

VIKING READER'S GUIDE TO

THE BOOKMAN'S TALE

AN INTRODUCTION TO *THE BOOKMAN'S TALE*

“What about the most valuable relic in the history of English literature—would that be worth killing for?” (p. 255).

Peter Byerly is still reeling from the loss of his beloved wife, Amanda. She passed away just nine months ago and the young antiquarian bookseller doesn't think anything could heighten his grief. Then he happens upon a watercolor portrait inserted between the pages of an eighteenth-century study on Shakespeare forgeries. Peter is stunned. “This painting, so much older than Amanda or her mother or her grandmother, could not possibly portray her. But it did” (p. 3).

Amanda was buried in North Carolina, where she and Peter had met and spent most of their married life. So how is her image in an old book in an English bookshop? The portrait itself is “almost imperceptibly signed with the initials B. B.” (p. 3), but yields no other clues. Impulsively, Peter slips it into one of his purchases, determined to learn the identity of both artist and subject.

Peter was a habitual loner when he met Amanda during his sophomore year of college. They fell in love, and Peter knew joy for the first time in his life. Immediately after her funeral, he fled to England in order to avoid the intrusive solicitude of friends and family. The bookshop excursion was “the beginning of his attempt to . . . discover that the world of books still existed” (p. 8). Yet the pile of tattered volumes he'd bought to restore and resell cannot distract him from the portrait and the woman whose presence he still feels.

When Amanda's reference library on her beloved Victorian art proves no help with the portrait, Peter calls upon a local artist and watercolor expert for advice. It's a bold act for a man with a “pathological dread of the unfamiliar” (p. 39), but the lure of the mystery is too great.

Further emboldened by his newfound obsession, Peter travels to London, where he meets Liz Sutcliffe. Liz—a forthright editor of art history books—plans to publish a monograph that will reveal the identity of the anonymous Victorian painter, but its secretive author will only divulge that “B. B. was involved in some sort of scandal” (p. 70). As they tentatively agree to pool their knowledge, Peter and Liz realize that someone will stop at nothing—even murder—to prevent the monograph's publication.

Nearly four hundred years earlier, a charming but unscrupulous bookseller named Bartholomew Harbottle hatched a plan to transform an ordinary first edition of an obscure book called *Pandosto* into something infinitely more valuable. If Peter succeeds in his quest to unmask B. B., what he finds will link him to both Harbottle and the Holy Grail of English literature: definitive proof that William Shakespeare of Stratford was the true author of Shakespeare's plays.

Charlie Lovett's debut novel, *The Bookman's Tale*, masterfully interweaves art history and literary history with a haunting tale of romance and deception. Alternating between Shakespeare's time, the Victorian era, and the present day, Lovett offers both a heartwarming chronicle of a shattered widower's return to the world of the living and a salute to the magical power of books.

ABOUT CHARLIE LOVETT

Charlie Lovett is a writer, teacher, and playwright, whose plays for children have been seen in more than three thousand productions. He served more than a decade as writer-in-residence at the Summit School in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. He is a former antiquarian bookseller and an avid book collector. He and his wife, Janice, split their time between Winston-Salem, and Kingham, Oxfordshire, in England. Visit charlielovett.com.

A CONVERSATION WITH CHARLIE LOVETT

1. *Are Ridgefield University and its incredible library based upon a real institution?*

Ridgefield is an amalgam of several North Carolina institutions—Wake Forest University, where my father taught English for forty years and where I spent many happy hours in the library as a child; Davidson College, where I received my B.A. in 1984; and Duke University, which several of my family members attended. The Devereaux Collection is fictional, but there are certainly many American institutions that have fine collections of rare books. Among those that I have visited most frequently and which helped inspire both the Devereaux Collection and the Devereux Room are Princeton University, Harvard University, New York University, Emory University, and the New York Public Library.

2. *You are an avid book collector and former antiquarian bookseller. Can you discuss how you became interested in both and pursued them?*

My father is a book collector, and in the 1970s he began collecting editions of *Robinson Crusoe*. This turns out to be a great book to collect, since it has been in print constantly for nearly three hundred years. As a teenager, I would often look for copies in secondhand bookshops. In college I began to collect for myself, focusing on editions of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. This was the beginning of a collection that now covers all aspects of Lewis Carroll and his world. I chose *Alice* because I was inspired by my father to collect a single title and because, as a child, on rainy days I had listened to old records of Cyril Ritchard reading the *Alice* books. I got my first job out of college working for an antiquarian bookseller and my first wife and I soon decided to go into business for ourselves. Because of our interest in Lewis Carroll, one of our specialties was antiquarian children's books. I was active in the antiquarian book business for about a decade and traveled widely in England and the United States to visit dealers, go to book fairs, and make purchases from estates and individuals. Like Peter, I spent time in Hay-on-Wye, and took driving trips through New England. Though I am no longer an active dealer, I have continued to collect, and remain active in Lewis Carroll Societies in both North America and England. My favorite thing about both book collecting and bookselling has been the wonderful people to whom those pursuits have introduced me all around the world.

