November 1997

In Praise of Bookshops-Rare Booksellers Lin and Tucker Respass

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Recommended Citation

Fund, Claire (1997) "In Praise of Bookshops-Rare Booksellers Lin and Tucker Respass," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 9: Iss. 5, Article 29.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.2931>

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In Praise of Bookshops —

Interview with Rare Booksellers — Lin and Tucker Respass, L. & T. Respass Books,
P.O. Box 1604, Charlottesville, VA 22902, 804-293-3553

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

There are more than 5,000 antiquarian booksellers in the United States today. One of the most respected and well known is the husband and wife team of **Lin and Tucker Respass**. Now based in Charlottesville, Virginia, the Respasses are seasoned professionals who share some of their insights and recollections on the changing world of bookselling. Hope you'll enjoy reading this interview as much as I enjoyed talking with these delightful people.

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

LR: We've been in the business for almost 18 years now. I sold my first book in December of 1979 and opened a bookshop, a general used bookshop in Chapel Hill, in June 1980. I'd graduated from the **University of North Carolina** with a double major in English and American History, spent several years in Europe in the military and then, in the mid-seventies, worked for a newspaper for two years. Since I'd always had an affinity for books, I started working on a graduate degree in library science at UNC Chapel Hill. While I was in graduate school, I took a course in the administration of rare books from **Paul Koda**, UNC's curator of rare books and an adjunct professor in the library school. One night he brought in a stack of booksellers' catalogs as an example of different kinds of bibliographical description. At that point, I'd probably been in only one used bookshop in my life — the **Old Book Corner** in Chapel Hill. But the catalogs really interested me. When I talked to Paul after the class, he was nice enough

to invite me to the rare books collection. He also showed me the Z section where the

books about books are. I read through the booksellers' memoirs and it wasn't long before I was going to yard sales, buying used books and putting them in various corners of my apartment.

I met Tucker while I was working as a graduate assistant in the undergraduate library. She was my boss. We married just after I opened the bookshop in December 1980. She continued working as a cataloger at the North Carolina Collection, so that we were able to put what money I was able to make — which wasn't a whole lot at the time — back into the business. After six years, we decided to see if the business could support us full time and we've been doing it since.

TR: I, too, had always been fond of books and started working in libraries directly out of

college. I was an art history major as an undergraduate. I've worked primarily in academic libraries although I spent a very pleasurable short period working in a public library. After nearly four years in library assistant positions, I spent two years (1975-77) on an MLS at UNC continuing there in various professional positions until joining Lin in the business full-time in 1986.

One of the pleasures that librarians and booksellers share is having people bring their interesting range of "wants" to you. It can just be blissful when you help somebody find something for which they'd been searching for years.

ATG: You've been in the business now for nearly two decades. How is it changing?

LR: One of the major changes has been the demise of the huge, old-time, used bookstores — Fourth Avenue in New York City, for instance, was famous for the number of three- and four-story bookshops. All of them would have 100,000 books or 200,000 books or whatever. That business has dwindled away. There are still some academic communities — Chapel

"We could not get along without, and would not live where we did not have access to, a good university library within reasonable proximity."

Hill, North Carolina, comes to mind — that have large used bookstores. But the increase in rents and expenses are hurting that kind of business. So there's been a trend towards specialties of one sort or another with people working (as we do) out of our homes or working in smaller specialty spaces.

Computer applications have spread in the bookselling business as they have everywhere. There are three computers here in the house and we both use them everyday. Some portion of our stock is on a database. Almost all of our catalogs, and we've now issued over 200, have been word processed by me.

TR: Clearly the Internet is expanding access — whether it's individual dealers who have their catalogs on their homepages, or Amazon.com or Interloc.

Computers have both improved and perhaps almost overwhelmed catalogs. On the whole, readability has increased because dealers can put something in the mail that looks attractive. However, a lot of dealers don't know when to quit and clutter their catalogs with boxes and graphics that are a problem.

There certainly are more book fairs, too. Twenty-five years ago, you could probably count the number on one hand. Now there are dozens, if not scores.

LR: Our fair participation really peaked in the 80's and early 90's when we participated in 25 to 30 a year. We've moved back down to about 12-15 the last couple of years. Instead of paying rents for a big shop, booksellers began to look for other ways to market books. Just like catalogs, book fairs are an outlet for many dealers. We have colleagues who do a fair virtually every weekend during the year.

ATG: Who are these dealers — can you characterize them in any way?

TR: For many people, selling books was not their first career. Very few people started as booksellers. A few were born into it, essentially because their parents, and in some cases their grandparents, were booksellers.

Often, booksellers are people who have been collectors. They're librarians, plenty of lawyers, some of whom still practice, doctors, college professors and even people who have gravitated from antiques or prints to books.

