

# RON FRYER OF KESTREL BOOKS

*Terry A. Stillman*

**A**S A BOOKSELLER, and as a bookbuyer, I'm encouraged for the future of the used-book trade after talking with Ron Fryer. Veteran of eighteen years with a general used-book store in Vancouver, Ron still seems very enthused about his vocation, the business of selling books. Although he realizes the major changes that the Internet has forced on the book trade, Ron is still optimistic that the independent bookstore is going to be around for some time to come. Following a sort of self-administered apprenticeship program whereby he acted as a book scout for a couple of years, Ron finally had the confidence, in September 1985, to open his own store on Broadway, just a block west of Main Street. Buying books wherever he could and then trying to sell them to local booksellers gave Ron a loose understanding of what books were saleable and at what sort of prices. After a short period of accumulating a roomful of the type of books that he thought he could resell to interested customers, Ron was ready to begin.

As with most businesses, the early days were a trial, and Ron soon realized that he had opened shop amidst a bevy of winos, hookers and dumpster divers. Yes, Main and Broadway happened to be one of the armpits of Vancouver. But Ron persevered and established a neat, clean shop with a good if not exciting selection of books. Early on, Ron tried to specialize in Natural History but it became apparent that there weren't as many people interested in buying books on the subject as he had hoped. So Ron cut down on the Natural History section and concentrated on offering a good general selection of moderately-priced hardcovers and paperbacks.

Luckily, across the street was a large drug store which brought a lot of trade to the area, and many of the drug store patrons became customers of Kestrel Books as well. Business improved for a few years until the drug store closed. Ron's business decreased with the cut in sidewalk traffic, as did the sales of other small local businesses. Some of these businesses also closed or moved, which made matters even worse for Ron. But Ron refused to give up on his dream and kept buying and selling enough books to keep going. Sales began to increase again with the addition of a couple of new neighbouring businesses. Then disaster struck. One cold Vancouver night in the late Fall of 1991, the boot factory next to Ron's store caught fire. It was a big one, a four-alarm fire, that firefighters battled for hours. When Ron was called to come down

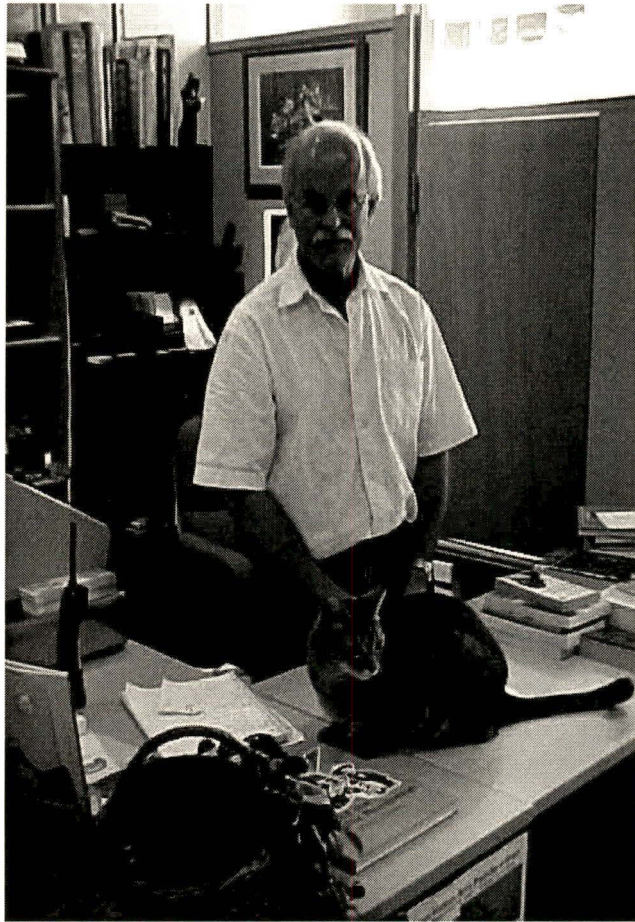
to his store very early the next morning, he found about four inches of water on the floor, with a thin layer of ice on it, plus ice on the walls. Directly to the east was a big space with some charred ruins. Ron felt pretty sick about it but he quickly got on the phone and rallied some friends to come and empty his store of books. They worked all day and evening and moved most of the books to a safe place. Ron's insurance agent was quick to respond, and provided him with an equitable settlement. Ron didn't want to reopen in the same space so, after searching for about three months, he leased a space on Cambie Street at 18th, next to a movie theatre. This was in January 1992, and Kestrel Books is still going strong at 3408 Cambie in Vancouver.

Ron was luckier in his second choice of location. It was an established, active neighbourhood and he was very well accepted by his neighbours, and the local residents welcomed a bookstore with great enthusiasm. The store was a compact 750 sq. ft., a very manageable size for one person to run. Sometimes it was Ron himself behind the small counter; a few days a week you could find Ron's trusty assistant Astrid there with a helping hand. These days, Ron's son, Paul, is working three days a week, giving Ron a chance to scout for books and do some business on the Internet, where he began listing some books for sale in 1999. Ron's been using the Internet on an ongoing basis as a reference tool and as an outlet for selling books. But, the vast majority of Ron's sales still take place in his store...close to 90%.

Ron carries books on quite a wide array of subjects but he says he leans now towards the humanities: art, literature, philosophy, psychology, plus some history, children's books and general fiction, and much more. He's also carrying more antiquarian books than ever before and he would like to increase that portion of his inventory, because it's often a lot more interesting selling older volumes.

Asked if he saw himself doing something else in the future, Ron said he'd probably always be selling books. But, a few years ago, he reprinted an out-of-print guidebook on birds which was successful enough for him to entertain the thought of doing some more self-publishing. A bit of an artist as well, one project Ron has in mind is creating and publishing a little book of Zen sayings with his own Chinese-style watercolour nature scenes.

When I asked Ron if he was still enthusiastic about the book business,



he replied, “Oh yeah, I love it! What other business can give you the personal satisfaction that you get in the book business from making people so happy. There are many complimentary customers and I’ve gotten nothing but positive feedback.” Ron tells the touching story of one of his regular customers—a pleasant, older lady—who came in recently to pick up an inexpensive first edition of one of L.M. Montgomery’s books. He’d supplied this lady with a few Montgomery books over the last year or so. The woman was very appreciative of getting this volume and thanked Ron warmly for calling her on it. Ron said that as she was in the doorway preparing to leave, the lady turned and thanked him again and with a bit of a quaver to her voice, she said “Always be here.” Ron could see tears in her eyes before she turned again to go. “Now that’s what it’s all about,” Ron said to me. Ron Fryer plans to always be there. He may be reached at 604-872-2939 or at [www.abebooks.com/home/kestrelbks](http://www.abebooks.com/home/kestrelbks).

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