

Traps for the Young

Comstockery and Its Legacies: Part One

Lindsay DiCuirici

As a professor of literature and book history and an amateur letterpress printer, I appreciate the mission of the Caxton Club, an organization “united by the love of books in all their forms,” and was glad to speak to the club. I wish what follows was all about that love, but I chose to take us in a different direction. I will look at the model that anti-vice crusader Anthony Comstock (1844-1915) created for book banning in the postbellum United States. I say model, because current efforts to remove books from libraries and classrooms are driven by many of the same ideas and are borrowing the same rhetoric from Comstock himself about the dangers of reading. Organizations like Moms for Liberty, which was founded in 2021 by Florida Republican activists and is funded by a number of right-wing organizations and individuals, now aided by the current administration, have set their sights on youth literacy in particular. I will discuss the contemporary scene, including efforts to fight the bans, in greater detail later. First, let us meet the patron of American book banning – Anthony Comstock.

By the time Comstock died in 1915, he was little more than a laughingstock. Even before his death, cartoonists imagined the most fitting afterlife for the moral zealot: perpetual nakedness. The press was Comstock’s chief foe and foil. Nevertheless, despite his lampooning in the press, Comstock was dangerously effective in his time. For his entire career in late-nineteenth century New York, Comstock dedicated himself to the seizure and destruction of print and related goods that he deemed obscene. Operating as an agent of the US Postal Service, he also arrested hundreds of people, young and old, found to be distributing or in possession of these goods. First amendment lawyer and writer Robert Corn-Revere has argued, “... no one person

before or since has affected American culture so profoundly.” Comstock was the nucleus for debates over American freedoms in the late nineteenth century. The precedent he set for federal meddling in private affairs has by no means been reversed – indeed, Americans are living through its swift resurgence.

Comstock is too much in American news these days. The federal provisions regulating the distribution of obscene material in the mail that came to be known as the Comstock Act (1873) was most recently invoked in a 2024 Supreme Court case, that considered whether the FDA could continue to recommend telehealth prescriptions for mailed abortifacients like the drug mifepristone. The original language of the Comstock Act cuts a wide path through individual rights. Americans could not “sell, or lend, or give away, or in any manner exhibit” or “publish or offer to publish in any manner, or have in his possession, for any such purpose or purposes, any obscene book, pamphlet, paper, writing, advertisement, circular, print, picture, drawing, or other representation, figure, or image on or of paper or other material, or any cast, instrument, etc.” representing the prevention of conception or causing abortion. Furthermore, any “obscene, lewd, or lascivious book, pamphlet, etc.” of an “indecent character” or that which promotes birth control and



Comstock: Punishment Fit the Crime

abortion was “strictly forbidden from circulating in the mail” or even approaching circulation in the mail, such as being addressed and stamped. It is easy to recognize the imprecision of words like “obscene” and “indecent” and the difficulty in proving intent. Indeed, the Biden administration’s Justice Department clarified in its own recommendation that simply mailing mifepristone did not constitute a crime under Comstock since the drug can be used for many things other than abortion. In other words, just because something is sent and received in the US mail does not mean that that thing will be used illegally. Then, as now, however, advocates of Comstock’s act viewed the mail as a dangerous loophole through which all manner of obscenity might slip. Comstock crafted a versatile law for what was perceived as a fluid threat.

People in Comstock’s day picked up on this

Caxton Club, Founded 1895

211 South Clark Street
P.O. Box 2329
Chicago, Illinois 60604-9997

info@caxtonclub.org
caxtonclub.org

Rudy Altergott, President
John Montes, Vice President
Leslie Winter, Secretary
Nora Gabor, Assistant Secretary
Jeff Jahns, Treasurer
Jacqueline Vossler, Assistant Treasurer

Council

Class of 2027
Michèle Valerie Cloonan
Erika Dowell
Robert Martier
Lisa Pevtzow
Michael Thompson

Class of 2028
Susan Levy
John Murphy
Richard Nielsen
Louis Pitschmann
Diane Weinberg

Class of 2029
Tad Boehmer
Mary Brockmiller
Cait Coker
Eddie Olewinski
Roger Rudich

Appointed Officers and Committee Chairs

Archives and Historian: Paul F. Gehl
Caxtonian: Michael Gorman
Development Co-chairs:
Ethel Kaplan and Jacqueline Vossler
FABS Representative:
Gretchen Hause Kostelny
Grants: Jacqueline Vossler
Membership Co-chairs:

Michèle Valerie Cloonan
and Lisa Pevtzow

On Line Exhibits:
Suzanne Karr Schmidt

Programs:
Lunch/Midday Douglas Fitzgerald
Dinner/Evening Mary Burns

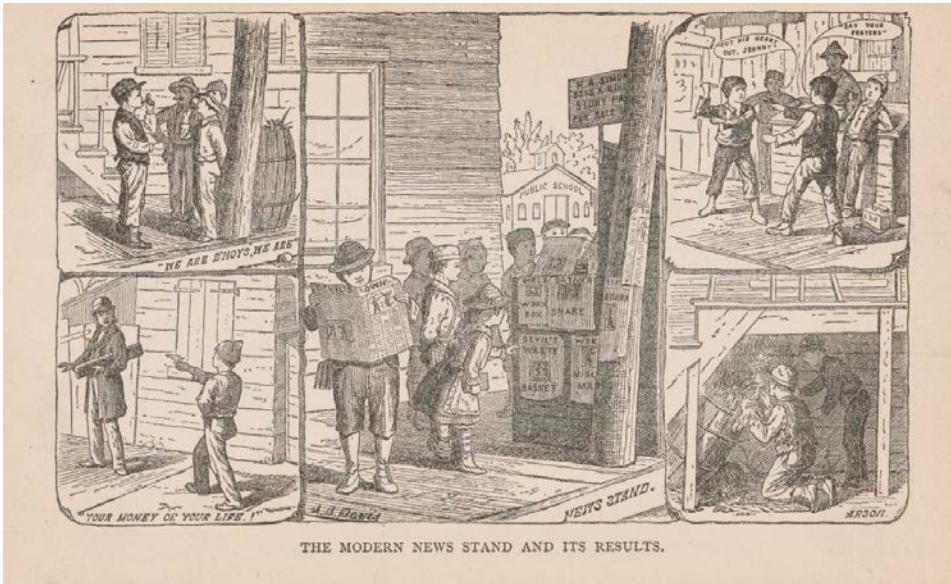
Publications: Chair position open

CAXTONIAN

Michael Gorman, Editor
Robert McCamant, Editor Emeritus
Rudy Altergott
Jacqueline Vossler

Design by Robson Design, Inc.

