

## Dictionary of Literary Biography: Interview with Ralph Sipper

Ralph B. Sipper grew up in New York City. He earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in American literature from the City College of New York and took classes toward a master's degree at The New School. Joseph the Provider / Books was established in San Francisco in 1970. Sipper has been a book critic for over thirty years and is the editor of several books, the most recent being "Inward Journey" (Cordelia Editions, 1984). This telephone interview between Matthew J. Bruccoli and Ralph Sipper of Joseph The Provider / Books took place on 15 November 1994.

DLB: How long have you been a rare-book dealer?

SIPPER: Twenty-five years, officially. We established Joseph the Provider in San Francisco. But I had been involved with books all my life, really.

DLB: Most book dealers start off as collectors. Had you been a serious collector before you commenced bookselling?

SIPPER: Well, I never thought of myself as one. A more accurate description would be that I was a book accumulator. Somehow books have always passed through my hands. I first began to accumulate them while indolently pursuing a master's degree in American literature. The indolence did not extend to the piling up of books. I passed them on for many years by way of gift or trade. Occasionally I sold some. Then I bought some more. One day my wife said to me: "You constantly run in and out of bookstores, dragging me along. Why don't we just open our own bookstore?" And that, as we say, was the beginning of the end. You must understand that I started late as a bookseller. I was in my late thirties. But after only two or three weeks I knew that bookselling was what I was meant to do, perhaps all I was fit to do.

DLB: I can't improve on that, Ralph. As you know I have the strong conviction that a good bookseller is a scholar, a researcher, to use a fancy term, a patron of literature. Would you accept that statement with a few blushes?

SIPPER: I would accept it in a collective vein. I think it true of many booksellers. Probably as a group we are what D. H. Lawrence referred to as "Soldiers of Literature." Bibliographical grunts, if you will. But there is another group who are better patrons. Just as booksellers sometimes educate librarians, good collectors educate and influence booksellers. Even more than booksellers, they can influence literary scholarship. Some of the best collectors I know are among the most knowledgeable bibliophiles imaginable. Would you agree with that?

DLB: I would say that they are supposed to be. That is what a good book collector is supposed to be – someone who knows what he is doing, who in fact knows more about the bibliography of the author than anybody in the world.

SIPPER: Exactly.

DLB: So we don't have any argument there.

SIPPER: No.

DLB: Could you express your rationale for operating a rare-book business? What should a proper antiquarian bookshop attempt to do?

SIPPER: "Should" is a strong word when you speak of a group as independent-minded as booksellers are. What we have done through the years, I think, is a little different than what others have done. Many booksellers try to find the buyer first. This is an economically sound way to operate. My associates and I, on the other hand, have always had the perverse idea that if we get the books the world will beat a path to our doorstep. "They will come," as W. P. Kinsella said. This may not be the safest way to proceed, but it is, for better or worse, our way. We have always tried to find the best copies of the best books, the rarest books, and then just put them out there for anyone to buy. We do this principally through our catalogues, which we research thoroughly, spearheaded by our chief cataloguer, Lee Campbell, trying to make them as accurate and interesting as possible. A secondary mode of selling is to exhibit at ABAA books fairs. The last major way is to respond to particular requests from collectors by locating particular books for them. What we have not done really is work the selling end as aggressively as the buying. We have bought well over the years, in part because we are a bi-coastal operation. With our main office being on the West Coast and our associate Larry Moskowitz living in the East, we manage to see as much modern literature as anyone. That's where the fun lies – in the seeing. We choose our books carefully, one by one really, and only after we have them do we concern ourselves with their marketing.

DLB: You form collections?

SIPPER: Yes, chiefly author or subject collections. I think we were the first booksellers to systematically catalogue Vietnam War fiction. We have also offered and sold collections of California novels, Hollywood novels, and baseball fiction. We even put together a group of agrarian works of fiction, novels in which the principal setting is the American farm. One of the ways in which we like to function is to identify all the books available on the subject and then go out to find the best possible copies of those titles.

DLB: When you build a collection do you then intend to sell it as a collection. En bloc?

SIPPER: That is always the aim, to unify a group of books and then keep the family together. In these days of beleaguered library budgets it is much more difficult to accomplish.

DLB: I should have backed up and asked you why you chose your specialty, which is modern literature and in particular modern American literature. My impression

is that you handle major works of modern British literature but your primary interest is American literature.

SIPPER: We handle British literature as well. Modern literature is the easiest way to enter the antiquarian book business.

DLB: Easiest in the sense of easy to build a stock and affordable.

