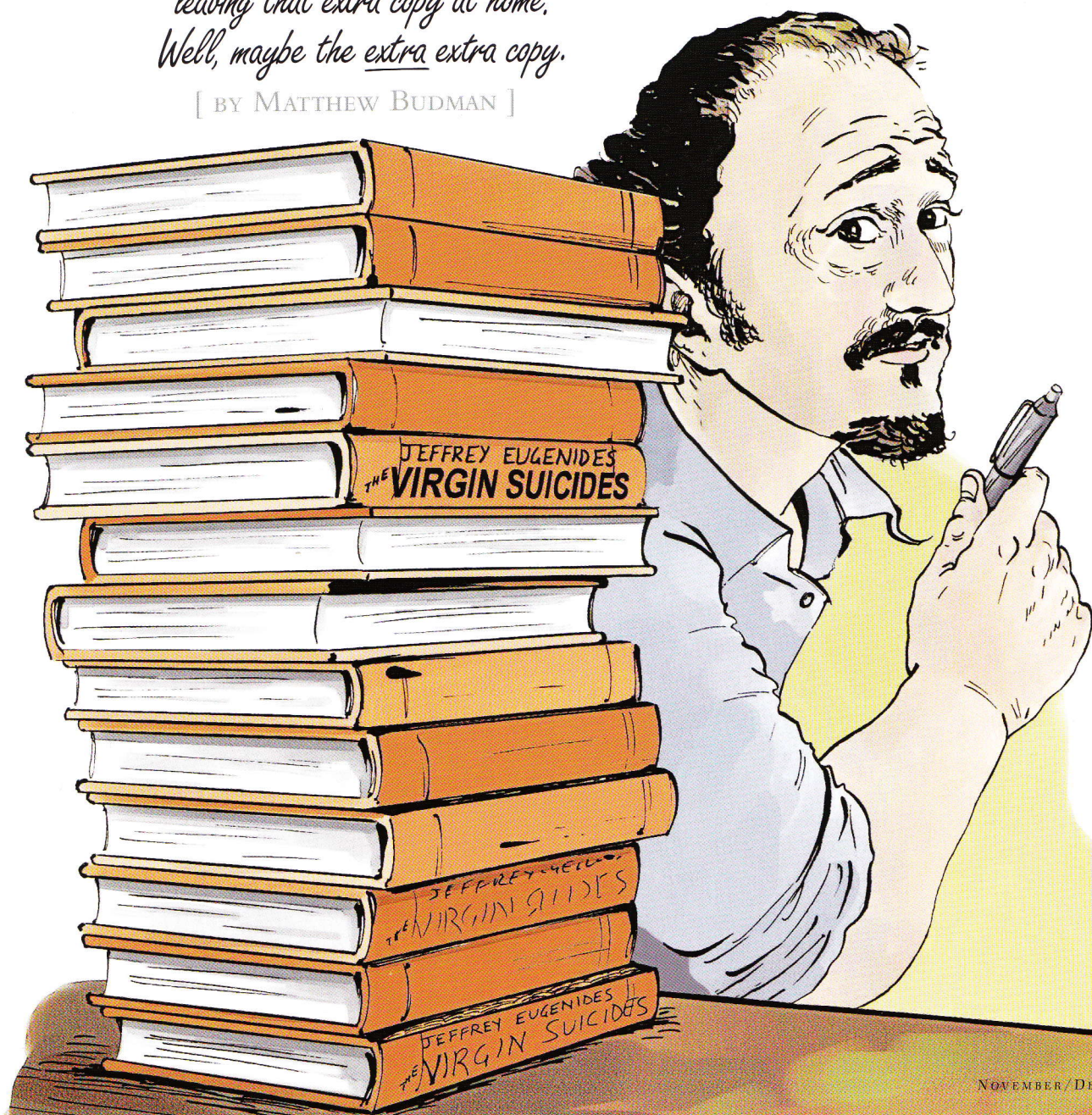


The Politics Book^{of} Signings

*It's enough to make you consider
leaving that extra copy at home.
Well, maybe the extra extra copy.*

[BY MATTHEW BUDMAN]



If you can't lug everything up to the table without a wheeled container of some sort, you've brought too many books.

