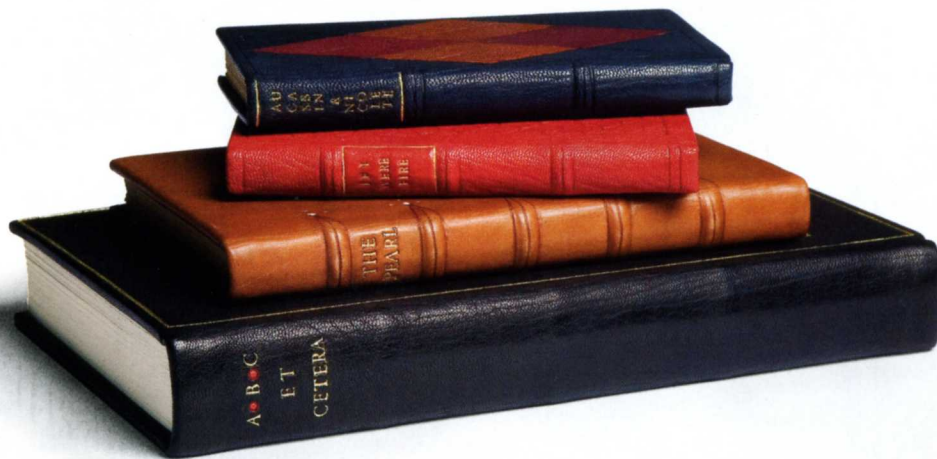


Returning the Pages

This Iowa craftsman brings antique books back to their original state.



LAWRENCE YERKES heals ailing books. The master bookbinder treats important and valuable volumes that have been traumatized by fires, floods, and the accumulated insults of advanced age. On a morning in November, he cradled a copy of *Annales Ecclesiastici*, a history of the Catholic Church printed in 1694 that was caught in a flood at its owner's Connecticut home. During the following weeks, Yerkes washed each page to remove water stains, repaired torn pages with thin strips of Japanese mulberry paper, restitched the binding, and crafted a new cover. The repairs will enable the book to survive for at least another century.

Yerkes, who is 62, usually works on four or five projects at once in his workshop in Iowa City, Iowa, and he has a waiting list that is three months long. "People bring books to me for a variety of reasons," he says. "Some want me to repair volumes that have personal meaning, such as a book owned by a grandmother or a family Bible. I also work on books that have intrinsic value, such as a rare edition of an early medical book."

Yerkes has restored more than 1,000 volumes during the last 16 years. He works alone in a space that is filled with old books, scraps of leather, and stacks of handmade paper. He keeps the workshop's temperature below 70 degrees to prevent molds from growing on the books' leather covers and discoloring them. Some of those books belong to Yerkes' personal reference library. "My private collection spans the centuries of bookbinding," he says, "so I can easily pull out a volume to remind myself of what techniques were used in each era."

Yerkes entered the bookbinding profession in 1984, when he met William Anthony, who taught book conservation

at the University of Iowa's Center for the Book, an interdisciplinary program on the art of making books. (Previously, Yerkes had been a librarian at an Iowa community college.) Anthony offered Yerkes an apprenticeship similar to the one he himself had received in binderies in the United Kingdom. Yerkes trained with him until Anthony died in 1989. Two years later, Yerkes opened his own workshop. Today he is one of fewer than 200 full-time book conservators in the United States and one of only a handful who have completed a European-style apprenticeship. "Most book conservators today learn their trade through classes and workshops," he says. "I was very fortunate to go through an apprenticeship program in which I was able to work side by side with a master day after day. In that setting you learn a lot simply by osmosis."

Yerkes specializes in complex conservation projects, such as the restoration of a 17th-century Koran from Morocco that had been damaged in a fire. Yerkes mended dozens of pages and created a new cover that featured an Islamic design. Yerkes may charge more than \$10,000 for projects as challenging as this.

However, his fee sometimes is only a part of the reward that Yerkes receives for his work. "I remember restoring the guest book from a pensione in Italy from the 1930s, and when it was done, the book's 90-year-old owner wrote me a long letter telling me her life story and explaining why that book was a link to a part of her past that was gone forever," he says. "I love it when people share their excitement and joy in books with me." —LORI ERICKSON

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After being restored by book conservator Lawrence Yerkes, these antique books look as good as new.