



Price, Value and Interest

There were moments when the Anthologist chose to forget about his profession and enjoys books for the sake of it. Small books with intricate details written by long forgotten botanists, thick overblown tomes of chivalry written by enthusiasts that didn't know when to stop, and tiny vessels of unimaginable knowledge on obscure subjects written by obsessives.

He found one during a browse at an auction. A book about puffins written by a married couple who lived alone on a storm ravaged island. Spending their days huddled from the weather, they filled the pages to the edges with astonishing illustrations of the birds they could probably hear from their own kitchen.

"Found something?" A stranger peered over the Anthologist's shoulder.

"Just a bit of whimsy. Lovely book, look at those drawings."

"Who's it by?"

"Clara and Frederick Morbeen. A Study of Puffins. Second edition."

"Worth much?" The stranger looked at the Anthologist more than the book.

"No. Unless you've made it your life's calling to study puffins."

"Interesting." He slipped away, but he was back later when the auction began. He mingled in a crowd of similar shifty individuals who kept their hands in their pockets until the auctioneer announced one particular title.

"Lot number sixty-five, A Study of Puffins. Clara and Frederick Morbeen, circa 1872. Second edition. Acceptable condition, who'll start at ten cents."

Hands waved, fingers pointed, eyebrows raised. The stranger and the others gesticulated and twitched like a flock of flamingos. Within a minute the price had gone through the roof. The Anthologist checked his catalogue to see if they were bidding on the same book.

And still the price rose. "Eleven thousand, do I hear twelve, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen. . . ." On and on, the crowd gasping at each bid until someone cursed and dropped out leaving the book, A Study of Puffins by Clara and Frederick Morbeen, circa 1872, going for twenty-one thousand marks.

"Twenty-one thousand marks, Anthea. It was worth less than the paper it was written on."

"No, it wasn't." Anthea would sometimes bring her pupils into the library when the Anthologist was there and then linger after the school day was over. She was a Warrior Scholar, but often told people she was more scholar than warrior, and never wore her leather armour in the school. "The price is what people are prepared to pay. Shopkeepers don't guess when they price their goods, they have an idea what people are prepared to pay."

The Anthologist poured another cup of tea and pushed the cup along the table in front of her. "Don't spill it on that almanac you're reading. It could be worth a fortune."

"You're just bothered because you couldn't afford to buy it."

"I could afford to buy it. They didn't bid the price up because A Study of Puffins is a valuable book."

"Why did they bid the price up then?"

"I've no idea."

"There must have been something about it you overlooked."

"I beg your pardon. I don't overlook important details that determine a book's value. No, something else was going on in that auction room. I know what it was."

"What?"

"A ring. They were running a ring. A group of people get together to bid the price up. One of them must have been selling that book."

Anthea's analytical mind jumped into action. "So which one of them ended up out of pocket to help his mate?"

"What do you mean?"

"They worked together to get twenty-one thousand marks for a book one of them owned."

"Yes?"

"Do I have to spell it out? Wouldn't they want to sell it to an unsuspecting stranger? They wouldn't sell it back to themselves, would they?"

"I have absolutely no idea what you mean, Anthea."

He did. The day after at a second auction he made a note of who was attending, who they talked to, stood next to, mingled with, stared at. They stared at him, studied his body language, checked out the books after he had handled them. His attention was distracted by an atlas, a mass produced title that often ended up in discounters' inventories, but was still a work of fantastic detail.

Two hours later he leaned against the wall at the back of the auction room watching the same mass produced atlas demanding a price as if it had been published by Charlemagne. When the bidding stopped and the buyer identified the Anthologist approached the sales manager.

"What's so special about that atlas?"

"I don't know. Books are not my speciality. None of that stuff interests me."

"But there must be something. I looked at it, there was nothing special about it. Thirty thousand marks?"

"Good day to be an auctioneer."

He walked back to the castle with those words turning over and over and spilled his suspicions out to Anthea. "They're part of it. The auctioneers."

"Not a ring?"

"No. The auctioneers are up to something. They must be. Perhaps they're putting stooges in the crowd, one or two of them bidding up the price and then dropping out when some unlucky mug throws his hat in."

