

The Bookplate

173 Pacific Highway, Hornsby

The Bookplate is a secondhand bookshop on the 'old side' of Hornsby. According to my calculations it stocks in excess of 65,000 books for sale, not counting those in the storeroom out the back. The shop has no particular areas of specialisation, shelves are amply stocked with most subjects from car manuals to cannibalism.

Romance sells surprisingly well – surprising, that is, to me. Maeve Binchy, Catherine Cookson, Shirley Conran, Danielle Steele, Joanna Trollope, Mary Wesley. Some customers admit they're buying trash when they're paying at the counter, and they make some excuse, like they need some holiday reading. Men never go to this section, not one. Just like women never show any interest in War.

Customers who buy mysteries and murder mysteries have a similar confessional air, though they are more likely to justify their purchases of Dean Koontz, John Grisham, Jack Higgins, Lynda La Plante, Ruth Rendell, Greg Iles and the like, as a 'good read'. The only one of these writers with any claim to 'literature' is John Le Carré, but I don't care, so long as they spend. Like Romance, no one collects them. I have only met one person who did so, a South African guy who collects Wilbur Smith hardbacks. Not even Stephen King is collected, in fact I've only read one of his, it was titled *On Writing* and I enjoyed it very much, though not enough to warrant reading his others.

Strangely, many women go straight to True Crime. They seem to like people like Myra Hindley and slasher murderers more than drug runners like Warren Fellows who spent 12 years in a Hong Kong prison. One attractive young woman gave me the website for mutilated body parts, which of course I politely accepted but have never visited.

Although the shop stocks Art, Sci-Fri, School Texts, Australiana, General Fiction, New Age, Kids Books, Gardening, Philosophy, Cooking, etc, plus various collectibles, if it can be said it has any area of specialisation it is War and related subjects – like military regiments, war planes, aerial warfare, amphibious warfare, great battles, etc. World War 2 is of more interest than other wars like World War 1, Vietnam, Iraq, etc. So I

imagine the bookshop owners would call *Fighter and Bomber Squadrons At War*, by Andrew Brookes (\$26) a 'good book'.

Hitler is more likely to sell than Churchill. The two copies I've seen of *Mein Kampf* (banned in Germany) went within the week, one was a \$200 collectible, sold to Ian who works for the taxation department. Ah, it's a funny business. The only customers with any interest in the British Royals are usually Asians. I sold Churchill to an Indian guy.

From the time I stood outside Tyrells Books at the Rocks, too frightened to go in, in the 60s – I always wanted to work in, or preferably own, a secondhand bookshop. I have Chris and Cat Shelley to thank for giving me this experience – which is more than just a Sunday job – but an ambition which has enriched my life.

I'm fascinated with books. My daughter Zoë laughed at me – again – the other day, for talking about the 'sensous' feeling of turning the pages of a well-published book. Today a customer called Luke declined to buy a Toulouse Lautrec that he had picked out. He declined because of the spotting on the pages. It was a \$15 book, with Lautrec's images in full colour. 'Don't worry,' I said, 'We have five more exactly the same'. And I found one, differently priced at \$10 and unspotted. He declined to buy. The paper – he said – was no good. That's right, actually.

Customers *miss* Cat. They *want* Chris. And I think they *like* me because I like them.

Cat got married two Saturdays ago, there were lots of people. The karate people over there, her husband's family and friends over here, and my wife Robbie and I were with the secondhand book people. There was Clive, who sold the Bookplate to the current owners, and Carol, who owns *Turn The Page* at Gordon. Carol and Clive both said they hate their customers. Well, I mostly love them – the maddies, the occasional drunks and I've never had a shop-lifter.

Clive had a shoplifter, at the Bookplate. Chris doesn't give a fuck about shop lifters. He reckons if someone is so desperate, let them steal it. I can't believe readers are stealers. But Clive reckons you can pick them because they're watching you more than the books. Seriously, what can they steal? The usual price in the general section is between \$8-\$15.

Anyway, when Clive owned the shop this woman slipped a book in her bag, and because of the lineal shelving, it is easy to cut customers off at

the pass if you're sharp, which Clive was. 'I believe you have one of my books in your bag?' he said, standing between her and the door. She handed it over. This is the only anecdote I have about a theft at the shop, Clive couldn't believe that she had the gall to front up two days later, bold as brass, wanting to sell him some books.

