



Cool Tools Show Podcast Episode 092: Rebecca Romney

Transcript

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Our guest this week is Rebecca Romney. Rebecca is a rare book dealer at Honey & Wax Booksellers in Brooklyn. She got her start with Bauman Rare Books, managing their Las Vegas gallery. She is known for her appearances on the HISTORY Channel's show Pawn Stars, where she evaluates books as the show's only female expert.

Mark: Welcome to the Cool Tools Show. I'm Mark Frauenfelder, Editor in Chief of Cool Tools, a website of tool recommendations written by our readers. You can find us at cool-tools.org. I'm joined by my cohost, Kevin Kelly, founder of Cool Tools. Hey, Kevin.

Kevin: Hey. It's great to be here.

Mark: In each episode of the Cool Tools Show, Kevin and I talk to a guest about some of his or her favorite uncommon, and uncommonly good, tools they think others should know about.

Our guest this week is Rebecca Romney. Rebecca is a rare book dealer at Honey & Wax Booksellers in Brooklyn. She got her start with Bauman Rare Books, managing their Las Vegas gallery. She's known for her appearances on The History Channel show Pawn Stars, where she evaluates books as the show's only female expert. Hey, Rebecca. How are you?

Rebecca: I'm doing well, Mark. How are you?

Mark: Doing really well. It's so great to have you on our podcast. What a cool job that you have. How did you get started becoming a rare book dealer?

Rebecca: Accident. Honestly, I fell into it. It was the type of thing that if I had known it existed, I would've been aiming for it the whole time, but in fact it was Seneca's

version of luck, which is preparation meets opportunity. I had some background with literature and languages, and when the opportunity presented itself, I jumped to join the opening of Bauman Rare Books Gallery in Las Vegas and eventually became the manager there.

Mark: Very cool. I'm excited. I took a quick look at the tools that you've selected today, and they're all tools of the trade in rare books. The cool thing is they have applications for a lot of our listeners, I think, who are makers and DIYers and things like that. Let's just get started. Why don't you tell us about mylar film?

Rebecca: Yes. When you have been to a library or you have seen an exhibit in special collections of something, there's often this plastic transparent film you see over things. This is often mylar. It's an archival, un-coated polyester film. You put it over things to protect an object for handling or for storage. When I have a book in the original dust jacket, I want to protect the dust jacket. The problem is, the dust jacket is the book's first defense against any sort of damage condition-wise, so you have to add an additional layer on top of that. I will take this essentially transparent, plastic-y film and I'll put it over that jacket to protect it in the long-term.

You also see this with displays. When people are displaying things open, they will use these little strips of mylar, if a book is open to a signature or something like that. These strips are things you get in rolls, and these rolls are part of your book fair kit or something, so when you go to a book fair you're all ready to pull out your strips of mylar and "mylar" things open for show. It's always a problem if you forget your roll, but the person next to you is going to have a roll of mylar too, because everyone has a roll of mylar, so you can always bum one off of someone else.

It's pretty ubiquitous in the trade. This idea is that it's archival, meaning there are other types of transparent film you could use in order to put things in just to protect, but in the long term you need something that doesn't have any chemicals or agents in it that might be damaging. For example, sometimes you see this terrible book sin, which is people put Scotch tape on their books, in order to repair, say, the spine or something, and Scotch tape has a very high acid content. If you see a book that was taped 20 years ago, today it has that icky orange color, which is really gross. What that is is it's the acid deteriorating the paper.

Something archival is really what you need when you're protecting, because otherwise in the end you're actually doing more harm than good.

Kevin: Are we sure that mylar is archival?

Rebecca: Yes.

Kevin: Because it's kind of recent, so maybe it's doing something in the long-term that we don't know about?

Rebecca: That's an interesting question. Mylar is pretty standard by conservators and people who use it and say there are no currently known chemicals in this that will affect it. It's been made specifically for this purpose and there's a wide trade in it. There are companies who deal specifically in this that are archival supply companies.

Yeah, I guess that is always a question. Certainly, when they first introduced wood pulp into paper in the 1840s, they didn't realize that that was going to destroy the paper. They just thought they were making the process cheaper. They thought, "Cheaper means we'll make more money. Good." But, in fact, after about 20, 40, 50 years, you're right, you start seeing deterioration and flakiness. Ironically, a book from 1818 is often less preserved than a book from 1718, because the 1718 paper doesn't have wood pulp in it, which has a high acid content.

