get even a
bag ’ull; 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
dim 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 con-
centrate on mint condition best sellers; special-
ists look for their fields; I look for what better
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.

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stark 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.

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