Clive and Françoise – husband and wife – started the Bookplate at least 12 years ago across the road from its present location. In this speeding world more than a decade is a long time, and I have customers who ask about the history of the business as if a tape recording is the next step.

Clive, Chris and I have in common that we have all been professional writers for many years. I have known these guys a bit for at least 10 years.

Clive was interested in my publishing connections. He still has a novel in him, and from what I can gather it's a Frederick Forsythe/John Galsworthy kinda tale. He has aspirations as a writer. However, even though I *am* a writer, I have more in common with Chris in this regard. This thing, we both wanted to be – perhaps desperately – at some point of our lives, we don't want it as much as Clive does.

I showed up today shortly before 11.00 because the deal with Chris & Cat is I can work 10-5 or 11-6 or any other 7-hour combination I choose. Having being fed a couple of books about bookshops by Chris, plus having just enjoyed *Books, Baguettes and Bedbugs* about Shakespeare & Co, Paris. I am fascinated as to what might be the nightlife of a bookshop. I am curious about what would happen if we habitually remained open on a Sunday 12.00-8.00? Today, I found out.

I never feel comfortable funding my book habit with 'family money'. So I ravage garage sales and Salvation Army stores for 50c and \$1 books that I can trade up with Chris. Today I've got my eye on *The Voyage of the Snark* by Jack London (\$40) published by – believe it or not – Mills & Boon.

So after turning on all the lights, the first thing I do today is place two books in the window. A signed edition of *Penguin Petty*, Bruce Petty's cartoons which neither Chris nor I can understand why it hasn't sold for \$25 – we agree it is possibly the best buy in the shop. And a two volume case-bound book about Harley Davidson motor bikes which I sourced from a customer and Chris priced at \$60. Then I take all the other books that he priced and left on the desk for me to put away and put the most

exciting ones in the window and put the others on the shelf. Lots of Romance, lots of General Fiction, too much Harry Potter.

Despite today's Vietnam veterans march to the Hornsby cenotaph, to say this morning was quiet is an understatement. Three books sold in the first four hours!

Believe me, it's a dead morning. It's time to eat. I pick up the phone and call Abdul at the *Sofra at Hornsby Pizza Kebab House*. He sounds flat when he picks up the phone, but sparks up when I tell him it's me. 'Lowell, buddy – what is it today beef kebab or gozlemé?' 'Beef kebab, no onion', 'Okay buddy – five minutes'. I don't close the shop, I slip out, walk 40 metres and pick it up. And there is Abdul arguing with a young man of 'Middle Eastern appearance' who wants a \$5 kebab for \$4. 'See that woman there,' Abdul tells him, 'She just spent \$85 to feed all her kids. It costs me \$1500 per week rent – how do you expect me to make any money?' He dismisses the cheapsake, smiles at me, I pay and rush back.

Then a strong-looking dark haired guy comes in wanting books on trains. I show him the *Observers Book of British Trains* (\$26) which is in the window and an authentic Department of Railways *Memo Book* (\$10), then ask him what he's after. He says he wants it for his son. 'How old is your son?'

'One'.

So I point him to the section of Kids Books, but he stays in the Railways Section and I'm not sure what to say next, uncertain what a one-year old might want with trains.

An elderly woman comes into the shop and says, 'Vestin Uio, non?' 'I'm sorry, I don't understand?' I say. She repeats herself. I have another attempt. 'Western Union?' 'Non?' she says, scratching herself. I shake my head, 'No, this isn't Western Union,' I reply – wondering if I understood anything at all - and she shuffles out the door.

Someone now wants *East of Eden*, ah, Steinbeck. No – by Cunningham, a book about the South Pacific. I tell him about *Treasure Islands* by Pearl Binder. This rapidly is turning into a Monty Python sketch.

Clive sold the Bookplate to Dave T and Chris in 2003. I knew Dave T 15 years ago, when he stood behind the counter in Michael Shuhin's bookshop, *Falcon Books*. Dave is another guy with a novel in him.

All these guys have sold me wonderful things over the years. Michael Shuhin sold me Allen Ginsberg's autographed *Kaddish*, Brett Whiteley's autographed *Recent Nudes* poster, *OZ* magazines. Lionel Lindsay's *Macaws*, and Leonardo da Vinci's *Notes & Drawings* in three hardback volumes for \$15. Clive was also terrific. He sold me an autographed Anthony Burgess book, 7-8 years ago. Pity it was *The Life and Work of D H Lawrence* not *A Clockwork Orange*. But then, it wouldn't have cost only \$20.