Kevin: [crosstalk 00:05:11]

Rebecca: Yeah, in some ways we are fighting against the unknown.

Kevin: My brother has a very nice collection of early paperback science fiction books, which are on kind of the cheapest possible paper. They're very, very yellow. Is there anything a person could do that was economical to slow that deterioration down on a paperback book, which is just basically printed on wood pulp?

Rebecca: Right. That's why they're called pulps, is because of the paper. There's nothing really economical. There are sprays that conservators will use that specifically de-acidify paper, but in order to do that you would literally have to spray every single page of every single pulp paperback you have. You could do that, but you're not likely to do it. Yes, they do deteriorate. They're generally not going to fall apart, flake entirely apart in your hands, but you have to be a lot more careful about handling them for that reason.

Mark: When I was a kid, I worked at a comic book store, and they sold something called vapor-phase de-acidification paper. They recommended that you stick it in the middle of a comic book and then seal it up in a bag. Have you ever heard of that, or was that just some kind of a scam?

Rebecca: You know, I've seen things like that. The conservators that I've worked with use a spray, but, yeah, it wouldn't surprise me if a paper like that existed. I've never used it. It's tricky, because it does affect books differently too. Some books are eaten up by acid a lot more quickly than others. In fact, the condition problem that we call foxing, which is these individual little bits, spots of brown and red, that actually happens from another chemical process in poorly made paper, which is essentially oxidation. It's like leaving an apple out that you sliced and it turns brown. That's what foxing is.

You get that in 19th century books, because they were bleaching the paper white, and the chemicals being used come out. You can have a book that, say two different

copies of the first edition of Moby Dick, and some of those have heavier foxing than others. It's really book to book. It's interesting to see how it's never uniform. Then, there are different ways to deal with it, but those two are in some ways a fight against the inherent nature of the material.

Kevin: Let's not talk about just the pulp library, but say maybe another great book I have. I'm right in the middle. Right now, I'm speaking from a two-story library of hardcover paperbacks. They would have been considered well-made at the time. Is there anything I can do to ensure that these aren't going to disintegrate other than keeping them dry?

Rebecca: It depends on when those books date to.

Kevin: They date to 1990s into 2000s.

Rebecca: Oh. Then you're actually fine in terms of the paper, because it was right around mid-century, 20th century, 1950s or so, that librarians and conservators started realizing that the high acid content in the paper was what was turning everything brown. Then this eventually made it into the publishing world, and you'll even see on copyright pages and things that "this was printed on acid-free paper." These days, people try very hard to use paper that will last, so you don't really have to worry about that too much.

You're right that dryness is really key, specifically for paper, because if there's any sort of moisture, then you're getting into the issues of mold. Similar to that, you want circulation, air circulation. You don't want to put your books in a box where they're just hidden away. It's actually in fact better for them to be on a shelf, because if you have a moment of rain or something, and it's normally not humid and then one day it's humid but then there's no circulation, it can just get in and stay there. It is better to have them on the shelf.

We'll generally say that books are kind of like humans, where if you just follow a few basic rules, they will take care of themselves. Like don't expose them for long periods to sunlight. Humans don't like that either, so don't do that to your books. Don't hide them away where they don't get any circulation. You don't want that either. And basic handling rules. You just want to be careful with how you handle them.

Kevin: Right, and say nice things to them too.

Rebecca: They like that. Everyone likes that.

Kevin: Yeah, exactly.

Mark: Now you're getting very Marie Kondo, Kevin.

Kevin: Yes, I know. Compliment them every once in a while. Actually, here's another pitch. You can confirm or deny this. I don't know, but this is my theory. My theory ... I have maybe, I don't know, 4,000 volumes, but I was very close to actually getting rid of them and going all digital in a moment. Then I had this realization that I think at no point in history and no point in the future will books be as cheap as they are right now, today, that you can buy books for pennies on Amazon, and that if you ever wanted to have a library, this is a time to assemble one, because I think paper books will continue to become more expensive in the future. They've never been this cheap to buy, is now.

