

CHARACTERS FINE BOOKS AND COFFEE BAR

Rhonda Batchelor



SHE DIDN'T HAVE A LIFELONG dream to own a bookstore. She didn't even collect books. But after leaving a position in high-pressure advertising in 1993, Carol Kirkwood was looking for a new way to make a living. Husband Bill Bell, also in advertising, took a leave from his job and he and Carol set off to Southeast Asia to relax and play golf and experience new things. While there, events steered Carol into the book business.

Carol had two passions: golf and dogs; and an interest: books. She thought that one of these three fields might be right for her. While browsing through bookstores in Manila, Carol came across a business book that listed the one hundred best businesses to start. A used-book store was near the top of the list. Further research indicated that a bookstore was a far more practical choice than a career in golf or dogs. She discovered another book, this one by Dale Gilbert: *A Complete Guide to Starting a Used Bookstore*. Carol read this book through while lying on a beach in Thailand. She liked it. She liked this Gilbert guy's ideas about setting up and running a neat and well-organized bookstore—the only kind of store that Carol would want to run. (Note: Gilbert's book today is a collector's item in its own right, selling for around a hundred dollars.)

When Carol returned to Vancouver, she set about finding a suitable location. She found the space and neighbourhood she wanted on south Granville Street at 71st, in Vancouver. A genuine Dale Gilbert disciple at this stage, Carol followed his advice completely in setting up and beginning to run her business. But, as she went along, Carol naturally found that she had to do some adapting to local situations. She adapted well and her business grew.

In the 1926 book, *The Successful Bookshop*, Frederic G. Melcher asked the question "What Is a Good Bookseller?" and answered it thus: "To be a successful bookseller one needs an innate fondness for books, an infinite capacity for pains in handling details, a certain poise and self

confidence which is the basis of selling ability. Beyond these one must cultivate business ability, for successful bookstore management is based fundamentally on the same principles as any other retail business: aggressive merchandising and sound financial control.”

Carol Kirkwood was good with people and she was good with details. She was also a sound business woman. When the city of Vancouver changed the parking regulations for South Granville Street in 1999, Carol knew she had to move. Her side of the street was going to become subject to no parking after three p.m. Carol knew this would hurt her business so she chose a store space a couple of blocks north on the other side of Granville Street. There'd be parking all day in front, plus a few spaces to park behind the store and on a side street. The biggest drawback to the move was the increased rent. The space seemed just too expensive for a bookstore alone. Carol and Bill put their heads together and came up with a combination bookstore and coffee shop, à la Chapters; and yes, you could choose a book and read it over a cup of coffee. Bill was about ready to get out of advertising as well by now, and he quickly settled in as manager of the cafe business. Rent problem solved. Two businesses could survive where one couldn't. Unlike Chapters, Carol says they've never lost a single book to coffee stains; and a high percentage of the “borrowers” end up buying the book.

A few years after the Internet came along, Carol began selling books online, following the lead of many other booksellers. However, Carol decided early on not to try and list fifteen or twenty thousand ordinary books for sale. She had a busy bookstore to handle those sales. She keeps only about five hundred books online for sale, books that would be difficult to sell in Vancouver, or books that would sell for much more money elsewhere in the world. Internet sales represent only about ten per cent of Carol's sales, but an important ten per cent. Carol also does a small amount of buying online for customers but mostly for older customers and those who don't have their own internet access. This is just Carol being nice because the profit on most of these transactions is minimal.

With the internet, there also exists the means to make someone very happy with books that aren't readily available locally. Last Christmas was a case in point. An older gentleman asked Carol if she could get him first edition copies of L.M. Montgomery books. Carol had a couple

of firsts of the later titles but there didn't seem to be any other firsts available in Vancouver at that time.

She asked the man if he had a lot of money to spend. He replied that he didn't have a lot but he had some. Carol explained that the first few Montgomery titles, including the Anne books would be very expensive if he insisted on first editions from Toronto or New York. These were the editions that his wife remembered, the books with the coloured plate on the front cover. Never mind, Carol told the man she'd see what was available online.

A few days later, Carol was able to tell her customer that she had located a set of twelve titles in England that were English firsts and had their original dustjackets. The books would cost about six hundred dollars. She received the go-ahead to buy them and they arrived in time for Christmas. Carol was a little concerned that the customer's wife might not like them as much as the editions she remembered. Frankly, Carol thought the dustjackets were pretty gaudy. Fortunately, the recipient did not share Carol's view. She was apparently thrilled to her toes on Christmas morn'.

Asked if she made the right decision eleven years ago on a beach in Thailand, Carol says "Yes." Asked if she'll still be in the book business five, ten, twenty years from now, Carol says she'll probably still have a storefront in five years.

She thinks she'll still be in the book business in ten years, even twenty years from today, but probably in a different capacity. With steadily increasing operating costs, the small business person will find it more and more difficult to afford retail space. Warehousing and mail order will become the dominant aspects of the used-book business. That's all right, Carol Kirkwood will adapt because she knows the business and she'll do what she has to do to succeed. Her record shows that. And she'll probably be able to organize it so she'll have more time for playing golf and walking the dog.

*Characters Fine Books and Coffee Bar is located at 8419 Granville, Vancouver, B.C. Open Thurs. and Fri. 9 a.m. to 8 p.m., other days 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. (604) 263-4660. Email: charactersbooks@telus.net.
Rhonda Batchelor is a well-known Canadian Poet.*