THE BOOKS I COLLECT, AND WHY

Bryan A. Garner

We publish a good deal of Bryan Garner's work, because it is good – useful and entertaining. This essay is especially timely because in recent months we have published dozens of short articles by him about items in his collections of books, ephemera, manuscripts, and miscellanea. See, for example, the 2023 and 2024 editions of our *Almanac & Reader*.

– The Editors

ASKING A BIBLIOPHILE "Why do you collect?" is a little like asking anybody "What's the meaning of life?" The question might be futile. A bibliophile, of course, is someone who loses contact with reality when not surrounded by books.

More literally, perhaps, bibliophiles are otherwise rational people who are consumed by a love of books. It gives us pleasure to handle any printed work that has something important to say – all the more so if it's in an old leather binding with a time-mellowed spine, exuding a sense of serene agelessness and unruffled calm.

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Every serious bibliophile is in some sense a scholar. But I think there are two essential categories: The Type 1 bibliophile is a *collector first* whose collecting leads to scholarly knowledge, usually of an unpublished kind. Type 1 principally cherishes rare editions and scarce volumes that are virtually unprocurable except by a combination of knowledgeable and worldly means. This type of collector is a connoisseur who talks of octavos and duodecimos and quartos in blind-stamped russia. The Type 1 relishes fine folios anciently bound in beveled wooden boards, with coats of sprinkled calf or diced calf – or modern firsts in pristine first-issue dustjackets.

The Type 2 bibliophile is a *scholar first* whose scholarship leads to collecting. Type 2 bibliophiles are principally concerned with the contents of books that can be used in support of their own writing. They are scholars first and collectors second, and their collecting may begin with inexpensive paperbacks. Only gradually, as their means increase over the course of a productive lifetime, do they graduate into owning fine and scarce books that, in their younger years, they probably thought resided exclusively on the shelves of major institutions such as the Morgan Library or the Harry Ransom Center. To a Type 2, the purpose of collecting books is predominantly utilitarian: to do something with them – especially to create more literature by using them.

Undoubtedly a Type 3 bibliophile exists: this type is perfectly happy working with other people's books, with little if any desire to possess a good stock of books personally. I'm not dealing here with Type 3.

The antiquarian book dealers sought out by the first two types are fundamentally different. A Type 1 bibliophile is happy to enter a bookshop in which the stock is highly selective, each item meticulously described so as to justify the painfully high price on it. The shelves are clean, and the books with dustjackets are all in Mylar. Each book has a slip inside with a paragraph or two explaining condition, provenance, and significance. If there's an asymmetry in knowledge between the dealer and the collector, the asymmetry tends to favor the dealer.

A Type 2 bibliophile prefers a different kind of bookshop, now a rarity: a sprawling, dusty warehouse-type place with tens of thousands of books loosely organized, but with books stacked everywhere on the floor and sometimes double- and triple-stacked, all the books consistently priced in the same place (front or back endpapers) and meticulously undescribed. In

this type of place, book-buying is a kind of treasure hunt, where you can discover books that were priced a decade or more ago. If there's an asymmetry in knowledge between the dealer and the collector, the asymmetry favors the collector.

In the 1990s, I was visiting 300 bookshops a year throughout the English-speaking world – sometimes 7 in a day, decisively making my choices, filling up boxes, and taking them back with me to Dallas. (In those days, almost no booksellers would ship.) My buying standard was this: Given my scholarly interests, is this a book worth taking home and examining more carefully at leisure? Over years, I built myself a library that is an endless source of pleasure and utility.

There was a time when I knew the vast majority of used-book shops in North America. In a single week, I might raid establishments in St. Louis, Milwaukee, Chicago, and Tampa. The next week it might be Santa Barbara, Portland, Spokane, and Seattle. My job took me everywhere. I would never declare in advance to a bookseller what my rather peculiar fields of interest were: law, English linguistics, and reference, but also poetry, literary criticism, and golf. If asked, I wouldn't really answer. You see, I'm a Type 2 bibliophile: I had already done scholarship, and then I became a ravenous collector. I wanted to stay under the radar. And I was *using* all the books I took home.

My taste in books got better and better as my knowledge increased. And although I'm still essentially a Type 2 bibliophile, I've acquired some characteristics of the Type 1.

There's another difference between the two types. A Type 1 bibliophile wants the first edition. A Type 2 bibliophile wants especially the *best* edition. I've come to want both.

Over the years, I've designed and built eight libraries, six at houses and two at business offices. But the phrase *building a library* is ambiguous. I meant just then outfitting a space with appropriate shelving, with the help of carpenters. But building a library also means the gradual assembling of well-chosen books in one or more fields. In this second sense, the building of a library confers a satisfaction that's hard to equal in any other sphere.

