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Papa Abel Remembers — The Tale of A Band of Booksellers

by **Richard Abel** (Aged Independent Learner) <rael@easystreet.com>

This tale begins in the Spring of 1944. The author had enrolled the previous Fall as a freshman at **Reed College**. It was difficult for the college to find the help to both perform the janitorial and other duties incident to running a residential school and to pay much for such help. So, the college instituted a Labor Draft in which all residential students were obliged to perform some stipulated number of hours of such chores at the rate of 25¢/hour. As a freshman I was assigned the washing of the breakfast kitchen pans every morning beginning at 7:00 AM until all were washed and stored. If any reader believes that a late-to-bed-late-to-arise individual, working in greasy water to above the elbows, could readily complete such a job in time to make the first class beginning at 9:00 AM in any kind of mentally alert state of mind and prepared to learn they have not tried to play that game.

Several desperate avenues of inquiry elicited the fact that one might change jobs if another opening could be found. I started scouting the **Reed College Coop** staff for dropouts. As good fortune would have it a junior dropped out to transfer to another college, as was a common stratagem to avoid the lengthy, written Junior Qualification exams

the satisfactory passing of which was required to advance to Senior standing. The then student manager was delighted to have a volunteer draftee waiting in the wings. At the time the **Coop** handled only the few textbooks used at **Reed**, largely for the science courses all purchased with the opening of classes in the Fall; school supplies; candy, cigarettes, and soft drinks; and a few toiletries — toothpaste, soap, shampoo, etc. Save for a couple of weeks at the time of the beginning of classes, the **Coop** was open only an hour or two a day.

Now the fact that the **Coop** stocked no general books seemed quit strange to a kid from Montana who delighted in a kind of Great Books curriculum — the two-year Humanities Program — then required by **Reed** for graduation. While this requirement was a superb foundation for subsequent classes, I could only hope for more in-depth study of this extraordinary cultural heritage to which I had fallen heir through no effort of my own. All I had to do

was to read and seek to understand, often in extended and winner-take-all debate with a few like-minded fellow students I could find. I had learned of a Great Books program while still a boy in Great Falls, Montana. But children (presumably under 21 years) were not allowed to participate, so, I

had to make out as best I could.

The only independent bookstore and the single department-store book department in Great Falls were of absolutely no help in my earlier quests — the staff was preoccupied with the latest crop of novels and endeavoring to project an image of “culture” and literary sophistication. But after a brief voyage as a juvenile in these turgid waters I concluded that literary entertainment as well as literary criticism and gossip were pretty thin gruel. I was a growing adolescent and needed heaping servings of intellectual red meat. So, after some months of almost random slashing around and special ordering of a few mediocre to useless books, **Will Durant’s** *Mansions of Philosophy* came into view, found on a remainder table. Here was the key I needed to unlock the doors to the vast intellectual treasure of the world. **Durant** clearly wrote this book for people like me — neophytes seeking to learn of the towering figures of intellectual history, their chronological and intellectual relations, and, as welcome, extended sidelong glances at the same figures and histories forming the Chinese and Indian cultural traditions. Had I only been wise enough, I am sure I could have gone to **Ms. Trigg**, the long-time librarian at **Great Falls Public Library**, and saved myself much bibliographic and intellectual history navigational confusion and bibliographic uncertainty. But finding my own way seemed a less daunting, even if retrospectively a stupid, undertaking.

With the **Durant** key in hand there soon followed cheap editions of some of the works of **Aristotle**, **Plato**, **Augustine**, **Aquinas**, **Descartes**, **Schopenhauer**, **Nietzsche**, as well as some of the classic Oriental texts and a growing string of histories of the West, the United States and the Far East I even tried on **Kant**, but was quickly lost in the complexity of language and logic — I obviously needed a knowledgeably guide to lead me through not just **Kantian** labyrinths but the more profound depths of those I had initially presumed I understood.

Now here I was in a place where such a learning opportunity was not simply available but required. And here was a faculty quite willing to advance such learning ventures. So, I soon proposed a **Plato** discussion group, lined up a dozen students who professed a parallel interest, and approached one of the faculty to act as the conference leader in the late afternoon following the end of classes. One by one the student attendance shrunk, finally leaving only a dedicated professor and me, so finis to that initiative.

To my further disappointment, the books being assigned/read in regular classes were all library reserve books, so one could not mark them up, go back as needed in connection with

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The Size of Thoughts (NY: Random House, 1996).

6. **Tom Wolfe** — the other one — has described library stacks as “the stored memory of a civilization.”

7. Librarians routinely instruct binderies to cut out the front-and-back matter — which may include reviews — when binding literary and scholarly journals, in order to save shelf space. This criminal act includes the journal covers.

