

Used Bookstores
An Endangered Species
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When I was a child, in the downtown area of the small town where I lived, there was a place called Brown's Tack and Feed. I didn't know then that it was on the verge of becoming an anachronism. There must have been a need for it back in the 1950s, and I remember that it was there well into my teen years. When it disappeared, I hardly noticed. My small town (located in reality where the Beverly Hillbillies were reported to have lived) had gradually changed from being a country village with a classic train station to a suburb, its fields subdivided and its walnut groves pulled out, all to be built over with houses on asphalt streets.

Later, in my adult years, I learned, to my amazement, that there was a blacksmith shop in a local community. I even went to see it, knowing then that it was an establishment that had far outlasted its own time. But again, there must have been a need for it. And to the best of my knowledge, it is still there—although it was less than ten years ago that the sad closure of the last “traditional” hardware store on its neighboring block made headlines in the local newspaper. “Progress” had moved the community beyond the need for the old shop, with its bins of screws like old fashioned cracker barrels, which had been in business since the 1920s, owned by three successive generations of the same family.

And when the stem broke on the windup Hamilton wristwatch that my parents had given me for my graduation from high school, darned if I had to search widely to find a watchmaker who knew how to fix it. “Sorry,” said the people at the jewelry/watch repair shop I went to first. “There's hardly anybody who knows how to fix one of these anymore.” Apparently watch repair has devolved into mostly changing a battery. But I found a real watchmaker in a neighboring town, who said that he could fix it but didn't know how long it would take. His shop was a wonderland of dozens of brass contrivances with wheels, gears, connector rods, and glass faces.

Oftentimes the demise of these old shops and neighborhood establishments catches us by surprise. We don't know the wonder places they are until they are gone. Like so many staples of our childhood that we treat with overfamiliarity in their day, we find out only far too late that they would become treasures of our own time.

I still have no idea what happened to my complete mint set of 1959 Fleer baseball cards. I do, know, however, what happened to my set of Amazing Spiderman comics, numbered one through

twenty-five. I had bought them for ten cents each as they came out over fifty years ago, and at the end of the 1960s sold them for 1000% per cent profit! I remember gleefully selling them for a dollar apiece to some comic collector. As I clutched the \$25.00 he gave me, I doubt that even he could have foreseen that those magazines would fetch prices today that would be enough to finance a long, luxurious trip around the world.

Yet I know that if I had them now, I wouldn't sell them. I'd still read and enjoy them.

Since the passing years have given me a little wisdom through experience, I am able now to treasure the used bookstores of my acquaintance. I know well that their days are numbered, and I will patronize them as I can. Already I've come up against online stores like the one I described in the article that appeared in the *Review* (#38, July 2005), whose name I concealed with the name Books up the Wazoo. This ultra-modern, up-to-date establishment only did business online. No personal visits to a store; not even sales by telephone.

And I have seen the closure of the great used bookstores I frequented when I first began collecting over twenty-five years ago: Acres of Books, Altair 4, The Book Baron—the first and third of these being huge warehouse-size establishments in which one could wander aisles for an entire day.

I began collecting series books when a thoughtful friend gave me a reading copy of *The Phantom Freighter* (original text) for my fortieth birthday, for I had mentioned to her that I regretted giving away all of my Hardy Boys books when I started high school. Inspired by her gift, I set out to rebuild my collection, and in eleven months had reassembled my set of mysteries by "Franklin W. Dixon". I did so solely by browsing used bookstores wherever I went. In my searches, I also found books from other series I had read as a child: Tom Swift Jr., Rick Brant, Tom Corbett, and others. I began to collect those as well. Once in a while I made a good find of a volume I had learned was scarce. And as I made friends with other collectors, I enjoyed hearing their accounts of good finds. We all knew then that used bookstores across the nation held the books that we wanted—it was just a matter of exploring, digging, wandering, locating the prizes that were there to be found.

In a recent conversation with a fellow series book collector, we commiserated that the golden age of series book collecting was probably past. Not only has it been a long time since we've made a good find "in the wild", as he put it, but finding a used bookstore at all is harder than it used to be, much less finding one with a good selection of series books.

Whenever I drive through small towns or cruise large cities, whenever possible I stop at any used bookstore I find. More often than not, the juvenile section is comprised mostly of paperback books a quarter of an inch thick that go back maybe to the 1990s. There may be a few hardbacks, but any series books among them are usually jacketless reader's copies, and are the most common entries of a series. Finding a scuffed copy of *Sea Gold* or *The Tower Treasure* or *The Revolt on Venus* offered for \$4.00 is more of a downer than anything else.

