

## Collecting

Contemporary notions of book collecting might be said to originate from definitions of collecting that date from medieval times onwards. One of the most celebrated is by one of the earliest known English collectors of books, Catholic bishop of Durham, Richard de Bury (1287–1345), who talks eloquently of his passion for acquiring books. And one particularly notable edition of his *Philobiblon* (written in 1344) has explicit New College associations, edited as it was by Wykehamist and New College man Thomas James (1572/3–1629), the very first Bodley's Librarian (whose remains lie buried in New College chapel). Published in Oxford in 1599—and containing the first printed union catalogue of manuscripts—aside from its rarity, our copy of the *Philobiblon Richardi Dunelmensis* is extra special to us today because it once belonged to another of our famous alumni authors, botanist Robert Sharrock (1630–1684). Indeed, this association with an alumnus was the reason for its acquisition into our collections in the first place.<sup>1</sup>

Last year I acquired for New College Library's collections an author-signed first edition copy of *The Collector*, the debut novel by New College alumnus John Fowles (1926–2005) which sixty years ago in 1963 launched his spectacular career as a writer. Following a spell with the Royal Marines, and a naval university short course at Edinburgh University, a 21-year-old John Fowles had entered New College in 1947 to read French and German, soon focusing on French. Letters in our archives to both the college's bursar Dr G. R. Y. Radcliffe and to an unnamed New College tutor reveal the efforts made by Humfrey Grose-Hodge—headmaster at Bedford School where Fowles had been head of school—to secure an Oxford place for his admired protégé. On 13 March 1947 the headmaster writes to the bursar:

The young man in question is J. R. Fowles . . . I think he is the type of man for whom you would like to make rather a special case. He was one of the best Heads of the School that I have had here, a very good member of a Sixth Form (Modern Languages) . . . On the personal side I have a rather particular liking for him. He is an intellectual rather than an athlete, a sensitive and rather diffident creature with a charm of manner which would commend him at New College as it does everywhere.<sup>2</sup>

Then on 22 March Grose-Hodge follows up with another letter, to 'Dear Mr Tutor', explaining further: 'I hope you will believe that I should not be urging his claims upon you if I did not regard him as a rather exceptional person'.<sup>3</sup> Once Fowles had come up, Dr Merlin Thomas, Fowles's amiable New College French tutor, also thought highly of him, recording on our report cards: 'best candidate this year', 'a good brain', 'very widely read', 'writes in an intelligent sensitive manner', 'displaying sound scholarship'.<sup>4</sup> John Fowles would graduate in 1950 with a Second—little indication of the literary genius that he was destined to become.

Given his towering stature as a writer—alongside Nobel literary laureate John Galsworthy (1867–1933), Fowles is the most significant fiction writer this college has nurtured—the acquisition of a first edition copy of *The Collector* was in fact well overdue. I had sought out a particularly fine copy of the book for a while, a copy Fowles had touched, had signed, because provenance matters. I had stalked out several specimens, of various levels of price and excellent condition, from rare book and internet dealers, inviting these copies into the temporary home of my online purchase basket until I had decided to seal the deal by pressing the purchase button on

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<sup>1</sup> Richard de Bury, *Philobiblon Richardi Dunelmensis sive De amore librorum, et institutione bibliotheca, tractatus pulcherrimus*, Omnia hæc, Opera & Studio T. I. [i.e. Thomas James] Novi Coll. in alma Academia Oxoniensi Socij. (Oxonia: Excudebat Iosephus Barnesius, 1599), New College Library, Oxford, BT1.131.16(4).

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Humfrey Grose-Hodge to Dr G. R. Y. Radcliffe (13 March 1947), New College Archives, Oxford, NCA DOS 1947 Fowles 378.

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Humfrey Grose-Hodge to the New College tutor (22 March 1947), New College Archives, Oxford, NCA DOS 1947 Fowles 381.

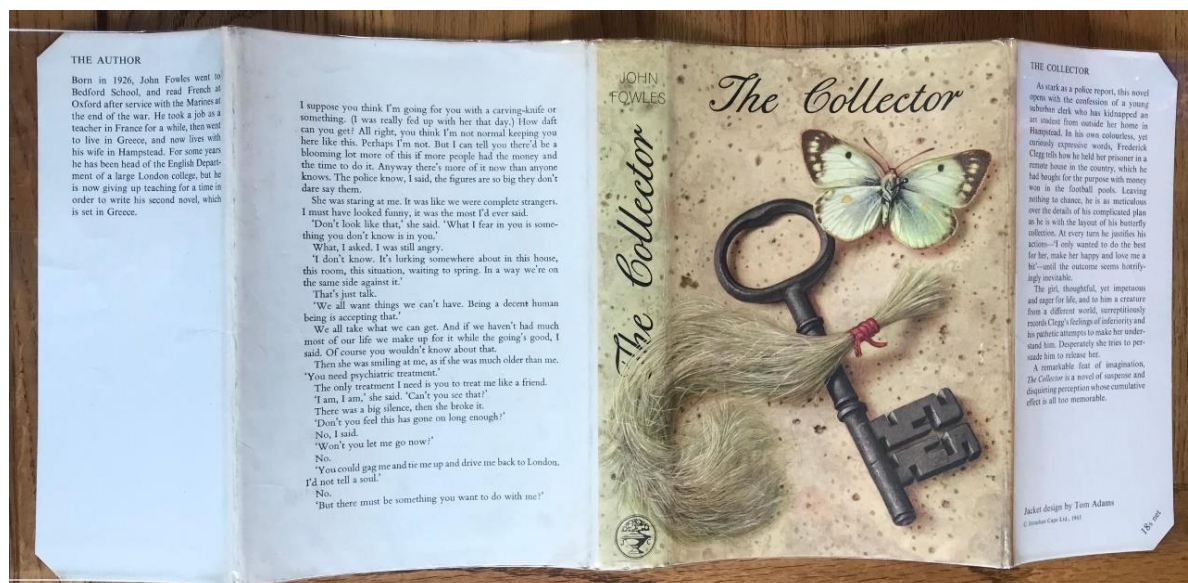
<sup>4</sup> New College Archives, Oxford, NCA DOS 1947 Fowles.