3. *Do most antiquarian booksellers also repair their finds or is restoration usually a separate profession?*

There are certainly some people who do both, but I'd say it's more usual that some dealers dabble in restoration and some restorers dabble in dealing. I wanted to introduce my readers, through Peter, to as many aspects of the world of rare books as I could.

4. *What was your most incredible find? Do you yourself, like Peter, seek a particular grail?*

As a dealer I'd say my greatest find came when I was called out to appraise some books for an estate. When I arrived, I found a house that was little more than a shack in the woods, and I figured the trip was a waste of time. But inside the house were about six thousand volumes, including hundreds of first editions of modern literature, all in superb condition in their original dust jackets. The man who had owned this collection hadn't ever done business with a rare book dealer; he had simply bought all these books when they were brand-new and kept them in perfect condition. I ended up buying most of the books for my business. At one point, I was on the verge of tossing a couple of paperbacks into the twenty-five cent box, when I decided to give them a closer look. They turned out to be the two-volume first edition of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. I sold them with a single phone call to another dealer, and the next month saw them catalogued for \$3,000. As a collector I've made many finds. While the rarest books (like the true first edition of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* that I obtained in 1986—one of five privately owned copies) usually show up at auction, my favorite acquisitions have some sort of story behind them. Looking over my books is like looking through a scrapbook of friends, colleagues, travels, and adventures. My favorite recent acquisition was Lewis Carroll's actual typewriter. He loved gadgets of all kinds, and this was a special favorite of his. And it still works! As far as what grail I seek—it's a question we book collectors ask one another often, a way to get a window into someone else's collecting. For myself, the holy grail of Lewis Carroll collecting would have to be the four volumes of his personal diary that went missing back in the 1930s. Of course, if they were ever discovered, they would belong to his family, but that would be a thrill to pull the top off a box and find those lost volumes with that familiar handwriting. You could write a novel about something like that.

5. *What do you think Shakespeare would have thought about all the controversy surrounding his plays' authorship?*

It's hard to say. Though W. H. Smith exaggerates the case in his work on Shakespeare quoted in *The Bookman's Tale*, it is true that we don't know much about Shakespeare. And outside the plays themselves, what we know is mostly factual. We don't know what his personality was like. This is great if you happen to be writing a novel in which Shakespeare appears as a character. I could make him whatever sort of person I wanted. But it also means it's hard to guess how he would feel about a particular situation. I like to think that he would be amused by the authorship controversy and amazed that people still care about his plays four hundred years later.

6. *Did you create the character of Bartholomew Harbottle—the supposed inspiration for Autolycus—after watching or reading Shakespeare's A Winter's Tale?*

Early on in the process of making notes about what became *The Bookman's Tale*, I hit upon the idea of having three booksellers in three different time periods. While Benjamin Mayhew (the Victorian bookseller) became a less central character in his story line than Bartholomew Harbottle and Peter Byerly, I kept that idea. I also thought it would be interesting if they were each dishonest in some way. Ultimately, Peter didn't have this particular character flaw, but I loved that Bartholomew Harbottle was a bit of a rogue. I wanted the Shakespearean artifact Peter discovered to be something both believable and unusual—a lost play seemed too easy. I liked the idea of an annotated source for one of Shakespeare's plays and ultimately chose Pandosto because it fit all my criteria: written by an Elizabethan, not generally known to modern readers, and exceptionally rare in its original printing. I had seen a wonderful production of *A Winter's Tale*

at the Globe Theatre in London in 1997 in which Autolycus entered from the audience wearing a trench coat, holding a brown bag with a bottle in it. As the novel developed it struck me that Harbottle was like Autolycus in many ways, so it seemed a great connection to make.

7. Is it true that the Grolier Club didn't admit female members until sometime in the 1970s? Is there a real Hroswitha Club and was it founded as a response to the Grolier Club's ban on women?

I'm proud to be a member of the Grolier Club, however, it is true that women were not admitted until 1976. While Amanda Devereaux is fictional, many of the collectors and dealers she encounters, like Henry Clay Folger and A.S.W. Rosenbach, were real people in an age when book-collecting was largely male dominated. The Hroswitha Club of women book collectors was founded in New York in 1944 and while it may not have been in direct response to the Grolier Club's "boys only" policy of the time, it seems likely that, had the Grolier Club accepted women, there would have been less demand for a club such as Hroswitha. The archives of the Hroswitha Club are now held in the Grolier Club library.

8. You include some pretty serious crimes in The Bookman's Tale, including murder. Is the world of antiquarian books as sensational as your novel makes it seem?

Most of the time, no. Some of the nicest people I've ever met have been my fellow book collectors, librarians, and dealers. However, there are certainly plenty of examples of criminals in the world of rare books. One reason I wanted to include the true stories of the forger Thomas Wise and the forger and murderer Mark Hoffman was to show that putting danger and criminal activity into the world of rare books was not out of keeping with reality.

