

MARKING MY TERRITORY

The Bookplate Story

©2020 by Steve Beam

After decades of procrastinating, I decided to create a bookplate for my library in July of this year (2020). Why a printed bookplate? Well, from a practical standpoint, it is the human equivalent to marking your territory and it's more sanitary than the alternative. After I completed the 8-week process, I started swapping bookplates with collector friends. To a person, when they found I had eight bookplates they all asked the same questions. When John Davenport asked, I responded in full, thinking I could recycle the answers to others asking the same questions in the future.

When John received my e-mail, he asked if he could post it on the Davenport website. I'm fairly sure the sordid tale that unfolds in my response below is the poster child for how not to pursue your own bookplates. However, with that as the less-than-inviting lead-in to the following e-mail, I hope you too decide to mark your territory by designing and using your own original bookplates.

Hi John,

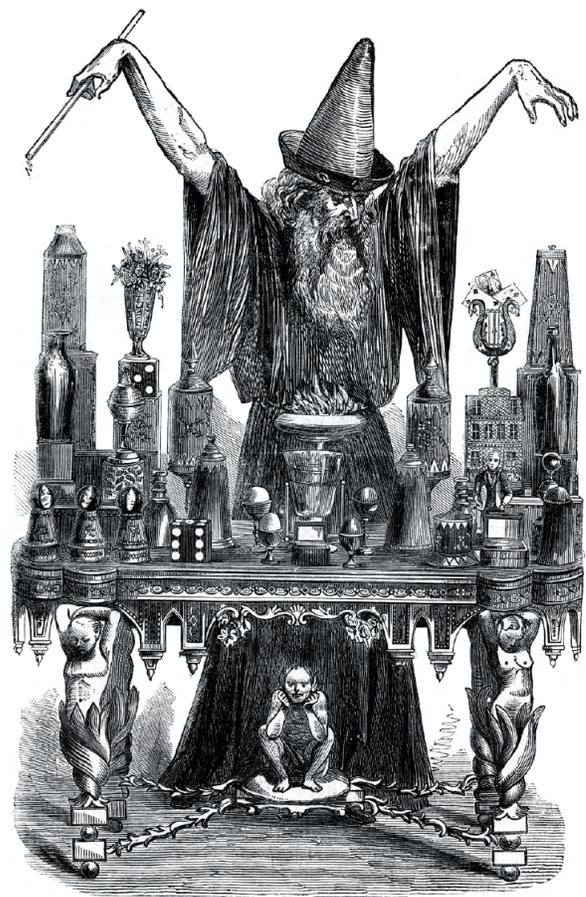
September 4, 2020

Yes, the bookplate debacle! Have you ever played with an idea for years with no result? Then, suddenly, the floodgates open and the ideas spew forth faster than you can scoop them up and record them? That is what happened to me with bookplates. Now that you have asked, I will respond to all your questions here, but I reserve the right to cut and paste some of my responses to send in reply to any future requests from others. (You were the sixth person to ask essentially the same questions.)

I have always loved good magic books. Since I had a career and a family, I limited myself to creating, writing, lecturing, and performing, resisting my urge to collect magic even though I had amassed a relatively large library – a library I assembled without regard to which edition of the books I had.

Then, two things happened at once: (1) I retired at the end of 2014; and, (2) six months later I purchased my late friend Phil Willmarth's 5000-volume library which almost doubled the size of my library. Phil had a large quantity of books on the history of magic. So, with the combination of having more time on my hands and a sudden influx of books on history and collecting, I started to indulge the magic history part of my brain that I had suppressed for almost fifty years.

This was the background that leads us to the bookplates. I've always enjoyed finding someone's bookplate in an old book I acquired. At least twenty years ago, I decided I wanted a bookplate for myself. I thought about it but never for an extended period. As a result, nothing was ever produced. Then I came

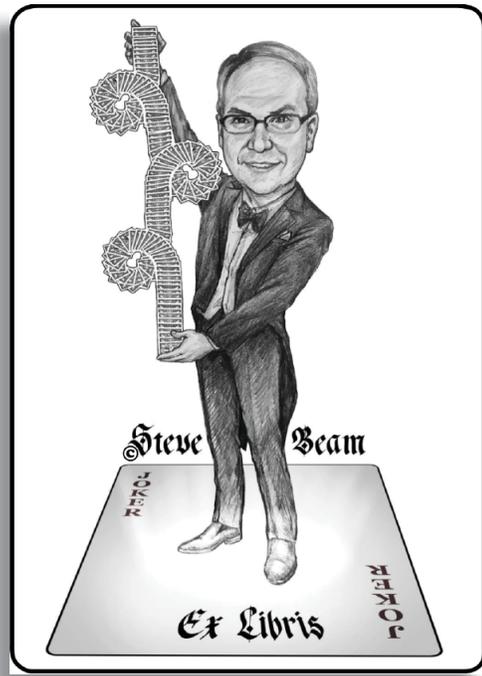


MECHANICAL CONJURING TABLE, WITH APPARATUS. MR. NOVRA, BURGENT STREET.

