

Next Sunday At The Bookplate

Good Books

My father is waiting for me outside the shop, with his gold-coloured ‘old person’s’ motorised trike parked outside the window. I rattle around for the keys, open the door, let him in, put out the \$2.50 bins and read the note from Chris.

I saw Chris two days ago when I called in on Friday. The Bookplate is having a hard week, possibly due to the hot weather and certainly due to the railworks at the station which discourages people from crossing the line and even coming to Hornsby at all.

Chris told me someone from the Church of Christian Science had called in and asked him not to buy any more Christian Science books from the Ormsby guy, because they are all stolen books. I’m sure Chris was most relieved to have this excuse, for if you look at the section called Religion, going by the numbers, you’d think Christian Science was a major religion. Mary Baker Eddy books abound. And they never sell. Nevertheless Chris has some compassion for Ormsby, who wanders the streets, skinny as a ghost, wearing various discarded uniforms and he tells the Christian Science guy that poor old Ormsby has a mental condition and is not just a thief. At this point, Chris told me, the Christian Science guy ‘lost it’.

I explain to Chris the principal tenet of the Christian Science faith is *if you’re sick, it’s YOUR fault*. This is the basis of its name: Christian Science. He seemed relieved, because ‘until that point, the guy seemed quite reasonable’, said Chris.

I am always real busy getting started, too busy to answer my father asking, ‘How’s the family?’ First I look for the note Chris always leaves – it’s underneath a pile of papers. It’s so lost on the desk I almost wonder if it’s current. Yes it is, and there is an emergency at the Bookplate: no coffee. Turning to my father I ask whether he’d mind the counter while I rush to the supermarket to buy Harris Espresso coffee-bags. Of course he will. I take \$10 from the till and leave him to it.

When I return he has sold two books, \$1 and \$7 but he couldn't find the till. There's a \$10 note on the counter, and even though $7+1$ doesn't equal 10 I am suddenly too busy with a new customer to enquire: a woman wants a book on bottle collecting. 'Well, you were looking in the right section,' I say, 'Let's see what I can do'. I shuffle through lots of books on glass collecting, offering them in hope. 'I said bottles.' 'Ah yes, of course'. Dolls, antique furniture, collecting autographs. 'I've got some good autographs,' I tell her. 'What's your best one?' Mark Twain, I reply, and I should have left it at that, but instead I list off various others she isn't interested in like Tiny Tim, the Doug Anthony Allstars, Lewis Morley and Vester Presley, Elvis's uncle. And there it is, I see the title 'Glass Bottles' and its only \$10 in hardback! I place it in her hand, as I always do to customers, knowing that it is an effective sales technique.

She says, 'I'll have to ask my husband – he's the collector'. *Now* she tells me! 'Where's your husband?' 'In the car.' What I should say next is to take the book out to him, because if they don't want it, she'll have to bring it back. I don't, so that's the last I see of her.

And so I return to my father. When I saw him waiting for me outside the shop, he looked so pensive that I thought he might have had bad news – like news that his brother Uncle Frank had died. But there's none of that, he just wants to know that my wife Robbie is in good health, that Amber and the grandkids are okay, that Joel is fine and Zoë too.

Having said that he tells me how much he enjoyed the book I lent him from the shop, *Memoirs*, Montgomery of Alamein. 'I was as close to him as I am to you,' he says, but he's told me this before, several times. My father served in North Africa, Italy and Austria during the Second World War, and had an Alsatian dog called Bella.. Today he reminisces about General Montgomery and Bella, then looks at his watch – as he often does before scooting off – and says, 'I'll stay here two more minutes'. Why two?

Off he goes, and next I sell an Enid Blyton book to a little girl. I tell the child that Enid Blyton wrote 700 titles and sold 500 million books, and is ever-popular. The mother comes over and seems to like me, I tell her that I was a member of the Enid Blyton Fan Club when I was seven, living in London, and that I subscribed to her magazine. So the mother adds how fond she still is of the Secret Seven and the Famous Five. Such a pity I spoil everything by telling her that devotees are currently snapping up the Nigger version and the Gay version of Noddy, as well as the Smacking Slipper version (which was changed to a feather duster, to

make Noddy politically correct). The child is startled, the mother suddenly hates me and mightn't come back. I wish I'd sum up situations better before just babbling. They add \$5 to the day's takings.

