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In Praise of Bookshops-Mike Slicker-Lighthouse Books

Claire Fund
College of Charleston

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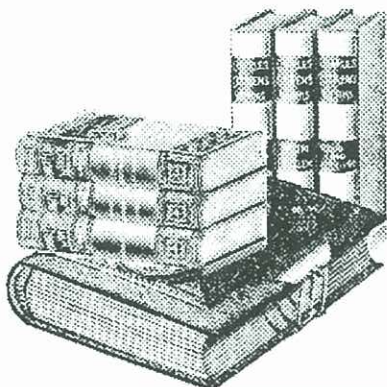
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Claire Fund
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66 George St.
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phone: (803) 953-5530
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In Praise of Bookshops

Interview with Rare Bookseller Mike Slicker — Lighthouse Books
(1735 First Ave. N., St. Petersburg, FL 33713; phone: 813-822-3278)

by Claire Fund (College of Charleston) <fundc@cofc.edu>

ATG: Please tell us a little bit about who you are and how you got started in the bookselling business.

MS: I'm a native of St. Petersburg, Florida. I graduated from the University of California—Davis, with a degree in Psychology and began studying Special Education in graduate school. I wandered into an old bookstore while working on a class project and decided that that was where I should have been all along. I worked for a bookseller, got some training and then eventually moved back home to Florida and opened up Lighthouse Books in 1977. I have a wife and three kids and bookselling has been successful enough to allow me to support a family. My wife and oldest son help in the store and I have two kids who are in high school.

We jumped on the computer bandwagon back in '85 and that really changed how we produced our catalogs. We eliminated our system of 3"x5" cards for each of the books and another 3"x5" card for each of the customers. At the same time, we eliminated days of typing mailing labels. In the last couple of years we've gone online. We're with **Bibliofind** and **ABE — Advanced Book Exchange**. Almost daily we receive orders from outside the U.S. We'd always done a certain amount of business internationally but the online services have made that a daily occurrence now.

ATG: I think there are a lot of folks who might be reading this publication who are thinking, "Well, you know, for my second career I'd love to open a rare book shop." And how about working with your spouse? What's it like?

MS: The old book business is interesting in as much as each store takes on something of the personality of its owner. Books are fun and the people that you run into are fun. On the other hand, like any small business today, it requires an enormous number of hours. That's just the nature of our culture. There just aren't enough hours in the normal day to do enough so you wind up with long, long weeks. And you have to be willing and prepared for that.

As for working with a spouse, I would recommend that each person have a defi-

nition of what they're responsible for. That helps a lot. However you break up the workload, one person has to have the ultimate decision-making in his or her arena.

ATG: You said every store has its own personality?

MS: We are a general antiquarian bookstore emphasizing Florida, the Caribbean and the literature of the South. And certainly we range more toward the scholarly than we do actual reading books. In all cases, however, the fun of the book business is not knowing what you'll be doing today or tomorrow. Who will walk in the store? Who will you visit? What sorts of collections will you see? Yesterday I visited a man who had a wonderful letter from just after the Civil War. Late last week I went over to Orlando and looked at an illuminated manuscript. The man also had an early edition of *Alice in Wonderland* with a letter from Lewis Carroll.

ATG: It sounds like your day is incredibly varied. If you're going off to various places to visit people and going to book fairs and antiquarian fairs ... how do you balance all of that?

MS: Not very well. Again, it's part of the reason that I got into book selling. I like the idea of not knowing what's going to happen during the day. I start each day with a list of things to do. More often than not it gets thrown out of the window by about 10 AM.

ATG: Let's talk a little bit about book fairs. You'll be exhibiting at the Charleston Book Fair in February and you were instrumental in establishing the very successful St. Petersburg Fair. Give us some tips on how to make the most of a book fair.

MS: The biggest problem to a book fair is sensory overload. How can you focus on that many books in one place and try to determine what to buy? Before you come to the fair, formulate in your mind what you would like to be looking for — whether it's a title, an author or perhaps a subject. Then, ask each dealer, "Do you have ..." He or she will probably point to a section or pull out a book for you. If not, go on to the next one. Go through once

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using that process. The first trip is an important one. You're not only getting an overview, but you're also getting a fix on things that perhaps won't be there on a second pass through. So be prepared to make some decisions quickly.

