Love What You Love Podcast
Episode 59: Rare Books with Allie Alvis
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Welcome to *Love What You Love*; I'm Julie Rose. I'm insatiably curious about people and the world around us, and absolutely in love with passion and unselfconscious enthusiasm. Every other week I geek out with someone about the thing that they love, and then I share it with you.

Welcome back! Or, Welcome! Just a quick note up top that in this week's show notes I'm including nonprofits responding in Ukraine and surrounding countries, including organizations that are looking after animals. They're all really well vetted and reliable organizations, so definitely take a look and contribute if you have the means.

Let's focus on some love, shall we? Allie Alvis is the mastermind behind Book Historia. They currently work as a book cataloger at rare books dealer Type Punch Matrix, having previously worked at the Smithsonian Libraries and Archives Special Collections and the Royal Scottish Academy of Art and Architecture. They have degrees in the History of the Book and Digital Preservation from the University of Edinburgh and the University of Glasgow. You can say they know a thing or two about rare books. I loved chatting with Allie about books!

We talk book detectives, licking books, charlatan linguists, old book versus old manuscript smell, poisonous books, kissing manuscripts, why rare books matter, and so, so much more. So find out why Allie loves rare books and why you might learn to love them too.

Julie: Hello, Allie! Thank you so much for joining me today!

Allie: Hi Julie! Thank you for having me on! I'm really excited to digitally be here!

Julie: Nice! Yes, indeed! It's much different than what you do for a living and your interest, which is rare books and old books. Maybe we could start at the beginning. What is the definition of a rare book?

Allie: Sure. So, rare, and antiquarian, and old, and antique, and all of these words, they kind of all mean similar things, which is that they are from a time before modern times, however you define that. So in a way, it's defined through its variety because an old book isn't necessarily an antiquarian book, and an antiquarian isn't the same thing as a secondhand book. But rare books are generally from… You know, you can have a first edition of a modern novel that is a rare book because there weren't that many published. And you can have a 15th-century manuscript of science that's a rare book because it's old and it's a manuscript so it's handwritten. So, rare is kind of what you make of it.

Rarity doesn't always equal value. You can have, like, someone's self-published memoir that they published through Amazon or whatever, and there were only 10 copies made, but that's not exactly, necessarily, desirable to book collectors.

Julie: Right! So, can you also define, what does antiquarian book mean?

Allie: Yes. Antiquarian actually comes from the concept of an antiquary, which was, in the past, a person who was interested in objects and things of history, rather than the classic narrative of history. They wanted to understand history through the lens of objects. So, antiquarian is a continuation of that idea, of looking at a thing like a thing

in context of history, rather than just reading a history book and taking history from that. So, an antiquarian book generally is an older book, it's not your modern first edition, and it's something that someone sees some sort of historical value in. That can be anything from… I collect really terrible, torn-up, marked-in schoolbooks from the 19th century. [laughs]

Julie: I love that!

Allie: So for me, those are antiquarian books because they tell me a lot about how people used books, and how people read and learned because there's so much evidence of human interaction in them. But for others, that's not necessarily an antiquarian book. 18th century is relatively recent in the world of books. Other people might say that 15th-century scientific manuscript that I mentioned, *that's* an antiquarian book because there's clear historical value there. But again, it's one of those things that's defined through its variety.

Julie: The definition of a book can be fairly wide-ranging, I would assume. I mean, there's manuscripts, but there's printed books. What all… just getting down to the bare bones, how do you define what a book is?

Allie: [laughs] I know. It's hard because, is a scroll a book? Is a tablet a book? So, within book history, and academia, and just generally, the thing that you have on your bookshelf, the thing that's sandwiched between two covers with a bunch of single pages, that is a codex. That's the form of the book that we are used to. And that actually goes way back to Roman writing tablets. They were two pieces of wood filled with wax. They were erasable, you could write your notes in them, and then erase them and reuse them. But that is where we get our form of what we think of as 'book'. But I mean, to me, any sort of carrier of information can be a book in its own way.

Julie: You started with linguistics but then moved on to degrees in History of the Book and Digital Preservation. You worked at the Scottish Academy of Art and Architecture and the Smithsonian. How did you go from linguistics to rare books?

Allie: It's actually not that strange of a trajectory. You know, it's expected once you're in the field, it's like, "*Of course* those two things connect." But looking at it from the outside, it's like, "Huh?" In my linguistics degree, I was particularly interested in historical linguistics, especially the development of the English language. And for that, I was looking through primary sources, and old books, and old pieces of writing that contained Old English, and Middle English, and early modern English as sources for papers I was writing, and projects in class, and stuff like that.

