

# Looking in from the Outside

SPENCER W. STUART interviews director D.W. Young about the work and future of New York's antiquarian booksellers.

D.W. YOUNG'S MUCH ANTICIPATED film *The Booksellers* premiered at the 2019 New York Film Festival and was released to select audiences this spring at the time of the annual New York International Antiquarian Book Fair on March 5–8. Closures intended to curb the COVID-19 pandemic prevented widespread screenings, however, including one originally scheduled for March 28 in Vancouver. The film was released as an on-demand offering by Greenwich Entertainment on April 17, 2020. An online screening will take place in Vancouver on June 5.

Alcuin Society director Spencer W. Stuart took time to interview Young prior to the film's general release.

**Spencer W. Stuart:** What drew you to doing something generally on the world of antiquarian books? Was it from an involvement with trade yourself? Or as an outsider looking in?

**D.W. Young:** I'm an outsider looking in. It was producer Dan Wechsler who first drew me and Judith Mizrachy (my producing partner and also partner in life) to the project. Beyond his film interests, Dan is a well-known dealer at Sanctuary Books. We'd become friends and some seven years ago he mentioned that he'd always felt a documentary on the rare book trade would be a great idea. And, notably, it had never been done.

Of course, Dan had an insider's informed perspective, plus a strong belief in the visual appeal of books. Judith and I immediately agreed. We'd been to the New York International Antiquarian Book Fair before and from that experience had an understanding of the cinematic potential of this essentially inexhaustible material. And we knew book dealers are a wonderfully smart and varied bunch. Plus, my aunt and uncle were booksellers in Philadelphia, starting in the 1960s at Sessler's.

Later on, the infrequent chances I had as a kid to visit their small shop Hibberd's (sometimes manning the bargain cart outside), were extremely important to me. So, I had a great personal fondness for the book world I inherited from them that added to my interest in pursuing the film.

**SWS:** Who were some of the first booksellers you interviewed for the project? How did these introductions lead to others within the trade?

**DWY:** Some of our initial interviews were with Jim Cummins, Henry Wessels, Bibi Mohamed, Dave Bergman, sisters Judith Lowry, Naomi Hample, and Adina Cohen at Argosy, and Heather O'Donnell and Rebecca Romney at Honey & Wax. We had a bit of an advantage going in with Dan as a producer as he really helped us make key connections out of the gate.

From the beginning I wanted to try to represent a fair cross-section of the established trade in New York City. This would include different areas of focus and not just the purely high end, although of course all these shops do deal in high-end material. I also wanted to represent younger dealers and collectors (younger being a bit relative in the antiquarian book world).

Once we had established people like these involved it helped us enlist other subjects as I extended the interviews outwards. And that was important to the process of building the film as I learned more and started pursuing my own lines of inquiry. A little while after this initial round of filming, I made an exception to our NYC focus and interviewed Bill Reese in New Haven. That conversation, for me, was incredibly informative. It also introduced me to his and Michael Zinman's 'Critical Mess Collecting' approach. This became a key component of one of the central arguments of the film—that rare book dealers not only play a unique and important

preservationist role, but can also be, as poet Kevin Young says, “great discoverers of history.”

**SWS:** In the film, we’re taken into the homes of a couple of individuals looking to sell collections. In both cases, the bookseller seems to respectfully decline the bulk of it. How was that experience for you, being present for that exchange?

**DWY:** Well, we weren’t privy to the exact financial details as everyone preferred to keep those private. But both experiences reinforced just how hard it can be these days to obtain quality antiquarian material. It’s a lot of legwork going this route and both private libraries were full of great books from a reader’s perspective, just not many collectible ones.

Watching Adam Weinberger dive in and assess such a large number of books so quickly was impressive. It’s not a skill you come by easily. And it’s really in-the-trenches work, as the one really decrepit apartment showed. There’s a sadness to it, too, this passing on of someone’s book legacy, even if not a particularly purposeful or valuable collection.

We actually accompanied Adam on a third visit where he was pursuing one quite valuable book—a very fine copy of Machiavelli’s *The Prince* from 1640. This segment didn’t make the cut but it helped me understand firsthand the amount of persistence that’s often involved in this work.

**SWS:** In discussing antiquarian books and the history of the trade, conversations can often have a tangential quality. In the making of the film, what were some directions that surprised you?

