THE Book Collector

GOLDSMITH

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Memories Pt 2

EAST GERMANY

WINTER 2021

Umberto Eco in his Library, 1997.

Thanks for the Memories: Recalling Authors and Their Inscriptions

Part II

NICHOLAS A. BASBANES

By Joseph Heller, E. L. Doctorow, Arthur Miller, and John Updike – each a favourite author of mine, and each someone I was already collecting in depth – I was further emboldened. It was in similar fashion that I obtained inscriptions from Margaret Atwood for *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), William Kennedy for his debut novel, *The Ink Truck* (1969), Louise Erdrich for the opening effort in her greatly admired Native American series, *Love Medicine* (1984), A. S. Byatt's wonderful biblio-novel, *Possession* (1990), George V. Higgins for his signature work, *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* (1970), acclaimed by both Elmore Leonard and Robert B. Parker – two other frequent interviewees of mine – as one of the most consequential crime novels ever written by an American. In each of these instances, I piggy-backed the indisputable high-spots of their respective oeuvres along with the newly released books we were meeting to discuss, and got all of them inscribed.

Of George Higgins, I can say, in addition, that we became friends through these interchanges. George lived in a suburb outside Boston and he was prolific, turning out on average a book a year, right up to the year he died in 1999, a week shy of his sixtieth birthday. We got together periodically, not for every new book he published, but often enough, with me always looking for a fresh angle to explore in my column – and always meeting at the venerable Locke-Ober Café, for many decades thought to be the city's finest eating establishment and justly celebrated for its Baked Lobster Savannah, now a fading memory, having closed for good in 2012. There is a succession of inscriptions I have from Higgins, each one, also, looking for

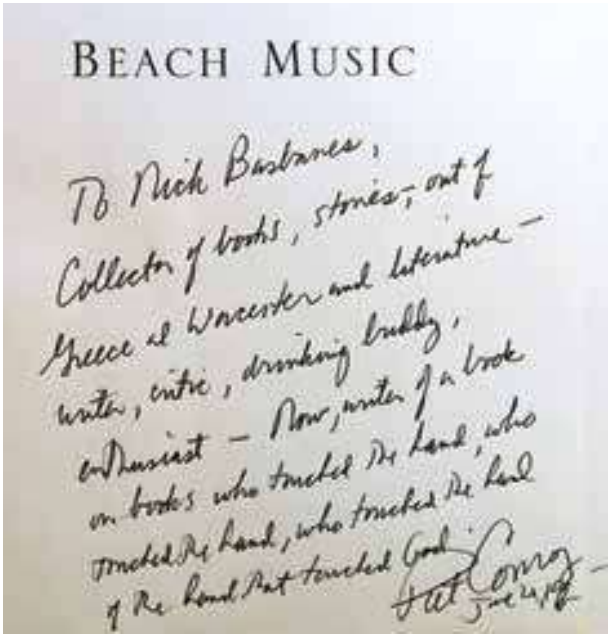
something new to say. Here's a sampling:

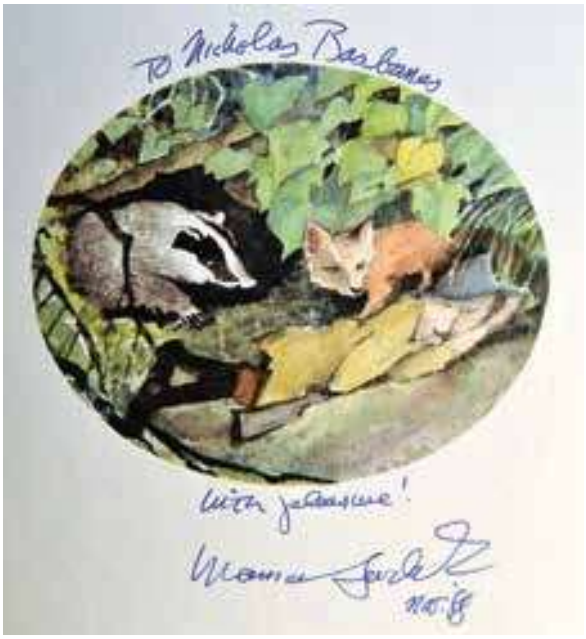
'There should be time enough and books enough for more conversations' (*A Choice of Enemies*, 1984); 'Jay Gatsby was right about Daisy, and also, I guess, about us – "It's just personal"' (*Imposters*, 1986). 'It is reassuring as the world grows old around us that old friends not grow cold – twenty-five years is a long, long time' (*Sandra Nichols Is Found Dead*, 1996).

