Collectible Ink: A banker and his books

Book collector Bill Grant specializes in modern signed first editions

A sampling of a few of the over 150 signed first editions that Maryland banker Bill Grant has collected. He’s built the collection personally, having them signed face-to-face, or through persevering research. (Photo by David Hathcox.)

By Steve Cocheo, executive editor

Community banker Bill Grant tends not to make a big display of things, so in visiting his home you might walk right by what looks like a simple wall-full of books and photos. But you’d be missing a neat treat. Every one of the books in those shelves has been signed by the author, the subject of the book, or both, either in Grant’s presence or, frequently, through his diligent detective work that put book and signer together.

Grant’s is an eclectic collection of more than 150 titles, reflecting his wide-ranging interests, from the exploration of space to politics to history. He’s obtained signatures from 11 of the 12 astronauts who walked on the moon--and some recent and current presidential candidates. (His “white whale” is Neil Armstrong, who declines to sign things.) He’s garnered signatures from seven U.S. Presidents. His collection includes humanitarians and military leaders, academics and athletes, corporate titans, and Supreme Court justices.

“I’ve been focusing on World War II people of late,” says Grant, whose family served in the military during the war.

The common thread across the whole collection: “Everyone who is up there is someone I respect.”

And that explains some absences of authors whom he might have notched for his archive. Case in point: Frank Abagnale, author of Catch Me If You Can. Abagnale, who eventually turned his life around, was a notorious fraudster and impostor whose exploits became a hit movie and later a Broadway musical.

Grant once had a shot at getting Abagnale’s signature on his book. He declined to pursue it.

Building up a collection of firsts

Read the February 2012 cover story profile of Grant, who is chairman and CEO at First United Bank, Oakland, Md., and current chairman of ABA’s Community Bankers Council, in the Digital Magazine.

Grant, an attorney by training, has an undergraduate degree in history, and maintains a strong interest in it. Some of the books and signatures in his collection Grant snapped right up at banking conferences where the authors spoke and then did signings. That’s how he gained signed copies of books by investigative journalist Bob Woodward, and how he obtained signatures from Alan Greenspan, on his The Age of Turbulence.

Closer to home, one of the key players in a real-life adventure readily signed Grant’s copy of The Last River: The Tragic Race for Shangri-la. Todd Balf’s 2000 book tells the story of an American whitewater team’s ill-fated attempt in the late 1990s to navigate the Yarlung Tsangpo, called “The Everest of Rivers.” One of the four kayakers was swept away, and presumed dead. One of the survivors, Roger Zbel, is a customer of Grant’s bank, and runs whitewater trips in the area. Zbel’s signature graces Grant’s copy of the book.

Roger Zbel, owner of PrecisionRafting.com, Friendsville, Md., plays a major role in Todd Balf’s The Last River, and signed the book for his banker, Bill Grant. (Photo by David Hathcox.)

But more typically, Grant has had to work at putting book and subject or author together.

For example, after much detective work, he found a relative of Gen. James “Jimmy” Doolittle, leader of the Tokyo Raid in the wake of Pearl Harbor, and learned that the retired hero lived in California. Doolittle gladly signed his

autobiography, I Could Never Be So Lucky Again. (The retired Lieutenant General died in the early 1990s.)

As in the case of Doolittle, sometimes when Grant finds out where an author or book’s subject can be found, obtaining the signature is as simple as sending a copy of the book and a return label. Other times, he’s relied on a mutual friend, or a friend of a friend, to get the job done. Sometimes his ABA service has helped him make a connection.

For instance, ABA President and CEO Frank Keating helped Grant to obtain President Bill Clinton’s signature on his My Life, through a group that Keating, former Oklahoma governor, and Clinton, former Arkansas governor as well as President, serve on.

Marking figures of personal respect

Grant, it is clear, enjoys the thrill of the chase as much as having the signed books. And some of them serve as reminders of individuals whose lives have deep meaning for him.

His three favorite Presidents are Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, and Ronald Reagan.

Roosevelt holds a special place in Grant’s heart as the result of a high school class trip to the colorful man’s summer White House and family home, Sagamore Hill, on Long Island, New York. “TR” made an impression on the young Grant that’s held to this day. Grant plans to spend time hunting up more about Roosevelt after he retires. For now, he has a signed copy of David McCullough’s Mornings On Horseback.

A special book to Grant is his signed copy of Ronald Reagan: An American Life.

“He stood for a lot of things that I agree with,” says Grant. “He was a plain-spoken man of high integrity, high character, and optimism.”

And some books in the collection have stories of special poignancy behind them. One is the inscription by the late Robert E. Byrd, former senator from West Virginia.

Through a friend of a friend, Grant obtained the signature. It is quite spidery and scratchy. Byrd was very ill at the time and Grant says he has been told that in writing in his copy of Child of the Appalachian Coalfields, the West Virginia senator and longtime Senate leader said he could no longer manage such favors.

“So,” says Grant, “this may have been one of the last signatures Byrd put on a book.”

Do you share Bill Grant’s hobby of collecting signed editions? Tell your favorite story below.

Also, if you are a bookish banker, check out our banker-reviewed books page. Bill Grant has written several himself.

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