



'Now, they ask for my autograph'

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Adam Andrusier's obsession with memorabilia provided the inspiration for his friend Zadie Smith's new book. Elizabeth Grice meets him

There are people who would kill for this moment. At last, Adam Andrusier is opening the flap of his big, black shoulder bag. The waiting is over. Small talk can stop.



Collector turned dealer: Adam Andrusier

All eyes are on him as he draws out a set of plastic folders containing the treasure trove of his profession. If this were a convention of crazy autograph collectors, and not a mid-morning coffee shop in Hampstead, Andrusier would probably have been mobbed by now.

"Collectors are a weird lot," he says. "They have a quick chat, but all the time they're looking at my bag, not at me. They're itching to see what's in there. It makes my stomach turn to see the way they peer and examine everything."

He flips through the stuff of other people's fevered dreams with a mixture of reverence and scorn. A 1963 John F Kennedy autograph on a menu. A returned cheque, signed by George Gershwin. A letter from Charles Dickens saying he can't make it for tea.

The contract young Fidel Castro signed with a Cuban football team in the Forties. The Beatles' autographs on one sheet. Billie Holiday's four-page lament saying she's "low as a snake" after being sacked by Count Basie. A good Stravinsky, a nice Churchill, a rare John Wyndham

Andrusier, 28, is a dealer in ephemera, but once, he was a collector himself, a promiscuous fan of any famous person who might supply him with a scribble. He used to ambush actresses at the stage door at midnight and flatter them in grovelling letters - usually identical grovelling letters.

As a starstruck youth, he wrote obsessively to Katharine Hepburn, once waylaid Ray Charles (who pretended he couldn't write) and got rebuffed by Boris Yeltsin. He understands the collector's wayward passions and compulsions and his knowledge of what the novelist Zadie Smith calls "the desire network" has furnished some of the most compulsive detail of [her new book, *The Autograph Man*](#).

Make no mistake, Adam Andrusier is the original Autograph Man. He and Smith, north London neighbours, have known one another since their student days at King's College, Cambridge. She has listened to his stories of auction-room dramas and fake bids.

She no doubt saw signed photographs from Ronald and Nancy Reagan arrive in his pigeon-hole and wondered about the strange retro fantasy life of such a young man. "Even then, I was trading, buying the odd thing, making a couple of hundred quid here and there," he says. "I suppose I must have been a slightly eccentric student."

He may quibble about the extent to which he is the prototype for her book's anti-hero, Alex-Li Tandem, but it is clear that the two have an awful lot in common, not least the ability, occasionally, to doubt the sanity of their profession.

One of Andrusier's most prized possessions is a sharp, handwritten note by George Bernard Shaw: "Here is a woman who declares that I have given her help, self-knowledge, strength and better understanding - and the result is that she collects autographs!"

Smith dedicates *The Autograph Man* to "my friend Adam Andrusier, who knows funny from funny" and thanks him for

"the kind of facts that can't be found in libraries".

He's still trying to figure it all out. "I guess she means she likes my sense of humour," he says. He gave her a few collectors' magazines, put her right about things such as the price of an Einstein autograph, but disclaims any further input. "She just went off on her own tangent; got her own picture together."

Smith, whose first novel, *White Teeth*, was a literary sensation, likes people who are pathological about things. Whether he realised it or not, she was clocking Andrusier as he gabbled on about the aura of fame, the nature of fan-dom and his own cultish enthusiasms. Her close attention to a trade that feeds on the cult of celebrity has made Andrusier a little bit famous himself.

"Some people are impressed by the fact that I know Zadie and that she's dedicated this book to me. Others have expressed no interest whatever - then asked me to get them a signed copy.

"I am quite excited about it and so are my friends, but collectors and dealers are not easily impressed. If you showed them a document signed by Jesus, they'd probably say: Oh, I've got five of those."