The late Pat Conroy was another writer I can say became a friend; we got along well, we had mutual interests, we kept in touch, we met up whenever he had a new novel being released. Over time I got most of his books inscribed, each one a lengthy rumination on what we had just talked about, and what had gone before. When we first met in 1980, he was flush from the success of *The Great Santini* and promoting his latest effort, *The Lords of Discipline*. We got together during a then-popular but long-since-defunct book festival put on every October by the *Boston Globe*, and sat by a window in the Ritz dining room overlooking the Public Garden. He was still fairly new at this, and though the Swan Boats paddling about across the way made for a charming vista, he was far more interested in who was schmoozing at the other tables, notably Tom Wolfe at one, Erica Jong at another, Edward A. 'Ted' Weeks, the long-time editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, whose offices were just a few doors away on Arlington Street, by himself, at his regular table, as per his daily custom.

Our next interview, for *The Prince of Tides*, took place on 22 October 1986, over club sandwiches and dry Tanqueray martinis in the Park Plaza Hotel. I had offered to drive Pat over to the WBCN-FM radio station on Boylston Street for his next appointment, but we were having a jovial old time and dawdled, both of us losing track of the hour. On the way to the studio, he asked me to drive by Fenway Park (home since 1912 of the Boston Red Sox) which he had never seen before. The Red Sox were in the midst of an epic World Series battle with the New York Mets at the time, but it was a travel day for both teams, and surreally quiet at the ballpark. I stopped the car in the middle of Lansdowne Street, yards from the fabled Green Monster in left field.

"So that is where Ted Williams prowled, on the other side of that





Books inscribed by Pat Conroy, Maurice Sendak and Kurt Vonnegut.

wall?" he said after a long pause. Affirmative, I told him, and asked if he wanted me to see if we could go in and take a look around. "No, this is good, I've got it here," he said, tapping his head. He explained that Williams, my boyhood idol growing up and by common consent the greatest hitter in the history of baseball – and a decorated Marine fighter pilot in World War II and Korea – had been a wingman of his father, USMC Colonel Don Conroy, the real-life model for the title character in *The Great Santini*. I got Pat to his interview well after he was supposed to have gone on the air, his appearance long since scrubbed. I felt terrible, but he gamely took full responsibility.

When we met again nine years later in the New York office of his editor, Nan Talese, to talk about *Beach Music* – no restaurants or bars this time around – he described me in his discursive inscription as a 'collector of books, stories – out of Greece and Worcester and literature – writer, critic, drinking buddy, enthusiast – now, writer of a book on books who touched the hand, who touched the hand, who touched the hand of the hand that touched God.' This was a convoluted reference to the climactic scene of chapter 1 of my book, *A Gentle Madness*, which I called 'Touching the Hand,' quoting Reynolds Price, another distinguished Southern writer – and a major literary hero of Pat's. It was Price who had told me, in 1992, an inspirational story about what had motivated him to acquire a copy of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* that had once been owned by Deborah Milton Clark, the poet's daughter and amanuensis. She was the person, in Price's words, 'who had touched the hand that touched the Hand' – thus giving, to him, a precious association copy with a tangible connection to creative genius. A determined collector in his own right, Price had written in my copy of his novel, *Blue Calhoun*: 'To Nick Basbanes, from his fellow bibliomaniac, with thanks and good hope.'

The Reynolds Price interview, it bears noting, was not the only instance of cross-pollination for me, where information gleaned for a newspaper column found a more nuanced examination in one of my own books. A 1995 interview with Umberto Eco to discuss *The Island of the Day Before* set in motion a far deeper meeting two years later at his home in Milan for a chapter in my 2001 book, *Patience &*

Fortitude: A Roving Chronicle of Book People, Book Places, and Book Culture. Surrounded by his personal library of 30,000 volumes, Eco recalled for my wife and myself how he came in 1980 to write *The Name of the Rose*, an international bestseller with more than fifty million copies now in print. He told how he had been inspired by an old but badly stained copy of Aristotle's *Poetics* from his own shelves – he fetched it to show us – with the idea for how to go about poisoning a monk in a 14th-century abbey library, the clever plot device at the heart of his greatly beloved biblio-mystery.

Similar sessions with the artist-illustrators Maurice Sendak and Barry Moser persuaded me to include expanded discussions of their work in *Patience & Fortitude*. Sendak, in particular, was a collector of the first order, and his interests extended beyond books, manuscripts and artworks to artifacts. When we met in his rural home in Ridgefield, Connecticut, he showed me one of his most prized possessions, an authentic death mask of the poet John Keats that he kept in a velvet-lined box in his bedroom and rubbed gently on the forehead every morning for inspiration. He invited me to do the same – and I did – with the understanding I could not use that detail in my writing until after his death, which I have honoured until now, a decade since his passing. I asked him why? 'Because he is very much alive to me,' he said, 'that's why.'

