

# Young Booksellers, Young Books: The Prospects of the American Rare Book Trade

by John Wronoski

## **Note:**

The following article that I ran across on the ILAB.Org website is by John Wronoski of Lame Duck Books, and is reprinted here with the author's permission. I first met John in the mid-1980s, when he owned a scholarly bookstore in Philadelphia, near the University of Pennsylvania, just across the Delaware River from our own location. It was always a temptation to visit John, buy his books, and like as not to consume many libations and consume vast quantities of Ethiopian food at the restaurant down the block from his store.

In the late-1980s, John, Ken Lopez, and I, formed an informal but effective partnership, maintaining our own businesses but buying many libraries and collections together. This continued until the mid-1990s, after John had moved to the Boston area, when I realized that John was mostly interested in books I didn't understand, by authors I had never heard of, and in languages I couldn't read.

We separated our businesses, with some modest strum and drang, but mostly amicably, and remain on good terms.

To paraphrase (actually to plagiarize, but I just don't remember how he said it; however, I can guarantee he said it better) another bookseller: Greg Gibson of Ten Pound Island Books, when commenting on John's mode of communication: when John imparts some wisdom I usually feel like one of the more intelligent breed of dogs when spoken to sternly by their masters. I'm pretty sure something pretty important is being expressed, but I'm never quite sure what it is.

Nevertheless John writes densely layered and interesting prose, and it is rewarding to read it all the way through.

John currently runs his bookstore in Harvard Square in Cambridge, as well as the adjoining Pierre Menard Gallery where he has added art to the repertoire of things he sells that I don't really understand.

*Tom Congalton*

## **Young Booksellers, Young Books: The Prospects of the American Rare Book Trade**

From the inception of our version of civilization, the notion that we represent a new beginning has been more or less accepted at almost every level in American society. It has not been our inclination to look back upon the Sodom and Gomorrah of the Old World. Not only is this the general attitude of a nation, but it is the individual approach of nearly every upstart businessman in it, and that includes the antiquarian bookseller. Because there are so few book firms in America that survive beyond the death of their founders, and because there is thus little opportunity or, for that matter, desire among American booksellers for apprenticeship in an established firm, the average American bookseller is sui generis in the same way that we Americans tend to perceive our nation itself. While this situation dictates a rather brutish recapitulation of phylogeny in each new bookseller, the fact that we are unencumbered by history probably has its benefits to us as well. It is surely responsible for a healthy willingness to take a new approach to an old enterprise, and it stimulates motion where there is the constant threat of stagnation.

The American book trade, though ostensibly vigorous, is far from univocal in its forecasts for the future. Even as unprecedented numbers of customers are flowing to the trade through the Internet, there is a widespread belief that our customer base is dwindling. Though, to all appearances, the quality of material in the trade is at a strong level, it is generally lamented that it is becoming more and more difficult, and more expensive, to acquire significant material. Although hundreds of book fairs—large numbers of which are oversubscribed—take place in the United States each year, there is a common perception that book fairs have proliferated to the point that they no longer arouse much public interest. Although few rare booksellers are sanguine about the ever more dominant role of the auction house in the American book trade, more and more booksellers themselves seem willing to place material in the hands of both the traditional houses and the newly established on-line auction services. Many worry that there is a critical lack of young booksellers, while others are concerned about the superabundance of new booksellers coming to the Internet and diluting the stock and the quality of stock in the book trade as a whole. The Internet is changing irrevocably the way we do business; for the worse say some, while more and more of their colleagues embrace the technology that provides them access to untold numbers of customers they could never have reached before. The prevalence of such antinomies in the dialogue of the American book trade suggests a tension that may indicate that we have arrived at a critical moment in our history.

