Lost in Austin: In a Second-hand Bookshop

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Christopher Morley is no longer alive, either, but when he was, he was a great champion of books and bookstores. He was mercifully spared the demise of bookstores and books, too, if we are to believe all we read about hard times in the industry.

I admit to buying second-hand books via the Internet but my record of purchases at two of the Half-Priced Books locations in Austin admit me into, I am guessing, a small but solid group of readers who contribute hundreds of dollars a year to the used-book trade. I buy new books, too, but all of my favorite authors have long since departed and are no longer writing.

There is nothing like a well-stocked bookshop, new or second-hand (a much more respectable term than used-books, a term that is tawdry by comparison). It is more fun than television or the movies and healthier, too. I am not only walking around or standing for prolonged periods of time but I am exercising my mind or letting my mind wander into a state of relaxation and otherworldliness that compares favorably with meditation, a recommended way to help reduce blood pressure and stress.

Many of us love bookstores, purveyors of new and second-hand books but how many would drive 560 miles round trip just to visit a second-hand book store? Admittedly, it is easier to drive that far to go shopping when you live in one of the western states or a southern state as large as Texas (how large? About half the size of California including the chilly temperatures that are too much for me, I could drive over to Lawton, Oklahoma and Ft. Sill where Gerominio is buried and take TX281 past Blanco and turn left at TX46 and then over to Startzville and Canyon Lake, going a bit out of my way but avoiding Dallas and Austin and enjoying not only less traffic, but more interesting (and not so ugly) scenery.

But back to Archer City, hometown of Larry McMurtry and the Last Picture Show now that we are off Hwy281 (we turned left at Windthorst and took TX25).

We were going to visit Booked Up: Fine, Rare & Scholarly Books, Larry McMurtry’s second-hand book shop housed in four buildings, two of which adjoin one another with another directly across the street and the fourth down the street near the public library and the water tower (we didn’t visit that one). (Go to www.bookedup.com for photos and more information. Be sure to read the Important Announcement and be happy that the store is still there.)

By McMurty’s own account (p. 111, Books), “Our own store, Booked Up, now contains remnants of the stock of at least twenty-six bookshops. Most of these purchases are sorted, reprinted, and put in their proper section, but knowing as we do that some book buyers resent too much order, we leave a couple of long walls, containing maybe 120,000 books, unsorted, with books that range in price between $10 and $40.”

I could not have stated his case better or with such authority. I can attest to the unsorted books and it is fun but one would take days and we didn’t have days. I was looking for books by my favorite authors, authors whose works I collect. They happen to be writers of fiction so I was in luck because much of the fiction is in reasonable order but not all because in those 120,000 unsorted volumes one is likely to find novels next to a work of history or travel or literary reminiscences.

I found, in the unsorted areas, some books that I would like to own but that were over-priced. I could have bought the facsimile first edition, in slip-case, of The Grapes of Wrath at another store for half of what Booked Up was asking but even the less expensive item was overpriced so I didn’t buy that one either. That is a minor criticism. If I lived close enough to Booked Up to visit regularly, I would soon run out of shelf space even as I ran out of money.

I found four books by Christopher Morley that I didn’t own (one was a variant) and Philip Wylie’s Finnyl Wren in fine condition with dust jacket, each purchase costing either $10 or $15. And to make things even better, my receipt is on Booked Up letterhead with each title and price neatly written by hand.

Several hours after we entered the front door of Booked Up, it was still daylight and I wanted to leave while I was ahead, so we hopped in the car and headed home.

I would like to return to Archer City and stay in the local hotel so that I could be at the door when Booked Up opens at 10 a.m. and stay until it closes at 5 p.m. I would spend more time on the ladders so I could properly explore the top shelves in what used to be, I think, a commercial garage. I was reminded of a bit of the Northern Regional Library Facility in Richmond, California including the chilly temperatures that are healthy to books and not so bad for humans, either, if you wear a sweater.

There is a rare book room across the street but there was no staff there and I didn’t want to fetch anyone (the sign says to go ahead and fetch) but I did visit the room containing review copies and galleys of books. I found one I wanted but I needed to fill up with gas in Windthorst so I demurred. Maybe it will still be there when I return.

Our original plan (my wife went along for the ride and the books) was to drive to Archer City, spend a few hours browsing, and then spend the night, browse some more in the morning, and then head for home. We finished early (more about that later) so we decided to drive back home when we considered the advantages of sleeping in and waking up in one’s own bed. Besides, Texas highway 281 is one of our favorite roads.

When I lived in Norman, Oklahoma, my parents were still alive and well and in Canyon Lake, Texas. I could drive straight down Interstate 35 and turn right at FM (Farm to Market) Road 306 and head for Sattler, Startzville, and Canyon Lake or I could drive over to Lawton, Oklahoma and Ft. Sill where Gerominio is buried and take TX281 past Blanco and turn left at TX46 and then over to Startzville and Canyon Lake, going a bit out of my way but avoiding Dallas and Austin and enjoying not only less traffic, but more interesting (and not so ugly) scenery.

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