Then a middle-aged woman comes in who wants to see Cat. The wedding photos are pinned to the shelf on the counter, and that's all that seems to interest her. She thinks they're lovely. I tell her that Cat works Monday to Wednesday, Chris works Thursday to Saturday, but she doesn't answer. She likes the wedding pics. This is one of those moments where I need to pretend to be doing something else, like reading. I'm the wrong person behind the counter, and no one can do anything about that.

An entomologist walks to the counter. Balding a bit, he has a pony tail and looks like a guitarist. I show him the Natural History section but I really don't think anything is going to be serious enough, so I find him a book of *Quimby's Bees* which he flicks through half-heartedly. I have to do better than this. Think, think. Of course, the rarer collectibles comprise some pretty offbeat titles, all sorts of natural histories of Australia written at least 60 years ago. Last week I had \$60 credit with the shop and from this section I took *Australia* by Anthony Trollope, (UQP, 1967) explaining to Chris that it's not ideal – I'm not rushing to read it – but I'll probably never have another opportunity to buy it again. Anyway, it had been hanging around the shop for a long time. Think, think. Search, search. Think entomology...ah! And there it is – what I was hoping for – a substantial 1945 book about Australian insects which might be obscure enough that this guy doesn't own it.

He recognizes the book immediately, checks the price - \$45 – and loves it. He will send his 'partner' around later in the day to pick it up, but I don't believe it, not after my experience with Ms Glass Bottles. However, he leaves his name, contact details and tells me that there are many members of his Society of Entomologists scouring bookshops for books about insects, and if we can deliver the goods, we're in!

I'm sure this will excite Chris and Cat no end - a note advising them the market for entomology is booming. Where are they going to get such books? Garage sales? I don't think so.

It is so difficult to explain what makes a good book to customers. They all think we should be shelling out \$notes when they bring Bryce Courtney in, in good condition. And I've got to explain, these books are worthless. We've got six of them, and the only Bryce Courtney book anybody ever wants is *The Power of One*.

Grant comes to the counter wanting to buy a lovely Bible – new – and a book about Jesus, also pretty new. I immediately suspect that he sold the books to Chris during the week for possibly \$10 and now he’s buying them back for \$45. I always feel we’re cheating him – but right now I don’t want to ask. Although I take his money, I try to give him other things – friendship, respect, even advice. Grant likes Tiny Tim. We’re hoping to commemorate the 10th anniversary of Tiny’s death on 31 November with a get-together at Martin Sharp’s forthcoming exhibition, and I tell Grant this. He is returning to the Gold Coast in four days time, but will be back possibly in time for Tiny.

‘\$40’, I say, letting him off \$5.

‘Wow, oh thanks Lowell,’ he replies.

I tell him I’ve put the previous Bookplate article on the Net and I wrote that he is paranoid delusional, and does he mind? ‘Well I *am* paranoid delusional!’ he affirms.

I make him a coffee and chat about his interest in *The Satanic Bible*, which I haven’t read, then I talk about the art of Martin Sharp – which he only seems to follow when I’m talking Tiny Tim, and then a guy apologises for interrupting but he’d like *The Celestine Prophecy* by James Renfield – yes! We have three on the top shelf of New Age, plus Renfield’s follow-up, and you cannot believe how pleased I am to unload this book, which – like Harry Potter and *Men Are From Mars, Women From Venus* – has hit the denial phase with customers, who all pretend they never owned it, read it nor had anything to with it.

‘It’s \$9 – unless you want the \$12 one in better condition’.

\$9.

Grant says I won’t see him now for 5/6 weeks. I shake his hand, and wish him well and tell him about the time I met Patrick White. Then the whole place fills up with people, none of them within range of the counter, all browsing, all right. If they get within speaking distance I blurt, ‘Sing out if I can help’ but only one of them has a question, about the story of a King which she insists is Sci-Fi even though I reckon it’s probably historical.