For *Every Book Its Reader*, I drew on my book interviews with the preeminent literary critics Harold Bloom, Helen Vendler and Christopher Ricks, the historian-biographer David McCullough, the child psychiatrist and Pulitzer Prize winning writer of non-fiction Dr Robert Coles, the esteemed translator of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* Robert Fagles, and the Princeton University historian of religion and author of *The Gnostic Gospels*, Elaine Pagels – the idea there being to introduce, in successive chapters, what I had determined to be a 'dream team' of 'readers' in a variety of textual formats. Inscribed books from all of these top-tier scholars and authors are represented in my collection.

A pair of interviews conducted separately within hours of each other in 1982 would be otherwise unremarkable in the context of this essay if not for the inscriptions themselves. In the first, I met with the satirist and comic writer Roy Blount Jr, known for his

down-home sense of humour and distinctive brand of irreverence. He thanked me for the cigar I gave him, the good literary conversation we had, and to that added, in my copy of *One Fell Soup, Or I'm Just a Bug on the Windshield of Life*, the following: 'It's nice to be able to discuss the concept of raunchiness with you just before you get to Annie Dillard,' whom I was interviewing immediately after this meeting. I showed the inscription to Dillard, a gifted poet and essayist who won a Pulitzer Prize in 1975 for *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*; she wrote, in my copy of *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters*: 'For Nick Basbanes, with all best wishes after a jolly old time at the Ritz-Carlton on the day of his talk with a slightly more raunchy Roy Blount Jr.'

On 3 October 1984, I was in Boston interviewing the historian Antonia Fraser, the occasion being the publication of her book *The Weaker Vessel*, a richly informative study of women in 17th-century England. It was a gorgeous fall day – no city in America is more beautiful than Boston in autumn – and her husband, the renowned playwright Harold Pinter, was anxious to see two paintings at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in the Back Bay, a Vermeer and a Rembrandt, the same paintings that would be stolen at gunpoint by masked bandits six years later, and to this day are still missing. About fifteen minutes into the interview, Pinter walked briskly into the main room of their hotel suite, and announced, "I think it's time we got going."

Lady Fraser looked at me apologetically; I assured her that I had enough material and asked for an inscription before I left. Ever the opportunist, I also asked Pinter if he might give me a signature as well. "That's not my book," he said with an edge of impatient annoyance. I stared at him with a thin smile and shrugged – nothing ventured, nothing gained. "Fine," he said, and hastily scrawled his name at the bottom of the title page, well beneath the inscription entered by his wife.

Concise inscriptions written by Michael Holroyd in a volume of his massive Bernard Shaw biography, and his wife, Margaret Drabble, in her novel, *The Witch of Exmoor*, are similarly unexceptional, other than the curiosity that they were each interviewed by me while both were embarked separately on lengthy American

publicity tours to the same cities, not together, which might have been more practical for each of them and their respective publishers, but they preferred this arrangement. "Do say hello to Margaret," Holroyd said cheerfully when we were finished with our conversation, which I did a few days later when she was in town – and noted in the feature I wrote of their contrasting writing regimens, well distanced from each other in separate London flats, as dutifully reported over the years by the British tabloids.

Every book I picked up to examine for this final parting evoked a memory. I wrote down the salient bibliographical details of each, photographed every inscription and every dust-jacket. Each volume recalled a time spent with an author talking about the craft of writing, about process, about the times in which we lived. The copies I confess to enjoying most are the ones that validated, in a way, the quality of the interviews I had done, and the articles that I was writing. A few of the authors may have gone a bit over the top in their comments, but how could I possibly be unmoved by what Harold Brodkey wrote in my copy of *Stories in an Almost Magical Mode*: 'I'd heard that you were the most intelligent interviewer in America, I won't argue.' Or not be humbly grateful to the biographer Robert A. Caro for what he wrote on the front pastedown of the first volume of his definitive life of Lyndon Johnson: 'To Nick Basbanes – who asked me some of the most intelligent questions I have been asked about this book.'

Just as important as the asking of questions was paying attention to what was being said. Helen Gurley Brown, the author in 1962 of *Sex and the Single Girl* and for more than thirty years the editor in chief of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, signed my copy of *Having It All: Love, Success, Sex, Money, Even if You're Starting with Nothing*, 'with deepest thanks (maybe the best listener I ever ran into!!!)'.

