

## THE BOOKMAN

*I remember the day a name changed my life.*

I'd driven down the mountain, hugging the twisting canyon walls of Flagstaff Road, carefully avoiding the five hundred foot drop into the ravine below, into Boulder, Colorado, then down 12<sup>th</sup> street, past its huge nineteenth-century homes, onto Pearl Street, finally angle-parking in at Trident, a used bookstore and coffee shop – one that had existed long before Barnes-and-Noble took that dark, espresso poetry, cleaned it up, made it brighter, and expressed it, half suburbia, half yuppie, with only a hint still remaining of shadowed, university revolutionaries and poets in the wooden background, into half the world's consciousness.

I stopped a minute on the sidewalk to look at the books comfortably standing, covers slightly akimbo, on the scattered, staggered-level, blue cloth-draped platforms behind the plate glass windows of the store, then grabbed the brass handle on the dark door and pulled it open. The smell of old books swirled over me blended subtly with the aromas of french roast coffee and cinnamon and years of human beings hunched over tables and text books and broken hearts, finding solace as millions have done before them in words of the long-dead who had themselves once felt this sun's light and breathed this same air.

I wandered the book-lined canyons, lingering in the safety of nineteenth-century literature, sunning myself in the warmth of ancient philosophers, stopping briefly near poets who called me in brilliant, diamond-edged language, and grazed gladly among the shelves of science fiction, until I drifted into the half-dream state all old bookstores – and most libraries – can evoke. Time slowed and in some sort of half-waking, half-sleeping state I felt myself pulled to the special bookcase that towered behind the checkout counter. Some special gravity found only

in such unique mind states, folded the space around one particular book, shifted light waves, until it was all I could see. I stretched, gathered the book off the shelf, took it in my hands, and opened the front cover of *I Sing the Body Electric*. There, in his trademark blue-felt-tip scrawl, covering half the page, was Ray Bradbury's signature. I reached out and touched the page – and felt a thrill go through me. Ten dollars seemed absurdly cheap and I gladly paid the money.

As I write these words, I stop, reach over, and take the book from the case in front of me. It's still as fresh and new as the day I found it. I touch the page once more and again I feel that thrill run through my body. Then I slowly flip the pages and find the lines Walt Whitman wrote so long ago, the lines that Bradbury took for his title:

*I sing the body electric;*

*The armies of those I love engirth me, and I engirth them;*

*They will not let me off till I go with them, respond to them,*

*and discorrupt them,*

*and charge them full with the charge of the soul.*

There are times, I swear there are times, when something grabs hold of us and takes us places we would never have gone otherwise. Some magic thing took hold of me that day and only in the rearview mirror of middle age can I see its ghostly hand on my shoulder.

A few days later I traveled down the mountain again, parking farther up Pearl street at rambling, heavy-beamed Stage House II. The building two stories tall, the books not only on scores of shelves along the downstairs walls but also upstairs along the balcony running three sides of the enormous store, and in the aisles and on every conceivable surface—stacked

staggering, drunken, leaning against all odds into some force of gravity that only used bookstore owners know.

There, disguised as an old book, half-hidden among the scruffy remains of abandoned magazines and travel guides, was a novel by H.G. Wells. I opened it at random and caught glimpses of strange landscapes and nineteenth century lives. I turned from the time-distorted language, flipped to the front of the book, and found that it, too, was signed. I reached out, tentatively this time, letting my fingers rest lightly upon that place Wells had touched so long ago. Something seemed to flow into me from the page, some living essence, as if I had dipped my hand in a flowing stream and for a moment some strange current was catching at my fingers. It pulled on me, took my hand, and murmured to some deep part of me, "Come, come and follow me." With difficulty I pulled my fingers off the page, stared at it a moment, then closed the book and set it back on the shelf. I stood bemused, feeling the pull, wanting to follow it, yet not understanding what it wanted, why I was so strongly affected by these unknown currents.

With an effort I broke the spell and wandered upstairs. The section along the west wall was filled with books on poetry, mysteries, science fiction, and fantasy. Letting my eyes go soft-focused, the titles and bright spines flowed into me like some kind of food. One book stood out and I reached out slowly and took it off the shelf. It was a first edition of *Earthlight* by Arthur C. Clarke, published, I later discovered, in an absurdly small hardcover print run in 1955 when Ballantine was just a small press few had heard of. The book was nearly perfect, the dust jacket like new. I felt drawn to it, some part of me wanted that book even though I didn't know the title well, didn't particularly desire to read it. I glanced through it, flipping the pages slowly. Reluctantly, I put it back on the shelf, and in a kind of dream, drove home.