SIPPER: It's easier to learn. For almost thirty years I have moonlighted as a book critic. During that time I have reviewed several hundred volumes of modern fiction, literary history, and biography. These are areas I know intimately, so perhaps that is why we began as we did. But once we established ourselves, we began to expand from within. Instead of just covering, say, American literature and then going back in time or forward, what we did was to identify smaller areas within that broad field and then do variations on those themes, to develop some of the less trodden paths. For example, through the years we have specialized in proletarian literature. Of course there are some obvious proletarian books that other dealers also offer regularly. During the Thirties, a period of social discontent in America, many writers went about expressing their dissatisfaction through fiction. Much of this proletarian literature is not very good because the author's point was less to create art than to improve social conditions. And, of course, art and politics have never been compatible. Nevertheless, because the field itself is historically important, we decided to resurrect it bibliographically on a grander scale before the books disappear for good. We are comprehensively doing this in the field of black literature, not only Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and the Harlem Renaissance, but hundreds of other black writers, and right now we are beginning to pick up books in the fields of Chicano literature and American Indian literature.

DLB: It has been said that smart rare-book librarians, rare-book curators, cultivate the book dealers who can make them look good. But, of course, there are librarians who are notorious for their hostility toward book dealers. The whole area of antiquarian book dealer / librarian relationships is a very thorny one. Would you care to comment?

SIPPER: What you say is true. I can only comment, though, on the basis of personal experience. We have never actively pursued or wooed librarians.

DLB: Do they woo you?

SIPPER: I'm tempted to paraphrase John Cheever by ruefully noting that Joseph the Provider has always been the lover and never the beloved. The fact of the matter is that historically we have been reluctant to hike up our corporate skirts in quest of book orders. I am not denigrating the time-honored practice of making the acquaintanceship of librarians at social functions or visiting them with book-bulging valises. We enjoy longstanding professional relationships with a fair number of libraries. But I like to think that these relationships have evolved naturally rather than by cold calculation. Anyway, there are not all that many great librarians around. There are people at top institutions

like Bill Cagle and Tom Staley and others like Austin McLean, Pat Willis, Tim Murray and Frank Walker (who just retired) to whom we have paid a fair amount of attention. We stay in touch with them, sending along advance copies of offerings if we think that they will fit into their existing collections. But these are more or less isolated cases. Too many librarians sleepwalk through their jobs. The better ones, more than you might think, become booksellers.

DLB: Yes, I've spent much of my professional life working with university librarians, and some of them are, of course wonders. I agree with you on Bill Cagle, for example, but most of them seem to really hate books. Baffling.

SIPPER: When you did your Ross Macdonald research at UC – Irvine, what would you have done without Roger Berry? I mean, there was nobody else there who knew the collection, and now that Roger has retired, the collection is not being developed further.

DLB: I could not have written either book without his help.

SIPPER: But what does a Macdonald researcher do now when there is nobody to guide him through the collection?

DLB: I don't know. Certainly booksellers have performed great services for literature, for authorship as well as for themselves. They've made money doing it by in effect serving as archivists for an author and keeping the author's material together through one sale, placing everything in one library. You have had the honor and pleasure of achieving such a deal in the case of Ross Macdonald.

SIPPER: Yes. It was through our offices that his papers wound up at UC – Irvine. He wanted them placed there. A major component of our business is appraising and placing archives. As a natural extension of being a bookseller I have come to know many contemporary authors. Some of them have approached us from time to time and asked us to find a home for their papers. The John Fowles archive, for example, went to the University of Texas through our offices. I traveled to England three times to accomplish this. The first time, I met with John in Lyme Regis to propose the sale. Next, I went back with the director of the library to iron out the details. Finally, I returned (with my wife as designated packer) to post five hundred pounds of paper to Austin, Texas, from bucolic Devon. Fedex flew the papers across the Atlantic, and they arrived in Austin thirty-six hours later while I was still suffering the early throes of jet lag.

DLB: Do you see any positive developing trends in the field of modern first editions?

SIPPER: Well, my thoughts last night about what I could contribute to this interview were somewhat negative. I see discouraging signs down the road.

DLB: Such as what?