my preferred copy. First published in May 1963 by Jonathan Cape of London, the copy I acquired bears the iconic original dustjacket with a *trompe-l'œil* design by Tom Adams (1926–2019), who also created the artwork for paperback editions of Agatha Christie's novels. And this copy, as mentioned, was signed by Fowles.

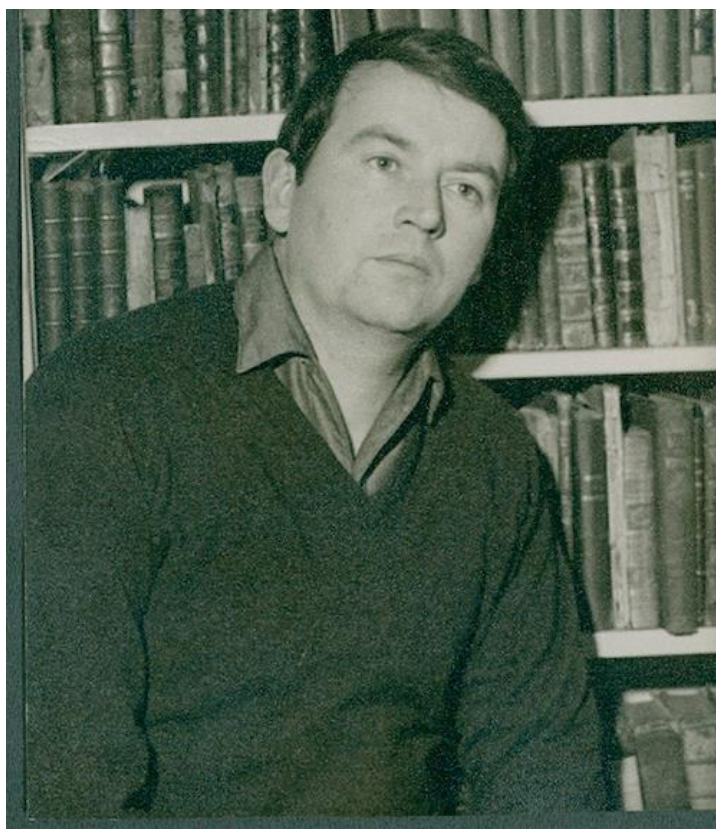
I had netted the one I most wanted.



New College Library, Oxford, NC/FOW—front cover (above), full dustjacket (below)



John Fowles's journals note that he started writing *The Collector* at the end of November 1960 (when he was 34), and in an interview he gave on 8 December 1974, Fowles records that it had taken him just one month to set down the first draft.<sup>5</sup> It was clearly something of a whirlwind. He worked on a revised second draft in November 1961, and prepared a third for his typist the following March. And on 21 July 1962, he signed a contract with Tom Maschler of famed publishing house Jonathan Cape. The book's quality had amazed Maschler, who printed it in an unprecedented 8,000-copy British first edition in 1963. That same year Pan Books also paid a record sum (for an English first novel) of £3,500, to acquire the British paperback rights.<sup>6</sup> The book was indeed an extraordinary overnight success, instantly establishing Fowles as a major novelist, attracting both popular and critical acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic. The first US edition appeared in July 1963<sup>7</sup> with Little, Brown and Company—in 'a first print', as he wrote in his journals on 8 February with obvious pride 'of 20,000—the biggest since *Goodbye, Mr Chips*'. And in another interview of October 1963, with Roy Newquist, he mentions how, as of the previous month (September 1963), the 8,000 copies of the first British printing had sold out, and over 40,000 copies of the American edition had done so too.<sup>8</sup>



Photograph of John Fowles some years before he began work on *The Collector*, by kind permission of Mrs Sarah Fowles

<sup>5</sup> John Fowles, *The Journals: Volume 1*, ed. Charles Drazin (London: Jonathan Cape, 2003), p. 452; James Campbell, 'An Interview with John Fowles', *Contemporary Literature* 17 (Autumn 1976), 455–69, at p. 456.

<sup>6</sup> Eileen Warburton, *John Fowles: A Life in Two Worlds* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2004), p. 226.

