
Old and Rare Books: A Practical Approach For Librarians

Tom Broadfoot

In almost twenty years of dealing with old books and old and new librarians, I have found that most librarians view old and rare books and patrons with old books as one of the most baffling and aggravating aspects of their profession, and rightfully so. Much of the public expects the local library to be the depository of all printed materials, old and rare, and they place the librarian as guardian guru atop the book pile—watchdog and authority of all. Unfortunately, most librarians don't know a hill of beans about old and rare books and most could care less. Thus, when public expectation and the inevitable exposure to old and rare that every library experiences meet with the librarian's lack of knowledge, pain in the lower posterior is the result.

However, be consoled in the knowledge that the chance of you or your patrons finding a very rare book (\$1000 and over) unawares is about the same as a person who has never been fishing breaking the blue marlin record. In twenty years of old books every day, all day, I have stumbled upon very few rare books in settings where the worth was not well-known: only one book worth over \$10,000 and perhaps ten worth over \$1000. Most rare books are owned by persons or institutions who know what they have. They are not going to dump their mother lode on the library steps or ask you about book care or values.

However, you will often need to know about old books. Consider the following and your reactions:

"What's my old Bible worth?"

"Who buys old books?"

"These books I'm giving to the library are valuable and I want you to keep them forever, in a special locked case with my husband's skull and my stuffed poodle, Fifi."

"Please tell me what these books are worth so I can deduct them on my taxes."

"This book is rare and valuable and should never have been placed on open shelving. It needs to be in a locked case."

"My old cookbook is falling apart. Who can fix it?"

"You sold a book in the book sale for \$.50 that was worth \$100 and my brother knows a trustee of the library and I'm going to tell him to tell her and you'll get fired."

"I found hundreds of old letters from the 1870s. What should I do with them?"

"What should I do to take care of my old books?"

If you have easy answers for the above, stop here; give yourself a star for being well-informed and read no further. If, however, the answers weren't so quick and easy, keep on reading. What I have to say will be brief, practical, and sensible.

Identification

How does one weed the wheat from the chaff? Rather than say which books are of value, it is far easier and clearer to delineate which books have little value. The following guidelines usually eliminate ninety-nine percent of old books as being of little value.

Of Little Value

- Damaged books: There is a catechism in the book world, "What three factors determine value?" Answer: "condition, condition, condition." A volume missing any part, a cover, a page or any portion of a printed page is almost always of little value; consider a Chipendale chair lacking one leg.
- Religious books, unless printed in the U.S. before 1800.
- Fiction, unless in fine condition by a household name author.
- Picture and illustrated books, unless the illustrations are such that you wouldn't object to having one framed and put over your mantle.
- Books on politics.

Tom Broadfoot, owner of Broadfoot Publishing Company, based this address given to the Resources and Technical Services Section on his experiences as a rare book dealer since 1971. He has written a price guide on Civil War books and issued almost two hundred catalogs of out-of-print and rare books, maps, and manuscripts. In addition, he is a book publisher and has issued almost five hundred books since 1975.

- Sets of books, unless of fine binding, fine illustrations or of such detail that it may be the final work on the subject—subject not being religion, literature, politics.
- Leather bound books unless small, of brilliant color, and in fine condition.
- Newspapers, unless *Harper's Weekly 1861-65* (however, keep three sets of all local papers and publications).
- Magazines, regardless of age.
- Atlases after 1900.
- Book club titles.

Of course, there are exceptions to the above, but they are surprisingly few. So, which books may have value? The above guidelines will answer that also, just reverse them, i.e.:

- Religious books printed in the U.S. before 1800.
- Fiction in fine condition by household name authors where the copyright page has the original copyright date or states first edition.
- Caveat: *any material, book, pamphlet, newspaper, printed in the South between 1861 and 1865 is a Confederate Imprint and all are valuable.*

Evaluation

Pinning down the exact value of a book is difficult. If you have books which you think are valuable, I suggest you call in a bookdealer. Select a dealer, buy a book from him once in a while, and in return you can call him when you have books to weed or evaluate. Most questions can be answered easily over the phone. I evaluate books for librarian friends without charge and they in turn, in addition to an occasional purchase, alert me when collections become available and inform me of duplicates and discards that might be of interest.