"Fourteen books?" my wife asks in a harsh whisper. "Haven't we seen Carl Hiaasen, like, three times?"

Four times, I think. "I'm, uh, not sure how I ended up with so many books."

"So how many do you already have signed?"

Maybe thirty. "This'll be our last Hiaasen reading for a while—I promise."

She looks down, shakes her head, and opens the canvas bag I've handed her. "So what did you give me to bring up?"

"Let's see: a French copy of *Tourist Season*, a British galley of *Hoot*, a copy of his first book as a ghostwriter—look, it's already signed by Neil Shulman—a first of *Native Tongue*... and I'll let you give him the new novel."

"Wait—*Native Tongue*? Don't you already have an autographed copy of that one? I could have sworn—"

"Um...this'll be an extra." Another extra, actually.

"You're planning to sell it, right? Right? I mean, it's a great novel, but how many signed copies do you need?"

She's well aware, of course, that the issue of *need* isn't all that relevant when it comes to book collecting and, especially, to book signings.

Regular non-collectors—that is, plain old *readers*—have it easy: they decide, perhaps that very evening, to check out the event, show up a few minutes early, and sit down anywhere with a view of the podium. If the author makes the book sound appealing enough, they stick around after the Q&A to wait in line, grab a copy, have it signed, and purchase it on the way out of the store. If the book sounds *really* good and (as Hiaasen's *Skinny Dip* did) scored a rave review in the previous day's *New York Times*, maybe they'll buy an extra for a best friend or parent.

But for collectors, there's nothing spur of the moment about attending a reading or discussion event. Is there a more appealing signing scheduled elsewhere that evening? How many backlist copies are okay to bring? Do you remove dust jackets and leave them at home? Do you leap to the front of the line or courteously hang back till the end?

It's enough to make you consider leaving that extra copy of *Native Tongue* at home. Well, maybe the *extra extra* copy.

You plan ahead, as far ahead as you can. Bookstores usually post event calendars weeks or even months in advance and

authors' web sites often list upcoming tour dates. You may need the extra time. After all, many bibliophiles with accumulation disorders—you know who you are—have books stashed in different locations that will require time to uncover.

The serious collectors keep tabs on how often authors face the public; those who emerge only rarely are deemed "hard to get." (Almost by definition, anyone appearing before a Barnes & Noble crowd doesn't qualify.) It's useful information. It helps estimate how crowded a given event will be, and how many fellow collectors might be showing up with wheeled luggage carts.

For a particular reading or signing, you take its rarity into account. When might you get another chance to see this author? On a given Tuesday night, is it worth spending an evening to get a scribbled name on the title page of one or two books? On four books? On eight? And if you're accumulating autographed copies to resell, some mental arithmetic is required: the number of hours of your life spent at readings versus the amount you can sell the books for on eBay.