<sup>7</sup> The blurb on the front cover of an advance reading copy of the American edition reads: 'We will publish it on July 24—but excitement at Little, Brown has been mounting since the manuscript arrived months ago, and advance comments almost defy capsuling. We think you will find it as remarkable and original a novel as you have read in years'. The library holds a copy, in its original printed wrappers, which also contains a letter from the publisher, alluding to the book's spellbinding quality: 'I guarantee that once you have started reading *The Collector* you will not put it down', John Fowles, *The Collector*, advance copy (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1963), New College Library, Oxford, NC/FOW.

<sup>8</sup> Fowles, *Journals*, p. 544; Roy Newquist, 'John Fowles', *Counterpoint* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964), pp. 217–25, at pp. 221–2.

In the Newquist interview, Fowles also articulates two inspirations for his novel's 'girl-in-the-cellar' plot: an 1950s' performance of Bartók's opera *Bluebeard's Castle*—'the thing that struck me was the symbolism of the man imprisoning women underground'—and the true 'extraordinary case' of the 1957 kidnapping of Majorie Sylvia Jordan, who was held captive for 105 days by John Raymond Bridal in an underground chamber beneath a garden shed in Lewisham, south London.<sup>9</sup> Fowles was himself, of course, a collector. With great satisfaction, he worked in his later years as honorary curator of Lyme Regis Museum for a decade. His uncle Stanley Richards had first awakened and encouraged in John Fowles the boy an interest in entomology and butterfly collecting, and Fowles's first published piece was 'Entomology for the Schoolboy', which appeared in a 1938 issue of the *Alleyn Court Magazine* of his Westcliff-on-Sea prep school.<sup>10</sup> His 1971 essay 'The Blinded Eye' sets out his history as a collector, a trait which then would influence the writing of his first published novel:

I began very young, as a butterfly collector, surrounded by setting-boards, killing bottles, caterpillar cages. Then I went in for birds and compiled painstaking lists of the species I identified, an activity closer to writing down the makes of cars than to ornithology . . . From birds I moved on, in my teens, to botany; but I was still a victim of rarity snobbery . . . Then I went through a shooting-and-fishing phase, a black period in my relations to nature . . . First of all, I was a collector. One of the reasons I wrote—and named—my novel *The Collector* was to express my hatred of this lethal perversion. All natural-history collectors in the end collect the same thing: the death of the living.<sup>11</sup>

And in an essay he penned the year before, 'Weeds, Bugs, Americans', he writes in yet stronger terms, echoing more closely the accusation—'Why do you take all the life out of life? Why do you kill all the beauty?'<sup>12</sup>—which that most beautiful creature, Miranda herself, levels at her butterfly-collecting captor Frederick Clegg in *The Collector*:

The worst variety of this group [viz. nature fans], the collector, is happily today a rare specimen. One can safely assume that anyone who still collects (i.e., kills) some field of living life just for pleasure and vanity has all the makings of a concentration-camp commandant. Egg collecting, butterfly hunting, taxidermy, and all that infamous brood of narcissistic and parasitical hobbies have become so obviously evil that I won't waste time condemning them.<sup>13</sup>

The collecting of all Clegg's butterfly specimens is indeed predicated on the death of each living, beautiful insect that he acquires, prefiguring the fate of Miranda his most prized capture and possession, whose pursuit and seizure he describes in lepidopterological terms:

It was like not having a net and catching a specimen you wanted in your first and second fingers (I was always very clever at that) . . . you had to nip the thorax, and it would be quivering there. It wasn't easy like it was with a killing-bottle. And it was twice as difficult with her, because I didn't want to kill her, that was the last thing I wanted.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Newquist, 'John Fowles', p. 219; on the kidnapping of Marjorie Jordan, see also the video newsreel from British Pathé, 'Captive in a Cave', canister no. 57/34 (25 April 1957) <[www.britishpathe.com/asset/61557/](http://www.britishpathe.com/asset/61557/)> (Accessed: 12 December 2023).

<sup>10</sup> J. R. Fowles and D. L. Erwood, 'Entomology for the Schoolboy', *Alleyn Court Magazine* 9 (2) (1938), 11, cited in Warburton, *John Fowles*, pp. 17, 468 n. 46.

<sup>11</sup> John Fowles, 'The Blinded Eye', *Wormholes: Essays and Occasional Writings*, ed. Jan Relf (New York: Henry Holt, 1998), pp. 259–68, at p. 260.

<sup>12</sup> John Fowles, *The Collector* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1963), p. 76.

<sup>13</sup> Fowles, 'Weeds, Bugs, Americans', *Wormholes*, pp. 243–58, at pp. 254–5.

<sup>14</sup> Fowles, *Collector*, pp. 40–41.