"Full of ideas, aren't you? Have you ever considered becoming a school teacher?"

"What? Not a chance."

"My pupils like you. They like spending time in here, the way you explain the history of the books, how books are bound and printed, handwriting, calligraphy. I didn't know the difference between a font and a typeface until you told us."

"Do they take it all in though?"

"Oh, yes. It seems to have had a knock on effect. They take an interest in everything else now. Mind you, if they heard your theories on how the free market works they'd soon realise you're not the last word in publishing."

"Thanks."

Another day, another auction, and this time one of the bidders introduced himself as Magnus and contradicted what Anthea had said. "You're considered to be something of an authority." Every time Magnus spoke he had just enough breath to finish his sentence.

"Am I?"

"Oh yes. I mean, acting as the Queen's Royal Librarian could only be bestowed upon someone whose knowledge is beyond question."

"Well I've never heard the Queen say that. I thought she employed me because I'm cheap."

"You do yourself a great disservice, if I may be so bold to say." Magnus's eyes ballooned when he glanced around the auction room. "Any little fancies here, may I enquire?"

"Any what? There's a . . ." he stopped himself. "There's a book of poems over there, written by a twentieth century housewife. Might be nice in someone's collection."

"Really?"

"Pick it up for a few cents. The cover's knackered, but you can still read the words."

Magnus took the bait. When the bidding eventually started he held back until he caught the

Anthologist's eye.

"Come on, will someone start me off at twenty cents? Fifteen? Ten?"

The Anthologist stared at Magnus, raised his hand and the madness began. The bidding rose to five thousand marks within a minute and the Anthologist, curious to know how far this contest would go continued to bid. Magnus matched him, raising the bid fifty marks, then one hundred, then five hundred, the audience silenced by the contest. The price touched twenty thousand marks when Magnus swallowed heavily.

"Do I hear twenty-one?"

Magnus moved to raise his hand.

"Twenty-one?" The auctioneer's gavel hovered and the Anthologist urged Magnus to bid again. "It's against you, sir."

Magnus checked every part of his body, the floor, the ceiling, the Anthologist and then shook his head. The gavel came down and the Anthologist was the new owner of Chords and Cornflour, A Collection of Rural Poems by Constance Caterall.

"I don't even like poetry," he said in a strangulated tone to the sales manager.

"Why did you bid for it then?"

"I . . . I don't know."

"Tough. You bid, you win, you pay. Twenty thousand marks. Come on, cash or cash?"

"I haven't got twenty thousand marks."

"Oh dear."

"Put the book back in the auction, it wasn't worth that much anyway."

"It's worth what people are prepared to pay for it."

"So people keep telling me."

"Well, you should have learned your lesson then, shouldn't you?"

"Look, I honestly haven't got twenty thousand marks. What can we do about this?"

The sales manager sent for the head auctioneer who sent for the owner of the auction house who didn't go anywhere without at least three years supply of body fat. "This the man who won't pay?"

"Can't pay," said the Anthologist. "I can raise the money, but I don't have twenty thousand marks on me at the moment."

"You shouldn't have bid twenty thousand marks then. You've got five days. Interest is five hundred marks a day if you don't come up with the goods."

"Five days. Okay. Thank you."

The Queen was even less sympathetic. "You want me to pay your debt?" She was in the armoury checking over a new delivery of ballistics.

"I bought the book for the library."

"Without my authorisation."

"I thought we had an implied agreement? If I see something of value I buy it, you reimburse me."

"I'd put that down if I were you. Don't want it to go off here in the explosives room, do we? You've already said this book was worthless."

"I said that? When?"

"This morning. You told Guinevere what happened."

"And she told you?"

"Yes. That's what she's here for."

"Right. Okay. I'll get the money somewhere else."

"Good." Anteje's attention was always somewhere else when she was inspecting cannonballs.

Anthea's arsenal was less incendiary; a pile of notebooks to be marked. She sat behind a large desk that gave her authority way beyond her station. "I'm a school teacher, do I look like I have twenty thousand marks to throw away?"

"If you wore your armour you could rob a bank."

She peered over her spectacles. "Don't you have any friends who could help?"