SIPPER: Such as the homogenization of book values. “The Great Gatsby” without a dust jacket is a five-hundred-dollar book, while “The Great Gatsby” with a dust jacket and signed by Fitzgerald might bring a hundred times that amount – big difference. Pick up a price guide, though, which attempts to inform through generalization, and you will see “Gatsby” pegged somewhere in between, information which means less than nothing. What price guides and auction records encourage is a misleading shortcut toward understanding book values. They undermine the very rationale of book collecting, which is the status of the individual copy – for example: Is it a poor copy? Is it a decent one? A spectacular one? Did the author sign it? And if he did, is he a literary lion, turning up regularly in public, pen in hand? Or is he reclusive like, say, J. D. Salinger or Thomas Pynchon, whose autographs are rare? Is the book merely signed, or is it inscribed to someone? To someone of note? Where does this title fit in with the author’s body of work? With the work of his peers? Does it float in the literary mainstream? Are there enough copies available of this particular title to satisfy the market? Or is it scarce? Rare? Now, no single reference work or price guide can even hope to begin to answer such fundamental questions, and yet we get three phone calls a week from some innocent asking, “What is ‘Catch-22’ going for these days.” I mean, surely you must have heard this kind of question.

DLB: Yes.

SIPPER: How does one answer it?

DLB: The answer is, which copy do you have in mind?

SIPPER: Exactly. The concept of the individual copy is a cornerstone of book collecting.

DLB: That’s the only answer.

SIPPER: When it comes to collecting, literary merit is only part of the equation. If content only is what you crave, there is always the public library or a paperback edition to fall back on. Antiquarian bookselling is about the book as artifact. The best collectors I have known are the independent-minded ones. Toby Holtzman, who sold his collection of American literature some years ago, collected hundreds of modern authors and on a comprehensive scale, including book contributions, periodicals, you name it. But most of his books he bought new. He kept up with his authors. Only what he could not find new did he pursue in the rare-book market. Toby collected in an individual way. The worst way to collect is to chase books by the new guy on the block. This month it is Cormac McCarthy. Now, the truth of the matter is that Cormac McCarthy is a fine writer, but he was also a fine writer twenty years ago when only a handful of collectors cared.

DLB: Ralph, there was a whole class of book collectors who were trained at 3 West 46<sup>th</sup> Street, Seven Gables Book Shop. It’s been said that Michael Papantonio and John Kohn created more good collectors than any other dealers in America. Would you

like to talk about the synergism between book dealer and book collector? Do you educate each other? What do you do for each other?

SIPPER: I did not get to know Mike Papantonio and John Kohn very well because they were phasing out as we were coming in. People like Margie Cohn, Warren Howell, and David Magee are among the dealers who were my mentors. But bookselling has changed since their day. Forty or fifty years ago, if you were a San Francisco gentleman who collected books, you went to your bookseller, either Warren Howell or David Magee – but not both – just as one man cut your hair or made your suits. Dealers in those days guarded their customers jealously. Today it has gotten a lot more egalitarian.

At a book fair in New York or Los Angeles, collectors peruse our books as well as those of Serendipity, Pepper and Stern, Heritage, Ken Lopez and twenty others. It's more competitive because you don't have the field to yourself. And that makes it more fun and challenging – to a point.

DLB: What, in your view, makes for a good bookseller?

SIPPER: Most of the good booksellers I know have good reference libraries. They spend many hours studying that will not necessarily translate into extra dollars or sales. They research the material they are offering because they understand that knowledge is the difference between creative bookselling and selling by rote.

DLB: What kinds of book scholarship would you like to see being done?

SIPPER: I think if you deal in an author's work you ought to know, at the very least, which of his books are the important ones. Most dealers learn quickly which of an author's books are scarce, but scarcity is only one factor in evaluating a book. Too many dealers don't really do their homework. To me that presages trouble down the line for everyone.

DLB: I'd like to go back to my question about what the customer means to the dealer. Is it fair to say that some of your customers have educated you?

SIPPER: Certainly.

DLB: Got a for instance?

SIPPER: Well, I mentioned Toby Holtzman. Carl Petersen was a most knowledgeable collector. And you, my friend, are no slouch as a scholar or a collector.

DLB: I've never been a good customer. I wish I had been.

SIPPER: It's not too late to start, Matt.

DLB: Thank you, but I was thinking in terms of someone walking in and asking for a book, an author you didn't even recognize, and the guy proceeding to explain to you why this was a great book and why the author was terribly underrated, and as you began looking for books for this customer you got educated. Has that happened?

SIPPER: Yes, but you have to remember that critical opinion is only as good as the critic dispensing it. I've learned to trust certain people's judgment. But they have had to earn that trust from me.

DLB: Impossible question, but this is the kind of question that readers like to see: What is the greatest book or manuscript you have ever handled? And define, please, the basis of greatness.