Acquiring, classifying, describing, archiving, interrogating, privately enjoying, displaying—do all of these add up to the eventual ‘death’ of the objects we collect? Perhaps, Fowles is suggesting, they do. His 1979 non-fiction book *Trees* takes issue with the Linnaean impulse for defining, for pinning down, if you like:

A great deal of science is devoted . . . to providing specific labels . . . in short for sorting and tidying what seems in the mass indistinguishable one from the other . . . Naming things is always implicitly categorizing and therefore collecting them, attempting to own them; and because man is a highly acquisitive creature . . . believing that the act of acquisition is more enjoyable than the fact of having acquired . . . [t]here is a constant need, or compulsion, to seek new objects and names.<sup>15</sup>

Bestowing on something a name, however poetic—be it the ‘Mazarine Blue’ or ‘Queen of Spain Fritillary’ (both species of butterfly extraordinarily rare in this country) that Clegg compares Miranda to<sup>16</sup>—may be tantamount to making of it in some way something banal, something prosaic. In his poem ‘Naming’, though Fowles cannot deny ‘the great utility’ naming things has for various groups of people—including ‘For museum curators; / For taxonomists and schoolboys’—he retains misgivings about a process that seems but a graceless necessity, musing ‘Could we bear the light of a world / Of things without names?’<sup>17</sup> Taxonomy is implicit in both botany and rare books librarianship, but is it more something reductive than instructive, Fowles seems to ask? (One of his poems takes issue with, and has the title, ‘Categoricomania’).<sup>18</sup> Or, as another of his poems, ‘How It Begins’, puts it: ‘There. I grow, I pin you, / Having seen you pinned before. / You thing, you stupid / Pinnable, nameable *thing*’.<sup>19</sup> Miranda expresses to Clegg the black irony of how her entrapment resembles the grim fate of the butterflies in his prized collection: ‘Now you’ve collected me . . . Literally. You’ve pinned me in this little room and you can come and gloat over me’.<sup>20</sup> And she vents her anger and irritation with her captor in the journal she maintains during her captivity: ‘He’s a collector. That’s the great dead thing in him’.<sup>21</sup>

Most of us have an antipathy to other people’s trying to put us into a box, to labelling us as it were, and Miranda, a talented art student, despises Clegg’s taxonomical instinct, and the taxonomical instinct in general. She acknowledges the beauty of his butterfly specimens, but also finds them ‘sad’, on account of ‘all the living beauty you’ve ended’:

‘I hate people who collect things, and classify things and give them names and then forget all about them. That’s what people are always doing in art’.<sup>22</sup>

Is collecting the ultimate form of objectifying, of fetishizing even, the novel seems to ask? Certainly, it is one of the more disturbing elements of the book that Miranda is reified, commodified, and falls victim to the voyeurism of Clegg—and of readers of the novel, who are complicit in spying on her, a beautiful young woman, in her captivity, and also of reading what is after all the *private* journal which she has written in some measure to help her survive and to preserve her own sanity.<sup>23</sup> A keen photographer, Clegg originally acquires a high-grade camera not

<sup>15</sup> John Fowles & [photographs by] Frank Horvat, *The Tree* (London: Aurum Press, 1979), unnumbered pagination.

<sup>16</sup> Fowles, *Collector*, p. 31.

<sup>17</sup> John Fowles, *Poems* (New York: Ecco Press, 1973), p. 41.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>20</sup> Fowles, *Collector*, p. 44.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 54, 55.

<sup>23</sup> See Brooke Lenz, *John Fowles: Visionary and Voyeur* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), p. 50. Other critical studies I have found particularly useful include: Robert Campbell, ‘Moral Sense and the Collector: The Novels of John Fowles’,

only to take pictures of living butterflies but also, furtively, of couples ‘in places you think they would know better than to do it in’.<sup>24</sup> Clegg will subject a bound, gagged, and mortally feverish Miranda to yet another appalling degradation when he photographs her in a state of undress and in forced poses, complete with high-heeled shoes, concluding that the best shots he has captured of her ‘were with her face cut off’.<sup>25</sup> Photography becomes pornography for Clegg, and Miranda, totally dehumanised, becomes but an object, a taken thing. She herself earlier in the novel equates photography with death, when, after viewing Clegg’s cabinets of displayed butterflies—‘my fellow-victims’—she also looks at the landscape photographs he has taken, concluding that ‘They’re dead . . . All photos. When you draw something it lives and when you photograph it it dies’.<sup>26</sup>

In Fowles’s essay ‘Of Memoirs and Magpies’ describing his own book collecting habits, he admits, ‘I enjoy possessing’.<sup>27</sup> Collecting is about both the delight in the chase, the taking of the object, but also thereafter the holding on to it. Walter Benjamin puts it eloquently:

The most profound enchantment for the collector is the locking of individual items within a magic circle in which they are fixed as the final thrill, the thrill of acquisition, passes over them . . . The period, the region, the craftsmanship, the former ownership—for a true collector the whole background of an item adds up to a magic encyclopedia whose quintessence is the fate of his object.<sup>28</sup>

But the simply having a thing can be enough too; it is enough for Clegg. He has no idea really what to do with Miranda. As a means of securing her release, after she has drunk three glasses of sherry for Dutch courage, she finally tries to seduce him, but he freezes. Yet from his perspective: ‘What she never understood was that with me it was having. Having her was enough. Nothing needed doing. I just wanted to have her, and safe at last’.<sup>29</sup> He fixates on her beauty but wants simply to possess her as one would a rare butterfly—or a rare book. Her living, breathing sexuality in some way repulses him, just as any fluttering aliveness of captive butterflies from within their museal cases might, rather than having them, as they ought to be, pinned down, preserved, categorised, controlled—dead. As Benjamin concludes in his essay on book collecting: ‘for a collector—and I mean a real collector, a collector as he ought to be—ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects’.<sup>30</sup>

