THE Book Collector

SCIENCE FICTION

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BENNET LANGTON

AUTUMN 2021

The author with Kevin O'Sullivan at the Cushing Library, Texas A&M.

Thanks for the Memories: Recalling Authors and Their Inscriptions

Part I

NICHOLAS A. BASBANES

It is a fundamental belief of mine that every collector is at heart a storyteller, and that every treasure in a bibliophile's library is part of a larger narrative with a backstory of its own to tell, one that goes well beyond what appears on the printed page.

Of the many truisms we can say about people and their books, few can dispute that the key to knowing someone is oftentimes gleaned through knowing what it is they read. I devoted an entire book to a consideration of this premise, *Every Book Its Reader: The Power of the Printed Word to Stir the World* (2005), which drew its title from a precept put forth in the 1930s by the pioneering theorist of library science, S. R. Ranganathan, on the singularity of books, and the impact they bring to bear on people and events, either in waves of approbation, or one-by-one in relative obscurity.

I was inspired to write that book, and gave due credit in the opening pages, to 'Printing and the Mind of Man,' an exhibition mounted jointly in 1963 by the British Museum and a confederation of printing press manufacturers to commemorate the milestones of Western thought as expressed in moveable type. The monumental event was the brainchild of booksellers John Carter and Percy Muir, who had worked closely with the novelist, bibliophile and founder in 1952 of this journal – Ian Fleming – on his remarkable collection of transformative titles that had 'made things happen' over the previous five centuries, and now housed at the Lilly Library of Indiana University.

I was reminded of all this a few years ago as I prepared to do something collectors everywhere dread – coming to terms at long last with the looming disposition of their most precious books. In

this instance, a section of my working library that had become a palpable window into my growth as a literary journalist and author was about to go off to the Cushing Memorial Library & Archives of Texas A&M University along with my considerable accumulation of research materials. These were not great rarities in any conventional sense of the word, though a good number of them would have commanded a nice price on the open market had I chosen to part with them piecemeal in this manner. Indeed, with a very few notable exceptions, I did not buy these books, most of them came to me in my capacity as a professional book review editor and literary columnist over three decades, a period that spanned the final years of the 20th century and the dawn of the 21st.

I have very few parlour games in my bag of bibliophilic tricks, though one exercise I enjoyed indulging once-upon-a-time when first-time visitors to my house inquired about the character of certain volumes that occupied one prominent wall: I would ask if they could guess what single feature it was the books all had in common. This was a motley group of titles – novels here, biographies there, a few poetry collections scattered about, with a gaggle of memoirs by such celebrities as former US President Jimmy Carter, second man on the moon Buzz Aldrin, path-breaking test pilot Chuck Yeager, folksinger Joan Baez and *Star Trek* actor Leonard Nimoy. If there was a theme to discern, it was not evident by genre or subject, or even literary merit, if such a distinction may have applied, though in many instances it definitely did.

With the exception of oversize books that were kept flat on their sides out of immediate view, this grouping was loosely arranged alphabetically, which offered one essential clue. The likes of Alice Adams and Martin Amis and David Attenborough occupied slots on the extreme left, Leon Uris, Kurt Vonnegut Jr, Richard Wilbur, Richard Yates and the American sportswriter Paul Zimmerman – 'X' was the only letter that went unrepresented – dominated the far right, with everyone else in between.

One astute visitor discerned a number of Nobel Laureates – Nadine Gordimer, Kazuo Ishiguro, Doris Lessing, Mario Vargas Llosa, Czesław Miłosz, Toni Morrison, Kenzaburō Ōe – along with books by a few others who never received that honour, but who, in

my humble estimation, very well could have, notably the Canadian Robertson Davies, the Mexican Carlos Fuentes, the American John Updike. To these were numerous Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award and Booker Prize winners, but no, prestigious accolades was not the thread that connected this colourful assemblage – though some very nice collections have certainly been put together along those lines.

What these books had in common was one feature – each had been inscribed to me by the authors, each in my presence, and all in the 'line of duty', as it were, while working as a journalist who specialised in writing newspaper and magazine profiles of authors, putatively on the topic of what were at the time their newly released books, but generally, where the situation warranted, and where there was a body of work to plumb, more far-reaching, and thus far less perishable as examples of my journalism.

