

Appraising Books or The Tales and Details

Written by Lynne Haussler Oakes on January 27th, 2018
after going with Craig Higgins and our old books to see
Alan Stypek at 2nd Story Books for appraisals given there
once a month.

In a back room
the line of us stretched out
waiting patiently
for the current person,
their number having been called,
to have their dusty old books appraised.
We were mostly grey-haired,
with ancient, crumbling books stashed
in the grocery bags we all now carry in our cars.

The room that surrounded us was full of
books on shelves, books on tables, books on the floor.
The appraiser sat at a small table covered by
a piece of cotton fabric with the sort of pattern you'd find
worn as a sarong at some island vacation place.
His ankles were crossed and he was in stocking feet,
wiggling his toes from time to time
as good stories came to his mind from his truly vast experience.
The computer screen faced him so he could occasionally
check his sites for more precise data on values and history.
The tower was on the floor next to him and the cables to
all this were in a plastic container to prevent tripping.

His wife stood near him, helping with anything that he needed,
which was a wide assortment of things from
finding a related book to show someone, or a kleenex
when mildew precipitated a physical reaction.
She occasionally took photos with her phone of the books
with and without the people in them.
Keeping certain records for them to revisit I guess.
Her unobtrusive demeanor and kind support made
These partners the perfect combination.

My mate and I had been given seats near the appraiser
and could hear what he told the seekers.
Some delighted, some disappointed
and trying not to show it.
He was extremely generous to share his well-earned
education with us all. On top of that were his priceless stories
which were ignited by the book someone had just handed him.
But what I noticed was the kind regard he showed us all,
understanding our treasures as he did.
Such attention he gave our books as he opened them with care.
I saw how he turned the pages,

an art in itself which few children learn today,
how to carefully lift the leaf and not put a dent in the paper.
It's called respect.

Often the book in hand spurred
the appraiser to tell a related story.
Then all of us in our line of chairs
would benefit from tales of yore,
of his years of cradling thousands upon thousands
of fragile books and the people behind these tomes!
Some of them famous, people we'd all heard of
from publications and TV.
He wasn't a name dropper but still we learned
of some of his fascinating life, appraising documents,
letters, prints and books for the famous.
This included several of our Washington DC
Institutions for whom he is their head appraiser.

The entire afternoon was an evolving show bound together
by what all of us in that room loved – books.
There is no charge to bring your assorted paper treasures to him.
But for me, to be there just on the other side of his desk
as he told about a wide range of marvels and disasters
was more of a pleasure than getting my books appraised.
It was a comedy routine, lessons in history, the intricacies of book
and document care and the company of like-minded people.

Do NOT ever laminate an important
document because it ruins the value.
That story was a pip. Poor old Scottish-Irish
grandpa so proud of his old tickets to a historic
event and finding out, ON TELEVISION, that he had
ruined the value of his treasures and so he broke
down and cried on the appraiser's shoulder while
the camera crew themselves just about held it together.

He has been an appraiser to the Kennedy family.
Yes, that Kennedy family.
A book someone brought kicked off quite the story
of such things passed down to subsequent Kennedy progeny.
And how JFK had done several paintings that were gifted within
the family as a wedding present, one being sold for \$130,000.

The tales and details retained by this appraiser
are nothing short of fantastic.
I commented that he should write his own book.
His wife who was standing nearby,
ready to assist him, heard what I said.
Shortly, she came over to me with a text message from
their daughter who she quietly told me lived in London.
The wife had just sent her what I said about him writing
A book of his own life, and the daughter concurred.
That informal human touch to the afternoon,
to send off a message of what I had said

and to then show me the response, was somehow underscored by the dog that accompanied this occasion. The pooch, comfortable among the books and people would get up and walk around the book-filled space, settling quietly on the floor next to some of us, then others of us. The informality of it all, the education of it all, the humor of it, and oh the stories. Just so singular an experience in this day and age of kindle books, of cell phones and folks not connected to each other in real life. This was real life full of respect and admiration with just the right touch of wit and humor thrown in.