And through that, I kind of… There was a glimmer in my mind. I've always been a fan of old things and antiques. But I had never really thought of books as a career, especially old books. So, through that it made me realize, like, there are these places called special collections libraries that hold all these incredible things, and people work in them to give people these incredible things. [laughs] And I thought, "How can I do that?!"

Julie: [laughs] Right. "I want that!"

Allie: Yeah, exactly! So, I found the History of the Book program at the University of Edinburgh and leapt at the chance to do that, which I really enjoyed. It really put me in touch with aspects of old books that I had never considered before as, sort of, a layman. Things about their materials, how they're made, how they're manufactured,

how to handle them properly without causing damage. And then from there, I went to the University of Glasgow for a very longwinded degree name called Information Management and Digital Preservation, which sounds a bit more beeps-and-boops than it actually is. [laughs]

There definitely were digital preservation elements, which helped me understand more about the digitization of rare books for example, and maintaining that sort of data, and organizing it properly. But the cool thing about British master's degrees is you can, kind of, make them what you want. So if you get in with the right people and you do the right internships and things like that, you can really pick and choose and make your degree about old books, which is what I did at Glasgow.

And during that degree, I was working at the Royal Scottish Academy of Art and Architecture as their sole Member of Library staff. So, that was exciting. It was a fascinating job, sort of, getting to grips with a huge collection that hadn't really been touched for a while. The organization had moved buildings, and they had a new-ish facility, and it was a grant project that was, basically, "get these books in order; let us know what we have."

And it was fascinating! It was everything from catalogs of exhibitions, to 18th-century books on anatomy, and all sorts of interesting gifts and bequests from members of the Royal Scottish Academy. So that was a great, sort of, first job in the field.

Julie: Yeah! Oh my god. That's amazing. [laughs]

Allie: Yeah, I know. It's so cool. The part I love about working with old books, especially working for a book dealer now, Type Punch Matrix, is the variety. Kind of like the definition of antiquarian or rare, there are so many different kinds of books that, even as a book person, I have not been familiar with. Things like artist books, books that are sculptural; they don't necessarily look like books but they are books. And then artist's books that you, you know, consider them as a piece of, sort of, verbal, written art. That was an angle that I had never really considered before.

And all of these little, ephemeral things, like chapbooks, which were little, tiny books that were sold for cheap and they survive in, sort of, a potpourri of ways. There are a lot of children's chapbooks, interesting little ABCs that were printed *very* cheaply, that have silly-looking woodcut illustrations, and lots of typos, and that's exciting to see.

But at Edinburgh and at Glasgow I was mostly focused on medieval manuscripts, because why not? But those are definitely more hefty items and more… you know, you think of history and you think of things like medieval manuscripts, and 17th-century books, and stuff like that. But there are so many different kinds of books. It's something new all the time.

Julie: Yeah… So, going from dealing with medieval manuscripts to what you're doing now with Type Punch Matrix, in your career so far, what's the most unusual book that you've worked with?

Allie: Unusual… that's interesting. I've gotten a lot of questions about, like, "What's your favorite book? What's the heaviest book? What's the most valuable book?" Hmm… Every book is interesting in its own way. Everything from, like, I don't know… I cataloged this really strange linguistics book that was unremarkable in text and form, but it was owned by this charlatan linguist who had…

Julie: [laughs]

Allie: I know! It's a fascinating story. He had his bookplate on the front pastedown, so I looked him up thinking, "Who could this be? Maybe it's a point of interest for this book that I can describe in the catalog." And it turned out that he was just, like, publishing random papers about stuff that he thought, without actually doing any fieldwork or citing any sources, and claiming he had a doctorate, and that he had taught at all these places he actually hadn't… It was just, like, "What on Earth??" Because it was an otherwise unremarkable book. I was, kind of, dreading cataloging it because I was like, "Eh, this is kind of boring, it's not going to be anything to write home about." And it turned out to be this adventure.

Julie: Wow. Is that part of the cataloging process, that you have to do research and, kind of, understand provenance and… What else goes into cataloging a book?

Allie: Yeah, it's a fascinating job and one that I never really thought of as something that would be for me, because library cataloging and bookselling cataloging are two different sorts of beasts. With bookselling cataloging, which really appeals to me in a way that I didn't expect, it's making books interesting for people looking at them, telling people what to look for. "There's a really cool engraving on this page that's signed by this artist, and that's significant because of this and that." And making them appealing to buyers to say, "Here's why you *need* this book in your library collection," or "You as a collector, you're missing this one piece."