Lisa staggers in carrying two bags of books. She wants to exchange them, She arrives precisely two minutes after I phoned Abdul at the *Sofra* for my Sunday goslemé. ‘You’re in charge of the shop,’ I tell her, as I walk out the door to pick up my lunch. On my return I make her a coffee – suddenly realising she *needs* a coffee.

‘What did you do last night?’ I ask. ‘I went to a party at Mount Anan’. ‘Mount Anan – near Campbelltown?’ ‘Yes’. ‘What time did you go to bed?’ ‘Four’. I assume that’s when she got home to Hornsby, but it wasn’t. She fell asleep there and came home at 10.00 which is only three hours ago. Ah, coffee.

I first met Lisa several months ago, she was in the Art section and I found out that she paints. I think she fancies water colours, but I could be wrong because I chat to all the artists and sometimes get mixed up as to who told me what. One guy was always running second to Adam Cullen in the Mosman Art Prize. He spent over \$100 on Art books. I liked him.

Lisa carried a Beatles shoulder bag, which is a second reason why I noticed her. The third was that she was amazingly receptive to the works of Charmian Clift and George Johnston – and Mick Reid reckons George is Australia’s greatest writer, with *My Brother Jack* just for starters. Lisa was buying everything on this subject, *Images In Apsic* (Imprint A&R), George Johnston’s biography by Garry Kinnane, and maybe three months ago I found the Charmian Clift biography for her, but she didn’t return. I thought that was the last I’d seen of Lisa, but she came back last week and told me that she was moving back to Newcastle because her poor father was dying of smoking-induced emphysema. She’s reducing her library radically because of the move, which is what this is all about.

I sort her books into three piles – the good ones – like (1) Terry Pratchett, Michael Foucault and Stephen King’s *On Writing*; (2) the mediocre/okay books and (3) the crap; - like out of date *Maths In Focus* and Stephen King in terrible condition. ‘That’s \$30 credit’, I announce – and she’s already picked out a Graham Greene first edition, so that was easy.

I talk to Lisa for maybe half an hour – or should I say, talk *at* Lisa. She attended the 1990 Yellow House exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, *This Is Not The Yellow House*. So I prattle on about meeting Martin at the original Yellow House, about seeing him yesterday and the return of the Tapestry at the State Library, as well as Martin’s forthcoming exhibition at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery. I hope she is

interested. Although she gives the impression that she is very interested, she is hung-over and defenceless.

After Lisa leaves the place is empty, leaving me to my thoughts, and as Lisa's pile of books is on the counter, never out of sight, that's what I think about. There are three piles – great, okay and crap. Remember, I don't have the authority to make purchases – only exchanges. Remember also that my fantasy is to own a bookshop someday in Katoomba. How do I define a 'good book'?

There are several answers. First one has to differentiate a 'good book' from a saleable book. So a Harry Potter book in the first week of its release is a champion! But after a time, it will be rubbish. So beyond whatever I say next, there is are the fluctuations of the book trade. *Sacred And Naked* by Ruth Ostrow, we can't sell at \$10. Yet at Borders across the line it seems to sell steadily at \$30 new. Explain that. We've got a couple of new release books like that, nobody wants them at the third the price. Yet they're still buying them new. So there's a 'new' book mentality, even though our Ruth Ostrow is in mint condition. I stick it in the window.

I fiddle with the window all day, sometimes putting books in because they're brightly coloured, other times because they're confronting – like soft porn or witchcraft, other times because they're newsworthy – about Iraq or US policy. I'm not sure any of this works, I think 'Harley Davidson' works better (Chris says he sold the \$60 cased bound edition to the local pawnbroker who was 'always looking for a book like that').

And ships. They sell well from the window. A female customer wants *First Lady* by Kay Cottee – the first woman to sail solo around the globe – and I know exactly where it is, it costs \$10 and if only every sale was as simple as this. Done.

