

**FIRST IMPRESSION: AN INTERVIEW WITH
AUTHOR AND BIBLIOPHILE
NICHOLAS A. BASBANES**

by William F. Meehan III



Nicholas A. Basbanes did not publish his first book until he was 52 but, in the ten years since, the former literary editor at the *Worcester Sunday Telegram* has given bibliophiles and librarians five books about books. The first, *A Gentle Madness: Bibliophiles, Bibliomanes, and the Eternal Passion for Books* (Holt, 1995), was a landmark commentary on book collecting that has sold 100,000 copies. The second, *Patience & Fortitude* (HarperCollins, 2001), named for the pair of lions that guard the entrance to the New York Public Library, explored the ways librarians and collectors have protected and housed their treasures throughout history, while describing libraries and book culture in general. Next came *Among the Gently Mad: Strategies and Perspectives for the Book-Hunter in the 21st Century* (Holt, 2002), a spin-off from the first book. Arriving after that was *A Splendor of Letters: The Permanence of Books in an Impermanent World* (HarperCollins, 2003), an expanded section intended for *Patience & Fortitude* that looked at how books are preserved for succeeding generations. Borrowing from Ranganathan's third law of library science, Basbanes' recent book, *Every Book Its Reader* (Harper Collins, 2005), allowed him to draw on numerous taped interviews conducted for *A Gentle Madness* that were never used. His next work will be a centennial history of Yale University Press. The Lowell, Massachusetts, native spoke at Indiana University as a guest of its Medieval Studies Institute in October 2005, when William F. Meehan III sat down with the author at the Grant Street Inn in Bloomington.

William F. Meehan III (WFM): The new Seattle Public Library made it clear when it reopened in 2004 that it is a place for the book and for people who like books. Is SPL an iconoclast or is this the start of the return of the book?

Nicholas A. Basbanes (NSB): Has the book ever left? Why can't the book live in harmony and in tandem with other modes of communication? I think Seattle is a pretty bookish town. Books matter there. They know. And I bet Seattle also has fabulous electronic resources. One thing I am concerned about is the whole concept

of the library as amusement park, where you can have all of these things other than the book. Or the idea of library as mall. I haven't been to the new Seattle Public Library, but it provides what the taxpayers want because it is a public institution. And clearly in Seattle what they want are books.

Public libraries are still very busy and very popular. They are still the best bang for the buck. I don't know what percentage of the tax dollar goes toward the library, but I bet it is one of the smallest shares of any municipal activity. How many adults and children at some point use the public library? I bet it's an astounding statistic, for what you get in return for that portion of your tax dollar.

What is a library, after all? It is a temple of the book. It is an institution where you go to learn. I titled my second book, *Patience and Fortitude*, after the names of the lions that stand guard in front of the New York Public Library, the guardians of the gates of knowledge. It's quite an image to have at this time when the whole future role of the library is in question. That's a validation of traditional views of what a library is supposed to be.

WFM: The University of Texas sent much of its undergraduate collection to an offsite facility to make room for an information commons. What does this say about the cultivation of the book among 18 to 22 year-old students?

NSB: It's disappointing. It's up to the teachers when they assign papers or work that they really insist that students use books. I know if I were teaching a course would I allow a paper to be based on research totally derived from Google searches? No. I wouldn't. I'd want to see footnotes, I'd want to see citations. I'd want to see the book.

I am frankly and admittedly amazed and impressed by the kinds of things I can find in electronic searches, but I still believe you have to have the artifact. You have to have the book. What I'm able to find on the Internet is very good, but it's just a very good first step. I still feel I have to go and get the comprehensive primary material. So often what I get on the Internet is wrong. I

find nobody is out there editing this stuff. Anybody can put whatever they want up there.

