

## LOST IN THE STACKS

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*Musings from the editor's desk.*

I consider myself something of a book collector who loves to scan the shelves of bookshops, but to any serious collector my library is small enough to require a more accurate description of me as a “book selector,” since with each new book I come across I indecisively wonder whether or not it is one I will enjoy looking through again a year or two after reading it. I love to read the same edition that the authors first held in their hands, reading the pages typeset as the authors had first arranged the poems or first reread their novel before signing presentation copies to their friends. Though I search for the first editions, I am content when I find one with a worn or torn spine, a reading copy I can use to show students and to consult for typos in manuscripts for the *Journal*.

The art of building a collection involves an odd jumble of emotions. I avoid the national retail chains and the world-wide web, preferring those green-painted, gold-lettered bookshops with their wooden, window-paned doors. But during the past few years one independent bookshop after another has closed after losing business to the chains and the internet.

The retail chains too often have more copies of fewer titles, displaying the front covers of books piled on tables or standing full-faced on wide shelving units like boxes of cereal in the aisles of grocery stores, though grocery clerks know their stock much better than the staff hired to swipe our credit cards for the retail managers. An alternative to shopping at these chains is to turn on the computer at home to search for a book on the internet, which feels to me like cheating, as if I am fishing in a pre-stocked pond. This shift from shopping to shipping has consequences. When we order what we are looking for we get exactly what we want and thus forfeit the opportunity for finding surprises.

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Librarians tell me that students searching for help with their essay topics are now balking when directed to relevant books on the fourth or fifth floor, preferring advice about online information that they can download to their laptops. But so much of our research in the humanities as well as the sciences develops from the unexpected discovery. When we are browsing the narrow spines in search for one book we rarely can resist reaching for another book. We bring to our table not only what we need, but a number of other books that happen to catch our eye.

In the retail stores we fall into fashion, finding what others want us to find, what the marketers have worked to ensure we will want, so that we read what others are reading. In contrast, the independent bookshop encourages the cultivation of independent thoughts. As the best poets explain how they find their personal inspiration to write each day by reading the work of other writers, we learn to think for ourselves by filling in the gaping spaces as we leap in unexpected directions between each book we pull from the shelf. Such idealization of the random may simply be a defence of the dilettante, but I cannot help thinking in our secular age of the importance of the personal libraries we build for ourselves, with books that most of us have purchased from independent bookshops, and hence cannot help thinking of how much we owe these shops.

Some of my favourite old bookshops have reopened with new proprietors now selling comic books, those stapled-comics, which in my neighbourhood we called “funny-books,” just as we called the daily comic strips in our newspaper “the funnies.” Such funny-books were the jewels of my first book collection. I gather now that those 10-cent purchases during my childhood could have been a wise investment, except that I never purchased the superheroes published by DC and Marvel comics, nor the Archie and Veronica comics; stories of superheroes or teen-age romance were alien to anyone raised on white-gloved mice and geese. I would trade a new *Chip 'n Dale* comic (not recognizing the names of the two chipmunks as a pun) for old copies of Pines comics, an American company swallowed up in 1959 by another American company, Dell comics. The Pines stable included Farmer Alfalfa, Gandy Goose, Heckle and Jeckle (cockney magpies), and Mighty Mouse (an opera-singing vigilante).

The other morning I entered by mistake one of these renovated bookshops. The comics I saw there were rows of superheroes displayed as collector items preciously wrapped in cellophane, whether they were recent or old “vintage” issues. As a child I would never ask a vendor about a particular comic book, so now stumbling back into this milieu of my childhood I muttered a question about Pines comics with hesitance. Somehow I was made to feel embarrassed and apologetic for presuming that a vendor for Batman and Robin might likely

extend his interests to Mighty Mouse – the barrel-chested tenor singing arias while he socked the jaws of baritone cats. My impromptu role as a note-pad toting cub-reporter lasted no more than a few minutes because the canon of respectable comics remains as exclusive as it was in the 1950s. There is no interest in *Buffalo Bee* (Dell comics), *Gandy Goose* (Pines), *Felix the Cat* (Toby, then Harvey), or *Timmy the Timid Ghost* (Charlton).