Because my roots are in journalism, I admit to having a number of professional heroes whom I have looked up to over the years and who I was thrilled to talk shop with when the opportunity arose. Ben Bradlee, the legendary *Washington Post* editor during the Watergate stories, complimented me with 'admiration for a thoughtful interview.' Walter Cronkite expressed 'appreciation for a well done interview' and asked that I send him a transcript of

my Q&A for his archives, which I happily did. So it went over the years, with David Halberstam, Neil Sheehan, Katharine Graham, Nicholas Gage, Russell Baker, Seymour Hersh, John Chancellor, Jimmy Breslin, Susan Stamberg, Gay Talese, Art Buchwald, Harrison Salisbury, Tom Wicker, George Plimpton, Peter Arnett, Carl Bernstein, Frances Fitzgerald, Roger Angell, David Broder, Carl Rowan – superstars from all facets of the business, and for me, as good as it gets.

Equally gratifying are the books that document meetings I had with non-fiction authors who have been models for my own writing. Front and centre among these is David McCullough, whose inscriptions in my books span twenty-seven years, 1977 to 2004. He had encouraged my work over this period – he even supplied a generous comment to my editor at HarperCollins for *Patience & Fortitude*, saying I had become 'the leading authority of books about books and this, his latest, is a jewel!' Our 2004 meeting was in the Massachusetts Historical Society, where so much of his archival research, and a good bit of my own, has been done. When we were finished, he asked what I was working on next. 'Think about doing a biography, you will never regret it,' he said, citing his own satisfaction in having gone from writing award-winning histories to chronicling the lives of two American presidents, *Truman* (1992) and *John Adams* (2001), both of them books that were the recipients of widespread acclaim and prestigious prizes. The following year I embarked on what would be my tenth book – and my first biography – *Cross of Snow: A Life of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2020), since named a 'book of the year' by the *TLS* and several other publications.

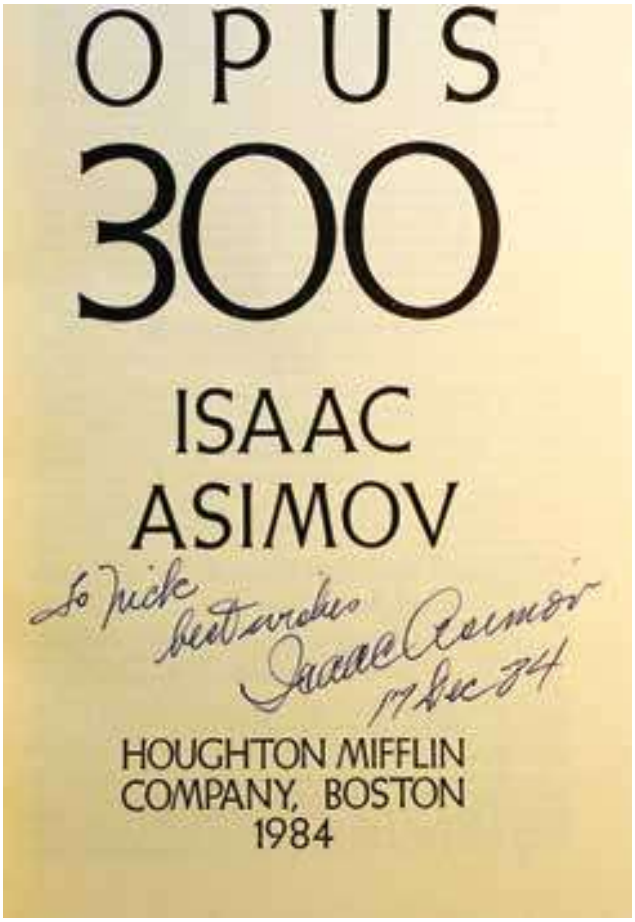
Packing up all these books and preparing them for shipment to College Station, Texas, in 2015 was bittersweet – some three and a half tons of material, loaded in 365 boxes. In addition to the inscribed books, were thirty other discrete collections I had gifted as part of my agreement with Texas A&M, along with all of my research papers, manuscripts, galleys, notebooks and microcassettes of hundreds of interviews that have since been converted to digital files and are now available to anyone with an interest in accessing them. And the stories and columns that resulted from all this – those