I cataloged a really interesting book about the works of Newton that was written for women. And when Rebecca Romney, who's one of my bosses, put it on the table in front of me, she said, "You know, this is a first edition of this book and we're probably going to put this much on it. Here you go," I started looking through bibliographies and things like that. And it turns out that it's not a first edition, it's a pirated edition. So, it opened this completely new avenue of exploration of scientific communication, and how works were distributed, and why this is a pirated edition.

Because you know, there was such a high demand for that first edition that another printer just ripped it off wholesale. It's an interesting practice because this was long before copyright. And it was printed under a false imprint. So there were all of these distracting elements to, sort of, mislead you into thinking, "This is definitely a first edition." And finding out it was a pirated edition was so exciting.

Julie: Do those, kind of, older pirated books still have interest for book collectors?

Allie: Definitely. And particularly academic interest because it tells you a lot about, like what I said, the demand for knowledge, and this information, and the pathways through which these things were distributed, and audiences that they might miss. Both the true first edition and the pirated first edition were published in Italy, but for reasons that are not quite clear to me, they came out at about the same time, which indicates that people were clamoring for this title. So, that's a fascinating thing that you can learn about history from just looking at a book without having to read the book. It is an interesting book. Like I said, it's the works of Newton presented for the ladies.

It's presented as a conversation between a, sort of, nobleman and a fancy lady. And he's presented as telling her all of this stuff about Newton, when in reality, the lady that the book lady was based on was the knowledgeable one about Newton. She was

interested in science. It's a really interesting, sort of, story beyond the issue of the piracy.

Every book has all of these different facets like that, where you come in looking at it one way, and you turn it to the side and it's a different thing, and you turn it to the other side and it's a different thing. And it's in a really cool binding that I like a lot. There are so many ways to look at a book.

Julie: So what part of a book… Maybe it's different for every book. What part do you like the most? I know you do Fore Edge Fridays on your Instagram, which is so fun. But do you enjoy the background, do you enjoy the binding, do you enjoy the illustrations? Is there a part that you're like, "This is so cool! I love this part of it most"?

Allie: I am definitely a sucker for bindings. I am not ashamed to say that sometimes I do judge books by their covers and buy them for that specific reason. I have plenty of books at home that I have no idea what their text is. They're in Latin, and they're from the 17th century or whatever. And it's like, I know they're some sort of religious, but I don't particularly care because they're in exposed wooden board bindings with really interesting grains, and you can see that there used to be clasps, and the headband is exposed. It's just… I like how they look on the outside and how the outside contributes to how you can access the inside.

A practice of the past, particularly in the 19th century and before, was to fully rebind everything from illuminated manuscripts, to early printed books, to 18th-century stuff, and they would rip them out of their contemporary bindings, which are excellent vehicles for the history of those individual books, and stick them in really ostentatious, overwrought, very colorful… which, it's interesting in its own way, but you mourn for the history that was lost in the rebind. And I did my master's degree thesis on the conservation of books with a focus on rebinding because it's just so interesting for me, the idea that bindings can make a book more or less accessible. A lot of those 19th-century bindings I mentioned are so tight, they put more emphasis on the aesthetic over the use, that they end up more as library furniture than they do as books that you can read.

It wasn't until, really, the early 20th century where binders started saying, "We need to start binding things more sympathetically. We need to look at the original structures of these books and figure out how they were bound in the first place if we are rebinding them." The bindery Douglas Cockerell & Son is definitely my pet project of research and my favorite binder. They really pioneered the field of 20th-century book conservation. They bind things in gorgeous Morocco, which is a fancy word for goatskin. But also, they paid attention to, like I mentioned, the original structures of the book and they tried to bind in a way that highlighted the content of the book rather than the binding.

So in a way, they kind of tried to make the binding invisible, that it doesn't stick out too much. But in the same way, to me, it makes it stick out because it's like, "Ooh! It's a Douglas Cockerell & Son! Let's see how they did this!" They did plenty of arts and crafts-type bindings and fancy stuff, but I really love their rebinding work.

Julie: The 19th-century binding aesthetic, it reminds me of just antiquarians in general at that time who, "I just want it because it's old and I like it." Completely screwing up archaeological sites and things like that.

Allie: Exactly! Yeah. Like, "This early printed book that was printed in 1487 should have the most bejeweled, gaudy, bright, terrible binding that befits its significance in history!" And meanwhile, that makes the book completely unusable.

Julie: Right! Exactly!

Allie: Another practice which is horrible and inexcusable, is sometimes collectors would bleach the pages.

Julie: [gasps in horror]

Allie: To remove any annotations, or notes of ownership or something, to make the book look "new." Which is just awful.

Julie: Oh, I have, like, full-body chills. That's horrible. [laughs]

Allie: I know. It's the worst.