© 2026, Caxton Club

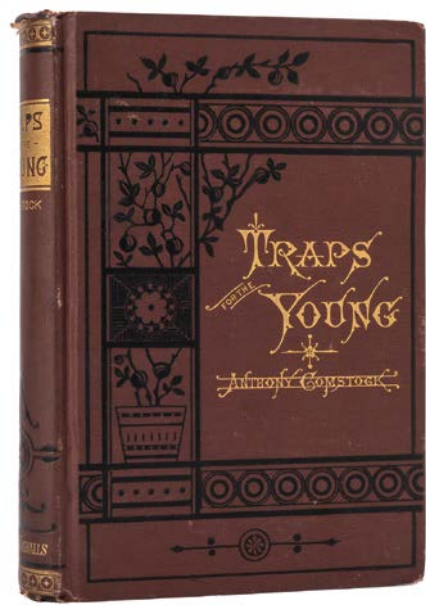


Traps for the Young frontispiece

dangerous dynamic, exposing the broad scope of the law’s application. For example, in an editorial piece from the journal *Forum*, published in 1914, an anonymous writer spotlights the law’s threat to all literature, not just the overtly obscene. Referring to a recent court case against a novelist, the writer explains, “What the jury really had to decide ... was whether literature and art shall be defined and then obliterated by the hopelessly stupid, or whether the reasonable members of the community shall have something to say in the matter.” The writer goes on to explain that if Comstock’s obscenity standard were consistently applied, “the Bible would have to be suppressed as an utterly obscene book, Shakespeare’s works would be withdrawn hastily” and “most of the classics of the world would

be added to the funeral pyre announcing the death of literature.” The law’s exhaustive list of vessels for the distribution of “filth” – letters, pamphlets, advertisements, pictures, objects – highlights the creativity of the producers of such materials. The list also poses a legal problem: determining creator intent and consumer use. When and how is a book determined to be harmful? Is a book automatically “poison” or does a poisoned mind make it so? Wilde’s aphorism that “to the impure, all things are impure” comes to mind.

Comstock’s meditations on these literacy questions can be found in his *Traps for the Young* (1883), the work that grounds the remainder of my consideration of Comstockery. The book operates in a few familiar modes. It can be read as a jeremiad – a lamentation over society’s moral bankruptcy. It is also didactic, teaching readers to spot the “smut” papering the city and even lying in their homes. It is obviously propaganda, using anecdotes of criminal delinquency to enlist the public in Comstock’s surveillance efforts. Beyond just these functions, I would like to address the book’s theories of literacy and youth reading in particular. For all of the ways that Comstock failed in his efforts to “suppress vice,” he succeeded in creating a model for conservative responses to new media in two key ways. He promoted surveillance as an expression of parental care and he harnessed the rhetoric of liberty to enforce censorship. Even in his own day, Comstock’s critics knew that his crusade was not just about lewd materials or contraception information. “Comstockery” came to mean immoderate censorship, broad government overreach, and moral panic.



Anthony Comstock came from unremarkable beginnings but used his connections to work his way to the top. He was born in Connecticut and moved to Brooklyn in 1867 following his service in the Civil War, during which he was reportedly disgusted by the indecency of his fellow Union soldiers. He worked as a clerk and a dry goods salesman in Brooklyn, but more importantly he became involved with the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA). Comstock’s New York was ever-expanding in connectivity via bridges, rail, electricity, and the post. In the time he lived there, the population more than doubled as Irish, British, German, Italian, and other immigrants crossed the sea for a new life. In the Gilded Age the city’s barons were becoming richer and tenement dwellers poorer. In a time of material excess and demographic change, Comstock characterized himself as a “soldier of the Cross” and received enough support from YMCA leadership that by 1872 he was able to quit selling dry goods and found the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. This organization was granted authority to search, seize, and arrest. The NYSSV’s seal renders its goals clearly – incarceration and conflagration. His campaign and its iconography—the cross, the jail, the fire—stood in apparent contrast to “Liberty Enlightening the World,” the statue being assembled as the gateway to America. Once he was appointed a special agent of the US Postal Service, he could operate with even greater authority and enforce the 1873 suppression law that became known by his name. Comstock appeared to love espionage and entrapment and also took advantage of the act’s leeway for turning everyday citizens into informants.

Ordinary citizens were needed because the perceived threat was enormous. The city’s “traps,” just like the Christian notion of the devil’s snares, were enticing and sometimes deceptively innocent looking. In an 1883 book called *Man-Traps of the City*, Chicagoan Thomas Green paints cities as the devil’s territory. Among the many obvious “traps” – sex work, alcohol, gambling – Green cites compulsory public schooling as a trap for the young as well. This requirement had just been enshrined into state law in 1883, the year *Man-Traps* was published. Green raises the specter of an integrated school classroom wherein children from diverse backgrounds mingle dangerously. In a section on “The Devil’s Printing Press,” Green worries that there are too many unregulated spaces and unobserved opportunities for “impure reading” to fester.



He estimates, “In the United States alone there were two and one-half billion papers issued” in the year 1873. Green and Comstock had “cheap” print in their sights, which demonstrates the vice patrol’s particular interest in regulating working class people’s behavior. Indeed, fear of the changing urban environment is always a subtext in discussions of print proliferation. So many people and pages swirling through the crowded streets. “The bad book is everywhere,” Green writes, “It is scattered through your libraries; it is sold in the streets; it is passed from hand to hand among the young ... It is disguised in a thousand different ways.” Widespread literacy was not considered a neutral good after all, especially in the context of the industrial metropolis.

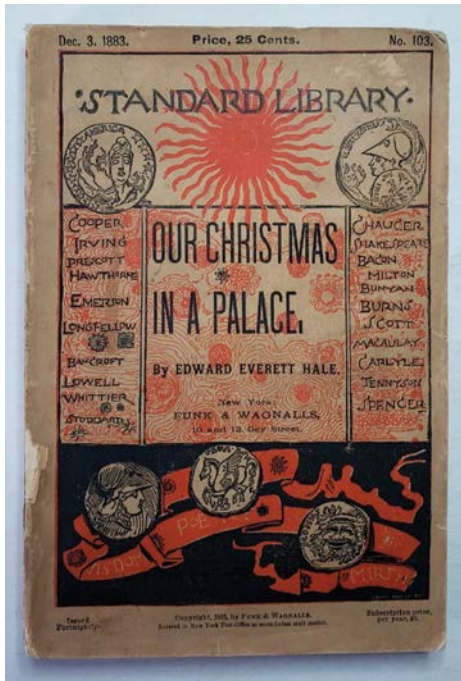
The Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw is often credited with coining the term “Comstockery” and was quoted in *Life* magazine as saying, “Comstockery is the world’s standing joke at the expense of the United States. Europe likes to hear of such things. It confirms the deep-seated conviction that America is a provincial place, a second-rate country town civilization after all.” Shaw had come under the censor’s eye in the US, his Irish heritage often highlighted in coverage of his writings and doings. Described in one 1905 newspaper article as an “Irish Bull in the China Shop,” Shaw is described as a “professional shocker” while Comstock is praised for his efforts in “cleaning out the filth of society.” These defenses of Comstock were often articulated in classist, racist, and xenophobic language. White nativist anxiety is always humming in the background of Comstock’s anti-vice crusade, just as it is in censorship efforts today.

