

Paranoiac Customers and Dead Bluebottles

Why George Orwell was wrong about second- hand bookshops

In an essay called *Bookshop Memories* written in 1936, George

Orwell said the following:

There was a time when I really did love books - loved the sight and smell and feel of them...But as soon as I went to work in the bookshop I stopped buying books. Seen in the mass, five or ten thousand at a time, books were boring and slightly sickening...The sweet smell of decaying paper appeals to me no longer. It is too closely associated in my mind with paranoiac customers and dead bluebottles.

Orwell's essay finds its way almost untransformed into the mouth and mind of his flyblown, neurotic anti-hero, Gordon Comstock, the protagonist of his novel of crushed ambition and lower middle class angst, *Keep The Aspidistra Flying*, which was published in the same year. (slide) Comstock's sense of self-loathing is nurtured by

the unremittingly depressing parade of freaks and weirdoes who frequent the shop – drawn, it would seem, directly from Orwell's bookshop memories.

(and it is perhaps another presentation altogether to talk about how under-appreciated Orwell is as a comic writer).

Of course, Orwell's drab and down-at-heel bookshop world is both true and untrue at one and the same time. It would be absurd to argue that all second hand bookshops are a joy to go into and that all of their owners exude an effortless and welcoming bonhomie – I too have been in enough bookshops to know that sometimes the owners best friend would be a skip that would dispose of two-thirds of the so-called stock. I too have been confronted by book shop owners who seem to think the public are their enemy or that their dearest wish would be to bury you under the patio.

But I have also been in second hand bookshops that make your spirit soar or feed your soul in ways that transcend simple

description. In my sleep I have dreamt – often – about bookshops and when I want to find solace and comfort I turn to bookshops. I'm delighted that I share this characteristic with Graham Greene who also had the same dreams:

I don't know how Freud would have interpreted them, but for more than thirty years my happiest dreams have been of second-hand bookshops.

(Preface to David Low's 'With All Faults')

Does does my love of second hand bookshops make me (and presumably Graham Greene) one of Orwell's weirdoes? Well, I want to argue not. And I want to argue not because I know we are not alone in believing that second hand bookshops contain the very essence of spiritual joy. Others have felt the transcendent euphoria of the second hand bookshop – a pleasure that includes but goes beyond the joy of hunting in a serendipitous way for actual books – and they have written about that joy. For the next ten or fifteen minutes I want to introduce you to the literature of the second hand

**bookshop experience although I do it, I must admit, reluctantly for
fear that sharing it with others will blunt the edge of the pleasure.
But I guess I have to take that chance now it's got this far!**

The book – the ultimate object of desire

Falling in love with books, desiring them not just for their content but for their physical appeal – the way they feel, smell and look – will inevitably lead you out of bookshops that trade in the newly published and pristine volumes that find their way onto best-seller lists and into the world of the second hand bookshop. The search, no.. the **hunt**, for the legendary out-of-print work by a favourite author, the curiosity to discover what other editions of favourite books are like to hold, the urge to get as close as possible to an author through owning a first edition are all, I think types of magic thinking – an almost primitive desire to capture a trophy that embodies the soul of the object of desire.

Certainly there are some customers of second hand bookshops who are casual customers just looking for a hard-to-find book in pretty much any condition or edition but they, I suggest, aren't the real denizens of second hand bookshops. To be dedicated enough to make the effort of finding the second hand bookshop usually

requires you to have been infected with a love of books that is at any level unreasonable and irresistible. It's a love that is just the right side of mania – or at least we like to think it is.

(slide) There are scholars of this mania like John Hill Burton,

Holroyd Jackson or, in our current times, Nicholas Basbane and Alberto Manguel who take a more or less scholarly approach to the subject of bibliophilia and who acknowledge the role the second-hand bookshop has to play in servicing the passion for books. But their love for the book itself overshadows the experience of the second hand bookshop itself.

I would argue that it isn't until we turn to much more popular, perhaps populist, forms of writing that we begin to get the sense of excitement bookshops themselves provide to the book hunter. The experience of the shop, I would argue, is part and parcel of the satisfaction of the book itself.

The US husband and wife writing partnership of Nancy and Lawrence Goldstone **(slide)** have written about the way, almost accidentally, they fell into the world of the second hand bookshop and ended up spending most of their spare time and money combing the country looking for second hand bookshops – not just because they were after books but because they were after the perfect experience of the right book in the right second hand bookshop.

What seems unavoidably true from any reading of the literature of second hand bookshops is that a good bookshop and a good bookshop moment is transcendental – we are taken to some other place. Lewis Buzbee successfully captures that feeling of the timeless moment in his splendid memoir *The Yellow-Lighted*

Bookshop **(slide)**

"November, a dark, rainy Tuesday, late afternoon. This is my ideal time to be in a bookstore. The shortened light of the afternoon and the idleness and hush of the hour gather everything close, the

shelves and the books and the few other customers who graze head-bent in the narrow aisles."