Of late there has been particular concern among the American rare book trade, notably among the Board of Governors of the ABAA, that there is no obvious next generation of booksellers, that, in effect, there are no "young" booksellers; that the competence of each succeeding generation is in decline; and that the need for such organizations as ABAA or ILAB is not apparent to the young bookseller, to the extent that he exists at all. At present, the ABAA can boast fewer than ten booksellers under the age of forty; the typical applicant for membership in the organization is much more likely to be in his or her fifties than in his or her thirties, and will almost certainly come from the ranks of collectors who have retired from another profession rather than from a long career as a bookseller or an assistant in the trade. The myriad distractions of our post-modern way of life do not conduce to the protracted solitary relationship with books that is the sine qua non of the bookseller's path. Clever young introverts today can readily find dozens of engaging calls upon their attention that do not involve books, and they have many more career options than existed when we became booksellers. The least talented computer drudge can easily expect to find employment more lucrative and secure than that which awaits most ambitious young booksellers. In fact, something of the air of failure or incapacity for life in the world hangs about many of even the greatest antiquarian booksellers: as a colleague put it to me, "Most of us were too feeble for real employment;" another typically asks of new booksellers he meets, "So what's wrong with you?" That the book is a retrograde technology is a truism that only now, after the first waves of the new electronic world are subsiding, is coming to be assessed rationally. Yet already many even among the guardians, the librarians themselves, have been seduced by the notion that their calling is the management of information. Rather than the paradise that the great Argentine librarian Jorge Luis Borges imagined as being structured like a library, they are intent upon a vapid hell built of reams and reams, or bytes and bytes, of what had once been despised as "data."

The young American bookseller of today faces not only an entrenched bastion of accomplished elder colleagues in mid-career, many of whom pioneered the bookselling strategies he must somehow now employ in competition with them, and a prospect in which the traditional avenues of bookshop and book fair have become economically unviable, but also an environment radically changed and rapidly changing in which he must compete, and one in which it is harder than ever to establish a reputation or even a public identity. The outlook for a young prospective bookseller with no particular prior connection to the trade, but only a desire to spend his time among books, is grim. There is no comfortable means of entry into the trade through which one can expect to be educated in its arcane ways. The likelihood of a young bookseller finding a mentor or an apprenticeship is negligible, even if it were a position he could afford to take. The costs of

establishing a business and the level at which he must immediately become competitive are forbidding; and the common view among established booksellers would seem to be that fewer rather than more booksellers are needed, in light of the diminishing quantities of rare material and, especially, the decline of the traditional bibliophile.

In America, scholars-the obvious and real constituency for many antiquarian books-seem to abide by a puritan ethic, a distrust of the "object" in favor of the "text." In the words of Walpole scholar and bibliophile S. Wilmarth Lewis, "Why is it that so many academics hate books?" This disturbing observation reflects the deeper reality that a tradition of book collecting has never really taken root in America, even among those who would seem to be the most natural custodians of the book. Our earliest bibliophiles were deracinated Europeans who looked east for their inspiration. In the glory days of American book collecting (and bookselling), Americans brought a new sense of scale, a seeming unslakable thirst, and perhaps a new set of tactics to the enterprise; but, essentially, the great American collectors were aping their European forebears. Although our history and literature have now become deep enough that they can sustain a uniquely American form of book collecting, the mere fact that modern printing arose in Europe dictates that American bookselling and collecting remain largely collateral phenomena. Many more books of all types flow to America than flow away from it. If there are few who any longer regard America as the destiny of the West, it has become, at least, the destination of the rare book and of the rare book trade.

Most contemporary American collectors do not have grand motives-they don't feel that, in however small a way, they "are preserving the history of the world." They aren't creating a personal picture of a time or a subject, and certainly not an analogue of the cosmos; their "libraries" don't resonate with unexpected juxtapositions like the disparate guests at a wonderful party. They are instead hanging a ready-made and fully sanctioned portrait on their wall, one which many another collector is hanging on his own at the same time, yet one they may expect will do well when it is inevitably put back upon the block. There was a time not long ago, when almost every collector was at least in some small way or in small locale more "expert" than any bookseller. It behooved the bookseller to serve these collectors by being a generalist, providing a bounty for numbers of discriminating customers. Today, almost every bookseller seems more aware than any of his customers of the meaning of his books, and it behooves him to be a specialist, the better to engage the much narrower range of customer he will encounter. Very few collect out of passion for books or from an inner need or in response to an inner voice. They aren't eccentrics burrowing further and further into an idiosyncratic trench that constitutes an ex-libris in itself. Nowadays, collectors are eccentric only in the general characteristics they share with the negligible portion of mankind that wishes to surround itself

