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Books for sale

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va. I am, perhaps, Americas most inept interior decorator.

I have no taste, and Im actively hostile toward fa shion. The more *au courant* the trend, the more *ennemi* I am.

Were design decisions up to me, I would build bookcases in every room, floor to ceiling, with a few spots left open for original art. I would fill the shelves with books Ive read, plan to read , looked through and will never get around to.

A wall of books provides knowledge, as well as announcements that, perhaps, once tingled each spine.

Unlike a deciduous tree, each book is content to stick with one cover color even when reading seasons change. Books dont waste energy traipsing around the entire spectrum. Even bodice rippers dont switch into something more comfortable when steam starts billowing from their interiors.

Books dont shed their leaves. With books, theres no raking, piling or burning.

With this as background, you can understand why Im disappointed in the free market.

You cant, you say. Well, consider this.

When Melissa and I went through her parents house in advance of its sale on October 17th, we brought home about 250 books. We kept some and planned to sell the others to a used-bookstore.

Were offering expensive coffee-table books, novels and college texts from the 30s, literary classics, technical works, references, folios, science and technology, Southern fiction, philosophy, religion, WWII and essays on the mind.

The first bookseller I phoned offered a nickel a book, about \$12.50...along with a tinny, embarrassed laugh.

I was stunned. The most thoughtful, most important and most widely read books ever written are worth no more in old reprint editions than a candy bar, a small candy bar, a Snickers!

Our books were insulted—I felt their pain. The ideas and labors of their authors count for nothing in today's market.

Seize the opportunity, I thought. If paperbacks sell for at least \$.50 each and hardbacks for no less than a buck, the used-book business has to have the best profit margin in the world.

Except for the fact that old books -- other than those whose rarity and condition infuse them with real-money value -- are wanted these days only by old people, of the dwindling numbers and diminishing returns.

Demand for old books is shrinking, and used-book stores are fading away.

With exaggerated politeness, I declined the nickel offer.

I contacted several other dealers. Visits are scheduled. They will pick through. No used-book dealer will build inventory that won't move.

I don't care about the money. It's the market's casual dismissal of authorial effort that depresses me.

I'm saddened that the market does not value most old books. Old content no matter how enlightening and exquisite in vernacular editions carries no intrinsic or monetary value.

I can see why books in the sciences, social sciences and humanities lose value as new research presents new evidence that leads to new interpretations.

But why should a good poem or classic story lose its market value because it was printed 50 years ago?

You can buy a brand-new edition of the complete Shakespeare for between \$35 and \$75 or a previously read one -- with identical content -- for a couple of bucks.

Buying new Shakespeare gives you new covers -- by which

you should not judge a book while were on the subject -- but nothing different between them.

I now face an unpleasant truth. Reading a book compromises its long-term dollar value. You increase investment value by not doing what youre supposed to do with a book, namely, read it.

My never-opened copy of Al Capones Happy Cookie Recipes and Sub-Alpine Yodels for Bad Little Boys in the Holiday Season, which I

bought at Meyer Lanskys final yard sale, should be worth a small fortune.

Capone threw away the dust jacket of his personal copy, because, he said, the gaudy paper made my book look as cheap as the tricked out Model Ts my guys drove during Prohibition, blessed be its name.

Not all knowledge is timeless and eternally correct. Not everything written is sacred just because it is bound. The problem with used books may be that dollars are not the best way to assign value to older knowledge even though its the one we use.

Lets not forget that some folks like old books for their palette and size.

A late friend who ran a local antique shop once told me that a sitting U.S. Senator from West Virginia stopped by some years ago and asked if she had any leather-bound books to fill the bookcases in the front hall of his new residence. She did.

I need about 30 inches, he said.

Do you need a particular color? she asked. Red would work, he said. The Senator is not alone.

Its Books for Looks! Oh my!

Half Price Books offers old volumes by the yard for interior decoration, including encyclopedias that provide a

faux-antique appearance, but in a larger size.

This company suggests buying mixed books—85% fiction, 15% non-fiction...when you need books to just look like books. And law books ...give any room a distinctive, scholarly and upscale look.

(I've always effected a distinctive, scholarly and upscale look by running around in rags and tatters, muttering: Is today Monday or not, and if not, why?)

A competitor -- Books By The Foot -- offers old publications according to color, size and subject. They even offer faux books if you don't want to purchase real books that you won't read.

I may be a minority of one, but doesn't this smell a little off?

It takes a lot of effort to write a book, even a short, crummy one that no one reads.

Cash income, of course, motivates such efforts, as misplaced as this hope is. The other motivation is that the writer thinks he or she has something to say that some other human beings might find of interest an equally dubious proposition.

If you assume that it takes 400 eight-hour days to research and write an average book, it's worth considering what else might have been accomplished during that time.

If you work for just \$10/hour, you would have earned \$32,000. Almost any job pays more than the average book earns for the time invested.

The average U.S. nonfiction book sells fewer than 250 copies annually and fewer than 3,000 copies total. If an author makes \$10 per book sale -- a very high royalty -- on 3,000 total sales, the result is \$30,000, which is *less than* earning \$10 an hour for the average amount of time invested.

Authors write because they feel a need to do so and, often, because it's the thing they're best at even if they ain't that good. Some take comfort in hoping for posthumous celebrity and

royalties for their heirs.

Book-writing effort should be honored, at least a little.

If you can't sell a used book for more than a dime, give it away as a tax-deductible donation. Or just give it away to anyone who wants it.

Every author I know would rather be given away than sold for a nickel...or, worse, turned into an interior accent.