Though most of us were seniors, one young black girl had brought in her grandmother's Bible and a few other books older than most of us. The value was not in the dollars in that case, but in family memories. He told her and the rest of us how many thousands and thousands of copies were printed, therefore giving it no monetary value. A yellowed clipping fell out of the Bible. As the young woman picked up the clipping, it tore. I think it was her grandmother's obituary. She found some tape on the cluttered appraisal desk and this is where someone in line said to laminate it. And we got the NEVER laminate something of possible value story. She began to tape it together and I suggested she tape it on the backside and then make a copy because newsprint will turn to crumbs eventually. (When you're older, you know this stuff!)

There was the lady with a very old book that was full of mildew. The mildew lesson ensued. First he told us about covering a book in kitty litter. Then the next solution came. 'Mildew is alive and will spread. Put it in the Refrigerator for 3 or 4 days to kill it and then you can store it in a plastic bag in the freezer.' He started sneezing and his wife handed him a tissue.

We learned that miniature books have value. One woman had a beat up old book no more than 3" across and he said it was worth \$40.

Our number was 39 and at last it was our turn. We learned something about our stash of books, many with powdering leather covers that

leave your hands coated and rusty.
We wanted to know about our books full of prints that were in sad condition and if the prints were worth anything. At least we found out that if we take the books apart for the prints, we aren't ruining some potential book bonanza.

I did have one book worth around \$50, but that was it. A few people had a good 'find', one of which was valued at three or four hundred dollars. Sometimes he would tell how much such a book would have been worth IF it had been a first edition, or in better condition, or signed.

As for the sports photograph book where a man named Kevin has gotten ALL the signatures of these famous men himself, many now deceased, and for which he had paid to have them sign it..... Well, I don't know that a value was even given to it. That, or I just missed it. He already had hundreds of dollars in it from getting the images signed. Kevin shared an interesting story about Mohammed Ali who was ailing and not really able to speak when the signature was acquired. Someone behind was trying to push Kevin out of the way so he could get up close to Ali. Ali stood up and just shot this man a look And pointed with Ali's inimitable intention to GET OUT And the man slunk away.

And from this sports book came the appraiser's story of how much our astronaut's signatures have gotten. Apparently they had no insurance, only making their astronaut salaries, and so as a supplement, they would have signings of their photographs. This gave them more money to handle their lives and families. One such 'signing' story had nearly a half dozen astronauts sitting at a table writing their names for people who paid for the signatures. As we all listened intently, a man with his old books told us all of being on a military base with the astronauts and that he sat with them at one particular signing session. He saw one with a bag with the money in it and asked how much that astronaut thought was in the bag after the signing. 'I'd guess about \$30,000' was the answer! Then he went on to tell that he wanted two of Gus Grissom's signatures for the twin boys of a friend. Gus was having trouble signing on a little piece of paper because there was nothing to lean on, so a VERY attractive woman who was there loaned her shoulder. At this point apparently Gus said 'I can't remember my name!'

A man that the appraiser seemed to know from previous sessions was apparently a playwright. He had written a play which was about to open in a S.E. Washington theater – "Malcombe, Martin and Medgar". As the playwright and the appraiser chatted with each other, it lead to speaking of Earl Hines. The man spoke of him as a fellow graduate of Howard University and that they don't give him proper credit for having been

one of their alumni.

He also spoke of the Library of Congress having an entire collection of Hine's work as a Shakespearean actor who did Othello as well as other Shakespeare plays in multiple languages, a brilliant man. We all know Earl from playing Bill Cosby's father in The Cosby Show.

It is hard to end this bit of writing about such a rich experience of a Saturday afternoon.

Of the generosity of the man who appraises there for free once a month and who shares all manner of tales that you would NEVER EVER hear anywhere else.

It makes me want to go there every month, even with no books at all.

I'm sure I'd come away with stories and yes of course more books.

Respectfully written by Lynne Haussler Oakes