This is when I met Dave T. He worked part-time in Falcon Books when I worked at Huntley Publishing, 100 yards up Falcon Street, Crows Nest. I never imagined nearly a decade and a half later that he would have a short partnership with Chris, buying the business from Clive and Françoise. Clive played Classical music in the shop. I play ukulele music. Chris plays Van Morrison. Cat plays bands with names I can't remember. I've bought a few good things off Dave at the Gordon Markets, like Albert Camus *Youthful Writing*, 1976, (\$18).

From Chris – when he was in partnership with Dave T – I bought the oldest book/s in my library, *Memoirs of the Protectoral-House of Cromwell* by Mark Noble, 1787 in two volumes. The two volumes were priced at \$400 and I paid them off by buying books at St Vinnies and bringing them in for credit. Somewhere near the \$340 mark Chris had about enough, and said, 'Just take the things'. He never again wanted to see me show up with another copy of *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*.

Next my father calls in with his friend Bill who buys me a cappuccino and I tell them that Hugo Chavez is my Favourite Dictator, obviously because of his denunciations of Bush. I like the 'Favourite Dictator' line, and use it throughout the day. Customers laugh, sometimes.

Luke thought it was sensational because he's got a favourite Anarchist, Guy Le Bord. Luke is one of the few people I allow to get involved in the sales process. In every other instance, when a sale is on, I cut everyone else out – no matter who they are, so I can focus totally on the customer. And if it doesn't work across the counter because of the customer chit chat, I take the customer away from the counter conversations and clinch the sale somewhere between New Age and School Texts. But Luke is

helpful. It was he who clinched a \$30 sale of Jung's *Man And His Symbols*. 'Oh you never see it in hardback, in this condition,' he said. And a young woman bought it for \$30.

Luke is a round-faced guy who gets his hair cut pretty short on the sides. He is well spoken and well read. He lives in Surry Hills and hangs out in Hornsby on Sundays because he visits his Dad who goes to the RSL Club. Luke can't stand the pokies so he calls in here. Luke works on the Clover Moore campaign in his electorate, he's a carer – teaching English as a second language, takes occasional lectures on subjects like T E Lawrence and never watches television. Luke never stays less than an hour.

Dave McMahon comes in today, and when he does the mood entirely lifts. The place has been dull as dogshit before he and Luke arrived, now here he is with my two other interesting customers of the day.

Then a customer comes in wanting a James Goddard book but I don't know the author. That's because I got it wrong, it's Robert, not James. For a while I thought he meant Trevor Goddard, the Captain of the South African cricket team in the early 60s, so I was looking in 'Sport'. After all that, he doesn't buy.

I have known Dave since 1975. He is the only person to keep up with my father linguistically. My father speaks six languages – English, French, Italian, German, Latin and Russian. Dave speaks English, French, German, Classical Greek, Latin and he can also read Egyptian hieroglyphics. He is a musician and a researcher. He collects Biggles, Leslie Charteris, actually he collects almost everything.

Dave is a jazz bassist who plays every Saturday night at the Hakoa Club Bondi, which he has done for years. Abe Saffron died last week, and Abe was linked to the Hakoa Club. Dave doesn't know anything about it. I despise Saffron for his involvement with the 1979 Luna Park Fire.

I make Dave a coffee. He wants to pay \$3 for it. Is he nuts?

I tell him that in 1970 – Chris – owner of this shop – was working for a finance company and (with an assistant) – was required to remove the finance company endorsement sign from a business in Bondi. Anyway, while unscrewing the sign a guy approached Chris and his mate, and said, 'The boss wants to speak with you'. Although his mate didn't have a clue what was going on, Chris knew exactly who he was talking to when he

was escorted into Abe Saffron's office. Abe asked him what he thought he was doing, Chris said he was just following instructions. And all the while Abe maintained eye contact – like a snake charmer – and toyed with a hand gun in his right hand. Although Chris was probably only 19 at the time, and his mate didn't have a clue what was going on, they both got off the hook. That's the story Chris told me 18 months ago while selling me *Rumpole* in a case, published by the Folio Society for \$10. 'Rumpole doesn't sell,' shrugged Chris. He still has another Rumpole sitting on the shelf. People are strange, John Mortimer is a great writer. Plus he was a defending barrister in the London trials of OZ.

When it comes to sales, this is the most ordinary day I could have chosen to write about. Though, when it comes to customers, they are always interesting.

