

MICHAEL KORDA

*Simon & Schuster's editor in chief makes time to talk about **Marking Time**, his newest book.*

BY LORRAINE DePASQUE, EDITOR IN CHIEF



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IF MEMORY SERVES ME CORRECTLY, I FIRST “MET” MICHAEL KORDA BACK IN THE eighties—figuratively, via an article he’d written for *The New York Times* on his travels in Africa. Korda’s descriptions, particularly of hot air ballooning over Kenya, were so vivid and passionate that I saved the article as inspiration to one day adventure to the eastern hemisphere’s exotic continent myself.

Now, some two decades later, Michael Korda has remarkably succeeded in bringing that same vivid imagery and passion to his latest book, *Marking Time: Collecting Watches—and Thinking about Time* (Barnes & Noble Books, \$14.95, 198 pages). Truly, if after reading this book, one is not already a collector of timepieces, one wants to be.

In his signature style of referencing experiences, desires, and learning processes that everyone can relate to or at least understand, the longtime collector of vintage watches has written a book that is perhaps the perfect gift from a luxury jeweler to his “best customers.”

While *Marking Time* is the first book on watches from Korda, he is, after all, editor in chief of Simon & Schuster and a highly accomplished author, having written more than a dozen books, both fiction and non-fiction. Many will recognize the various titles, among them: *Charmed Lives*, *Horse People*, *Country Matters*, *Queenie*, *The Fortune*, *Power!*, and *Ulysses S. Grant: The Unlikely Hero*.

With regard to *Marking Time*, one element that contributes to this book’s prominence is its discussion of timekeeping as well as timepieces. Korda’s chronicling of the historical and cultural changes that led to innovations and refinements in timepieces will interest history buffs as well as watch aficionados. For me, however, one of the most significant sections involves his frank and refreshing analysis of the vintage versus the collectible market.

Finally, as one finishes the last chapter, “Tools of the Trade,” on the equipment watch collectors need to pursue this hobby with satisfaction, one wants more. Truth be told, if you know anything about the writer, then you especially want more. Michael Korda, you see, is a living Renaissance man, who not only writes best-selling books and travels to some of the most exotic places on the planet, but is also an equestrian, an Oxford graduate, and a former serviceman in the Royal Air Force.

I recently met with Korda in his New York office to discuss his newest book as well as the pursuit of collecting timepieces in this modern age, and his personal pleasure from being part of it.

Timepiece photos appear in *Marking Time* and are courtesy of Antiquorum.



Rolex watches from the 1930s feature a variety of fascinating dials.



“Farewell to the Beloved” enamel pocket watch, mounted with pearls, 1830, made for the Chinese market.

Why did you write a book on timepieces?

Korda: Originally, at one time, the publisher of this book, Barnes & Noble, wanted to write a series of books on collecting: watches, silver, stamps, guns, all kinds of things. So the idea intrigued me because I saw it as part of a five- or six-book package. But that never happened—maybe because people who collect watches probably don’t also collect guns.

Actually, you collected guns, didn’t you?

Korda: Yes, at one time I collected guns, too, but now I’ve gotten rid of most of them. In the real world, people don’t have enough time to collect a lot of things.

So what timepieces do you collect?

Korda: Patek Philippe pocket watches, and only those watches made between 1870 and 1914, the great period for the pocket watch, when the dials were still made of enamel and hand-painted. I limit myself to about a dozen watches.

What watch do you wear?

Korda: At work, I only wear a pocket watch. But, I’m fairly active. I go to the gym, I ride horses—my wife, Margaret, and I live on a horse farm in upstate New York. The kind of life I have requires a robust watch. So, I wear a Rolex up in the country. A Rolex is about as robust as you get. I don’t really care how battered my Rolex looks. But with Patek Philippe, it’s easy to become obsessive about the scratches. Once you begin to collect things that are objects for use, it becomes a different case. [Editor’s note: Korda owned a Rolex oyster watch at the age of 17, and he still wears it today and he says it still keeps perfect time.]

You’ve been interested in watches since the 1940s. In your experience, what’s the typical demographic of a watch collector?

Korda: Mostly men. I’ve yet to meet a woman who’s interested in collecting watches. The typical demographic? Men in their fifties.

You have a strong opinion about collecting versus acquiring.

Korda: Yes, well, I don’t think that acquiring is the way to build a collection—and, frankly, in this country, acquiring is much bigger than collecting. But in regard to real collecting, a lot of watch collecting is essentially inquisitive—much like jewelry collecting. There’s a certain faint notion that collecting is a form of permanency, but it isn’t, really. Preserving a collection doesn’t much go beyond a generation. I think that you don’t really own the things you collect. You simply have them for a period of time. Then, perhaps you give them to a museum.

And if they don’t end up in a museum?

Korda: You pass them on to the next generation or you give them to auction houses and jewelry shops. If you pay attention to the auction catalogs and follow what’s available, many watches actually come up again and again. Because for collecting timepieces, there’s a relatively small pool. There are just so many people who want to acquire and collect them.

Collecting, in general, is on the rise—artwork, timepieces, jewelry . . .

Korda: Well, yes, there’s a natural tendency for the world’s valuable objects to be set in motion from time to time. Social cycles can set loose such a tsunami-like wave.

Should luxury jewelers go full force into vintage timepieces?

Korda: They don’t have a choice but to get into vintage watches because, since the 1950s and 1960s, the world became one where the consumer expects a tradeoff for their Rolex. So jewelers have to be into vintage and do tradeoffs. Up until the fifties and sixties, you couldn’t negotiate with, for example, a Bulgari or a Cartier. But, today, how many people go in those stores and pay the real price? That’s the difference between a customer and a client. A customer comes in and the sales associate tells them the price. A client, on the other hand, is someone the store has a long relationship with and so they negotiate with them.

Do you think timepiece collectors buy off the Internet?

Korda: I’m not the expert when it comes to the Internet. I’m the wrong generation. But I don’t know anyone who is a real watch collector who uses the Internet. When it comes to watches, my feeling is that, if you can’t pick it up and wind it, you probably shouldn’t buy it. In the days when I was vaguely collecting cars, I wouldn’t have bought a Ferrari without going to see it and take a drive in it. It’s the same principle with watches.