If the streets and schools were hosting the mass traffic in “evil reading,” the solution was, for Comstock, very public raids and a

media pipeline to report seizures and arrests. The numbers – the sheer volume of seized material—was considered the only appropriate response to the tsunami of smut hitting the market each day. One account describes Comstock boasting that he had arrested enough people to fill a passenger train of “sixty-coaches containing sixty passengers each and the sixty-first almost full.” In two years, he reportedly seized 130,000 pounds of books, 194,000 pictures and photographs, and 60,300 condoms. Comstock cleverly leveraged the press – and not just in New York – to publicize large busts and ensure that the statistics were widely shared. Who was going to sift through and ensure that nothing innocent was swept up in a haul of 15,000 letters? No one. In this way, Comstockery offers a fascinating look into types of reading. Reading for censorship is at once cursory and careful. The censor must characterize himself as a “trained eye” but also operate a broad dragnet to ensure nothing slips through. The censor might not even read the book at all. Naturally the censor must also try to avoid accusations of perversion – what kind of person, after all, sees obscenity at every turn?

From the perspective of literacy studies, we can recognize immediately how ways and means of reading register fear about youth vagrancy. What Harvey Graff, in his 1979 book of that title called “the literacy myth,” is a series of myths associated with literacy’s power, especially as an index of things like societal health. One myth is the link between illiteracy and criminality. However, Comstock wanted to make clear that literacy was itself a chink in the armor protecting against criminality – an opening through which the darts of degeneracy could slip. In an engraving included in the front matter of *Traps for the Young*, the artist renders young boys reading cheap newspapers together and then mimicking what they have read by committing arson, engaging in knife fights, armed robbery, and smoking. Interestingly, the public school building in the background of the engraving suggests that the children are also truants. They are young readers, but the wrong kind.

Amy Werbel notes in her history of Comstock’s reign, when language failed to define obscenity, the text or object’s effect became the measure. One effect in particular, sexual arousal, was deemed the gateway drug to criminality, especially among youth. “Do not forget that lust breeds crime,” Comstock declared. Controlling the flow of reading material was about regulating thoughts, feelings, impulses, desires, and curiosities. Comstock’s ace in



The Standard Library

the hole was a concern for the nation's youth. Media scholar Margaret Cassidy observes that the link between self-government and literacy was so firm in the US that any material that leveraged children's literacy for ill was "a threat

to the future of the nation." She notes that almost as soon as the common school took shape in the US, worries about controlling reading material also flared. Thus, we can see how censorship measures ramp up in proportion to demographic changes and expanded access to social goods, both then and now.

To fill a gap in the market for cheap but "wholesome" literature Funk & Wagnalls, publisher of *Traps for the Young*, released a series called *The Standard Library*. Funk & Wagnalls would go on to be a successful publisher of encyclopedias and other reference works, but they began their catalogue with religious literature. The authors of the Standard Library volumes are part of the Western canon, including British authors Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, etc., and the Americans James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and the like. No women or writers of color were included, despite the fact that by the 1880s many such writers were best sellers. An advertisement for *Traps* appeared on the back covers of Standard Library editions and the publisher also ran short essays like "How the Advocates of Good Cheap Books Can Help Us," to build a subscription list. The language of class and

moral warfare is clear. The affordable Standard Library promised to provide the "ammunition," and the soldiers in the fight are the clergy and "advocates of good reading throughout the country." The "bad" cheap books are not just penny papers read out in the streets during school, but also dime novels, quickly produced, cheaply bound in paper wrappers, and easily purchased for ten cents. By comparison, the Standard Library Series is expensive. Why would a young person pay a quarter for *Our Christmas in a Palace* by Edward Everett Hale when that quarter could buy two Buffalo Bill dime novels and a nickel weekly packed with detective stories? Comstock recognized that the young readers most at risk of "vagrancy" would probably not shift their reading habits to the Standard Library Series. If he could reach parents, caregivers, and community leaders with his warning, though, he might move the market.

§§

(Part Two will appear in the September/October Caxtonian.)

Carbon dating "Medieval" and "Early Modern" Woodblocks: An Invitation

Ed Potten and Elizabeth Savage

On February 18, 2026, we delivered a talk to the Caxton Club to offer a book collector-friendly introduction to the science and research benefits of carbon dating in the context of print and book heritage. Each living cell traps the level of carbon-14 that is present in the atmosphere at the moment that it dies, or stops metabolizing. That level changes each year, so it can be mapped against the record of atmospheric carbon levels in order to identify the years in which that cell stopped absorbing carbon-14. Carbon dating can reveal the range of years when the cells in a woodblock would have closed, meaning when those rings stopped growing (not when the tree died or was felled). This offers a broad date after which the woodblock was created, as the blocks could have been designed, cut, and printed in different episodes over many years. This dating can be extremely

useful for confirming that certain artifacts of print heritage are not as early as they seem. Ed presented an example of what appeared to be a German medieval woodblock that was in fact commissioned by an English antiquarian, as confirmed by both the carbon dating of the woodblock and the original records of the block's commission. Elizabeth discussed two apparently German early modern woodblocks, both with a key face on one side and a tone face on the other, that seem to have been produced shortly before their first known printing, in a volume of restrikes in 1810. We believe that many other woodblocks for otherwise untested or apparent medieval block books or woodcuts, especially those of which the wood is in excellent condition and little marred by printing ink, actually belong to the origin of book history as a field of research in the eighteenth century – not the origins of printing itself in the fourteenth century. We argue that

these objects are not necessarily deceptive, but a product of antiquarian knowledge creation. Before photography allowed for facsimiles of artifacts, these research tools plugged gaps in collections that allowed their owners to make the history of printing tangible. We are keen to expand the knowledge base.

At this early stage in research, every data point is significant. If you have any old woodblocks that could be carbon dated, we would be delighted to hear from you. Testing is only minimally destructive. Samples need to be of ten to twenty milligrams (about three pencil tips). Woodblocks with cracks, wormholes, or damage can be ideal candidates for sampling that is invisible to the viewer. If you would like to learn more or suggest some blocks to be considered for carbon dating, please contact us at elizabeth.savage@sas.ac.uk and edpotten@hotmail.com.

