

Long ago, when George and I were not yet lovers but seemed to be tottering in that general direction, we gave each other our first Christmas presents. Of course, they were books. Knowing that I liked bears, George gave me *The Biography of a Grizzly*, by Ernest Thompson Seton. Modestly sequestered on the third page was the following inscription: *To a new true friend*. No Talmudic scholar, no wartime cryptographer, no deconstructionist critic ever scrutinized a text more closely than I did those five words, hoping that if they were just construed with the right emphasis (“To a *new* true friend.” “To a new *true* friend.” “To a new true *friend*”), they would suddenly reveal themselves as a declaration of undying devotion.

Knowing that George liked fish, I gave him *Old Mr. Flood*, by Joseph Mitchell, a slim volume of stories about the Fulton Fish Market. The author had autographed the book himself in 1948, but did I leave well enough alone? Of course not. I wrote: *To George, with love from Anne.*

Then I mistranscribed a quotation from Red Smith. And finally—on the principle that if you don't know what to say, say everything—I added fifteen lines of my own reflections on the nature of intimacy. My cumulative verbiage, not to mention the patency of my sentiments, exceeded George's by a factor of approximately twenty to one. It's a miracle that the book, its recipient, and the new true friendship weren't all crushed under the weight of the inscription.

Unfortunately—since George married me anyway and has retained his affection for both fish and Joseph Mitchell—my words were preserved for good. Unlike the card that accompanies, say, a sweater, from which it is soon likely to part company, a book and its inscription are permanently wedded. This can be either a boon or a blot. As Seumas Stewart, the proprietor of an antiquarian bookshop in Chipping Campden, Gloucestershire, has observed, "Imagine how delightful it would be to own an edition of Thomson's *The Seasons* with this authenticated inscription: *To my dear friend John Keats in admiration and gratitude, from P. B. Shelley, Florence, 1820.* Imagine, too, how depressing to have an otherwise fine first of Milton's *Paradise Lost* with this ball-point inscription scrawled on the title page: *To Ada from Jess, with lots of love and candy floss, in memory of a happy holiday at Blackpool, 1968.*"

My inscription, a specimen of the candy-floss school, did not improve *Old Mr. Flood* in the same way that, for example, *To Miss Elizabeth Barrett with the Respects of Ed-*

gar Allan Poe improved *The Raven and Other Poems*, or *Hans Christian Andersen / From his friend and admirer Charles Dickens / London July 1847* improved *The Pickwick Papers*. In the bibliomane's hierarchy, such holy relics of literary tangency eclipse all other factors: binding, edition, rarity, condition. "The meanest, most draggled-tailed, foxed, flead, dog's-eared drab of a volume" (as the critic and bibliophile Holbrook Jackson once wrote) is instantly transfigured by an inscription with a sufficiently distinguished pedigree. Whose hands could fail to tremble while holding the well-worn copy of *Corinne*, by Madame de Staël, on whose flyleaf Byron wrote a 226-word mash note to the Marchesa Guiccioli that ends, *I more than love you, and cannot cease to love you. Think of me sometimes when the Alps and the ocean divide us,—but they never will, unless you wish it.* (Now that's the sort of thing I wouldn't have minded finding inside *The Biography of a Grizzly*.)

Even in the heat of passion, Byron remembered to observe proper inscription etiquette by writing on the flyleaf instead of the title page, which is traditionally reserved for a book's author. I learned this only recently, after having defaced dozens of other writers' title pages. I should have cracked the code years ago, since the Books by Friends and Relatives section of our own library contains a profusion of title-page inscriptions, all licitly deployed. My father inscribed *Famous Monster Tales*, an anthology to which he contributed a preface when I was a sullen fourteen-year-old, *For Anne, from that old monster, Daddy.* Mark Helprin,

who likes to leave messages on his friends' answering machines in spurious (but highly convincing) dialects, inscribed several of his books in imaginary languages. In *A Dove of the East*, he wrote *Skanaarela tan floss atcha atcha qumble ta. Da bubo barta flay? Staarcroft*. I spent the better part of a decade trying in vain to figure out what that meant.

A distant rung down from the "presentation copy"—an inscribed book actually presented by the author as a gift—is the "inscription copy," a book inscribed (sometimes, one suspects, with a gun to the author's head) at the owner's request. Before the advent of store-sponsored book signings, most readers got a book inscribed by mailing it to the author and praying that it would make a round-trip. Yeats once asked Thomas Hardy how he handled these requests. Hardy led Yeats upstairs to a large room that was filled from floor to ceiling with books—thousands of them. "Yeats," said Hardy, "these are the books that were sent to me for signature."

The first edition of *On Forsythe 'Change* that I saw last month in a secondhand bookstore had obviously made a more fruitful circuit. On the title page, in small, formal handwriting—the work of an old-fashioned fountain pen—were the words *Inscribed for C. F. Sack cordially by John Galsworthy, Oct 6 1930*. Presumably, Galsworthy didn't know C. F. Sack from Adam, and he didn't pretend to. But what are we to make of *To Owen—Love + Kisses—Brooke Shields XX* (to quote from the title page of *On Your Own*,

glimpsed in another bookstore)? I feel certain that Ms. Shields had no more intention of kissing Owen than Galsworthy had of kissing C. F. Sack—the fact that she signed her full name is a dead giveaway—but that was no deterrent. Her panting communication, written in black felt-tip pen, filled nearly half the page. (I can report, after a close study of the celebrity-autograph department of the Strand Bookstore in New York City, that the felt-tip pen has achieved near-total hegemony. Barbara Cartland writes in pink, Ivana Trump in purple, and Francine du Plessix Gray in green.)