At the age of ten I graduated from the pulp-world of comic books after visiting Thomas Haliburton's 1833 home in Windsor, Nova Scotia. As author of the satirical *Clockmaker* series, three books subtitled *The Sayings and Doings of Samuel Slick, of Slickville* (1836; 1838; 1840), Haliburton was admired by Dickens and Mark Twain, and was long considered the father of Canadian humour. Through the sayings of a shrewd clock-pedlar travelling the colonial countryside of farms and hamlets, Haliburton popularised such proverbial wisdom as "facts are stranger than fiction," "a miss is as good as a mile," "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." Here I had found a local author of Canadian funny-books. When the tour guide let me touch the covers of those 1830s editions I was entranced. I longed for a Haliburton book for Christmas, but I was so disappointed when my grandparents gave me a new paperback edition that I went right to work at making my own cloth-bound copy, soaking a cotton rag in the pink vegetable dye used for the frostings of birthday cakes. Nothing could have looked less authentic than my handmade, frosting-coloured, pale pink binding.

By the time I reached high school I would sneak out of science classes whenever we left our desks for lab work at the back of the room. I would stride past the principal's office and out the front door of the school with a quarter-sheet of paper folded in my hand, pretending I was holding a printed "excuse from class" note, and would spend the rest of the hour in a nearby bookshop or at a table in the public library. I was suspicious of any middle-aged men dressed in overcoats, and I'd nervously finger my blank piece of paper, fearing that such men must be truant officers. Did truant officers actually exist? Or was I a guilty teenager haunted by the characters created for the dramatic chase scenes in those stapled comic-books I'd been collecting as a child? I preferred my classmates think that I was smoking cigarettes rather than reading books, so I would never show them the first editions of poetry by Canadian Pre-Raphaelites, like Bliss Carman and Charles G.D. Roberts, purchased for the price of a milkshake.

When I arrived as an undergraduate at university, the library was a stone's throw from my Victorian residence, and I was at last a kid set free in the candy shop, no longer feeling the need to remain alert to jump from a book and run from the reach of a real or fictional truant officer. In her latest book, Alice Munro describes the wondrous experience of a student at work on an essay in the library:

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The university library was a high beautiful space, designed and built and paid for by people who believed that those who sat at the long tables before open books – even those who were hungover, sleepy, resentful, and uncomprehending – should have space above them, panels of dark gleaming wood around them, high windows bordered with Latin admonitions, through which to look at the sky. For a few years before they went into schoolteaching or business or began to rear children, they should have that. And now it was my turn and I should have it too. (*Too Much Happiness* 89-90)

Munro's library is a secular cathedral, but as is usual with Munro, her account is double-edged, as she captures that faith in the need to provide a fleeting glimpse of our heavenly potential that is all but lost amid the oppressive weight of the oblivious, the indifferent, and the cynical. I am unsure which side of the divide I fell into before I reached university, the studious scholar or the uncomprehending delinquent, as I scan my shelves today for the books of poetry I bought during those long-lost hours of science-labs.

With the independent bookshops replaced by video stores and the like, I wonder whether delinquent students today still sneak into the public library to peruse random books on the shelves rather than bee-lining towards the commercially promoted bestselling book and the blockbuster video. When I think of Sylvia Beach's bookshop in Paris or of Marx and Morris studying in the British Library, I identify bookshops and libraries as our refuges from conformity, our socialist communes for subversive thought. Collecting and preserving, memory and history: the personal and the social are merged when we practise the "Fundamental Brainwork" Dante Rossetti demands we pursue as the prerequisite for independent thought (qtd in Caine 249). Without the discoveries that arise from practising Rossetti's principle, we settle for the predictable that follows our half-hearted hunch.

