

Modern Firsts

Fair play: Buy the book

TWO YEARS AGO, Vancouver once again hosted an antiquarian book fair after a 20-year hiatus. The papers of bookseller Stephen Lunsford, now at Simon Fraser University, recount the discussions that led to the first of these fairs, in 1983 (see Richard Hopkins, "Let's Go to the Fair!" in *Amphora* 156). Lunsford, cited by Hopkins, recalls bookseller Bill Hoffer's motivation in advocating for such an event: "Bill wanted a fair to show those guys in the East that we could put together a book event every bit as good (and presumably better) as the established Toronto and Ottawa fairs."

The 1983 fair made this point with 1,300 paid admissions, including 1,000 attendees on opening night. The best proof of success was bookseller satisfaction with sales and exposure, which led to four more fairs in seven years. These fairs provided an excellent platform for three generations of Western Canadian booksellers to connect with established customers and sell books to new customers. An added bonus for local collectors was the presence of book dealers from across Canada and the United States, with an emphasis on the West Coast, including Los Angeles, Berkeley, San Francisco and Seattle.

The end of the Vancouver book fairs in 1990 is usually ascribed to the introduction of the federal

goods and services tax (GST) in January 1991. The new tax greatly increased the complexity and cost of importing for commercial purposes large, diverse quantities of items such as antiquarian books and modern first editions. Acknowledging this significant obstacle for U.S. book dealers, it also seems likely that the strain of organizing the fair took its toll on the relatively small, and on occasion divisive, bookseller community.

Two Vancouver-area booksellers, Richard Hopkins and Charles Purpora, with financial support from philanthropist Yosef Wosk and the Alcuin Society, resurrected the Vancouver Book Fair in 2010. While a more modest affair than previous fairs, the resulting event was judged a success by participating booksellers. A second book fair with Hopkins as the main organizer was mounted in September 2012. I attended the 2012 fair in its entirety and I'm pleased to report that it was enough of a success that booksellers were planning the next one even before it ended.

Seventeen of the 24 exhibitors at the 2012 fair were from the Vancouver area, with six more from elsewhere in British Columbia and one from Winnipeg. The concentration of regional dealers did not appear to deter book buyers from attending and spending money. Close to 800 attendees paid the \$5 admission fee (good for both days), and Hopkins says the fair will show a small operating surplus. More important, exhibitors reported decent sales. Organizers even had to make an emergency supply run when the initial stock of 500 stickers



Jason Vanderbill photo



Jason Vanderhill photo

used by dealers to seal book bags was depleted!

Previous fairs were traditionally held downtown at Robson Square, and this year's fair was no exception. Despite being tucked away on a lower level with no street presence, the fair's compact yet comfortable location met with approval from exhibitors. Traffic was no doubt helped by a front-page story, "Book dealers selling treasured tomes," that ran in the *Vancouver Sun* the day before the fair opened.

Conversations during the fair indicate that a tradition of self-deprecating black humour continues to be alive and well in the world of book dealers. A sample of quotations from the booths: Things are great (*pause*) in the context of the times. How are books selling? Let me get my thesaurus. You have to have a lot of faith to be selling modern first editions. No matter how you price a book, someone is selling it cheaper.

For me, the biggest and most pleasant surprise of the fair's two days was the number of younger people who attended, engaged knowledgeably with the booksellers, and, yes, bought books. Sure, there were the usual suspects—bearded grey-haired boomers—present in sizeable numbers, but it was the younger book buyers who give hope for the future.

During the fair I witnessed several interactions between exhibitors and younger customers which evoked for me distinct memories of my early book collecting years:

A teenage boy spends time carefully looking at a 1930s edition of *Don Quixote* illustrated by Salvador Dali and talks about how much he loves surrealism. He heads off and returns later with his parents in tow and the book is purchased for him.

A book dealer selling a bundled collection of 17 signed Chuck Palahniuk titles for \$2,350 resists the entreaties of a long-haired young man to sell him the first edition of *Fight Club*, clearly the most desirable book in the collection.

At issue is not the price of the book—the potential customer and seller agree on what the book would fetch on its own—but rather the book dealer's need to try to sell all of the titles together, while the young collector is only lacking the one title.

A young woman, accompanied by three friends, looks at a signed English first edition of Umberto Eco's newest novel, *The Prague Cemetery*. She indicates that she would love to buy it but that her book budget is spent for the month. She departs only to return later to purchase the book at a reduced price.

The program for the 2012 fair included an essay by Richard Hopkins, "The Last Book Store Standing," which, while documenting the demise of a number of used bookstores in the Vancouver area, offers hope for prosperity for a smaller number of agile survivors. Hopkins sees the book fair as one means for such booksellers to mount a collective approach to increase their profile and sell books. The success of the 2012 Vancouver Book Fair suggests that this is a viable strategy for booksellers moving forward.

Paul Whitney,

a bearded grey-haired boomer known to frequent book fairs, is the retired City Librarian of Vancouver Public Library.