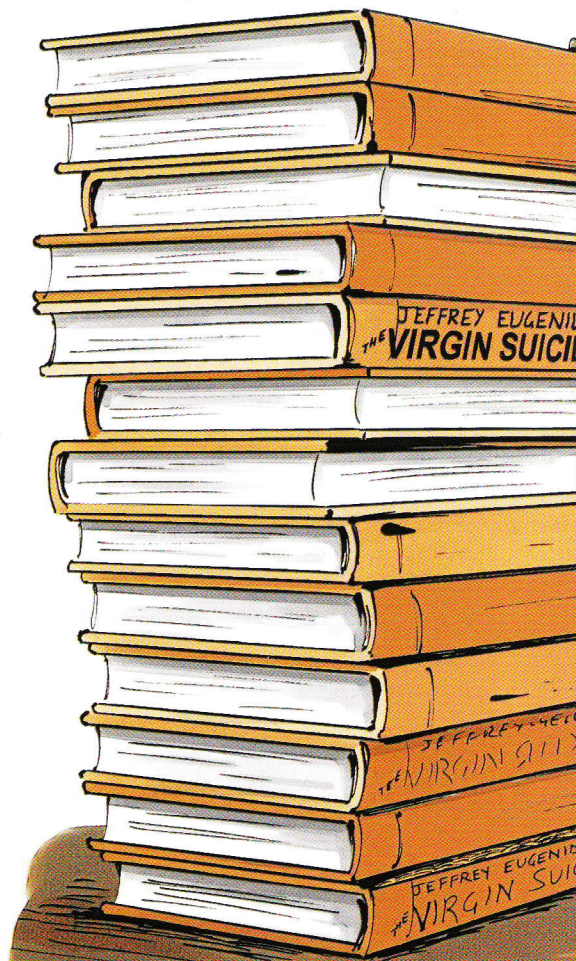
If the event is unusual, it's hard to resist maximizing the opportunity by loading up. Do you have enough of the author's books? Of course not. No such thing as "enough." And the longer you plan ahead, the more time to fill gaps in your collection, courtesy of Abebooks, eBay, Amazon, and whatever bookstores are within driving range.

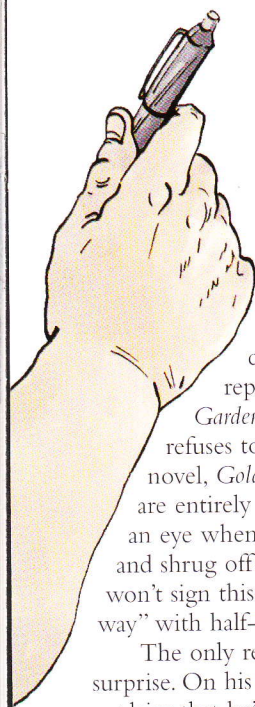
Multiple copies of the same book are tricky, since they're obviously not all just for your personal library. Many authors are savvy and cynical about collectors, and at the first sign of a duplicate, they'll make a crack about your plans to sell it online. Unless you're comfortable smiling and saying, "Yes, I intend to make a profit by reselling your book," you need to have an excuse ready. I usually go with: "It's one of my favorites, and this copy is for a friend, but I'm not sure which friend yet, so just a plain signature, please." Even if they don't believe me, I feel less embarrassed.

Duplicates aside, there's a maximum number you can legitimately bring to the event without official sponsorship—running a reading club, perhaps. If you won't be able to lug everything up to the table without a hand truck, that's too many. And you have to go by feel, taking into account likely attendance, the author's age and stamina, and your sense of whether the author will be delighted or annoyed by your stack, or stacks.

I don't know how many books you'd have to set in front of the hyper-prolific Joyce Carol Oates before she'd raise an eyebrow. My wife and I once stacked twenty in front of her, and she raced through them without comment. On the other hand, you can make a real impact on authors unaccustomed to bibliophilic readers. I'm a fan of feminist critic Elaine Showalter, and at a bookstore event a few years ago, only one other attendee approached the podium. She held only the author's new book, so I graciously let her go first—and then unloaded the thirteen books I'd brought. Showalter was amazed. She evidently didn't know that she *had* fans.

You might think advice about propriety is unnecessary, but you'd be wrong. I saw novelist Jeffrey Eugenides read several years ago in a New York bar, and afterward a dealer asked him to sign a few books—and then erected a tower of plastic-sheathed copies of *The Virgin Suicides* on a table. Eugenides, pen in hand, recoiled. "Not all those, man," he said, shaking his head.