§§

Bookplate Collecting in the Twenty-first Century

James P. Keenan

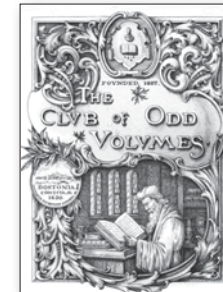
"Steal not this book,
my honest friend,
For fear the gallows
be thy end."

Bookplates have been used as marks of pride in book ownership since the mid-fifteenth century. Distinguished artists and their patrons have given serious attention to this art form, creating miniature graphic art prints that adorn books and provide a convenient and personalized way for the book's owner to be identified.



The "Iglor" (hedgehog), for Johannes Knabensberg. Germany, 1450

During the Victorian period, bookplates were made not only for library identification, but as original, signed, numbered print editions for exchange – a tradition that has persisted to this day. Over the centuries, important artists have created superb bookplates with artistic and technical quality that often outweighs their utilitarian purpose. Yet most collectors see these prints as a personal mark in book ownership, where the artwork reflects the owner's interests and his or her



Edwin Davis French, USA, 1895



Ernest James Cross, USA, 1905

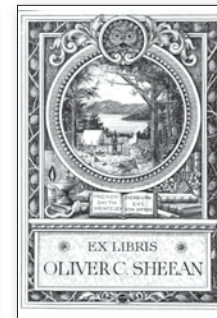
story is told in a unique creation interpreted by the artist

Interest in bookplate collecting flourished in the 1890s. London welcomed the first Ex Libris Society in 1891. Within a year, more than three hundred enthusiasts from England, Europe, and the United States had joined. The pastime quickly spread across Europe and then beyond the Atlantic. In 1896, collectors in the United States formed their first society, the Washington Ex-Libris Society. Since 1922, the American Society of Bookplate Collectors & Designers (ASBC&D, hereafter "the Society"), of which I have the honor of being its director, has fostered a thriving US community. Enthusiasm continues in Canada and Latin America, too.

Collecting is a companionable pursuit that



Frederick Charles Blank, USA, 1925



Arthur Nelson MacDonald, USA, 1942

introduces one to fellow collectors and leading artists. Through this fellowship, we form friendships with ex libris colleagues worldwide, strengthening the sense of community. Bookplates become passports to friendship. As Grace B. Sibley, an American collector living in Australia during the late 1930s, said, "Like music, bookplates speak all languages. They are virtually small ambassadors of friendship and international understanding when exchanged with those of collectors in other countries."

What makes this graphic art form so special is how bookplate collections grow as collectors exchange duplicates. In addition to trading, collectors commission new designs – sometimes partnering with dozens or even hundreds of leading artists – all to expand their holdings. They enjoy keeping detailed checklists and organizing them by artist, technique, and period. As collections grow, some amount to hundreds of thousands.

Ex libris congresses started with the first meeting in Austria in 1953. Initially, they

were national meetings, but they gradually expanded to include other European nations. Early congresses took place in Switzerland, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, and other countries. Eventually, such meetings became truly international. In 1966, the Fédération Internationale des Sociétés d'Amateurs d'Ex-libris (FISAE) was organized in Hamburg, Germany. This association is also known as the International Federation of Bookplate Societies.

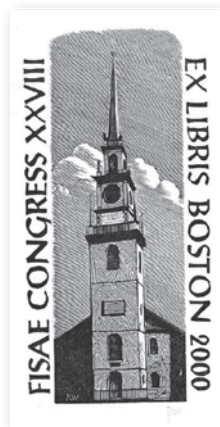
Since its inception, the FISAE biennial congress has warmly welcomed serious bookplate collectors. This international gathering brings together booklovers, art collectors, artists, scholars, historians, librarians, educators, and researchers – all truly passionate about bookplates. At every meeting, attendees



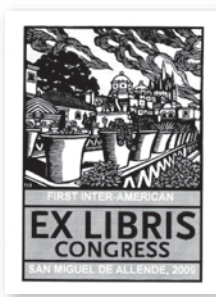
One of the exchange rooms. No money is passed, only the exchange of prints.

enjoy a host of fine exhibitions featuring both historical and contemporary works, usually accompanied by illustrated talks. Additionally, delightful guided tours of the region offer further opportunities for connection, and the lively, friendly exchange of bookplates continues throughout the weeklong event.

Every two years, a different FISAE member nation hosts an international congress. More than forty nations are part of FISAE. For example, our Society organized the twenty-eighth FISAE Congress at the Boston Public Library in 2000 and the thirty-ninth FISAE Congress at Jack London Square on San Francisco Bay in 2022. In the Americas, we also initiated another meeting for enthusiasts from Canada to Argentina. The Interamerican Ex Libris Congress began in the sixteenth-century town of San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato, Mexico. International participants gathered at the Instituto Allende Fine Arts College, where we led Master Artist workshops, exhibitions, lectures, and exchanges.



Richard Wagener,
USA, 2000



Artemio Rodriguez,
Mexico, 2009

The basics of bookplate collecting remain unchanged in the twenty-first century. In our network, congresses are an important opportunity for networking; by attending you can participate in bookplate auctions and get to know the members through correspondence and exchanges. You may just fall victim to “ex libris mania” – a gentleperson’s pastime. For your library collections, you should commission bookplates in your name from a few artists, to have materials for exchange, and you’ll meet the world’s best artists at a congress. Be selective and always, always strive for the best. The true drama and excitement of bookplates lies in exchanging ideas and forming friendships between collectors and artists, whether in person, at a congress, or through correspondence.

Bookplate aficionados collect both historic ex libris and contemporary prints. The first World Congress I attended was in Sapporo, Japan in 1992, hosted by the Nippon Ex Libris Association. There, I formed lifelong friendships with leaders in our field.

Interest in ex libris has ebbed and flowed over the years. For instance, it notably subsided during World War II, then gathered renewed momentum in the 1950s. Enthusiasm for bookplate art continues in most

countries. In the twenty-first century, renewed interest is visible in the Americas. Exciting movements in the book arts thrive. Meanwhile, hundreds of top artists, printmakers, and book illustrators create exquisite works throughout Europe, Russia, and Asia.

If you are curious about historic ex libris, you may be delighted to discover how many collectors eagerly exchange old examples for new creations. As you step into this welcoming world, consider making the creation of your own bookplate. There is a real joy in seeing your unique ex libris in your books at home. If your interest in bookplates springs from a love of book arts, designing a personal bookplate feels even more rewarding.

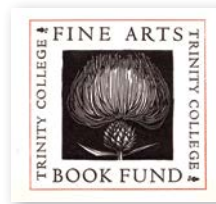
Commissioning a Bookplate

Luc Van den Briele (1930-2024), a well-known Belgian collector and author, stated: “An ex libris should be a synthesis of the ideas and feelings of both artist and client. The artist’s commitment must be notably present, but the subject chosen by the commissioner must leave its mark on the result. The assignment is the heart, and artistic expression is the blood that makes it beat. The one cannot exist without the other.”