Rebecca: You know, it's something a lot of people will ask me as an antiquarian rare book dealer, like, "What do you think about this new digital age? Don't you just hate these ebooks?" I'm like, well, first of all, no, but, second of all, for most of the history of print, the average print run was only about 750 to 1,000 copies. Even if we went vast majority digital and there were only a token amount of printed books created later for a print run, say 700 copies or whatever, we'd just be working with the same type of scarcity that we've been working with for most of the history of print.

Kevin: Wow.

Rebecca: That doesn't really bother me as a rare book dealer. In fact, scarcity's kind of good from my perspective, because from a supply and demand angle, the smaller the supply, the more that that affects the asking price, if people want it. So, yes. I agree too that right now we are dealing with the tail end of the paperback revolution and all of these technological advancements that have allowed us to make books very, very cheaply, and a lot of them. Yet, as you're saying, we're moving into this digital age, which is changing the demand. It's a very interesting point in time.

Kevin: What kind of tools do you have in your workshop or your bag for when you are dealing with books?

Rebecca: Let's see. If you want to talk about specific tools that I use to examine books, one of the tools that I always have in my bag is what's called a clip light. Now, what this is is it's essentially a handheld light that I use to backlight paper. It uses LED light. It's not very hot or anything like that. It's kind of the shape of a pen, or maybe a highlighter, because it's about eight inches long and it's a little thick, like three-quarters of an inch. It just has a button that you click on and off to turn the light on.

The reason that you need this when you're examining books is, especially when you're talking about books with handmade paper in the hand press period, this is about, speaking in general terms, before 1800, they have marks of their manufacture. The way paper was made by hand is you'd have this huge vat of stuff. "Stuff," by the way, is a technical term. That's actually the name for it, is stuff.

Kevin: Really?

Rebecca: Yes. That is correct.

Kevin: Cool.

Rebecca: Yes. You have this vat of stuff, and what it is is essentially water liquid, and it's filled with gelatin and other materials that go along with the scraps of usually cotton fibers, cotton or linen fibers that then are made into paper. What you do is you have this wooden frame, and that frame goes around a wire netting on the bottom. You dip this frame into that vat of stuff and you pull it up, and the water drains out through the wire mesh. What's left on top are these fibers, and those fibers are the things that you press and dry and turn into handmade paper.

The wires crisscross in horizontal and vertical lines, and we refer to these as chain lines. This is what you need to look for in a hand-pressed book, because it'll tell you how a book is made. For example, in a book that is what we call an octavo, it has eight leaves that are with mainly vertical chain lines, with the watermark in the gutter of the top inner gutter.

The reason you might want to know that is because, as you're counting the leaves in a book to make sure that everything is there, that it's complete, you count in eights for an octavo, so you go, "One, two, three, four," as you're turning the pages, "five, six, seven eight." If you do this and you get to an end of an [inaudible 00:14:19] section, it's called a signature, and there's only seven pages, for example, seven leaves, then you know that a page is missing. It's really important to know the makeup of the book to know what is missing, and you can't do that without checking the chain lines, and you do that by lighting it from the back.

The other thing about that is the watermark. Watermarks can tell you all sorts of things about a book. Famously ... Watermarks, essentially what they are are they're symbols that have been placed on that wire mesh for the paper so that what it does is it creates a ghostly image, especially when back-lit. It looks lighter than the rest of the paper. This can be a monogram, or it can be an image of some sort. Sometimes you can see it with the naked eye, but generally you need a back light in order to see it.

A really famous example would be foolscap. When you hear the term foolscap paper, that actually has a precise meaning. It is a long, scroll-like type of paper. It's often used to scroll because it's very long. That is a specific size, and whenever you see that size, if you look with the watermark, it shows a picture of a jester's hat, a fool's cap.

Mark: Wow.

Rebecca: Foolscap paper is paper with a specific size, and it's marked that way by the fool's cap watermark.

Mark: Do they still make that kind of paper?

Rebecca: You can find things like that. We're really talking pre-1800 essentially here, but, yes, this is an old standing thing. If you're working with a fine press printer today or other people who are making handmade paper, they would as a throwback say, "I'm doing this specific size, and I'm doing it with the jester hat as foolscap." Yes, you can do it that way.