So what is a good book? I wonder – it is now 2.00 and sometimes I have a couple of hours to sit and wonder with few interruptions between 2-4 on a typical Sunday, after which Luke comes in around 4.00 and conversation intensifies, but I wonder if he will come in today, with the train not running.

I think a good book has longevity, it is not something in which the public loses interest after a burst – and I say this irrespective of whether or not it has been on the Best Sellers list.

Nobody wants novels by Bryce Courtenay, Jeffrey Archer, Isabel Allende, Peter Carey, Barry Humphries, Germaine Greer, L Ron Hubbard, Sarah Henderson, Colleen McCullough and – I know it's been huge – but *Rich Dad, Poor Dad* by Robert Kiyosaki is one dead book – in this shop. A lot of faddish business books are. New Age is a bit like that, everyone started getting rid of *The Celestine Prophecy* by James Redfield and then *we* get them! As for the sequel – forget it! These books are about as popular as a Spice Girls CD now. Customers selling books to the shop don't understand this, they expect a secondhand bookshop would want multiple copies, after all they got sucked in to buying the first edition! With 35 million *Da Vinci Codes* junking their way around the market, I guess Dan Brown will now go the way of J K Rowling.

However, some best sellers are amazingly resilient, especially in Sci-Fi. Terry Goodkind, Stephen Erikson, Raymond E Feist, David Eddings always sell. And Terry Pratchett sells immediately.

Biggles is a terrific seller. Collectibles editions sell for hundreds – no, thousands – of dollars, but the humble \$12 paperbacks are also in reasonable demand, and I can't explain that. Nor can I explain why nobody buys Frank Clune, whereas Ion Idriess sells steadily. Ian Fleming has never fallen out of favour – admittedly though, usually in collectible rather than reprint (so it's easier to sell a \$40 James Bond book than an \$8 edition). And Enid Blyton never goes away.

A good book has a lot of integrity – it is what it says it is, and fulfils its promise. Therefore *The Rotary Club of Sydney 1921-1981* by Alex Mitchell (\$20) is everything you would want (in the unlikely event that you would want that sort of thing). *Hunter Valley Bushwalks* by Greg Powell (\$10) is the same. Likewise, *Behind Broulee*, *The History of the Eurobodalla Shire* by William Bayley (\$20). They are what they are. Sooner or later someone will buy these books.

Church and institutional histories don't work as well, being written to justify their past and glorify their current state. Nevertheless, the historical data is generally reliable. Biographies too, unless sensationalised, are also built on solid rock.

A great book does all the things it's supposed to do – early editions become collectibles, hardbacks are worth money, their integrity is apparent to all and prized by those it is written for.

Another aspect that differentiates good books from useless books is originality, and I don't mean being 'different', I mean good books start something.

Here are 10 'good books' – chosen specifically because they are not necessarily my favourite books (some are), but they are nevertheless 'good':

- *The Power of Positive Thinking* by Dale Carnegie – why would you read the modern copyists?
- *Think And Grow Rich* by Napoleon Hill – my God, he's got a lot to answer for in terms of bastard children!
- *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley and *Dracula* by Bram Stoker – both books sparked an interesting genre.
- *John Barleycorn* by Jack London, the first book about alcoholism. His friends thought he was crazy to write it.
- *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, not only inspired generations of writers but influenced Scotland Yard's detective operations.
- *Moll Flanders* by Daniel Defoe, the first book to make the common person a hero – and thus Defoe invented the modern novel.
- *The Confessions of an Opium Eater* by Thomas De Quincey, which predates drug literature by a century and a half.
- Theosophical writings of Madam H P Blavatsky, Alice Bailey and Charles Leadbeater who invented the New Age. In comparison, almost everything else on the subject is pap.
- Much as I'd love to credit Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, it was really Captain Marryat who spawned this sort of adventure novel, as well as H Rider Haggard, the author of *King Solomon's Mines*.
- *Samuel Pepy's Diaries*, who turned diaries into an art form years before Letts invented the diary and Andy Warhol's *Diaries* became a mass seller.