There is of course something very meta about trying to collect to a comprehensive degree beautiful editions and interesting variants of one book—written by a great novelist with a potent and ambivalent relationship to collecting—a book entitled *The Collector*. A novel which is itself about a collector of rare and beautiful butterflies who eventually regresses to collecting a beautiful young woman—and, the conclusion of the novel implies, will go on to become a serial collector of more women.<sup>31</sup> Collecting lends itself to obsessional pursuit, and can indeed be the quest for

*Critical Quarterly* 25 (1) (1983), 45–53; Pamela Cooper, *The Fictions of John Fowles: Power, Creativity, Femininity* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1991); John Neary, *Something and Nothingness: The Fiction of John Updike & John Fowles* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992); Danielle Sands, *Animal Writing: Storytelling, Selfhood and the Limits of Empathy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019); Thomas M. Wilson, *The Recurrent Green Universe of John Fowles* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006); and Bruce Woodcock, *Male Mythologies: John Fowles and Masculinity* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1984).

<sup>24</sup> Fowles, *Collector*, p. 15.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 54, 55.

<sup>27</sup> John Fowles, ‘Of Memoirs and Magpies’, *The Atlantic Magazine* 235 (6) (June 1975), 82–4, at p. 82.

<sup>28</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting’, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), pp. 59–67, at p. 60.

<sup>29</sup> Fowles, *Collector*, p. 95.

<sup>30</sup> Benjamin, ‘Unpacking My Library’, p. 67.

<sup>31</sup> ‘I have not made up my mind about Marian (another M! I heard the supervisor call her name), this time it won’t be love, it would just be for the interest of the thing to compare them and also the other thing, which as I say I would

fanatics, and for completists. As Werner Muensterberger's *Collecting: An Unruly Passion* (1994) sets out:

collecting can become an all-consuming passion, not unlike the dedication of a compulsive gambler to the gaming table . . . moral standards, legal considerations, and societal taboos have been disregarded in the passion to collect.<sup>32</sup>

Though, as Baudrillard notes in his essay on 'The System of Collecting', collecting to acquire all possible relevant copies can prove a two-edged sword, given 'an object only acquires its exceptional value *by dint of being absent* . . . *the collection is never really initiated in order to be completed* . . . [since] the acquisition of the final item would in effect denote the death of the subject'.<sup>33</sup>

This year is the sixtieth anniversary of *The Collector's* first publication. Consequently, we have been displaying copies of the novel behind glass cases in New College Library, almost as if they were butterfly specimens themselves, in our exhibition 'John Fowles *The Collector*—A Modern Classic Sixty Years On'. It has featured early and fine press editions of the novel, a range of materials relating to *The Collector* on stage and screen, letters from our archives, along with photographs by kind permission of John Fowles's widow, Mrs Sarah Fowles.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps the most visually spectacular copy of *The Collector* we have displayed comes, in fact, with its own handmade Tulipwood enclosure box, mimicking the appearance of an entomological viewing case complete with seven paper butterflies labelled with their scientific Latin names. This book is one of a 26-copy lettered state Suntup Edition of *The Collector* published in 2021 in California—a signed letterpress edition printed on Mohawk Superfine paper, and produced partly in Somerset, partly in Massachusetts.<sup>35</sup> Within a full-length bradel binding with amandine buffalo-covered boards, and blackberry goatskin spine, the book has hand-marbled, custom-designed endpapers, and the front cover features a handmade embroidered butterfly leather onlay. The corners of the enclosure box are secured using splines of oak; the base of the box where the book sits is lined with dark grey suede. Two short videos are available, revealing something of the painstaking craftsmanship involved in the production of this treasure, and they make for compelling viewing.<sup>36</sup>

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like to go into in more detail and I could teach her how. Of course I would make it clear from the start who's boss and what I expect': Fowles, *Collector*, p. 283.

<sup>32</sup> Werner Muensterberger, *Collecting: An Unruly Passion: Psychological Perspectives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 6.