But you can see that these can actually be really useful. Sometimes the watermark is a date, for example. Maybe you have someone saying, "This is the first edition. It was published in 1808," and you check the watermark and the watermark is dated 1828. You're like, "I don't think they went into the future and got that paper from 1828. I think that this is the 1828 edition." There's a lot of information you can get from back-lighting, and I use the clip light in order to do this.

Kevin: Does anybody make books with handmade paper still today? I understand they would do letterpress and stuff, but do they actually go as far as to actually make paper that has watermarks to make new books today?

Rebecca: Yes. You see this less in the mass produced major publishers, but you do see it with a lot of fine press printers. Often, even though with fine press printers, they are really specialists in their particular art, which is printing, and then they outsource the making of the paper to a specialist in handmade paper.

For example, one of my friends, Russell Maret, is a printer in New York, and he recently ordered a huge stack of paper from Amsterdam or something that he had to use specifically for this project that was all handmade, and that's what they specialized in. He wasn't going to make the paper himself. He was going to leave that to those specialists so that he could do his specialist job of printing.

Yes, people who, they get really into every single detail and how a different paper is going to react differently to the pressure of the press and how the ink goes in, all of that type of thing.

Kevin: You also carry magnifiers I think as well.

Rebecca: Yes.

Kevin: What do you use those for? Do you have one to recommend as a hearty, durable magnifier?

Rebecca: I use a few different magnifiers, depending on the circumstance. The easy go-to is frankly just a good old jeweler's loupe. These are generally doublet lenses, which are a single piece of glass that has been ground into a lens on each side. You can flip them open. They're really small, about, what, the size of a dime, at least in width,

and then they're obviously thicker than that. You just keep it in your bag and you can pull it out. The idea is you keep these about half-an-inch to an inch away from the focal point, and it provides magnification generally in the lower end, like 5 time magnification, 10 times, 20 times. I'll keep that around in a pinch for easy things.

For more complicated things, I will use a microscope. You can get a lot more intense magnification. You can get 100 times, 400 times magnification with a microscope. I had to use this once, in fact recently, for a Bob Dylan signed document. I had a man offering me a document signed by Bob Dylan, and I was pretty excited by it because it's hard to find authentic Dylan documents these days. He was sure it was right because it was an official document, but the problem was that it was notarized, the signature of Dylan, in New York, whereas this guy was working for a company in Minnesota.

I'm like, "Are you sure that it wasn't a copy sent to you from New York, Xeroxed or something?" He was like, "I'm sure it's right because it's all official." I said, "Okay, well, send it in." Because as a dealer, I have this theory. You use the same theory of the Royal Society in London, which is nothing on another's word. The scientific method. You have to prove on your own. You can't just take someone else's word for it.

He sends me the document, and I put it under a microscope. I put it under just 40 times magnification. I can tell that the ink flow is wrong. Ink flow with a signature has a sort of fluidity to it. It's in fact a totally different type of ink than what's used in printing ink. As I'm looking in this, I can tell in fact that this has the marks that it's been printed, and specifically Xeroxed. I can only see that under 40 times magnification. When he had sent me photos of it, it looked fine, and when he was looking at it, it looked fine, but I needed the microscope to double check. I couldn't actually sell it, much to both of our dismay.

Mark: Oh, wow.

Rebecca: Yeah. You do your due diligence. It doesn't always work out for you, but ...

Mark: That's good, though. I bet that guy was disappointed. Did he pay a lot for it himself?

Rebecca: No, he didn't. This was something, yes, that he came by through his work, and that's why he thought it was right. He wasn't trying to pull one over on me or anything like ... He was in fact very embarrassed when I told him. I was like, "Listen, I put it under a magnification. This is how I know." He was very, to his credit, kind of sheepish, but it was disappointing for us both, sure. You can't take it on another person's word.

Mark: Backing up just for a second, Rebecca, you mentioned that you like a clip light that's both LED and ultraviolet. What does UV show you?

Rebecca: With UV, you can see things essentially that aren't visible to your naked eye. I've used this with autograph authentication specifically, but you can use it for printing too. A good example of this is one time we were authenticating a signed first edition of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Now, this book in the dust jacket, even not signed, is like a \$15,000 to \$20,000 book. It's an expensive book.

Mark: Wow.

