



Conserve 0 Gram

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What Makes A Book Rare?

The traditional definition of a rare book is any book which has an enhanced value because the demand for the book exceeds the supply, usually because of its importance, scarcity, age, condition, physical and aesthetic properties, association, or subject matter. If there is no demand for a book, it will probably not become a rare book even if the other factors exist. It is of little or no value if no one wants it. Demand can change as interests change.

Importance

Is the book in question an important contribution to human knowledge? Is it a seminal work? First editions of such important works have added potential value as do works by important authors. Although it's not always easy to determine if the book is the first edition, a good general rule to follow is to compare the date on the title page with the copyright date, which is usually found on the back of the title page. If the dates are the same, the book is probably the first edition.

Local importance is determined by asking if the book is vital to the interpretation of the site for its reference or artifactual value. Would it be difficult to replace, even if its market price, when available, were only a few dollars? If so, then the book should be given the same care and protection accorded to other rare books.

Scarcity

Scarcity is a major factor. When coupled with one or more of the other criteria, scarcity becomes a deciding factor. In order to determine scarcity, some background knowledge concerning the number of copies that were

printed and the number that survive is necessary. Perhaps there was a fire in the book warehouse, or the publisher's plates were destroyed.

Some books are published as *instant* rare books. These are usually limited editions, possibly autographed by the author. Some of these eventually become rare books. Any book printed in a quantity of less than 500 is potentially rare.

Age and Imprint

Age, like scarcity, is not always a critical factor. Any book published before 1900, especially on Americana, is potentially valuable. On the other hand, there are many rare books that are not more than 20 years old. Usually, these books are in demand and rare because of the combined factors of importance and scarcity.

The imprint, which is the publisher and place and date of publication, is often a good indicator of a book's potential value. Movable-type printing started in the 15th century in Germany and spread slowly throughout the world. Printing came to America with the colonists and spread across the country as it was settled. The general rule is: the later the place of publication was settled and the earlier the date of publication, the more potentially valuable the book. For example, an 1810 Philadelphia book, all other factors being equal, would very likely be more valuable than an 1810 London book. Similarly, an 1810 Michigan publication would probably be more valuable than the 1810 Philadelphia book.

Certain publishers are the subject of many collections. These are usually small publishers

who took great pride in the selection of titles and the production of the book itself. Derrydale Press and Merrymount Press are two of the many examples. Any book finely bound on fine quality paper should be considered valuable, especially if one or more of the other criteria applies as well.

Condition

Condition takes into consideration whether the binding is original and the extent of wear; whether the pages are brittle or show signs of damage; whether the copy is complete with all its pages and illustrations; and whether there are markings on the spine or title page. Any damage or deterioration that detracts from the appearance of a volume also detracts from its market value, but not necessarily from its usefulness or informational value.

Physical and Aesthetic Properties

Certain physical and aesthetic properties of a book add to its potential value. Fine handmade bindings are the focus of some collections. Some binders signed their work. Books with original photographs, color plates, or fine illustrations are potentially valuable. Print dealers have been known to cut up a book in order to sell the plates. In older books, the plates may loosen and fall out if care is not taken. Such books should be well protected.

One of the most valuable physical properties a book can have is a fore-edge painting. This is a picture done by hand on the page edge (opposite the spine) of a closed book. Fore-edge paintings are sometimes difficult to see. Unless the book is opened and the page edges fanned to the correct angle, they may look as if the paper edge has only been gilded.

Association

The value of a book may be enhanced through its association. As with museum objects, a book owned by John Doe may be worth considerably

less than the same book owned by George Washington. The value of the book is greatly increased if the famous owner signed it, affixed his or her book plate to it, or, even more important, made marginal notes in it.

Subject

Subject matter is not usually an important factor, although certain subjects are very desirable to collectors. Museums and historic sites usually have many books and pamphlets which are highly collectible due to their subject matter, even if they do not have a great monetary value. Age and scarcity of these items are the important considerations. One example is 19th-century military manuals. Many of these are indeed rare and valuable, but many are available in used book stores for under \$50. The monetary value may not be high, but they are historical pieces, and very desirable to some collectors. Aside from their lesser monetary value, they should be considered as rare books.

All of these factors are interrelated and all contribute towards determining the rarity of a book. What is a **rare book** in a small library may not be considered **rare** at a large repository like the Library of Congress which, due to limitations (e.g., space or resources), is much more selective about what it considers a rare book. One library's rare book may sit on the open circulating shelves of another library. In a museum situation, every museum object ideally receives a certain level of care and security, so the differences in rareness among books which are museum objects is much less pronounced. However, differences do exist: volumes that fit the definition require a more complete physical description so that ownership can be proven if they are stolen; and the monetary value must be documented on catalog records to determine if the book is tracked as controlled property.

Whether the book is in a library or museum collection, a good general rule is to err on the side of caution: if a book is suspected of being a

rare book, treat it as such, until proven otherwise.

References

A.B. Bookman's Weekly (A.B. Bookman, P.O. Box AB, Clifton, NJ 07015) can assist in determining demand of a book and its market value. This reference is available in many libraries with rare book collections.

Books in Print (Reed Reference Publishers, 121 Chanlon Road, New Providence, NJ 07974) can be consulted to help determine if a book is still in print. This publication will also indicate which editions of a book are still in print and may thus assist in determining demand. This reference is available in most public libraries.

For guidelines on care and security of rare books, see **Conserve 0 Gram 19/2**. The use and handling of rare books is discussed in **Conserve 0 Gram 19/3**.

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