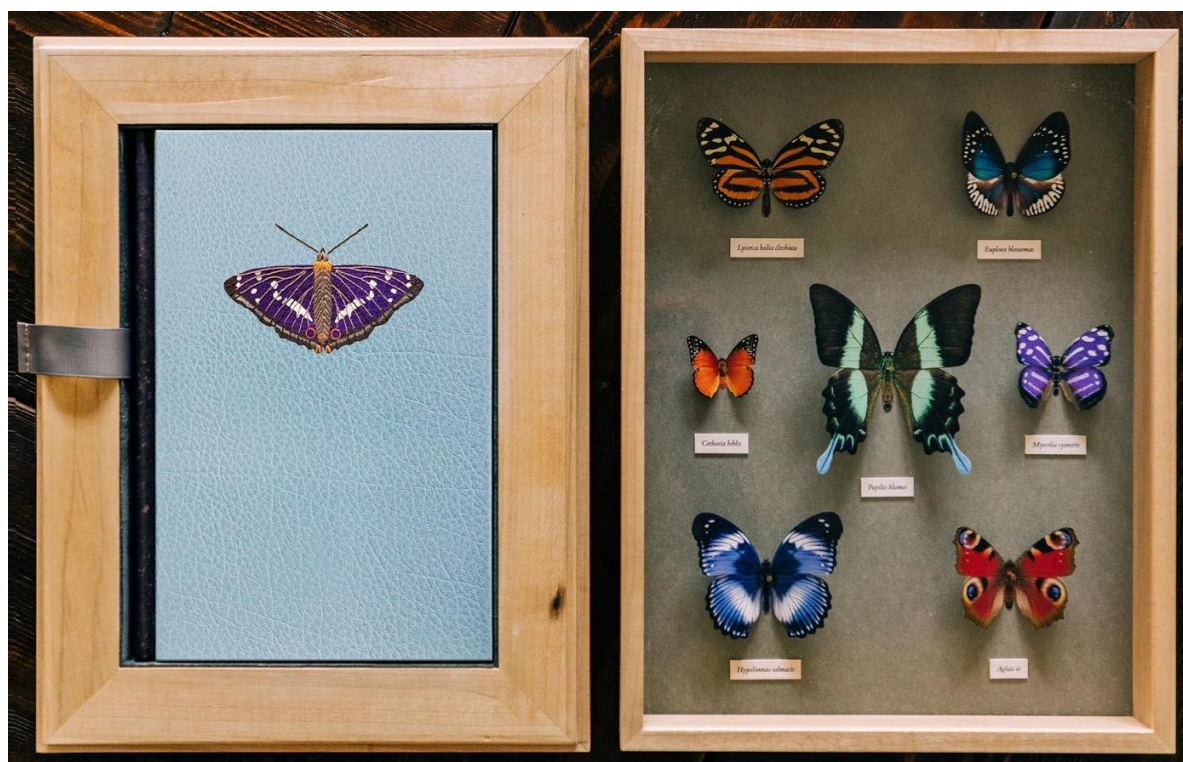
<sup>33</sup> Jean Baudrillard, 'The System of Collecting', in *The Cultures of Collecting*, ed. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (London: reaction Books, 1994), pp. 7–24, at p. 13.

<sup>34</sup> Some of the more unusual items on display included lobby cards, from a 200-copy limited edition set, produced to accompany the highly successful 1965 film version of the novel: Columbia Pictures Corporation, *The Collector: Almost a Love Story* (Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1965), New College Library, Oxford, NC/FOW (Oversize). (The billing of the film as 'almost a love story' is decidedly provocative.) The film was directed by triple Academy Award winner William Wyler (1902–1981), one of the great moviemakers of his time. Flown out in March 1964 to Hollywood in a kind of rescue mission, John Fowles rewrote the film script of *The Collector*, and worked tirelessly on the whole project, thereby guaranteeing the film's success. It starred both Terence Stamp (who became one of Fowles's friends) and Samantha Eggar. It was nominated for three Oscars, won in the Best Actor and Best Actress categories at the Cannes Film Festival, and Eggar, who found the filming process fraught, also picked up a Golden Globe.

It has been a huge pleasure to get to know Sarah Fowles over the course of this year, and I am most grateful for information and assistance she has generously provided. I was delighted that both she and Lesley Thorne of Aitken Alexander Associates, the agent who represents the literary estate of John Fowles, were able to visit the exhibition on 19 October 2023.

<sup>35</sup> John Fowles, *The Collector*, introduction by Bradford Morrow, illustrations by David Álvarez (Irvine, Calif.: Suntup Editions, 2021), New College Library, Oxford, BT3.275.1.

<sup>36</sup> Suntup Editions, 'The Collector by John Fowles—Part 1: Wood Enclosure & Embroidered Butterflies' <<https://vimeo.com/714836924>>, and 'The Collector by John Fowles—Part 2: Bookbinding' <<https://vimeo.com/714836415>> (Accessed: 12 December 2023).



New College Library, Oxford, BT3.275.1

There is indeed something delicious just in this description alone of such a rare, bespoke item. It is a private press book, elitist and esoteric by its very nature, as Paul Nash notes of such publications: ‘the nature of the private press means that many of the books are expensive limited editions, aimed at those with artistic, literary, bibliographical, typographical or bibliophilic interests’.<sup>37</sup> But are such beautiful, extraordinary, rare, and oftentimes fragile things designed to be pored over as a solitary activity, as Miranda is for Clegg? Or, as Baudrillard puts it, ‘confin[ing] beauty in order to savour it in isolation?’<sup>38</sup> Or do we invite others to view our treasures, open up our collection, as one would in an exhibition, albeit in a strictly controlled environment and for a defined period of time?