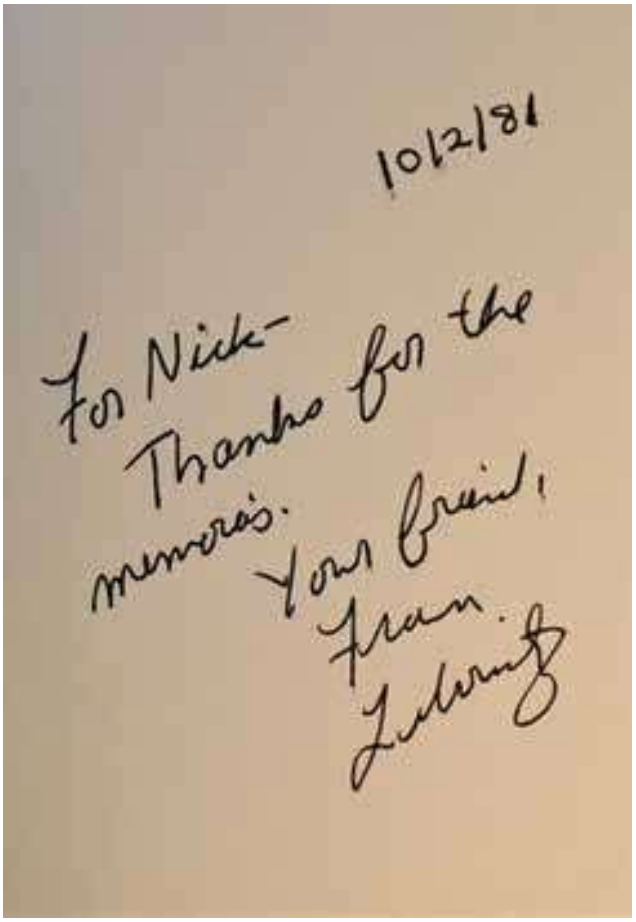
are there, too. Although there were other institutions interested in my archive, I chose Texas A&M because of their dynamic programming and vision for the future, their decision to mount an exhibition on the making of *A Gentle Madness*, their commitment to digitising all of my recorded interviews (at least 500 hours of tape), and the fact that they have a world-class preservation lab. A few of the books I handled for the final time drew a smile by their cover art alone, none more pleasantly to me than the 1980 memoir of an octogenarian veterinarian I spoke with in Boston, Louis J. Camuti, about his six decades as a cat doctor who made house calls in all five boroughs of New York. The title: *All My Patients Are Under the Bed.*

In another volume, Kurt Vonnegut Jr had doodled a self-caricature in profile, with the inscription, 'For Good Old Nick.' The polymath Isaac Asimov had inserted a business card in my copy of *Opus 300* – the three-hundredth book he had either written or edited to that point – that identified him professionally as a 'natural resource.' Inside my magnificent first-issue copy of *Yosemite and the Range of Light*, inscribed and dated by the outdoor photographer and pioneering environmentalist, Ansel Adams, is a postcard of thanks he sent me afterwards for the 'excellent article' I had written, with one of his majestic photographs of the California coast reproduced on the front. In the memoir *Men From Earth* inscribed to me by the astronaut Buzz Aldren, I had laid in two postcards that picture him walking on the lunar surface, personalised to my daughters, Barbara and Nicole.

Some inscriptions continue to dazzle me for their calligraphy – none more practiced or stylised than the three I received from Tom Wolfe for *The Right Stuff* in 1979, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* in 1987, and *A Man in Full* in 1998.

A few of the books prompted me to pause and reflect on the character and courage it took to write them: *Of Blood and Hope* (1980), the recollections of Samuel Pisar, a Holocaust survivor of Treblinka and Auschwitz who became a Harvard-educated lawyer and diplomat; *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without Number* (1981), the harrowing memoir of the journalist Jacobo Timmerman who was persecuted, tortured and imprisoned by the Argentine junta in the late 1970s; and *Taken on Trust* (1993), Terry Waite's account of four





Books inscribed by Isaac Asimov and Fran Lebowitz.

years spent as a hostage in Lebanon in the late 1980s, most of them in solitary confinement, taken captive by the very people he had met with in good faith as an envoy from the Church of England. He had retained his sanity largely by composing in his mind the memoir he would commit to paper when finally released.

Sometimes, in the end, short and sweet says it all. Chuck Yeager – an ace fighter pilot in World War II, the first person to break the sound barrier, and arguably the greatest pure pilot who ever lived – inscribed his memoir, after an hour of congenial conversation: 'For Nick – Nice working with you, Chuck Yeager, B/Gen USAF Ret.'

And then there is Fran Lebowitz, the New York humorist who has become famous for an unparalleled case of writer's block, and for her sardonic commentary on the foibles of living in 'the city that never sleeps'. I met with her in 1981 to discuss what to this day has remained her last published book, *Social Studies*.

Her inscription: 'For Nick – Thanks for the memories, your friend, Fran Lebowitz.'