My friend Mark O'Donnell, whom I consider the none-such of inscribers, would never stoop to such tactics. At a signing party for his collection *Vertigo Park and Other Tall Tales*, he came up with something different for each postulant: *Dear Reader, I love you* (an ironic homage to the Shields genre); *No time to write—Life in dang*—; and, the most heartfelt of all, *Thank you for shopping retail*.

Maggie Hivnor, the paperback editor of the University of Chicago Press, once told me that when she adds an out-of-print title to her list, she calls the author and asks for a pristine copy that can be photographically reproduced. "The author is usually a man," she explained. "In a few weeks, a beautifully kept copy of his book arrives, a little dusty perhaps but otherwise absolutely perfect. And on the title page it invariably says *To Mother*."

Now *that's* a real inscription. The best thing about it is that until the editor's call, the book that it ennobled reposed precisely where it should have: in a place of honor on Mother's shelf. And there it shall return. How melancholy, by contrast, are the legions of inscribed copies one finds in any used-book rack, each a memorial to a betrayed friendship. Do the traitors believe that their faithlessness will remain secret? If so, they are sadly deluded. Hundreds of people will witness it, including, on occasion, the inscriber. Shaw once came across one of his books in a secondhand shop, inscribed *To ——— with esteem, George Bernard Shaw*. He bought the book and returned it to ———, adding the line, *With renewed esteem, George Bernard Shaw*.

I once saw a copy of *Mayflower Madam* inscribed by Sydney Biddle Barrows *To Patrick—Richard has told me so much about you*. Henry Miller could have written an entire novel about that inscription. It would take Turgenev to write a novel about the inscription I found in *The Golden Book: The Story of Fine Books and Bookmaking*. It read: *To Father on his birthday, March 16, 1928. In the nature of a peace offering? Alan*. After sixty-seven years, that heartbreaking question mark still hangs in the air. I only hope that *The Golden Book* found its way to a bookseller long after Father's death. If not, Father, shame on you.

Fortunately, the very finest inscriptions, like the finest love letters, rarely pass out of a family. The most bravura performance I've seen—testimony that the art of the ro-

mantic inscription was not buried with Byron—graces the Oxford Classical Text of the complete works of Virgil, given to my friend Maud Gleason when she was reading *litterae humaniores* at Oxford. Maud says she would no sooner part with it than with her son's first tooth. As she explained to me, "I had repaired to the King's Arms, the pub closest to the Bodleian Library, with a fellow student, a dashing but bullheaded young Scotsman who proclaimed over coffee that Homer was vastly inferior to Virgil. As a Homeric partisan, I was much miffed, even though, as the conversation progressed, I had to confess that I had never actually *read* Virgil. 'If you think Virgil's so great,' said I, the brash American, 'why don't you give me a copy?' Soon thereafter a blue volume arrived on my doorstep, inscribed on the flyleaf with thirteen lines of Latin dactylic hexameter—Virgil's preferred meter." The inscription began *Poscimur; atque aliquid quando tu, cara, requiris / Dabitur* (I am entreated, and when you, dear, ask anything of me, it shall be given); continued with an apostrophe to Maud, whom the Scotsman declared that he admired, as all poets were wont to admire Virgil, *quanto desiderat astra / Papilio volitans* (as the fluttering butterfly longs for the stars); and ended with a pledge *amoris amicitiaeque* (of love and friendship).

"So what happened?" I asked Maud, who now teaches classics at Stanford.

"I never slept with the boy," she said. "But I fell for Virgil, and I've slept with the book many times."

The best inscription *I've* ever gotten—it may not be as

dazzling as the Scotsman's, but I wouldn't trade—is on the title page of *The Enigma of Suicide*, by George Howe Colt. I've never slept with the book, but I've slept with the author many times. It reads (how far we have come, George, since our new true friendship!) *To my beloved wife. . . . This is your book, too. As my life, too, is also yours.*

❁ YOU ARE THERE ❁

On November 12, 1838, Thomas Babington Macaulay set out by horse-drawn coach from Florence to Rome. “My journey lay over the field of Thrasymenus,” he wrote in his journal, “and as soon as the sun rose, I read Livy’s description of the scene.”

The moment I read that sentence, I knew that Macaulay and I were peas in a pod. It is true that I had never reformed the Indian educational system, served in the House of Commons, or written a five-volume history of England, but those were paltry details. He would surely have agreed that we were alike where it really counted: we were both hard-core devotees of what I call You-Are-There Reading, the practice of reading books in the places they describe.

The discovery of our mutual passion was particularly gratifying because Macaulay was probably the greatest reader of all time. He started reading at the age of three, died at fifty-nine with an open book in front of him, and in between, as his nephew observed, read books “faster than