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The Sunday **EXPRESS**

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Bonanza between the covers

Don't throw away your old books or give them to the raddiwallah.

Devangshu Datta

Helene Hanff authored a minor literary classic in '84 Charing Cross Road'. This book showcases a delightful exchange of letters between an American bibliophile (Hanff herself) and the staff of a bookstore located at 84 Charing Cross Road, London. That bookstore specialised in finding rare and second-hand books. Over decades, the English staff and the American lady developed a warm personal friendship, which is highlighted in the increasingly personal tone of the correspondence.

The book was a pretty accurate reflection of the trade in rare books in the pre-Internet era. The trade was then considered extremely esoteric. It was carried out by dusty men with thick-lensed magnifying glasses in the backrooms of dusty bookstores. Book traders needed both expertise and a long list of lovingly-cultivated contacts.

However, the market was actually far bigger than even the experts realised. To take a single example, Charles Dickens is estimated to have signed over 2,00,000 copies of his own titles on various reading tours. Each of those autographed copies was worth perhaps 100 times as much as its cover price, and less than 5,000 were known to exist. Then the Net happened and many more copies were found to exist in good condition.

Many of us possess early editions of books handed down to us by some ancestor. We also often possess books that are autographed by the author or some other well-known personality. We may even possess pulp fiction or comics that have become surprisingly valuable. But most of us have little idea what these are worth and still less of a clue about the mechanics of buying and selling such.

There's little excuse for doing that anymore. After the Net arrived, it became possible for laymen to quickly get a rough valuation of any book they happened to possess. The Net created a powerful information dissemination channel and forum as well as a virtual marketplace. There are now more than 20 lakh listed websites that advertise as forums for dealing in rare and valuable books.

Some of these are massive multilingual archives of more than a million titles; others are auction sites where single items can be advertised by individuals. Still others are very specialised. For example, there are sites, which deal solely in calligraphic Persian manuscripts or on treatises of the US civil war of 1862-1865. Some sites deal solely with books placed on various banned lists.



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Some sites even deal with editions that were recalled due to errors. A classic example is the 'Wicked' Bible of 1631, which caused a storm of protest. It was printed with the 'not' missing from the Commandment 'Thou shalt not commit Adultery'. The printer was fined heavily but a copy of this hastily-recalled edition is now priced at a value that could easily fund the construction of a brand-new church.

If you're looking to sell or buy an autographed copy, it may be best to look for a listing on a general auction site such as www.ebay.com. This has special sections that deal with autographed memorabilia and you may get better prices than from a book site.

If you're looking for obscure, out of print books, the best place to go is www.abebooks.com, which justly calls itself the largest online marketplace for rare books. It allows browsers to simply type title and author into a search engine and sift through the listings that pop up.

For example, if you check for Russell & Whitehead 'Principia Mathematica', you will be offered several editions at prices ranging from the nominal to the exorbitant. The sheer range of titles listed is dazzling—it is as easy to search for second-hand Alistair Maclean thrillers as for Howard Staunton's 19th century illustrated annotated edition of Shakespeare.

The only place that compares is www.bibliofind.com, which partners with www.amazon.com. Bibliofind concentrates more on locating backlists of popular writers rather than highly specialised old books. It is however good in its own right and frequently does find extensive listings.

A simple search on an engine like www.google.com will throw up both general and specialised site listings for books and magazines in any category. If you possess a book that you suspect is worth a lot, you can simply look up listings for that title and edition in any of the major sites. These will give you an idea of the rough going price and, if you so desire, you can also opt to list the book for sale on many sites.

There is plenty of trouble and strife between identifying an interesting book and trading it. If you're buying, make a call on condition. Perhaps you can ask the seller for a scanned picture or photocopies of the cover or a valuation certificate from the site itself or some trusted intermediary. Perhaps you can inspect it directly yourself. Similarly, if you're selling, you must be prepared to comply with reasonable requests for verification before you can conclude the deal. However the Net does remove the initial hassle from the process of discovering a market price.

If you're interested in books that are older than 75 years, you must avoid falling foul of the Indian Antiquities and Art Treasures Act of 1972. It may be illegal to take such a book out of the country if it is classified as a national treasure. Such a problem could arise if, say, you possess a first edition of Gitanjali or even any signed edition of Tagore Iqbal or Saratchandra.

However there are plenty of collectible books that don't fall under that definition. Even collections of old comics, especially early editions of Superman, Spiderman and Batman and also magazines like Mad or Life or Private Eye can often be surprisingly valuable.

So can Billy Bunter and Biggles. Collections of the now-defunct periodical 'The Soviet Military Review' or of speciality publications like Jane's annual updates on fighting ships and planes are often enormously sought after by many people. In such cases, a complete set in good condition will always be worth far more than the sum of its parts, although even single issues can sell for a lot.

Condition always counts in the book trade. It is a fallacy to imagine that a First Edition is always worth more than the Second Edition. A second edition in good condition may well be worth far more than a first edition that has been half

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eaten by silverfish. Rid yourself of the notion that only antiquity counts—age is important but so is condition.

Next time, you need to create space on cluttered shelves, don't just throw your books out or give them to the raddiwallah or a local second-hand dealer who pays by weight. Get onto the Net and search for going prices of those titles, especially if they are in fair shape. You could be pleasantly surprised if you're sitting on a treasure trove.



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