There were one or two. He kept their identities to himself. The Vampire he befriended several years ago would help, but the price she wanted would be fatal to most people. The Forger was even more penniless than the Anthologist and didn't know how to forge money.

"What about your wife?" Anthea flourished her quill pen down a page in one of the notebooks.

"Yes. If I could find her." He slumped into the chair next to the enormous desk. "That invitation to teach a lesson to your pupils."

Anthea didn't look up. "What about it?"

"Is it a paying position?"

Job satisfaction, she told him, a currency worth more than gold, she told him, an act of altruism beyond value. He stopped her when she started talking about investing in everyone's future.

Half way through the lesson he said, "And then there's compound interest in which the interest you're charged is added to the outstanding capital plus the interest that has already been added to that capital. It increases exponentially. I think. Does it?" Anthea shrugged. She paced around the classroom making sure the girls paid attention. Without her patrolling presence they'd all be asleep. "Look," said the Anthologist, "theory is all very well, but there's nothing like real life for learning. Why don't you buy and sell something?"

Like waking turtles, heads everywhere began to rise. The idea stirred and blew around the room. "What can we sell?" said a girl called Max.

"A book. Cheap to buy, potential, particularly at this moment in time, to return a huge profit."

"Let's not get carried away," said Anthea, but she was too late. Max had big plans to capture the world market in books and soon had the other girls alongside her.

"Where can we buy a cheap book?"

"There's the bookshop by the castle inlet," said a girl called Ivy.

"Can we go now, ma'am?" said Gina and before Anthea could answer the girls were uprooting themselves and packing away their books and pens.

"Don't go mad," said the Anthologist. "Don't pay too much, trust me, I know what I'm talking about." They were gone before he could finish.

"Well that went well." Anthea pulled on her cloak. "We'd better get after them before they buy up the village."

The bookshop by the castle inlet was never designed to accommodate so many girls eager to buy the one book that would return a life changing profit. They overturned the display piles, stripped the shelves, bombarded the shop keeper with a salvo of questions.

"Would you take three cents for this," said Max holding up a large leather bound manuscript.

The shop keeper took it back. "That's my sales ledger, it's not for sale."

"Here's one." The Anthologist pushed his way through the mob and caught the girls' attention. "Pastiche, A Guide For Survival at Royal Court. Yves-Jacques Bonneville, 1668." He tapped the cover and waved the book in front of the nearest faces squeezed around him. "Make an offer of thirty cents. But," the faces waited for the but, he whispered, "if it was the 1666 edition it would be worth thousands."

"Why?"

He didn't know where the question came from, but he held the title page up to the light of the shop window. "See the watermark, a crab, that was the mark of a publisher called Frederick de Balmain, they called him the combattant pourpre because of his anti-monarchy pamphlets. He fled the country in 1666, took a barge along the Rhone and then a corsair across the Mediterranean to who knows where. After that there's always been doubts about his books. Up to 1666 it's definitely one of his, after that who knows."

A hand appeared between the faces and snatched the book. "Buy it." It was Ivy's hand. "Sell it, buy the next one. This could be the start of a new mercantile adventure."

They borrowed the money off Anthea (who borrowed it off the Anthologist) and bought the

book, took it back to the castle and before they had any idea where or how they could resell it, Ivy pointed at the publication date. "Easiest thing in the world to change an eight into a six. . . ."

There were easier things, but it didn't stop them. They toiled for hours until the numbers lied. The following morning the Anthologist sat in the classroom, book in hand, three villains stood bold as brass in front of him. "You did this?" They nodded. "You do know forgery is a criminal offence?" They nodded again. "And it doesn't bother you?" They shook their heads and smiled.

"You have a forger working for you," said Ivy. "If it's okay for you to do it, it's okay for us. Unless you want to be considered a hypocrite."

He handed the book back and told them about an auction that afternoon. If they hurried up they could get the book into the sale. He needn't have worried about them getting there on time; schooled by Anthea and trained by Warrior Scholars they could run as fast as he could ride a horse and the book was on display one hour before the auction was due to begin.

The owner of the auction spotted the Anthologist. "Don't even think about bidding," he said and yanked the book out of his hand.

"I wasn't going to. I am an observer."

