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Yvaska: What's the worth of old books

By Steven Wayne Yvaska
for the Mercury News
Posted: 02/27/2009 12:00:00 AM PST

Longtime reader Peggy Maher wonders about the value of an old book she's had in her library for many years. She, too, is curious about several of her other tomes.

This question comes up frequently, so I thought I'd pass on the same advice I gave in January to the antiques study group that meets monthly at the San Jose Woman's Club:

See <http://www.abebooks.com/>.

The Web site is an online marketplace for book lovers. You can buy or sell books, join a club to hobnob with others about a favorite author, and read articles and book reviews.

It is a handy way to get an idea how much a book is worth. You can learn how much a seller is asking for a certain volume. Every used-book store owner and antiques vendor I know refer you should, too.

Upon entering the Web site, a search page appears. Above it reads: "Search thousands of booksellers selling million books." I can't help but think that's a lot of books.

I put the title of Maher's book ("The Rubaiyat of Bridge") and the author (Carolyn Wells) into the search field and a listing of 31 books with prices ranging from a low of \$6.21 to a high of \$75. What accounts for this price range?

Condition is of paramount importance. Does the book have a broken spine? Is it missing pages? Is it moldy or damaged?

Check to see if the listing includes mention of a dust jacket or a slipcase. Is it signed or dedicated by the author? Is it a paperback, or does it have a hard cover?

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Does the book contain illustrations? Make note if they are in color, black and white, or halftones.

Check the first few pages to see the year your book was printed or released. Determine if it is a "first edition" or was issued many years later. Later editions generally don't elicit as much demand from collectors.

And note the publisher. It is not uncommon to have the same work printed by several publishing houses, if it was popular and in print for many years.

Sometimes, there is important information in the back of a book. A "limited edition" work, for example, may include special notation with the number of books printed.

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You may not realize it, but the edge colors as well as the color of the exterior cloth of a book determine its value. Books with elaborate "endpapers" — the leaves of paper before the title page and after the text — may be of great interest to collectors and add worth.

Here's one final tip to take into consideration. Some books boast bookplates — decorative, gummed labels that provide space for the owner's name. Unless the previous owner was famous, these can detract from a book's value.

After reviewing these factors, the Web site said Maher's book ranges in value between \$30 and \$49.95.

Professional appraisers use all sorts of tools to assign values to personal property. They check book auction records and records for specialized sales. Undoubtedly, sellers confer with one another to compare their expertise.

Discovering values can be exhaustive and painstaking. You won't find everything you seek on the Web site, but checking it out is a good start. Let me know how it works for you.

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