Julie: Oh no. So, you've handled a lot of books. I'm sure you get this question a lot, but what's the oldest book that you've personally handled?

Allie: Hmm… I think it was a… When I was doing my master's degree at Edinburgh and working on Douglas Cockerell & Son stuff, Douglas Cockerell & Son had rebound an early Scottish manuscript. I think it was from the 1100s.

Julie: Wow!

Allie: Yeah, I would have to go back and check, but it would be either that one or the Hunterian Psalter at Glasgow which, again, it's a rebinding thing. But I think that one is 1100s. I would have to check on that. It's either 1100s or 1200s, but those are the earliest. I feel very privileged to have handled them. It's very special to go into a reading room and have those things brought to you; it's a really surreal experience.

Julie: How did you feel when the book came out… either one of them, when they came out to you, what were you feeling?

Allie: It's interesting because most of the time in special collections reading rooms, it's not a thing. You just… The librarian brings the book, and they go sit at the desk, and they monitor the reading room, and you set the book up on supports, and whatever, it's fine. But with both of these, because they were both, sort of, treasures of their respective institutions, there was a fair amount of pomp and circumstance that…

Julie: Oh! Okay!

Allie: Yeah, I had to get certain permissions from people in the upper administration to even look at these things that my research necessitated me seeing these things in person because they had both been digitized, which is great, but it doesn't tell you much about the binding structure or the physical elements of the book that you can only get in person. And so, especially with the Hunterian Psalter, that came out on its own special cart, and its own special support, and it had, like, a very special locked box that it sits in, in addition to being inside the rare book vault. [laughs] So, it was kind of a big deal, and the other readers in the reading room were looking at me like, "Yo… What is *this*?"

Julie: Wow. And how much time do you get with a book like that?

Allie: I mean, as long as the reading room's open. You could come in at 9am and leave at 5pm and stay all day with one book without taking a lunch break. Not recommended.

Julie: [laughs] And what do they smell like? Those old, old books?

Allie: That's a really interesting question and something that I know a lot of people… Like when they go to my Instagram they say, "Ooh, I wish I could be in there to smell it." But printed books on paper smell much different than manuscript books on vellum. It has something to do with the way the vellum is prepared and the ink is prepared that it's like a weird, sort of, almost pleasantly sour smell to manuscripts. It's surreal. It's not that vanilla-y – I can't even describe it – of paper books. But manuscripts, when you are up close and personal with a manuscript, you can smell it. It's a really evocative smell. I know humans are, kind of, tuned to remember things by smells, and whenever I sit down in front of a manuscript it's like, "Oooh yeah…"

Julie: [laughs] "There it is!" [laughs] And this is probably a very stupid question, but–

Allie: No stupid questions.

Julie: Well, so… In the illuminations, especially the gold… Is it really that shiny?

Allie: Oh, it's more shiny.

Julie: [gasps]

Allie: I'll kind of go back in time a little bit to my first time in a special collections reading room at the University of Edinburgh. I had been there for a class and the instructor had called up this incredible illuminated Bible. And I was just in awe that we could be in the same room with this thing. So, the day after I went back up to special collections and I thought, "I'm going to call up this book and see if they let me have it." And I did. And they did! [laughs] I was like, "Oh my gosh… Anybody can do this. I'm the master of everything. I have unlimited power!"

And it was such an incredible first rare book in a rare book reading room to be physically with. I remember opening it and just being blown away by the texture of the illuminations. Because digitization doesn't really do them justice, especially with the gold, because you can't really photograph the shininess of gold; you really need a video. A lot of digitized manuscripts are static. You move through the book, you "turn the pages," but the light doesn't change on the page. A lot of the dynamism of a medieval manuscript is when the light changes on the page.

I saw a tweet recently of a professor who had facsimile copies of a medieval manuscript and they were actually teaching by candlelight to give the students an impression of what it would be like to read a manuscript by candlelight. Obviously not with the real books because we don't want fire and books in the same room. [laughs]

Julie: Right!

Allie: But it's an interesting exercise. But really what struck me was the matte sort of texture of the colors. It's just, with the shininess of the gold, there's such a fascinating contrast and interweaving of the different textures and shininess that… You cannot capture it digitally. Even with a video, the contrast between the matte paints and the shiny gold, it's just… It's gorgeous and visually enticing; you can't really look away from it. And this illuminated Bible that I was looking at, every page had a couple of illuminations on it. Illuminated scenes from different books of the Bible, illuminated initials. It took me, I think, three hours in the reading room after class… It was, like, 8pm when I left and I thought my eyeballs were going to fall out of my head. But I was so happy. [laughs]

Julie: Yeah… So, how does that interplay of the shininess and the matte colors – not just for that manuscript but other manuscripts you've looked at – how does that affect how you read the words on the page?