with books. Book collecting is no longer a spiritual quest in America, or a part of the "good life," or even a natural part of everyday life. Book collecting has degenerated into a hobby on the lower levels and an investment at the heights, and there is little in between. The creative element in collecting seems to have been submerged. Lacking a personal agenda, many collectors recapitulate *Printing and the Mind of Man*, Connolly's 100, Queen's Quorum, or the currently popular price guides. The fact that important literature, even if only the safest "canonic" titles, has become an ever more vital collecting area suggests only that conspicuous consumption still appeals to the American success story, but even very enthusiastic collectors in the field typically remain active for only a few years. There is too much money involved and too much awareness of the amounts; there is too little of the simple desire just to be surrounded by many books, too little of a need prior to any thought of money. The market is broad enough to sustain itself, but it is not sufficiently nourishing to sustain most collectors for a lifetime.

Though our practice should be directed to the latter, the contemporary trade requires so many more frivolous customers than real collectors in order to survive at the level to which it has become accustomed in recent years, that we end up serving the casual buyer, the hobbyist, the trophy hunter-the least rather than the most ambitious. Our stocks become narrower, less adventurous, and less textured. We are complicit in consigning vast ranges of books to oblivion, and we are permitting the sort of customer whose interests are not to the long-term good of the trade to dictate our behavior. And these are precisely the collectors whose books will be represented by auction houses when they have "finished" their collection, a notion which itself strikes one as odd. It will be the disdained idealists of the collecting world who will persist in the face of what they must perceive as the antagonism of the trade. The truly great American collectors almost uniformly collected against the grain of the trade, recognizing value in what had been disdained by the marketplace. In the eyes of the trade, Thomas Streeter or William Loring Andrews were collecting junk. And current practice must be even more discouraging to the visionary collectors of today.

There is no topic that currently engages the thinking of rare booksellers in America more than the Internet. Every day dozens of ABAA members join in electronic discussion and argument about the role of the Internet in the trade, the future of the Internet, the value of the Internet, and what our presence as an organization on the Internet ought to be. There is no consensus; but, among the rather nuanced arguments one hears, it is apparent that dealers in rarer or esoteric material tend to be suspicious of its blandishments, while the general dealer with a less expensive stock and specialists in many kinds of more modern books are enthusiastic about its effects upon their businesses. However, one of the most prestigious firms in the country recently registered on-line that the Internet has become crucial

to its own business.

The new developments in communication technology seem to spell the end of the rather cloistered world of antiquarian bookselling. Tendentially, at least, the Internet reveals the most closely kept knowledge of the trade—the "real" value of rare books and the names of the customers who want them. It is essentially globalizing and mandates the constantly increasing internationalization of the book trade. The carefully maintained pyramidal structure that has sustained the trade in a sort of equilibrium is eroded by the Internet. Any bookseller can, in principle, find the customer for the rare book he may find only occasionally. Information as to book values, information the last generation of booksellers learned at great expense only over many years, is readily available on the Internet. Furthermore, there is no need to sell the book into the trade. Everyone has access to the customers the bookseller of the past discovered only as his business and his credibility gradually improved. Even in the event the Internet fails to cough up the desired information about a particularly unusual acquisition for the new bookseller, the emergence of on-line auctions, perhaps the chief threat to the traditional food-chain of the rare book trade, offers a rapid means of testing the water, though it casts in stark relief the always-inherent potential of auction as a mode of bookselling ignorance. The imperfect knowledge of our colleagues and the differential spread of the most current trade information can no longer be relied upon to sustain a distance between the highest and lowest echelons of the trade.

The Internet has already insinuated significant changes into the American book trade. It is democratizing the book trade beyond the wildest egalitarian dreams of even the most American of us. Anyone with some books can be a bookseller on the Internet. The cost of commercial space or of printing and mailing a catalogue are no longer an impediment to the beginning bookseller. On-line bookselling provides anyone access to an enormous customer-base at virtually no cost, and it has become apparent to anyone who has even dabbled in on-line bookselling that there is a much larger book-buying public than any individual bookseller might have imagined. Their needs and buying habits differ across the full spectrum, and in aggregate they cannot be marginalized as "irrelevant to the real business of selling rare books." True, a substantial number are there to find one book only, and many of the most serious book buyers in the world will never purchase a book on the Internet, or perhaps even browse it, but it would be arbitrary to ignore the many who will visit it repeatedly or their reasons for doing so.

