

Sunday After The Previous Sunday

Sex, Death and the Mini-Shop

Chris suggested the lead for this chapter should be, 'I tidied up the Bookplate for two hours'. Maybe he wants me to stop typing and tidy the books like I used to, when I was new and keen. So that's my lead paragraph.

'Tidying up' in a bookshop is different to tidying up elsewhere. For example, during the course of a normal day one might probably jiggle 50 books around: this is not 'tidying up' this is called 'walking past' or 'talking to customers'. Someone wants an *Encyclopedia of Gambling* and you're walking past World War 1, and suddenly *Montgomery of Alamein* catches your eye, 'Hmm, that belongs in World War 2...' so you pick it out and move it one shelf down, on your way past. And then there's, 'What's Tim Winton doing under C?' so you fix it, and keep on walking. None of that counts as tidying.

There are two types of tidying. One is (a) 'looks good A-Z', and (b) take the bloody lot off the shelf – make stacks on the floor that customers will have to step over, then put them all back *right*. I tidied *Australiana* a few months ago, meticulously pulling them all out, and putting them back one-by-one. I grouped all of Queensland together, all Tasmania together, all the States. Now they're a mess because customers do what they do.

Then I made a section for specific histories, like the Rea Family for example – under R; History of Goulburn NSW under G, History of the NSW Police Force under P and a handbook for Justices of the Peace under J, thinking 'who is ever going to find that there? But where else should I put it?' Picture the scene: customer, 'Have you got anything for JPs?' How is the person behind the counter ever going to think, 'Sure, in Specific Australian Histories under J'?

When I tidied up the Poetry section recently I made alphabetical stacks on the floor which was okay, not too many customers go in the Poetry section, so the books weren't in their way. You're at you're sharpest when you're tidying a section. 'Have you got *The Poems of Shaw Neilson*?' SLAP, it's in their hands in hardback quicker than they can blink.

I think about most books I handle. Hello, here's *Short History of Australia* by Manning Clark in two editions – cheap paperback and slightly less cheap paperback. And here's *Desirelines* by Peter and Richard Wherrett which Chris & Cat are selling for \$20, but as it's in the Art Section, today you get a 25% discount. I don't have anything to say about these books except they are a bit dusty. *Ethel Turner's Diaries, Confessions* by William Chidley, David Marr's excellent biography of Patrick White, which doesn't sell – not because there's anything wrong with it, but because the huge print run means that everyone who wants it has already got one. There's a back up copy in the back room. Then I start wondering about these fragments from a bookshop that I am writing.

'Nothing happens,' I exclaim to Chris. 'No one gets laid, no one dies, no one gets robbed...'

Three months ago the Noodle Shop next door got robbed at knifepoint in broad daylight. Three guys took two day's takings (\$1200). Then they crossed the road and robbed the brothel, they took a customer's wallet too, which amused me: 'Hi honey, I'm home'.

'The Police called and want to talk to you about your wallet. Where did you lose it?'

'Er...!'

I tell Chris that to turn this document into a real book we need sex or death. In *My Brother Jack* George Johnston had sex in a bookshop, but murder seems more likely here. In time, the developers will murder the Bookplate, the Noodle Shop, the Indian Restaurant, the sex shop, the pawnbroker, Abdul's Leb food...they will murder us all.

And they will construct cheaply built 9-storey high rise – as they have in Waitara – with Indian-owned convenience stores at street level. Initially those buildings will look smart because they are new, but within five years they will begin to deteriorate until they eventually turn into slums, by which time people will have forgotten what was once an attractive and authentic part of Hornsby, and nobody will care; nobody will remember that in its heyday – 10 years ago - Hornsby had at least two antique shops, two secondhand bookshops, and a secondhand LP record shop called *Discovery Records*.

I am tidying the Australian Section because I have only sold two books over the last two hours (\$12) and at this rate, the total of the today's takings will total around \$42. Then, while tidying *The Outback*, a woman asks if we have *Memoirs of a Geisha* and I know we do. But neither of us can remember the author's name.

I phone Chris. He says Arthur Golden, 'How's the day been?'

Groan.

So we nail *Memoirs of a Geisha* by Arthur Golden in General Fiction - \$8 paperback. A sale!

And then right in the middle of this slump, in walks a guy with a little girl. He parks himself in Architecture, on a stool, and pulls out *The Federation House* and that doubles the day's takings if he buys it. In fact, this guy saves the entire day by spending \$360. Then, at the counter, he buys *The Coachmaker Atlas of Scale Drawings* (\$80). Not only that, but he notices the *Mythbusters* book on the counter which I wrote. 'How much is this?' he asks - \$25!

Someone wants *The Power of One* by Bryce Courtenay. Not *Tandia*, not *April Fool's Day*, not *The Power of One to One*, not *The Potato Factory*, not *Tommo & Hawk*, not *Jessica*, not *Solomon's Song*, not *Smoky Joe's Cafe*, not *Matthew Flinders' Cat*, just *The Power of One*, 'Do you have it, it's not in General Fiction?'

'We've got it,' I reply, remembering that it is in the Back Room, a 12 x 12 room full of terrific 'stock' but always used as storage. Many times I have said to customers, 'Hang on a tic and I'll go to the secret stash'.

And then all those ideas about running my own bookshop came flooding back when I saw this room: I thought I could create a Lowell-Room within the shop. I had it all figured out.