That is a quick list of 10 foundational books. And I forgot to mention Jane Austen, who invented the Romance genre, and having done so remains uniquely as the only genius writer of an awful genre.

As for contemporary Australian writers I think Ian Jones is the best biographer, Tim Winton – the best novelist and Robert Adamson – the best poet.

I often try to direct customers towards Robert Adamson's poems. But they don't want to buy anybody's poems – unless they are on the school syllabus.

How often do we sell poems? A 'smart' owner/manager – an economic rationalist - would simply exterminate the Poetry section. The only poet who is hot is Charles Bukowski. Bukowski is read by people who don't normally read poetry. But I am proud of the poetry section – which sits directly in front of me, so I never lose sight of it (nor the Science Fiction section). I put Poetry in alphabetical order six months ago.

The poetry section that should really be trashed is the 'anthologies' which is the whole slab of books between Poetry and Philosophy where nobody ever looks. While there is something terrific about holding Sylvia Plath, Carl Sandburg and W B Yeats, *An Anthology of Indian Poetry* or *Welsh Poetry* is a waste of time.

A street person with long wavy white hair comes into the shop and asks me for \$2.50 which I promptly give him because I've seen Chris 'give' money to anyone who asks. Last week I gave \$3 to a guy who reckoned he needed train fare. This guy tells me he is 63 years old and has been sleeping in the Hornsby Park until he can find his way back to Scone. He smokes bumpers, doesn't eat much, and drinks with other guys who also describe themselves by the forgotten term 'swaggies'. His skin has that tough quality of people who are forever out of doors and after receiving the \$2.50 he shakes my hand warmly, then spies Chris's Drum tobacco pack and asks me for tobacco. I give it to him. Then the swaggy asks for papers. And then the old rule about bludging comes to mind. I'm not going to like my swaggy if he asks me for anything else.

Thankfully he doesn't. He tells me all about Jack Kerouac's daughter, who he reckons wrote a book called *Off The Road*. Well, she didn't – that was Carolyn Cassidy – which we had in Penguin paperback for \$12 (until I bought it off Cat) – but I don't correct him, of course not. Then he raves about the Beat writer who died on the railway line, I tell him that was Neale Cassidy. Yeah, yeah. Then he tells me that Kerouac's daughter was a junkie – and I don't know whether that's correct or not. Meanwhile a quiet Asian guy comes in, almost puzzled by all the loud talk and then I realise something about being a shopkeeper.

In most situations in life, when one is engaged in conversation, somehow people assume there is a connection between the two parties, but behind a counter no one actually connects you to the customer. No matter how

urgent or intimate the conversation, the next customer has equal turf. The Asian guy isn't fazed and politely interrupts because he wants a book about Chris Patten, the 28th and last Governor of Hong Kong until its handover to the People's Republic of China on 30 June 1997. My swaggie immediately walks out. Well I don't know anything about Governors of Hong Kong and I immediately try to locate a bio of General George S. Patton, the big WW2 US war hero.

So I'm going 'Patton?'

He's going, 'Patten!' until I send him into the Travel section until he gives up and walks out.

My father calls in once more – after an hour and a half afternoon siesta - and he sings me the verse from *Trial By Jury*, where the Judge closes with the words 'I'll marry her myself'. He wants to buy Gilbert & Sullivan's libretto, and though we have two quite attractive Gilbert & Sullivan compendiums, it's just the libretto that he wants.

It's 4.00 and Luke should arrive soon.

So what makes a book good? Well Chris was very pleased with Cat for picking up *The History of the Waldenses*, which – even though it hasn't yet sold, after nine months – it *is* in fact, a history of the Waldenses. If you are interested in this heretical sect which appeared in the last half of the 12th Century, this is the book for you. And I can see that. It's as genuine as a book can be – straightforward title, with content that fulfils its promise. Only \$9 and you've covered the Waldenses.

Luke?

You always call around this time, so where are you?

Is it the trains? Probably.

I phone Chris who after 12 months doesn't say 'How'd you go?' any more.

He won't say 'How'd you go?' ever again as an opener because I put it in the previous chapter.