I found that out with *Every Book Its Reader*. I was looking for something on Chekhov for a chapter about physicians who are writers. I had seen a quote attributed to Chekhov, "Literature is my mistress, medicine is my wife." You see that and you want to use it, but I want to know where it came from. If I were to do a Google search right now on that I'd probably get 1,800 hits. Every one of them seems to be quoting each other. No one will tell you where they got it. Who did he say it to? Did he use it in a letter? You need a little more than just citing some website. I spent a lot of time trying to track down that quote and I could never find where any of these 1,700 or 1,800 websites got that quote. So I didn't use it. But what I did find in Valerii Trukhov's biography was a letter from Chekhov to his brother. He had a quote somewhat different and not quite as dazzling, and it's the one I ultimately used.

The point is, I did a search and found something that looked good but to feel comfortable using it in one of my books I have to have a citation, a real hard citation that tells me in a letter from so and so to so and so and I can go and read the letter. Scholarship requires a little bit more than second-hand stuff, unverified stuff off the Internet. Until you can convince me that this is really verifiable, then I still feel I have to go and handle the goods. I'm disappointed that the University of Texas has chosen to do that.

So, what are the kids to do? They put these books in storage and you can't go and look at stuff. You have to know precisely what you want, then you put in a request, and they'll bring it to you maybe within twenty-four hours. There's no browsing. There's no serendipity. You have to know precisely what book you want. These off-site storage modules shelve books by size. Some of them go up thirty feet in the air and can hold up to between 2 and 5 million books or book objects. I'm all for them. Harvard University has in excess of 15 million books and they can't keep all of these on the Harvard campus. Only 4 million books are on the Harvard campus, and the rest are in off-site storage.

The politics of how you decide what books go to off-site storage is of great interest to me. How do you decide what you have to remove from the campus and put out to what I call 'deep sleep' in off-site storage?

So I'm disappointed in the University of Texas. It's almost an acknowledgment on their part of the continued marginalization of the book as we know it. And maybe that's a fact of life. But I know if I were teaching a course down there and assigned a paper, I would hold it against a kid if every footnote was from a website. I really would. I'd mark the paper down, but I'm not teaching the course. It's up to the teacher.

I love the Internet. Are you kidding? I can't live without it. I'm not a Luddite. I love my books and I love my Internet. The book is too precious and too important. It's ingrained in humanity. I don't think it is dismissed and marginalized that easily.

WFM: What does this say about the changing nature of research and scholarship?

NSB: I was at the Lilly Library [the rare books and manuscripts library on the IUB campus] this morning and I sure saw a lot of people in there. It was busy. They were undergraduates as well as graduates. I asked. This is not some temple erected to the greater glory of the book through the ages. This is a working research library, where people are coming to find material they need for their research.

Research is changing. Everyone, I'm sure, who was in there doing research was doing it in one way or another in the humanities, whether it was a manuscript from the eleventh or twelfth century, or something in history or literature. For correspondence, for research, for manuscripts, for books in the humanities, you have to have the material artifacts, the books, the manuscripts. In the sciences, on the other hand, I don't think there's any doubt, especially with research that changes every six months, it is prudent to place scholarly monographs in mathematics and physics and chemistry online, even at the graduate level at MIT and Cal Tech. Everybody in the sciences is doing their work online. In the humanities you still continue to need the artifact, but in the sciences and engineering and mathematics the people are all doing their writing electronically and they are getting their research at databases. That's inevitable. But in the humanities the material that you need still comes from the past, and that material you still have to go and access at a repository.

WFM: How can a bibliophile on a budget or with very little money, like a college student, develop a disposition toward collecting books?

NSB: You can do book collecting at any level with great satisfaction. Books that I like, my favorite books are what I call my "working books." The books that I got for nothing. The books that have been discarded by libraries. These are books that are one step away from the landfill. You get them at discard sales, you get them at friends of the library sales, and they all have an ex libris stamp on them.

One of the most treasured treasures, one of their top treasures, at the University of Hawaii Library is a very important book on whaling from the 1840s that has a 'withdrawn' stamp from the Boston Public Library. This is a book that the BPL, at some point because of some myopic view, because nobody was taking it out, deemed discardable. But it gets to Hawaii, where it's not only a treasured artifact it's on exhibition

in the special collections. It's a treasure they have out on display. It's a rare, rare important book that another library, a great library that I write very positively and with great admiration and affection for, discarded. I took a picture of it when I was there giving a lecture.

