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Texas Trails — Bulls and Buckram: A Visit to Archer City, TX
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Archer City, Texas sits in the flat, windswept brushland of North Texas between Dallas and Wichita Falls. Located almost 700 miles from the calming influence of the Gulf of Mexico, the town is subjected to both extremes of midwestern weather. In the summer it lies baking in the 100 degree plus temperatures while in winter it is blasted by icy Canadian winds sweeping unimpeded across the plains.

The town itself has no industry to speak of. It is most likely a product of the oil boom that became obsolete once the oil wells dried up. Think of the stereotypical Texas town and you will see Archer City. One four-way intersection with a flashing stoplight, a large city hall building facing onto a central square, and a row of squat vacant storefronts opening out onto the main street. It takes less than a normal business, through the town and return to the flat open brushland of cows and oil rigs.

The question, which naturally springs to mind, is why would anyone want to go to Archer City, much less write an article about it? And in truth there would be no reason to visit the town unless you like books. If you do then you could spend a whole day in the town and not be bored. For Archer City, TX is the home of Booked Up Inc., a rare and used bookstore owned and operated by Larry McMurry. McMurry is the popular author of such modern classics as the Pulitzer Prize-winning western Lonesome Dove and Terms of Endearment.

I recently moved to Burk Burnett, TX, and having read about the bookstore in a number of articles, I was eager to pay a visit to the town and see it first hand. After looking at the map, I discovered that it was about a half an hour drive from my home. At the next available opportunity, I drove to the town and quickly located the store. The store is composed of four separate buildings, each containing books on various subjects. The first building contains the cashier's cage as well as a sort of showcase area with various rare and first edition books. I had visions of meeting Mr. McMurry but I was immediately disappointed since he was nowhere to be seen. The only indication I had that he was even involved with the store were the Xeroxed pages stuck up on the wall that indicated he no longer signed books so don't ask.

The cashier was helpful, however, and she gave me a sheet indicating what type of books were located in each building and I set out to browse the area. The first building consisted of various biographies, political memoirs and literary criticism. It also had a section devoted to Texas history. In another room were stacks of yellowed pulp western magazines as well as books on the civil war and religion.

A walk across the street to building number two brought me into the history and literature section. There was also a large room devoted to oversized art manuscripts. If you are looking for lower priced books, this building is probably your best bet. There is an oversized paperback section that consists primarily of modern classics, which are the most reasonably priced of all the books in the store.

While I was browsing through the titles, a lady and her husband entered the building and began yelling "Yoo-hoo!" in a loud Texas twang. Being the son of a librarian, I was somewhat disturbed by this lack of book etiquette. Any one who has any cough at all knows that you are quiet whenever you are around books. In their defense, this is what the signs posted around the buildings said you should do to get a salesperson's attention. On the other hand, I'm not sure they were meant to be taken seriously and it was fairly obvious that there was no one in the store besides me. They continued to walk around and yell without any results. Then they carried on a loud conversation that seemed to echo throughout the store about how they couldn't find anything. "I can't believe it, all these books and no Harry Potter!" They left in disgust.

While walking through the store I saw several titles that interested me, however, I felt most of them were overpriced. I would estimate that the average price for a book was $25-$30 dollars although some of the paperback books were as low as $3. As for the most expensive book, I did not ask.

Building 3 contained many different foreign language books as well as a large variety of the century's popular works since gone out of print. It also proved to be the location of the bathroom. This was quite convenient since after two hours of browsing I was in need of a facility. While browsing through building 3, I found a hardbound copy of Under Two Flags by Ouida that seemed reasonably priced at $3.

Building 4 was the largest and least organized of the stores. It contained many modern works as well as an art, travel and science section. There were stacks of books, many of them duplicates of books from other areas of the store. There were also quite a few signed copies in here. There were at least five, each, signed copies by authors such as Lawrence Durrell and Allen Drury. In another section devoted to boats, I found a novel that was autographed by the author to William L. Shirer, the author of The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich. There was no way to tell if a book was autographed unless you opened it. It was up to the browser to take the book off the shelf and discover what lay inside.

I had spent the better part of the day between the four stores and had picked out a few books. I quickly stopped into 3 Dog Books, another bookstore in the town, but did not find much of interest. After spending five hours browsing continued on page 81.

Talk of the Trade
from page 79

More Writter in Residence News:
British Author Negotiates Macmillan Contract from His Free Room
Jeffrey Archer, long-time bestselling author and knight of the realm, was allowed to meet with representatives from Macmillan Publishing Company in his prison cell. Archer ran afoul of the law last year, some lack of judgment issue involving bribery, prostitutes, and perjury, resulting in his free room courtesy of the Home Office. Since "deprivation of liberty has traditionally meant that one is deprived of the right to continue one's normal business", The Independent wondered how Archer and Macmillan were allowed to conduct their normal business. The Home Office responded to the newspaper's inquiry, at first saying the questions were too general, and then complaining the questions were too specific. Finally, a spokesperson said that Visiting Orders ask the reasons for the requested visit, and that "business is not supposed to be on the agenda." It was unclear whether MacMillan or Archer fibbed on the visit request. Or perhaps the publishing folks just wanted to drop by and chat about the prison's reputation of being a good place to get books. After all, the prisoners all share a love of books, no matter what they are into. They could have been discussing the latest book released by their publisher. It's hard to say. The Independent did not have access to the prison's files.

Don't Read This If You Are Hungry (or Dieting)

At a recent nine eleven charity event sponsored by The New Yorker magazine, your correspondent enjoyed food prepared by some of my town's best chefs. All recipes were inspired by descriptions of foods featured in the chefs' favorite books. Among them, from the restaurant Quest, omelets with truffles and shiitake mushrooms from Escoffier's Memoires of My Life; from Aquavit, herring with green tea mustard from Memoirs of a Geisha; from Fiamma, panzanella with gulf shrimp from Under the Tuscan Sun; and Grammery Tavern's chocolate caramel tarts inspired by Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. Proceeds of the dinner were donated to the families of restaurant workers killed in the Windows on the World, located at the top of the twin towers. Like the chocolate, the event was bittersweet.
I left Archer City and returned home having spent a pleasant day rifling through old books. I also had an idea of some books that I wanted to purchase. I searched on the Internet and found them much more reasonably priced and bought them there. I thought of McMurry's vision of a town of nothing but bookstores and café's where people sat and drank espresso and debated Hemingway and Faulkner while leafing through their works. It seems like a pleasant idea but, unfortunately, Mr. McMurry probably couldn't have picked a worse place to do it. In the summer it's too darn hot for espresso and if you're out too long in the winter wind you're liable to get frostbite. The closest big city is Dallas, almost two hours away, and the local populace probably knows more about Ernest Borgnine than Ernest Hemingway. Now if he were to open a fifth store with nothing but mass-market paperbacks and Harlequin romances, the town might gain some popularity. But whether the town is economically viable is beside the point. If you ever happen to be in the Dallas area for an extended period of time, the town warrants a trip. Just make sure you give yourself plenty of time.

Postscript: I believe there is also a Booked Up store in New York City although I have no first-hand knowledge.