

Who Dunit, Roger?

Terry A. Stillman

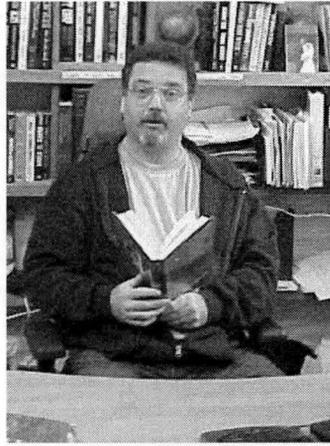
BROWNS BOOKS "HOUSE OF MYSTERY" is located at 3740 East Hastings Street, in Burnaby, British Columbia. The owner, Roger Brown, maintains that he has the largest stock of used mystery books in Canada. I can believe it! His store is less than 1000 sq. ft. in size but it has high ceilings for tall shelves, and row-on-row of paperback and hardcover mysteries, detective fiction and suspense, with some science fiction and fantasy thrown in for good measure. Roger estimates about 75% of his stock is paperback and that the paperbacks make up between 80% and 90% of his sales. Internet sales are catching up to in-store sales and now amount to about 40% of total revenue.

Roger's background has very little to do with books, except that his prior occupation in the heating and air conditioning business required him to travel a lot, so he was often going into bookstores to buy reading material for the road. He began to do some serious collecting of mysteries and built up a notable library. Some books he bought at a mystery and occult bookstore near where he lived in North Burnaby. After a few years as a customer, and tiring of his long-time job, he decided to go into the book business. As it happened, the bookseller whose store Roger often frequented was ready to sell. They made a deal and Roger took over in March, 1999. Now he's just celebrated his fifth anniversary.

The occult inventory went elsewhere, so Roger was left with pretty much a complete mystery stock. He made three major changes to the operation of the store: he set out to acquire a sizable stock of science fiction and fantasy paperbacks; he immediately began listing a great number of books on the Internet (he has over 20,000 books for sale on Abebooks and Alibris now); and, after a couple of years, he began bringing in a select number of new mystery titles to satisfy the needs of some of his customers. Roger then began arranging the odd book signing by mystery authors in his store. All of this has resulted in a steadily growing business for the ex-heating and air conditioning salesman.

When Roger bought his bookstore, he knew about the Internet and he saw the great potential for selling the mystery store stock on line. As mentioned, it has worked out well for him. However, like most booksellers, Roger sees the Internet as a necessary evil. It has changed the book business in so many ways, most pointedly by lowering prices on thousands of books. This cuts profit margins for booksellers. As Roger told me, the Internet prohibits stock buying to some extent as well.

“Customers look on the Internet, they see an array of prices for their books and they naturally choose the higher prices being asked. Then they bring their books to me and want half of what they saw on the Internet.” On the plus side of the ledger, local readers find Browns Books on the Internet, then come into the store and buy.



Roger also took the big companies on the Internet to task. In his opinion, the book-matching services, major on-line re-sellers and big auction companies are hurting the small bookseller in two ways: by constantly raising their fees and by inserting themselves between the bookseller and the customer, thereby eliminating personal contact with the customer, and perhaps the chance to make future follow-up sales.

I asked Roger if he noticed a downturn in the demand for mystery fiction, perhaps due to a lukewarm interest from the younger generation. “Generally speaking, there is not a whole new generation of mystery readers out there, but I’m still pleasantly surprised when a couple of teenagers come in and ask for Sherlock Holmes or other vintage series. The main reason that mysteries are still very good sellers, I think, is the huge increase in readership by women over the last five or six years. And helping to fuel this popularity is the big increase in women authors and women sleuths.”

I asked Roger if, after five years, he still enjoys selling books and the answer was an unqualified “Yes!” I also asked, “Do you foresee staying in the book business for a long period of time?”

His answer: “It’d be awfully hard to go back to my former type of job now.” “Any other aspirations?”

“No. I gave up hope of doing anything else when I decided to sell books. What’s that quote? Abandon hope all ye who enter here?”

The quote of course was in reference to entering Hell, but some may interpret that quote as “abandon all hope of making any money once you enter the book business”. On a bookseller’s bad days, this sentiment may override his or her love of the book business, but it’s usually a short-lived state of mind.

Terry A. Stillman is a Vancouver area bookseller who specializes in children's books and is a member of Hastings Street Booksellers' collective.