1872 British Print – This was the inspiration for my first bookplate (and my sixth bookplate, which you can see on page 3).



Bookplate #3 – From idea of Bernhard Schmitz.

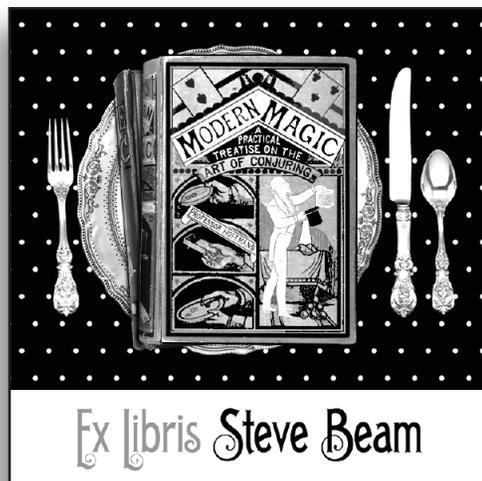


Bookplate #4 – The Impossible Flourish

upon an 1872 British print of a wizard standing in front of a (Joseph Bland?) magician’s table with antique magic props on it. I thought, there’s the idea for which I’ve been searching. I commissioned an artist to do a similar piece. I provided pictures of the props I wanted on the table and told him I wanted a friendly and wise-looking wizard rather than a scary one. And, since I wanted the bookplate to be personal, I wanted the wizard springing playing cards. Thus, the image covered most of my interests: magic, magic history, collecting, and card magic. To be clear, this was an original piece of artwork that was inspired by the Victorian print. Now that I would finally have a bookplate, I assumed I was done. That wasn’t painful at all. (Since this bookplate contains the same image as Bookplate #6, it is not pictured here.)

I had no idea what the quality of the finished product would look like. As soon as I sent the ideas to the artist, I thought that the design I created was missing the main reason for a bookplate – books. Instantly, if not sooner, I thought of two hands springing books rather than playing cards. Bingo! A bookplate with this image would cover my interests in magic, magic books, card magic, magic history, and collecting (I used early-edition Hoffmann books to meet the last two conditions). So, I contacted another artist and got him working on this idea. Art project #2. Again, but now with two bookplates in progress, I thought I was done. (Since this bookplate shares the image with Bookplate #7, it is not pictured here.)

However, while these were at the printers, I talked with Bernhard Schmitz about wanting a bookplate that could be printed in a smaller size for smaller volumes and still look good. He suggested a picture of a joker springing cards. This added humor in the form of a joker – another interest of mine, and



Bookplate #5 – Books on a Plate



**Bookplate #6 – The Wizard - Inspired by the
1872 British Print on page 1.
(This is a Color Version of Bookplate #1.)**

I had the artist use my face as the model for the joker to personalize it. Artist project #3, and I was pretty sure I was done. (See the top left image on page 2.)

That bookplate, being simpler in design than my other bookplates still in process, came back quickly. However, when I received it from the artist, it was my least favorite. The idea was better than the execution. So, I decided to use an old publicity photo of me doing an impossible cascade as the model for a bookplate. I decided I would have an image drawn with me standing on a joker executing the impossible flourish. Artist project #4. I liked the result and I was quite sure I was done. (See the top right image on the page 2.)

Then (and by now you probably realized there would be a “then”), I realized that neither of the last two smaller bookplates could be shrunk smaller than a playing card. So, I got an idea for a smaller bookplate. Specifically, a dinner plate with collectible magic books on it. (Books on a plate = a bookplate.) As far as being personalized, this design included books, history, collecting, a pun to represent humor, and it included my other major hobby – aerobic eating. So, I called magician/artist Phil Young for Artist project #5. Stick a fork in it... I was done. (See the image at the bottom of page 2.)