"Do you have the money?"

"I will have. Just be patient."

"Don't have any choice, do I?"

When he was gone a familiar voice piped up. "Ready for round two," said Magnus.

"Sorry. Barred from bidding. You're on your own today."

"More's the pity. I rather enjoyed our little joust the other day."

"I'm glad someone did."

"May I enquire, if you were to bid today, your choice of titles?"

"You can enquire, but I have to keep these things to myself. Trade secret."

"Quite."

"However."

"Yes."

The Anthologist picked up a book and turned to the title page. "What do you think of this? See the date there? There's something about the date that doesn't quite convince me."

Magnus took out an eyeglass and inspected the page. He kept his voice low. "An obvious attempt to tamper with the date. If I was a suspicious man I would say this book is a forgery."

"And a rather clumsy one." The Anthologist didn't want others to hear. "Why would the forger make it so obvious?"

"An incompetent."

"A trick. Must be a trick. There must have been a reason for doing that."

Magnus put his eyeglass away and disappeared into the crowd.

School was suspended for a couple of hours, the girls sprinkled around the room, Anthea in the middle where the auctioneer could see her. When the book was presented she glanced at the Anthologist for reassurance. He made a point of nodding and smiling, conscious of Magnus's beady eye on him at all times.

"Pastiche, A Guide For Survival at Royal Court. Yves-Jacques Bonneville, 1666. Will anyone give me five thousand?" Several girls squealed.

Magnus raised his hand.

"Thank you sir, five thousand, do I hear six?" Six was bid. Magnus went up to seven and kept on going as the bidding reached ten and twelve and onwards in a relentless tit-for-tat that showed signs of fatigue at nineteen thousand. The girls held their breath.

"Twenty thousand," said Anthea. Bystanders in the auction room lost their balance as girls from every direction scuttled towards their school mistress.

"Twenty thousand, do I hear twenty-one." Magnus bid. "Twenty-two?" said the auctioneer.

Anthea waited for the Anthologist's signal. Magnus waited for his signal. The Anthologist nodded. Anthea raised her hand. Ivy pulled it down.

"Twenty-two." The auctioneer switched his attention between a nervous Magnus and a

woman being tugged and tackled by a swelling group of girls. "Twenty-three?" Magnus bid again.

"It's against you, madam at twenty-three."

"Twenty-four."

Ivy gritted her teeth and said no. Max yanked the Anthologist's head and whispered, "She bidding for our book."

"I know."

"Why is she bidding for our book?"

"She's your teacher, how should I know?"

"Do I hear twenty-five?"

Magnus bid twenty-five. Anthea waited for another signal from the Anthologist who was close to having his shoulder dislocated by Max. He shook his head. Anthea shook her head and Magnus finally breathed out when the gavel came down.

The Anthologist pulled Max's hand off his arm. "Go and get your money."

After collecting their profit and taking it back to the classroom to count they learned an equally difficult lesson in economics. One involving leverage, loans, ownership and, a lesson learned the hard way by the Anthologist, repaying one's debts.

"You bought the book with my money," said Anthea. "And our friend here lent the money to me to lend to you, so by rights the book belonged to him." He ringed he money on the tabletop with his arm and dragged it all into a small sack. "However, as an act of generosity, he is prepared to let you keep the profit to reinvest in your next purchase."

The girls were unimpressed watching their money being scooped up. Max lifted a coin off the table and said, "What's so special about your opinion anyway?"

"What do you mean?" he said.

"The minute you pay any attention to a book the price goes up."

He tried to answer, but at that moment it all became clear. No rings, no auctioneer's tricks, other bidders watching him like a hawk. Anything he touched, every book he lifted up they bid on it. And when Magnus saw him and Anthea working together he assumed there was something special on offer, something he had to get his hands on.

"Do you know, you might be right."

"Can't understand why you never figured it out yourself," said Max.

"It's obvious," said Ivy.

"I don't think it's obvious," said the Anthologist. "But now that you mention it it does make sense."

"When we buy our next book," said Max, "you'll come to the auction."

"Yes. Sure."

"Don't say anything. Just lift it up, look at it, put it down again and keep your mouth shut."