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A WRITER'S IMMERSION IN
THE FLEA MARKET TRADE

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WHEN MAUREEN STANTON DECIDED TO LEARN ABOUT THE REALM OF BUYING AND SELLING ANTIQUES, SHE THOUGHT THE RESEARCH MATERIAL WOULD BE STRAIGHTFORWARD AND ACCESSIBLE. SHE WAS MISTAKEN.

SIX YEARS OF RESEARCH later she felt ready, but just barely, to start writing. By then, Stanton had signed a contract for a book, her first, with Penguin, a New York-based trade (aka commercial) publisher. A perfectionist and a lifelong insomniac — a condition that informs her haunting essay, “The Hours: In Pursuit of Sleep,” published by the literary journal *River Teeth* — Stanton worried about whether she could absorb her huge amount of research material, craft it into quality nonfiction narrative and teach effectively while meeting her contractual deadline.

Stanton’s fears were not at all unreasonable. Completing a successful book is much more difficult than stringing together a bunch of disparate essays. Books are organic in ways that shorter pieces of writing are not, and as a result they take on lives of their own. Not all essay writers, no matter how talented, adapt well to the book form. The years of writing and rewriting can feel tortuous. And even though authors freely choose their path, that path can feel despairingly lonely.

But Stanton, an assistant professor of English at

MU, persevered, and thousands of readers are happy she did. Published last summer, Stanton’s compulsively readable book, *Killer Stuff and Tons of Money: Seeking History and Hidden Gems in Flea-Market America*, has captivated an audience of both general readers and academics. Given the lasting popularity of “Antiques Roadshow”—16 years and counting—on public broadcasting stations, built-in fandom for Stanton’s book seemed assured. In fact, she includes an insider’s examination of “Antiques Roadshow” within the book.

In the *Washington Post*, Annie Groer, a former staff writer for the newspaper, termed the book “utterly engaging” while also being “heavily researched.” In the *New York Times*, Bryan Burrough—himself an MU Journalism School alumnus, well-known magazine writer and bestselling author of nonfiction books—praised Stanton’s “light, sure touch” as a writer, noting, “This is one of those books that, if you truly love the subject matter, you will truly love.”

Parade, the omnipresent Sunday newspaper supplement, chose the book as one of “twelve great summer reads,” while periodicals and websites aimed more narrowly at antiques dealers and serious collectors also took notice. At www.goodreads.com, a website frequented by readers of substantial literature, fiction and nonfiction alike, antiques dealer Rob Atkinson said he “found this a fascinating, informative and inspirational read.” *Maine Antiques Digest*, a nationally influential publication for the trade, said Stanton’s book “educates and entertains while giving an honest insider view of the trade.”

Stanton enjoyed that comment, especially given her Georgetown, Maine, connection — she hides out there every summer in a modest cabin to contemplate amidst the peacefulness, write and take breaks to visit relatives. Stanton is a New Englander by birth, growing up as the third of seven children in Walpole, Massachusetts, and receiving her B.A. in communication studies from the University of Massachusetts.

Today Stanton acknowledges that perhaps she was fated to one day penetrate the insular world of flea market trading. “Growing up, dump picking was

a ritual in my family,” she reveals. “On Saturdays, my mother took me and my siblings to the town dump, where we rescued old chaise lounges, furniture in need of minor repair, and phones... Her penchant for dump picking was about recovering something valuable discarded by someone less thrifty, less resourceful. She grew up poor, the daughter of a widowed housekeeper; scavenging was the economic imprint of her childhood. For me, dump picking was a treasure hunt.”

Although Stanton’s research plan was multi-faceted, her primary coup was winning the cooperation of “Curt Avery,” the pseudonymous antique dealing guide she quotes throughout the book. “Avery” insisted on anonymity because, she says, the hunt for hidden gems can be ruthlessly competitive. After all, money is involved; money sometimes brings out the worst in both buyers and sellers. Stanton explains the decision like this in a note to readers: From the start, “Curt Avery asked to remain anonymous, which allowed him to speak candidly, and to remain the private, modest person he is... In our Facebooked, YouTubed, celebrity-idolizing culture, it’s rare that someone does not want attention.”

Stanton approached other dealers to speak for attribution but was unable to find any dealer, who, as she says, was “willing to convey the gritty truth of this subculture” while being identified by her or his actual name. Part of the reason, Stanton learned, is economic survival in a business realm with low margins as the norm.

“There’s a sort of secrecy or stealth that is necessary to be successful,” Stanton says. “For example, to win objects at competitive auctions, you can’t broadcast your interests or your knowledge. If Curt Avery or any other dealer had used his real name, that ability to ‘fly under the radar,’ as Avery said, is diminished. Any dealer who sees Leigh or Leslie Keno — ‘Antiques Roadshow’ stars—show interest in an object will immediately understand that the object is very valuable and so they may raise the price. That’s why big-name dealers have scouts and pickers who operate with anonymity and stealth.”