Allie: Yeah, it's been called a cathedral of painted windows, illuminated manuscripts. I think Ruskin called it that. A fairy cathedral of painted windows, he called illuminated manuscripts. And it is very much that. And that's the purpose that the illuminations serve in a manuscript, because in the Middle Ages, people really considered books to be talismanic in their power of communicating to God, or the Virgin Mary, or certain saints, that the illustrations were really windows that you could, sort of, gaze upon the holy and have that exchange of blessings and prayer be transmitted through those windows in very literal ways that I think is difficult for us to comprehend today.

But a lot of illuminated manuscripts I've looked at have weird smears on their illuminations, and that is actually from kissing. People would kiss their books or touch them ritualistically to, sort of, get the blessings, or to become closer to the image of Jesus, or what have you, to actually interact physically with that religious icon. So, it's a really interesting, sort of, literal idea of these illustrations of these people, that it's really looking across time to Biblical times of the crucifixion or what have you.

Julie: That's fascinating.

Allie: Yeah.

Julie: And not something you would know unless you got to look at the books yourself.

Allie: Exactly. One of my other favorites is a copy of the Apocalypse that I looked at, at the University of Glasgow. Someone had taken a knife and actually slashed through one of the depictions of the Beast, sort of as a ritualistic "be gone, devil" type of thing. But physically mutilating the book in order to communicate that. And I'm very thankful that that happened, like, many, many, many centuries ago and not recently, because we don't encourage that sort of behavior in special collections reading rooms. [laughs]

Julie: [laughs] Yeah. So, was that kind of the moment when you first… You know, you went after class, you saw this beautiful Bible. Was that the first moment where you said, "Yeah, I'm in the right place. This is really it"? Or was there another moment where you're like, "Ah! This is it"?

Allie: Probably. That is my clearest memory of thinking, like, "I want to do this exact job of be-the-person who goes back, and gets the books, and brings them to people," or talks about them, or tells people about them. It was that one-two combination of seeing the book in that class, and hearing the instructor talk about it, and then being able to go see it myself. I really realize that I really like talking to people about books.

So, I directed myself at things where I could tell people about books, which is why I have so many social media accounts and things like that. I just like to point out different things that I would've found interesting before I started looking at books. And I realized that a lot of this stuff I was learning and looking at is not necessarily obvious to other people when I started posting on Instagram. It used to be just a place where I posted pictures of my cat, and my dinner, and whatever. And I started posting pictures of, like, "I saw this in class," or "I saw this at work," or whatever. And people, they responded like, "I never knew that," or "I've never seen anything like that," or "What is this?"

So I just, kind of, rode that wave of educating people through images, and through the physical book and aspects of the book, and was able to really translate that into academic work as well as practical work as a librarian and now as a bookseller.

Julie: I know what my answer would be here, but why do rare books matter? Why is it worth taking the time to study, and protect them, and educate people about them?

Allie: Yeah, it's like what I talked about, that they're vehicles of history, that they're physical manifestations of the past in a way that many other objects aren't. The thing that makes a rare book special is that it still works if it's bound properly. It's a machine that still functions. You shouldn't drink out of a Roman glass, for example, but you go to a special collections reading room, and you turn the pages just as someone in the 13th century would have turned the pages, just with a better light source. And the fact that they are that physical manifestation, I think, really makes them important beyond the information that they carry.

I'm a sucker for the physical object, as I said. I'm really interested in the binding, and the kind of paper they're made out of, and the glue they used on the spine, and the printing mistakes, and things like that. But beyond even that material culture aspect of books, the text they contain tells us a lot about the legality of talking about certain topics. Like I mentioned the pirated Newton published under a different imprint, a lot of works of controversial nature would be published under false imprints to say, "This was printed somewhere where it's legal to say this stuff," where in reality, it was printed somewhere where it was *not* legal to say this stuff. But it presented a wall against persecution.

A really interesting book that I cataloged a while back was a Huguenot Bible, which was… You know, it's a really pretty book, it's little, it's cool for a variety of reasons. But it was missing its title page, and that was on purpose. A lot of times, Huguenots, when they were being persecuted in France, they would rip out the title page of their Bibles because the soldiers that would go door to door looking for Protestant bibles would be able to recognize the bible by the title page. But a lot of them were illiterate so they couldn't read the text, so they were looking for a thing that says Holy Bible, and without that title page, they don't know; it's just a book.