9. In addition to The Bookman's Tale, you are also the author of numerous plays and books of nonfiction as well as books for children. What inspired you to write your first novel for adults?

I had always been interested in writing fiction and in 1997 earned my MFA in creative writing. The genesis of *The Bookman's Tale* came in 2005 I was walking alone in the Yorkshire countryside on a chilly day. I had just finished devouring the latest Harry Potter book and I was thinking about what I might like to write next when I hit on the idea of a hiding a secret in an old family chapel. I think this idea must have come from recalling a previous trip to the north of England during which some friends had taken me to see a tomb in just such a chapel. Like Evenlode House, the house near the chapel had fallen into disrepair and the residents lived in trailers in the garden. When I returned from my walk, I began to make notes and ended up with several pages of ideas about a Victorian English painter and a modern day American expatriate bookseller. With the exception of those two characters and the settings of the falling down house and hidden chapel, almost nothing of my original notes made it into the novel. In fact, it was two years later before I started working on the book in earnest. During the same time that I was working on revising the early drafts of the novel, my wife and I bought and renovated a cottage in Oxfordshire village of Kingham—the same cottage we had lived in for six months ten years earlier. With a few modifications, our cottage became Peter's cottage, and my own familiarity with rare books and the English countryside helped me create the world of the novel.

10. *Who are some of your literary influences?*

There are so many—Jane Austen and Charles Dickens for the way they draw characters, John Irving for his masterful storytelling, P. G. Wodehouse, David Lodge, and Tom Sharpe for their senses of humor, and of course A. S. Byatt for the way she can weave together literary history and contemporary fiction in books like *Possession* and *The Children's Book*.

11. *Several of your nonfiction books are about Lewis Carroll and Peter contemplates his original drawings in The Bookman's Tale. Do you feel a particular affinity to the creator of Alice in Wonderland?*

I came to Lewis Carroll first as a book collector, having no idea about the man himself. Over the years I've discovered that not only was he a fascinating figure, but he lived in a fascinating time. I feel an affinity to him not because of similarities in our characters, but simply because I feel I know him so well after years of researching him and his times. The biggest thing my interest in Carroll has taught me is the importance of having a passion. It doesn't really matter what that passion is—mine happens to be Lewis Carroll—but if you have one your life will be so much richer. Because of Carroll I have traveled to amazing places, met wonderful people, read great books, and explored a whole world of books and book collectors that ultimately led me to create *The Bookman's Tale*.

12. *What are you working on now?*

I'm working on the follow-up book (not a sequel exactly) to *The Bookman's Tale*. This is a novel (working title *First Impressions*) about a lost Jane Austen artifact which could rewrite the history of the English novel. The protagonist is a young woman, but that's about all I can say right now.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

(Spoiler Warning: Plot points may be revealed)

1. Do you believe that Shakespeare was the true author of his plays?
2. It's ironic that Robert Greene's most immortal words are those deriding Shakespeare as "an upstart Crow" (p. 31). Can you think of any other writers who were belittled by their contemporaries but went on to achieve greater and more enduring fame?
3. Consider Dr. Strayer's "typed list of things [Peter] needed to do in order to move on with his life" (p. 7) after Amanda's death. Can following such a list help someone recover from grief?
4. Peter's first visit to the Conservation Department at Ridgefield University transforms the way he regards books, "He had thought of books before only as his shield, but now they seemed to be taking on lives of their own, not so much as works of literature or history or poetry but as objects, collections of paper and thread and cloth and glue and leather and ink" (p. 15). Have you ever experienced a similar epiphany?
5. As Harbottle watches a performance of Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale*, he takes some offense at the character of Autolycus. "Was knavery really Bartholomew's profession? Surely the proudest moments of his career did not drip with honesty, but Bartholomew did not believe he had ever done anyone real harm" (p. 64). Are Harbottle's crimes—as he believes—mostly harmless?
6. When Bartholomew Harbottle offers Robert Cotton the opportunity to purchase Shakespeare's manuscripts, the latter is reluctant because he "doesn't collect contemporary literature" (p. 67). Are there any writers at work today who you feel might attain literary immortality? Why?

7. At one point, Peter contemplates how he would feel if he were asked to change his name from Byerly to Ridgefield in order to preserve Amanda's family name. Since he always felt estranged from his parents, why might this be difficult for him? How would you feel in his position?
8. Philip Gardner spurns the woman he loves and his own child in order to keep his affair a secret from his wife. Does he do so for his own comfort or for the preservation of his family estate?
9. Was Peter justified in hiding from his own Amanda the letter in which Amanda Devereaux writes about her desire to have a child?
10. Is Peter really visited by Amanda's spirit or is she a figment of his imagination?
11. Are high-quality forgeries themselves works of art?
12. There are many unacknowledged children in *The Bookman's Tale*: Robert Greene's son, Fortunato; Bartholomew Harbottle's son, Matthew; and Phillip Gardner's son, Phillip Devereux. Why do you think this might be?