

*Once Upon
A Time...*

An Omaha Jesuit's collection of fables and related items is second to none

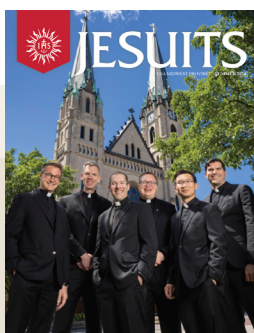
by Garan Santicola



In the Rare Books Room at Creighton University's Reinert-Alumni Memorial Library, Fr. Gregory Carlson, SJ, holds an 1895 Jeu des Fables game featuring tokens with quotations and fable morals to be guessed at for points. Funding for the collection has come from gifts, donations, grants and generous support from Creighton University.



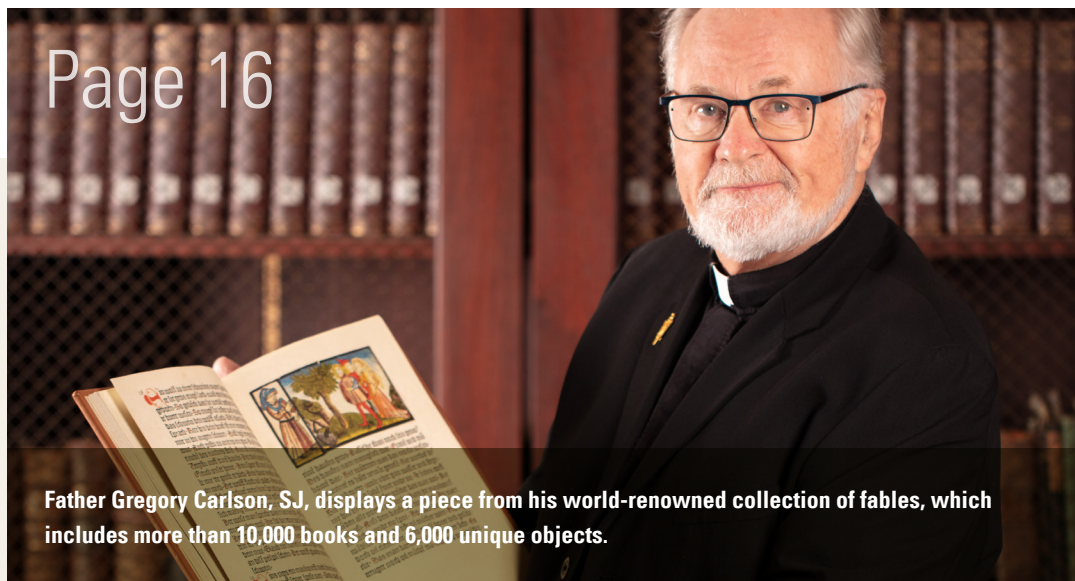
Our story begins with Fr. Gregory Carlson, SJ...



ON THE COVER

The 2024 ordinands at Church of the Gesu on the campus of Marquette University.

Photo: Steve Donisch



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Father Gregory Carlson, SJ, displays a piece from his world-renowned collection of fables, which includes more than 10,000 books and 6,000 unique objects.

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Midwest Jesuits Ordination

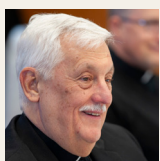
On June 8, six Midwest Jesuits were ordained by the Most Reverend Robert J. Fisher, auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Detroit.



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The Power of Innovation

Loyola University Chicago alumnus John Dewan's philanthropic efforts reach across the world.



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Father General in the Midwest

Photos from the Midwestern visit of Father General Arturo Sosa, SJ.



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Four Sets of Twins

All four Jesuits professing first vows this summer have twin connections. Three of them are twins themselves.

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(Top) A child's thermos and lunchbox from the 1950s/1960s depicting Aesop's *The Tortoise and the Hare*; (bottom left) a 1956 transatlantic dining car menu with cover art by Jean Mercier depicting Jean de La Fontaine's *The Coach and the Fly*, and; (bottom right) E. Phosty's lithograph of the same scene.

