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Collecting Modern American Literature in the 1980s and Beyond

Carter Burden



CARTER BURDEN, William A. M. Burden Company, New York, is a book collector.

It has been suggested that I speak today about my life as a collector of modern American literature: what I did right; what I did wrong; what generalizations (if any) I derive from my own particular experience and where I see the field going in the future.

I won't bore you with a detailed rendition of where it all began, a story dear to every collector's heart, except to say that it was all a terrible accident and one for which I hold this august institution primarily responsible. I was perusing a Sotheby's catalog one day, minding my own business, when I came across a first edition of Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*. It just so happened that I had written my undergraduate History and Lit. thesis on Henry Miller, and I decided, in a spasm of Harvard-inspired nostalgia, to bid on it. Suffice it to say that what began with one lousy book, by one unreadable author, acquired purely for old time's sake, followed by a few first editions by contemporary women writers purchased as Christmas gifts for my wife, turned into an eighty-thousand-volume monster a mere twelve years later. I'm told that among modern rare book dealers, the 1980s are still affectionately referred to as the "Burden Decade" in much the same way that the twentieth century was designated the "American Century."

But that was then, and now is now. I'm still collecting modern literature, but in a far more limited sense. I am wiser now than then—more realistic, less ambitious. Of necessity I've had to narrow my goals, refine my objectives, discipline my obsessions. I'm still a player in the market, but I'm no longer the market itself.

Which is not to say that my original goals were not honorable ones. My inspiration from the beginning was the extraordinary collection of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American literature assembled by the late Waller Barrett. The Barrett Collection, which now resides at the University of Virginia, is extraordinary in its quality, scope, and completeness. Here was a man who bought huge, duplicate collections of Robert Frost merely to obtain a single elusive title, a man who built complete collections not merely of writers *now* acknowledged to be important, but writers who were *once* considered important, or who may yet turn out to be important. I didn't realize it at the time, but I think, at least subconsciously, I saw myself picking up where Mr. Barrett left off, somewhere around 1880, post-Melville and Whitman, but pre- those two great modernists, Crane and James.

Comprehensiveness and completeness were my goals, although even then there were some tricky conceptual issues to resolve. For example, in later life both James

and Eliot became British subjects. Does that mean they are not American writers? Did Auden's embrace of U.S. citizenship render him an American rather than an English author? Then there was the question of availability of prime material. Although Mark Twain clearly fell within my collecting time frame, I figured it would be very difficult (not to mention extremely expensive) in 1980 to build a world-class collection from scratch, and I was right. Admittedly, therefore, some of the rules I set for myself were arbitrary, but I was serenely confident even so that they were both realistic and attainable. I mean, how bad could it be? How many truly important or representative American writers have there been in the last hundred odd years? Little did I dream or imagine.

My favorite mental exercise when faced with insomnia is to make up lists: the ten most overrated painters; the ten greatest non-German composers; the ten most beautiful women; the ten most obscenely luxurious hotels. You can imagine, then, the exquisite pleasure I experienced compiling my own master list of modern American writers. Obviously, you start with the "Big Three" American novelists: James, Faulkner, and Hemingway. And, of course, you include major poets such as Eliot, Pound, Auden, Stevens, and Williams, as well as playwrights like O'Neill and Tennessee Williams, and critics such as Henry Adams and Edmund Wilson. Just below the top rank, you incorporate all of those writers who, if not unquestionably immortal, clearly have a good shot at surviving into the next millennium: Cather, Wharton, Frost, Lowell, Nabokov, O'Connor, Bellow, Salinger, and Updike. Then there are the so-called genre writers who, if nothing else, have achieved an established place in popular American culture: for example, hard-boiled detective writers like Chandler and Hammett; science-fictionaries such as Bradbury and Heinlein; children's book writers such as Edgar Rice Burroughs and L. Frank Baum (for some reason all important American children's authors seem to have three names: Frances Hodgkin Burnett, Joel Chandler Harris, Marjory Kinnan Rawlings) as well as Western writers like Jack London and Zane Gray; and humorists such as Lardner and Thurber. And what about Black writers, feminist writers, Native American writers, non-fiction writers, historians, journalists, and finally, that ever-expanding category, living (or recently deceased) producing authors about whom the jury is still out? When the smoke clears, who will still be standing? Pynchon? Raymond Carver? Philip Roth? Alice Munroe? None of the above? Who the hell knows?

Before I could say "Louis Zukofsky" I was up to approximately seven thousand names (which is ridiculous). Not only had I cast my net too wide, I had also cast it too deep. I pursued not just first editions of major titles, but manuscripts, letters, diaries, association and presentation copies, proofs, and ephemera, as well as limited, foreign, pirated, and other variant editions of every damn thing every prolific pseudo-important American writer ever wrote. One of my favorite examples of how absurd this kind of anal compulsion can become is the bus card I purchased for several hundred dollars containing John Steinbeck's one-line endorsement of a particular brand of beer. Say what you will, but that sentence exists in printed form nowhere else on earth and I was truly excited when I found it.