Here, for example, is the usually perceptive Terry Eagleton in his recent book, *How to Read a Poem*, dismissing "Victorian verse," from Swinburne's to Christina Rossetti's: "Swinburne, alas, never ceases to be Swinburnian," "full of florid gestures and empty of substance" (116; 46). Rossetti's sonnet "Remember" is reduced to a punchline about table rapping:

Another Victorian woman, Christina Rossetti, handles this double *abba* rhyme scheme more adroitly [than Elizabeth Barrett Browning]:

Remember me when I am gone away,  
Gone far away into the silent land;  
When you can no more hold me by the hand,  
Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay.  
Remember me when no more day by day  
You tell me of our future that you plann'd:

Only remember me; you understand  
It will be late to counsel then or pray.

The rhymes here, tolling like a bell, are vital to the mournful mood. As often in Victorian verse, the *abba* is emphasised graphically as well, by indenting the two middle lines. Some readers may find Rossetti's tone rather too tremulous for comfort, skating a little close to self-pity; but the lines are nonetheless impressive in their sad dignity. The last line is forced by the exigencies of the metre into altering the more predictable "too late" into "late," which has a slightly curious effect: it surely won't just be *late* for him to give her advice after she is dead, unless he is an accomplished table rapper. And it is hard to see how he could not understand this, unless he is of exceedingly low intelligence. (118-19)

Such heckling is what we do when we presume we are wiser than the writer we are reading. The presumption that Rossetti is no more than a Victorian cliché is one shared by novice students after reading an excerpt from something like Coventry Patmore's *Angel in the House*. The patriarchal sonnet tradition invites us to expect the poet to celebrate the power of poetry to immortalize his beloved. But Rossetti writes back from the perspective of the beloved, ironically repeating the word "remember" five times to remind her lover that he has forgotten her interests in his musings about their relationship. Still careful and caring about her lover's feelings, she is subtle to the point that the careless listener may hear only the caring tone of voice that seems to say, *I love you so much I'd rather you forget me and live happily than grieve sadly for me when I'm gone*. Such sentiment is indeed there but it is re-framed to protect not a widower from bereavement but the about-to-be jilted lover from the blunt blow of rejection. The beloved must express with subtle tact her reservations about this dying relationship with the auditor who holds her firmly by the hand (3) and does not listen to her, never remembering *me*, she says, when "day by day you tell me of our future that you plann'd" (5-6). Unlike the conventional male sonnet, here when we reread this poem we clearly overhear the subtext: the implied voice of the partner who has for too long "counsel[led]" his beloved (8). As the poem begins, she half turns to go, but pivots back to stay once more. What may she say? Rather than retaliate in a power game – well let *me* tell *you* what *my* plans are for our future – as if one or the other must dominate, she ever so gently suggests that if you cannot remember me and my part in this relationship then better you should forget "the thoughts that once I had" (12):

Yet if you should forget me for a while  
And afterwards remember, do not grieve:  
For if the darkness and corruption leave

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A vestige of the thoughts that once I had,  
Better by far you should forget and smile  
Than that you should remember and be sad. (9-14)

The poem is her last plea for understanding. Though she knows he will not hear her, she makes one more effort to keep their love alive.

Rossetti's sonnet thus subverts the literary conventions of its genre and the social conventions of the romantic relationship. Eagleton's joke should be reworded to fit the feminist perspective of the poem: most men never listen to their beloved until it is too late, when they then indeed will need a Ouija board to hear her. To help us hear the voice of Rossetti and recognize some of the many possibilities of her poem, we must remind ourselves to reach beyond our social and critical presumptions. The bookshop and the library can provide an outlet for our release from the pressures of conformity and the prejudice of finding only what we are looking for. Lost in the stacks, we emerge with discoveries. As we ponder ideas in the books pulled randomly off the library shelves and look skyward to the light of those "high windows bordered with Latin admonitions," we glimpse ideals, from G.M. Hopkins's revelatory discovery of a "yonder, yes yonder, yonder / Yonder" ("The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo" 47-48) to Morris's revolutionary commitment "to frame a desire" ("How I Became a Socialist" 383)), inspiring us to envision directions we may will ourselves to move towards.

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