Bookshops can also be, like churches before them, places of sanctuary protecting the vulnerable from the outside world and wrapping them in the fortress of it's volumes. Jeremy Mercer's

Books, Baguettes & Bedbugs (slide) takes us inside the

Bohemian walls of the legendary Shakespeare and Co., whose owner provided a raggle-taggle group of drifters and exiles a place to get back on their feet and tolerance of their foibles. This theme of sanctuary is evident in Zafon's blockbuster best seller *Shadow of the*

Wind (slide) where the mythical Cemetery of Forgotten Books

and Sempere & Sons Bookshop play this role - and provide the important locus of good in a world of evil. The same claim can be made for the role the second-hand bookshop plays in John

Dunning's *Booked to Die* (slide) and the series that followed

that first book. Second-hand bookshop owner and ex-cop Cliff

Janeaway's entanglements with a range of more or less lethal criminals is always punctuated by the return to 'base' – to the safety and sanity of the bookshop.

Sanctuary is also an important part of the role second-hand bookshops play in children's literature. Constance White's *The Bookshop Holiday* - where the shop offers a place for recuperation from illness and private sleuthing – or Patricia Lynch's *The Bookshop on the Quay* (**slide**) – a safe place for a runaway – build their whole story around the second hand bookshop as 'safe space'.

The shop – thinking transcendently and historically

For some writers, however, their meditations on the role and nature of bookshops goes a little deeper. There are a number of memoirs by book shop owners that tell the tale not only of their time in books but also something of the social history of their times. Leona

Rostenberg & Madeline Stern, **(slide)** legendary US bookshop

owners and authors of *Used and Rare, Old Books Old Friends* and *Old Books in the Old World* deal with Europe on the verge of Nazism and New York in the 40s and 50s when dealing in second hand books made you part and parcel of an exciting intellectual and radical milieu.

Anne Scott's *18 Bookshops* **(slide)** provides us with a window

on the historical continuity of the bookshop through a series of vivid vignettes and, of course, no overview of the bookshop literature would be complete with mention of Helene Hanff's *84 Charing Cross*

Road **(slide)** - at once a meditation on time, distance,

ambition, continuity, friendship and a love letter to a bookshop of the mind.

Second hand bookshops can also be statements of cultural defiance.

Unlike Orwell's mausoleum of a shop, they can also be places that

disturb and foment change – just think of the social role played by

Shakespeare and Co., in Paris or Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights

in San Francisco. This means they are not always welcomed by everyone and Penelope Fitzgerald's perfectly crafted novella *The Bookshop* (*slide*) gives us an insight into just how fundamentally disturbing books can be in a closed and conservative community.

Book people : The book scout – none of them are like Johnny Depp

Bookshop owners are - if we are to believe the literature – a funny breed. Typically they are either warm-hearted, perceptive, welcoming and embracing characters or – alternatively - a variety of unpleasant sociopath.

However, in many ways the bookshop owner is rather less well represented in this literature than is the almost legendary book scout. Book scouts are that dying breed of bookshop habitu  who made a living scouring the country for bargains and undiscovered masterpieces that they would sell at a profit to bookshop owners. At one time book scouts were the indispensable lubrication of the

whole system but as the number of book shops decline so does the possibility of making a living.

The book scout was made briefly famous by Johnny Depp in the movie *The Ninth Gate* which was a truly dreadful adaptation of the Perez-Reverte novel *The Dumas Club*. (slide) Needless to say,

most book scouts do not look like Johnny Depp. But there is a good literature of the book scout and their symbiotic relationship with the second hand bookshop.

John Baxter's *A Pound of Paper* (slide) is perhaps the most thoughtful of these and paints a picture of the book worlds of both the UK and Australia written by someone who drifts in and out of dealing in, broadcasting about and collecting books. (slide)

David Meyer's *Memoirs of a Book Snake* (a comic mis-hearing of the term 'book scout' by his grandmother) is more affectionate about the great books the trade led him to and which passed through his hands. But probably the masterpiece of all book scout literature was written by Iain Sinclair – himself a scout for several years. The

hallucinogenic *White Chappell Scarlett Tracings* **(slide)** mixes

an insane road novel of book hunting with the unsolved mysteries surrounding the Jack The Ripper mysteries.

If you ever needed confirmation that no book scout looks or behaves like Johnny Depp – go no further than this.

The shop – the desert that is the High Street

When I was in my early twenties, Birmingham used to have enough good second hand bookshops to fill my day off from working in Hudsons – the Waterstones of it's day. Starting with the two Maxwell's shops it was possible to drift down to Middleton's and on to Stephen Wycherley's and end the day in the book market in Bearwood.

All these are now gone and Birmingham has no second hand bookshops beyond the Oxfams and other charity outlets.

Every weekend I still go in search of the perfect bookshop experience but it gets harder and harder to find and I have to travel further and further to find anything.

But the world of the second hand bookshop at least lives on in print – perhaps as it should – and it's a body of work that is there to prove that Orwell was wrong in his gloomy claim that second hand bookshops crush the spirit and the love of books.