

DB THE HARTFORD COURANT: Thursday, December 13, 1984

## She Keeps Her Book-Selling Trade Alive With Eye on New York Style

Continued from Page D1

decades ago and reminiscences of all the great authors her father knew and helped, from John Steinbeck to Henry Miller.

Her father's influence on her was dramatic. An only child, she changed her last name when she turned 21, from Abramson to Benson. It was a gift to her father, who had always wanted a son. Ben's daughter became Ben's son.

Her book business 40 years later remains: Deborah Benson, Bookseller.

Fifteen years ago she moved to West Cornwall with her husband, a physicist, who designs lenses. But she knows the train schedule to Grand Central better than most daily commuters, and she still jokes that she hasn't forgiven her husband for moving out here. He has a small laboratory in the basement. She has enough shelf space for 10,000 books.

Covington does not collect books so much as she helps build collections. "I collect to sell to somebody else," she says.

"I'm the daughter of a bookseller who was a merchant. He wasn't a collector. He thought it wasn't fair for a bookseller to collect books. A bookseller built collections."

Other dealers visit her home to buy and sell books. She does appraisals and searches, and she receives many requests by mail.

These days, because her eyesight is waning, she has scaled down her business, specializing in fewer and more expensive books.

Her two greatest concentrations are on subjects that could not be more dissimilar: diabetes and "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," by Lewis Carroll.

"I'm a third generation diabet-

ic," she says, "and I've always loved "Alice." My father used to read it to me when I was very young. It's my favorite children's book. There are so many various editions and so many people have illustrated it.

"The Russian edition of "Alice" is unbelievable. First of all, Russians don't care about time. So what are they going to do with the rabbit with the watch? So what if he's late? Everything is late in Russia."

Recently, she attended a meeting of the Lewis Carroll Society in New York, and took along a 12-page, single-spaced inventory of her "Alice" books and paraphernalia, including theater programs, advertisements and dolls. She sold 80 percent of her collection, which took her 10 years to build.

Covington is a short, sprightly woman with auburn hair pinned in a bun atop her head. She talks rapidly, with a penchant for Yiddish words, apologizing that there is little food to offer. Her husband is on a salt-free diet, you see, and she eats mostly yogurt — six, one-pint containers fill the refrigerator. But her bagels, she boasts, come directly from New York.

In 1977, she wrote a book about her father, who ran the Argus Book Shop in Chicago, and later, New York. In it, she recalls how she was required to read a book and answer questions about it before receiving an inscription from a famous author.

Her love for books is evident in the way she holds them, as if each were a tablet from Moses, and by the way she talks about them and about the book-selling business of years ago.

As she describes it, her father's era was one in which streets were lined with independent shops selling new and used books. They were places where people came to buy, sell and talk books.

People in those days collected books primarily for love, not investment, she recalls. And booksellers would read young authors and promote their works.

Her father, Covington says, "would read an author who was unfamiliar to him and he would decide he was a fine author. He would list the book in his catalog and rave about it.

"He would even send books to his customers, suggesting that they read them. This is how he got [William Somerset] Maugham and Steinbeck customers. No bookseller would dare to do that today."

The business has changed dramatically, she says. Used and out-of-print bookshops are declining and being replaced with book fairs. High rents, she says, make it almost impossible to run a storefront bookshop.

She estimates that 60 used and out-of-print booksellers live in Connecticut, most of them in small towns, and many operating in their own homes.

She believes that people should collect books because they love them, not for profit. And she thinks people should collect books they enjoy and will read. She has other tips.

"People ask what should I collect," she says. "I say collect what you like. Choose an author you're going to read. And collect everything. All the ephemera, any ad, any dinner menu, program or autograph. Collectors want all these things.

"Why is a book worth so much more with a dust jacket? It's like selling a wardrobe without a coat. Nothing's complete without a dust jacket."

## Deborah Benson [2/2]



Clipped By:

**Bibliophagist**

Mon, May 23,  
2022