Now that he's a trader, Andrusier looks down on the common ruck of collectors with pity. "Intelligent people with big jobs fall over if you show them a scribble on a piece of paper by their favourite idol," he marvels.

Yet that is how it was with him, in the days when collecting was an addiction. He's got over it, but he has to be careful and he feels sorry for those sweaty-palmed, middle-aged men who are still under the influence, even though his own livelihood depends on it.

"I sound like a recovering alcoholic, don't I?" Too right he does. The Billie Holiday letter is a case in point. Why, exactly, is he not ready to part with it? Why does he handle it as if it were a religious icon?

It isn't that he's waiting for it to increase in value (though it is now worth between £5,000 and £10,000), so it must be affection, reverence, awe. "I find it quite amazing to hold an artefact like this," he says, tenderly turning the pages. "It's as though I shouldn't really have it in my hands."

These days, a piece of paper with a famous signature doesn't move him, he claims, but an interesting letter like Billie's, a historically significant document - that's different. The glittering stare of the collector masks his usually mobile features as the passion to own overcomes the desire simply to trade.

"I never really chose autographs," says Andrusier. "I just fell into it. I did it because I knew enough to buy and sell and I suppose I'm a natural businessman. I see it more as a way of surviving than as a sensible career move. I don't feel like I have a job, but I suppose I actually do."

Andrusier has been collecting something or other since he was a little boy. First, it was marbles, then it was fossils, especially ammonites. When he was 11, his father - who collects postcards of European synagogues that were destroyed by the Nazis - gave him a signed photograph of Cary Grant.

Armed with this one signature, Andrusier found he could impress people, especially his parents' friends. Aged 12, he started trawling *Who's Who* in his local library and fired letters off to actors and writers. He rang up Barbara Cartland, pestered Katharine Hepburn and James Stewart.

"I was a cynical little boy. I would work the same letter over and over again, changing a couple of details to suit the person. I introduced myself as a fan, making bland statements such as 'I think all your work is fantastic. Nothing would make me happier than to have your autograph'. I'm embarrassed to think of it now." Even when he was a teenager, he wrote pretending he was only 12.

A turning point in his acquisitiveness came when he discovered it was possible to buy the autographs of famous dead people at auctions. "I would just turn up, this odd little kid. Once I started spending money, it was more entertaining."

Jazz autographs became his speciality. With a loan from his parents, he bought a cache that included the Billie Holiday letter. When he left university, he borrowed £12,000 and bought an entire private collection of entertainment memorabilia, the most he has spent in one go. "It became my stock."

He had been expecting to make a career in music, but his ambition to become a concert pianist took a severe knock when he got a section of Ravel's Piano Concerto in front of 1,000 people in King's College Chapel. The experience

made it easier for him to drift towards autograph trading.

It sounds a nice life. He can justify a trip to Paris by visiting second-hand bookshops. He can attend a New York auction, as he did recently, and visit Zadie at the same time. "Sometimes, I wake up and think: I don't want to do this today." If his credit card bills get high, he can sell another autograph.

Not surprisingly, Andrusier is reluctant to be identified too closely with Alex-Li Tandem in Zadie Smith's book. Tandem is a bit of a loser. He has trouble with relationships and seems to be suffering from arrested development. Maybe autograph hunting is just for sad geeks?

"I recognise myself in the situations in the novel, but not in the central character," he says. "You may think I'm rather unstable, but I'm not as unstable as he is. I really like the book and I don't feel it has complicated our friendship. It has strengthened it."

Someone asked for his autograph at Zadie's book launch. "I thought it was hysterical. I felt a real fraud. I don't think I'm a celebrity. But would you like my autograph?"

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- The Autograph Man by Zadie Smith (Viking) is available for £14.99 plus £1.99 p&p. To order, call Telegraph Books Direct on 0870 155 7222

► [5 September 2002: Zadie Smith bounces back with fun and too many facts \[review of Autograph Man\]](#)

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