What about books that authors won't sign at all? Maybe you've heard the rumors about authors' unwillingness to autograph certain books: Rick Moody reportedly won't sign his debut, *Garden State*; Michael Cunningham refuses to sign his hard-to-find first novel, *Golden States*. These two rumors are entirely untrue. The authors don't bat an eye when handed copies of the books and shrug off comments like "I heard you won't sign this one but thought I'd try anyway" with half-smiles.

The only refusal I've ever seen was no surprise. On his web site, novelist T. C. Boyle explains that he's willing to "stand there for two hours if necessary (and sometimes it is necessary), until everyone has been accommodated," but he won't sign advance readers' copies, "because those are given away free and then become objects of greed for certain sellers and collectors." Indeed, at an event a couple of years ago I saw Boyle refuse—surprisingly gently, considering—to sign one fan's galley.

He's an exception, though. Few authors object to ARCs, even though they're prima facie evidence that the guy holding the books paid not a dime to the guy holding the pen. Jim Lehrer, presented with a stack of books topped with several ARCs, expressed something close to gratitude: "Wow. I've never even seen these before!" At worst, authors are blasé: "You got this at the Strand, didn't you?" Dale Peck asked me. Writer Matthew Derby professed genuine concern. "I certainly hope," he told me at an event this fall, holding my galley copy of his short story collection, "that you didn't pay more than, like, three dollars for this." (I had.)

Most collectors and dealers leave the dust jackets—safely Brodarted, of course—on the books; some remove them, assuming they'll be safer at home. Novelist Christopher Moore, upon seeing my plastic-covered jackets, assumed I was such a serious collector that I'd want him to follow strict guidelines as to page and color of felt pen. I assured him that the choice was his, and he left a bright red scrawl on each title page.

It's good manners, of course, to take out review slips and publicity photos, since they signify that you didn't actually, as God intended, purchase the copy from a bookstore. Other ephemera, such as reviews, can make great

conversation starters—or can bring on a small fit of pique. At one signing, Ann Beattie glimpsed a harsh *New York Times* review I had tucked inside an early novel of hers and took mock offense; perhaps the memory still stung.

So you're at the signing. Should you buy the new book right then? Absolutely, even if it costs a bit more, for all the usual reasons of morality and the continuing survival of bookstores. Apart from massive media events—appearances by the likes of Bill Clinton—you never know how many people will show up. You'd think that New York, home of the publishing industry as well as America's most populous city, would draw lots of people to every event, but it doesn't. At starved-for-bohemia cities like, say, Sacramento, a midlist author may draw several hundred people. On the other hand, those cities provide the setting of most publicity-tour horror stories. You know, the kind in which the author ends up reading to two homeless people and an off-duty cashier.

The issue of need isn't that relevant when it comes to book collecting.

Once you gauge the size of the crowd, the next decision is where to sit. It's a question of balancing courtesy and convenience. Obviously, a seat up front—offering the chance to jump to the front of the line—means less waiting after the Q & A before you can head for the exit. It means a better chance at getting legible signatures before wrist and pen wear out. But if you have more than four or so volumes, it's the equivalent of steering a loaded shopping cart into the eight-items-or-less aisle. You'll get out faster, but you'll piss off everyone behind you.

If you've brought a lot with you, then, you do the proper thing—right?—and resign yourself to waiting until the end. The good news is that you can choose a seat with a great view of the podium, no matter how inconvenient it is to get to the signing table.

Assuming you arrive early, you listen to, and perhaps participate in, bibliophilic chatter. At New York events, the same dozen or so faces show up in the first rows of most major

events, canvas bags at their feet. The collectors talk about how the author's new book compares to his previous ones; the dealers discuss which of the author's books sell particularly well, or poorly. (The former is endearing, the latter tacky—this is supposed to be a literary event, not a stage in a business transaction.)