There's Grant, a guy in his mid-to-late 30s who sells me books for \$2-\$3 apiece and buys them back on the same day for \$12-\$13 – or sometimes more. Grant lives on the Gold Coast with his mother and explains he is paranoid delusional, with a religious bent. He has worked as a librarian – which he disliked, and a telemarketer – which he loved, and was good at it, once earning \$700 in a 4-hour period. He explains he is staying in Hornsby because his uncle died and he and his Mum are selling the uncle's 2-bedroom unit. His Mum gives him money plus he lives off a disability allowance which makes me feel terrible about cheating him on the books. Chris says he used to feel that way, but after buying and selling back-and-forth on the same day, he simply got sick of it – having priced and shelved them, plus remembering which books came from Grant, and explaining the mark-up. My patience is running out too.

There's a guy in a State Emergency Services uniform with a nasal way of speaking who reckons there's 'millions and millions of Ormbys (ie Hornsbys) and God could just pick you up and put you in another one, *and you wouldn't even know*'. He buys books on Eastern mysticism, but mostly he just comes in and looks at them.

Then my 90-year old father drops in, speaks German and sings Gilbert & Sullivan to astonished customers. *When I was a lad I served a term from office boy to an attorney's firm...* 🎵. Sometimes he denounces evolution, pouring out all sorts of scientific reasons why I shouldn't believe in Darwin's theory. He is relieved when I tell him I don't believe in it, but dubious as to my reasons, which are that I am not interested in science and that – for poetic reasons - I prefer a magical creation.

Then a little boy comes in with his Dad, a long haired guy wearing multiple ear-rings and wants ghost stories which he says Chris puts aside for him behind the counter. He can't find any, so he tells me he's going to the \$2 shop to buy a pack of 15 little American flags to stick in dog shit.

Dave McMahon – who spends \$35 – recounts an extraordinary story about Paul McCartney-Burt Bacharach. Dave says Tommy Tycho told him – when drunk – that he knows Burt Bacharach personally. And Burt said that Brian Epstein asked him to ghost-write three songs, which were *Yesterday*, *Michelle* And Dave can't remember the third. Wow! Tell the press – quick!

Today – after the shop being empty for four hours – an attractive woman with a dog called Jack – hangs around the shop for an hour or more. I allowed the dog inside.

When she comes to the counter she has a stack of books and says she mightn't be able to afford them and might have to put some back. Chris has told me I can give customers 25% discount any time I want. Mostly I do the opposite. A customer comes to the counter with \$21.50 of books – and whenever I've been there with Chris behind the counter he rounds it off to \$20. I never do. I reckon that all those \$1.50s add up to an extra \$10 by the end of the day. Anyway...she's got \$100 worth of books and Luke is commenting on it, which I don't mind. One is *The Celestine Prophecy* at \$8, but we've got heaps of them and I'm happy to see the fucking thing go at any price. Another is a book about Saddam Hussein (\$14) that I've been popping in-and-out of the window for the last six months, and again, I want to get it out of my life.

She also buys *The Beauty Myth*, and everything else is good stuff – like Hans Heysen - on which I can't cut the price. Luke angles for a discount for her which is okay. That's \$75 in the till.

So Luke tells her, 'Oh what an usual selection of books – *Hans Heysen*, *The Beauty Myth*...chess.'

I tell her about a game where young Paul Morphy played a Grand Duke who had a team of advisers. On the 13th move he gave away his Queen, on the 14th he gave away his Rook, on the 15th move he gave away his Bishop, on the 16th he check-mated the Duke. I wrap up the story stating the obvious, 'Because the aim is nothing other than to kill the King'. Then Dave adds his bit, and Luke too.

She says mournfully – looking at Luke, ‘I wish I had someone to play Chess with...’

Luke? Luke?

Not a word from Luke.

After she leaves I challenge him. ‘She gave you a feed line mate, why didn’t you say okay?’

To uproarious laughter from me and Dave he explains, ‘I don’t want women to love me for my body, I want them to love me for my mind!’

‘Oh I know mate, Dave and I have that problem too!’

It’s closing time now, Dave and Luke pack up and go. Luke tells us that T E Lawrence wrote poetry, Dave tells us Egyptian hieroglyphics aren’t too difficult once you’ve learned about 80 foundational characters.

Then just as I am about to close, in comes a woman who wants something by Judith Wright. No probs. We have five books of her Collected Poems in paperback, two in hardback, her Letters and more if she wants me to pursue it. The counter is stacked with eight Judith Wrights, ‘Ah no, I’ve changed my mind’, she says and abruptly walks out.