So, the fact that the book survived without its title page, and then it was added back later in manuscript form, in facsimile, a later owner or somebody later on in that family when the danger was over, replaced it with a handwritten copy of the title page. That tells you such a story and in such an immediate way that just hearing about it doesn't quite do it justice. Because you learn about the prosecution of the Huguenots in school, and you know, people fleeing, and all of that sort of thing. But to have an object that really tells that story is really important and worth preserving.

Julie: Yeah… And you've done research on poisonous books.

Allie: Mm-hmm. [laughs]

Julie: I'm curious to know about this research, and what you learned, and what it can tell us about a time and a place.

Allie: Yeah, that's an interesting topic. I was particularly focused, as I am, on the older poisonous books, the 16th-century German bindings that contained arsenic in the form of a pigment called vergaut. It uses orpiment as a yellow pigment combined with

a blue, either indigo or some other pigment, to produce a nice green. And that was something that I stumbled across accidentally.

I saw a blog post from the University of Southern Denmark about poisonous books that they found in their collection, and I thought, sitting at my desk at the Smithsonian Libraries, I thought, "Hey, we have one of those!" [laughs] So I ran and got it from the vault and it was like, "Hm, yeah. This is that, isn't it?" And it went through a whole lot of testing, x-ray spectroscopy to say, "Yes, this is definitely arsenical." It was a fascinating process. I have really cool pictures of strange, like, ray gun-looking technology being pointed at this book from the 16th century. And you've got to wonder, like, what a 16th-century person would think of what's happening here. [laughs]

But it's interesting because the arsenic is definitely a secondary, sort of, effect from the fact that it's green. Obviously, the people that used vergaut, including painters, knew not to eat it, but they didn't think, you know, handling it would kill you, or that it would kill any pests or anything. It was just like, "It's green. It's nice. It's good to have a nice, colorful thing." The other part of that is that the binding was actually made out of a recycled manuscript leaf, which…

Julie: Ah!

Allie: Yeah, that's a whole other thing. It was a common practice of the past because most manuscripts are on vellum, which is a very strong material that makes a very good bookbinding. And in religious upheavals, or a text goes out of date, or any sort of reason that a house burns down and there are fragments of books around and usable vellum, people just recycled it. It was cheaper than making new. And painting it green disguised the fact that it was a manuscript.

The only reason I knew immediately that it was a manuscript – and it had been one of my favorite books for a long time before I found out it was poisonous because it was made out of a manuscript – is one of the little corners had come off. It sort of has a spine made of pigskin and two pigskin corners on each board, and one of the little corners had popped off at some point in the past several centuries. And it revealed that there was manuscript under there. So, I would often bring it out for tours, and talk about the practice of manuscript waste finding. So, luckily nobody was able to touch it during the tours, only me. Hopefully, there won't be any lawsuits coming. [laughs] But yeah, so after all of the testing, we and the University of Southern Denmark folks published about it.

And about the same time, Melissa Tedone at the Winterthur Museum was starting a factfinding project about arsenic green in 19th-century books. So, this is a different kind of arsenical green. This is, like, machine-produced pigments that were super, super bright. So these are the vibrant, really… almost eye-burning green publisher's cloth bindings that were dyed with either Scheele's green or Paris green, which were both pigments used on everything from dresses to wallpaper. They theorized that green wallpaper may have had a hand in ultimately killing Napoleon, but obviously that's debated. But it also was applied to different foods and candy, which is *bananas* to me. But the accepted knowledge was, "Well, if there's not much in it, it won't kill you."

Julie: "But you can only eat one!" [laughs]

Allie: Exactly, yeah. So, Melissa has done a lot of organizing of people around this idea of poisonous books and getting other institutions involved in testing their collections. It's this really interesting project that is ongoing. She calls it bibliotoxicology.

Julie: Oh my gosh. That's awesome.

Allie: Yeah, it's really cool. So, keep your eyes and ears open for publications and stuff from this group. Eventually, we'll hopefully be taking this more public beyond blog posts and things. It's a wild topic, and I would like to emphasize that your books probably are not poisonous that you have on your bookshelf at home. [laughs]

Julie: She says "Probably." [laughs]

Allie: Probably! Just in case, don't lick them. [laughs] But yeah, the books that you got from your grandmother or whatever, those are probably not impregnated with poison, so don't throw them away or anything. Just wash your hands after handling them, which is really a good piece of advice for most rare books because some of them can get pretty yucky. [laughs]

Julie: Have you ever had, like, an allergic reaction to a book? What do you do when you find books with, like, mold or fungus? How do you deal with that?