These books didn't change the world by any means, but they were witness to what was taking place during consequential times in a variety of illuminative and cultural ways, and what their authors had to share gave expression to the moving pageant. In an interview with me for *Humanities* magazine, Michael Suarez, the multitalented director of Rare Book School at the University of Virginia and co-editor in 2010 of the exhaustive, two-volume *Oxford Companion to the Book,* aptly described every book as a 'coalescence of human intentions', a definition that works as much for me as any other I can think of.

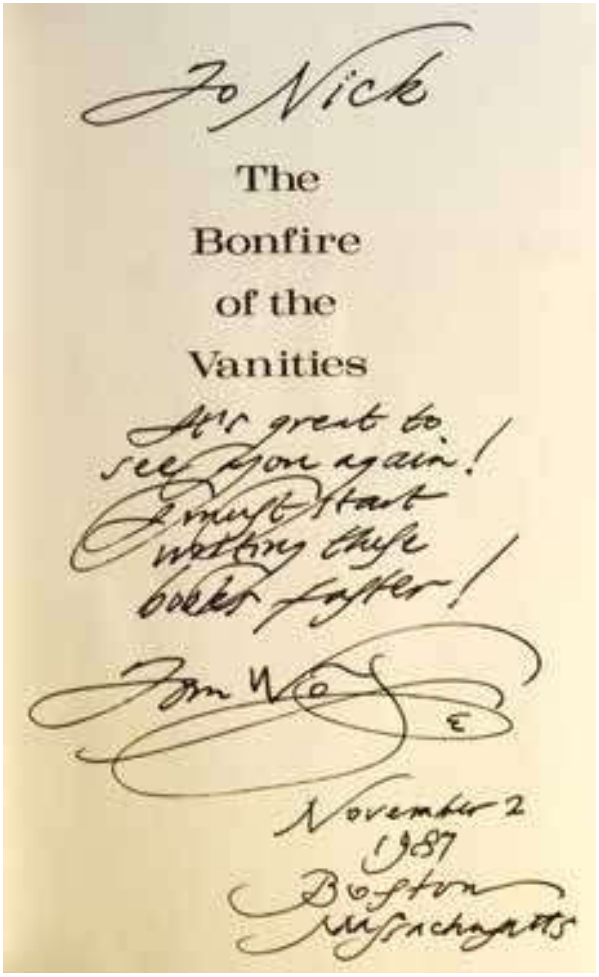
It was either through foresight or blind luck, I am not entirely certain but I started doing this from the time of my first author interview, in 1977, with the historian David McCullough, sent to the island of Martha's Vineyard to discuss with him his thrilling new book on the making of the Panama Canal, *The Path Between the Seas*. A few months later I became the full-time book review editor and literary columnist for the *Sunday Telegram* and *The Evening Gazette* in Worcester, Massachusetts, New England's second largest city, realising from the outset that I had been presented with a marvellous opportunity to build something distinctive. I committed myself to profiling a different author every week, believing then, as I continue to believe today, that important interviews are best conducted face

