

## PBNA Essay

Before I was an author I was, briefly, a bookseller. The summer between finishing graduate school and getting my first teaching job, I worked a Spokane's gorgeous downtown bookstore, Auntie's. The story I want to tell is about something that happened on my first day. I had just been trained on how to answer the phones and fill online orders, then left on my own at a desk upstairs to do both for the afternoon. The first call I fielded was from a man who asked if we had any books about spiders.

Excited to help, I pulled up the store's computer catalogue. I asked if he had a particular genre of spider book in mind.

"A book that says what different kinds of spiders are worth," he said.

"Worth, in what sense?" I asked.

"Worth to scientists," he said. He explained that he had caught an unusual looking spider and wanted to know how much money a scientist would pay him for it.

For the record, I want it to be known that I tried. I typed in things like "Spider Monetary Value" and "Profiting from Arachnids Through Science" and "Kelly Blue Book for Spiders" into the catalogue but received no hits. I apologized to the man. We did not seem to have any books that fit the bill.

He then asked if I personally knew anything about spiders. Might I be able to take a guess at his spider's value? He offered to bring it down to the store for me to see. He said he was nearby and could be there in just five or ten minutes.

I apologized again. I did not know very much about spiders. And the store had a no outside bugs policy.

He agreed not to bring his spider after all.

I think back often to that interaction, in part because it was everything I like fiction to be: unexpected, funny, and a little threatening. Except it was real. Although I've never known exactly how real. Maybe it was a prank call, or a bit of hazing from my Auntie's colleagues. Though I'm certain anyone who has lived here in Spokane would believe that someone called a bookstore to ask about spider-pricing.

In my not-quite decade as a fiction author, living and writing in the Northwest, I have been treated to many such delights and oddities in our great region's independent bookstores. Here's the thing: I believe places that hold stories also attract stories. People come to bookstores for something to read, or to hear something read to them. But it also opens up a desire to share of themselves and their stories. Last winter, I traveled around Washington, Oregon, and Idaho, promoting my very weird and very regional short story collection *SINKHOLE AND OTHER INEXPLICABLE VOIDS*. I met readers who told me their own stories of time spent on glaciers, and encounters with octopuses, and overwhelming invasive species, and, of course, sinkholes. Turns out nearly everyone has a good sinkhole story. I met booksellers who shared with me the secrets of their stores, gave me recommendations for where to get the best gyros, and told me about all the local ghosts. Turns out nearly all booksellers in the northwest believe their stores to be haunted, though usually by benevolent ghosts.

I am so grateful for this ecosystem. That the same place where we go for books is also the place we go for community, to hear stories and to share them. I am grateful for all the support booksellers have shown for me and my books. I am grateful for anyone, anywhere, trying to figure out how much a spider is worth.