

Get to know... Bill Schaberg and Lucy Rose DaSilva, of Athena Rare Books

by Justin Papp

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Lucy Rose DaSilva and William Schaberg look over a first edition of "The Second Sex" by Simone de Beauvoir at Athena Rare Books in Fairfield, Conn., on Oct. 18, 2017.

FAIRFIELD — Driving by, you wouldn't look twice at William Schaberg's Fairfield home.

There's no sign on the quiet road, on the east side of town near the border with Black Rock, indicating the rarities inside his garage, no placard bearing the name, Athena Rare Books, of Schaberg's business of more than 10 years.

Even if there were, few would likely understand the nature of the business, or the kinds of books Schaberg has been so enamored of since he was an undergraduate at Fairfield University in the 1960s.

Schaberg deals in old and rare books. Books from hundreds of years ago, whose arthritic bindings creak with old age and whose well-worn, musty pages crinkle with each turn. Specifically, Schaberg collects and sells first edition philosophy texts, or "Fine and Rare Books on the History of Ideas," according to his website.

"I had never thought about first editions — never seen first editions. They weren't on my radar in any kind of way," said Schaberg, 74, on a recent Wednesday from his office adjacent to his home library of rare books.

That changed in the 1970s and early-1980s. By that time, Schaberg had graduated with a degree in philosophy from Fairfield University, served in the Air Force, was running his family's blueprint shop, and was back at the university taking night classes in philosophy with his professor and mentor, the late King Dykeman. Through Dykeman, Schaberg was introduced to other academics in the world of philosophy, including John McDermott, a one-time president of the American Philosophical Association.

It was around this time that Schaberg came across his first, first edition, an 1889 printing of "Twilight of the Idols," by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, with whom Schaberg had long been captivated.

"I took this book off the shelf and thought, 'Oh my God, Nietzsche could have held this book in his hands.' It was freaking me out," remembered Schaberg.

The encounter deepened an already intense philosophical interest within Schaberg, and throughout the 1980s he began to build a collection, focusing especially on Nietzsche and other philosophers, and then broadening his sights to first edition science texts — by the likes of Albert Einstein and William Gilbert — and poetry — including collections of verse by W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot and Sylvia Plath.

In the world of rare books, Schaberg considers himself the Nietzsche guy, a title solidified by the 1995 publication by Schaberg of Nietzsche's publication history, which was printed by the University of Chicago Press.

"If somebody calls a guy in Los Angeles and says I'm looking for a first edition of the "Birth of Tragedy," he's likely to reply, 'You need to call Bill Schaberg,'" Schaberg said.

In addition to collecting an increasingly larger, more diversified library of books, Schaberg has learned what kind of books to look for, and where to find them.

"They say in real estate there are three important things, 'location, location, location.' In rare books it's 'condition, condition, condition.' The closer it is to the original publication or binding, the better it is," Schaberg said.

He does most of his shopping online, scouring Internet databases like AbeBooks, where he can buy from, and sell rare books to, other dealers around the world. Auctions, too, offer items of the particular quality that he's looking for, often with a four- or five-figure price tag. Schaberg has also become a scholar of rare books, a necessity, he said, to ensure their authenticity.

"You have to know what you're looking at. You have to know that in William James' 1902 'Varieties of Religious Experience,' on page 37 in the fifth line of the first printing, first issue, Nietzsche is misspelled. There's no 'z,'" Bill said, laughing.

Schaberg laughs often and brandishes his eccentricities openly. Upon entering his office he immediately kicked off his shoes, noting that he doesn't like his feet covered. He sports an immense white mustache and shaggy white hair that's grown untidily over his ears, giving him a playfully professorial look not unlike that of Einstein. His volubility and enthusiasm fill the small space above his garage — where his collection of roughly 300 rare books is kept in wooden cases, on top of which a bust of Nietzsche sits on one side of the room, staring across at a bust of Voltaire — and contrast with the more reserved countenance of his 17-year-old assistant and protégé, Fairfield Ludlowe senior Lucy Rose DaSilva.

"I've known Lucy since the day she was born," said Schaberg, who is a friend of DaSilva's parents. "She's been coming over the house regularly during the week for eight years or so."

They first bonded over movies. But around age 14, DaSilva began reading some of the texts that Schaberg so often referenced and quickly became a devoted reader of philosophy.

"I think it was because Bill talked about Nietzsche so much. I read 'Beyond Good and Evil,' with all these short little aphorisms," DaSilva remembered. "And I thought, 'Everything he's saying makes a lot of sense.' They were answering all of these questions that I didn't even know I had. It really changed how I saw the world and other people."

Once her interest was piqued, DaSilva began contributing at Athena by photographing the books for the catalogs that Schaberg curates annually. Examples of titles include "All Things Nietzsche," "Einstein First Editions," and "Thirty High Points in the History of Ideas," each with extensive descriptions of the physical text, the context in which it was written, and biographical information on the author.

As she has grown older, DaSilva's responsibilities have grown. Schaberg's upcoming catalog, which highlights important, and often overlooked, women thinkers, is being co-written by his young pupil.

To compile the catalog, which is due out at the beginning of 2018, Schaberg is researching and writing descriptions on texts at one end of the spectrum, starting in 1641 with a book by the Dutch writer Anna Maria von Schurman, while DaSilva is covering the other end, starting in 1949 with the French feminist Simone de Beauvoir's groundbreaking, "The Second Sex."

According to Schaberg, the catalog was inspired by customers who pointed out to him that his previous lists had been dominated by male philosophers. The catalog will also include works by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Harriet Taylor-Mill and Lou Andreas-Salome, among others.

The content of the catalog proved particularly engaging for DaSilva, who said of de Beauvoir, "I want to be this woman."

DaSilva was equally rapt by Andreas-Salome, dedicating a month to the writings of the woman who had relationships with both Nietzsche and the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, and was a student of Sigmund Freud's.

"I was obsessed with her for such a long time," said DaSilva, who's beginning to look at colleges and is balancing curating the catalog and her studies of feminist philosophers with college applications.

DaSilva's apprenticeship came at a crucial time for Schaberg, when the health of his friend and mentor, King Dykeman, began deteriorating three years ago, leaving Schaberg without an outlet for his philosophical queries. Dykeman died this August.

"Losing the guy who was a brilliant, brilliant teacher was a big blow to my intellectual atmosphere," said Schaberg.

Increasingly, he shares his thoughts with DaSilva.

"Now I read something and it'll make me crazy, then I go to her with it and I make her crazy," Schaberg said. "I'm training her."

For DaSilva, whose peers she said are not terribly familiar with the work of Nietzsche, or Immanuel Kant, or de Beauvoir, her philosophical relationship with Schaberg has been an enlightening one.

"You hear one idea and then you see it everywhere," said DaSilva. "Then you're like, 'How did I ever live without knowing this?'"

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