LR: What attracts some people is being able to run your own business. You set the hours that you're going to work, you travel if you like to travel, there are certainly all kinds of opportunities for that.

ATG: And who buys your books?

LR: First off, there is a certain percentage of people who like to read and who like books. Our library sales are primarily to special collections. For example, **UNC's North Carolina Collection** is interested in material written by a North Carolinian or about North Carolina that they don't already own. I can't say that I go into a house or a bookshop thinking "Is there a piece that the North Carolina Collection might need?" But once I have something in hand and realize that it may relate to their Collection, I usually try to find out whether or not the library already has it.

We used to do more business with general academic libraries, but you're well aware of the staffing and budget problems there. We only read about what happened in the 60's and early 70's when one institution would buy an entire

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catalog — that's sort of legend. In the 80's when we issued a literature catalog with 500 or 600 items, several university libraries occasionally ordered 50 or 75 titles. We don't get very much of that anymore.

And for specialized books, we sell to each other. If I turn up American law books from 1800-1820, I may call one of several specialty dealers. Likewise, dealers may think of me for some North Carolina or South Carolina material.

ATG: *How do you decide what it is that you're going to purchase and where do you find them?*

LR: Like most booksellers, we sell things that we know the most about and both of our backgrounds lie in American-related material. Two years after I began the business, I bought a mailing list from a dealer who had sold mostly North Carolina material. That list fit my long-term interests. I had grown up hunting and fishing in the South and knew most of the regional authors from the 50's and 60's. When I became a bookseller, I quickly found out that the books by those writers were beloved by a certain portion of the populace. It's just a matter of having the books and then they're sold. You can apply this to just about any other subject — that's the way it works.

ATG: *I suspect there are a few readers who entertain daydreams about opening their own bookshop. Any advice for them?*

LR: Within a week of my opening my shop, a dozen people came in the door with a crestfallen expression, telling me that I had "beaten them to the punch." Each of them had been thinking for years that Chapel Hill needed another good used bookstore and now their bubble had burst. While I was too young to give them advice then, now I'd say, "Just because I've opened a shop doesn't mean that you can't." There are virtually as many ways of doing this business as there are people doing it. It's like a fingerprint. There's an individual stamp on each business. I know some of our colleagues advise against it, but I think it's a good business.

TR: To get a little more specific, I'd recommend that people read memoirs of booksellers and books about booksellers. It's a fascinating literature. Many people in our business are really quite collegial and are happy to answer questions about what they do and how they do it.

Another suggestion is to work for a bookseller first. It's an apprenticeship. Some people started in cataloging or running the shipping department. They saw firsthand from the inside how others have done it.

LR: I think the best advice I ever had was from **Paul Koda**. He urged me to "handle as

many books as you can. Go to as many book stores as you can; look at every book. Go to book fairs anywhere, anytime there's a book fair around, go booth to booth; handle every book; look at them, see what their price is, look at their descriptions. Go the library, go to special collections people."

We've used facilities at the **University of North Carolina, Duke, Brown, Yale**, at the five colleges in the Amherst-Northampton area, and here in Virginia. The folks have been uniformly wonderful to us. When I lived in Chapel Hill, I called their big reading room my reference library.

TR: We could not get along without, and would not live where we did not have access to, a good university library within reasonable proximity. And, of course, online resources today make it easier and easier to access catalogs.

ATG: *Let's switch gears. Can you tell us some of your favorite stories and your biggest bibliographic finds.*

LR: Three months after I opened the bookshop in 1980, an antique dealer from Chapel Hill was conducting a tag sale of an estate. He realized that the books were a bit more valuable than he was used to selling. So he went back to the trust officer and suggested that the books be offered as an entire library to

"...[R]ead memoirs of booksellers and books about booksellers. It's a fascinating literature."

one of the local booksellers. I was one of the booksellers asked to bid. Until that point, I'd assumed that my bookselling career would consist of having a general used bookshop in some academic community. This opened the door to the world of rare books which I'd assumed had already been locked up in rare books departments in colleges and universities. I didn't know it at the time, but it was one of the best libraries that we've ever bought. The experience of dealing with those good books showed me that it was still possible to buy rare books. So I went in and, based on little information but with the old **Van Allen Bradley** handbook, went through a couple of shelves of **Charles Dickens** first editions and a couple of shelves of **Mark Twain** first editions and then came up with a figure for everything. And, lo and behold, I got the library. There were two cases of books about books, most of which I read before I sold. That collection provided me with a wonderful education.

ATG: *It sounds like you really like what you're doing.*

TR: Yes, although right now having to run some more invoices and wrap some more packages to mail isn't really the highlight of the experience.

ATG: *So there is a lot of nitty gritty that goes on.*

TR: There is, indeed. 🐾