

Upon first sight, the University of New Orleans Lakefront Arena looks like the Mother Ship in *Close Encounters*. It's a huge and beautiful and modern facility, built to host concerts and athletic events. In early April, in recent years, it's also been the focus of every science fiction fan's eye in the Big Easy.

Two sets of eyes in particular. Inside the building, Justin Winston, adorned by an apron, busies himself unloading hundred of boxes onto dozens of tables. He stacks the tables according to signs on standards atop each: classics, mystery, science fiction ... some paintings, some drawings, some video tapes, some antique vinyl records, some sheet music and some autographs. But mostly, *books*.

Outside, another story. It is said that contemporary SF fandom was born in New Orleans when jazz aficionado Winston, clued to a fellow traveler by a French Quarter bookstore owner, met movie- and ERB-nut John Guidry. Now, 40 years later, while Justin labors inside, John, chair man of Nolacon II and founder of ERB-apa, waits outside – all night long. When the **New Orleans Symphony Book Fair** opens, he will be first in line. *Always*.

This has been going on for decades – or rather, the involvement of our hero has been going on for decades. The Symphony Book Fair wasn't always at the UNO Arena. John Guidry has, however, *always* been first in line.

It began after a trip to Baton Rouge, when Jawn – sorry – when *John* first visited the dean of Louisiana fanzine editors, Camille “Caz” Cazedessus. The date was December 28, 1963. Editor of *ERB-dom*, the Hugo-winning Edgar Rice Burroughs fanzine, Caz told John, “There's someone you *have* to meet,” and John called Pat Adkins that evening. Along with Guidry's bookstore encounter with Justin the same year, it was another moment in the genesis of modern New Orleans fandom.

Illos by Kurt Erichsen

“We talked for about 20 hours on the telephone,” John says.

“We talked *all night* about Burroughs and other things. I'm not kidding you, my ear was sore. We'd transfer the phone from ear to ear because we couldn't stand the pain any longer.”

Adkins told John about the Symphony Book Fair. To raise money, the Symphony haunted estate sales and sought donations, keeping its wares in a well-stuffed warehouse. The next year, while John was in college in the small Cajun city of Thibodaux, he watched the first day on the TV news. “In those days it didn't matter if you went on the first day or not because it was in a little bitty building – now the police station on Royal Street – and the volunteers could only bring out a few boxes at a time. So it didn't matter if you were there the first day or not. It might be hours before they opened a new box.”

It was while the Book Fair operated in these claustrophobic climes that John – in Adkins' company – made what must be his greatest find. “They opened a box of books – all *Rafael Sabatini*. All published by Houghton Mifflin – some first editions. They were *ten cents apiece*, and some are worth a couple hundred dollars each now.

“I was trying to get as many into my bag as I could but somebody else picked out a few before I could get to them. I'm still looking for one of those books.”

John and Pat bought so many books that day that getting them home proved a challenge. “I had about ten or twelve bags in each hand, and I could walk literally about one block before I had to put the stuff down and pry the straps off my fingers. They were cutting into me; I was almost bleeding. We were walking, complaining, crying with pain.”

The Sabatinis came before the years when John had to be first in line. That madness began when the Book Fair outgrew Royal Street and moved to the Oakwood Shopping Center, two or three years later. “That was sort of scary,” says John, because the shopping center had many entrances, that could open at any time.

“The first year was just dumb luck. We asked around and found the door that usually opened first, and it did. There were only about ten people there until late that afternoon, when

people began getting off from work. It wasn't a big deal to be first in line initially. But it became that way."

It became that way because soon, unlike previous years, all of the books went on sale at once, and because the Book Fair was not organizing its sale according to fannish needs, they were making things tough. For instance, while all the paperback science fiction was being placed out on one table, all the *hardback* SF was going on another, in a different section.

John's fannish friend Ken Hafer got himself a job as a security guard at the shopping center. He insured that the door John & Co. gathered at would be the door opened first. But the final solution was to bring in helpers – fans by the dozen, including Bob Lupton, a muckety-muck with Burger King, who fed everyone coffee and doughnuts. "We had teams," Guidry says, "picking up everything in which a fan could possibly have any interest." After raiding the tables and boxes, the teams would meet, compare finds, and take whatever their collections required. It was a successful technique, "so much so that, on several occasions, we were almost thrown out of the Book Fair."

