

## **The Company of Books**

*Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Awards Banquet*

*March 17, 2006*

As I was growing up in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., in the 1950s and early 60s, books were all around our house. Many kinds, from fine sets of Shakespeare and Francis Parkman, to early coffee-table books such as *The Family of Man*, to baseball books and the Freddy the Pig stories my brother and I loved, to the cheap paperback novels with lurid covers that my father liked for recreational reading. It was common to see both my parents reading, my father with his half-frame glasses in his maple rocker, my mother in the morris chair or on the sofa. Neither of them, that I recall, read out loud very much to my brother and me. They did something better: they read books themselves, in our presence, allowing us to absorb their silent statement that to read was to do something valid and valuable.

But books to me were about more than reading. I liked to touch them, hold them, see them arrayed on shelves in the living room. Once, when I preferred to be alone—an old impulse of mine—I got rid of my best friend by feigning an avid interest in a volume of Macauley's *History of England*. The text did not engross me, but the book itself did. I liked the grainy paper,

the feel of the rough fore-edges of the pages. I liked the hard gray covers, embossed with opulent lettering. I liked the substantial heft in my hands. And I loved the smell, both musty and fresh, that filled my nose when I buried it in the book's open spine. It was a smell like no other; it seemed as old and mysterious as England itself.

I still like to smell books, and I know I'm not alone. I suspect, in fact, that many in this room are book sniffers, closeted or out. A certain poet I knew, and some of you knew him too, once claimed that he could find his way around the Lewis & Clark College Library just by the smell of the books. "Books from Britain smell different from American books," William Stafford said. And he said, in his not-quite-kidding way, "Some people judge writing by how it sounds or looks. I judge it by how it smells. I want that total experience of language."

An earlier American, Henry David Thoreau, wrote in his journal one day in 1850, "A truly good book is something as wildly natural and primitive, mysterious and marvelous, ambrosial and fertile, as a fungus or lichen." He was referring to the ideas and spirit of a good book, the wild, uncivilized thinking that absorbs us in *Lear* or the *Iliad*, but the sensory gusto of his small ode entitles us to suspect, at least, that Thoreau was a book sniffer too.

I knew one man who went further. At Stanford in the 1980s I met the great Conrad scholar Ian Watt, now dead. An Englishman, Watt was one of the World War Two prisoners who built the bridge over the River Kwai. In the squalor and privation of the prison camp, he had managed to hang onto—appropriately enough—a copy of Dante’s *Inferno*. Someone else had a store of tobacco. No one had a pipe or papers. Which would it be, then—the solace of one of the great achievements of the human imagination, or the comfort of an occasional smoke? Watt chose both. He memorized the *Inferno*, one page at a time, then tore the page from the book and ripped it into as many rolling papers as it would make. With his cohorts in slavery, he took the warmth of paper and ink into his lungs, and Dante Alighieri into his mind and heart.

*Book.* The word has heft and grain and smell in its own history. “Book” is directly related to “beech,” the species of tree, with an original sense of beechwood sticks on which runes were carved. That early book must have been a versatile thing. Besides what edification and inspiration it might provide, it could be leaned on when one was tired, kindled to start a fire, or gripped hard to bang robbers on the head. (I needed such a book one night in my Rogue River solitude when I awoke dead certain that an intruder had entered the cabin. Fumbling in the dark at my bedside table, my hand

found only a softcover Icelandic novel with which to defend myself.)

On balance, though, I'll take the modern book. Beechwood sticks might smell nice but would smell pretty much alike, whereas our books form a lovely array of olfactory delights, as various as single-malt whiskies. And anyway, that old wooden book was worthless for pressing flowers, resting a coffee mug on, or riffling with one's fingers for the pure pleasure.

No one knows what all goes into the making of a writer, but surely—along with the mother complex, the poor social skills, the exhibitionism parading behind modesty, the limitless ego, and the perverse unwillingness to work a real job—along with those factors and more, surely a love of the book as physical thing must play a part. A writer, I suspect, wants more than to write a book. He wants to *be* a book, and to some extent he is.

And what of you, dear booksellers? What are the secrets of your psyche? Surely it wasn't *only* the money and sheer glamour of the trade that attracted you. But what, then? Were you habitually naïve and optimistic as children? Did you actually imagine that you could spend your lives on this most impractical excursion from reality?

Perhaps it was this simple: you could not imagine a career without the close company of this lively, fragrant creature, the book. And perhaps it was this simple too: you formed a conviction that good books ought to have a

public, that they can speak for themselves only if read, and that in order to be read they must first be spoken for, they must be spirited from the shelf to the hand of the reader by a friendly and knowledgeable advocate.

Thank you for being that advocate.

And thank you for selecting *Rogue River Journal* to receive this award, which does me great honor and gives me great happiness.