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DAN BROWN:

In praise of used-book stores

CBC News Viewpoint | February 17, 2004



February 20 will see the conclusion of *Canada Reads*, the CBC series airing on both radio and television that aims to pick one book by a Canadian author for the entire country to read. *Canada Reads* interests me not because it celebrates Canadian literature, but simply because I love to read.

Reading, you see, is my favourite leisure activity. I spend roughly an hour every day reading, which may not sound like much, but devoting an hour a day to *anything* is an accomplishment when you have a full-time job and a girlfriend.

Since reading is a regular part of my daily routine, I spend a lot of money on books. And as anyone who has bought a bestseller lately knows, books cost too damn much. Consequently, I'm always on the lookout for new ways to enlarge my book collection without spending crazy amounts of cash.

Websites like Abebooks.com and Amazon.ca have certainly been a boon in this regard. As convenient as they are, though, they lack one vital thing: the ambience of a good used-book store.

One of my favourite places to buy second-hand books is the City Lights bookstore in London, Ont., the city closest to Coldstream, the small southwestern Ontario town where I grew up. Situated in London's downtown core, City Lights is something of a landmark. As long as I have been alive, local politicians have been bemoaning the state of London's downtown; as long as I have been alive, City Lights has been in the same location. Despite a state of seemingly eternal urban decay, it refuses to go out of business.

When I was younger, the store was run by Marc Emery. You may know him as the guy who later wound up in Vancouver making a mint by selling marijuana seeds over the internet. But back then he was just a businessman, Freedom party booster, and general pain in the butt for the city's conservative establishment.

When the courts labelled 2 Live Crew obscene in 1992, for instance, Emery went out of his way to get himself arrested for selling albums by the banned rap group. He was a colourful figure in a community that sometimes seems colourless.

After Emery decamped, the store's employees took over the operation. In the years since, they have worked diligently to maintain the store's independent spirit. Just to the left of the front door, for instance, someone has posted quotations from a number of literary heavyweights. Among them is a kernel of wisdom from Kurt Vonnegut likening writers to coal-mine canaries who "should be treasured as alarm systems." That pretty much sums up the store's philosophy.

But before you go thinking this is one of those shops that's, you know, unrelentingly *high-minded*, stop by the front counter and look down. That's where you'll see a blown-up photo of the employees standing with ... Crispin Glover? That's right - the oddball actor from such movies as *Wild at Heart* and *River's Edge* once visited City Lights, and now there's a miniature shrine to the career he has made out of playing weird characters. I can't think of a better way to set the tone for a visit to City Lights because, well, you half-expect to bump into someone like Crispin Glover every time you walk in.

MENU

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DAN BROWN
ARTS EDITOR

Dan Brown is the site's senior arts editor/reporter. Before joining us he was a lineup editor and senior writer for Newsworld International. Dan helped to

Needless to say, there are books galore - some 25,000 titles stacked on wooden shelves that reach to the ceiling (which is different heights in different parts of the store). As you wander the cramped aisles, you'll see volumes by the likes of Pierre Burton, Dostoyevsky, S.E. Hinton and Hillary Rodham Clinton. Far Side cartoons are taped to the sides of the shelves. The air smells sweet and musty, like old paper.

The inventory is surprisingly comprehensive. There's a metal rack for paperbacks about serial killers, a shelf devoted to Welsh history, and loads of Canadian material (a handmade sign lets shoppers know they are in the presence of "splendid Canadiana").

Some thoughtful soul has filed the Coles Notes alongside the corresponding novels, and there's even a section devoted to the 100 books that made *The Globe and Mail's* list of the best works of fiction ever written, along with a hand-printed apology because the store doesn't stock all 100 titles. To help you reach the highest shelves, there are stepladders scattered about.

It doesn't take long until it dawns on you: this is an egalitarian bookstore. The people who run City Lights are not snobs. They value all kinds of reading material and therefore all kinds of reading. Looking for a Harlequin? They're up near the front. Want some back issues of *Playboy*? They're piled across from the counter, in the adult section. Is science fiction your thing? Those books are in the very back, behind a curtain made of purple tinsel.

Even better, the staff has cheek. Taped near the books about conspiracy-theories and revisionist histories, for example, there's another handmade sign that encourages visitors to "Ask our helpful staff! If you trust them ...". In the literature area, on the K shelf, there's a notice that deadpans "Ask us for more Kipling. We have more Kipling than you could possibly imagine."