Those new to the art of the bookplate may need some guidance in commissioning designs and becoming acquainted with the process of building a traditional collection. Do not cut any corners in reproducing your bookplates. They should always be examples of fine printing, using archival-quality papers and neutral pH adhesives. Commissioning the best artists you can afford gives you the greatest value for exchanges. This pastime allows you to collect ex libris by the most important printmakers and book artists in the world today. Bookplates have been designed by artists and engravers such as Albrecht Dürer, Thomas Bewick, Paul Revere, Kate Greenaway, Aubrey Beardsley, Marc Chagall, M. C. Escher, Rockwell Kent, Leonard Baskin, Barry Moser, and



Rockwell Kent, USA



Barry Moser, USA

many others. Your collection will likely have tremendous value in the future.

Leading Chinese and Japanese printmakers produce fine, beautiful, multi-color woodcut bookplates. Artists throughout Eastern Europe and Russia have turned out exquisite mezzotints and aquatints. Wood, copper engravings, serigraphs, and etchings are created by artists in Western Europe. Works are produced in various media in Canada, the United States, Mexico, and South America. Despite these trends toward sophisticated design and execution, the contemporary bookplate is often simpler in concept and design than the bookplates of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

To organize your collection, sort bookplates by period, country, and designer for clarity. If the designer is unknown or anonymous, use the owner’s name in alphabetical order. You can also group prints into clear categories, such as institutional bookplates (including public libraries, clubs, societies, and subscription libraries) or by design theme (book piles, armorials, pictorials, calligraphic prints, book labels, book stamps, or super libri). Feel free to create additional categories that suit your interests or the focus of your collection.

Once you commission your first bookplate, you’ll have prints for library identification and exchange. Members of our Society can find a directory and exchange lists on our website. You will need an idea that reflects your tastes and interests in literature, music, hobbies, family, and heraldry – the subjects are endless.

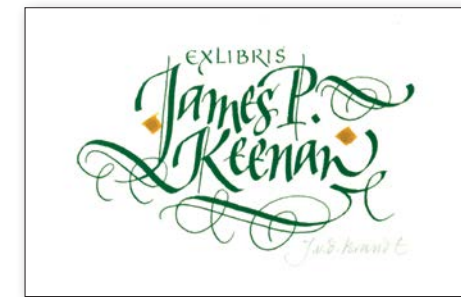
The American Society of Bookplate Collectors & Designers

The Society is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, charitable organization founded in 1922 to further the art and study of bookplates. We are an association with subscribers worldwide and we have a growing membership throughout the Americas. For more than a century, it has built a tradition of advancing the interest in bookplate art. We accomplish this through our publications, exhibitions, conferences, and electronic media.

Now in its 104th year, we are proud to be among the oldest societies worldwide. We are still going strong as we plan new exhibitions, publications, and competitions. We also continue to grow our international museum collection of more than one hundred and twenty-five thousand bookplates and thousands of books, exhibition catalogs, society journals, with more than fifty donated collections. Our collection is unique in the US because we have antique examples along with fine contemporary prints. Continuing participation and contributions from all corners of the globe make our society both valuable and vibrant.

The Society and Victoria University in New Zealand sponsor competitions to present outstanding book artists to the public. Our tribute to Truman Capote featured the “Breakfast at Tiffany’s” bookplate competition exhibition, initially hosted by the Book Club of California

in 2025. Building on this momentum, we currently offer four exhibitions of contemporary bookplates – *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, *The Tribute to George Steiner*, *James Joyce’s Ulysses*,



Calligraphy by Johanna van den Brandt, Belgium

and Eugenio Montale’s *Ossi di Seppia* (Cuttlefish Bones). Montale won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1976. Our publications always feature the world’s top book artists, printmakers, and engravers. We offer bibliophiles the opportunity to commission bookplate artists. Our January newsletter highlighted Argentine artist Julieta Warman and profiled her more than two hundred bookplate engravings. It also featured articles on American Art Deco pioneer Mac Harshberger and another on Rev. Jonathan Fisher, an early American bookplate artist and printer.

§§



Mac Harshberger,
USA



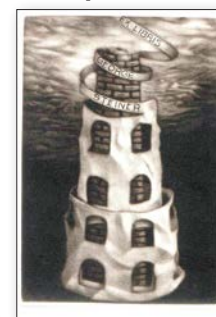
Julieta Warman,
Argentina

You will not want to miss the forty-first International FISAE Bookplate Congress. This will take place in the beautiful coastal city of Varna, Bulgaria, September 1-6, 2026. Attendance will be strong, given the central location, and will provide global networking and collaboration opportunities for bookplate enthusiasts. English serves as the primary communication language at international bookplate congresses. If you have questions, comments, or want to get involved, please contact us at info@bookplate.org or write to ASBC&D, P.O. Box 14964, Tucson, AZ, USA 85732-4964

Contemporary World Bookplates



Anthony Russo,
James Joyce Ulysses



Deborah Chapman,
Canada, George Steiner



Julieta Warman,
Argentina, Jazz, JPK



Marina Terauds,
George Steiner



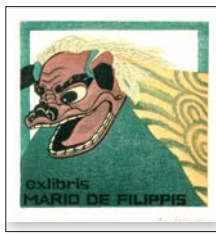
Richard Wagener



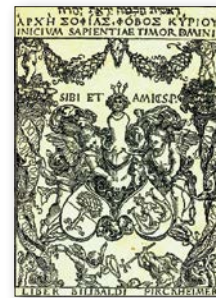
Sergei Hrapov, Ukraine,
H.P. Lovecraft, JPK



Katsue Inoue, Japan



Keiko Tsurusawa,
Japan, Multi-color
woodcut



Pirckheimer bookplate,
1504, by
Albrecht Dürer



Paul Revere, USA



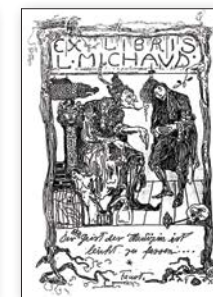
Hristo Kerin, Tighrope



Kalinovich, A Selle



KM Bak, Tribute to
George Steiner



Paul Klee, Michaud



Kalinovich, Isolde Kern

Branching Out

Sidney E. Berger

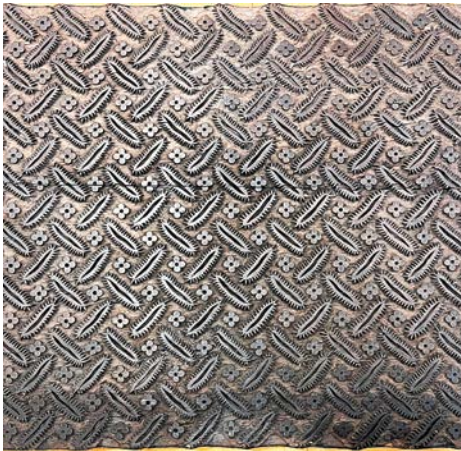
A friend of mine collected hotel shampoo bottles. Then she decided to branch out. She started collecting hotel conditioners. Eventually the branch got farther from the trunk when she added hotel sewing kits.

