

Ed Valauskas, Rare Book Sleuth and Teller of Tales

There is a hidden gem among the hidden treasures in the Lenhardt Library: his name is Ed Valauskas, and he is the curator of rare books at the Chicago Botanic Garden.

Valauskas knows how to tell a tale, and he writes a fascinating column for the Garden's website called Stories from the Rare Book Collection. Here, he highlights the stories behind many of the Library's one-of-a-kind books, such as Ellen Robbins's spectacular watercolor collection from the 1860s, said to be so realistic that the plates have been confused with actual specimens. Another column discusses the oldest book in the Rare Book Collection, *Historia plantarum*—the first great botanical work published by the ancient Greek polymath and Aristotelian student and successor, Theophrastus (371–287 B.C.).

Valauskas has been at the Garden since 1998. In addition to his work here, he teaches library science and the history of the printed book at Dominican University. Part of the inspiration for Stories from the Rare Book Collection came from a colleague of his, Ben Williams, who wrote a similar column for the Field Museum, where he was the head librarian. And part of the inspiration came when Valauskas saw that “every time I was asked to speak about the rare books, I realized that almost every book had a story. It might be about the author, or what kind of paper it was printed on—there was always some aspect that intrigued me.” He said that his students play a crucial role in researching the books and doing the “detective work.”



These valuable books are housed in the pristine, locked, temperature-controlled June Price Reedy Rare Book Room within Lenhardt Library. In fact, Valauskas has been instrumental in helping the library's collection grow to one of the most impressive botanical libraries in North America. In 2002, several staff members alerted Valauskas that the Massachusetts Horticultural Society was looking for a buyer for its collection, considered to be the best of its kind. Ultimately, the Garden purchased the entire collection, moving more than 50,000 pounds of books, including 2,000 rare books and 2,000 rare journals.

What makes this online column so much fun for Valauskas? “You never know what you're going to come up with,” he said. “You think you may know, but frequently you're surprised.

There are many clues about the stories of the books themselves—book plates and signatures of previous owners, notes in the margins, bindings and stamps...it all adds up.” He hopes that by reading some of the interesting stories he tells, readers will have a different appreciation for books when they come across them. “The old adage is true,” he said. “You really can't judge a book by its cover.”

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