And if you go to the rear of the store, in the corner farthest removed from the front counter, you'll notice that the white ceiling tiles above your head have turned to brown. On the shelf immediately below, there's a sign that urges caution: "Watch out for dripping water! Also, do not drink said water. There's a cooler at the front if you're thirsty." If a store can be said to have a sense of humour, then City Lights has a great sense of humour.

I never, of course, leave empty-handed. The last time I was there I found a book about *Heaven's Gate* - not the cult, but the doomed 1980 movie that for a time was the biggest box-office loser in Hollywood history. Who knew that someone had even written a book about *Heaven's Gate*? It's the kind of 432-page hardcover that a pop-culture devotee like myself would love to spend his days reading. And at \$2.50, you can't beat the price.

And here's the beautiful thing: even though it has so much personality, City Lights is not unique. There are similar stores all across this country. Maybe you shop in one. If so, [write in](#) and tell me about it. If you have any strategies for saving money on books, send those in as well. Let's get Canada reading ... on the cheap.

Letters:

My sister introduced me to this little gem: www.bookcrossings.com

The idea is that you read a book, then set it free into the world to be found by someone else.

When I returned to Ottawa, lo and behold, there was a lonely book in a bus shelter. I thought, "what are the odds?" but when I opened the front cover there was a little note telling me to help myself to the book, read it, and set it free, noting the bookcrossing web site.

I've sent a few into the jungle myself. It's a great system!!

launch the National Post's Arts & Life section, where he was a columnist and reporter. A former editorial writer, copy editor and journalism instructor, Dan has degrees from three universities.

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Tanya Richard

Our second hand book store here in Truro Nova Scotia is The Book Merchants - 904 Prince Street, Truro, N.S. The book store is cozy and friendly with great staff- and prices that help feed our reading addiction easily.

Enjoyed your article very much.

Charlene MacCallum | Truro, Nova Scotia

There is a wonderful used bookstore in Waterloo, Ontario called Old Goat Books. It is in an old yellow brick house on the main street.

The bookshelves are all in pine so the smell is quite lovely and of course it is full from floor to ceiling with used books. The vibe of the place is laid back and the books are all in great condition.

They only opened about three or four years ago but they must have almost 20,000 books! I have bought and sold books there and it is a great place to hang out.

Shelley Young | Waterloo, Ont

If ever in Newmarket, Ontario, go to Starlight Books which has been in business for years and years.

It started out in small premises and then moved to a nearby plaza where it now has at least 3 and possibly more adjoined units full of new and used books of every genre at reasonable prices . They also buy used books.

Margaret Howie

I really enjoyed your column on used bookstores. In many cases I find used bookstores have more selection than Chapters and Coles: and at a far better price.

You asked in your article about used Bookstores. There's a ton in the Halifax area, but the best I've seen is in a town in PEI called Kensington (sorry, no likenesses of Al Waxman can be found); about 45 minutes N-W of Charlottetown.

Never seen anything like it...tiny but organized, functional but with character. The most charming thing was the enthusiasm of the proprietor.

Kind of like the 60-year old waitresses who advise you in a motherly way "you know where the coffee pot is". I brought a Clive Cussler book to the counter: in a sneer, he said I'd hate it but (accurately) suggested a Follett novel of the same theme that was a can't-put-it-downer.

I asked him why he stocked it if it was so bad: he told me for the tourists. Told him I was from Nova Scotia: replied "won't hold it against ya, but now it'll cost an extra buck" He laughed and suggested another 5 books by various authors and I couldn't put any of them down.

John Skelton

I'm a book lover as well, though I still haven't made it to City Lights yet.

Since my interest is in Russian literature, preferably in the original, I

usually buy online. That's how I discovered the following site:
<http://www.bookcrossing.com/home>

Maybe you know about this already, but in case you don't, I think it's a worthwhile concept. Another thing, there are quite a number of sites on the net that carry full-texts of books that people can download for free.

It's not the same as holding a book in your hand, but it sure is an inexpensive way of reading, especially for hard to find out-of-print books.

Jane Buckingham

I don't buy fiction. I borrow fiction from the Ottawa Public Library, and other than going to the lovely Rideau Branch with its helpful librarians, the transaction is done completely online.

I browse book reviews on amazon, in the New York Times Book Review, & various newspapers, select what I want, and submit my request.

There are multiple copies of best sellers and the wait is short. Unless a person has a compulsion for collecting hundreds of one time reads, library borrowing is the way to go.