SIPPER: I don't know that I can or care to isolate one. We've become famous for the fine condition of our books, though some would say "notorious" or "fetishistic" are better descriptive words. But even more thrilling to me than exceptional condition is a book's emotional connection or literary association. One could collect association copies and theoretically write a cultural history by cross-pollinating literary relationships with established canons. Someone right now is collecting important books inscribed by authors to their mothers. You can't get any more bibliographically intimate than that.

DLB: Would you like to say something about condition? Because I think you and I do not agree on the value of condition, and the point is not to argue, but I think I am closer to how civilians feel. Civilians are baffled for the most part by the existence of two copies of a book – neither one inscribed. One is a copy that looks better than the other. It looks newer, looks nicer, and it doesn't cost twice as much; it costs ten times as much. Could you do a brief disquisition on how condition affects value and why?

SIPPER: Because collectors like beautiful objects. And fine copies are much harder to find than ordinary ones. When we started out in business the value of a dust jacket was considered minimal. Yet the jacket is an integral part of the book, having been issued with it, after all. The jacket contains biographical information, bibliographical information, and artwork that imparts a visual feel for the book's time. Dust jackets are beautiful things, and people with the taste and wherewithal to own beauty will go to extraordinary lengths to obtain such things, the more so if they are hard to find. Call it preservation of the dubiously valuable; call it anal if you like. I call it human propensity.

DLB: So the dust jacket is in fact not a dust jacket.

SIPPER: Come again?

DLB: It hasn't been a dust jacket for damn near seventy-five years.

SIPPER: Right.

DLB: It is the way in which the publisher attempts to introduce the book to the reader. And in some cases, of course, it has an authorial statement.

SIPPER: Well, yes. Twenty years ago we began to pursue some of these scarce jackets with a vengeance. Now, if at that point nobody had cared, then undoubtedly we would have abandoned our search for them. But it quickly became apparent to us that what collectors really wanted was what their fellow collectors lacked. Having a jacketed “This Side of Paradise” is a way for a collector, who after all enjoys the pride of possession, to acknowledge that while he and his friend both have nice copies of the same title, his is finer. There are only five or so copies known of Vladimir Nabokov’s “Despair,” published in England some sixty years ago, and only two in jacket. The publisher’s building was destroyed by a bomb during World War II. For such an important rarity we will pay what we have to, add something onto that figure, and hope that someone agrees with our notion of value. And we had better not be wrong too many times. When you really think about it, bookselling is just about the purest form of capitalism extant.

DLB: I have no response. You’ve made the case perfectly. You know, we’ve all heard the story about the guy who got married and his wife removed all the dust jackets and threw them all away because they spoiled the color scheme.

SIPPER: My parents did that. When I was growing up in the Bronx, my parents and my friends’ parents normally removed the jackets just as you say. The green bindings were arranged together, etc. I will grant you that someday the whole dust jacket thing could blow up in our faces.

DLB: Good point. You were saying?

SIPPER: Buyers will resist at some level, if they think a book’s price is inflated. Value when it comes to art objects is really only a perception. Today, a little thing like a price-clipped dust jacket can alter a book’s value significantly. You must remember that the absence of a price on a jacket can in some cases leave one in the dark as to whether or not he actually has a first edition. So there are sound bibliographical reasons for insisting on a dust jacket, too. But things may change. Styles of book collecting usually do.

DLB: Of course. We all understand that, but when people come to the house, the one out of one hundred who notices there are these things on the bookshelves asks the question about why do you have all these pieces of paper on the books, and of course, book collectors come in two sizes, the devout and the infidels. The great Louis Armstrong said, when asked after one of his gigs by a gushing fan what jazz is, “Lady, if you don’t know by now, you never will.” I don’t know why you should want to tell them. However, this is turning into my interview and not yours. You’re going to have to do the mandatory explanation of why your business is called Joseph the Provider.

SIPPER: Really?



DLB: I know the story, but do it please, for the record.

SIPPER: Well, I thought that the Book Nook would not do. I wanted a name for our enterprise that people would remember. I was first introduced to books by my grandfather, Joseph Sipper, who when I was three or four sat me on his knee and read from his books, which he obviously loved. The books under discussion happened to be Hebrew prayer books, which were not then my cup of tea – and still aren't. But grandfather's passion for them shone through. His death was my first intimate experience with that grim reality. Suddenly it all came together: the desire to resurrect a loved one, the literary allusion, the implicit idea that we would be finding books for those who also loved them. Our logo derives from an old photograph of my grandfather.

DLB: It's been lucky for you. Some names are lucky, and it's been a lucky name.

SIPPER. I'm lucky to be a bookman.

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