All collectors tend to branch out. My friends Sandford and Helen Berger started with Kelmscott Press books and other creations and branched out to other presses of the time, such as the Doves Press of T.J. Cobden-Sanderson. These examples show that the branching out can be in the same genre (books) or different genres (hotel amenities). Such extensions from the core collections carry much meaning and can reveal a great deal. For my wife and me, our collection of decorated and handmade papers was begun originally to show students the kinds of decoration that paper has been given over the centuries – with a particular focus on their use on (and in) books. Then we came upon a sheet with an extraordinary watermark, not at all related to books, but of the same medium (paper) as were the other items we collected. So we branched out to watermarks.

Of course, that was a slippery slope, for if we could justify such extended perimeters of our collection, what was to stop us from collecting other decorated papers of different kinds? Obviously, nothing. In fact, in justifying the new areas of collecting – beyond mere sheets of decorated papers, and the closely related use of decorated papers on books – we could go on to adding anything that had



Ties by Regina St. John, Chena River Marbling. The process of marbling the silk is exactly the same as that for marbling paper.



Eighteenth-century woodblock used to print patterns on paper

decorated papers. This opened up a floodgate, and new items began to pour in.

It is one thing to say, “This decorated paper on a box of nineteenth-century stationery belongs in the collection” (stationery, after all, is akin to writing and communication, as we see with books), and another thing to say, “This letter-opener belongs in our collection because letters and writing and books are sort of what we collect, and also because the letter opener is in a sheath covered in Italian block-printed paper.”

The opened floodgates led to total inundation. In response, we tried to narrow down our acquisitions to really extraordinary papers – unusual in their designs and manufacture, and also in their use.

I wonder how many Caxtonians who collect books have branched out. By the way, it is quite easy to justify such activity. “Well, we do have a great collection of X; and such and such (uses) (is related to) (was made by the same party that makes) (comes from the same country in which there are companies making) (looks like) (smells like) (can be substituted for) X. These parentheticals are ready-made justifications for not sticking to one’s original core collecting area. I can cite two examples from our decorated paper collection. A little box of women’s facial powder covered in an attractive decorated paper, and cake-wrapping papers from a German company, c. 1900.

There is a large realm of materials for book collectors related to the books that are the core of their collections. Books have a broad connection to the material world beyond the bound volumes. There are prospectuses, some of which can be quite valuable. Poetry book collections will have an immense world of broadside poems around them. The world of advertising beyond prospectuses could engage



Paper umbrella – waxed

the collector with other kinds of printed matter. Such materials include announcement cards sent out to entice buyers to acquire a particular volume; reviews appearing in various kinds of publications; and even email messages between the collector and the maker of the book, or sent out to a wider readership of potential customers. I have printed out untold numbers of such quotes and messages, and I keep them with the books to which they are connected. There are booksellers’ catalogues, listing the items the collector has acquired or may wish to acquire. The entries in these catalogues can be cut out and inserted into the appropriate volume. Entire catalogues can be part of the collection, showing the items collected, the copies on the market, prices asked, and other information. An Oak Knoll catalogue listing a Dard Hunter book will have an extensive entry explaining the importance of the item, its background, biographical information about its author, additional information about historical events or personages related to the creation or text of the item, and so forth. Many a dealer’s catalogue is a source of important information based on research and presented in a scholarly way, sometimes with citations of bibliographical sources. A catalogue may also have a color photograph of the item that could reveal how the book in the collection varies in some physical way from the one shown in the catalogue – as with a different cover cloth, different marbled or block-printed paper, or a completely different binding style. Collectors will want to enhance their copies with the extra information – to offer information not in the book itself and that explains why the book is worth a good deal more than one might imagine from merely seeing the volume.

Further afield, the branching out could be of related, but not book-related, material. In



Eleven marbled wooden eggs created by Milena Hughes

our collection of decorated paper and books on the subject we have a significant collection of toilet-paper-roll wrappers. They are here because they are paper related, and, in many cases, are decorated papers themselves. Some are beautifully designed and printed, and many of them have a good deal of information that could be useful to researchers someday. We have about two thousand such wrappers. Only slightly branching out, we acquired a mid-nineteenth-century brick of toilet paper in its original wrapper, unopened. The rectangular sheets are individual, not connected to one another, and are held together with a

brass wire through the entire brick. That was a logical enough acquisition. About twenty years after acquiring it, I found a small brass “handle” in an antique store. Cast into it was “A.P.W. Paper Co./Albany, N.Y.” I acquired it because it was paper related. That was branching out. I subsequently learned that A.P.W. Paper Company made handles to hold bricks of toilet paper. In this case, the weird branch-out connected with the toilet paper, which connected by a branch higher in the hierarchy to the larger collection of decorated paper. Sometimes going beyond one’s core collection makes sense – by intelligent design or, in this

case, by pure serendipity. The danger is that the areas one branches into can tend to the infinite. Ephemerata related to our book collections could swamp the book collections. One must delineate clearly – and narrowly – to what extent one may go in for such add-ons. On a final note, I find that the other paratextual and extratextual items give me the same kind of pleasure and frisson that I have when acquiring a coveted book. Also, the add-ons often cost a fraction of the prices of the books. Maybe I should stop collecting books and just go for the branches. §§

Caxton Club Bibliographical Society of America Scholarship Awarded

The 2026 BSA Scholarship, funded by the Caxton Club, has been awarded to Dr. Claire Byers for her project *Forgotten Journeys: The French Bestsellers That Shaped American Exploration*. Dr. Byers will study six books by French authors who, though virtually unknown in the twenty-first-century, were bestsellers in their day. The books, originally written in French, were read in the British Empire, particularly in North America. The study seeks to reveal early America as a multi-lingual knowledge space. In that environment, Anglo readers gained access to indigenous knowledge from French authors who wrote about the history, natural history, and geography of Canada and Louisiana in the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries.