By now I had received the artwork on the first two bookplates. However, when I started having the first two bookplates printed on self-adhesive paper (peel and stick) I didn't like the final look. Both designs were very detailed and the matte paper lost some of that detail. The printing needed to be on glossy



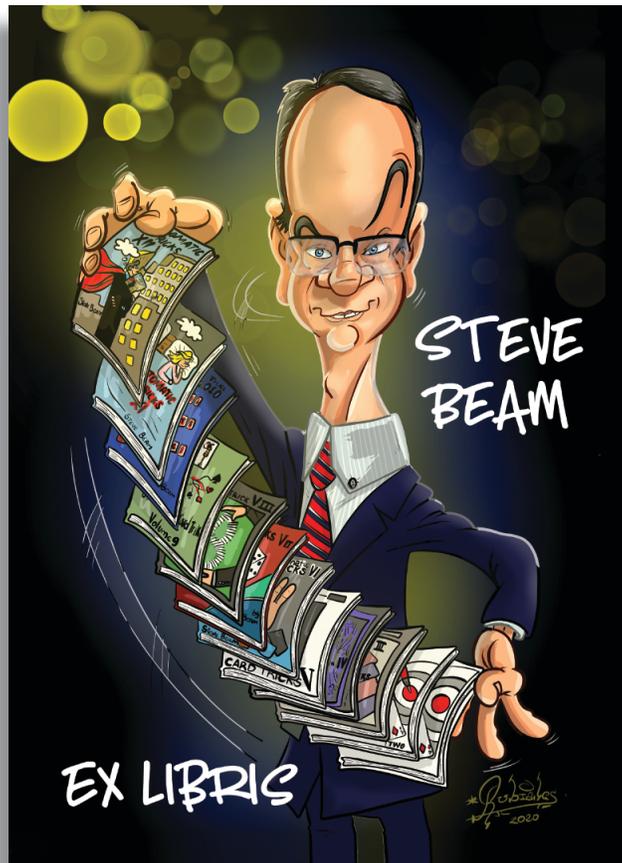
Springing the Hoffmanns
Bookplate #7 – “Color” Version of Bookplate #2

or semi-gloss paper to pick up the detail in the images. So I decided as long as I was reprinting those two plates, I should add a bit of color to both plates. So, I printed them again, using different paper and a small amount of color. Bookplates #6 and #7 were to replace bookplates #1 and #2 which I would now phase out. At this point, I *knew* I was done. I was less than a month into the project and I had already “retired” two bookplates. Counting the retired bookplates, I had seven more bookplates than anyone needs and six more bookplates than most (non-collector) people want. (See the image of Bookplate#6 on page 3 and Bookplate #7 above.)

But then, in an unrelated project, I have a magician friend (Juan Luis Rubiales) who does incredible caricatures. I wanted him to do an ad I would use for my **Semi-Automatic Card Tricks** series which I just completed in June with the publication of Volume 12. He couldn’t work as a magician due to global pandemic. So, rather than put off the idea like I had done for decades with the bookplate, I thought it would benefit both of us to commission him to do the full-color caricature I would use in the ad. I asked him to draw me springing all 12 volumes of my series from hand to hand, to which I would add the line, “It’s time to spring for the whole set.” He did an incredible job. When finished, I really liked the image for the ad. But the more I looked at it, the more I thought it was a great ad but that it would also make a great bookplate. So, I added the “ex libris” and had some printed in bookplate size. Bookplate #8, or *Unintentional Bookplate #1*. (See the image of Bookplate #8 at the top of the next page.)

I don’t think I’m done... I know I’m done. Well, at least for now. Like the 1970s television show, *Eight is Enough*. Sure, I have another small bookplate I designed which will remain in final draft for now as nobody needs nine bookplates. (Yes, I know the same could be said of bookplates two through eight.)

I have discovered an unexpected advantage to having so many bookplates. I haven’t been collecting bookplates long enough to have duplicates to swap with other collectors. However, by having six



Bookplate #8 – Springing the Semi-Automatics
“It’s time to spring for the whole collection.”

bookplates (or eight, depending upon your point of view) I have enough bookplates of my own to swap for some of the duplicates other collectors have. So, instead of receiving one bookplate for one bookplate, I have been growing my collection by eight at a time with each trade. (So far, and surprisingly to me, all have wanted the “retired” bookplates as well as their replacements in trade. There really is no explaining the thinking of a true collector.)

Regarding specific uses for different bookplates, while I won’t stick 100% to this, the general plan is to use the small one (books on a plate) where its size makes it the only candidate. Most old collectible hardbound books will get the Wizard or the hands-springing-the-early-edition-Hoffmanns bookplate. The other bookplates will be used mostly in pamphlets. The full-color caricature wouldn’t look right in a book from the 1800s. I will use it for most of my contemporary books. It would probably be most at home in a Karrell Fox book, or in something like Dorny’s **Trix and Chatter**.

