

PERILS AND PEARLS

The used book business is in great peril. If the rare book trade seems less precarious, the implications for it are just as ominous because the used book business is the base of the pyramid, of which the rare book is the apex. If the used bookstore survives it will be in a very different form from now. About the only used bookstores that seem to be operating successfully are those where the proprietors seem to know virtually nothing about books. Nor care. They buy for a buck and sell for five, and seem to me entirely lacking in discrimination or any sense of quality. I suspect that even they can only exist by owning their building. I drop in to some of them occasionally, but they are so boring I can seldom force myself to look long enough to find something. I hope they are not the future, but I fear they are; at least in the cities. Rents in the rejuvenated centers of most North American cities have outpaced a bookseller's ability to pay them. Used bookstores need a lot of space and they need it cheap. After all, used bookstores dealing in recent books at half price, or out-of-print books which are still fairly cheap, need, by their very nature, browsers to seek them out. That means ample space and time, for the books must wait for the person who wants them to come in and find them.

Used & Rare was once a generic term for anything not brand new, although in recent years it has been superseded by the designation Antiquarian (another futile attempt to confer respectability). Used bookstores in the past would usually contain the leavings from the previous hundred or hundred and fifty years—from last year's bestsellers to the reprints of the works of famous writers, the purged books of people moving house, and the libraries of the deceased. While the bulk of the stock in a typical used bookstore would consist of such books, in the last sixty or seventy years the space which paid the rent was the area in front, which sold used paperbacks, the common reading of the young and the impecunious, which heavily outbalance hardcovers in sales. Paperbacks in our time have fuelled

the used book business, while the larger general stock of hardcovers gathers dust, sometimes for many years, until the right person finds them.

With the Internet now rendering most used books unsaleable, one finds dealers like me not even buying almost all books from the last hundred years or so. While I hate this, I now have no choice. When we check the Internet sites to find one hundred and fifty copies of a modern book, we begin by not bothering to list our own copy, and it doesn't take long for us to realize that we shouldn't even be buying them in the first place. So now instead of Used & Rare we increasingly find Used disappearing and Rare hiding in offices and homes, appearing only at book fairs.

When the worldwide web started to function, there was a state of near ecstasy in the book trade. Books started to sell to people in places like Tokyo, Singapore, Australia, Eastern Europe. Good books, but ones which previously we would have anticipated might have taken fifteen years for the right person to come along. Pessimists like me weren't so sure this was a good thing, and now we see why. Rare books, being established by their scarceness and intrinsic importance, are less endangered. But there are many cases in the last few years where the Internet has demonstrated that some books, once considered rare, are considerably more common than current owners find comfortable. What I'm saying is that many so-called rare books are not rare. Last year, obtaining a first edition of Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*, I priced it at \$30,000.00 and offered it to one of my most serious clients. "No thanks," he said. "I was at the Los Angeles book fair last week and there were three copies there." Johnson's *Dictionary* is not a rare book; it is an expensive book, as it should be, being one of the literary cornerstones of western civilization. Because it was expensive when it was published in 1755, it would have been purchased only by the wealthy, and instead of being read and tossed aside, it mostly languished for a couple of centuries on the library shelves of those huge country houses and survived in great numbers.

But the great books always sell, in fact they are now more saleable than common books. Most dealers will tell you that they can sell a \$2,000.00 book more easily than they can sell a \$20.00 book. But what used bookstores need, even more than space and cheap rent, is customers; people who actually come in and browse and find books they weren't looking for but can't resist; or books they didn't know existed by authors they never heard of; or simply a newly discovered book that appeals to their curiosity. The Internet seems to have affected even people's visits to stores. The consensus amongst those colleagues I have talked to seems to be that store sales have been down over a lengthy period, from anywhere between 20% and 50%. It seems that almost everyone uses the Internet to buy most, if not all, of their books. The intricate and I believe essential connection between the buyer and the dealer is thereby threatened, to me perhaps the worst aspect of the entire current situation.

So, used bookshops are closing at a speed which is scary to people who care about learning and civilization. Right now this is mainly booksellers, and perhaps the habitual customers, but the implications seem to me to far exceed the economic concerns. What is most troubling to me in all of this is that collectors need some years of experience collecting to be ready for books in the higher price ranges. And it is my deep conviction that only in the used bookstores can they educate themselves to obtain that level of sophistication which will prepare them for when they are faced with a high price for a book they need for their collection or their library. And what will happen to the education of new collectors when there are no used bookstores? Who will teach them what they need to know?

The large chains, after decimating many of the independents and capturing the average new book-buyer, have staffed their stores with young and ignorant, minimum-wage staff. A friend of mine seeking Evelyn Waugh's *Decline and Fall* was told "try ancient history, you might find 'her' there." Another, wanting Maugham's *Cakes and Ale*, was referred to the cooking section. No one expects a kid working for low wages to have an encyclopedic knowledge of our literature, but your average used bookseller not only knows

these things, he can lead you to them or find them for you, and more often than not will recommend similar books that you might not know about. All these changes point more and more to the triumph of bland mediocrity over the personal guidance offered by a knowledgeable bookseller. Every serious reader and collector I ever knew knows that having a knowledgeable dealer to instruct and guide them, especially in their early years, is essential. A friend of mine, a long-time and astute collector, told me recently that years of experience had taught him to start with the best dealers. Although they will often be more expensive, they tend to get the best material and he found after various unpleasant transactions that the high-end dealers often end up cheaper in the long run. A very wise conclusion!

Our job is to search out and buy from remainder tables, from garage sales and the junk heaps, those books which our instincts tell us someone should be looking for, and hold them until that person appears. In other words, we are trained to cull the worthy from the dross. We rescue the past to hold for the future, and if we're wrong we lose money, so we learn to hone those instincts. Like the blacksmiths, we may be doomed, but let me make a prophecy. We are not going away. If we are doomed, it is only to more of what we have always had to deal with, and we will deal with whatever comes next in the same manner. Fairly soon we will no doubt be selling books as quaint artifacts like antique dealers and we will be selling fewer books to fewer people. But the truth is that most dealers I have known won't much care as long as they can survive to buy another book tomorrow. And read another one tonight.

Even after forty years I still wake up every morning wondering what exciting thing will happen today. And what book I will buy that I never thought I'd own.

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~ An excerpt from David Mason,
The Pope's Bookbinder (Biblioasis, 2013).
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