Father Gregory Carlson, SJ, learned the value of play from his father, who ran the toy department in a large department store in Milwaukee. "I still play," says Fr. Carlson, whose fable collection at Creighton University features more than 10,000 books and 6,000 unique objects. "Fables play," he says. "As we engage them, we play our way into understanding."

As a young scholar, Fr. Carlson loved the brevity and wisdom of short pieces of classical literature and the parables of Christ, an affinity that became yet another thread leading to his appreciation for fables. "Fables pulled on various threads of my life," he says, "and even pulled those threads together."

In a piece he wrote for the Dutch journal *Tiecelijn*, Fr. Carlson recalled those threads intersecting when, early in his academic career, he received approval from the American Philological Association (now The Society for Classical Studies) to present a paper on fables at its national convention. "That acceptance opened a door," he wrote. "I could enjoy a hobby of collecting fables and presenting what I found, and it could fit into my professional and scholarly life."

Today, The Carlson Fable Collection occupies its own room as part of the Special Collections of the Libraries of Creighton University, and generous portions are viewable in an online photo database. In addition to the many unique books Fr. Carlson has acquired over the years, his collection includes cards (mostly postcards or trade cards), stamps, buttons, matchboxes, blotters, tiles and tableware, all of which feature scenes from fables.

"There is absolutely nothing comparable to this collection anywhere else," says Laura

Gibbs, who taught mythology and folklore at the University of Oklahoma for many years and recently has been cross-referencing Fr. Carlson's collection against the already digitized copies of rare fable books around the world. The project is just one part of a broader effort to attend to the legacy of The Carlson Fable Collection.

Father Carlson credits Susan Naatz, Creighton's director of Ignatian formation and ministry for faculty and staff, with inspiring him to spearhead that effort. "For several years in our annual reviews of my work, Susan has asked what I am doing to promote the collection," he says. "Each year I answered, 'I

A LARGE PART OF WHAT MAKES THIS COLLECTION SO IMPORTANT AND VALUABLE IS THE STORY BEHIND EACH AND EVERY BOOK AND OBJECT.

will think about that.' When I gave my answer last summer, Susan said, 'I do not want you to think about it. I want you to pray about it.'"

That prompt led to the formation of a committee of colleagues working to refine the presentation of the collection, marking a more recent point at which the threads of Fr. Carlson's life have come together.

"A large part of what makes this collection so important and valuable is the story behind each and every book and object,"

says Peterson Brink, Creighton's director of archives and special collections since 2021. Since then, he has worked on centralizing fable materials,



streamlining accessibility, and ensuring optimal preservation conditions. Caring for the collection feeds his own fascination with the artistic styles of fables across hundreds of years. "Focusing on fables allows you a view of how societies and movements change over time," he says.

Brink's predecessor, David Crawford, points to the rich diversity of the collection, from books printed centuries ago to digital media only a few years old, from toys for children to jewelry for adults, from cheap trinkets to expensive Chagall etchings and beautiful ceramic pieces. The collection "demonstrates how fables transcend generational, cultural, societal, economic, language, race/ethnicity and many other boundaries," Crawford says. "In short, The Carlson Fable Collection highlights a part of globally shared culture."

Michael LaCroix, former senior library director at Creighton, characterizes Fr. Carlson as "an amazing storyteller" and fondly recalls hearing about his adventures acquiring the

many pieces in the collection around the world and closer to home. He discovered a first edition *Esops Fabler* in Swedish with illustrations by Ernst Griset in an airport bookshop in his hometown of Milwaukee.

"In 33 years, I have not found the book again, even in



ARTS & CULTURE

(Top) An 1885 fable card from J&P Coats Spool Cotton with a reference to Aesop's *The Lion and the Mouse*; (bottom) a 1971 publication of *The Father, his Son and their Donkey*, retold by L.A. Hill and illustrated by Paul Wright.

Stockholm," Fr. Carlson says.