The Internet has compelled many antiquarian booksellers to re-assess just what constitutes a desirable book. Many collectors have been underserved by the specialist trade in rare books. Catalogues can be only so large, and authors who are not in great public demand will tend to be neglected by

catalogue booksellers. Since any given book requires only one customer, however, books by many of these neglected authors have again become commercially viable, and thousands of customers may recently have been satisfied in ways they futilely sought for years before the advent of the Internet. Many a book that has lingered on a bookseller's shelf untouched and unremarked awaiting its one customer sells instantly on the Internet, because its one customer is out there waiting along with the one customer for tens of thousands of other books. And we would do well to remember that, in spite of the heady world of ever higher prices in which we operate, the true collector is often seeking relatively inexpensive titles among the hundreds or thousands he craves. One obvious benefit of the Internet is that it reveals the inventories of innumerable booksellers whom even the most diligent collector could never have ferreted out in the past. At the same time, many modern first editions that had generally been deemed uncommon are so readily available on the Internet that the speculative prices they had achieved must be scaled back. Specialist booksellers can no longer control the supply of these books by virtue of their privileged access to customers or the barriers imposed by business overhead. It would seem that the trade in inexpensive, say \$20-200 books, has been permanently damaged by the Internet, where any collector or part time bookseller willing to accept less than the highest retail price may easily undercut the established bookseller. And there is such a proliferation of booksellers on the Internet that there is no possibility of controlling the flow of such quantities of material. Historically, the tendency of commerce has been to reduce the role that middlemen, transportation, storage, and even advertising play in the pricing of commodities. The Internet would seem to offer the ideal frictionless plane on which to conduct the retail sale of almost anything. In this environment, it is inevitable that the prices of books obtainable enough to be in competition with other copies on-line must fall. It is obvious that the strength of the Internet book trade has had at least a temporarily deleterious effect upon both catalogue and book fair sales. Many customers have taken to the new technology with an initial passion that has made significant inroads into their disposable incomes.

One thing that is clear is that the Internet is the bookshop of the young bookseller of the future, and this means that the exigencies of the technology and the modes of engagement with books it encourages will affect his education in books. Because the Internet requires only the most minimal commitment, either to books or to commerce in them, and little time beyond an initial investment in making book descriptions available, it is highly probable that the medium will encourage part-time or even ad hoc bookselling. Because the Internet gives the convincing impression of being self-contained, young booksellers are less likely to look outside it for the sorts of information they seek, as to bibliography, pricing, etc. Because it is a medium that encourages and rewards speed, it is likely as well to encourage cursory or even shoddy cataloguing practices, a disconcerting

trend in light of the general decline in cataloguing standards: in its brief history, the commonest complaint among seasoned book people is that books are not as they are described on the Internet, a situation that must change, one supposes, with negative feedback. Because one isn't actually looking at books when one "browses" the Internet, but only rather slight records of books, it would seem likely that the sort of intimate relationship with books that results in an appreciation of them as objects will gradually diminish. Because the Internet best serves customers seeking a single title, the pleasures of browsing and the joys of serendipity are lost to its users; the senses are not satisfied, and the hard-won and ultimately vastly more efficient skill of rapidly scanning shelves for the unusual falls into desuetude. Of course, booksellers will still require-and customers will still be compelled by-the unruly world of the bookshop and book fair, but it is unarguable that as the Internet becomes responsible for more and more sales, the fortunes of the open shop must decline yet further. Although big inventories may again become desirable in the face of the diverse clientele the Internet will attract and serve, the large open shop is not likely to enjoy a renaissance as a consequence. Unlike a catalogue, which quickly reveals the nature and extent of a bookseller's engagement with books and, in fact, constitutes the bookseller's signature, the Internet tends to be non-hierarchical, impersonal, and all but useless in helping a young bookseller to establish an identity among the other booksellers beside whom his books are offered. Because most young Internet booksellers have little personal interaction with their colleagues at large, very few of them are conversant with the code of behavior that has evolved in the trade over many many years, and their education in such matters takes commensurately longer. Of course, the structure of Internet business changes so rapidly that what may be said of it today may well be untrue tomorrow, and since it also inherently constitutes a forum for communal self-reflection, perhaps its present immaturity as a bookshop will be quickly redressed.

