

Valuable Book Group, LLC
Specialists in Rare and Antiquarian Golf Books
Newsletter and Book Review for the Serious Collector

I'll have mine rare, please

Who among us isn't looking to add a rare golf book to their collection? Discriminating collectors are always on the hunt to add rare titles to round out their library. What exactly is the definition of a rare golf book? Describing a book is an art form, not a science. The book seller, dealer or auctioneer also has an inherent conflict of interest when describing a book, in that he or she will likely fetch a premium price for an item that is considered rare. There are many effusive descriptors for a book that is hard to come by. Creativity is at a premium when describing a book's scarcity. Consider the following descriptions of a book's availability, all of which conjure up images of paucity:

1. Difficult to find
2. Uncommon
3. Scarce
4. Very scarce
5. Rare
6. Quite rare
7. Very rare
8. Exceedingly rare
9. Truly rare
10. Impossibly rare
11. Notoriously rare
12. Previously unknown
13. Unique
14. One of a kind

I attempted to list the definitions of rare in order of 'less' rare to 'more' rare, and you can quickly see it's a fools game. My own personal favorite hyperbolic description of rarity was for a signed copy of Ben Hogan's *Five Lessons* described as *beyond rare*. Since there are four signed copies on-line for sale and the book comes up for auction frequently, the description is meant to generate excitement to entice a buyer to jump at purchasing the book. Maybe the seller thought he was placing a meat order rather than describing a book, and wanted his steak barely cooked, but his copy was not beyond rare, whatever that means.

Absolutely or relatively rare?

In his masterwork on collecting, *ABC for Book Collectors*, John Carter makes several delineations on rarity and generally takes a jaded eye toward describing items as rare. His definitions in two categories give a broader perspective on the subject:

Absolute Rarity – A book printed in a very small edition. For example Tennyson's *The Lover's Tale* printed in 1833 in an edition of only six copies or Robert Frost's 1894 *Twilight*, of which, only two were printed.

Relative Rarity – A property only indirectly connected with the number of copies printed. It is based upon the number which survive.

Based on Carter's definition, there are likely very few golf books fitting into the 'absolute' category. Almost all described as rare are *relatively* rare. Carter, I think rightfully, also takes exception to the description of *unique* and prefers to qualify it as *apparently unique* because you never know if something truly is. Calling something unique should be done with great caution.

Is a golf book that comes up for auction three times a year rare? Probably not, since over a ten year period thirty copies would have been available for purchase. A hand full of golf books that would be rare when compared to books outside the golf universe include *Pen and Pencil Sketches on the Game of Golf* by George Aikman published in 1888 in Edinburgh, which has seen only two copies change hands in the last twenty years and *The Goff. An Heroi-Comical Poem in Three Cantons*, also published in Edinburgh in 1793 and is rarely (no pun intended) seen.

Do your homework

The best advice for a buyer of golf books remains *caveat emptor*. Unlike twenty or thirty years ago, a collector can pretty easily do his or her homework to determine rarity. In today's world, an estimate of rarity can be checked on-line against auction records, previous sale catalogs (the sale of Joe Murdoch's library in 1998 is a good benchmark) or holdings at the British Library, the British Museum or the library of the U.S.G.A. If the libraries' don't hold a copy, it's a pretty safe bet that the book is rare. The other benchmark golf book collectors use is the bibliography of golf books published between 1566 and 2005 produced by Donovan & Jerris and referred to in shorthand as D & J. As has been pointed out to me on more than one occasion, D & J did not catalog every golf book ever published. They attempted to and missed some, particularly more than a few from the Southern Hemisphere. The fact that a book is not listed in D & J doesn't guarantee that it is rare, but it is a good starting point; although, with several caveats, as D & J generally don't include brochures, for example.

When looking at a description of a rare book you will sometimes see it described as not being found in OCLC or WorldCat. OCLC stands for the Online Computer Library Center and it contains references to over one billion items in the world's libraries, so if a copy of a book is not in OCLC or WorldCat, it is also a good indication of rarity.

How many? Is it really limited?