So many libraries are using usage figures as a criterion for deciding whether or not to discard a book. If a book hasn't been read in five years it is now a candidate for being discarded. If that rule was applied to IU maybe 80% of your books would be discarded. If a book hasn't been used in x number of years then no one must be interested in it anymore. The commitment, the mandate that the library had, their function, is not for now but for our kids, the next generation. John Hill Burton says a library can't be built; it's a growth of ages. You can construct a library building, but the collections have to grow.

So how does a college student interested in books collect? You collect what you can afford. The beauty of books is that you can collect at any conceivable level. One of the reasons I decided to start collecting collectors was because I knew I could never afford, ever, some of the books that I was being allowed to handle, like Shakespeare Folios, Gutenberg Bibles, the Audubon elephant folio, which you have here at the Lilly. These are dazzling things. So the next best thing for me is to collect the person who buys them and to learn what really drove them to build their libraries.

You can collect at any level. That's one of the things I like about undergraduate book collecting contests. I've started a couple Basbanes Book Collecting Contests, at Clark University in Worcester [Mass.] and Sweet Briar College in Virginia. These students do not have a big budget. What impresses us is they start a collection. Every book collection does not have to be made up of something that's expensive. I'm much more impressed by the person who spends next to nothing and rescues something, defines something that nobody else thinks has any value. And that to me is the true collector. It doesn't take a genius to know that a Shakespeare Folio is an important book and all it takes is 8 million dollars to buy one. I'm far more impressed by the person who does as John Hill Burton says, "it is the ambition of the species to see value where others see nothing but rubbish." The book hunter sees value in the rubbish. And it's largely because of this ability that so much of what we have and are able to preserve of our history, our literature, our culture, we owe to collectors, people who had the foresight and the conviction and the eccentricity to save things.

WFM: What library first comes to mind when you recall your travels around the world?

NSB: It is awfully hard to find anyone to challenge my selection of the most beautiful library I've ever seen and that is the *Medicea Laurenziana*, the Laurentian

Library in Florence designed by Michelangelo for the Medici family. He basically had an unlimited budget and was creating a library for the Medici family that contained an extraordinary collection of Latin manuscripts. That's a library that just dazzles. It's the most dazzling library I've ever been in.

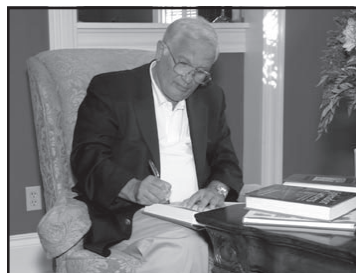
Having said that, I really do love libraries and I find something that pleases me in all of them. It can be a little library in Concord, Mass., where we have Emerson's books and Thoreau's books in special collections in a town of twenty or thirty thousand. That's a wonderful library. The New York Public Library is a great library, the Lilly Library here is an extraordinary library. There's always something that pleases me about a library.

WFM: What makes a personal library noteworthy?

NSB: That it reflects the personality of the person who built it. Books define the person. In *Every Book Its Reader* I have a chapter where I explore what we can know about people by knowing something about the books they've read. You know the person by knowing what they read. What distinguishes a private library? It's what you can tell about the person who owns it.

WFM: Can connoisseurship of books be learned?

NSB: Yes, of course. The greatest gift you can give as a book collector is to share what you know, to teach. I was fortunate that I learned from an older person who I regard as my mentor. He took me places and shared things with me and pointed out the nuances. He nurtured my sense of feel and touch. And I suppose that if you have that bug, if you really love these objects, then inevitably you'll develop connoisseurship. Taste. There's a book *Taste and Technique in Book Collecting*, and if you're fortunate someone will share with you what they've learned. You develop it like you develop anything. You develop a sense of taste for books. Absolutely, but you have to have the desire. And if you have that then you can learn. The best collector is one who knows more about the subject than anyone else. And that you can't fake. You either know it or you don't. When I see something, when I know something about this book even if you're



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the bookseller and don't, it's because I've done my homework and studied it and understand it. That's not from connoisseurship, that's just from applying yourself.