Allie: So, yes, kind of. Some leather eventually ages in such a way that it gets something called red rot, and it's just a breaking down of the leather. It has something to do with the chemicals that it's treated with. But it gets all over everything, and it's called red rot because it's bright red. So, I would carry books sometimes, like from the vault, or from the stacks, or whatever, and I would just be like, "Oh no…" [laughs] I would be covered in red. It gets all over your hands… It's kind of comical.

At one point I was doing something with a book that had red rot, and it's not like contagious or will kill you or anything, but I sort of absentmindedly chewed my thumbnail and thought I was going to die. The taste was *so bad*. I have never tasted anything like that before or since, and it was just like, "Augh! God!" [laughs] So, that's why you wash your hands.

But books eventually, you know, some of them do get mold. Some of them start to warp. And book conservators have a lot of ways of dealing with things like that. For books that are moldy, they usually freeze them. I actually have a book in my freezer right now. I don't know how long it's been there because our freezer… It's not a conservation freezer; it's just a kitchen freezer. But I was suspicious that it might have mold so I put it in a plastic bag and put it in the freezer because that kills the mold. Conservators eventually would use a special kind of vacuum to pull the mold spores off the page. That can cost a fair amount of money and this book is worth nothing to anyone but me, [laughs] so I'm doing the at-home problem solving.

But that's one of the reasons why rare book vaults of special collections libraries are temperature and humidity controlled, to keep everything at a, sort of, standard, set temperature and humidity so things don't expand and contract. Organic materials, especially vellum, are really prone to swelling. It's called cockling, if the humidity and temperature change. That's when you get books that look like wedges, or pages that look like waveforms. Organic material is just naturally susceptible to changes in the atmosphere. And vaults are usually on the chillier side to prevent any sort of mold growth.

At the Smithsonian, we would pull anything that we even had an inkling, if there might be, thinking of mold on it, and pass it off to the conservators to say, "No this is fine," or "We'll throw it in the freezer just in case." But yeah, so if you have old books at home, just keep an eye out for little black dots on the pages, which are different from foxing. Foxing is something that you often see in old paper, and those are just, sort of, brown spots scattered over the page. It can get pretty intense sometimes depending on the paper. Just a really giant section of brown. But those are just natural impurities in the paper coming out over the course of centuries or decades. Foxing is not mold, although sometimes they can look similar. Mold is usually a darker color.

Julie: Got it. And I'm just curious, how has technology changed or methods changed since you started working in this area?

Allie: Yeah, I mean, I feel like I haven't been in this field for very long. I started at Edinburgh in 2014, so it's been less than ten years, I guess. But the conversation around digitization has changed somewhat. I do think that there is a greater understanding of the fact that digitization isn't going to save us, that you can't just digitize everything and throw it away because that's… you know, there's elements of books that are still being discovered that… the book was photographed back in the 1900s and nobody noticed this thing until last year.

There was a famous case of a manuscript, I think it was at the National Library of Wales, that was photographed back in the late 19th century or early 20th century, that had a snippet of old Welsh in it, on the edge of the page. And there was a photograph of it and it was, you know, like, "This is the first noted use of old Welsh in existence."

And when librarians went back to check on that, because there was a research question or a discussion about it or something, they found that the book had been rebound and that piece of page had been trimmed off.

Julie: [gasp] No!

Allie: Yeah. So, it's just like, "Oh god, no!" The things that you could have learned from having that physically… Yeah, it's hard. Digitization is great for certain kinds of access. It's great for people who don't have a special collections reading room in their area, that they just want to get a better sense of what a manuscript is like or how it's put together.

Dot Porter does a lot of excellent work with book structures of manuscripts and visualizing those digitally. Because just with a flat digitalization, sort of an overhead camera view of two pages, you can't really see how the pages are nested within each other structurally. And Dot's work works to sort of pull that apart digitally so you can see the construction of the book, and if leaves have been added, or removed, or anything like that. So, I think that that's an aspect that is moving forward continually.

Julie: I'm sure you own lots of rare books; you've already talked about the schoolbooks. But which one is your very favorite that you own?

Allie: Hmm… I own a lot of "rare books." I don't know if any of the listeners out there play Skyrim, but my fiancé calls them my Skyrim-ruined books, because they look terrible. [laughs] They're falling apart, and they're stitched back together by school kids, and it's just… They're awful, and I love them dearly, and they're worth nothing. [laughs]

But I also collect miniature books, which I really love. They're just so cute! And I readily admit that I mostly collect them because they're just so cute.