An important factor in determining rarity is how many copies of a particular book were printed to begin with. According to Carter, publishers in Great Britain in the late nineteenth and early

twentieth century typically printed between 1,000 and 3,000 copies of a book. The standard trade edition of Horace Hutchinson's *The Badminton Library: Golf* was printed in a first edition of 5,000. Today a print of between 5,000 and 10,000 is about standard.

I used to drink 1% milk, which is marketed as low fat or skim, thinking I cut out 99% of the fat, until I discovered that whole milk has 3.25% fat, so that it is about a third less fatty. Limited editions are less common than a book printed in a standard trade edition for sure, but, like skim milk, it can also be a bit of a marketing ploy. Given the number of copies of a book typically printed, a limited edition of 1,000 isn't particularly limited. Some limited editions really are rare, particularly those with less than 100 copies printed. Take, for example, Wethered and Simpson's *The Architectural Side of Golf*, a large paper edition published in 1929 in a signed, limited edition of only fifty. This would be legitimately rare on a relative basis. Also, Tom Doak's original hand-produced *The Confidential Guide to Golf* in 1989 in a production of twenty copies. While his later, hard copy limited edition and the general trade editions, both of the same title, are either difficult to find or expensive, the original is the one that is truly rare. Finally, *A Round on the Links: Views of the Golf Greens of Scotland* by George Aikman published in 1893 in a limited edition of 28 is also rare.

Price

It's expensive, therefore it must be rare? Maybe. *James Arbuckle's Glotta: A Poem*, published in 1721 sold for over \$50,000 at auction in 2011. Pick your favorite embellishment in front of the word rare and you will likely be right on when describing this book. Yes, price is a pretty good indicator of rarity, but not always. Sometimes a book that hasn't been seen in a while will go up for sale and will then attract other copies for sale, paradoxically, reducing the item's perceived rarity. The first copy might sell for \$3,000 and those collectors holding it will say to themselves, wow, I didn't realize it was worth that much, I think I will sell it. Thus, the market sees extant copies come forward which then sell for \$2,500, then the next for \$2,000, etc. because collectors now see the copies that were previously sitting in private libraries now flooding the market because people didn't think it was rare or worth much. While the book can likely still be described as rare, over time, it can become less rare on a relative basis due to this factor.

Other factors in determining rarity

Several other determinants are important when considering rarity:

- Age. Books published in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries are rare because they have survived the ravages of time including floods, fires, insects, pestilence, uncaring inheritors and spilled whisky.
- Who was the publisher? Was it published by Simon & Schuster or was it privately printed by a golf club. The latter will generally be more rare than the former since typically there will be 300-500 members of a club the book was printed for and the motive for publishing was not to make money, but to document the club's history.
- Where was the book printed? Those printed in an out-of-the-way locations are generally rarer than those published in New York or London.

- The position of the book in the author's literary career. Earlier works are usually rarer because the author may have been lesser known at the time of publication and may not have achieved fame or infamy yet (or ever).
- The binding. This one is a bit counter-intuitive. Books bound in fancy bindings such as morocco are more likely to survive over time. An heir inheriting a library or someone stumbling upon the book will look at it and conclude that if the book has such a fancy binding it must be worth something (despite our mother's teachings, we do judge books by their covers) and it is retained and well cared for, while other less luxurious looking ones probably end up in the trash bin or are kept but subjected to heat, light, humidity and toddlers.
- The state of the book. A book in its original pristine state is prized by collectors and makes it potentially rare. A copy of the limited edition of 260 of C.B. Macdonald's *Scotland's Gift* is expensive and relatively rare; however, a copy with the original publisher's box or the slipcase can accurately be described as truly rare. Likewise, the Shinnecock Hills club history of 1966 started off relatively rare, printed in a set of only 500. Due to its fragile nature, a copy that retains the unusual original "Spiderman" glassine dust jacket can also accurately be described a rare.

Like a lot of what is espoused during political campaigns, collectors, like informed citizens, need to make up their own mind on the relative rarity of a book. Repeating something over and over does not make it true. Just because someone says it's rare, it doesn't make it so.

Perhaps the rarest of golf books is the one we have all yet to discover? Surely, packed away in somebodies attic or forgotten in a club's archives there lies a truly rare golf book we have not seen before. Perhaps even one that is *unique*. I mean *apparently unique*. This is what makes collecting such a passion for us.