This was because the Fair was very wary of letting book dealers into their event. So paranoid did they become that one of New Orleans preeminent artists and book collectors was victimized.

This was Clarence Laughlin, the brilliant New Orleans photographer whose work had been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art. "They invited Clarence to come to the Book Fair because he was donating one of his prints to be sold. They let him in early, which was a mistake. He bought so many books they threw him, their Guest of Honor, out of the Book Fair."

This nonsense went on for about ten years, along with silly rules that no one ever enforced, like the one declaring that if you put a book in your shopping bag, you *had* to buy it. People started complaining and the Fair began to relax.

"Bad behavior could still get you thrown out. For instance, a book dealer went nuts one year and jumped on the table and swam down it like a fish, sweeping books off the side. Someone grabbed him off the table and said 'Leave!' He didn't go to any Book Fairs after that."

So, when did it start, this practice of getting to the Book Fair earlier than early? John says it was a gradual madness, people showing up earlier and earlier, and didn't verge into the actively psychotic until the Fair moved into its current venue.

"It's been at the UNO Arena for about 20 years," he says. "It's hard to believe."

That year Justin Winston and their friend Richard Janeski put up signs: "Guidry is #1 in Line! Line begins after John!" Embarrassed, John took them down. However, he *was* first – despite other contenders.

"There was this fellow named Sheldon who ran a local bookstore," John recalls, "and he kept trying to beat me into line. Every year I'd get there about an hour or so earlier. So one year I got there real early – and I was just parking the car when I saw *his* car coming down the road. He asked me 'How long have you been here?' and I replied, 'I hate to tell you, but it's been *all night*.'

"Then I realized that was a mistake, since I knew the next year *he* would be there – *all night*." Which meant *John* had to be there – *all night*. (The story of why Sheldon's breath smelled like *canary* will have to wait for another time. John says his canary was named "Cat Food".)

John was first for so many years – once braving a riot of fighting dogs, many times enduring frigid winds off of adjacent Lake Pontchartrain – that he became both a celebrity and a challenge to other Book Fair aficionados. "One guy kept telling me 'I'm going to beat you next year!' He was really obnoxious – but he got his."

John's accoster "got his" courtesy of students from the Baptist Seminary near to the UNO Arena. Aiming to buy all the religious books on sale at the fair, they brought cots to sleep on through the night. John's pushy rival showed up and found them – as well as Guidry – ahead of him. "What the *Hell* are you doing here?" he demanded ... thus giving John the pleasure of watching the theologians lecture the poor schnook for hours about his foul language. "Poetic justice," Guidry says.

For many years a fellow named Gene would move from, say, 201st in line to 2nd by *cutting* – engaging you in conversation and insinuating himself into your spot. So the object with him was, "Don't make eye contact with Gene."

At this year's book fair, shortly before it was to open, John made a comment to a friend in line. "It's 15 minutes to opening time; you know what that means? It means Gene will be here to be second in line." Everyone laughed – but Gene was *not* there. His health had turned bad enough

to keep him from the Book Fair ... a first. To their surprise, everyone missed him.

John has found autographed copies of various treasures, and a first edition by Edgar Rice Burroughs, though he missed a complete set of Burroughs in dust jacket. "They don't give you clues," John laments. At times he's found himself at the glass doors to the arena *scouting the tables through binoculars*. Such is the nature of a book collector's obsession. So what treasures – besides the Sabatinis – has John uncovered at the Book Fair?

"One year I opened the very first box that I went to, and all the books were spine down except one, laying flat so you can see the entire dust jacket. It was *The Fabulous Clip Joint* by Fredric Brown. His very first hard cover for which he won the Edgar Award. Really rare. Worth thousands of dollars in that condition. I tore the box apart looking for other Fredric Browns – but this was the only one at the Book Fair. But I had no complaints.

"The weirdest find of all actually wasn't mine. New Orleans fan Ilaine Vignes found an early history of animation she was sure people would want. She couldn't find Justin Winston so she brought it to me. The book was not in very good shape but it did have all those pretty illos and was only a dollar, so I bought it. But somebody had *written* in it.