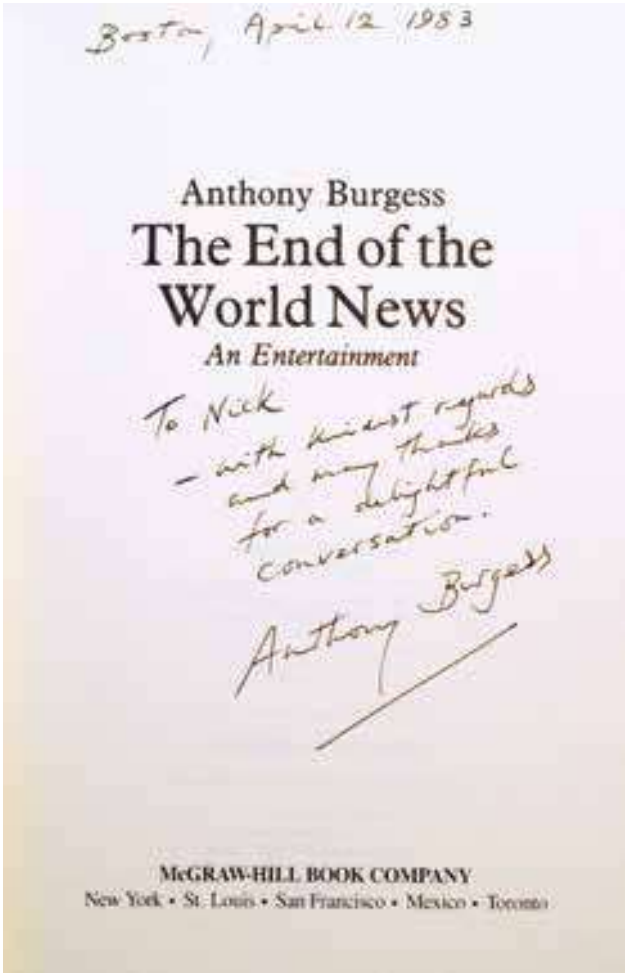
to face, not remotely by telephone, the only alternative in those pre-internet days to the email exchanges and video conferencing options available to us now.

As a department of one, I had autonomy, which allowed me to go into Boston whenever I pleased to meet with touring authors, a privilege I exploited shamelessly, and without apology. I assembled a solid corps of freelancers to write reviews for the Sunday pages I edited, but since I alone wrote the literary features that ran without fail on Wednesdays and selectively on the weekends, I decided who I wanted to meet with, and who I wanted to write about. When I left daily journalism in 1991 to concentrate on what would be my first book, *A Gentle Madness: Bibliophiles, Bibliomanes, and the Eternal Passion for Books*, I continued to profile authors for a syndicate of newspapers I established that served, at its height, some thirty publications throughout the United States, with readerships centered in regions with a proven interest in books – which expanded my reach and circulation, and earned me access to pretty much any author I wanted to interview, even if it meant a three-hour drive down to New York to do them – as I often did to talk with Doris Lessing, Mario Puzo, Alfred Kazin, Amy Tan, Elia Kazan, Patrick O'Brian, Oleg Cassini, and so many others.

Thus, the collection grew, week by week, month by month, year by year, about 900 volumes in this category alone. My wife Connie, bless her heart, never once complained about the books that flooded the house, not just these special ones, but myriad others I brought home on a daily basis to examine – and typically decided to keep – along with the antiquarian copies I was soon buying with gusto to complement them. Our two daughters came into the world during this time, and never knew a house without piles of books occupying every room.

My fundamental interest through all this was the grand continuum, taking heed that the goal of any columnist is to establish a voice, and that every piece I wrote be a kind of performance unto itself – a commentary on a particular book together with a profile of the author, an incisive glimpse, in essence, of how each work figured into the unfolding pageant. To spend an hour discussing the creative process with Anthony Burgess, Toni Morrison, Penelope Fitzgerald,