Forgotten Journeys will take her research for her dissertation a step further to consider environmental factors and their implications. Knowledge and print traveled back and forth, but irrespective of where the book was printed or the article written, all the knowledge



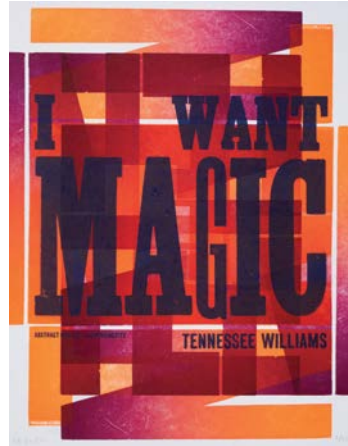
Dr. Claire Byers

originated from local and indigenous North American sources. The knowledge was tied to the land, not just through the people, but through natural resources. Knowledge gathered in North America was sent to Europe,

and colonial marketplaces sold books and newspapers printed in Europe. *Forgotten Journeys* will build on earlier scholarship to consider knowledge circulation among indigenous peoples and Europeans from different empires – imperial France and in the Anglo-American context. The view of entangled empires will permit a two-fold study of the publication of French knowledge about North America and the later presence of French-authored books in Anglo collections to understand how Anglo readers repurposed the knowledge in the global British Empire. Developing the six case studies from her earlier research, the project will investigate who among Anglo readers owned, used, and referred to these French bestsellers. She will cross-reference the books in her current study with private and institutional library lists, commonplace books, and manuscripts of select Anglo-American figures and create a digital project with the data from a number of archives. §§

Central Print

Annual Outstanding Authors Print Exchange, 2025



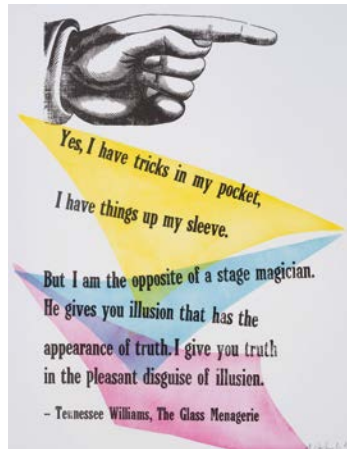
Lauren Emeritz



Micha Fessler



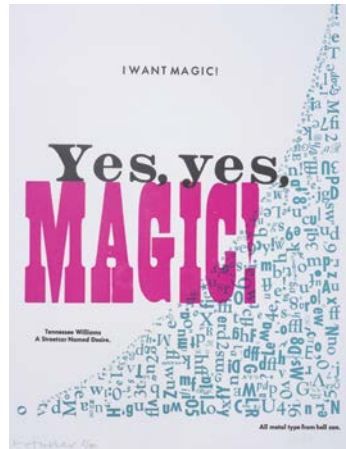
Jen McKnight



Marie Oberkirsch



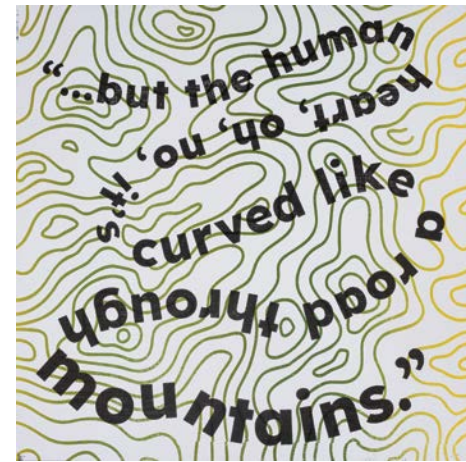
Libby Scobee



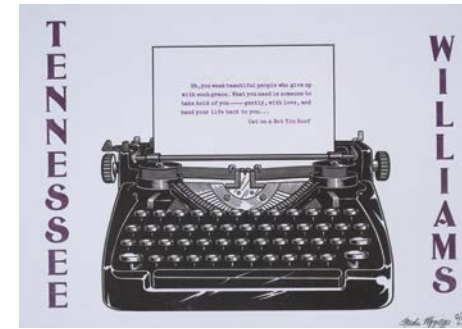
Lorna Turner



Karen Zimmermann



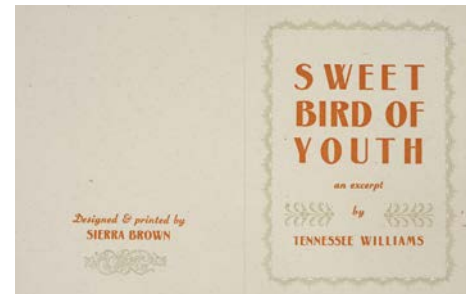
Megan Asbeck



Heidi Mozingo



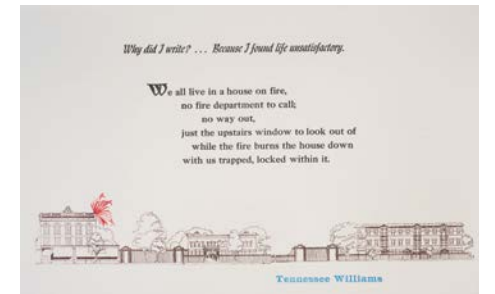
Sullivan Edwards



Sierra Brown



Carrie Keasler



Mark Sableman



Dennis Adams and Clarence Wolfshohl



Steph Kukuljan



Diane M. Welsh

Marie Oberkirsch

Central Print is a non-profit arts organization with a mission to promote the art of letterpress printmaking and related arts, by providing workshops, classes, and programs focusing on design and production using historic printing equipment. Located in Saint Louis, Missouri, Central Print invites the public to visit and tour the studio to learn more about the history and practice of letterpress printing. (See: centralprint.org)

Central Print's Outstanding Authors Print Exchange initiative began in the summer of 2023. In 2025, we invited artists to submit prints celebrating the works of Tennessee Williams (born Thomas Lanier Williams III), innovative and daring playwright. Everyone

submitting work received a complete set of the prints. Central Print has retained several extra sets to make available for exhibition throughout the year. A complete set has been donated to the Newberry Library.

Those submitting prints were required to employ letterpress or templates for relief printing. Type is made from wood or metal and the combination of both has been used in many of these prints. In addition to carving wood blocks to create images, some of these prints use found "cuts," such as photo-etched zinc plates, cast ornaments, or photopolymer plates. Also notable is the use of line and rule to provide defined breaks in the text, and borders employed to frame some compositions. All these methods fall under the definition of letterpress printing and provide each printer with

unlimited variables for creating their work.

Printers were inspired by Tennessee Williams' work and the theme of "conscience and kindness" bringing human nature into focus. Optimism is the theme of many selected quotes to accompany imagery that reinforces the notion. Sullivan Edwards' print of a blackbird in a flock reminds us "Everybody is nothing until you love them." A soft gradient of bright colors with printed metal type by Karen Zimmermann quotes "Her delicate beauty must avoid a strong light" from *A Streetcar Named Desire*. A typewriter composes "Oh, you beautiful people who give up with such grace ..." from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in Heidi Mozingo's print. A booklet by Sierra Brown shares an excerpt from *Sweet Bird of Youth* elegantly composed in metal type with an ornamental border.

