

The Reactor

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Small Bookstores Aid Diversity

It happened in Pennsylvania, Jim Bresnahan tells me. A salesman of children's books had some leftover samples he offered to a neighbor for her little boy. The neighbor turned the books down, politely, with "He has a book."

Thanks to movable type most people have the opportunity to own more than one book. There are those who own hundreds or thousands of books, gathered over a lifetime. Books can be a window into an owner's mind, his interests, even his character.

The avid science fiction reader does not devour Harlequin romances. There are those who dote on mysteries and detective stories, and those who loathe them.

Each individual's library should be unique, because each of us is unique. But how sad if that uniqueness is reflected in the statement "He has a book." If your friend has two microwave ovens, don't get him a third. If he has two telephones, he probably doesn't need another one. But the more books he has, all the more likely you can please him with yet another one, provided you follow his taste. I have books on my shelves I have never read, because the person who gave them to me was thinking of his or her own tastes, not mine. Give me a book by Stephen J. Gould and I'll be your friend forever. Give me a Rex Stout mystery and I'll never read it. My wife is just the opposite. She loves Rex Stout, probably wouldn't recognize Gould's name.

While each person's library should be unique, everyone should have a dictionary, an atlas and probably an Almanac. I would add a complete Sherlock Holmes, a Bible, and a few others, but that's my taste, maybe not yours.

In a rational society there would be a bookstore and a library on every streetcorner. In Pacifica, unfortunately, there are only two stores making their living on book sales, and they would probably be more profitable selling almost anything other than books. Florey's Book Co. on Palmetto Avenue is a kind of hidden treasure. You sure wouldn't be attracted by its flamboyant exterior. In fact, there may be neighbors who don't know there is a bookstore in the neighborhood. But inside there are rooms full of books including a number of books specifically about Pacifica or by Pacificans. Florey's has one approach. Lucy's paperback exchange on Francisco does it differently. Each one fills a need.

Independent bookstores are beset from all sides. The market for books is limited in a TV society. Books by mail compete strongly, what with the various book clubs, clearinghouses, etc. They skim the cream, selling to the most voracious readers. Then there are the chains including B. Dalton, Waldenbooks and Crown Books, etc., all owned by huge corporations. They monopolize the shopping centers. Mail-order clubs and the chains provide a short-term advantage to book buyers. They usually sell best sellers at a "discount." What they offer sounds good. Unfortunately, they operate on the old discounter's motto, "Thick on the best, the hell with the rest." "Best" is what sells. When the small bookstore run personally by its owner no longer exists we will all the more be part of a homogenized society. As book selection narrows to the most popular titles, and choice becomes more and more limited, the process will feed on itself. By saving a little money today we all lose tomorrow. It's a hard choice.

The world needs more good newspapers and it needs a lot more owner-operated bookstores, not just clones set up by a computer in New York and operated by interchangeable clerks who don't know a Rex Stout from a Big Mac.