Julie: There's nothing wrong with that. [laughs]

Allie: Yeah, but I don't know… I collect books based on, sort of, the stories they tell because that's what draws me most to book history. So, that's why I have a lot of damaged books and a lot of books that are bound in different ways. I have a book – I think I mentioned it in an anecdote earlier – with exposed wooden boards that I really like because it demonstrates that aspect of bookmaking and why, for example, book dealers and librarians call the covers of the books 'boards'. They used to be boards. They used to be wooden boards, and that terminology has just stuck around. So, I think either that or one of my horrible, terrible books full of doodles and things.

Oh! I take all of that back! [laughs] I love all of those books dearly, but I think my favorite book is one that I bought on eBay. [laughs] Purportedly a treasure binding, it is this god-awful French Bible from the 1700s, which is very loved, and somebody glued a piece of jewelry to the cover, in the 1960s. [laughs] Like, it's this awful, gaudy, bejeweled cross, which it's not jewels, it's glass. It's so amazing. Its spine is just desperately bowed, it's barely holding together. The gutters are full of schmutz of all sorts of… There's sticks and pieces of grass in there. I don't know if they were reading it outside.

I regret to inform you that I found human fingernails in there. [laughs] It's just… It's a disaster and I love it so much. It's like, you look at it and you think, "Oh wow. That must be a really special book with a bejeweled thing on it." And you look just millimeters below this surface and it's like, "Oh, this is horrible." [laughs]

Julie: I love that. Oh my god.

Allie: I know. I call a lot of my books horrible, affectionately, because I really don't know how else to describe them. Like, these are books that book dealers do not want because they're liabilities. [laughs]

Julie: [laughs] Well, just to wrap up, obviously you're super passionate about this, it's so exciting. If someone listening wanted to get involved in rare books, how would you suggest they get started? Either studying, or purchasing; what's a good way to get started?

Allie: Yeah, there's lots of resources out there for people looking to get into rare books, either on the library side or the trade side. The Virginia Rare Book School is an excellent resource. They have classes every summer. It's connected to the University of Virginia, but it's not like a college program. Anybody can apply and take these classes.

There are also college degrees available, like I mentioned. I'm more familiar with the ones in the UK, but there are programs that focus more on rare books. Like at the University of Iowa is a great one. CABS, which is the California Antiquarian Books Seminar, is something that is like the Virginia Rare Book School but more focused on bookselling. So, they offer lots of classes, and both of those programs have been online since covid times. But I believe there's going to be in-person classes this year.

But if you don't want to go that deep that quickly, there's lots of posts on Instagram about old books, and Twitter. So, just browsing social media. Rebecca Romney, you might know her from *Pawn Stars*, has a great personal website where she talks about,

sort of, the basics of rare books and getting into collecting. And obviously I'm going to plug Type Punch Matrix, [laughs] because like I mentioned way back at the beginning of this episode, the variety there is amazing. We have things for six figures and we have things that cost $20. I have bought too many books from ourselves.

But I think it's really interesting to look at websites like Type Punch Matrix, which are more accessible, I think, than some more traditional bookdealers' websites that can feel a bit Byzantine in the way you actually get to see what the books look like. So yeah, I also… I'll plug my YouTube series, which is *Bite Sized Book History*. I do little, short, seven-to-eight-minute-long videos about various elements of book history. So, I have episodes about miniature books, and forage paintings, and I'm going to be starting a new season soon so I'll have episodes about chapbooks. And I also just filmed an episode about bookselling, and what a bookseller does, and how we work. So, that is also a great resource.

Julie: Yes it is! Oh my gosh, Allie, thank you so much for taking so much time to talk about your passion. This has been an absolute joy to chat with you today.

Allie: Thank you so much for having me! It's fun to talk to people about books. It's my favorite part of my job.

You can find Allie at BookHistoria.com and her socials everywhere as @BookHistoria. I'll include links in the show notes as well as links to Allie's favorite nonprofits. Huge thanks to Allie for sharing their passion with us today.

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As always, thank you so, so much for listening. Let's hang out again soon.

Links:

Find Allie on Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr, YouTube, and BookHistoria.com

More Resources:

Colorado Antiquarian Book Seminar

Douglas Cockerell & Sons

Hunterian Psalter

Illuminated Manuscripts

John Ruskin

Napoleon wallpaper

Poison book project

Poisonous books: analyses of four sixteenth and seventeenth century book bindings covered with arsenic rich green paint

Type Punch Matrix
Vellum
Virginia Rare Book School

Allie's Favorite Nonprofits:

The National Center for Transgender Equality
The Center for Reproductive Rights
The Voting Rights Alliance

My Favorite Nonprofits:

Everytown for Gun Safety
Humane Society of Silicon Valley
Southern Poverty Law Center
Town Cats of Morgan Hill
World Central Kitchen

Nonprofits Supporting Ukraine and Surrounding Countries:

Člověk v tísni, ops
International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
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