Many of the images and quotes are joyful with imagery to match. Fantastic toes tapping with a unicorn in the landscape illustrate "In memory everything seems to happen to music" by Jen McKnight. A field of letters brings emphasis to the phrase "Yes, yes, magic" in Lorna Turner's wood and metal type composition. Lauren Emeritz (Abstract Orange Press) uses bright transparent color to illuminate the print "I want magic." Micha Fessler depicts a vast ocean using a wood block carving with words floating in the sea and sky "Make voyages. Attempt them. There is nothing else." A hand-carved image of an iguana brings emphasis to the words "... fantastic, absolutely fantastic ..." in the print by Dennis Adams and Clarence Wolfshohl (El Grito del Lobo Press).

Prints that reveal truth appear with

boldness and imagery that speaks to the depth of Tennessee Williams' range. Mark Sableman sparks a blaze with a red ornament on a streetscape in the print for "We all live in a house on fire." Alligators in the print by Steph Kukuljan remind us "All cruel people describe themselves as paragons of frankness." Diane M. Welsh employs a script typeface for the quote "Friends are God's way of apologizing to us for our families."

Observations made about the state of being ring true in the meandering words set by Megan Asbeck of Peanut Line & Co. "But the human heart, oh no, it's curved like a road through mountains." Libby Scobee places wood type boldly to declare "Oh! Life's a geyser!" Sleight of hand is implied with a pointer ornament and silk scarves drawn from

a sleeve in "Yes, I have tricks in my pocket" printed by Marie Oberkirsch. Carrie Keasler's print features lyrics from the song "This Little Bird" with portraits of Tennessee Williams and Marianne Faithful finely carved and printed.

Our thanks to the participants who engaged with the writings of Tennessee Williams so creatively. We are also grateful for the support of the committee members who worked to conceive and organize the Outstanding Authors Print Exchange: Mark Sableman, Kseniya Thomas, Don Corrigan, Scott Gericke, Jen McKnight, Rodrick Whetstone, and Marie Oberkirsch. We are also grateful to the Mercantile Library at the University of Missouri St. Louis for hosting an exhibition of these works.

\$\$

Saving the White Whale

Michael Gorman

In all of publishing history it is hard to find any book that was not only defined, but rescued from oblivion by its illustrator. – Chris Saunders

I have subscribed to the English magazine *Slightly Foxed: the Real Reader's Quarterly* for many years and read each issue (sometimes from cover to cover) with great enjoyment. The heterodox issues contain a number of relatively short essays on particular authors or books by enthusiasts. Most essays are illustrated, often with wood engravings or black and white photographs. The authors and books range from classics of literature in English to the well-known to the relatively obscure or even forgotten by everyone, except the enthusiast writing the essay. For example, the sixteen essays published in the latest issue (Summer 2026) include Fanny Burney's *Eveline* (1778), Edward Gibbon's *Memoirs of my Life* (1796), Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), the English poet Al Alvarez's book on poker, *The Biggest Game in Town* (1983), and that epic of sensationalism, *Valley of the Dolls* (1966) by Jacqueline Susann.

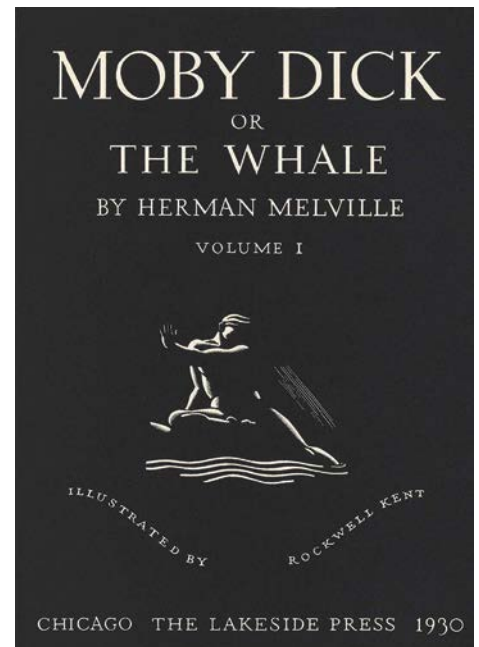
The essay in the current issue that most caught my attention was "Catching the White Whale" by Saunders, director of collections at Henry Sotheran, Britain's oldest antiquarian bookseller. It details the complex publishing history and rise from obscurity of Melville's *Moby Dick*. Just as Ernest Shepard's drawings are inseparable from the *Winnie-the-Pooh* stories (or were until Disney vulgarized its characters), Tenniel's from the *Alice* stories, and Cruikshank's from early Dickens, one illustrator (working long after Melville's death) is key to *Moby Dick*. That work was published in the US and Britain in 1851 in different versions (the latter suffering from bowdlerization, a changed ending, and being titled *The Whale*).

Both were greeted with lukewarm reviews and sales – Saunders tells us that the US edition sold a little over two thousand copies in its first year and averaged twenty-seven copies a year for the rest of Melville's life. In his words, by the centenary of Melville's birth in 1919, *Moby Dick* was "a forgotten book by a largely unremembered writer."

Interest in the book was revived somewhat by the centennial and, to a greater extent, by its inclusion in D.H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), but Saunders argues persuasively that its rise to its present critical eminence was fueled by an edition published in Chicago by the Lakeside Press in 1926. It was part of a six-volume set of limited editions and its illustrator was, at his own request, the painter and illustrator Rockwell Kent (1882-1971). *Moby Dick* evidently meant much to him. He wrote to William Kittredge, director of design and typography, that it is "... a solemn, mystic work ... that should be read slowly, reflectively; the large page and type induce such reading, the character of the type should be homely rather than refined and elegant, for homeliness flavors every line that Melville wrote." He not only provided two hundred and eighty ink drawings for the three-volume set, but influenced its paper, layout, and typography. The limited edition of one thousand copies, bound in black cloth with silver lettering, sold out immediately. It was quickly followed by trade editions (with slightly fewer illustrations) by Random House and Cassell (UK). Thus it was that Lakeside Press and Rockwell Kent rocketed Melville, who died disappointed, and his masterpiece into immortality.

§§

Slightly Foxed is also a publisher of reprints of novels and memoirs.



Cover of volume one



Kent illustration

Club Events

Full details and registration can be found on our website, under Events. (All events are Central Time.)

September

- ♦ Friday, September 11, 12:00p.m. **Tim Gress** on **Collector Burton Emmett and American Book Design**. (Zoom only.)
- ♦ Friday, September 24, 2:00p.m. **Neil Harris** on **Some Women Binders in Paris: The Deco Years**. (New location and format: in-person program at Woman's Athletic Club.)

Scan QR code for more information