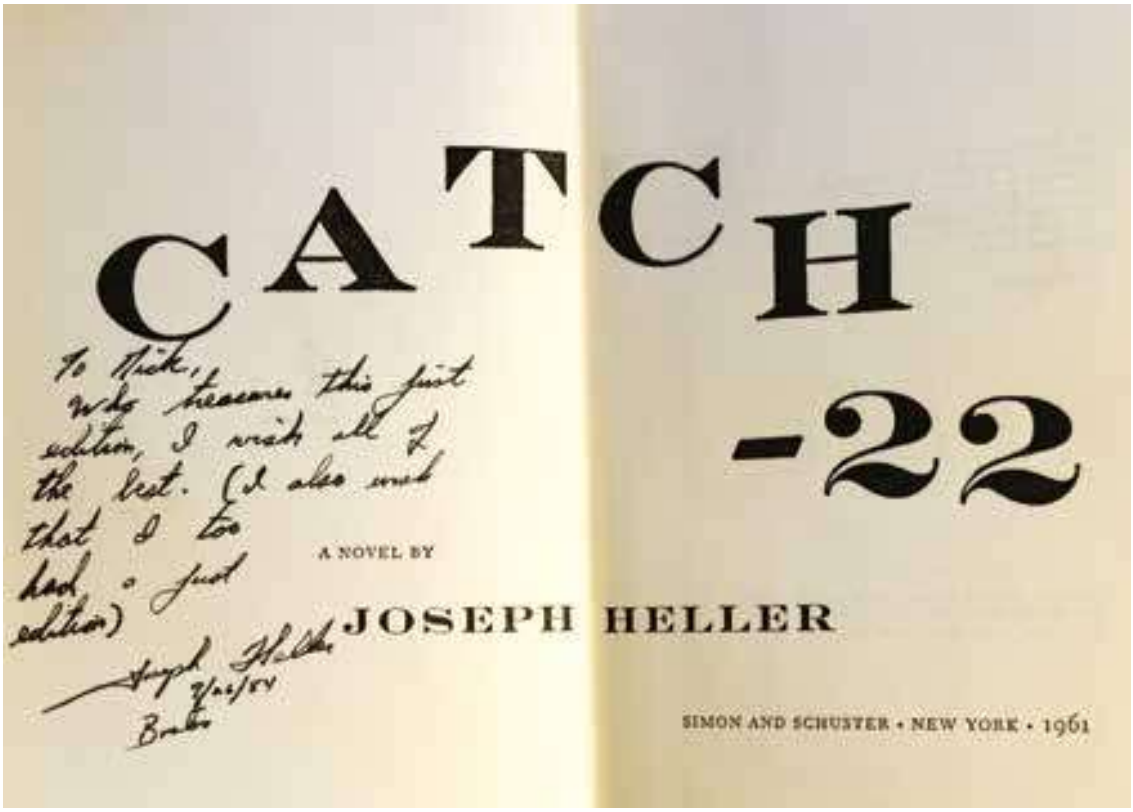
Books inscribed by Tom Wolfe and Anthony Burgess.

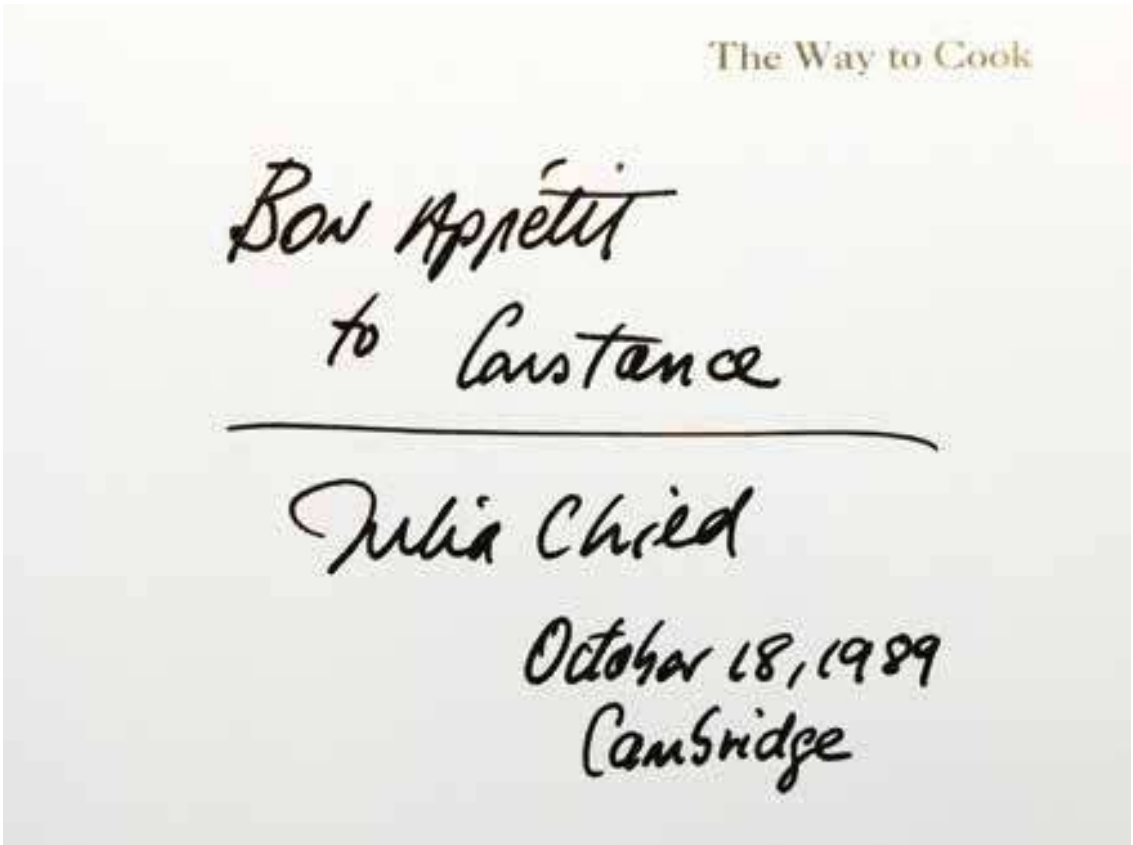
Mary Gordon, Norman Mailer, Robert Stone, or John Irving; poetry with Richard Wilbur, Robert Creeley, Allen Ginsberg, or Stanley Kunitz; the shaping of literary nonfiction with Theodore H. White, Tom Wolfe, Gay Talese, or Barbara Tuchman; military history with the incomparable John Keegan; crime and detective fiction with P. D. James, Robert B. Parker, Ruth Rendell, Sara Paretsky; photographic technique and 'visualisation' with Ansel Adams and the photo-portraitist Yousuf Karsh – was a gift I never took for granted. I was determined to cast a wide net, but nothing about it was willy-nilly.

