WHO COLLECTS THESE DAYS? What do people collect? What mechanisms are used to buy and sell collections? When we began contemplating an issue of RBM devoted to collecting one thing seemed certain: the world of collecting has changed dramatically in the more than 50 years since John Carter’s Taste and Technique in Book Collecting: A Study of Recent Developments in Great Britain and the United States first appeared.

Carter’s erudite and elegant tome opens with a quote, in Greek, from the Palatine Anthology that he translates as “who are you and to whom do you speak,” providing the author with a fine rhetorical and conspicuously antiquarian opening. Without appropriating the use of classical Greek as Carter did, the essence of his trope serves by reiterating the questions, “who are we and to whom do we speak?”

The essays assembled here do not aspire to Carter’s purpose nor do they chart new paths in collecting. Rather, we hope that these pieces will prompt discussions about the status of collecting and collectors. Dealer and collector Kenneth Rendell looks backwards and forwards at the rare book and manuscript trade and examines the ways in which members of the trade and collectors interact with one another. Eric Holzenberg offers a thought piece on the past five years of online auctions and Internet-based collecting. Holzenberg’s work, in particular, suggests that many commonly-held notions about rarity, the profile of collections, the nationalist understanding of collecting, and finally, about taste as well as technique no longer may be valid. Donald Farren
casts a cold eye on the history, mechanics, and usefulness of undergraduate book collecting competitions. Finally, in his interview with Daniel Slive, Henry Snyder explains how one scholar-collector found his life’s work in creating one of the most important bibliographic tools available, the ESTC.

What is evident is that there are many more collectors and kinds of collections than we may have supposed. There are many more people whose love of books, manuscripts, art, and other cultural artifacts binds them to our mission to preserve a shared cultural heritage. Perhaps it is time to acknowledge the historic importance of John Carter’s work, classical quotes and all, and adopt an understanding of the vast breadth and depth of current collecting practices. Who are we and to whom do we speak? We are the collectors of incunables, first editions, dime novels, comic books, Harlequin romances, home videos, DVDs – you name it, we collect it. We are speaking to ourselves.