Stanton knew and her editor knew that everything she conveyed was factually accurate and



☉ **TREASURE HUNTER** Leroy Anderson of Independence, Mo., carries Sissy and Stink, brother and sister Chihuahuas, while shopping at the Boulevard Swap & Shop flea market in Kansas City, Mo.

It’s a lot to ask of the reader,” he wrote. Groer, in the *Washington Post* voiced no reservations other than noting, tongue in cheek, that the anonymity might prevent her from finding Avery easily; he comes across as so fascinating that Groer wants to hang out with him, much like Stanton did.

Creative nonfiction (sometimes labeled “literary nonfiction” or “narrative journalism”) uses the techniques of fiction, such as dialogue and scene setting, but eschews anything invented. Stanton teaches creative nonfiction as well as employing it in her published writing.

“As a highly critical reader of creative nonfiction, I am not bothered as much by creative liberties — such as name changes or even re-created scenes — if the author indicates to me the conventions she has employed in telling the story,” she says. “I think this can actually enhance a writer’s credibility because the reader then knows how to trust and interpret the information presented.”

So how did Stanton manage to worm her way into Avery’s life? Here is the short version: Stanton met Avery at the University of Massachusetts during the 1980s and remained in contact. She knew him well enough then to learn about his obsession — digging for discarded bottles in spots that, before the days of curbside trash pickups, would logically have served as dumping grounds. She even accompanied him on a clandestine digging expedition during their college years. In 2000 they reconnected. Avery traveled to Ohio from his Massachusetts home to attend an auction. Stanton, living in Columbus, attended with him.

In her book, Stanton recalls how the event played out. Avery arrived carrying \$4,000 in cash, hoping the sum would be enough to purchase two old bottles. He stared, she writes, “at a single bottle for a half hour during the preview, turning it this way and that, holding it up to the light, running his fingers over its lip.”

Fascinated by the scene, Stanton promised herself

contextually authentic. In the book, she says from her campus office, “I abided by standards of truth or facticity that are closer to journalism along the continuum of creative nonfiction than, say, memoir, which is at the other end of the scale.”

Burroughs, in his *New York Times* review, considered the anonymity a “problem.”

“I have no doubt this is an actual person who simply wants to retain his privacy, but seriously, an entire book with a pseudonymous main character?”



SCENES FROM KANSAS CITY MARKETS, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Jim Klaasen traveled three hours from Peabody, Kan., to sell antique bottles, tools and toys at the Boulevard Swap & Shop. Kansas City, Mo., resident Scott Best holds two chickens he purchased at River Market Mall, an antique mall. Best will add the new purchases to his collection of chickens and roosters. Paul Kostrow, also from Kansas City, stands in front of his booth at the River Market Mall. Kostrow is an antiques dealer specializing in lighting fixtures and art. An assortment of miscellaneous hammers and tools lay on the ground for sale at Nate's Swap Shop.

she would one day write about it. Four years later, while trying to make a living as a full-time freelance writer, Stanton again met up with Avery, this time at a flea market. The experience confirmed her earlier sense that here was a subject worth writing about. It also convinced her that the essay form was not big enough to contain it. A full-length book became her goal.

Stanton wanted to accomplish a lot with her words: to explain the subcultures of antiques and collecting; to delve into the human psyche and understand why material objects frequently mean so much to the acquirer; to demonstrate the link between material objects and historical study.

As Stanton and Avery traveled the nation buying and selling, Stanton employed what sociologists and

cultural anthropologists call the “participant-observer” research model. In her case, this involved watching, listening, setting up sales tables and scouting the tables of other dealers.

She became an expert on the rich, often hilarious subcultures of flea markets as well as the higher-end realm of antiques. The learning curve was steep, and before long she could distinguish worthless items from those that might earn a profit. She grew to understand and appreciate experts’ ability to bid highly but wisely, and she mastered the art of knowing when to stop bidding.

Stanton also discovered that even super stars have bad days, and that professional antiques dealing can be a stressful gig. Avery, for example, wants very much to serve as a dependable provider for his wife

and two children. But there is no safety net in this line of work. As one dealer told Stanton, you learn from your mistakes by “losing thousands of dollars.” Hopefully, he adds, “not all at once.”

Purchasing perils notwithstanding, it’s the stories of that one-in-a-million find, many of them true, that keep millions of amateur antique hounds chasing after that next big score.

Stanton documented a story about a painting by Alexandre Iacovleff hanging in a North Attleboro, Mass., elementary school auditorium. It remained there for 48 years until a visitor with a specialist’s knowledge recognized it as a potentially valuable piece. The appraisal came in at \$800,000.

Stanton’s immersion in antiquing culture helped her understand, and explain to a wide audience, the

preparation necessary for someone like Avery to have a chance of success.

