2013

The Peripatetic Browser--A Book Review of Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Book Store by Robin Sloan

James N. R. Walser
U.S. Army, raymondwalser@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg

Part of the Library and Information Science Commons

Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7422

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.
The Peripatetic Browser — A Book Review of Mr. Penumbra’s 24-Hour Book Store by Robin Sloan

by James N. R. Walser, LTC, EN (U.S. Army) <raymondwalser@gmail.com>

Mr. Sloan’s first novel takes place mostly in the joyous fantasy world of San Francisco where everyone is young, geeky and good-looking. After being laid off as a Web-page designer for a start-up bagel company, Clay Jannon takes a night-shift job at a mysterious bookstore managed by Mr. Penumbra. Once he has started, Clay is quickly drawn into a mystery involving a secret society of bibliophiles. The plot is well-paced, and the writing style is succinct and fun.

A highlight of the tale is the glimpses it provides into the inner workings of the Google Campus at Mountain View. Here, employees line up for free tailored and vitamin-enhanced gourmet meals while discussing weighty issues. During the visit, the reader learns something of Google’s management structure and is treated to a Faustian conversation about Old Knowledge, defined as everything recorded before the invention of the Internet, and Traditional Knowledge, which Google already appears to have. The characters chat about their desire to get all knowledge into a giant database in order to solve the world’s problems. The visit culminates with a scene of a helpless book being rapidly scanned in a specially developed Google scanner.

Mr. Sloan’s description of the scanning is touching, and he does make you feel sorry for the book. Fortunately, it is only an old visitor logbook from Mr. Penumbra’s book store and not anything important.

Look beyond the basic plot, however, and the book does raise some interesting questions about the nature of books, why bibliophiles collect them, and why physical books might not be completely replaced by eBooks. As the story progresses, the reader discovers that most of the books in Mr. Penumbra’s store are written in secret code that the bibliophile club members must decipher in order to solve a grand, antique puzzle. The nature of this puzzle suggests the secret society may consist of book readers who wish they were computer programmers. As most bibliophiles know, there is no need for a good book to be written in code. It already is — words. Bibliophiles enjoy books not just for the way they smell or feel but also for the knowledge they contain. Book-reading is a discovery process.

This highlights a potential conflict between “Googlers” and bibliophiles. The bibliophile is not wholly concerned with the book as a physical object but rather what it contains. Of course, there are certain physical books that have a greater value because they are of historical interest, contain beautiful illustrations, are especially rare, are signed by the author, etcetera. But how can the true seeker of knowledge, the true lover of literature, be sure that the book he or she downloads to his Kindle or iPad is the complete and original book? How does one know that elements of the book have not disappeared in the transfer? That a profound thought or a beautiful turn of phrase has not been lost? This may be the true debate. Googlers are mostly computer programmers who are concerned with getting books into their database in the quickest way possible so that they can be rapidly searched. One might even be tempted to accuse Google of being mercenary because the majority of the profits at Google come from these searches. However, the quest for knowledge is not just about getting an answer to a question immediately or cracking a code to solve a puzzle. It can also be about the discovery process in and of itself. Reading a good book brings many surprises. Only those who truly love books know this. Until eBook publishers can certify that not one word of the original has been omitted, it is likely that bibliophiles will continue to collect and read paper books.