"Have you read them all?" Every Type 1 or Type 2 bibliophile gets asked this question with some frequency. It's an avocational hazard. My favorite answer is, "Some of them twice!" For a time, I was using a completely fa-

cetious answer: "No, this is my to-do list. These are the ones I haven't read. Once I read a book, I throw it away." That's a bad answer. The truth isn't that I've read every one of my books – a moment's reflection would show the fatuity of thinking I might have read 38,000 volumes – but I have indeed *used* every one of them.

In any event, the question "Have you read them all?" isn't really intended to elicit information. It's really a mild rebuke, as if to say that the mere possession of books is nothing to be proud of if you haven't read them.

Anyway, who would want to read 4,500 dictionaries? Then again, why would anyone want to collect so many dictionaries? Even fellow bibliophiles ask me that question in bafflement. In literature, as in love, we're often astounded by what others choose. For myself, I'm highly suspicious of any literary person who doesn't find dictionaries among the most interesting books in our language. I can well understand David Bowie's comment: "Don't you love the *Oxford Dictionary*? When I first read it, I thought it was a really, really long poem about everything."

Book collecting isn't just a matter of amassing thousands of volumes – in fact it's the opposite. Book collecting is a passionate and intimate pursuit that in some sense can be accomplished only book by book by book. People are surprised that I can often identify a volume in any of the three libraries at my house from 20 feet, identifying the title, the author, and sometimes even the publication date. Most of these books I know. I certainly know their spines. And what's *inside* them I'm rediscovering day by day. With each important book that you come to know, you build a bridge to your forebears. Over time, a consanguinity emerges. For me, book collecting engages both the mind and the heart in a way that most other collecting doesn't. That's especially so if you're using the collection to create new literature. A Type 2 bibliophile believes that any good book must be fruitful of other books.

I've always believed that a genuine scholar writing in any field – especially a Type 2 bibliophile – must become thoroughly immersed in the existing literature. That means handling scores of books. To do good work, scholars must have a thorough working knowledge of their predecessors' work.

The books I've written now add up to 30 in all, with a total of 65 editions. They're pretty thoroughly researched, mostly as a result of my having a library at the ready. I take pride in citing sources, and using nonobvious

references that my predecessors have either neglected or missed. I want my work to be fundamentally original, and yet I must recognize the contributions in the existing literature. Let me cite five cases in point.

In *The Winning Brief*, I quote 550 sources on writing, editing, and advocacy an average of two times apiece – for a total of 1,100 quotations. The book essentially counteracts the 100 most common writing blunders that advocates make, and I use the citations as epigraphs in each section to back up my advice in favor of practices that contradict what many, if not most, American lawyers do. Hence the authoritative and wide-ranging nature of my sources is essential to the book's argument. All of them I found the old-fashioned way – by poking around in the original sources.

In the new *Black's Law Dictionary*, released in June, I quote 1,200 of the most reliable and reputable legal sources in support of my explanations of legal terminology – and I quote them an average of 2.3 times apiece in the 2,030-page book for a total of nearly 4,700 citations. Each quotation represents the locus classicus for discussions of legal terminology. All these were gleaned from original texts, not from internet searches. I consider such toils to be the source of great pleasure. A lexicographer could hardly continue were it otherwise.

In *Reading Law*, the late Justice Antonin Scalia and I cite more than 1,600 sources on statutory interpretation – though we consulted perhaps twice that number. As we say at the head of our bibliography, the literature on legal interpretation is "stupendously voluminous," and I don't know of any other book that has so thoroughly canvassed the literature in that field. Again, we did this work reading the physical copies of books and articles. I wouldn't know how else to do it as effectively.

In my book *The Chicago Guide to Grammar, Usage, and Punctuation*, I illustrate the methods of punctuation with sentences drawn from 260 acclaimed writers, such as Maya Angelou, Ray Bradbury, Agatha Christie, Stephen Crane, Charles Dickens, Ralph Ellison, Christopher Hitchens, Somerset Maugham, Margaret Mitchell, Eugene O'Neill, Bernard Shaw, Muriel Spark, Edith Wharton, Oscar Wilde, and Tennessee Williams. There are dozens of others, including such pop-culture figures as Tina Fey and the Notorious RBG. I gathered all these exemplars from the literature section of my library. I suppose I might have done it at a major bookstore, but it wouldn't have been as convenient or as much fun bustling among various shoppers.

