How to Collect Puzzle Books

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Collecting puzzle books is the most interesting hobby I can think of. It beats collecting old Buddy Greco records and sure licks stamps. I wish I could say it's the fastest-growing pastime in America, but it isn't. In truth, I doubt there are more than a dozen of us in the field. What a shame there aren't more.

Our tiny number is what makes collecting puzzle books such an inexpensive hobby. Small demand means low prices. Rare book dealers have no idea of the feelings that stir in my chest when I see a long-sought puzzle book from, say, the early part of this century. In a shop in Pasadena once I found a rare volume, Clarke's Unscrambler, that unscrambles any eight, nine, or ten letter word for you from the Merriam-Webster Pocket Dictionary. Quickly I asked myself -- $5, $10, how much would I pay for this? Inside the book was the penciled price -- 50 cents.

The key to inexpensive collecting, I think, is never to let on your real interest in the book. When I found Carolyn Wells' A Book of Charades (1927), I feigned I was buying it on impulse for my mother, and got away for a quarter. When I found the "Nuts to Crack" puzzle column in a set of Youth's Companions from 1900-01 molding in the basement of a used book store, I tried to control my racing pulse as I took them upstairs to the clerk. $3 for the lot, he said. There was puzzle history in my hands.

Another key to collecting, I have decided, is to look poor. Whenever I go book-hunting I wear cheap clothes; no one would dream I have much money, and they'd be right.

Why collect? Collecting puzzle books gets you acquainted with the world's great puzzle literature. Do you know what was America's most popular puzzle before the crossword (invented in 1913)? It was the versified charade. Solve the puzzles in William Bellamy's famed Century of Charades (1894) and you'll see the work of a master puzzler which holds up surprisingly well even today.

Understanding what puzzles were popular in the past, and why, helps you guess what puzzles will be popular today and in the future. The rebus puzzles of 1937, detailed in Picture-Puzzles and How to Solve Them, I'd say are due for a comeback.

Old puzzles also give you ideas for new ones. In a column in Frank
Leslie's Boy's and Girl's Weekly from the 1870s, I found a puzzle called "Comparisons". The word FEE was compared FEE/FEAR/FEAST, and EYE went EYE/IRE/ICED. I thought of ON/HONOR/HONEST and turned it into a puzzle for my next book.

Book collecting, though, is really an end in itself, a hobby that is as satisfying as puzzles themselves. If there is a joy equal to receiving Volume 1, Number 1 of The Ardmore Puzzler (May 6, 1899), I would be hard-pressed to name it.

Where can you go to collect? A good friend and puzzler from North Dakota swears that all the good, rare puzzle books are on the East Coast where I live. This is untrue.

The key, of course, is knowing where to look. A good start is at library, hospital, and school fairs in your home town, where books are sold second-hand. My first hardback puzzle book was Arthur Hirschberg's Can You Solve It? (1926), purchased at a hospital fair in Indiana for ten cents. It's a rare book sale that doesn't have something of interest.

Garage and rummage sales are a second possibility, although you'll have to hunt through untold numbers of Reader's Digest condensed books. The few gems you'll find make it almost worthwhile. Last week at a garage sale, looking for a bookcase, I opened the drawer of a bureau and found a puzzle page cut from an 1874 rural magazine. My day was made.

The best place to find old puzzle books is used and rare book shops, and this is where those of us in the New York metropolitan area have an edge. The number of such stores here is staggering. Wherever you live, look in the yellow pages of cities near you, under "Books -- Used and Rare" and you're sure to find several stores listed.

Ambitious book hunters like to attend book fairs which appear every year or two in most large cities and many smaller ones. Keep a watchful eye in the newspaper for ads, or read the AB Bookman, available in most libraries. Prices, you can bet, are not ten cents or twenty-five cents. In New York this spring I bought The Cryptogram Book (1928), co-edited by Margaret Farrar, for $15, and for $25 I bought Gadsby, the 50,000-word novel that does not contain the letter E. A first edition of Lewis Carroll's The Game of Logic, going for $250, I had to pass.

What should you look for? Say you go into a rare book shop. Don't ask if they have any puzzle books (they usually say no) and leave. Know where puzzles are likely to be hiding and ferret them out.

The obvious place too look is the puzzle and game section, if there is one. Next, look in "Humor". That's where I found J.A.H. Hunter's Fun with Figures (1956), a book of mathematical puzzles. What's funny about it I still haven't figured out.

A surprising number of puzzle books are placed in the reference section. Look for charades and periodicals for opinion that I found Borglum's Aha! and a book of around.

And remember, got. Today's like me.

A. A.

Near the beginning of this personal account is the name Glorianan. Glorianaan is a made-up name. It is all names of deceased relatives (example: name of my favorite store). It is a letter I like. I got. Today's like me.

Fact
If you are a puzzle lover, you'll find a wealth of choices in "EE/FEAR/ HONOR/..." by Arthur Hirschfeld, a book that is a must-read for puzzle enthusiasts (1928). The book is available in twenty-five different book shops, and wherever you find it, keep a watchful eye on the shelf. The book contains 180 examples of alphabetic puzzles, presumably the cream of his collection. Some exhibit amusing contradictions, like MAJOR MINOR and JOHN SENIOR, JUNIOR; others are alliterative, like LARRY DERBY; others are suggestive, like OPHELIA LEGG and MARY LOUISE PANTZAROFF.

The author claims that every name cited was "verified as carefully as time (and funds!) will permit." Unfortunately, little evidence is given in the book; usually a city-and-state address is given, and sometimes a comment is made that the name was obtained from such secondary sources as Dunkling's First Names First, Mencken's The American Language, and various newspapers. Like UFOs, parapsychology, and extreme longevity, unusual-name claims require meticulous research to winnow fact from fiction (or outright fraud): does the person really exist? If he does, does he use this name in his ordinary affairs? Was the name invented by him, or does it have a familial history going back a generation or more?

Fact or fiction, the book is undeniably amusing.