I phone Chris at 5 to 6 as usual, and his first words are always, ‘How did you go?’ at which point I tell him my day’s takings. It’s a bit disappointing but he says ‘better than a kick in the bum’.

Then Chris asks whether anything happened today, and I tell him about Grant, and that Ian – who works for the Tax Office and hates Muslims - didn’t come in to pick up the books he has left behind the counter for months. I tell him about ‘millions and millions of Ormsbys’ and the Burt Bacharach anecdote, which not even Dave McMahon believes. Plus we had a Satanist in the shop while an elderly Christian lady was there – who works for Historic Homes and helped save May Gibbs’ house. So that’s the day done.

Then Paul Duncan walks in. Paul has a willingness to laugh at everything, so I tell him about Luke and the woman who wanted to play him Chess. I explain that Luke didn’t pick up on it because then he’d have to go to her house.

'He wouldn't go to her house!' he laughs. Next I tell him about *East of Eden* by Cunningham, 'Which is like David Copperfield with a K!' and he laughs some more.

Paul is an agricultural scientist who is buying a book about the coming worldwide oil crisis and another about the Peter Falconio murder by Richard Shears. I tell him that Shears wrote one of the Azaria books and that I wrote a 10,000 word article about the Azaria case for *Rolling Stone* magazine, and somehow while telling him about my trip to Docker River NT I explain that the only way to have illicit sex in Docker River is like the Beatles song, *Why Don't We Do It In The Road*. The road is the only place. Reason: when a husband notices his wife is missing, he looks at the tracks leading from the front door, and says, 'She's gone to Joe's place'. The road is the only place that wipes out footprints in the fine red dust. More laughter.

By now it is 6.30 and Paul spots a magnificent book called *The Coachmaker Atlas of Scale Drawings* (\$80) which he examines page-by-page, and it slowly dawns on me that this guy knows all about the finer points of coachmaking, so I tell him my great-grandfather – George Tarling was a wheelwright in Essex.

So Paul explains that my great-grandfather would have worked with a team of eight, plus apprentices and assistants. The smith would be No 1 – because he controlled the fire. My great-grandfather would be No 2, then there would have been a coachbuilder, a striker, a rimmer, a farrier, a riveter and someone working the leather. All the while he is turning the pages and more customers are drifting in. Two are pretty young girls to which Paul exclaims, 'Chess!' and cacks himself.

It is now approaching 7.00 and I want to go home, but Paul starts explains about coopering, a related activity, and he tells me about the fine art of making barrels. Eventually he makes his way out adding a \$9 book about Orchids to his purchases on the way out and I pick up the \$2.50 bins on the pavement and bring them inside.

Just as I am about to lock up I notice an elderly man is inside the shop browsing and I tell him I'm closing now. He is maybe 75, wearing a beige cardigan and with blood on his right eyelid, underneath his glasses. He speaks slowly. He does everything slowly. 'I'm closing.'

'Okay,' he says, 'Have you got Tacitus in Penguin Classics?' 'We sure have', and I whisk him over to the Classics section while he ruminates

over this volume for five minutes with me standing too close in the hope that I can irritate him into going home. Remember home?

‘I’ll come back and get this,’ he says. Meanwhile I am packing up my laptop, switching off lights, making disruptive noises with an air of finality.

‘Have you got anything on Shackleton’s expedition?’

‘Yes we do, in the Polar Regions section’. I race past Australian Birds, past Lonely Planet Travel and find two books which he studies slowly. I check the clock, it is 80 minutes past closing time. ‘It’s not just the subject matter,’ he explains, ‘I like to see if a book is well written too’. Then he asks what I know about the Shackleton expedition – which is nothing – so he tells me that he saw a movie about it at the IMAX theatre where the actors simulated the dramatic final three day trek but they couldn’t even approach three days to cross the mountain, not even with modern equipment. ‘Sure, sure...’.

Then he explains how Shackleton and his men did all this without sleep, because if they stopped they would die. Sure mate, sure. He also explains that they didn’t even know World War I was happening until afterwards. ‘Sure...’.

And then finally he tells me that these are very interesting books and now he knows where they are he’ll come back later. Fortunately I have edged him to the door. Yes, he says, he will come back later for Tacitus and Shackleton when the other bloke is here – what’s his name?

‘Chris,’ I blurt, shutting the door at last and turning the sign around displaying the word CLOSED.