



Alex Warren

Founder and Owner of Zorzura Rare Books

INTERVIEW YI-HWA HANNA

Zorzura is Dubai's first rare and vintage bookshop. What inspired you to open it? I studied literature and languages at university, so was always interested in the world of books and the slightly romantic idea of having a shop. Then after COVID, I wanted a change in career, and to work with a tangible product that you can hold and touch, rather than something digital. There's a resurgent appetite for physical books (bookshops seem to be cool again) and the population in Dubai is bigger and more diverse than before, so I thought it was time.

What makes rare books a good investment?

First, it's a personal investment – something with emotional value to enjoy over time or even pass down through the generations. What you buy is very much an individual choice – it might be a first edition of your favourite book, a book signed by your favourite author, or something that reminds you of a specific person, place, or moment. Financially speaking, investing in first edition books in very good condition can be a solid long-term store of value, especially for well-known titles that have popular TV or film adaptations. And you can start with a small budget.

How does the Middle East's fairly new rare books market compare to others? The most established markets are the US, the UK, and Europe, plus maybe a few other pockets like Japan or Russia. But you can find niche booksellers and book collectors all over the world. It's true that the market in the Gulf is much smaller and newer, but this is a quick-growing region and I think it will develop further, especially with greater awareness.

How do you source books? Do you travel a lot?

I buy a lot from the UK, which is a fantastic place to source all kinds of stock. But I regularly buy from lots of other countries too – recent examples include New Zealand, Belgium, Canada, Syria, and Lebanon. It's quite hard to find stock in the UAE, but I regularly hunt around for hidden gems. I do



travel a bit for work, but I'd love to spend more time at book fairs in different places.

What types of special requests do you get from clients?

A weird and wonderful range! It could be someone looking for help on gift ideas, or a specific book they can't find easily. Some examples of things I've sourced this year are a collection of Kazakh poetry, a rare book on Dubai, an early set of *The Lord of the Rings*, an obscure map of Brazil, and all the original *Bridgerton* novels!

What usually sells the best here?

Often it's books that are well-known across many different countries and languages, so first editions of things like Tolkien, Khalil Gibran, Tintin, Agatha Christie, Roald Dahl, and Jane Austen. People also like books that look and feel "old", even if they're not especially rare, which I think is because we live in such a new and modern city. Interesting and unusual books on the UAE or the Middle East are also popular.

What are your personal favourites? I'm not a literary snob, and will read anything that keeps the pages turning. In terms of collecting, I like books that are unique in some way – for example, inscribed by an author, or that would be virtually impossible to find again. As for genres, I like Cold War espionage, travel

and exploration, history, biographies, and anything that will make me laugh.

Are there any especially prized books in your own collection? I'm a big fan of film music, so I've got books signed by John Williams (who composed all the themes for *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*, *Harry Potter*, etc) and John Barry (who wrote the James Bond scores). Hopefully I'll never need to sell them...

How do you like to spend your vacation time?

Visiting and spending time with family is always important, as is a change of scenery – I often crave rain, hills, and cold air. I'm also trying to visit at least one new country every year and see places I haven't seen before. This year it was Vietnam, which was great.

If you could travel to any fictional world, which one would it be?

It's not an entirely invented universe, but it would be the 1980s fictional rural England created by Jilly Cooper. I've been watching the TV adaptation of her novel *Rivals*, on Disney Plus, and it's made me nostalgic for that childhood period.

What are three things that you always pack?

Running shoes, earplugs, and a book.

What's your earliest childhood holiday memory?

A blurred general memory of (usually wet) summer holidays in England, often involving visiting stately homes, castles, and assorted gardens. I remember going on a plane for the first time, and the thrill of being pushed back in your seat during take-off.

What is your go-to choice of in-flight entertainment?

Definitely Tetris! The best computer game ever invented. It's addictive and makes the time go quickly, and you can compare your scores against other passengers.

How do you spend your air miles? Very boring answer: I redeem them against flights. I have a credit card that earns miles on Emirates so they gradually stack up that way.

What's your ultimate bucket list destination?

I'd really like to see Mount Everest. I'm not interested in climbing it, but just being able to see the highest place on earth really appeals. I've read a lot about the 1920s expeditions that tried to reach the summit, and it still has this kind of romantic aura about it. **BT**