

Confessions of a Bookseller

Shaun Bythell

David R. Godine (Apr 7, 2020)

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An astute observer once remarked to Scottish bookseller Shaun Bythell that “every industry has its porn.” For those who crave the specific “filth” of literary voyeurism: Bythell’s *Confessions of a Bookseller* is here to sate your appetites.

Composed of droll and incisive notes from one year spent volume hawking, the book caps its daily entries with often dismal register numbers. Yet despite the contemporary challenges posed by online monopolies and falling prices, The Book Shop opens faithfully each morning for its local and international visitors. This mix includes the silent Mole Man, who regularly gathers a diverse stack; a craftsman who trades his carved walking sticks for esoteric volumes; and strangers with absurd questions and haggling demands, resulting in raucous moments and plenty of secondhand embarrassment.

The Book Shop’s own roster is populated by part-time and intern workers who prove perfectly comfortable dropping sass, both in response to silly questions and to their boss’s requests. They battle hangovers, pricing disagreements, overflow stock, seasonal lags, and the frustrations of online sales interfaces in their efforts to keep the shop busy. When they wax misanthropic, it’s earned:

A customer came to the counter and said, ‘Three things: law, philosophy, and spirituality.’ I complimented him on his numerical skills.

The particular flavors of bookseller life, from the bitter frustrations of seller and buyer expectations to the honeyed delight of discovering unfamiliar titles, are apparent everywhere. Snapshots from outside of the shop (days spent fishing; errands in Glasgow; accounts of heartbreak and complicated family conversations) enliven the work further.

Prescient observations (the diary, written in 2015, glums that there are “rumours that [Donald Trump is] going to run for the US presidency”) are a reminder that book people see all. Tantalizing book recommendations sneak in, too—it’s an occupational hazard. *Confessions of a Bookseller* is an enveloping account from the front lines of an industry in flux.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (March / April 2020)

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