

MODERN FIRSTS

The intrinsic value of ex-library copies

Amphora's esteemed editor asked how I reconcile collecting modern first editions, with its emphasis on condition, with, in my career as a librarian, overseeing many first editions being stamped, labelled and their dust jackets laminated: in other words, generally made totally unacceptable to the collector.

At the outset it is important to note that were it not for the library market, the publishing of literary first novels, collections of short stories and poetry would be impossible as a commercial enterprise. Some might argue this is the case even with the library market in play. When sales for literary titles number in the hundreds and print runs in Canada hover around 1,000 copies for fiction and 500 copies for poetry, the library market represents the best hope for such books to actually be read. Therefore these “defaced” copies on library shelves represent the best hope that a worthwhile writer will connect with readers and build an audience. This does indeed mean over time that collector condition copies of desirable books will be more scarce, but this is irrelevant if it means the books will be read and a writer's reputation will grow.

While the modern firsts market obsesses about condition, one of the key collecting tenets is that when you find a sought-after and elusive book in questionable condition, buy it—you may never see it again. Better a copy on your shelf with a tattered (or no) dust jacket than no copy at all. Any serious collector upgrades copies in his or her collection over time.

And yes, an ex-library copy can become an important part of a collection, although admittedly this is less likely to be the case with more recent publications.

My favourite ex-library copy in my collection is a 1933 Jonathan Cape edition of Malcolm Lowry's *Ultramarine*. This first novel is one of the 20th century's notable rarities due to two factors: sales of the book were low (Woolmer's Lowry bibliography indicates that 750 copies of a 1,500 print run were sold), and the rest were destroyed during the London blitz. At this time the in-print life of a book was measured in years, not months, and it was common for the unsold portion of a print run to remain in the publisher's ware-

house a decade after publication. The copy that found its way into my collection (thanks to Don Stewart of MacLeod's Books), while being in far from acceptable condition, is welcomed for the simple fact that I will not in all likelihood see another copy for sale, at least at a price I can afford.

In the case of this jacketless book, its history is partially discernable from its markings, and this history adds to its appeal. The mid-blue cloth cover is rubbed at the edges from shelf wear. The dust jacket appears to have been discarded when the book was added to the library collection, for there is no indication of tape marks on the paste-down endpapers and the spine is slightly browned. Two different library stamps appear on the front and rear endpapers: “Library RCAF Station Bella Bella, BC” overstamped with “Property of No 2. E Depot Library.” (The RCAF's anti-submarine No. 9 Squadron was stationed at Bella Bella from 1941 to 1944.) Indications of what was perhaps a removed book pocket are on the front paste-down endpaper, and a date due slip was removed from the front free endpaper, with a remnant of the top remaining with a handwritten “Date due” in fountain pen and a red stamped “43” and a typed “BC.” Partially visible underneath the remaining paste-down is a pencil note, possibly a price. The interior pages of the book are surprisingly fine, with only one library stamp on page 111 and one faintly on the fore-edge. Notably there are no signs left by readers—turned-down page corners, marginalia, food stains...

In this case I do wish that the original slips and pockets had been retained in the book after it left the No. 2. E Depot Library under whatever circumstances and started its journey to my shelves. I am curious to know how often it was borrowed while Lowry lived not far down the coast in Vancouver and Dollarton. Might it have been the only copy in B.C. while he lived here? After all, Lowry wrote his father from Vancouver in 1940, “There is no library here worth mentioning.”

If I had the opportunity, would I upgrade my copy of *Ultramarine* for a fine copy in dust jacket? Certainly yes. But I would also retain my ex-library copy from Bella Bella, which evokes a special time and place. Condition isn't everything.

Paul Whitney is City Librarian at the Vancouver Public Library.