

## Real Bookstore

My wife tried to get rid of me the other day outside a large book store in a shopping center. She wanted to spend some time in a few ladies emporiums without my lurking behind her “breathing in an impatient manner,” as she once described my behavior. I denied it, of course, explaining I was merely sighing over her terrific taste in colors.

In any event, I am not much enthralled by the retail chain book stores found in or around most malls. They have entirely too many titles to wade through. If I know exactly what I want, a gigantic outlet can be useful, but when I’m after a particular book, I order it on the Internet. While out shopping, I never remember the reviews I’ve seen or which book was touted to be the one I couldn’t live without this week. Besides, it’s more fun coming across a book I never heard of that looks terrifically interesting, when I can hardly wait to get home and open the covers. Or sit on a bench in the mall reading the first chapter or two while I wait for my wife to return ... wearing a great new color.

I prefer what I call a REAL bookstore, one that’s usually small and most often owned and managed by a real live person who actually reads. When you walk into a real bookstore, a quick scan of the shelves will tell you all you need to know. You won’t find thousands of titles, but just about every book on display is a title you want to buy. Either the store owner or someone on the staff exercised their mind and took the time to read most of these books, often writing a quick note to stick in between the pages. I found one of my favorite “Staff Pick” notes in a small store in Wells Beach, Maine. “Heroine sails across bay through storm, loses clothing. Great Story!”

In a real bookstore, you should find knowledgeable help. You might say to the man or woman behind the

counter, “I’m not sure what I want.” If he looks puzzled, he’s an out of work stock broker filling in today. But a book savant’s eyes will light up when you ask for advice. He or she will kick off a marathon of suggestions and tell you something about every book he’s read since he got his library card in the second grade. After a half hour or so, he may need to sit down and take a few extra breaths before continuing.

A real bookstore should be comfortable, but furniture isn’t necessary. A locally famous bookstore in a nearby town has their history section back by the furnace room in the deepest reaches of the long and narrow 200 year old store. I have never been more cozy than sitting on the floor curled up under the stairway back there on a cold rainy afternoon, browsing through their small collection, which doesn’t change that much. Don’t tell anyone, but if I find something I like, I will often go home and order it on Amazon. Other days I buy it there, paying the full price and hoping the profits keep the place open a few more years.

I once toyed with the idea of opening my own bookstore, but decided that would reduce one of the great avocational themes of my life to nothing more than work. There are enough beautiful things in my personal saga that have been profaned by the almighty dollar without adding bookstores to the list.

Still, it’s tempting, if only to show the world how a great bookstore should be run ... in my humble opinion, of course.

I’d run a bookstore like a bait shop. I don’t know how many readers have been to a bait shop, but in most you can just hang out and talk about fishing or any other topic to the folks who amble through. It’s a comfortable atmosphere, where conversation is more important than sales. In fact, a year ago I admitted to a man I frequently spoke with in Al’s Fish Bait Parlor that I was a fly fisherman and never bought or used bait. He laughed and told me he hadn’t been fishing in twenty years.

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