Connoisseurship, with its focus on the materiality of cultural artifacts, has been an undervalued skill in the Age of Pure Theory. However, there are many welcome signs that the pendulum has begun to swing the other way, and the appearance of Stuart Bennett’s monograph on early modern British trade bindings is one of them. Bennett comes to his task from the book trade where, over a distinguished career of some thirty years, he has built a reputation as a very smart bookman (forgive the archaism, please) whose catalogues of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British literature have been easily among the best and most interesting in the business. His most recent contribution to the literature is a reminder of how valuable the store of information tucked between the ears of many booksellers can be to the world of learning and to the practices of curatorship. In Bennett’s case, a lifetime of handling British books has led him to some major revisions in the received wisdom that many of us (myself included) have duly absorbed and erroneously passed along to others. Now, at least, there can be no excuses for not getting things right.

Briefly, Bennett makes and (I think) documents a seemingly unremarkable claim, namely, that the vast majority of books sold in Britain and North America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were sold bound, not in sheets. In and of itself, such an assertion will mean little to any except specialists. However, insofar as it consigns to the realm of the fabulous a cherished chunk of wisdom that has resisted critical scrutiny for so long, it alerts us to the tenuous character of much of our supposed knowledge of our collections and their origins. The value of Bennett’s patient and compulsively empirical study is in reminding us how we may look at—and still not see—our collections. The cliché “hidden in plain view” occurred to me more than once in reading Bennett’s book. “We” had long assumed that those rows of leather bindings, many humble and unadorned, in our stacks were the results of negotiations between book buyers and bookbinders. The more ornate and embellished the binding, the more assured its bespoke creation. We had long assumed that, for a variety of reasons, books were shipped and sold in sheets, especially books headed from Britain to North America in the eighteenth century. Whether overland or by sea, sending books in sheets seemed a better business plan than sending them bound. But all of these were only assumptions, assumptions that had no real evidence to justify them. Bennett has now set the record straight, and in doing so has opened some new portals for curators and historians of the book alike.

When we think of publishers’ bindings or trade bindings, we think of large runs of uniformly bound copies of the same book, the model that came into practice in the earlier nineteenth century and persists to the present. However, that is only one model of trade bindings. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had another, more interesting, more variegated model that could fill booksellers’ shops with arrays of bound volumes designed to appeal to the economic and aesthetic range of their client base. British book buyers may well have customized their bindings, but they did so like Samuel Pepys: after they had bought the volume bound from their local merchant. Often books would be bound by publishers or by syndicates of booksellers with copyrights; sometimes
they would be bound or customized by
the bookseller functioning only as re-
tailer and responding to local tastes and
requirements. Either way, British book
buyers in the eighteenth century had
long since grown accustomed to acquir-
ing their tomes “ready to use” since the
sixteenth, if not the fifteenth, century,
according to Bennett. The varieties and
generic similarities across these bindings
reflect both the economics of publish-
ing and the evolving tastes of the times.
Binders were at the bottom of the food
chain, and the publishers and booksellers
who controlled the ebb and flow of their
work made sure that wages remained low
throughout the period.

For historians of the book, Bennett’s
study is richly suggestive of the density
and sophistication of the British book
trade in the early modern period. We have
long known about the London syndicates
and publisher cartels that attemped to
control copyrights and distribution, and
there is a growing body of literature on
the struggles of the provincial book trade.
Samuel Johnson, on intimate terms with
the book trade, long ago showed us the
tiers of middlemen who steered “product”
from publisher to retailer and so increased
the markup at every stage in the process.
But what we had not really appreciated
before Bennett was the extent to which the
trade was, as we might say today, “verti-
cally integrated,” with publishers actually
maintaining their own binderies or stables
of binders. With the costs of paper large
and relatively fixed, binders represented
a leverage point for the trade in which
wages, designs, and material could all be
adjusted to achieve desired profit margins.
The British book trade was no place for
amateurs by the eighteenth century. It
was Big Business. To what extent these
business practices were employed on the
Continent remains to be studied. Perhaps
Bennett’s inquiry will provoke similar
forays by Continental scholars.

For curators and collectors, Bennett’s
book is an invaluable road map through
the maze of trade binding styles avail-
able throughout the period. It provides a
wealth of detail on individual publisher
styles, on the chronological evolution of
binding styles and materials, and on the
cryptic and arcane vocabulary binders
used to describe their menu of offerings to
publishers and booksellers. Hundreds of
illustrations with generous captions allow
Bennett to make his points in considerable
detail and constitute a major exhibition
in their own right. Indeed, I found the
examples much more compelling than the
narrative, which really could have
been condensed to a single chapter. The
illustrations also may encourage profes-
sionals to compare and contrast examples
from their own collections with those in
the book. They may even have provided
lifetime employment for the dwindling
cadre of rare book catalogers who now
can go back and update appropriate
MARC fields based on Bennett’s gallery
guide. Although localizing and attribut-
ing unsigned bindings from the early
modern period is notoriously difficult,
Bennett’s painstaking efforts are the best
points of departure yet.

Although it is good to have Bennett’s
excellent work in the form of a book, it
is exactly the sort of project that would
be well, if not better, served on the Web.
The author himself alludes to this in his
conclusion, and I would like to stress
it here. Bennett has accumulated the
nucleus of a rich and valuable database
of images and descriptions that could
easily be augmented over time by librar-
ians, collectors, and booksellers on both
sides of the Atlantic. A dynamic database
would permit the kind of clustering and
associating that the book does not and
thus might help establish relationships
among books otherwise not immediately
apparent. The Web would permit image
management, allowing viewers to zoom
in, adjust color values, and so on. So, if
a second, expanded edition of Bennett
would be welcome someday, why should
we have to wait for it? We could begin
growing it now, on the Web.—Michael
Ryan, University of Pennsylvania.