Rebecca: If it's signed, then you're looking at \$35,000, \$40,000. You've taken a book that's already very expensive and you've doubled the price with the signature. When we're offered something like this, we're doing our due diligence very, very carefully.

Looking at this book with the naked eye, everything seemed right. It was signed on the front free endpaper, which is essentially the blank leaf right before the title page. Then you had the title page. In the case of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, that leaf with the title page on the front and the copyright page on the verso, on the back, is the leaf you need in order to determine if it's a first edition. It actually says "first edition" on the copyright page, which is amazing. Just so you know, most books don't actually say "first edition" on the copyright page. These days they do more, but for the vast majority of the history of print, they do not. *Mockingbird* is blessedly simple that way.

We're looking at it, and it seems all right, but then you put it under this UV light and you see that the offsetting is wrong, which is to say that if this book for 50-plus years — *Mockingbird* was printed in 1960 — if these pages were next to each other for 50-plus years, you get a ghost of the title page design on the blank of the page in front of it.

Kevin: Because some of the ink bleeds off, is that what you mean?

Rebecca: Yeah. Not visibly, but under UV, yes, you can see this. When we turned on the UV, you could see in fact that that didn't match up, that it was still *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but it was a different title page design from a later edition. What had happened here is they had gotten a book that was authentically signed, the signature was right, but it was a later edition. The person knew that the single leaf that you needed to say it was a first edition was the title page with the copyright on the back, so they took that page from a first edition and inserted it into this book. The way we were able to tell was from the UV light.

Mark: That's incredible.

Kevin: You should also be able to tell from the signatures too, right? Counting. Like you were saying earlier, wouldn't there be an extra page in it now?

Rebecca: Yes and no. When it comes to modern books, that all goes out the window. In hand-pressed, they tend to be regular octavos. These days, people call a modern

book an octavo, but it's almost just a nod to the ... It's not same imposition scheme. Yes, technically they took out one title page and replaced it with another page. It had the same amount of leaves.

Kevin: I see. As an author, I'm often asked to sign my own book, and I never know where to sign. If I was to care about its value in the future of a signed book, where should I sign?

Rebecca: In some ways, where you sign matters less than how consistently you sign.

Kevin: Really?

Rebecca: For example, always signing on the title page, always signing on the half title, or something like that. Because what that does is, especially if people are trying to forge your signature ...

Kevin: I see.

Rebecca: ... then those are things to look for. It's like you see, "Oh, well, here this signature of Kevin's is on the title page. We know he never signs on the title page."

Kevin: I see.

Rebecca: In some ways, you're looking for habits. The other thing is that there's a lot of debate about whether you personalize inscriptions, whether you just do a flat signature or whether you inscribe it to the person.

Kevin: What's the current thinking on that in terms of if you were interested in that kind of collectors world?

Rebecca: In the sport memorabilia world, everyone wants things just signed, no personalization, and it makes a difference. In the book world, it's split a little bit more, partially because I think book people are interested in the history of the book. A lot of book people think, "I want to know who had this book before me. I want to know who was reading it." They have a little bit more of a romance associated with it and less of a trading trophies ... No offense to sports memorabilia people, but it's less of a trading commodities thing and it's much more about, like, "I am one owner in a chain of owners, and we all have worked together to preserve this thing beyond our own lifetimes."

Some people really don't mind it. For really recent books, sometimes people don't like it inscribed to another person, because they're like, "Well, this author's still alive. I can get it inscribed to myself," or, "I'm giving it as a gift, maybe I don't want to." It doesn't generally affect the asking price, but it does sometimes make the book harder to sell, if I can offer that distinction.

Kevin: That's interesting. I was just reminded of Chinese scrolls, which are often populated with these red squares and chops and hieroglyphics, and those are actually the history of the owners. Each owner of the scroll is adding their little marks so that what you're seeing in some ways is actually this annotation of the provenance of the ownership. It'd be cool if every owner of the book also would sign it.

Mark: That's cool.

Rebecca: Yeah, genealogy of a book. You do see other examples of this. You'll see book plates or ownership inscriptions. Before the 20th century, people tend to like these. It's just when you get into living authors and more recent ones, people start to be more interested in, if having it personalized, being to themselves. We're I think on uncertain ground here. I personally like personalizations. I don't have any problem with them. But, yes, we're fighting against other trends in collectible worlds with it.