Due to the gradual natural depletion of the objects and to the special knowledge required of a collector or seller of real antiquarian books, trade in them has become a mode of connoisseurship in which few young American booksellers of today can hope to become accomplished. Daily involvement with a diverse range of the material, which is the traditional and the best education in rare books, has become a virtual impossibility as the great general antiquarian bookshops have fallen away. A small number of assistants in the premier antiquarian businesses of our day may arise from the trade to continue this tradition, but, as always, the antiquarian bookseller of tomorrow is more likely to descend from the ranks of disaffected (or failed) scholars and librarians or of the monied bibliophiles, whose mysterious presence in the trade has always lent it a fundamental air of dignity and an appearance of timeless stability, than from within the

trade itself. As older books become more and more opaque to the young bookseller of today and of the future, he has little choice but to sell young books. An active trade in modern literature, Americana, children's books, photography, genre fiction, etc., permits him to deal in a species of rare book that is also available in common circulation: a valuable modern book may reside just about anywhere. But specialization tends to become confining. Very few booksellers beginning in the nearest-to-hand fields of modern rare books ever broaden their sights to include a significant range of older books, for reasons that must be fairly apparent. The obvious tendency suggested by this situation is a less and less bridgeable rift between the modern and the antiquarian rare bookseller. Except in the instructive and hopeful cases of true generalists in rare books, whose businesses remain open to all possibilities, the trade seems in danger of dividing in two.

There is a common perception that the American book trade is dominated by the field of modern first editions, and this may be true in essence if not in fact. A quick perusal of the directory of the ABAA will reveal that the modern first edition represents a relatively small component of the trade, but there is a basis for the perception nonetheless. The field attracts new customers at a rate of which no other specialty can boast. The reasons for this may be self-evident: there is an emotional component in the attraction these books exert, both in the nature of the literature itself and because it is steeped in the charged memories of youth, that other fields can draw upon only in rare instances; the attention that has been paid to appearance in their production comports with a deeply visual material culture, whose memory of the past itself is articulated on visual lines; and the books require no specific preparation: everyone can and does read or has read novels, and everyone has been affected by them. Even though it did not arise out of nothing, the field of modern first editions has provided the model for the speculative path on which the American trade has been bent for the last couple decades. It is the essence of speculation to be forward-looking. Even if it begins in locating undervalued masterworks, it must soon arrive at the cusp of the market where the future melts into the past, where the work of practicing artists is assessed *sub specie futuri*, and where trained tastes can clash against each other in a battle for the future of western culture and, not incidentally, for the redemption of their vision in lucre. Furthermore, the books engage the imagination of even the non-collecting public: they are collected by movie stars, directors, and giants of the financial world; in the rare instances in which the media deign to take notice of the rare book trade, the modern first edition figures prominently, no doubt because an exotic story about a book one is likely actually to have read, or that perhaps even rests silently upon one's own bookshelves, is more likely to engage the common imagination than is one about an obscure volume one will likely never see or, for that matter, read, and of which one may never even have heard.

There are many customers for a small number of ever more expensive titles—one of our most esteemed colleagues comments that, really, his business consists of selling the same fifty titles on a regular basis—and there are hosts of customers for desirable books at the lower levels, including the very recent titles known as hyper-modern first editions, speculation in which sometimes rivals the pitch of excitement an IPO can ignite in the stock market. The whole texture of the modern first edition field suggests a boomtown where fortunes can be made overnight, and it consequently evokes the distrust and occasional envy of the antiquarian bookseller. To the unconvinced, it may appear that the entire market is driven by considerations that are fundamentally irrelevant: the presence of dust jackets and minutiae of condition, imperceptible to most, that can raise or diminish the price of books by factors of two or three or even fifty. Though there are compelling, non-definitive arguments on each side, the American preference for the first edition in "original condition" and tending toward "as new," is fait accompli in the market. The magical survival of artifacts of the "gone world," so poignantly understood by the great book collector Walter Benjamin, re-appears in the world from under the detritus of indifferent or even hostile time as the phoenix-like eruption of the lost historical moment into the present. While the antiquarian book has become opaque, its aura impenetrable except to those privileged by specialized education to receive it, the modern book in original condition is a mystical residue that we are much readier to embrace.