What to do with patrons who must know what their books are worth? Tell them the world of old and rare is most vast and complicated and that you are no expert, but that you have the latest in reference material and steer them as follows. The chances are they won't find any specific reference to their volume's value, but you will have provided references, and by using them, they will determine for themselves that evaluating books is no easy matter.

First, expose them to the above guidelines. That will satisfy about ninety-eight percent of their questions. Bibles alone compose fifty percent of all old book queries. If they are not satisfied or still have reason to think their volume to be of value, I suggest the following references:

Van Allen Bradley. *The Book Collector's Handbook of Values*, 1982 edition. Order from: The Putnam Publishing Group, 200 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016. Telephone: 212-576-8908. Cost: approximately \$40.00. Good general guide with useful points for identifying first editions of fiction; values tend to be inflated. Regretfully, out of print.

If you have money to burn and wish to really wow your customers, you might consider the following tomes, the second of which is vastly overpriced:

Bookman's Price Index. A twice yearly listing from dealers' catalogs. The chance of finding a specific title is slim, but descriptions of book conditions are included. Thus, a better value indicator than Bradley. Order from: Gale Research, Inc., Book Tower, Department 77748, Detroit, MI 48277-0748. Telephone: 313-961-2242. \$180.00

American Book Prices Current. Issued annually, a listing of books sold at auction; a wide variety; prices tend to be on a wholesale level. Order from: American Book Prices Current, Bancroft-Parkman, Inc., P.O. Box 1236, Washington, CT 06793. \$390.00

You can also refer patrons to bookdealers, but tell them that appraisals are expensive. A better idea is to host a book evaluating night every year or so. Call in a book dealer and, either for free or a small fee, let him spend an evening evaluating books and explaining book values. If handled with foresight, such an evening can produce a good crowd, create a lot of satisfied patrons, and be most enjoyable.

Selection

Having identified certain books as rare, which ones should you keep? In addition to whatever specialized area of interest your library may have, I would suggest retaining multiple copies of all local newspapers and periodicals. If you live in Podunk, the odds are that the only complete file of the *Podunk Daily* is at the library. I know of more than one instance where the local library discarded the only complete run of the town newspaper—and in doing so lost the best source of history and genealogy in the region. Also, keep old letters and manuscripts you are offered, if need be in boxes, until they can be evaluated. Discard whatever is left after adding to the specialized collection of local history. What need does the library have for a rare book on embalming?

Disposition

Do not fill shelves and rooms with material just because it is rare and you don't know what else to do. This is a common situation which I call the treasure room syndrome.

Frequently, I am called to libraries, usually following a change of command. The new librarian has discovered that along with her job she has inherited a room full of old books, in fact every old book that came into the library for years. Rather than evaluate, select, keep and discard, the predecessor solved the problem by keeping everything and locking it away. Don't be a predecessor. Weed with "vigah" and discard with courage. You're the librarian and you're paid to do a job. Getting rid of books is as much a part of the job as buying books. Don't worry about the busybodies who are sure to shriek when the first book goes out the door; but don't be improvident either. If you have a large lot of old books which you suspect are of value, before putting them in the book sale at \$.50 each, have a dealer look them over. Ask him to give you a statement that he has seen the books, identified those of value, and priced them. This nullifies any shrieking Sally who says the librarian is selling books and doesn't know what she is doing. Please, if selling books which have library markings, stamp them discarded, preferably on a rear endpaper. Otherwise, people will frequently be returning books which you meant to discard.

Interestingly, a book may have a retail value of \$100, but it probably won't fetch \$20 in a book sale. Why? Book pricing has a hierarchy as the following example will illustrate. I am a Civil War dealer and issue catalogs on Civil War books. A book priced at \$100 in my catalog is near top retail; it is being offered by a specialized dealer to a specialized clientele. I buy many books from other dealers at no more than fifty percent of my retail and often a good bit less. The dealers in turn have often purchased from scouts or "pickers" at half or less than they sell to me. The scouts in turn have purchased at auction and book sales at a price at which they can make a profit. However, values must be based on a standard and when price guides say a book is worth \$100, that is a retail value. That doesn't mean you can readily sell books for full retail. Valuable books in a book sale at twenty-five percent of retail are reasonably priced and probably are still too high to sell.

