

Literary Refuge on Coburg Street

JULIA WRIGHT ventures inside a Saint John bookshop and finds a business steeped in history.

ON STEEPLY PITCHED Coburg Street, the door to Dave Shoots's bookshop curves gently inward—an unusual, concave design studded with small, rectangular panes of leaded glass. The black mahogany has a magical quality, as if the door and vaulted neoclassical portico were the departure point for another world.

Shoots, like the 1827 storefront he's maintained for 15 years, is a lovely throwback. Born in 1938 in Ohio, he received his Master of Divinity from the Methodist Theological School in Delaware. He moved his family to Canada in the late 1960s, dismayed by deteriorating race relations in their home of Toledo. "Nixon was taking his thumb and pushing down on black people," says Shoots, "and this was the opposite of what was needed. We heard stories about Canada in the newspapers."

He moved around from Ontario to British Columbia and Alberta, spending long periods away from his late wife, Dotty, and their children, Wendy and Jeff. Shoots and his adult daughter, Wendy Shoots Matheson, settled in Saint John in 1998. Wendy, an avid reader, takes an active role in the business, and Jeff lives in Ontario.

Shoots is a man with respect for tradition, an appreciation of well-built, fine objects, and a love of good stories—all quintessential elements of Saint John, the first incorporated city in New Brunswick and, for that matter,

in Canada. "I feel very lucky to be in Saint John because of the historical record, and the fact that it's largely still available," he says.

BOOKS TO TAKE YOUR BREATH AWAY

His book business sprang up in a roundabout fashion. For 35 years, he dealt in assorted antiques. His trade was, in his words, "a travelling

situation where I had a cargo van that allowed me to move about with antiques and collectibles, small things that I could handle by myself, and I would set up on Sundays at local markets."

Fifteen years ago, Shoots transitioned exclusively into old hardcovers, books of local history, and vintage literary finds, all of which line three rooms of shelves behind that magical entry door.

"When people come in," says Shoots, sitting by the fireplace with a weighty leather-bound volume on his lap, "one of the most common experiences

is that they take a big long sniff and say, 'It smells like a bookstore.'

"There are classes or groups of customers," he continues, "the first being people who have a book and want to know what it's worth. But the second—the people we look for—are people who read and study a particular subject or collect books from a particular author or field. There's something about the experience of going to a bookstore and looking on the shelves:



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The entrance to Dave Shoots's bookshop on Coburg Street in Saint John, New Brunswick. (Julia Wright photo)



*Dave Shoots in his Coburg Street bookshop (above); one of the many books in his shop (below).
(Julia Wright photos)*

you may never find what you're looking for. But you may find something that's even more interesting, and which takes your breath away."

In the same way that Saint John's history can be felt in the bricks of its lovingly preserved



heritage buildings, the volumes on Shoots's shelves testify to a deep respect for our shared history. "Those people who write their stories, or those of important people in their lives, are helping to create and maintain history," he says.

Running a tiny niche bookstore in a tiny, not-particularly literary city has its challenges, but Shoots believes that reports of the death of the printed word are greatly exaggerated. For Shoots, books represent "smell, touch, memories of childhood, intellectual stimulation, ideas, thoughts, friendships that can develop. A person can be completely isolated, but if he has a book, there's something going on. The time is not wasted, and it's never boring.

"Everybody is an author," he says. "Some of us never get around to writing our stories."

~ Julia Wright lives in Saint John, where she writes, reports for CBC Radio, and contributes to publications including *Vice*, the *Telegraph-Journal* and *BuzzFeed*. Follow her on Twitter @thewrightpage.