There were some limits. I stayed, for the most part, away from formulaic genres such as Westerns, science fiction and pulp romance, but then how do you turn down an opportunity to meet with Louis L'Amour, Isaac Asimov, or Judith Krantz? Same goes with cookbooks: I interviewed James Beard over an early breakfast one day, and Julia Child twice, the first time in her kitchen – the same kitchen that is now relocated to the Smithsonian Museum of American History in Washington, DC – and again at a chic restaurant not far from her home just off the Harvard University campus in Cambridge.

That second meeting came about through a colossal misunderstanding, not of my making, nor of Child's, but an intern in the publicity office of her publisher who had given me one date for our appointment, her another. On the day Child expected me, I got a frantic call from New York asking where I was, that a lobster had been prepared for me, and was getting cold. Totally aghast, I called Child in a mild panic, apologised profusely for the mix-up, and to make things right, invited her out to dinner for the following night at any restaurant of her choice, my newspaper's treat. 'I would *love* for you to take me out to dinner,' she replied in her cheery, unmistakable voice, 'I'm *so* tired of cooking.' I made a reservation for two at a newly opened place she had been hearing good things about, Michela's, and picked her up half an hour early the following day.

I told the restaurant in advance, of course – how could I not – who I would be dining with, and the owners asked, when we arrived, if they could select the menu, which turned out to be a seven-course *pièce de résistance,* with fabulous wines of Julia's choosing. When we





Books inscribed by Joseph Heller and Julia Child.

were done, the owners asked if Julia might visit the kitchen, where the entire crew was assembled line abreast in full, crisply starched linen regalia. Julia gamely trooped the line – and at six feet, two inches tall, she towered over the all-female staff – congratulating them one by one on a bravura performance. I paid the bill, drove the guest of honour home, had *The Way to Cook* signed for my wife ('*Bon appétit*!') – and got a terrific article out of it to boot.

A transitional moment for me came on the day in 1984 that I met over lunch with Joseph Heller at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel. The book to be discussed was his latest novel, *God Knows,* and we spent ample time discussing it, but I was ever mindful throughout, too, that I was breaking bread with the person who in 1961 had given us *Catch-22*, a satirical novel of World War II whose very title became an idiomatic expression for impossible-to-resolve situations arising out of mutually conflicting conditions, and to this day – six decades since its release – remains securely acclaimed as a 20th-century classic, with more than ten million copies in print worldwide.

Heller was a gracious subject who answered all my questions thoughtfully. When we were finished, I asked if he would kindly inscribe for me a copy of *God Knows.* 'Delighted to,' he replied, and added – before I had an opportunity to open my briefcase – 'too bad you don't have a *Catch-22* in that bag' – which, needless to say, I did, having acquired a very nice copy with a superb first issue dust jacket in anticipation of this opportunity. In fact, I had copies of several other books Heller had written as well – actually, I had all of them – and he personalised each for me with the Montblanc Ambassador fountain pen I was now bringing along with me for precisely that purpose.

