

Regina's Richard Spafford talks about attitude, Bill Hoffer & that quasi-religious feeling.

Richard Spafford started selling books in Regina almost 40 years ago, getting his early training from the famous—and to some, infamous—Bill Hoffer. Spafford's business has been built around a strong focus on Western Canadiana, the fur trade, and related subjects including ethnic settlement, natives and the North. Spafford was slowed by a stroke in 2005, and day-to-day operation of the business has been taken over by his daughter Leah. But the stroke has not dulled Spafford's commentaries on the world of books—it's almost like having questions answered by Hoffer himself...

How and when did you become a bookseller?

In the late '60s. I was teaching art in Saskatoon and came to realize that I was unsuited to continue. When I looked around the person who seemed to lead the style of life that I wanted was Tom Williams, who was then the owner of Northland Books in Saskatoon. After long discussions with Tom, I became convinced that there was a potential living for me in the area. My only assets were my university degrees and the library that I had built up over 20 years. Regina didn't have a specialized bookshop so I moved, rented space, built shelves and with about \$400 cash, started the Book Cellar.

How did you learn the business? With \$400 on hand, you didn't have a lot of room to make mistakes in building up your stock.

I learned by paying attention to Bill Hoffer. In those years I spent many hours and days with Bill, and adopted the attitudes I carry to this day. Bill taught me the importance of context and research. A bookseller's biggest asset is reference books. I kept myself poor for 20 years by investing in reference material and now have an extensive reference library. Other than that, I learned on the fly with the help of a number of patient customers and fellow dealers.

Expand on Bill Hoffer's "attitudes."

Condition and context. Things need to make sense and be in near-perfect condition to make a client happy, be it a library or an individual using an item merely for research. Bill would often say that he wouldn't want to sell a damaged book to anyone who would buy it. He also would refuse to sell perfect books to people if he didn't like them.

On one of the first encounters of our long relationship, I was in Bill's shop and he was explaining the details of a book to a customer. This turned into a bit of an inquisition and when the buyer was unable to answer some pertinent questions, Bill put the item back on the shelf. When he was questioned by the client, who had stated he was interested in buying said book, Bill replied, "I will not sell you a book that is so far superior to you."

Hoffer is a famous name in Canadian bookselling. How did you two first meet?

At the Winnipeg Children's Hospital book sale. After the sale we met for excessive drinks over two or three hours, and then retired to our hotel rooms to discuss the finds of the day. Bill would haul out my books one by one and ask, "Why did you buy this?" The slightest defect would send him into a rage and he would demand, "How can you possibly put that on your shelves?! Remember that the books that end up on your shelves are a reflection of who you are." We would then move to his books, and he would explain one by one why he had bought them. This was the beginning of my education. He often came to Regina and was extremely generous in giving me the benefit of his encyclopedic knowledge of books. Bill had a very strong influence on the early part of my career by showing me the importance of being honourable and trustworthy. It was in his nature to be generous with his knowledge, and this is a very important part of my involvement in the booksellers' community to this day.

Do you remember the first book you sold, as a scout or dealer? The one that made you realize there was a living to be made doing this?

No. It took a year before it occurred to me that there was a decent living to be made. Especially through specialization.

You're open by appointment. Do you prefer dealing with collectors at arm's length (catalogues, Internet), or do you enjoy the personal interaction? I've always been uncomfortable making appointments, because I like to take ages browsing the shelves, and then will feel guilty if I don't buy anything. Should I just get over it?

Yes. I cannot begin to describe the amount that I have learned from browsers. I prefer working face to face, but I've had great success occasionally

with libraries and collectors. I moved into a “by appointment” situation because I became more specialized and wasn’t interested in buying people’s “garage sale leftovers” any longer.

Tell me about sourcing books in the Prairies. Are there barns stuffed with treasures, just waiting for a scout to arrive?

No. The people who moved to the Prairies tended to be poor and dispossessed. If they brought a library with them, they tended towards the religious. With the increased availability of information online, people tend to know what they have, although there is the occasional treasure.

What kind of book collecting history or traditions existed in that part of the country?

Short of libraries and universities, there was no collecting. People’s requests were on the practical side and centred on things that could increase the productivity of their land.

It’s been my experience that cities generally either are or aren’t good book towns (basically judging by the number and calibre of used book shops). How does Regina rank today, and has that changed during your career?

Regina still does not offer a variety of bookshops, mostly paperback exchanges. That being said, Regina now has many Internet book dealers, which makes picking at church sales and garage sales more difficult.

What is the most prized or notable book you have handled during your career?

I was asked to appraise the original Riel diary. I was honoured to be allowed to touch it. Eventually the government bought it and gave it to the Métis of the province.

Tell me one of your “greatest finds” stories.

My best find was at a university book sale, where I bought a first issue of *The Scarlet Letter* for a dollar. It was defective, so I had to buy another first issue for parts. After slaughtering the second copy, I created, with the help of a conservator binder, a decent copy which sold recently for \$15,000 (minus a substantial discount for a quantity purchase). Now that’s artistry.

In your opinion, what currently is the most desirable —and elusive—title for a serious collector (or dealer) of Western Canadiana?

There has always been an active market for Prairie radical political movements. I have recently re-founded a broadsheet from the Regina Riot and On to Ottawa Trek. The second piece I have never owned. Of course, there is a significant ongoing interest in the early exploration of Northern Canada, an interest that doesn’t seem to be subsiding.

It’s been said you cannot be both a book collector and seller—something has to give. Do you collect books outside of what’s in the shop, & if so, what?

I have a very large collection of books and related materials with the word “Dick” in it. Nice to be able to claim to have the largest dick collection! But it’s become very difficult for me to find items I do not already own.

William Targ described publishing as the second oldest profession, which probably makes bookselling a close third. What is the attraction of being a bookseller?

Setting your own lifestyle, making your own hours, travelling. Also, a very lucrative way to make a living, providing you can stay focused on your buying. As the saying goes, “If things aren’t

selling then you should be buying.”

Have you ever imagined yourself retiring from bookselling?

My stroke has effectively retired me, although my daughter uses my experience and knowledge hundreds of times every day.

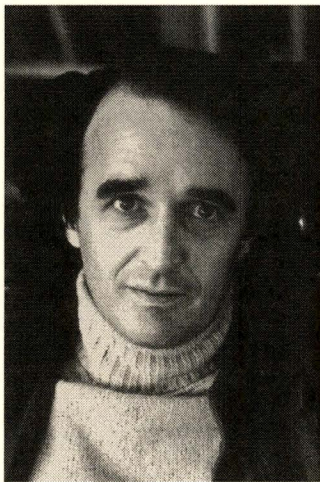
Has being a bookseller changed your relationship with books?

Yes. Handling books no longer has the quasi-religious aspect to it that it once had, but I am enjoying watching the same reverence grow in my daughter.

Finish this sentence: “We buy books, except for ...”

Most of what is presented.

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After almost 40 years, Richard Spafford laments that handling books no longer has the quasi-religious aspect it once did.