The best site for used books online is www.abebooks.com. There are thousands of books for sale by book vendors throughout North America ranging from the hot off the press to the obscure. The transactions are safe, secure and pleasant & quick. And the books are very very inexpensive.

Pat McDowell | Ottawa

I couldn't agree with Dan Brown more about City Lights! I first discovered them while working in London in 1995. Now I live in Scarborough and make the trek down the 401 at least 3-4 times a year just to spend hours wandering through the books, CDs and movies. The atmosphere there is perfect!

Once upon a time, Queen Street West in Toronto used to have several stores like this... Gail Wilson Books, Bakka and others. The trend-oids moved in and pushed these wonderful places into extinction, replaced by designer jeans, designer coffee and other soulless merchandisers.

One other store that I've found is The Highway Bookstore, on Highway 11 north of North Bay. It's a huge barn with new and used books, but it also has the right feel and you can spend a whole day lost in literature of every age and type.

They even have old government pamphlets and topographical maps, some dating back before 1900! They're a riot to browse and funny, sometimes in a sad, wistful way, sometimes in a bust-your-gut way.

But the mother lode I've found is the northern/central Vermont-New Hampshire area. Every small town seems to have a used book store, with well-stocked shelves and knowledgeable, interesting staff who really care about the printed word.

Keep up the good work and thanks for the raves about City Lights! There's nothing more peaceful, enlightening and enjoyable than roaming through a well-cared-for used book store!

Mark D'Gabriel | Scarborough, Ontario

Hi there, just read your article about City Lights used book store. Loved it! I'm just undergoing a reading resurgence myself as my daughter is now 13 and doesn't need every minute of my time again.

As luck would have it, my husband and I cleaned out our hundreds of books in January and carted them off to the local used book stores (making close to \$150 at it at the same time).

At the same time we both took looks around and ended up picking up a book here and there to read. Last week I went looking for Shogun and ended up spending \$1.65 at The Book Closet in Mount Pearl www.bookcloset.com Newfoundland.

Well, the point of this letter was to thank you for an interesting article and to send a link to the Book Closet website. There are a lot of used book stores in and around the St. John's area, but you can always find whatever you're looking for at The Book Closet.

Maxine in Newfoundland

Another really good used book store that I frequent whenever I get to Chilliwack, BC (6 or 7 times a year) is The Book Man. Similar in a lot of ways to the store described by Dan.

It also has a great selection of LP's, the collection of which is one of my passions.

The selection at The Book Man is so extensive that I can quite easily lose myself for hours looking for a gem, which I frequently find.

Jim Balmer

I just wanted to write in and tell you about my favourite used bookstore in Vancouver. It's called Carson's. There are actually two locations (maybe more but, not being a walking Yellow Pages, I don't know for sure). The one I frequent is on Broadway in Kistilano.

The books are fantastic. They overflow from the shelves into heaps on the floor. Every time I'm there I end up taking armfuls home and leaving just as many I wanted behind.

Stephanie Shu

I'm a student who can't afford new book prices, so I go to the Toronto Reference Library's used book store named "Book Ends."

Book Ends has new books [that have been donated to the store], and used ones, as well. It has many genres of books, and the most expensive books are the hardcovers for 1 dollar each.

I think that's a very good deal when you could get, like I did, the Complete Works of Shakespeare, for a dollar.

And they have children's books, no matter what the size of the book, for 25 cents each [I recently picked up Harriet the Spy because I never read it when I was younger].

P.S. They're going to have a very big book sale March 18-20

Lorna Brown

Thanks for bringing back my teenage years of browsing in City Lights Books

on my way home from the downtown London high school that I attended during the seventies.

I would spend hours plowing through the oftentimes under organized shelves to find obscure gems for low prices. Now wherever I go, I seek out the used books rather than the Chapters which is so predictable.

At times, you find the most unexpected things. I remember coming across some books that Al Purdy used to own (his name was in them) in the Wayfarer book store in Kingston and another that had a handwritten dedication to the late Kingston based poet Bronwen Wallace.

Hunting in a used book store, time stands still.

Paul Milton

When in Winnipeg you may want to stop in at Burton Lysekie Books, located on Osborne street in Fort Rouge.

Owned and operated by a bearded man of the same name, Burton Lysekie was a God send when I was in University and I still stop in when visiting my parents who live in the neighborhood.

Same musty smell, same irreverent filing system, a fabulous place to spend a rainy afternoon.

Andrea Lawrence

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