John, it dawns on me that much of this will not make any sense to you until you receive the bookplates which should be any day now. Until then, take care and take cards.

Best,

Steve

As discussed above, I am new to admitting to having a collector problem. During the last six years, I have noticed an amazing generosity of others similarly afflicted. They have shared their collections

with me and been forthcoming with suggestions to help with my own affliction. So, when John asked if he could reprint the above e-mail, I thought it might be a good idea to share some tips and thoughts on bookplates to help those who may be interested in tossing away two months of their lives to generate what is in essence, a stationary bookmark. I already knew much of what follows or discovered it along the way using my trademark hit-or-miss method, but some of these tips were the result of conversations with veteran bookplate collectors including George Daily, Bernhard Schmitz, Mike Rose, and Michael Colley. If there is anything useful below, it probably came from them. There was not unanimity of thought in the solutions to some of the problems so what follows is more a discussion of the journey than a road map to the destination.

- **Stick It** – One of the early choices you will make is how you will adhere your bookplates to your precious books. The choices include licking the backs Marv Albert style, peel-and-stick labels, or individually applying adhesive with a glue stick. My culinary interests do not include consuming large amounts of glue over time, so I quickly eliminated coating the backs with lick-and-stick adhesive. Peel-and-stick labels were the most appealing (if you'll pardon the pun), but they are only available in limited materials by limited vendors which tends to price them at many times the cost of your other choices. And while using a glue stick is more manual labor than I would have opted for, if you are applying the bookplates to your books over time, it is almost painless. It also allows you to have multiple bookplates should you naively decide to open that trapdoor. If you can find an archival peel-and-stick you like, I would go with that. Otherwise, I'm all about the glue stick.

- **Permanent or Removable** – There is a belief espoused by most collectors that we are merely the temporary custodians of books and props in our collections. While that may be true, my books are *my* books for all time. Those who own the books before and after I do are custodians of *my* books. Once you understand the inherent truth in this logic, you will realize that using permanent adhesive to apply my bookplates was a no-brainer and is far superior to using removable adhesive (think "Post-it Notes"). To paraphrase bookplate collector Mike Rose in an e-mail to me: "*The glue stick I use is permanent. Let the guy that buys my books from my widow deal with it!*" (I'm thinking about asking for Mike for his spouse's direct cell number. And if I later don't like how he applied his bookplates, at least one of mine is large enough to cover his without any peek-through. Does that make me a bad person... or a good collector?) You will find both permanent and removable glue sticks available at most office supply stores.

- **Do No Harm** – The first commandment of bookplates is to use archival (acid-free) paper and archival adhesive. The first is easy because acid-free paper is standard with most printers. (It is not so standard that you shouldn't confirm it is acid-free.) On the other hand, the standard for adhesive is book-destroying, loaded-with-acid, non-archival, aggressive glue that, over time, will leave a slow-spreading puddle of darkness all over the front of your books. This stain looks like you asked a canine friend with a hydration problem to mark the book for you. The majority, but not all, of the peel-and-stick label options I found were non-archival. Do not skimp on this and do not forget to ask. I have acquired books that were from the 1970s that look like their owners spilled coffee from almost-full cups all over their inside front covers. One would think that temporary custodians would be all about preventing messes.

- **Personalize It** – My favorite bookplates in my collection tell me more than just a name about the previous owner. I'm slightly disappointed when I find a generic bookplate that says nothing about its owner and looks like it was purchased at Bookplates-R-Us. I'm surprised they don't come preprinted with "John (or Jane) Doe" after the *Ex Libris*. I have seen bookplates with the following: "*This book is from the library of _____.*" Your mission is to handwrite your name in the too-small blank for every book you own. No book wants to sport a generic bookplate for the next 200 years, especially one with a handwritten name. Using a bookplate that says nothing about you is like buying a trick and using the patter that comes with it word for word. You don't want your bookplate embarrassing your books. Instead, ask

yourself what you are known for in magic and is there a way to communicate that through a bookplate? It doesn't matter how you personalize the design, only that you do. I have a magician friend who is known for flashing during sleights and another who is known for a pass so loud it could be measured on a Richter scale. If I were them, I would incorporate those unique characteristics into my personal bookplate with a light flash coming from my hands or with ear-plug-wearing spectators. (These examples will remain hypothetical since, as of my writing this, neither knows what he is known for.)

