

Collecting Roethke's Work

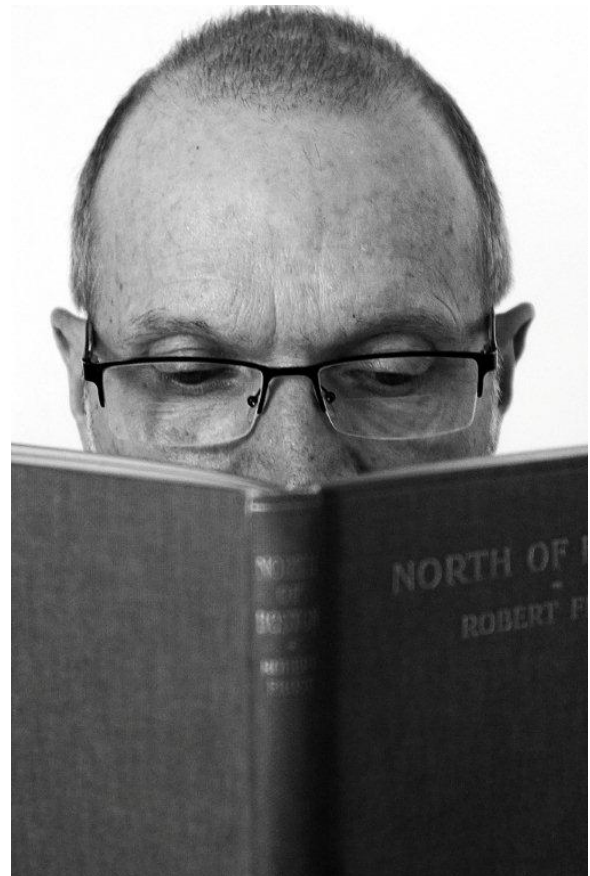
An Interview with Jett Whitehead of Whitehead Rare Books

While many rare book dealers dabble in selling verse, Jett Whitehead of Whitehead Rare Books has specialized in American and British poetry for more than two decades. During that time, Whitehead, an accomplished poet in his own right, has emerged as one of the country's leading experts in poetry first editions, chapbooks, broadsides and manuscript material. He buys, sells, and builds collections of modern poetry for institutional and private collectors and clients worldwide. He is a member of two of the book trade's most trusted and selective organizations, the Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America (ABAA) and the International League of Antiquarian Booksellers (ILAB). Whitehead earned his undergraduate degree in Business Administration at Northern Michigan University, and a master's degree in creative writing and poetry at Central Michigan University.

Whitehead, like Roethke, was born in Saginaw, Michigan. He currently works from his home in nearby Bay City. He serves as an honorary member of the Friends of Theodore Roethke Board of Directors and a trusted advisor to that group on all matters bibliographic.

FRIENDS OF THEODORE ROETHKE (FOTR) You were born and raised in Roethke's hometown. What are your earliest memories or impressions of the poet in the context of your childhood and your development as a writer, if any?

WHITEHEAD: My first recollection of Roethke revolves around my older sister's 9th grade English class that was being taught by Roethke's sister, June, who also lived in Ted Roethke's home her entire life. My sister, Linda, was a first class student in all subjects. She tackled the tough ones – Latin, Spanish, math and sciences – with impressive success. But her subject to struggle with in the 9th grade was Miss Roethke's English, where the students had to master the instructor's brother's poetry! She brought home plenty of homework from that class, and I believe, without realizing it at the time, the poetry seed was being planted for me.



FOTR: On behalf of The Friends of Theodore Roethke, thank you for the work you did on the renovation of Roethke's childhood home, which is a National Literary Landmark. You spent an entire day repainting Ted's bedroom. It looks great and I'm sure he'd be thankful.

FOTR: Poetry as a profession pays the heating bills of very few. You created a wonderful – and by all accounts, unique – career that allows you to combine your love of the craft with the love of books. How did this come about?

WHITEHEAD: Through luck, the persistence of ambition and a good healthy dose of naivety. From the beginning – my college years – I knew I wanted to pursue a career in poetry. From the outset I planned to teach and write with the goal of publishing enough to live on. Fortunately, I'm also a realist. Through a wonderful chain of events, I became a serious collector of poetry. Surrounded by supportive mentors and my personal evolution, I became dedicated to the idea that I could become a book dealer exclusively in modern poetry. No one else was doing it. I filled a niche.

FOTR: If you were advising a collector with an interest in Roethke, what would you suggest she or he focus on? And what challenges might they face?

WHITEHEAD: I would advise taking a straightforward approach, the same as I would when collecting any single author or poet. First acquire a bibliography or checklist of the author's major publications (for Roethke I would recommend the bibliography by McLeod). Then begin your collection by acquiring "the best copy" you can find of each major item. Major items are listed in bibliographies as "A" items. This should become

your core collection. Then branch out to bits of ephemera that suit your taste such as broadsides, chapbooks, appearances in magazines & journals, and off prints. Then set your radar for manuscript material, letters and other truly unique matter. Always attempt to improve the quality of your collection, which can become an ongoing challenge and goal.