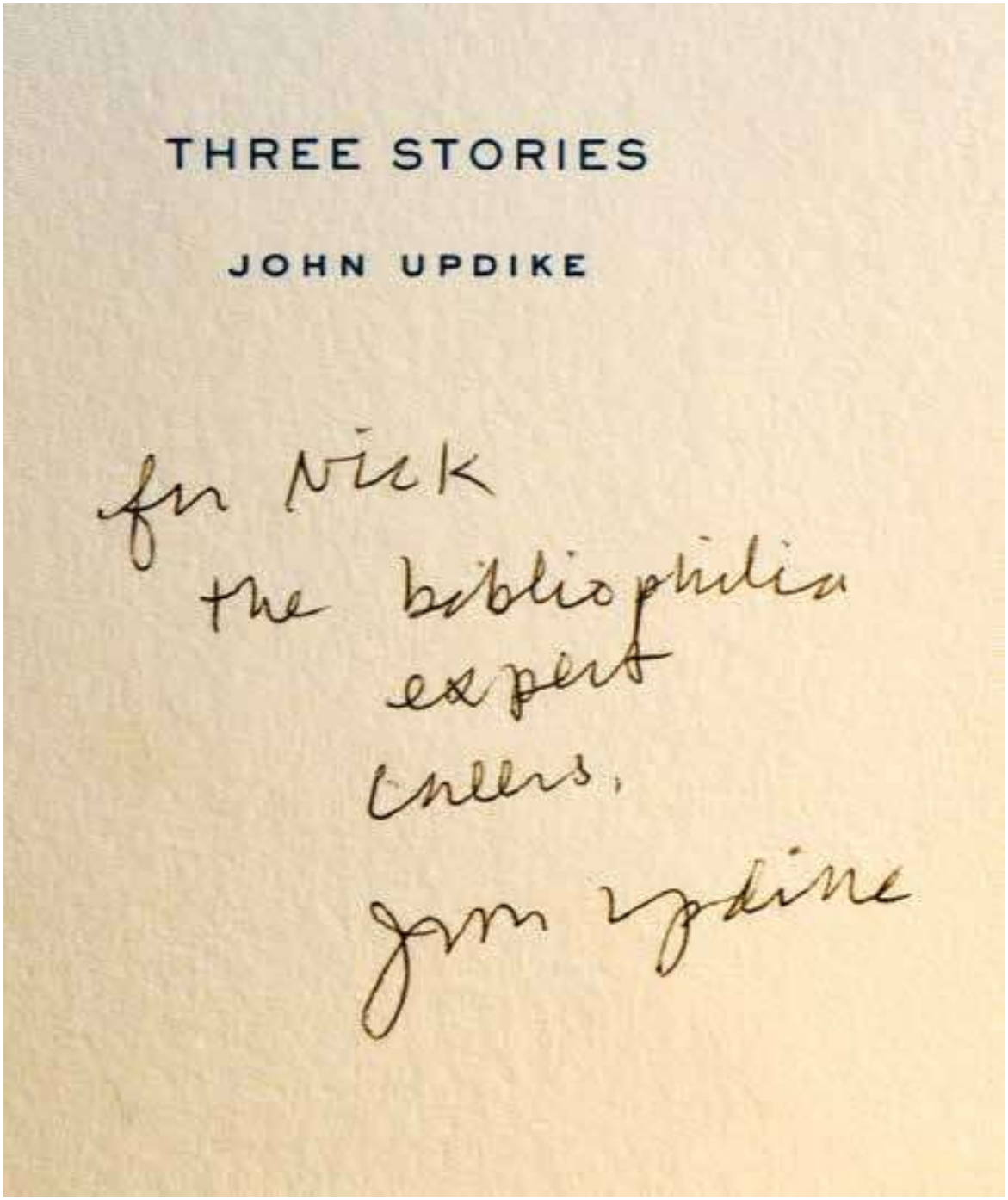
Heller was impressed by this, and said as much, in an obliquely pleasant way. "Maybe you want me to just sign *this* one," suggesting, ever so tactfully, that perhaps the market value of a rarity such as *Catch-22* would be higher if just autographed, and not made out to me. "I'd like a dated inscription, please," I replied, "the value to me is personal, not monetary." With that, he wrote the following: 'To Nick, who treasures this first edition, I wish all the best. (I also wish that I too had a first edition.)' Turns out that was an accurate statement – his personal library at that time was caught up in a do-