Acquiring this particular Suntup Editions copy did not prove straightforward. (Fowles is very collectable. A rare books dealer in Sacramento, California—Fowles’s literary reputation has always been higher in the States than at home—runs a website dedicated solely to selling Fowles first editions and related items.)<sup>39</sup> Suntup is a fine press set up in 2016; it produces exquisite books. This year, its Roman numeral state of Roald Dahl’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* was shortlisted for the 2023 British Book Design and Production Awards (results will be announced in January 2024). Its books tend to sell out quickly: copies of Suntup books are often purchased on a pre-order basis, with many of the finest states available on a lottery basis only. That the 26 copies of the lettered *Collector* had already been sold necessitated my contacting the publisher in the hopes of acquiring a publisher’s file copy instead, which in the end I did. (A collector must be patient, and not give up easily.) Ours, then, is designated ‘PC’, for publisher copy—similar to what is often termed an out-of-sequence copy. The book comes in three handsomely produced, limited states—

<sup>37</sup> Paul W. Nash, ‘Collecting Private Press Books’, *The Private Library* 4th series, 10 (4) (Winter 1997), 149–81, at p. 159.

<sup>38</sup> Baudrillard, ‘System of Collecting’, p. 18.

<sup>39</sup> <[www.fowlesbooks.com/booksforsale/](http://www.fowlesbooks.com/booksforsale/)> is run by Bob Goosman, who has also written ‘Collecting John Fowles’, *Firsts: The Book Collector’s Magazine* 14 (1) (January 2004), 24–35; this essay was reprinted in revised updated form (though without illustrations and the checklist) as Bob Goosman, ‘Collecting John Fowles’, in *Recollecting John Fowles / Wiedererinnerungen an John Fowles*, ed. Guido Isekenmeier and Gerd Bayer (Berlin: Lit, 2018), pp. 11–21.



lettered (26 copies), numbered (350), and artist (1,000)—and all three featured in our exhibition. Two other private press books featured. One was a 1982 limited edition of *The Collector* by the Franklin Library, Pennsylvania, individually signed by Fowles, with a preface by him in which he calls his book a ‘black fable’: ‘it is not enough to condemn and punish monstrosity. It has also to be understood’, he writes. With illustrations by Dennis Luzak, and silk moiré endpapers, it is bound in gilt-decorated full leather.<sup>40</sup> Yet rarer and more elaborate is a 2017 edition from the Centipede Press, Colorado. In a signed print run of just 100 copies on thick cream paper, this fine copy contains original wood engravings by Vladimir Zimakov, a front board blind stamped with a butterfly motif, a top-edge crimson stain, full cloth binding, and it comes in a slipcase.<sup>41</sup>

Collecting and collectomania are recognisable themes in fiction, especially from the nineteenth century onwards—Balzac’s *Le Cousin Pons* (1847), Bruce Chatwin’s *Utzi* (1988), and A. S. Byatt’s *Possession* (1990) readily come to mind.<sup>42</sup> Collecting is a trope that appears in other books by John Fowles too—Charles Smithson in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), for instance, is an amateur fossil hunter. Clegg in *The Collector* demonstrates, however, one dangerous deception about collecting: the one that persuades us that simply possessing things will reward our compulsion to collect, when in fact maintaining that delusion can inflict great damage both on ourselves and on others. Collecting may be the ultimate form of self-fashioning. But identifying too readily with objects, with things we can possess, is of course ultimately dehumanising. Maurice Conchis in *The Magus* (1965; 1977)—the novel generally considered Fowles’s *magnum opus*, and one Fowles worked on both before and after the publication of *The Collector*—says: ‘This is true of all collecting. It extinguishes the moral instinct. The object finally possesses the possessor’.<sup>43</sup> And Baudrillard writes of the possessed object that:

its absolute singularity . . . depends upon the fact that it is *I* who possess it—which, in turn, allows me to recognize myself in it as an absolutely singular being . . . The singular object never impedes the process of narcissistic projection, which ranges over an indefinite number of objects: on the contrary, it encourages such multiplication, thus associating itself with a mechanism whereby the image of the self is extended to the very limits of the collection. Here, indeed, lies the whole miracle of collecting. For it is invariably *oneself* that one collects.<sup>44</sup>

Fowles’s story ‘Poor Koko’, from his collection of novellas and short stories *The Ebony Tower* (1974), can serve as an interesting commentary on *The Collector*. The narrator in it is a ‘poor clown’ 66-year-old academic writer, who intends *his* great work to be a definitive biography and critical account of the satirical novelist and poet Thomas Love Peacock (1785–1866). In the course of the tale, he is tied up then finally gagged, during a burglary on the cottage in north Dorset where he is residing, by a masked intruder who turns into a bewilderingly devilish interlocutor. The climax of the story comes with what seems to be the entirely gratuitous burning by the young male burglar of the writer’s irreplaceable working draft of his book along with all his notes and annotated printed sources on Peacock; the burglar, however, does nothing to harm the writer physically. The clues to Poor Koko’s undoing, I suggest, might be determined from his way of living—his sin against life, you might call it—which has privileged objects over people, and has made of his particular collection of things something that has, in essence, possessed and enslaved him:

<sup>40</sup> John Fowles, ‘A special message to subscribers from John Fowles’, *The Collector*, illustrated by Dennis Luzak (Franklin Center, Pennsylvania: The Franklin Library, 1982), initial unnumbered pages, New College Library, Oxford, NC/FOW.

<sup>41</sup> John Fowles, *The Collector*, artwork by Vladimir Zimakov, afterword by Laird Barron (Lakewood, Colorado: Centipede Press, 2017), New College Library’s copy is no. 17 of 100 copies for sale, and it is held at NC/FOW.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Emma Bielecki, *The Collector in Nineteenth-Century French Literature: Representation, Identity, Knowledge* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2012).