Then, go back through the fair again. You may have an interest in, let's say, fiction that uses fishing and a dealer forgot to point out *The Old Man and the Sea*. So the second time, go back and check yourself. By asking for *The Old Man and the Sea* and the dealer says "I don't have one here but I do have one back at the shop, so leave your name and address." Certainly, booksellers are more likely to bring Hemingway than the less well-known authors. So part of what you're doing at a book fair is establishing an identity for yourself and getting to know the dealers and their strengths. You're sampling and then you can call or talk with a few dealers later on.

Book fairs are especially wonderful if you have an interest in some of the more ephemeral areas. For example, here in Florida, a lot of our history is in promotional brochures. They're difficult to describe in a catalog. Yet you can find remarkable broadsides or promotional brochures at a fair. That happens with authors, too. You may find a transcript of a speech or a broadside that the author signed or perhaps a sales poster or some other treasure.

One final suggestion — plan to come back next year. You may not have found just what you're looking for this year; next year there will probably be more dealers and more books while some dealers will drop out. The dealers who don't bring what the public is looking for aren't going to make sales and they're going to drop out. Somebody else will take that position and may, in fact, bring just what you're looking for.

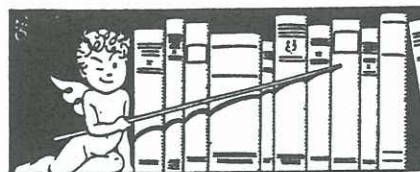
ATG: In terms of helping the relationship grow, are there other suggestions that you could offer acquisitions librarians or special collections librarians on the best way to work with a dealer?

MS: Absolutely. As we started off with the premise that almost every bookstore has its own personality, you have to do a little shopping around for a personality that fits your own. There are some institutions that I do business with that want to see everything before they purchase. So once a year I'll go visit them. They tell me what they are looking for and we'll spend a day or two going through materials. Others, for whatever reason, are much more comfortable dealing over the telephone or through the mail and that's how we've built our relationship. Some libraries ask us to check their online catalog and make sure the institution doesn't already own it before we offer it to the library. While we can't be 100% accurate, the odds are in their favor that they won't be considering something that they already own.

Some libraries — particularly public libraries — want only very fine copies with the dust jackets intact. Academic libraries, on the other hand, usually don't use the dust jacket. In fact, they discard it immediately. So librarians need to tell the bookseller about their parameters and what they are looking for and then we know how best to work with them.

Online searching is another area where booksellers can be helpful. In our case, my son is online practically full time. Finding a book online is not quick or easy. And even then, the job is not over. Many times, the book has already been sold or we have to make two or three telephone calls to make contact about the book or send an email message that may not get answered until tomorrow or a week from now. If I were a librarian I would

find a bookseller who understood my needs and let them expend the man hours, rather than put one of my staff people online.



ATG: Do you see the focus of people's collecting becoming more narrow or more broad? What are the trends in terms of people buying books?

MS: Actually, I'm a little distressed by the people who go into book collecting like it's the stock market — trying to figure out who is going to be collected in 15 years and "getting in on the ground floor" sort of thing. I'm strongly against that, frankly. First of all, the fun of book collecting is that you can make up your own collection. It doesn't have to be like coin collecting or stamp collecting where there are a finite number of holes in the little book and you fill them up. You can, in fact, look at subject areas like women authors from South Carolina or books about dogs or books only about Shetland ponies or what have you. To mire yourself in trying to figure out what current author is going to be appreciated tomorrow defeats the whole purpose. Today the authors that are collected have a high visual appeal because we live in a visual world. Television, movies and billboards are highly visual. Authors who provide strong visual images like Stephen King are currently hot. We don't know, and certainly can't guess, what our culture is going to be in 20 years. Perhaps the writers who are overlooked today will be in demand tomorrow.



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