8. One of the library administrators I fought was a carpet fetishist. His office shelves had carpet swatches — not books — and he spoke passionately about the library carpeting. The late **Mayme Agneu Clayton**, librarian at **USC** and **UCLA**, spent her own money building her collection of African-American material that included 30,000 books, the world’s largest collection of 16-mm films made by blacks, 75,000 photos, and “tens of thousands” of documents and manuscripts. That is exemplary conduct

to be emulated by good librarians. Yet **Ms. Clayton** did not arrange for placing her collection in a library (*The New York Times*, 14 December 2006).

9. A **DLB** editorial board member has been donating the volumes to the Rutland, Vermont, public library for a decade. On 19 July 2006 he received this message from librarian **Paula Baker**: “We are trimming down our reference collection in a very large way this year and will not be able to collect future volumes in the **Gale** literature series.” She didn’t even get the title right. Her note was written on a card with the printed slogan Get Connected!

10. On 25 October 2006 the **Thomson Corporation** announced that it was selling **Thomson Learning** — including **Gale Research** — in order to get out of the library reference book business. CEO **Richard Harrington** stated: “After the sale of **Thomson Learning**, the vast majority of our sales will come from electronic products and services with recurring revenues that are currently growing at high rates.” Is that what reference librarians want? The bidding starts at five billion dollars in January 2007. 🐼

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understanding other books, take one's time to read beyond the assigned chapters, etc. I thought one should possess these basic cultural texts on one's own shelves as routine intellectual resources, not simply for the undergraduate years but as the foundation for the building of a personal library. However the **Coop**, exceeding all reasonable expectations, offered no such learning/intellectual help. As a child who had mined out the **Great Falls Public Library** and who had later as an adolescent, spent considerable time on the family cattle ranch, struggled to learn about the books that had shaped the Western mind and then to acquire them — this seemed more than passing strange.

At **Reed** this tyro found a mine of bibliographic knowledge in the faculty. They were not simply prepared to open the full array of the intellectual riches long sought and previously captured only in bits and pieces but to help guide a still-being-shaped, self-trained mind to a more profound level of understanding of the substance of these riches. So, why wasn't the **Coop** loaded with these books? There was shelf space for a fair inventory and there was money in the bank to finance such an inventory. Curious indeed to this newly inductee clerk.

When approached with these questions and presented with a plan for converting the **Coop** into a general, retail, college bookstore, the manager agreed to such a move. But only

if I assumed full responsibility for ordering, managing, and selling a small inventory, and fully replenishing the bank account by the end of the Spring semester. So, I had at it with a will. A close scrutiny of the "Green Pig," the collection of publishers' lists bound in either two or three massive volumes and published by **Bowker**, led to placing small orders to **Random House** for selected volumes of the Modern Library and the Lifetime Library and to **Knopf** for a handful of titles.

Within the week of receipt this tentative stock was completely sold out. This routine was followed by several iterations that Spring, the orders progressively increasing the number of titles being brought in. At the end of the semester the bookshelves were bare and the bank held rather considerably more money than had been employed. I had employed neither plan for the inventory nor any vision of either what a good small bookstore should stock or what kind of an image such a store should present to **Reed** students. I simply ordered books I had become acquainted with in the bunkhouse at the ranch or in the unfolding months of the Humanities 11 class.

This performance was capped by being named the **Coop** manager for the next academic year with the understanding that I would close the books of account for the year just completed. Knowing nothing about even the simplest practices of bookkeeping that summer was a painful exercise in learning on the job.

I returned to the campus several weeks early the following Fall to order not simply

the required textbooks, supplies, and toiletries but the much more substantial list of books intended for general sale. The business worked out better than expected — my problem had become one of ordering more titles, larger quantities of stocked titles, and more frequent reordering to avoid the new phenomenon of going out-of-stock. This pattern was pursued for the next two years. The **Coop** carried an increasing inventory of books for general sale — the store had rapidly growing monetary resources for financing of inventory — and was now open for four to five hours a day to accommodate growing sales. In my Senior year the demands on my time for researching and writing the Senior Thesis obliged forgoing the 40-hour weeks devoted to affairs of the **Coop** for the previous two years. These hours were beyond those required to turn in a satisfactory academic performance — I was a busy undergraduate, but one who could make it on three to four hours of sleep toward morning. So I fell back to the role of book buyer under the management of a new student manager. By this time the **Coop** was open eight hours a day and had to be moved to larger quarters containing a greatly augmented number of shelves to display the ever-growing inventory.

Upon graduation I thought I had closed the book on a life in the world of the book-trade and eagerly looked forward to graduate school — and in time opening a new book as a professor of Medieval and Renaissance English History. 🐷