Sometimes the event facilitator precedes the reading or discussion with instructions: "We'll bring you up row by row," or "He's exhausted, so we're asking that people have no more than three books," or "Since there are so many people, she won't be able to personally inscribe books." Limits may or may not come without an explanation. Neil Simon: two. Doris Lessing: three. John Updike: one. Paul Auster: three. Suzanne Vega: two. Margaret Atwood: two. In 1991, Kurt Vonnegut arrived at a Berkeley bookstore bleary and rambling and wild haired, and the store quickly announced a limit of one signature per person. (Vonnegut crafted each autograph so slowly that the line still took hours to clear.) Of course, if there's a limit—and one is to be expected with the highest-profile authors—you jump into line as soon as you can.

At the reading itself you try to be a good listener, don't you? The dealers in the front row may slump with downcast eyes, waiting for the autographing to commence, but you don't have to be one of those guys. Interestingly, neither the dealers nor the collectors ever ask a question of the author during the event itself. Their focus is on the books as collectible objects. Who asks the questions? Oh yeah—the readers.

You bring up what you have, if you can, and face the store personnel, who are of widely varying competence and cheerfulness. At independent bookstores, they're almost always openly excited and welcoming of attendees of all kinds. At the Manhattan Barnes & Noble stores, the people in charge run the gamut from briskly efficient to friendly but hapless to openly hostile.

If the staff is on top of things, they'll have Post-It pads at the ready: Would you like your book inscribed? To whom? Your choice, of course. I always prefer inscriptions to plain autographs, but a lot of people disagree. And no question that, presented with a stack of books, authors *always* prefer to keep it short and simple.

And then you're there with the author. Most readers can simply smile and nod if they wish. They'll be on their way, inscribed book

in hand, in moments. The collector has more time to fill, plus a need to justify the stack of books he has set in front of the author. "I'm a *big fan*" seems awfully generic, takes only a second or two to say, and invites little interaction on the author's part. You need to prepare *something*—perhaps a brief, sparkling testimonial to your favorite of his books, or an anecdote about your efforts to track down a particular hard-to-find copy—and have a backup line or two ready in case he pauses to respond and then returns to signing.

We waited until the very end of the line to present our fourteen books for Carl Hiaasen's signature, and assured the store rep, Post-It pad in hand, that just plain autographs would be fine. We greeted the author with smiles and apologies and a quick reminiscence of the last time we saw him speak.

His pen moved too rapidly to allow much time for we're-*big-fans* banter. A decade ago, Hiaasen marveled at the rarity of prized items that collectors set in front of him. Now, a best-selling novelist who tours for every new book, he hardly notices the words printed on the title pages he's autographing.

He closed the cover of the last one—a hard-to-find U.K. first of *A Death in China*, his last co-written thriller before embarking on a solo career, really a nice copy—and pushed it toward us. "Thanks," he said. "Thank *you*," we chorused, loaded seven books back into each canvas bag, and headed for the down escalator. My wife waited until we were halfway down before nudging me. "So you are going to sell that extra copy of *Native Tongue*, right? Right?"

Matthew Budman, a New York writer and editor, is author of *Instant Expert: Collecting Books* (Random House/House of Collectibles).

COLLECTIONS GETTING YOUR BOOKS SIGNED

1. PLAN AHEAD

In almost every major town there's a bookstore that hosts author events. Get the newsletter or stop in regularly to see who's coming.

2. BRING THE BACK LIST

Recent first editions of all but the most popular writers can be found used, cheap. Pick up a few books ahead of time and take them to the reading.

3. BUY THE NEW BOOK

Authors make less than \$5 from each new book sale. It's a small price to pay for a couple of autographs—and you'll help keep the book-

store in business and more authors coming to town.

4. SWEAT THE SMALL TALK

No, don't be nervous, but think of a few things to say ahead of time. If you catch the author's interest, you'll get a better response.

5. SIGNED OR INSCRIBED?

If you are going to sell a book—and don't mention that to the writer, who may feel you're taking advantage—a straight signature is probably better. However, if the book means something to you, a personalized copy will mean that much more.

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