The next week I received a catalogue of rare and out-of-print science fiction and fantasy from Lloyd Currey in Elizabethtown, New York. There were hundreds of signed, and unsigned

books, by so many of the writers I loved. Flipping the pages, I noticed scores by Arthur Clarke, found *Earthlight* and glanced at the price, 600 (1985) dollars. My brain went black, I seemed to remember an entirely different price on the one at the bookstore. I drove back down the mountain, slipped into the store and up the stairs to the science fiction section, pulled the book off the shelf. I snuck the price catalogue out of my pocket, hurriedly found the page, stared at it. \$600. Looked at the price lightly pencilled on the front free end paper of the book. \$60. Must be a typo in the catalogue I kept thinking. I went outside, called Currey on the phone. After a few rings, he answered in that grumpy voice I would come to know so well, "L.W. Currey."

"Uh, hi. Ummm. Do you have a first edition of *Earthlight* by Arthur C. Clarke?"

"Yes."

"How much is it?"

"\$600."

"Uh, thanks," I said and hung up, then stood a minute, thinking.

Went back in the store. Snuck upstairs. Picked up the book. Stood uncertain, trembling. Took a deep breath, carried it downstairs, picking up the Wells on the way. I placed the books on the counter, feeling like a thief, trying to keep my eyes calm, trying not to blush or look away. The clerk walked over.

"Help you?"

"Uh, I'm interested in these books but they are a little much for me. Can you offer a discount?"

The guy behind the counter, balding, glasses perched low on the end of his nose, glanced keenly at my face, opened the books, took a look at the prices. "\$100 and \$60." He paused to think for a minute. "Yeah, sure. 20 percent off."

I mumbled something, took out my check book, began to write. Tried hard to keep my hands from shaking.

I felt a hand grabbing my shoulder all the way to the car.

The rare book game is an addiction, an endless Easter Egg hunt, an exciting adventure, and a constant swimming in the transcendent world of language, printing, storytelling, storytellers, and the human solace and wisdom that can be found in books. If you are ever touched by it, it pulls you in, and, for a time, you can think of, do, nothing else.

I was not immune. I began to haunt used and rare book stores.

Back then, Book Row in Denver was a collection of adjoining stores on Colfax Avenue a few miles east of the capital building. In the midst of bad restaurants, street prostitutes, drug dealers, Salvation Army stores, antique shops, and decrepit clothing outlets was one block on the south side of the street dedicated to used books. The stores began with Michael Grano's and Steve Wilson's Kugleman and Bent and ended with John Dunning's Old Algonquin bookstore. In between these bookends was a collection of stores that traveled the spectrum from nice, if spare, to heaped collections of rotting, rain-soaked books in a store I never found open in seven years of regular trips to the Row.

Rumor had it, romantic it seemed to me then, that Grano and Wilson, one or both of them, had been motorcycle-riding, leather-clothed wild men, possibly heroin addicts. Wilson had once been a dedicated alcoholic (they said) who still had a first edition (in dust jacket) of the Alcoholics Anonymous handbook. Grano was charming, loquacious, and possessed a seemingly inexhaustible knowledge of books, their first edition points, value, and marketability. Wilson was towering, black-bearded, wild-eyed, less talkative – both of them showing the wear and tear

of years spent too close to the bone. Always short of cash for the store rent my ready checkbook and raw enthusiasm for rare and unusual first editions were very welcome.

The day I first arrived in their shop they had just bought the entire collection of an early, Denver-based, science fiction publisher. Grano pulled out some gems: one of only three copies of Merritt's *The Black Wheel* bound with *The Fox Woman and the Blue Pagoda* and the original cover art for Frank Belknap Long's *The Horror from the Hills*. I bought them all. Then I made my way down to The Old Algonquin where I could see John Dunning through the plate glass window, his back to the street, huge frame oozing over the stool, elbows on counter, head on hands, eyes scanning AB Bookman's magazine. Back in those days, of course, he wasn't on the bestseller lists, wasn't selling a half-million copies a year, just a writer down in the trenches like all of us. Getting up at 3 a.m. to write, eating breakfast at 6, scouting antique stores, the Salvation Army, and early-opening bookstores before unlocking the doors to his store at 10. He worked till 5, closed the shop, scouted books again on the way home, ate dinner and went to bed. Repeated it the next day.

He had some great books and that first visit I bought a lot of them. Sitting on the shelf is one I still have. *The Complete Stories and Poems of Edgar Allen Poe* in two volumes, the Alfred Knopf edition of 1946, both volumes fine in jackets – a beautiful set. His tiny writing, pencilled at the top of the front free end paper, notes: "two volume set, 1st thus." On page 72 is Poe's immortal "The Raven" which, ten years later, John turned into one of the best mysteries ever written: *The Bookman's Wake*. But back then, of course, he was in his long, ten-year dry spell and had almost given up on writing. He spent his days learning the rare book game, sitting, along with the rest of us, at the feet of Grano and Wilson, just trying to keep a roof over his family's head and food on the table.