Seven thousand authors, eighty thousand catalogable items: something clearly had to give and, three years ago, it did. There were several straws that finally broke this camel's back. When I started, I'd given myself a lavish all-in budget of $25,000, a figure I immediately surpassed with my first telephone order. Appearances to the

contrary, I am not John Kluge, and if I had the slightest inkling in 1980 of the amount I would end up spending on books over the next decade, I would have committed myself then and there to a madhouse. In fact, I only managed to fund my book collecting by reaping the fruits of one of my earlier passions, the post-war American art I had collected (also against all reason) during the 1960s and 1970s.

I didn't plan it that way. I've never considered art or books or furniture as "investments" per se, but I admit I have been very fortunate, both in my taste and timing, when faced with the necessity of transforming non-liquid assets into cold cash. Frank Stella, Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, and Roy Lichtenstein, all of whom (among others) I collected extensively at a time when $2,500 could still get you a major work of art, stood me in very good stead during the gloriously excessive 1980s, when I was assembling the bulk of my book collection (the $2,500 figure comes to mind because it's the precise amount I paid in 1970 for Stella's *Quathlamba*, which I sold at auction seventeen years later for $1.3 million). The point is, one *Quathlamba*, if deaccessioned at the right moment, buys a lot of books, and it did. Unfortunately, the time also comes — in my case around 1989 — when one runs out of *Quathlambas* to dispose of, and it was only then that I really had to confront the harsh economic consequences of my book collecting mania.

In addition to the cost factor and the incredible amount of time it takes just to keep abreast of the annual output of John Updike, not to mention Joyce Carol Oates, space also became a deciding factor. Not that anyone else cared. It's remarkable to me how uninterested even the most literate people are in viewing a book collection but I, at least, like to see my books, handle them, and move them around. Storage in some inaccessible warehouse is not an acceptable alternative so far as I am concerned. I was fortunate to have lived for twenty-four years in an eighteen-room apartment that, in fact, did accommodate eighty thousand books (assuming my wife and children slept in closets). But then, in 1989, somebody made me an offer I couldn't refuse and I was faced with the frightening mid-life prospect of moving to another flat. No matter how many bookshelves I built, the maximum capacity of our new abode was 15,000 volumes. The discipline I was incapable of acquiring for myself, was, in effect, imposed on me by the realities of the New York real estate market. In short, I shut down, and the lights went out in antiquarian book shops all over America.

Not that I exactly went cold turkey, but I did reduce the number of authors I would continue to collect from seven thousand to six hundred. With a few exceptions, I stopped buying proofs and variant and limited editions, as well as broadsides and beer signs. I eliminated entire categories and authors. Burroughs and Baum, among others, were sold for me by specialist dealers at what turned out to be huge profits. (*Tarzan of the Apes*, in jacket, I learned to my delight, is now worth $30,000 compared to the $2,500 I paid a few years ago). I donated my entire collection of science fiction, and with it the absurd, mind-numbing task of keeping up with Stephen King, to the New York Public Library. One way or another, I disposed of approximately twenty thousand books. Another thirty thousand remain in storage—their future undetermined—and fifteen thousand, the best fifteen thousand, reside in alphabetical splendor in my new apartment. I am still adding, of course, but far, far more selectively if not, necessarily, more cheaply. A brief review of some of my more recent acquisitions will suggest how fundamentally my collecting has changed in the last few years.

Last year, for example, I acquired William Faulkner's annotated copy of his first Hollywood screenplay, *Turnabout* (1933), formerly in the Carl Petersen Collection. I paid what most reasonable people would consider an insane price, but it reflected both my total commitment to Faulkner — whom I consider the most important American writer of the twentieth century — and my growing interest in original screenplays, a relatively unmined field for collectors. Among other screenwriters I continue to collect in depth are Chaplin, Preston Sturges, Ben Hecht, Orson Welles, Billy Wilder, and Stanley Kubrick.

Other recent acquisitions include:

> Publishers' dummies of two Hemingway titles, *Stories* (1933) and *The First 48* (1938). These fall perilously close to the Uncorrected Proof Category, which I consider vastly overrated and overpriced. In this case, however, there are significant textual differences (including their titles) between the dummies and the published books. And, of course, it's Hemingway we're talking about here. He may not be in the same league as Faulkner or James (not to mention Mr. Tolstoy) but, as far as collectible twentieth-century American writers are concerned, Papa was, is, and I suspect always will be, gilt-edged.
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> Willa Cather's *The Fear that Walks By Noonday* (1931), one of approximately five copies inscribed. The rarest piece in Cather's canon, it is not of particular literary importance, but an item I've been seeking for twelve years, by an author I consider still very underrated and undervalued.
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> *Hike and the Airplane* (1912) by "Tom Graham," i.e., Sinclair Lewis, in the only known copy of the dust jacket. Since it is a matter of public record, I will confess I went head-to-head at auction with Michael Jackson for this obscure piece and ended up paying the absurd price of $17,500 for a book I already had, of no literary merit, by one of America's worst writers. No better example exists of the exaggerated importance in today's market of original dust jackets. I cannot explain or justify it. Indeed, I'm one of the worst repeat offenders. In addition to *Hike*, I paid an equally insane price last year for the only known dust-jacketed copy of Nabokov's *Despair*.

