

Confessions of a Collector

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Saying that Rob Wozniak collects books on psychology is akin to saying Tiger Woods hits golf balls. The Bryn Mawr professor has more than 10,000 such books. They fill shelves that reach floor-to-ceiling along every wall of seven rooms in his home. Some of those rooms even have stacks, just like the university library.

His books, in “pretty much” every European language, are neatly shelved by author.

The works date from Francis Bacon’s *Twoo Bookes of the Proficiencie and Advancement of Learning* (1605) to Clark Leonard Hull’s *A Behavior System* (1952), and touch virtually every stepping stone in between. Wozniak stopped in the early 1950s, he says, because had he continued into the modern era of explosive growth in psychological exploration, “it would be many times seven rooms.”

He also has more than 50 file drawers filled with papers, correspondence, notes, conference programs, membership lists, test forms, photos, lithographs, publishers’ advertisements, dust jackets, engravings, stereo-views of “insane asylums,” even psychological postcards – “you name it, anything and everything related to the history of psychology,” he says, “including a diploma signed by Wilhelm Wundt,” titular father of experimental psychology.

How did he come to dedicate such a large part of his life to the collection?

He collected as a kid. By the time he entered college he’d amassed some 2,000 “boys’ books,” like The Hardy Boys and Tom Swift series. He also collected baseball cards, coins, stamps, “anything you could collect.” It was only natural that, in graduate school at the University of Michigan in the fall of 1966, when he heard they were selling off old books at the library, he paid a visit. “Comparative Psychology of Mental Development,” by Heinz Werner, a book he respected, caught his eye. It was going for 50 cents, “or maybe it was 25 cents.”

“The first thing I noticed was that it was a first edition,” he says. “Then I noticed it was signed by Werner. It was a presentation copy.” The author had given it to a retired University of Michigan psychologist, Burton Thuma, who had donated it to the library. “I thought, ‘Wow that’s really cool!’ I went into Detroit the very next weekend and visited all the old-book stores I could find. And that’s all she wrote, as they say.”

He has acquired such treasures as William James’s personal copy of John Dewey’s *Psychology* (1886), with James’s notes in it, and a copy of the PhD dissertation of the famed behaviorist John B. Watson (1878-1958), which Watson had inscribed and given to the woman who was soon to become his first wife.

In fact, many of Wozniak’s books come from the personal libraries of the most renowned early

psychologists – James (1842-1910); mental development pioneer James Mark Baldwin (1861-1934); Margaret Floy Washburn (1871-1939), the first woman to receive a doctorate in psychology; and Robert M. Yerkes (1876-1956), who founded the first nonhuman primate research laboratory in the U.S. – to name but a few. They bear their owners' bookplates, signatures, and notes. "I have hundreds of those kinds of things," he says.

At Bryn Mawr College, Wozniak teaches developmental psychology, an undergraduate course in the history of American psychology and a graduate course in the history of American clinical psychology. His current research interest is subcultural differences in values regarding family interactions. But you don't have to talk long with him before you appreciate that his true love is his collection.

"It's a combination of intellectual and personal enjoyment," he explains. "It's a way of exploring the field with artifacts. If you pick up a standard history book, there are literally hundreds and hundreds of names and dates. By the time you're finished, you'll probably remember 5 percent of them, if you're lucky. The beauty of collecting books is that they give you a concrete index for each author, each event, each major publication."

A more personal reason he does what he does is the sheer joy of it. Collectors' minds, he says, delight in the taxonomy of it all: identifying the bibliography of a specific author, for example, and then finding a copy of each item on the list. When the last item is found, "It's a very satisfying experience."

But by that time the typical collector has already expanded the boundaries of the collection to include books about that author, or books by others the author influenced. Wozniak tells of a Toronto collector who has thousands of items on Bertrand Russell alone. "Collectors can become quite fanatical about their collections," he concedes.

Wozniak also cites an important social purpose for collecting. "Much of the material that I've collected, most especially the letters, the off-prints and pre-prints, like typescripts and mimeographed copies, are of particular value to historians. They have the potential of showing the genesis of the authors' ideas. These can contain a tremendous amount of information about the way a discovery developed, for example. And, as you can imagine, they are quite ephemeral. In my 50 file drawers, it's fair to say 80 to 90 percent would have been lost if I had not saved it. In many cases it was literally on the way to being thrown away."

He tells of an experience at the University of Minnesota in 1976. The gifts librarian, someone he'd been sure to befriend, had just received a large donation of books from the daughter of a recently deceased educational psychologist, Marvin Van Wagenen. Wozniak immediately contacted the daughter. She and her husband were clearing out her father's things and were planning a yard sale for the next day.

"I said I couldn't come tomorrow, could I possibly come today," Wozniak recalls. "One of the things you learn as a collector is you never wait." At the house he bought an old rocking chair and a bookcase. He asked if she had anything else relevant to her father's work in psychology. She hesitated, then said she didn't think he'd be interested in the rest.

"When she said that, every hair on the back of my neck stood up." He asked what she had. She said her husband was on the way with a rental truck, they were going to haul a lot of stuff to the dump, including

“an old file cabinet up in the attic that has some test forms in it.”

While at Columbia University studying under renowned educational psychologist Edward Lee Thorndike (1874-1949), Van Wagenen had become interested in psychological testing. That was during World War I, when Yerkes was chairing the committee that designed the Army's Alpha and Beta program for psychological testing of recruits. Van Wagenen saved a copy, and went on to collect a copy of every psychological test he could get his hands on until he retired in 1952. Wozniak found them in the attic, “literally hundreds and hundreds of test forms in four file drawers, all nicely tagged and filed. I can't tell you how rare these are. They would have been taken to the dump and disappeared if I hadn't shown up on the day that I did.”

Wozniak says he “can recount any number” of such stories of finding rare monographs or notes or programs boxed and ready to be trashed because nobody wanted them. “The bottom line is simply that collectors of any sort, in any area, serve a valuable social function. They preserve material for future generations, future scholars – even future collectors, for that matter – that would otherwise disappear. That's been true down through the ages.”