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bushwhacking with the rare book expert of the CBC Calgary Reads book sale

- Barbara Bruederlin



To most of us, it's as fundamental as learning to walk, as elemental as our ability to speak, as natural as breathing. Most of us cannot imagine life without reading. It's a tool, a diversion, a pleasure to be anticipated.

But learning to read does not come easily to everyone. Without adequate literacy skills, children struggle with low self-esteem, reduced academic achievement and ultimately, given limited career choices, face a life of poverty.

Early literacy programs, if administered during the magic window between Kindergarten and Grade 2, are highly effective at improving the ability and confidence of children struggling with reading. Calgary Reads, an early literary initiative, was designed to identify and support children struggling with reading. The program piloted in 1998 with 25 trained volunteers providing individual tutoring to 40 students. Today 350+ volunteers work with 500+ students and their families in over 75 Calgary and area schools, to ensure that each child is given the tools needed to instill the confidence to read.

The CBC/Calgary Reads book sale has become a major annual fundraiser for the program, and an essential event for book lovers. Last year the book sale raised \$98,000 for Calgary Reads. Every year thousands of book enthusiasts return home with arms laden with high quality used books. Some have even been lucky enough to scoop up a rare edition or two for the insanely low price of \$2.

With the exception of books denoted as rare and valuable, all hard covers sell for \$2, while paperbacks sell for \$1. Most of the rare and valuable books donated to the CBC/Calgary Reads book sale are priced at between \$4 and \$80, with exceptionally valuable books sold by auction. Long-time book sale volunteer Gerry Morgan, who has the challenging task of separating the rare and collectible books from amongst the thousands of books donated annually, estimates that 12 to 20 books whose values exceed \$100 are placed on the auction table annually.

“One of the highlights was a Cree dictionary, found one or two years ago,” Gerry recalls. “When I researched it on the internet, it was worth \$700 or \$800.” Stumbling across these sorts of discoveries is what Gerry cherishes most about what he refers to as his “privileged position of dealing only with rare books” in his capacity as a volunteer.

As a retired geophysicist and former academic, Gerry has always maintained a library well-stocked with books from his technical field. As his interests expanded into palaeontology, art, and antiques, so too did his book collection. And in the six years since his retirement, he has branched out from

merely collecting books to becoming a book dealer and in the process has become something of an expert in identifying rare and valuable books.

Prior to the annual book sale at the Triwood Arena, Gerry Morgan scours the dozens of boxes of potentially valuable books that have been set aside by the other volunteer book sorters, and he separates those elusive and often innocuous-looking rare books from the regular offerings. Some of the rare finds are unmistakable, such as the 18-volume leather-bound Canadian history set, circa 1910, which was donated last year. Because of the value of those books, estimated to be between \$1500 and \$2000, Gerry recommended that a reserve price of \$1200 be placed on the bidding for that set.

One of Gerry's favourite discoveries was a first edition series of books written by Winston Churchill. Aside from the monetary value of this particular set of books, what he found particularly compelling was the historical significance of the inscription he discovered on the fly leaf of each volume. "The person who had originally bought these books in the 1940's or maybe early 1950's had written on the title page of each book 'I purchased this book on the very first day that this book was published and appeared in bookshops in England.' I thought that was historically interesting," Gerry recounts.

Even amongst the rare books being sold at the CBC/Calgary Reads book sale, there are real bargains to be found. Gerry estimates that all the collectible books are priced at one-half to two-thirds of the asking price at any antiquarian bookshop. "When people come to the sale, they expect a bargain," he explains. "They don't expect to pay bookstore prices. If I think a book would sell in an antiquarian bookshop in Calgary for \$100, I usually price it at \$50 to \$60, because we don't want books left over."

Bargain seekers and rare book aficionados alike will be heartened to hear that not all the valuable books uncrated make it onto the specially priced or auction tables. Many books worth \$50 or more are left on the regular tables, priced at \$2. Much of this is due to the time and space crunch facing Gerry and the other volunteer book sorters. "There is not a lot of time between when all the books are put on the table and when the sale opens to the public," he explains, "but I go through the tables and I find dozens of books that the sorters haven't picked out, which should be marked rare and valuable. I go through as many tables as I can, but I can't look through the boxes underneath the tables, which are still packed."

Other times, though, the oversight is deliberate, an incentive to those who enjoy the thrill of the hunt. "Half the fun is looking at the regular tables and finding books for \$2 that should be \$30," Gerry maintains. "There are always a few valuable books left out on the general tables. Some of those are

worth \$40 or \$50. I hope I don't leave too many, but I leave enough to make people want to come back the next year."

So get over to the 8th Annual CBC/Calgary Reads book sale, starting this Friday afternoon, April 30 (4-9pm) and running all day Saturday and Sunday (9am-4pm) at the Triwood Arena. You never know what treasures you may unearth while helping to raise the funds needed to assist a child in learning to read.

For further information about Calgary Reads or about volunteer opportunities, please visit www.calgaryreads.com or call 403.777.8254.

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