I also recently acquired Henry James's first book, *The Passionate Pilgrim* (1875), with the master's contemporaneous autograph presentation. It's worth noting here the special allure—and marketability—of first books for contemporary collectors. The most valuable modern books generally are maiden efforts: Pound's *A Lume Spento* (1908), W. C. Williams's *Poems* (1909), Nabokov's *Stikhi* (1916), and Faulkner's *Marble Faun* (1924). From the point of view of literary value, they are almost, without exception, dreadful. They are, however, extremely rare, often because the repentant author tried hard to suppress them later. Over the last twelve years, I've been able to acquire almost all of the important modern American first books, with one major exception: I am still looking for *Poems* by Edith Jones (Wharton). To my knowledge, no copy has ever appeared on the market, but I'm still hoping. James's first book is nowhere near as rare as his friend Mrs. Wharton's. For one thing, it was commercially published, not a pure exercise in vanity. Inscribed copies of *Pilgrim*, however, are very, very uncommon and the difference

in value in today's market—$2,000 for a fine uninscribed copy compared to $20,000 for an inscribed one—reflects that fact.

I hope this gives you a flavor of how my collecting has changed; it's quality now, rather than quantity, that I'm after. In a sense, I could be accused of moving away from scholarly comprehensiveness toward that dreaded dilettantish term "high-spotting," but the fact is, after a decade of avid pursuit, it's only the few selected high spots that I'm missing. I still pore over booksellers' catalogs with a great sense of anticipation, and I always will. But, more and more, I find that there is less and less that I want or need. And I thank God for that.

I'm not sure my own experience over the last decade can be extrapolated in terms of general trends in the book market but, for the sake of discussion, I will hazard a few, mainly economic, generalizations.

First, the values of modern first editions have certainly increased in the last decade but nowhere near as quickly or substantially as in other fine arts categories, such as contemporary art, antiquities, old master drawings, etc. By the same token, book prices have remained far more stable over the last three years than prices in those other categories, which are thirty to fifty percent below their 1989 levels. A recent appraisal of my own book collection indicates that its total value has approximately doubled over the last decade. Whether I could actually realize that amount at auction is another matter.

Second, the market attaches no value whatsoever to comprehensiveness. There is no economic premium for a laboriously assembled, complete collection of an author's work or, for that matter, for a complete collection of an entire school of writers: beat poets, say, or proletarian writers, or Black writers. For me, that's the most challenging and satisfying kind of collecting but, unfortunately, its rewards are largely non-material. The payoff will come from future scholars, students, and readers, who use and depend upon our great university and research libraries where these collections ultimately belong.

Third, "Literary Reputation," as defined by the reigning, self-appointed intellectual establishment—you know whom I mean: the *New York Review of Books*, Helen Vendler, Gordon Lish, Tina Brown, that sort—is still the prime determinant of collecting value. Prices for the undisputed heavyweights—James, Faulkner, Hemingway, and Pound—have risen steadily and consistently since the 1950s and will continue to rise, in my opinion. Others, once considered contenders, like John Steinbeck, appear to have peaked and are already declining (as any Pearl Buck reader can tell you, a Nobel Prize does not a great writer make). The market value of rarities like the scarce first book of Edna Millay or H. L. Mencken hasn't changed in thirty years. Willa Cather, on the other hand, has experienced a significant critical and economic renaissance. As to who's hot these days among the younger generation of American writers: Anne Tyler, Ray Carver's short stories, Toni Morrison, Richard Ford, Elmore Leonard, Rick Bass. I assure you, collecting contemporary writers is the next best thing to playing the horses.

Fourth, and finally, I am convinced that by far the best "investments" per se over the last ten to fifteen years have been cult and genre titles: those "icons" Bill Reese was referring to, *Tarzan*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Maltese Falcon* (an unadorned copy of which was recently sold for $30,000), *Gone with the Wind*, *The Fountainhead* (God help us), even *Lonesome Dove*. They may not represent the highest artistic achievement, but who can deny that they are all now a part of our common language.

As to the future, only one thing is certain, which is that there will always be people crazy enough to collect books. Fads—dust jackets, uncorrected proofs, Anne Rice—will come and go, but quality, condition, and scarcity will always matter. Word processors will make holograph manuscripts obsolete but, somehow, somewhere, some kind of record of the creative process will exist and it will always be worthy of collection and preservation.