There are fewer and fewer used bookstores that one can enter through a door that sounds a little bell when it is opened, and where the visitor is greeted with the heady aroma of old paper, aging

bookbinder's glue, and dust. If one finds a good book in a dust jacket, prices are usually pretty high, and they're often in the "classics" section apart from the Goosebumps paperbacks. Or maybe inside a glass case.

In an antique mall near where I lived until earlier this year there are some Rick Brants in dust jacket offered for \$30.00 each, and they're low numbers. And they've been there for months. Which is another point: now I find books in antique malls more often than in used bookstores. Maybe the proprietors think that classifying them as "antiques" rather than "used books" makes them worthy of high prices.

Well, all things come to an end, and we collectors are in an era that is winding down. We are by no means finished, but there were only a finite number of books to begin with and attrition and other forces are cutting their numbers each year. Even if a print run fifty or sixty years ago produced 20,000 volumes, there are few now to be found. And the demand is low, since most young people today are too busy with electronics, and maybe most of the baby boomers who are collectors have found most of what they want. Occasionally a new collector arises, or someone who reminisces about our favorite books in an article filled with nostalgia, published in some periodical for the AARP crowd. And there's even the occasional young person who's introduced to our books and likes them. I've been delighted more than once to give an extra Troy Nesbit or Hal Keen or Ken Holt or Three Investigators or Connie Blair to a twelve-year-old whose eyes grow big with wonder and gratitude. But the trend is clearly downward.

Fortunately, there are still a few good used bookstores around. Even in the second decade of the twenty-first century it is possible to enter an aromatic emporium suggestive of Amos Grice's general store in *The Mystery of Cabin Island*, offering books of earlier eras rather than cracker barrels and pot bellied stoves. Now that I live in Illinois, I've heard of one in Springfield, which I plan to visit soon, and another in next-door Indiana, which is also on my list.

Through the recommendation of Valerie Kramer of Port Orford, Oregon, near where I used to live, I went to Robert's Bookshop on Highway 101 in Lincoln City, on the central coast of Oregon. The ocean is just across the street. Robert's is to used books what an old fashioned ice cream parlor or drug store with a marbletop fountain is to a hot fudge sundae. Robert's is not only "the way used bookstores used to be", but what they used to be at their best. In the course of a five-day visit to the area last January, I went to Robert's three times for visits of two or three hours each.

The right look is there. The right smells are there. The right layout of aisles and shelves is there. There are corridors, crannies, several "back rooms" that appear just when you think you've reached the end of an aisle. The walls are festooned with posters and memorabilia of historical events and bibliophilic ephemera. The treasures are cornucopial; nearly every turn has something of wonder to draw the discerning and appreciative eye.

Here there is a poster honoring the Navajo code talkers of World War II—covered with autographs of the code talkers themselves. There is a movie poster from a classic 1940s drama. And there are dozens of framed original artwork for classic book covers, many of them signed by

either author or artist. Great pulp works in lurid colors that bespeak the era in which the books were in print and sold by the tens of thousands.

The proprietor, Robert D. Portwood, is a tall, slender, energetic man of middle age with short grizzled iron gray hair. The checkout desk is, of course, surrounded by and covered in books, both shelved and stacked. The prices are, I would say, fair. Not real cheap, but not gouging by any means, either. Enough to keep him in business and to keep the customers coming back. He's been in business since 1987 and is thriving even now, so the formula must work.

The aisles are narrow but sufficiently lit. On one wall, on the top of the shelves, is a long line of Better Little Books, including some that I knew were scarce. There were two sections set aside for series books, and they were there by the several hundreds. Two or three nooks with floor to almost-ceiling volumes, and a few stacks on the floor, all in reasonable order so you know what you're looking at. Many were in very good condition, in dust jacket. I saw books that I hadn't seen in any other store anywhere.

Yes, this is the way it's supposed to be.

Maybe best of all, each time I visited the store it was jammed with customers, many of them young, including a good number of preteens.

Recently I had a conversation with a new friend in my new town. We were talking about books, and she revealed, "I don't even own a kindle." No doubt these electronic pads the size of a Little Golden Book that can store up to 3,500 books in electronic format serve a purpose. I've tried one. But for me, I had almost the same feeling I had when I realized that I had discarded my Amazing Spiderman comics. Something of incalculable value had been given up—not monetarily by any means—but in the content of my life, of my self-definition. As so many others have said, even in this "digital era" I much prefer a book with pages, illustrations, boards, and a dust jacket (or picture cover). There is a tactile sensuousness to a real book that can't be replaced.

As long as there are places like Robert's, the experience can always be had for a few dollars. Like blacksmith shops and watchmaker's shops, they won't last forever. Value them and patronize them when you can. Make the most of them and support their proprietors. They deserve it. They are not just business people; they are preservationists.