It would be mauve with black shelving. I would line the shelves with books like Tintin, Chess, Bob Dylan, Marianne Faithful, Tiny Tim, John Lennon, Oodgeroo (Kath Walker), Annie Lennox, Nick Cave, the Nag Hammadi Library, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and I would sell autographs and playing cards in a special section.

I have been buying playing cards from garage sales for more than a decade. For example, *Norman Lindsay* cards, *Salvadore Dali* cards,

Caesar's Palace cards, *Coca Cola* cards, *Harry Potter* cards and *Antiche Minchiate Etruria Nel 1725*, facsimile edition, brought back for me from Europe by Genna and Anne. This is just the tip, I also have Holden cards, Qantas cards, magic cards, marked cards, round cards and z-shaped cards. We could sell cards.

I told Chris and Cat all this, and they agreed to let me use the back room as a Lowelliana shop. Chris also asked me how would I replace the Bob Dylan shelf when it's cleaned out, how would I get another copy of *Bob Dylan* by photographer Bob Kramer? Where would such books keep coming from?

I think it works like this – you start with a theme you love, like Bob Dylan – and you probably sell out your collection. Then, out of necessity you start to think of other themes. So instead of coming up with a theme like Australian Modernism in Art & Literature (cos you tried that, and nobody noticed) suddenly because you've got so many Health books, you decide that Health & Nature is your 'theme' this week. And lo and behold, there's all these new customers walking through the door who didn't give a rats about Bob Dylan and Australian Modernism.

Nevertheless I do, by nature, chase the customer. I find myself agreeing that Paul Gaughin is a great artist, without the suggestion that he kinda 'murdered' Vincent. I nod as if impressed when a female customer talks about Indian motor bikes. I have even recommended *Women's Weekly Cookbooks*. Sometimes I just can't understand customers, when it hit the shops I paid \$60 to buy *Stravinsky's Lunch* by Drusilla Modjeska new. Then we got one in the shop which I couldn't sell for \$20. I stuck it in the window, no bites. Weeks past and I told Clayton about it. He said, 'Okay, I'll buy it for Neilma'. Otherwise it'd still be there, I guess.

Someone gives me \$2.50 for a Dean Koontz book that Chris has chucked in the front bins.

My father always comes in, but doesn't sing Gilbert & Sullivan, doesn't tell me about his high school, doesn't negate evolution, he just talks about the turning circle of his old person's bike and we grumble about the government. Then he looks at his watch and says, 'Three more minutes', and I wonder, 'why three?'

As for the mini-shop backroom idea, Chris & Cat agreed to go 50/50 with me on cover price – therefore, suppose that back room turned over \$600 per week, that would be okay. I felt that if it succeeded, I could expand by

asking Carol at *Turn The Page* Gordon if she would let create a second shop-within-a-shop in her back room – then I'd have two. Four is what I'd need to quit writing.

But I'd have to service them. It would be a mistake to think that a thing like that survives on its own momentum. You've got to keep coming up with a constant supply of *On The Road* by Jack Kerouac, *Michael Dransfield's Lives* by Patricia Dobrez, *Dialogues With Marcel Duchamp* by Pierre Cabanne, *A History of Underground Comics* by Mark James Estren...

Customer: *Cassell's Compact French Dictionary*, hardback, \$8.

Luke comes in and whacks down two books, one is a Samuel Beckett play, the other *Madness and Civilization* by Michael Foucault. 'I'm giving them to you.' He wants the book *Cars* after the Disney film, I tell him that's an okay swap. Nevertheless he pays for the book.

I tell Luke we've got an offer on our house, which means we might be moving to Katoomba soon. 'I used to live in Katoomba?' he says. 'I renovated a house in Station Street'.

'Yep, we've got an offer.'

Robbie and I checked out a couple of places, both within walking distance to the shops and Echo Point. These places have absolutely no 'street presence'. Looking at them you wouldn't know if they were inhabited by people on the dole or if there's a new BMW parked out the back. The fronts tell you nothing.

But the second one has upstairs 3-beds, bathroom, lounge, kitchen, etc. And downstairs there's another bathroom, another bedroom, another lounge room, but - wait for it - then three 'cells' that used to be artists' rooms, when artists used to stay over the weekend years and years ago.

These are very small rooms, right? However, they would work perfectly as a 3-room study. Guests walk through Room One, a library of nice hardback books and maybe a small chair would fill the room. Room Two, entirely devoted to Martin Sharp and Tiny Tim research papers, posters, and all that stuff, and a small chair. Room Three - where I would work, surrounded by things I'm working on - manuscripts, tapes, old SBLs, Dominic Alafaci, Galilee, Michael Wilkinson, Wilts, Bill Wolfgramm & the Islanders, Mythbusters, the Sydney-to-Hobart yacht race, Tom

O'Toole, diaries, poems, Joe Sammon, stories about the Bookshop, and press clippings as to Yaca's progress as a super-football star, etc. Three interesting cells, plus there are poetry readings within walking distance of the house, in a coffee shop.

Perfect.

Unless, of course, a builder inspects it and reckons it's a damp hole.

I say all this to Luke who asks the name of the coffee shop. I can't recall.

He says, 'The Parakeet'.

I am hoping Zoë will swagger into the shop at 6.00, but she doesn't.

I phone Chris to tell him the day's takings. 'Okay', he sighs, 'Tell me the bad news'.

'\$600!'

He thinks I'm kidding. I have to tell him twice, I don't tell him that \$420 was that one customer.

Better to let him think I'm a genius.