

SECOND HAND BOOK SHOPS

Mag Merrilees

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Usually this column is about the art of writing or of being a writer. I'd like to stretch it sideways and talk about books. After all any writer worthy of the title is also a reader.

Like most of us, I am trying to come to terms with the age of the electronic book and to understand the impact of this technology on book publishing and book selling. The other morning on the tram I saw a person, in the uniform of a well known chain of book-sellers, engrossed in a kindle. The sight made me laugh. The ultimate in bad PR, I thought. And I'm preserving the person's anonymity in case their kindle is a secret vice and against company rules. But, on second thoughts, probably the company is selling kindles and electronic books. They'd be mad not to have worked something out.

I am doing my best to keep up. I have finally downloaded a friend's electronic book, published months ago, and now I'm trying to get my head around taking my laptop to bed in order to read it. I keep forgetting, because it's not on the bedside pile.

Partly these are issues of habit and taste. I like books, actual physical books. And there are ethical questions as well. How do we protect writers' meagre incomes when downloading and piracy are so easy? But if I'm talking ethics then I have to confess to my own secret vice. I adore second-hand bookshops. I know that buying books second-hand does nothing to support writers or publishers or any of the people who labour to make the books. And when I'm at home and can't afford new books I use the library, so at least the author gets lending rights. But since I've been travelling, I offer you a brief celebration of three shops, excursions into paradise.

Firstly, step through the corner door of Macleods in downtown Vancouver. Here you must pause, partly because the sight is quite overwhelming, and partly because it's hard to know where to step without sending some towering pile of books sliding to the floor. The ceiling is very high, it's an old building, and on every wall there are ceiling height bookshelves. The space between is partitioned into a rabbit warren by more tall bookshelves. Books are piled all over the floor. If you're a traveller, and have come to trade-in the books you've just finished, then you must ease yourself cautiously through the maze in search of a counter. When you come to the centre of the shop, as best you can judge, the bookshelves are replaced by a head-height mound, perhaps three metres across, of books. Under this is the service desk and the cheerful proprietor occupies a sort of indentation in the mound.

If you stay calm, you will discover that this apparent chaos is actually quite orderly. The general fiction (my goal) is arranged alphabetically, a feast of nearly every writer past or

present, including some Australians, that you've ever heard of. An odd-shaped alcove near the door is filled with Canadian writers. The challenge is not so much how to find things, as how not to spend the whole of your holiday browsing, and how to limit yourself to a ration of only three books for the next leg of the journey. Prices seem very reasonable, and luckily the Australian dollar is not far behind the Canadian.

Would it be rational to emigrate to Vancouver for the sake of a bookshop?

Having read the three books from Macleods, your next treat is Russell Books, which occupies two adjacent shops in Victoria, on Vancouver Island, and sells both new and second-hand books. Despite the twee charm of Victoria, this is a more business-like enterprise. It would be possible to sweep the floor. The range of books, however, is still breathtaking: a great many more novels than my local library, and a great deal more interesting selection. And the prices are again reasonable. They can produce, on request, a wide sample of the writings of Emily Carr, a remarkable twentieth century artist whom it is impossible not to discover if travelling in this part of the world.

So you buy your three books and set off, if you're lucky, on the ferry to Seattle to join the Starlight Express to San Francisco. And somewhere in that city, never to be found again because you forgot the trail of breadcrumbs, is Green Apple Books. This also occupies two shops, sells both new and second-hand books, and again the range is extraordinary. In this case, not having finished your previous three books, you are that least ethical of all writer/readers, the browser who doesn't buy.

There is pleasure to be had in any bookshop, but the experience of being immersed in affordable second-hand books is the panacea for any ill, pleasure that is sensuous emotional and intellectual (though not so good for those who suffer from hayfever). I'm sorry that it doesn't put bread on the writer's table. But from a non-economic point of view it can only increase the esteem in which books and writers are held.