mestic entanglement, and he did not possess a first issue copy of his own masterpiece. When we met again in 1994 to talk about *Closing Time,* the much-hyped (and to my mind greatly underappreciated) sequel to *Catch-22,* he began his inscription to me thusly: 'By now an old and welcome friend. It's a new time for you with your new business idea, and I wish you all success.' The 'business idea', as he put it, was the small enterprise I had recently established to distribute my book articles, Literary Features Syndicate, which he thought was a splendid undertaking.

Two years later, we chatted yet again, this time in New York, to discuss his memoir, *Now and Then: From Coney Island to Here*. His first words were friendly and to the point: "I saw you on *Booknotes*," his reference to a C-SPAN television interview with me conducted by Brian Lamb in 1995, following the publication of *A Gentle Madness*, in which I had told the story about the *Catch-22* inscription. He enjoyed the interchange, and when it came time to repeat our ritual, he wrote this: 'For Nick Basbanes, To add to his rich collection of Joseph Heller works, and I *still* wish I had a good first edition of *Catch-22*!'

So, what's better, I often ask – with this pair of books and their unique history being my prime example – a plain signature, or a personal inscription? The answer being obvious, the larger point to be made here is that I had, at that moment, crossed the Rubicon – it was not just work anymore – and I would cross it again and again. Later that year, E. L. Doctorow signed a fine copy of his first book, *Welcome to Hard Times* (1960), along with *Ragtime* (1975), and of course the volume of his literary essays that had occasioned the get-together. 'To Nick Basbanes, at high tea,' he wrote in one of the books. When I interviewed Arthur Miller in 1987 for his memoir *Timebends*, I brought along a pristine copy of *Death of a Salesman* (1949) – his best-known dramatic work – and also the novel *Focus* (1945), his first published book.

Ten years after that, John Updike agreeably inscribed a copy of *Golf Dreams*, a collection of essays on a beloved pastime of his, which provided the occasion for that talk, and personalised several other titles I had with me as well, notably *Rabbit, Run* (1960) and *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981), the two outstanding novels of his four-volume



Inscribed by John Updike.

Rabbit Angstrom cycle. We had arranged to meet in the studios of WBUR-FM, a public radio station in Boston where he had just done an on-air interview, and went from there to a little Italian restaurant nearby on Commonwealth Avenue.

We had an amiable conversation that touched hardly at all on the casual essays that had prompted the interview, but ranged widely instead on such subjects as bibliomania, and, surprisingly, Shakespeare, a favourite subject of mine for more than half a century. He had been particularly interested in a detail I mentioned about a real-life woman named Katherine Hamlet who drowned in the Avon River in 1579, which may possibly have given Shakespeare the idea for the nature of Ophelia's tragic demise. He also grilled me about what I knew of Saxo Grammaticus, the 13th-century Danish historian whose legend of *Amlath* is thought to be a principal source of the bard's tragedy. When we were done, he wrote this in my copy of *Golf Dreams*: 'For Nicholas Basbanes with best wishes to a canonologist and expert collector.'

When Updike's novel *Gertrude and Claudius* was published a few years later, it crossed my mind that he had probably been tinkering with the idea of a novel inspired by the characters in *Hamlet* when we spoke, and like any writer who is constantly thinking about what comes next, was ever alert for any relevant insights that might come his way. I chatted with him one more time, at the Boston Athenæum after a reception where he spoke briefly about a limited fine press edition of three stories just announced for publication by Thornwillow Press. There was a stack of the nicely produced prospectus available, and I brought one up to him. 'Ah, the bookman,' he said, to my delight and astonishment. His inscription: 'For Nick, the bibliophilia expert.'