Gifts

Regretfully, most gift books are more trouble than they are worth. However, take them one and

all with profuse thanks. By doing so, you keep your patrons satisfied by fulfilling the image that all libraries need more books. Under no circumstances agree to keep any books forever. Just say thank you, and we're glad to have them, and we will make appropriate use of them. Don't accept books with strings. Otherwise, when your successor fifty years from now gets rid of one of Aunt Haddie's cookbooks that you agreed to enshrine forever, all hell will break loose because Aunt Haddie's daughters live forever and they will find that one volume in the book sale among the thousands.

Appraisals

DON'T. It's forbidden by law. "The following persons cannot be qualified appraisers: The donee of the property, the person employed by or related to the above."—Department of the Treasury, Internal Revenue Service Publication 561 (Rev. Dec. 87) *Determining the Value of Donated Property*.

Say, I'd love to, but I can't. A librarian, unversed in rare book values, in IRS tax court defending an appraisal which was illegal in the first place, is not a happy camper. If you feel that a donor's collection is valuable, put the donor in touch with an out-of-print dealer who can provide a qualified appraisal. If an appraisal is to be made, the books must be kept together so the dealer can physically examine them. A tax appraisal cannot be done from a list. However, as rare books are few and far between, most of the books you will receive will be of little value and not worth appraising. If by using your guidelines you see the books are not of great value, perhaps you could give the donor a receipt for the books on library letterhead. A form letter will do: "Received from Joe Jones on this date an unrestricted gift of 97 hardback non-fiction books in good condition" . . . or "53 hardbacked books of fiction in good condition." Perfectly above water, plus you've gotten in the term "unrestricted." It seems to me that somewhere I have heard a bookdealer (whose name I don't recall) say that the IRS would not object if a person deducted \$3.00 each for gifts of hardback non-fiction, in good condition and \$.50 each for fiction. After all, what non-fiction book in good condition is worth less than \$3.00—not a true appraisal but a reasonable approach.

Care

Care of old books is easy. The part that isn't easy you don't need to know about. Keep them

dry, recoat the leather ones with plain vaseline every few years and wipe well with a terrycloth towel. Don't rebind, but repair (see the Gaylord Catalog on repair). If you must rebind, preserve original covers if possible. Actually, when a book reaches the rebinding stage, it probably has little monetary value; but since most of your rare books should be of the local historical variety, preserving the original binding should be as much of interest as preserving the content. Your book-dealer or the rare book person at any university should be able to suggest a professional binder.

Security

Professional thieves seldom visit any but the largest libraries, and there they usually target the rare book room. The people librarians should watch most carefully are the genealogical seekers. If Mrs. Jones is looking for information on her great grandfather and she finds him on page 99 of your prized original local history volume, you better not leave book and Jones alone or high chances are that Mrs. Jones, who would return \$1000 if found on the street, will depart with the page, if not the book. However, Mrs. Jones will leave all in place if she is gently watched. Have genealogical and local history material used in an observed

area, have each book signed for, and verify (before and after) that all the pages are present. There is no need to make an actual page count. When the patron signs for the book, have her verify the pages, and have someone make a cursory page check when the book is returned. It is not the checking that deters the theft, but the knowledge that the book will be checked.

Material of great value and scarcity should be placed in a locked bookcase in an area under observation. Those books should not be used except in the presence—cheek to cheek—of the library staff.

Thus, for old books. Hopefully, this unfoot-noted, practical approach will prove useful and beneficial. By knowing how to deal with old books, you will be a more complete librarian and better able to serve your public and yourself. The patron whose donations are gladly received, the elderly lady who found out where to rebind her Bible, the people at book evaluation night, the genealogists and historians who know and use your local history-genealogy collection; these people not only vote "yes" on library bond issues, but are often political and financial allies; more so than the readers of current fiction.

Here's to old books.



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