Gaining knowledge of the potential value of everything from paintings, bottles and candlesticks to necklaces, furniture and baseball cards — the list could contain tens of thousands of items — requires years of intense study. For the most dedicated dealers, it’s an education that never ends.

As her understanding of the antiques realm grew, Stanton hoped to land a book contract with an advance large enough to make the remainder of the research and writing time economically feasible. Obtaining an advance from a major publisher is extremely difficult: typically only established authors and national celebrities can expect to receive them. Still, Stanton and her literary agent agreed to give it a try.

Together they shopped a proposal to publishers in 2006. (By then, Stanton had joined the MU faculty, teaching her first courses in the fall of 2005.)

No offer resulted. Stanton changed agents and

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kept trying. In early 2009 she received almost unimaginably good news: three publishers had made competing offers.

Like the best flea-market traders, Stanton possesses a relentless curiosity, and it shows in her writing. When she publishes an essay about insomnia, she cannot focus only on herself; she scours myriad sources to learn everything she can about the malady. When the subject is an antiques dealer, Stanton feels compelled to learn, and eventually share with her audience, everything she can about the profession.

Within the pages of her book, readers learn the term “flea market” is derived from the French

marches aux puces, or “market with fleas.” Around the year 1890, the town of Saint Ouen, on the outskirts of Paris, built roads and walkways for vendors who erected stalls to sell antiques and collectibles. The site today covers 17 acres and features the wares of about 2,500 vendors. On a typical weekend at least 150,000 potential buyers will visit, more than will travel up the Eiffel Tower.

A site in Brimfield, Mass., is one of the three most expansive antiques and flea market venues in the United States (the others are in Pasadena, Calif., and Canton, Texas). Since Massachusetts served as home turf for Avery, Stanton’s research took her to Brimfield with him.

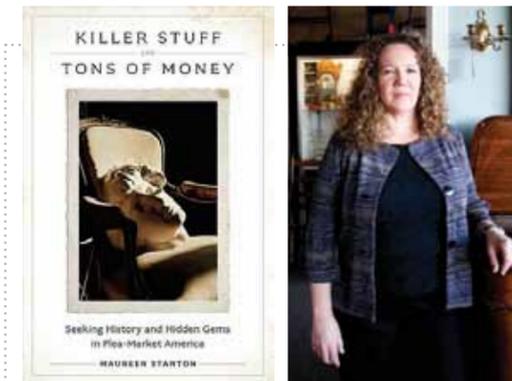
She explains how “for six days in May and again in July and September, the sleepy burg of Brimfield becomes a tent city with up to 5,000 dealers, like temporary squatters, and as many as 250,000 visitors.” The hours are long, the buying and selling intense, and the overall impact becomes individual exhaustion.

On one trip to Brimfield, Avery is described as hauling items that he estimates could sell to the public for \$30,000. But selling isn’t the only thing on his mind: On this day, as always, he’s also on the lookout to make a buck among his fellow dealers. Stanton describes how this works with an example from another flea market, one where Avery had spotted a guy offering a small butter churn for \$40. Avery bought it quickly.

“They made very few one-quart butter churns,” Avery told Stanton, “because for all the work you did, you only got a little butter. You do the same amount of work in a two-quart churn and double the butter.” Avery later sold the churn for \$200.

Unlike churning a quart of butter. It seemed effortless. Stanton knows better: “Avery’s apparently effortless profit is the result of years of being on the scene, gleaning tips from other dealers, working at an auction house for minimum wage, studying obscure reference books.”

This is not to suggest that Stanton learned everything. In fact, she soon came to internalize an old but apt flea-market cliché: a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. After working her first flea market with



STUFF AND MONEY Author and MU assistant professor Maureen Stanton used “creative nonfiction” to bring flea market culture to life. “As a highly critical reader of creative nonfiction,” she says, “I am not bothered as much by creative liberties, such as name changes or even re-created scenes... if the author indicates to me the conventions she has employed in telling the story.”

Avery, on her way home she stopped at an indoor flea market near closing hour. She spotted a perfume bottle, one of Avery’s special interests, and felt proud when she walked away with it for only \$20.

Back home, a quick visit to the Internet confirmed that there were, in fact, hundreds of identical perfume bottles for sale at \$1.

Where had she gone wrong? She had failed to heed the words she’d heard Avery utter time and again: “Wrong color, no discernible wear, and too easy to find, especially at the end of the day.”

There are few such failures when it comes to Stanton’s prose. On the page she is the consummate professional. For her there is always just the right word to employ — although it might seem elusive when at the keyboard — and countless other words less right.

The majority of the words she wrote for *Killer Stuff and Tons of Money* ended up succumbing to the delete key. “I amassed over 900 pages of material, and had to cut that down to a 300-page book,” Stanton says. “Whole interviews with people fell by the wayside.”

In the realm of book writing, a place limited by reader attention span and publisher production costs, authors can’t expect to publish all their gems at once. Think of it as another lesson from the flea market: you can’t expect to possess every object you desire. ★