"I get home and I'm thinking, This was a mistake. So I look through it and notice that – this was odd – there were things underlined up to about halfway through it. With notes in the margins like 'No, this is wrong, it was such-and-such', and 'Yes, he used to do this' – and it's obvious whoever this guy knew what he was talking about.

"I go to the front of the book and my jaw drops. It has a foreword by *Paul Terry*, the creator of Terrytoons – Mighty Mouse, Heckle and Jeckle, and Farmer Alfalfa – one of the big animators of the time, along with Walt Disney and Walter Lantz. In the front of the book there's an original drawing of Farmer Alfalfa by Paul Terry inscribed *To my favorite nephew*.

"It dawns on me that this was an advance copy that Terry had at one point. My guess was that he was going through the book making annotations when who should pop in but his nephew. He gives it to him – with a drawing done on the spot of Farmer Alfalfa.

"When Justin found that Ilaine had given me that book he was so *not happy* ..."

John's adventures as book-buyer have not been restricted to the Book Fair. Two of his choicest memories on the topic involve a gentle dealer and collector named George. "George passed away a few years ago and is missed by all of us – but especially those who were early in line, as he always brought free coffee and doughnuts. One year he called me to ask about some books that a young guy had brought into his shop. It turned out that they were all *lost race* novels."

John went over to examine the tomes. "I noticed that while the prices on the books came in all sorts of handwriting other things were all marked over in black marksalot. Then I noticed info that had been written in the same handwriting in every one. I knew as soon as I saw that, it meant one thing and one thing only: These books had belonged to Clarence John Laughlin and that the thing that had been blocked out was his name. They were stolen books."

"George had guessed as much, but wanted someone, in this case me, to look the books over and see if we'd come to the same conclusion, which I did. We called Clarence's widow and told her the story. It turned out a young student at LSU had been cataloguing these books, and had taken them to New Orleans to sell. Elizabeth (Mrs. Laughlin) was so kind about it. She did not want the student arrested or thrown out of school. She just wanted him talked to by his dean and given a stern warning. No use in ruining a young man's life. A lady of real class."

George called John on two different occasions to give him first refusal on science fiction rarities. "The first were a set of about 25 Winston juveniles that I got for about \$2.00 a book (which was about the best I could spend at that time). I called a friend who collected them and he paid me \$100 for *four* titles that he did not have. I tried to give them to him but he said no way – he had been trying to find them for almost 20 years and he would have gladly spent even more had he found them at a higher price.

"The second time it was even better! I got over 150 very rare out of print Arkham House, Fantasy Press, Gnome Press publications – all in dust jacket! *All* of these books were first editions. The first one I picked up was a first edition of *The Martian Chronicles* by Ray Bradbury!

"There stacks and stacks of books – were more than just books, too – there were pulps, and not just SF! I spent two days hauling books away from this lady's house. The first day I had brought about \$100.00 which she took, but she refused to take any more money. It wasn't till later

that I had any idea of what some of those books were worth.

“One could say I miss George just for this – but to go back to the book fair ... The last year it was at Oakwood was the only time that I could not go the night before and try and spot the good stuff set out on the tables. That year they covered the tables with brown paper. This did not make me full of joy as to go there meant a 20 mile trip just to stare at brown paper. Then, with only hours left before the doors opened, I noticed that there was some paper that looked like it might just be stacked a tad bit too high. Could there be boxes under this pile of paper? *Yes!* there were, eight boxes to be precise.

“So I sat on two and stacked the other six boxes on top of each other, thus making sure that only I would be the one going through them. In the two boxes on which I sat, the second layer of each box were books by Talbot Mundy. I could not believe what I was looking at. I yelled out loud: ‘*Talbot Mundy!*’

“A few weeks later I went to see George. As I walked through his door, he shouted ‘*Talbot Mundy! Talbot Mundy!*’ When I had made that find, George had been standing right behind me, laughing his head off. Yes, I miss George

“Oh yeah, and then there was that find of the rainbow edition of *The Road to Oz*, and the story of the cigars that Justin would blow in the face of someone about to touch a book that he wanted – but that, as they say, is another story ...”

