

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

Bloomsbury treasures & paperback keepers

Having worked in the book trade for a few years now, I've learned that a major perk is the access I have, on a regular basis, to a multitude of interesting books, collections and related ephemera. Whether through clients, other bookstores, dealers, catalogues, auctions or the Internet, there is a deep well of information that can be tapped to educate, inform and generally satiate any bibliophile's appetite. It is rare that a day goes by without my curiosity being piqued by an interesting title or some scarce tome. Another major perk of being a bookseller is sharing my discoveries.

A few of the more eye-catching works that sold over the past year were a 1502 edition of Dante's *Lo'nferno e'l purgatorio e'l paradiso* printed by Aldus Manutius (also the first Aldine book to include the anchor device) for \$15,000; a set of Alan Turing's papers presented to the London Mathematical Society in 1936 entitled *On Computable Numbers* (\$14,000), which laid the theoretical groundwork used to construct the first digital computers; an incredibly scarce set of *Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the War* (\$130,000), which included 100 original albumen silver print photographs forming perhaps the most important pictorial record of the Civil War; and finally a beautiful copy of perhaps the most important private press book ever issued, the Kelmscott Press's *Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, bound in tooled leather by the famed Doves Bindery, which saw the hammer fall at \$150,000. While these highlights realized some spectacular prices, the majority of lots fell well within reasonable limits for many collectors, and I look forward to following the new series of auctions starting this fall.

We have also received here at the shop a number of catalogues from other dealers. The latest from Patrick McGahern Books offers a marvellous 1794 first edition of Joseph Haydn's *Original Canzonettas* (31 engraved sheets of music) signed with a flourish by Haydn on the bottom front corner. The price tag on this one is a little steep at \$12,000, but what really interested me was the story behind the Haydn. While visiting McGahern's a short while ago, they related how the *Canzonettas* had actually come from a local who had the fortune of un-

earthing the music sheets at a library sale a few years ago for a nominal sum. Once the signature was researched and confirmed, they quickly realized they had their hands on a pretty amazing find. Another *Tamerlane* tale to add to the repertoire, and proof that there are always significant treasures waiting to be found.

As for unearthing treasures of a somewhat lesser value, but no less exciting to happen upon, I often turn to scouting for obscure and scarce paperbacks. Mass-market paperbacks tend to get passed over at book sales, thrift stores and other venues in favour of sections containing potential antique volumes or hardcover first editions. However, a number of good finds are available for those willing to dip into the softcover sections and hunt through the slew of paperbacks for those hidden gems. Titles I have turned up in the past for a buck or less are *The Long Walk* by Stephen King, an early Richard Bachman (\$75), the scarce occult book *Passport to Magonia: From Folklore to Flying Saucers* by Jacques Vallee (\$75), and *Devil's Guard* by George Robert Elford (\$150), an account of a fugitive battalion of Nazi SS veterans who fought in Vietnam under the French Foreign Legion, leading to debates as to whether the book is exaggerated fact or outright fiction.

Other valuable paperbacks that are worth keeping an eye out for are *Once a Runner* by John L. Parker, a cult classic about the dedication required to be an elite runner, which had very low print runs and is quite scarce. An early Nora Roberts paperback, *Promise Me Tomorrow*, is probably passed over regularly but can command a decent price of \$100 to \$150, being the only book she refuses to have reprinted. Jeffrey Deaver's elusive first two books, *Voodoo* and *Always a Thief*, published by Paperjacks Press, are always a great find and can easily fetch \$50 to \$200, for Deaver's fans are always on the lookout for these early paperbacks that rarely even get noted in his backlists and bibliographies.

After sharing just a touch of what I've come across these past few months, and I could easily ramble on for a number of pages, I've made plain that my passion for biblio-gab is exceeded only by my passion for hunting down the next curiosity. Until next time, happy hunting.

Richard Coxford is the proprietor of Bytown Books in Ottawa, <http://bytownbookshop.ca>.