In my usage books, for which I supply illustrative quotations of good and bad usage, I've combined electronic research with paper research. In *Garner's Modern English Usage*, a 1,276-page book, there are more than 12,000 citations. *The New York Times* is cited 511 times, mostly for poor English usage, as by misusing *shedded* as a past tense for *shed*, misusing the past-participial *shrunk* for the simple past *shrank* (as in what should be, "Honey, I shrank *The New York Times*"), misusing the past-participial *sunk* for the simple past *sank* (as in what should be, "Honey, I sank *The New York Times*"). I name names and cite chapter and verse, even page numbers. And with those three examples, we've barely scratched the surface of the letter S – and look what fun we're having. In the tradition of Fowler, you begin by stipulating that major publications aspire to Standard Written English, and then you document examples of editorial bloopers. Usage books are impish fun, especially when they're backed up by historical and empirical evidence.

But what practical basis can there be for 4,500 dictionaries? I'll give one example. As a legal lexicographer, I frequently serve as an expert witness in lawsuits. After 9/11, for instance, I was hired to explain the history of the word *vicinity*. In that lawsuit, an insurance company had issued business-interruption insurance to a travel company that did business "within the vicinity" of a terrorist attack – in this case the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The whole lawsuit hinged on the meaning of *vicinity*. As an appendix to my report, I prepared a 50-page chronological listing of every English-language definition of *vicinity* from 1604 (the earliest) to the present day. (The 1604 was Robert Cawdrey's *Table Alphabeticall*, commonly said to be the earliest English-language dictionary.) The lawyers who hired me wanted to know how I could do it. "Right here in my library," I answered. Anyway, I do that kind of thing several times a year. If you don't have the books, you can't do that work nearly as efficiently – or as fully.

It's an easy move from using and citing lots of books to owning lots of books. And then it's an easy move to collecting books – that is, wanting the finest copies with the finest associations. One comes to think of books as if they're friends, and then it's an easy step to think of their authors also as companionable friends and to cherish the copies of books that have direct physical connection with them. Hence the value of association copies – and we haven't even touched on my hundreds of copies of those.

You've just heard an extended rationale for my collection. Maybe it's more a rationalization because there is admittedly some unreality to it. In 1988 – four years out of law school – I owned perhaps 1,500 books. When I founded my company LawProse in 1991, I decided to build my own library. I had written two books for Oxford University Press, and I wanted to write more. At first I decided that I must own every book that I cite in one of my own books. Soon after that, I decided to acquire every book that I might conceivably cite in one of my books. In the end I decided to acquire every book that I might ever conceivably cite in any book I might conceivably write. That opens up the field quite a bit, and that's how I ended up with 38,000 at this stage in my life. They've all been carefully chosen.

A book collector is only a temporary caretaker. After all, the books have outlived all their earlier owners, and they'll outlive me. I'm convinced that the relationship between bibliophiles and their books far transcends the sentiment that numismatists have for prized coins, philatelists for rare stamps, or antique collectors for museum-quality furniture. I know this because I also collect coins, stamps, and antiques.

It's a threefold difference in kind.

First, the book has intellectual content, which draws you to it in the first place. A book induces a combined mental state of intellection and sentiment – thought and feeling – each book in unique proportions. The sentimental aspect is enhanced by the sensory experience of handling the book: the feel of it – its heft and weight, together with the texture of its cover and the heavy crispness or gossamer limpness of its pages; the sound created by turning those pages; the look of the pages, as set perhaps in metal type by a master craftsman of yore when bookmaking was a high art; and, not least, the book's distinctive smell, which derives partly from the make of the paper but partly also from all the previous environments in which the book has been kept – perhaps sunlit and airy, perhaps dank and smoky. As the novelist George Gissing once said, "I know every book of mine by its scent, and I have but to put my nose between the pages to be reminded of all sorts of things." Four of the five senses are actively and distinctively engaged in the activity of reading.

Second, if you're a productive scholar, there's the probability of using the contents of these books to contribute to literature. In my own small way, I've done that in the fields of grammar, lexicography, usage, composition, jurisprudence, advocacy, contracts, legislation, and golf. In this sense, the earlier authors become your literary colleagues. They live with you. They're tenants on your shelves. They have personalities, and you commune with them. You sometimes congratulate them, sometimes argue with them, and sometimes just scoff at them. There's a timeless friendship involved, as you carry on the tradition they carried on from their own predecessors.

Coins and stamps and antiques can't give you that – which isn't to disparage collectors of those items but rather to praise the enhanced station of the book collector.

Finally, there's the discoverable history of the book as an object, both in its publishing history and in its prior owners. Your copy may have direct associations with the author, with other noteworthy people, with your own life – the way you discovered it, the experiences you had with it on a particular trip you took, or the role it has somehow played in your life.

All these things converge in the simple act of reading a book or even just looking at it as it sits on a shelf, if you know it well.

Let's never forget what you must bring to the act of reading. As the 18th-century German writer Georg Christoph Lichtenberg observed, "A book is a mirror: when a monkey looks in, no sage can look out." What you derive from a book depends on all the intelligence and knowledge that you bring to it.