In 1991 and 1992 at Georgetown University, Fr. Carlson taught his first of many courses on fables. While in Washington, D.C., he ventured to a nearby book fair and found two books on the fables of Jean de La Fontaine: one an 1894 edition published by Pierre Barboutau with illustrations by Japanese artists, the other a Gustave Doré illustrated first edition, which Fr. Carlson calls "splendid and massive" and "typically dark, as Doré is."

Aesop's Fables, from 6th century B.C. Greece, and La Fontaine from 17th century France, are the primary sources for most works in the collection. One of Fr. Carlson's greatest acquisitions came on a visit to Paris, where he stopped in a bouquiniste's stall on a walk along the Seine and found a five-volume edition of La Fontaine's fables and short stories illustrated in 1950 by Gaston Barret. Thinking the price was too high, he tried to negotiate but the seller would not relent. Father Carlson left empty-handed only to find that very same edition at a different spot later in the day for half the price.

"We've built a champagne collection on a beer budget," says Fr. Carlson, who credits the generosity of many sellers for providing discounts in exchange for seeing their treasures become part of his collection.

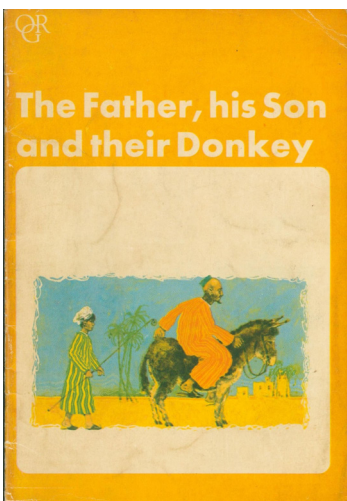
At Serendipity Books in Berkeley, Calif., where he once bought a 1544 *Historia Vitae Fortunaequae Aesopi, cum Fabulis Illius* (an account of Aesop's life with the fables) by Joachim Camerarius, the seller told him, "I don't believe in religion, Father, but I'll give you 20 percent off if you'll pray for me."

In Morocco, he found an enormous book of La Fontaine fables illustrated by Adolf Born, published in the Czech Republic but written in French. In Bangkok, he came across a



multiplicity of Thai-language fable booklets with cover illustrations, such as one depicting a lion and a mouse.

On mission in Nigeria, he stopped in the city of Ife for lunch with a fellow Jesuit. There, he found Oxford University Press' pamphlet *The Father, his Son and their Donkey*, with Ibrahim and Ali appropriately presented for an African audience.



Fables are subject to interpretation, a theme that took center stage in a 2018 exhibit of The Carlson Fable Collection at Omaha's Joslyn Art Museum. In the exhibit, a 1956 Transatlantic dining car menu with Jean-Adrien Mercier cover art depicting La Fontaine's *The Coach*

and *the Fly* is paired with Gabriel Gostiaux's 1895 lithograph of the same scene. Treating the fable about a fly who takes credit for the hard work of horses and a stagecoach driver, Mercier highlights the fly's insignificance by placing it outside the picture, creating the optical illusion that it has landed on the viewer's menu. Gostiaux, on the other

hand, puts an actual man in place of the fly in multiple scenes along the coach's route, drawing attention to the human flaws the story was intended to explore.

Having incorporated the wisdom of fables into his years of teaching classics at Creighton, Fr. Carlson's effort to hone the presentation of his collection is rooted in his hope that it might become an enduring educational resource in the university's special collections, and in many more around the world through the comprehensive digitization currently underway.

As for himself, Fr. Carlson sees his pastime of collecting fables and fable-related artifacts as an enriching gift. "I'm watching for the way life is engaging because I think God is engaging us. For me, enjoying God's gift, receiving God's gift, has had something to do with fun and adventure and creativity, and fables are a part of that." ✠



Garan Santicola is a freelance writer who lives in the Catskill Mountains of upstate New York. His Beauty & Truth column on the arts has won multiple National Catholic Press awards, and he is currently working on his first novel.