Mark: I have four questions written down that I want to ask you, because this is so fascinating and your stories are great, but we should probably keep moving. You wanted to un-recommend a tool or dis-recommend a tool. I don't know what the exact word is, but something that most people associate with antiquarian book dealers. What is it that people should not be using that they think they should?

Rebecca: This is my anti-tool, I suppose. I want to tackle the question of white gloves, because I don't use white gloves. I am against using white gloves. I get people yelling at me all the time for not using them. In fact, this really isn't a debate anymore. People from the British Library have a definitive statement out about it. The Houghton Library at Harvard, major rare book conservators, librarians, and curators agree that white gloves in fact, these cotton white gloves, are more likely to damage a book than if you were handling the book with clean bare hands.

For example, if you've ever been skiing or snowboarding, you've got the gloves on, and then you're sitting there trying to dig in your wallet for bills to pay for fries or something, and it's really hard to get any of those individual bills because you've lost your tactile sensibility. This is the same principle. Imagine the scenario of you trying to pay for your fries versus holding a 1750 book that is worth \$20,000. That's a little bit higher stakes. If you have clean hands, if you've washed your hands, the acid that is on your hands is generally not going to do any kind of damage close to what you can do from poor handling of the book. It's a question of risk, risk management.

Yes, I get a lot of crap for this, and a number of other people do too. I've even heard librarians who give into this because they feel like, "Oh, people want a show," or it makes it seem a little bit more reverent to people. I'm like, "But you're perpetuating a myth."

Kevin: Also, I would suggest to anybody who's listening that if you've never handled a book that was printed with an old style paper, which was basically cloth or cotton, it's

really a remarkable experience, because the paper itself feels completely different from the paper that we are used to. It's like cloth. In some sense this is very sensual. If you have gloves on, you wouldn't feel that, but if you have a chance, use your bare hands, clean bare hands, and page through an old book. It's another layer of enjoyment that you normally wouldn't get from a book that you can just get on Amazon.

Rebecca: Yes, and as a dealer I actually use that as another point of data when I'm going through a book. I can often tell fake facsimile leaves that have been inserted into a book because the paper feels wrong. That's something I couldn't do with gloves on. Yes, there are important reasons not to. I will say there are exceptions, like if you're dealing with a metal binding that has gems on it, if you're dealing with photo books with coated paper. There can be exceptions, but in some ways these prove the rule, because these are different. These are things that react to your touching of them, which is not the case for a typical printed book.

Mark: You have such cool stories, Rebecca, and I would love to have you go on, but the cool thing is you actually have a book that you published that's filled with interesting stories about books. It's called Printer's Error. Tell us about it.

Rebecca: Printer's Error was published earlier this year by Harper Collins. I co-authored it with J.P. Romney, who's a novelist and historian. It's anecdotes from the history of print that demonstrate how much human error has played a part in this glorious history of the printed word.

When we think of someone like Shakespeare, we don't think about the fact that a lot of his earliest plays were pirated, and that there are all sorts of mistakes made in it or all sorts of problems introduced that we take as gospel truth today. Like even the spelling of Shakespeare's name, with "Shake" with an E at end and then "speare," that's not in any of the examples of his signature that we have, how he spelled his name, but printers added that E in "Shake" because that way the K wouldn't run into the S when they were printing it. I'm serious. It's called kerning.

Mark: Wow.

Rebecca: That way, it wouldn't damage the type. They added it in for it was specifically long S's in italic so that they wouldn't ruin their type. That made it he was doomed to have his name misspelled for the rest of the history of print, because of printers being annoyed with their type deteriorating. Yes, it's full of stories like that, to give you an idea of the humanity behind these vaulted works.

Kevin: That's fabulous.

Mark: That sounds really good. It's called Printer's Error, and just looks like a wonderful collection of anecdotes like the ones you've been sharing with us today. Rebecca, this has been a blast. Like I said, I wish we could keep on talking, because you're a

wealth of knowledge about this and it's just fascinating stuff. Kevin and I are both big book lovers, so it's fun talking to someone who lives in breathes books.

Rebecca: Indeed. You have good questions too. That's always fun.

Kevin: Thank you. Thanks for your cool tools. We really appreciate it.

Rebecca: Happy to be here.