WFM: Are there any similarities between someone like E. Forbes Smiley III, recently charged with stealing rare maps, and Stephen Blumberg, the book thief you profiled in *A Gentle Madness*?

NSB: No. Stephen is unique, to my experience. Stephen comes from outside of the establishment. Stephen lived like a homeless person. Smiley is from the inside, as most of the book thieves are. It's usually someone on the inside, a librarian, a bookseller, or somebody granted access who betrays all these things, is driven by greed and is looking to sell what they steal. Smiley's alleged crime is that he not only butchered these books and removed extremely valuable objects, but then he turned around and sold them for money. Blumberg stole the books because he loved them and kept them. He didn't sell any of them, and he kept them together. That's why I call that chapter [in *A Gentle Madness*] "The Blumberg Collection." Every other book thief I know of steals the books for greed to sell them, for truly evil purposes. Who knows what kind of damage Smiley has reportedly done?

WFM: The New York Public Library plans to sell some of its precious art because Paul LeClerc, the president, said, "We're getting out of the picture business." [The art work was auctioned at Sotheby's in New York on November 30, 2005.]

NSB: He's right. If it was a choice between the NYPL selling its Gutenberg Bible or a master painting, then you sell the painting. It is a library still, in what they do.

The NYPL, by the way, is public only in name. It's open to the public but that is a 100% privately funded library. The New York Central and all its branches are municipally funded, but the NYPL survives through the generosity of its friends and its benefactors. They need to raise the money, and it's come upon some pretty difficult times. Sadly, that's what it takes. On the other hand, when I see the Massachusetts Horticultural Society which, prior to its shameful dispersal of its treasures, had what was arguably the finest collection of botanical and horticultural materials in North America-



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they broke up that library and sold it off. That to me, in my own backyard, is reprehensible. Contemptible. I couldn't condemn it in any stronger terms. While unfortunate that the NYPL is forced to sell off some of its non-literary holdings, if that's what it takes to preserve the library, to let it perform its primary function, then I can't criticize it.

The NYPL is a great institution and they are good people running it. They've done some stupid things in the past. They were microfilming old newspapers and got rid of the printed newspapers. They've changed. They said that'll never happen again, and I believe them. But now they are openly coming up with a strategy to sell off some materials for funds which will be used to strengthen the endowment and to strengthen their collections and to keep the building open so scholars can use it. So I can understand what they're doing and can't condemn it.

WFM: Have you had any encounter with a book lately, or come across any finds, that you can share?

NSB: I haven't really been 'collecting' as assiduously and with the determination that I did when I was younger. I still acquire books. As recently as yesterday I went to a second-hand bookstore in Bloomington, Caveat Emptor, and found a really nice book on paper making, which is interesting to me and something I may be writing about in the future. That was exciting. There's something I didn't know and might help me. That kind of defines the books I have been acquiring over the last five-ten years. Books that are really useful to me in my work. What I really have is a working library of many thousands of books that do give me great personal pleasure and excite me. Though I remain a bibliophile, I can't say that I'm out looking for firsts. If there are targets of opportunity, as with every book hunter, I'll go in and scoop them up.

I'm 62. That's not old but it's not young either. One of my favorite collectors, Toby Holtzman said, "You reach a certain age when you begin to collect by subtraction not by addition." So you start to think, 'What am I going to do with all this stuff?' I have two daughters who love books and we've been asking them, 'What interests you?' They've been taking things. I'm not thoroughly ready to dispose of things, but you think about it. I haven't really been collecting as I once did. Not because I don't love it. I really am interested in materials I can use. I really get excited about finding stuff I didn't know about and that really will help me in my research.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William F. Meehan III is a member of the adjunct faculty at SLIS IUB, where he received an MLS in special collections in December 2005.