

On TV's "Night Court," the situation comedy that's doing well in the ratings this year, John Larroquette plays the role of Dan Fielding, the uncouth, bumbling assistant district attorney, whose "nerdy" antics not only contribute to the show's success, but also won Larroquette a 1984 Emmy for best supporting actor in a comedy series.

But in "real life," Larroquette is the antithesis of the character he plays. And his avocation is anything but comedic: He collects first editions of contemporary books-books that are unusual or rare because of their limited press runs.

An avid collector for the last five years, he's also a copious reader.

"I read everything I buy," the actor says, adding that some of the later works of novelist William S. Burroughs are the exceptions.

'Feeling of Power'

One wall of the small study in Larroquette's Malibu home is lined with his collection, which includes works by poet Charles Bukowski, the late social critic Henry Miller and Nobel laureate Samuel Beckett.

Among the pleasures of collecting is a "certain feeling of power in knowing there might be only 26 copies of a book on the planet and you own one of them."

Author-signed copies with book jackets in pristine condition are his and other collectors' particular acquisition goals, and he feels fortunate in having acquired many of this quality.

A book collection often stems from an interest in and desire to acquire works of a particular author, a genre (poetry, for example) or in an area of interest such as Civil War history or memorabilia. In the case of Larroquette, he began by collecting books about the Beatles. Then in 1982, he bought the complete works of Samuel Beckett, and recently he acquired an intact set of Screen World magazines, 1949-1984.

For the major part of his collection, however, Larroquette specializes in authors given to casting a cold eye on modern life.

In advising others who want to become involved in collecting, he suggests that they research the publication history of a book. He points out that a first edition may have several printings and that subsequent editions-with deletions or additions-may also be valuable.

In helping determine the value of books, Larroquette uses two reference works: "Modern Book Collecting" by Robert A. Wilson, which narrows the field and lists major U.S. publishers, and "The Book Collector's Handbook of Values" by Van Allen Bradley. (The latter is a staple of used bookstores and can be found in libraries.)

Though Larroquette has shopped in "spider-webbed" bookstores in the past, he feels that nowadays this might prove a waste of time. While an alert bibliophile might occasionally find a relatively inexpensive buy in either a bookstore or garage sale, Larroquette says the days are gone when first editions of Ernest

Hemingway sold for 50 cents or you could pick up the complete works of Gertrude Stein or Eugene O'Neill for \$5.

In acquiring books through a dealer, Larroquette suggests comparing prices to determine mark-ups. Booksellers usually buy a book for about 50% of its retail value-and more if there's a waiting client.

He advises the serious collector to establish an account with rare/used book dealers, so they can be on the lookout for the kinds of books that are right for the collection. Larroquette deals with a book dealer he refers to as "the man called Red," who runs Baroque Books. He also buys from Larry Edmunds, a Hollywood book dealer who specializes in cinema titles.

Other sources of supply for the actor's collection are auction-house catalogues. These publications list previous sales of volumes to help in determining the value of books. For example, he says his copy of Thomas Pynchon's "V" is worth \$400, but a signed copy by this elusive author might fetch as much as \$5,000.

The actor also buys through catalogues advertised by specialty book dealers in the New York Review of Books and book review sections of newspapers and magazines. He also subscribes to the American Book Collector, a bimonthly publication.

Condition is a major factor in determining a book's value. If it has a broken spine, torn pages, a missing dust jacket, is "foxed" (stained or discolored) or has marginalia and underlinings-except those by the author, which may enhance the value greatly-the price of the book can plummet. But an inscription, if "well done," doesn't necessarily hurt the value at all.

Another practical way to build a good collection is to hold onto books. Who knows, perhaps in 30 years, Larroquette's first edition of John Fowles' "Daniel Martinez," picked up from a remainder table for a song, will prove a rare book.

And, finally, Larroquette says not to delay buying a particular title when you find it, even if it means stretching the budget. Chances are it won't go down in price, and often it will be gone when you later make up your mind to buy it.

Though there are some books that got away from him, Larroquette's goal of buying all 99 volumes described in Anthony Burgess' "Ninety-Nine Novels," plus his "A Clockwork Orange," should round out an impressive contemporary collection.