- **Size Matters** – I own magic books that are about the same length and width of a playing card. Unless you plan to wrap the smaller books like fish in your bookplate, a small bookplate is a necessity for these situations. Similarly, I acquire books that have existing bookplates, some almost the same size as the book itself. (I actually have acquired two books where the bookplate was bigger than the book to which it was applied. These books look like they had an additional page added to the front of the book. This tells me far more about the previous owner than any artwork or text he included on the plate.) Since I don't want to cover the existing bookplates, having a smaller bookplate allows me to find an otherwise unoccupied space near the beginning of the book where I can place my bookplate.

However, a small bookplate must by nature be a simpler design. Artwork loses its detail as you shrink it to fit the size of the bookplate you want. To save time and money, let your artist know in advance the desired measurements of your plate. Even a large 4-inch by 5-inch (that's 39 square deciliters in metric) bookplate will lose detail if the artist created it on a large sketch pad.

My solution to the size issue is to have a small bookplate and a larger, more personal bookplate and use the one that fits. It's probably a good idea to stop before owning your own bookplates constitutes having a bookplate collection. Then again, where was that suggestion when it would have done me some good?

- **How and Where to Stick It** – Once you are ready to bestow your bookplate upon your library en masse, George Daily suggested it is not necessary to wet (or apply glue) to the entire back. It might result in a lumpy mess. *"Just moisten the back along the top edge and the bookplate will lay flat."* I thought this was George trying to save a few pennies he could apply to his next acquisition. However, I have several books with plates applied forty-plus years ago that survived this type of application and they are doing just fine, thank you. Perhaps this survival rate was explained by George's next suggestion. *"I always try to mount the plate on the reverse of the front cover."* By applying to the inside front cover, the bookplate is not being bent back and forth as it would be if it were attached to a page. I have opted to do the same where there is nothing of value already printed or adhering to that location. And while I agree with George about where to apply the bookplate, I glue mine down so securely that no future collector/custodian will be separating it from its book without a trip to Home Depot and something going bang.

- **Previously Removed Bookplates** – I mentioned in my e-mail that I enjoy finding bookplates in books I acquire. I dislike acquiring books where the bookplates have already been removed, ostensibly by some overly zealous bookplate collector who was not a true book lover. If this was you, cut it out! You are not a nice person and if it happens again, I will hunt you down.

- **Stake Your Claim** – I like maintaining the history of the book's ownership by retaining all pre-existing bookplates. I have acquired books with up to four bookplates/stamps, not counting gift inscriptions or owner signatures. For me, I don't want my bookplate to in any way intrude on those of the previous custodians of my book. If I can't find an empty space near the front of the book large enough to support even my smallest bookplate, I would have no qualms about using one of my biggie-size bookplates on the inside *back* cover. Then I would do my best to resist the temptation to write a large obnoxious note on the front cover that says *"Open other side."*

- **Displaying Your Toys** – A couple of bookplate collectors were kind enough to send photographs to me of my bookplates mounted into their collections. They look beautiful in their new velvet-lined homes. Both of the collectors take the whole mounting thing a little more seriously than I do, but then

they have *much* larger collections worthy of being professionally displayed. I'm going to suggest you discuss mounting preferences with collectors other than me (and also to be clear you are discussing bookplates being mounted to avoid potential misunderstandings). I ordered some clear archival sheet protectors designed to display postcards and 4 x 6-inch photographs in three-ring binders. They are efficient, inexpensive, and comparatively plain looking. And, as a result, I'm not planning on sending any photographs to others whose bookplates I mount.

There you have my thoughts and those I collected from other collectors. As with magic in general, there are no firm fixed rules (although there is at least that one commandment about acid-free adhesive). Feel free to experiment as I did and you will arrive at your own conclusions about creating, placing, and collecting bookplates. You might also start thinking as I do that a fine magic book is like a fine meal at a nice restaurant – it's not complete until it's properly plated. Regardless, I can guarantee that if you do follow the above tips and suggestions, in a mere two dozen years, you too may have a suitable bookplate (or eight.) As for me, I have stepped away from the bookplate-generating phase for fear that I won't stop until I have a unique plate in every book in my library. I have moved on to the bookplate-collecting phase.

Bookplate collecting doesn't require a lot of space, and if you show restraint on your mounting options, it's not terribly expensive. In fact, one of the great things about collecting bookplates is that once your memory goes fuzzy about how much you spent on your own bookplates, you will feel like you have entered a relatively inexpensive branch of collecting when you trade yours for others. And while you are getting in touch with those feelings, feel free to contact me if you would like to swap a few (or even up to eight) bookplates. I may not have a large magic collection, but if you count my personal bookplates, I'm pretty sure I have one of the largest bookplate collections in the world.

Steve Beam
sbeam@mindspring.com