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My Own PRIVATE LIBRARY

A peek inside the personal library of a librarian

by Steve W. Schaefer

Hello, my name is Steve and I am a biblioholic.

My addiction to books started when I discovered the bargain table at a local chain bookstore in my hometown. I had to buy a book, just about any book, every time I went there.

I never got into mainstream fiction. I didn't see the point, except for Charles Dickens. He was like reading a movie. And books about time travel: I read Jack Finney's *Time and Again* and became addicted to that genre, but please don't tell anybody. People might think I collect action figures and attend Star Wars conventions, which I don't.

I liked some mysteries because they were not as stultiloquent and filled with pretentious puffery as general fiction.

My obsession was so out of control that I joined book-of-the-month clubs — all of them. Even the cheap ones that printed books on pages made from balsa wood and put together with the cheapest glue in Christendom.

Four decades later, I am not doing a very good job of controlling myself. On the day I am typing this article, I have, according to my inventory (www.librarything.com/home/sws53), 6,904 books. Go ahead ... take a look; be my guest. I'll wait.

I mean, I have tried to control my obsession ... by specializing.

I think an aunt bought me my first book on Abraham Lincoln. I was so young that when I saw another book on Lincoln at a bookstore, I was astounded and had to have it. Then I had two books. It was a collection. I felt I was now an expert on the 16th president and had to buy any Lincoln book I found. It was my duty. This "duty" continues to this day. I have 734 books on Lincoln.

However, by the time you read this article, I will have more. 2009 was the 200th anniversary of Lincoln's birth. I am going bankrupt from trying to keep up with new books on Lincoln.



As an aside: In the seventh grade, I had to make a speech about my interests in speech class. I spoke on my Lincoln book collection. A classmate felt compelled to make fun of me and thought it would be clever to call me "Hitler." He kept

that up for five years. His logic eludes me to this day. Anyway, if you know him or come across him — for example, when you visit a prison — please kick him in the keester for me. Tell him "Hitler" sent you. His name is Kevin Snow, former attendee of North Kirkwood Junior High. OK. I am joking; don't use violence on my account. Just call me and tell me where he lives.

I should, at this point in my narrative, describe my discovery of "Heaven." After I escaped the suburbs, I found, in the more decrepit sections of towns and cities, a bookstore of another order. It was a used book store. Who needed to go on a safari with flies and heat and smelly animals, when one could go through used books stories hunting for prey? What I could not find in new

book stores, I could find in used book stores. Admittedly, I have been in some used book stores that were hot, filled with flies and had smelly animals ... of the bipedal variety.

And then Sherlock Holmes entered my life. I was married and had my library degree when I went again to the bargain table and found Samuel Rosenberg's *Naked is the Best Disguise: The Death and Resurrection of Sherlock Holmes*. I didn't understand a word of it, but I was hooked. Now my Sherlock Holmes collection has 346 books. My interest has somewhat faded over the years, especially after the genre was glutted by greedy writers eager to profit from indiscriminate addicts as was I. My most valuable (and perhaps treasured) edition of my Holmes collection is a paperback, in mint condition, that depicts Holmes and Watson as gay lovers. It is robustly pornographic and was never intended to appeal to the traditional collector but, ironically, is now lusted after by Sherlockians all over the world. I haven't been able to track down a copy of the nudie magazine that featured the clothed Holmes and Watson (apparently) investigating a crime in a nudist colony.

As library school students at Florida State University, we toured the Shaw Collection. It had children's poetry books. I thought that was kind of cool, but since I am allergic to poetry... and to children, I felt compelled to find another area of interest. I liked book illustrations; it is the poor man's art collection. So I decided to collect illustrated editions of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. Surely, I could buy every illustrated edition that existed. Not so easy.

In those pre-Internet days, I had to search titles from book catalogs. There are bibliographies to find various editions to seek and possess (the biblioholic credo), but none are complete. At present I have 361 editions not counting my "reference books" on "ACC." I have many editions that appear nowhere in WorldCat.

I found one title in a bibliography that was curious. It was a "very limited" illustrated edition published by a technical high school in Van Nuys, California in 1934. Even the illustrations were by a student. WorldCat let me know that the Library of Congress was one of seven

libraries that owned a copy. So when I was in Washington, D.C., for a library meeting, I hopped over to the LC to give it a gander. When I submitted my request, I waited at one of those desks. And waited. And waited. After asking for the book again, I was told that it apparently was lost. I was crestfallen. Eventually, I found a copy. I bought it. The illustrations are profoundly amateur but that doesn't matter, it is the pursuit.

I have every illustrated edition in English listed in all the various bibliographies and then some. The "some" in the previous sentence includes versions in languages other than English. I also have coloring books, comic books, magazines and items not within the purview of this article such as DVDs, videos, LPs, cassettes, puzzles, paintings, drawings, toys, ornaments and so on.

One edition eludes me. It taunts me. There is only one copy (according to WorldCat) in libraries in the world; it is at the Harry Ransom Center (University of Texas, Austin). It was published in 1911 in London by a religious publishing house known as Robert Scott. There are eight illustrations.

I must have this book. I have to find it. I want it. I need it. I must possess it.

My name is Steve and I am a biblioholic. ▶▶

Steve W. Schaefer is former director of the Madison-based Uncle Remus Regional Library System. Now retired, he is likely on a book safari as you read this.

Update: I found it! I found the Robert Scott book! It was glorious, but the joyous feeling is now fading. But worry not for me because there is another book I want ... in Italian ... only 100 copies were printed. I ordered it. And it is on its way... but I can't wait ... I cannot wait.

There is always the next conquest ... the next acquisition.

— Steve W. Schaefer
March 2010

