

Oregon Trails: Jack Walsdorf: Bookman Nonpareil

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On Sunday, July 9, 2017, the book world lost a great bookman and I lost a friend when John “Jack” Joseph Walsdorf died of a pulmonary embolism in Portland, Oregon his home for most of his lifetime. Portland is where Jack’s wonderful museum of a house is but the real world that Jack inhabited was the boundless, joyful, beautiful world of books, glorious books.

Readers of *Against the Grain* and attendees of the Charleston Conference probably know of Jack and his Booklover’s Road Show. Jack the serious book collector was also an entertaining showman. The sum of Jack’s talents and his character are best described in the words of David S. Zeidberg, curator of Special Collections at George Washington University in 1980, in his Foreword to *A Collector’s Choice: The John J. Walsdorf Collection of William Morris in Private Press and Limited Editions*. “Jack combines humor, enthusiasm, purpose, knowledge, and generosity.”

I first met Jack in the late 1970s when I was buying books for a living as the acquisitions librarian at Boise State University and Jack, working for Blackwell North America, was in the business of selling books to libraries. I wish that I had a memorable story of our first encounter but I don’t. It is almost certain that we met at either an annual or midwinter meeting of the American Library Association and that when we met, our conversation must have drifted from the business of books to books as things to be read and appreciated most fully by collecting them.

I never got to see the displays of Jack's collections so I had to imagine them through the three inscribed catalogues that Jack presented to me. I have recently re-read them along with *On Collecting William Morris: A Memoir*, The Printery, Kirkwood [MO] and am in awe of him and what he accomplished. When friends or colleagues questioned Jack about how he found time to collect, write, and catalogue while gainfully employed, he would reply that everyone gets 24 hours a day but how we spend that time is an individual choice. Jack made the most of his time.

Happily, I got to stay in Jack's house a couple of years ago and was introduced to all of Jack's collections, not just his William Morris items. Every room in the house filled with books, even the bathrooms, and squeezed in among the books were other collections including WWII memorabilia and typewriter ribbon boxes, a bit of history that is associated with how book manuscripts were converted to a type form. Jack didn't collect the actual ribbons but he used them in his manual typewriter, preferring it for his correspondence and eschewing e-mail except to read it.

Jack, as anyone close to him can tell you, was more than a collector. He was a reader, a scholar, and an author of bibliographies of William Morris and Julian Symons. For more about Jack as an author and scholar, I refer the reader to <http://themorrisian.blogspot.com/2013/04/the-morrisian-interview-series-2-john-j.html>.

“January 30, 2004. Dear Tom: Just a quick note thanking you so very much for your very nice article in ATG covering our joint talk at the Charleston Conference and also my Booklover's Road Show. You are very kind to give me such a good review and I too, hope that someday a show (in full) can be done in your area. Again, thanks Tom. It was nice doing our book talk

together. See! There are still a few book people around. All the best, and a very Happy New Year in 2004.” [signed] Jack

This *tls* [typed letter signed] is but one example of Jack’s thoughtfulness. It’s a letter that I treasure but one that, had it not been written, I would not have expected because Jack had already expressed his thanks in person and in the best way possible by inviting me to go book-hunting with him during that same Charleston Conference. The bookstore [I can’t recall the name] we spent some time in is no longer in business but the memory of our joint venture lives still. And as was his wont, our book hunting excursion was followed by a meal, this one in the evening at Fish, a restaurant that, unlike the bookstore, is still going strong.

In 2006, Jack was invited to Austin to perform his Booklover’s Road Show at the annual dinner for the Scarborough-Phillips Library Advisory Board. It was such a big hit that he was invited back in 2010 and was even more enthusiastically received. Sadly, like that nameless Charleston bookstore, the library of that name, the board, and the annual dinner are no more but Jack and I were there for that final celebration of books and those who read them. Thanks to Jack, they collectively and figuratively left in a blaze of glory. Thank you, Jack, for the memory.

During that first visit to Austin and St. Edward’s University, Jack had dinner with me and my wife. He learned that she enjoyed the mysteries written by Phillip Margolin, a Portland, Oregon author, and she learned that Jack knew Margolin. A short time after Jack’s return to Portland, my wife was pleasantly surprised to receive a package of Margolin books, each one signed by the author. Several years later, Margolin named one of his characters after Jack. Remembering that

meal in Austin, perhaps, or perhaps just a thoughtful, generous memory, Jack had a copy inscribed for my wife and surprised her with another package.

During our 2006 book hunting, we were in the rare books room of the N. Lamar Blvd. Half-Price Books when Jack discovered a copy of his William Morris bibliography. He suggested to the young woman at the desk that he was the author of the book and that if he signed it, it would double the value of the book. Would she like him to sign it? She shrugged her shoulders and said, "I guess so." Jack removed the book from the slip case, took out his pen, and signed the book before replacing it in the slip cover and the book shelf. She never doubted him, never asked for credentials, and probably never mentioned to anyone that the asking price should be increased.

Three book-hunting tips from Jack:

- Don't neglect those bottom shelves where hidden treasures might be lurking;
- If you are going to collect an author, invest in a bibliography of the author's works;
- Carry a small flashlight to help uncover sleepers on the top and bottom shelves and dark corners.

I want to end this inadequate tribute to Jack with an example of how kind and thoughtful he could be. He and I, thanks to Jack's endorsement, are members of a bibliophile society that sponsors book-collecting awards to students at Reed College, in Portland, Oregon, and Oregon State University, Corvallis.

On April 26, 2017, at the awards ceremony in Corvallis, Jack was the presenter of the three prizes for best essays about what the students collect and why. After his opening remarks, Jack

introduced each student and read excerpts from the essays and contributed his own encouraging, supportive, and comments about the collections. The third-place winner was no less extolled than the second-place and the first-place winners. Jack's eloquence elicited glowing expressions on the faces of the essayists and moved the audience, too. Jack's detailed attention to each essay, each young book lover's subject, made a special occasion especially touching and memorable.

Jack, old book-loving friend, thanks, for the memories.