<sup>43</sup> John Fowles, *The Magus: A Revised Version* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1977), p. 178.

<sup>44</sup> Baudrillard, ‘System of Collecting’, p. 12.

Very regrettably I have always found my own faults more interesting than other people's virtues; nor can I deny that books—writing them, reading, reviewing, helping to get them into print—have been my life rather more than life itself.

This exchange between intruder and writer is especially telling:

'Hey-hey. It's just clicked. That's you on the table down there.'  
 'On the table?'  
 'All that typing and stuff.'<sup>45</sup>

And so the destruction of the writer's collection becomes in a way the death of the self.

Those of us at liberty to act with autonomy, Fowles seems to suggest, can curate our own lives, for good or for ill. But Miranda in *The Collector* becomes an entirely curated thing, transformed into and indistinct from something akin to a butterfly, a Kafkaesque giant insect. After her death, she too is finally archived, not within a butterfly drawer but, Clegg narrates, 'in the box I made, under the appletrees'. Even her very journal is preserved, with access to it embargoed for a prolonged period of time: 'I shall put what she wrote and her hair up in the loft in the deed-box which will not be opened till my death, so I don't expect for forty or fifty years'.<sup>46</sup>

It is the collector himself who, in no small measure, always assigns value and meaning to the books that make up a collection—his intent, his actions, his judgement, his predilections shape what the collection is. I have collected quite a number of copies of *The Collector* and other John Fowles items for New College Library, not only because I think Fowles is a very great writer, but also because he is *our* very great writer. Such activity is in no way uncommon; it is usual for rare book libraries to collect the works of their alumni. Our collection, our institution seems to me one of the best and most appropriate homes for Fowles's books and related works, if we make the choice to cherish him, along with all the other extraordinary alumni authors we are fortunate enough to be able to claim as our own.

Of recent definitions of collecting, I particularly like the one set out by American librarian and academic Richard Wendorf, sometime librarian of two great collections—the Houghton Library, Harvard, and the Boston Athenæum—whose reading of *The Collector* has also assisted my own:

Collecting, as I see it, is the process of differentiating among and acquiring objects that have cultural value, broadly defined. The arrangement, display, and classification of such objects—and the possible addition of other objects to them—will certainly help determine the nature and value of each collection . . . This doesn't mean that we can't value these objects for their own qualities, but it does mean that a single object—no matter how splendid it may be—does not a collection make. Collections are predicated on accumulation, whether . . . they be serial or eclectic in nature. They are also based on desire, curiosity, knowledge, observation, patience, and pursuit.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> John Fowles, *The Ebony Tower* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1974), pp. 147, 160. New College Library's copy of this first edition was signed by the author in 1981 for Paris-based Australian writer John Baxter (*b.* 1939). The library also holds an author-signed, typographically beautiful, separate printing of 'Poor Koko', published in Finland and printed 'on special Michelangelo paper made at the Magnani Paper Mills in Pescia, Italy'. Ours is 'one of 12 additional copies printed for the personal use of the author': John Fowles, *Poor Koko*, Contemporary Authors in Signed Limited Editions, no. 22 (Helsinki: Eurographica, 1987), p. [69]. (The only other library in the UK that appears to hold this separate printing is Cambridge University Library.) Both these books are held in the library at NC/FOU.

<sup>46</sup> Fowles, *Collector* (1963), pp. 282, 282–3.

<sup>47</sup> Richard Wendorf, 'The Literature of Collecting', *The Literature of Collecting & Other Essays* (Boston, Mass.: Boston Athenæum, 2008), pp. 5–70, at p. 61.

All collected things—Miranda included—do of course begin their existence beyond the collection. The ending of *The Collector*, with its foreshadowing of the serial killer Clegg will become, evokes of course the *Barbe-bleu* French folktale, which we have already noted was one of Fowles's inspirations for the novel. (Fowles would also adapt another of Charles Perrault's fairytales for publication in 1974, *Cendrillon* or *Cinderella*.)<sup>48</sup> Yet the very act of collecting in some way implies that the collected thing only really comes to life once it has been collected—housed where the collector always intended it to be kept—however grisly this notion might be in the context of John Fowles's novel. For me, Walter Benjamin sums this up perfectly when he writes:

One of the finest memories of a collector is the moment when he rescued a book . . . and bought it to give it its freedom—the way the prince bought a beautiful slave girl in *The Arabian Nights*. To a book collector, you see, the true freedom of all books is somewhere on his shelves.<sup>49</sup>



Upper Reading Room, New College Library, Oxford, showing part of the exhibition displayed in 2023

Christopher Skelton-Foord  
Librarian  
New College, Oxford

<sup>48</sup> New College Library holds a special copy of *Cinderella*, adapted from Perrault's *Cendrillon* of 1697 by John Fowles, illustrated by Sheilah Beckett (London: Jonathan Cape, 1974), NC/FOW, signed on the title page by both John Fowles (dated 1980) and illustrator Sheilah Beckett.

<sup>49</sup> Benjamin, 'Unpacking My Library', p. 64.