**DWY:** The hardest thing to cut out of the final edit was a long and freewheeling dinner discussion with a bunch of the dealers we shot at The Grolier Club. We did keep one brief sequence from this, which is right at the end of the film and really helped provide a means of closure. So, for that alone the dinner was worth doing.

However, there was much great footage beyond that. Perhaps we can find a way to show it eventually in some form. The conversation ranged far and wide, from personal experiences with theft and forgery to changes in academia to Trump,

*Mein Kampf* and Harry Potter. One subject that came up that I was particularly interested in hearing more about was “breaking” books to sell off individual plates or pages. (Which, I will add, nobody in attendance advocated doing.)

**SWS:** From making the film, are there any lines of thought you’d like to pursue further relating to book culture and collecting?

**DWY:** I always push myself to try something new with every film. So, generally speaking, I’ve had my say on this topic and I have a number of other projects I’m keen to pursue, particularly on the narrative side.

That said, there is one project I’m planning on that does have a rare book component. Dan and another New York dealer, George Koppelman, have made a compelling argument that a 16th-century dictionary they obtained once belonged to William Shakespeare. In 2014 they published a book making their case titled *Shakespeare’s Beehive* and their dictionary has since been on loan at the Folger Shakespeare Library. We’ve done some filming over the years documenting that storyline. However, the film I have in mind is more broadly about our cultural and academic obsession with Shakespeare, and particularly the mysteries of his biographical gaps. So, the project’s not specifically about rare books. But the story of this one book will be a central thread—what’s so unusual and divisive about it and how that ties right into all these Shakespearean arguments, as well as the challenges Dan and George have faced making their claim. I guess you could loosely consider it a companion film to this one.

**SWS:** In compiling these approaches toward and opinions of the trade, what are your thoughts on its future?

**DWY:** There’s a great quote from Bill Reese on this subject: “Is it possible to be an optimist and a pessimist at the same time? If so, mark me down in each column.”

That’s about how I feel, although at the end of the day I’ll choose optimism as sometimes it’s the choice itself that makes the difference. Clearly, as a number of people lament in the

film, many wonderful and longstanding aspects of the book trade have been all but lost. But as with all things, evolution is inevitable. And it's very heartening to see the newer generation of dealers feeling upbeat about the future and finding new approaches and ways of leveraging the Internet, not to mention tapping into new collecting interests. And millennials, by all accounts, are reading quite a lot, which bodes well.

But of course the pessimists will point out it's not a sudden collapse that's really the concern but rather an ever-increasing constriction of the trade that slowly chokes most of the life out of it over a couple further generations. I think that's a very valid concern, and social media and smartphones and streaming entertainment may prove to be as damaging as they often portend.

There have been studies showing we have a greater capacity to absorb information from physical books than digital versions. I increasingly have hope that that tactile relationship will take on greater significance. If our brains do indeed fundamentally interface better with long-form texts in printed form, then perhaps they will be reconsidered as an essential format for everyone. Or perhaps you could say be re-established as a fundamental part of being human (as Susan Sontag is quoted in the film arguing). By laying claim to a means of being scientifically superior to the digital, this would give printed matter value beyond the nostalgic or the collectible in mainstream eyes. Which I'm sure would only be of benefit to the rare book trade.

Whatever may come, in making the film my faith in the ability of books to endure over time, to outlast us, and to offer something digital forms never can, has only grown.

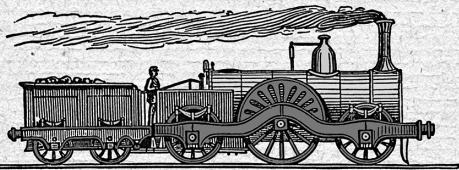
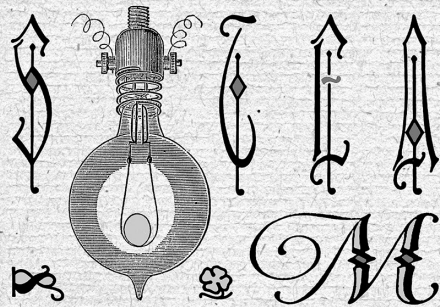
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~ Spencer W. Stuart is vice-chair of the Alcuin Society and a collections management specialist based in Vancouver, British Columbia.



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