With regard to special challenges when it comes to collecting Roethke specifically, condition can be an obstacle. The US publishers of his early work often used low-quality materials, particularly with the paper used for the books and the jackets. Thus finding dust jackets in near fine or better condition can be a real challenge.

FOTR: What is the most interesting or unusual Roethke item you've handled over the years?

WHITEHEAD: I've been lucky to acquire many unusual and unique Roethke items over the years. The one that stands out most in my mind is a copy of Roethke's *THE LOST SON AND OTHERS POEMS* (Doubleday) that he signed as "Butch" – a seldom used and seldom seen Roethke nickname. I've also handled a copy of *WORDS FOR THE WIND* (Secker & Warburg) that he inscribed quite humorously to his publisher.

FOTR: For better or worse, collecting can be trendy. What modern poets are currently in demand and do you see any trends in this area?

WHITEHEAD: There is a difference between poets who are read today and poets who are collected. Usually, the times I've seen particular poets broadly in demand have been during historical moments: the death of a Nobel Prize laureate, for example, or a surprise figure winning a major poetry award. Many poets have been popularly collected at one time or another including: James Merrill, Robert Lowell, Donald Hall, Philip Levine, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Donald Justice, and Wallace Stevens, just to name a few. I have also identified that the popularity of particular poets can be cyclical, with certain authors going in and out of fashion over periods of years or decades.

Historically, in my experience, Robert Frost has been the most actively collected and he is still today my best-selling author. The trends I see today are for collectors to seek the truly unique items such as manuscripts, letters and important association copies of books. I also see broadsides as continuing to appeal to buyers and collectors of poetry, especially when broadsides are exposed to the public at book fairs. Likewise ephemera, such as original photos and uncorrected proofs, are also a strong area. Two other poets who seem to currently have broad general appeal are Billy Collins and Seamus Heaney.

FOTR: I'd like to shift gears away from Roethke and other collected poets to talk about rare books broadly and modern poetry specifically. As we move further into the age of the digital book, let's discuss the place of the physical book moving forward. That's a big topic, so let's break it up a bit.

As digital books become more prevalent, in your opinion will interest in the physical book as an object increase or decrease?

WHITEHEAD: It will increase for people with a collecting or archival interest. For those who are only interested in the text, it really doesn't matter in what form the information is presented, so that side of the market no doubt will decline.

FOTR: The Internet and access to global databases of books has changed the definitions of rare and scarce. Books that at one time you might have only seen once or twice a year are often now available at the click of a mouse. How has that changed the business?

WHITEHEAD: Dramatically. Before general Internet use, a service I provided to my customers was to travel state-by-state buying poetry books that were out of print or otherwise unavailable. I would catalog the books and offer them for sale via printed, mailed catalogs, quotes, book fairs etc. Today collectors travel themselves via the Internet, so if a copy of a book is anywhere it is everywhere. Today a book dealer's stock must be unique, unique, unique!

FOTR: Knowing how the market has changed since you started, how would you advise a young person with an interest in becoming a rare bookseller?

WHITEHEAD: From a practical perspective, being well financed is more important than ever. The traditional "3-5 year rule" cannot be counted on today, although I do know of exceptions where new dealers have survived. Getting a good education in your field is paramount, and having spirit and guts to go the long haul will serve you well. (*The "3-5 year rule" assumes a new business will*

operate the first three to five years without the owner taking any profits.)

FOTR: What words of advice would you have for the person who might be starting a collection of rare poetry books? Start with one poet, buying quality copies of every title the author has published, and then branch out to other poets whose work you enjoy. As you look for books, rely on professional book dealers to assist you in your search. Often book dealers have books in their stock that are not listed in catalogs and Internet listings. If dealers know what you are collecting, they will often quote you special things that otherwise never hit the marketplace. One more tip: collect only what you like and want to live with for a long time.

FOTR: In addition to selling rare poetry books, you also collect. What's the main focus of your collection?

Robert Frost! And taking my own advice, my core Frost collection is based around his eleven principal volumes of poetry. These volumes are represented with copies of the first trade editions, as well as the special limited editions. Most all of the books are signed or inscribed, and several are key association copies. I also have an extensive Frost Christmas card collection; many other pieces of unusual Frost ephemera; and a good deal of Frost reference material.

Aside from Frost, I have also enjoyed building a collection of poetry books that are inscribed to me by the living poets whom I've met throughout my life. For me, collecting the friendships of poets, collectors, and colleagues along the way has been more important than the books.

FOTR November 2013

For more information on Whitehead Rare Books, visit their website at www.PoetryJett.com and follow them on Twitter @PoetryJett.

Also, Like the Friends of Theodore Roethke on Facebook. There you will find features on rare and unusual Roethke books and ephemera. Also follow us on Twitter @RoethkeFriends