Our relationships with our customers may also, to some extent, derive from the practice of the modern first edition field: they are *prima facie* rather antagonistic than co-operative. We are the knife in the invisible hand of the market, constantly exacting a bit more blood from those who would have the finest copies of the best books. A prominent dealer in modern first editions has remarked that, "If [he] receives a dozen orders for a book he's catalogued, he's made a mistake, and one that ill serves his market; a book is priced correctly when [he] receives a single order for it." If he has miscalculated so wildly the supply of or the demand for a book, he has not only failed to serve his own interests, but he has failed his customers in providing an accurate and meaningful sense of the place of that book in the world.

Such scruples have undoubtedly informed the enormous wave of scholarly bibliography that has made twentieth-century English language literature some of the best-documented in the history of the book. When one peruses the modern bibliographic literature of the rest of the world, one finds it inchoate at best and, more likely, a shambles. The poor documentation of Russian and Soviet bloc literatures, Cuban and Latin American literature in general, that of embattled countries everywhere, and even the remarkable modern literature of Germany stands in stark contrast to the achievements of descriptive bibliography in America. While the bibliographic rigors of the

modern book don't readily compare with those of the antiquarian book on the level of the individual volume, the greater picture painted by contemporary American author and subject bibliographies may comport more deeply with the needs of the reader of today. It cannot be a coincidence that in Russia or Cuba, where no antiquarian book trade has existed for decades, many of the most important twentieth-century authors' works still do not exist in textually sound editions. But it may be that the self-assertion of the modern book in America has completed itself in a such a way that it now stands as an equal among the great rare books of the past; that the moment of the "modern first edition" as an unruly child clamoring for attention is over; that it is now our obligation to re-integrate it into a larger picture for our customers. The battle of the ancients and moderns that has been played out in the American book trade over the last decades need not remain a source of division, but might instead represent an accumulation of potential from which the trade as a whole may benefit.

Because we are torn by the dual imperatives of commerce and scholarship, between which most of us cannot afford but to strike a more or less uneasy balance, there is constant danger, especially in a climate so sensitized to the virtual markets of Wall Street and the Internet, that even veteran booksellers might submit unreflectively to a standard beneath that to which our vocation calls us. As it is our responsibility to encourage depth and breadth among our customers, to encourage their growth or development, so should it be the duty of our organization to encourage the same among its members. The ABAA has long been pulled back and forth by conflicting strains of populism and elitism within it. If a real and vital democracy is to be achieved, it will be only through an integration of these strains on a higher plane; and the best way to effect this may be for us to take up the matter of the education of our next generations as a responsibility of the established trade. The practices and principles of antiquarian bookselling are merely the ability to read the rare book. If they are not received by new generations, they are lost. We can embrace the positive potential of new technologies, which encourage us to take a broader view of books and of the people who want them, without surrendering the patient virtues by which our trade has developed and endured.

At a time when the air-nay, the very aether-is thick with commerce, we would do well to recall what it is about the trade that has opened it to the possibilities that now threaten to undermine it. We are the custodians of charged or magical objects. The book is the very soul of Western culture: like nothing else in the material culture of the West, it speaks to us: it is its very nature to speak to us. A prominent colleague, well known for his unique perspectives on the book trade, once said to me, in a way that conveyed his thrust perhaps more profoundly than its mere contents, "We're selling the best things in the world." In recent years, it seems, the world has suddenly become aware of this fact, and customers and money have flowed to the

trade from all sorts of unlikely quarters. Although many of our customers are not aware of it, it is its spiritual force that attracts them to the book; and it is the monastic vocation of the book trade that has conserved this force over the ages and that mediates this force for the public today. If we permit ourselves to become lost in the whirl of commerce without remaining moored in our traditions, we are lost indeed. Let us make haste slowly.

**This article**

originated as a speech delivered at the Vienna International Book Fair and Congress in 1998.