That first day in his shop he pulled himself off the stool, towered over my near six-foot frame, shook my hand and said, "As you can tell, I rarely miss a meal." Then he patted his stomach and grinned.

As the years went by we became friends and he told me stories – of his years at *The Denver Post*, how he started out sweeping the floor and ended up being the *Post's* lead investigative reporter, of even earlier times when he worked the racetrack circuit as a walker, and, of course, all about being a writer and what it's really like for most of us who decide to do this strange thing of weaving meaning-filled words together into a living fabric filled with dreams.

I remember one year when a bunch of us – Grano, Wilson, John, and some others whose faces and names have been lost in the wasteland of middle age – were on the road someplace, perhaps in Los Angeles at its great antiquarian book fair. We were at dinner, each of us telling stories of the rare book game, and into a pause John cleared his throat and said, "Here's a great one." And then he paused, making sure he had our attention.

"I was in L.A. a few years ago, scouting books, and wandered into a great store. The owner was one of the *old* bookmen, been around forever, and I struck up a conversation. We talked about the trade awhile and then he started telling me about this one book he'd sold recently.

"An old guy, tall and thin, with a shock of white hair above an incredibly lined, ancient face came into the shop one day.

"The bell above the door tinkles as the old guy enters the store, then he stands there a minute, blinking his eyes, letting them adjust to the gloom of the shop. He begins to glance around, sees the owner there, walks over to the glass counter, and pauses uncertainly.

"The owner smiles at him and says, 'Hi. Can I help you?'

"And the old guy says, 'Yes, I hope so,' and clears his throat, a bit nervous.

"'Well, you see,' he says glancing at the bookman's face a bit timidly, 'there is this book I am looking for. My mother used to read it to me when I was young. I haven't thought about it in many years, but at this point in my life it is beginning to take on great importance to me. I want to read it again, once more, before I die.'

"The old bookman looks at him, waits a minute, and seeing that the old guy isn't going to say anything else, asks him, 'Well, what book is it?' And the old guy tells him.

"'Oh,' the bookman says, 'I know that book. And though I do get it from time-to-time, I don't have one now. It's not an expensive book but it is a little uncommon.'

"At this the old man's expression falls and the bookman sees this and says, 'Would you like me to do a book search for you?'

"The guy looks up hopefully, nods his head. 'Oh, yes,' he says.

"So, the bookman takes his name and address and phone number and the guy leaves."

Now most people, when they hear that a bookstore is going to do a booksearch for them have an image, difficult to avoid, of a fleet of little cars out back of the store with guys in black suits and ties, just waiting to search out hard-to-find books. When an order comes in, the thinking goes, they spread out over the country looking for just your book. The truth is much more pedestrian. What actually happened (in those days before the internet) is that all those requests for book searches were thrown in a drawer. When enough of them accumulated the store owner would take out an ad in *AB Bookman's*, a used and rare book magazine that listed books wanted and books for sale. Used book store owners around the country, a few collectors, and some of the more solvent book scouts subscribed to the magazine, read it when business was



slow and, if they had one of the books listed, would send out a postcard saying they had the book, its condition and cost, and that they would hold it awhile if the advertiser was interested.

"So," John goes on, "The bookman eventually takes out an ad in *Bookman's*. A couple of weeks, maybe a month, goes by and he gets this postcard, from Iowa or someplace, from a book scout, saying that he has a copy of the book. Pretty nice copy, previous owner's inscription on the first page, and not too expensive."

Now, as all of us at the table knew, bookscouts are the only form of life, besides cockroaches, that can survive a direct nuclear attack. They are often marginal people, many times homeless, who generally got started as scouts when passing a garage sale one day. "Hardback Books, 50 cents" the sign says and they happen to have three dollars. So, they pick out six nice looking books and take them down to the used bookstore which buys them for twelve dollars and they're hooked for life. Oddly enough, these guys often get very good at it and although they travel alone, they sometimes show up in large numbers at Salvation Army stores and garage sales, fighting each other over books they think they can sell. And once or perhaps twice a year they find a great book. A first of *Gone With the Wind* or an early Stephen King, perhaps a first edition *Salem's Lot* in the very rare first state dust jacket, books worth many thousands of dollars. But usually it's just three dollars into twelve dollars.

"So," John continues, "the old bookman calls this guy and says, 'We've managed to locate a copy of the book you wanted.' He tells him the price and says, 'Would you like me to order it for you?' And the old guy says, 'yes.'"

"Then, in a couple of weeks, the book arrives. The bookman calls the guy and says, 'Your book is here.' And the old guy tells him he'll be right over."

"Now this bookman has a great sense of style and he cleans off the glass counter top and sets the book just so in the middle of the glass and pretty soon he hears a car pull up in front of the store, the car door slams, and the shop door opens. The little bell tinkles and the bookman looks over to see the old guy standing like before, eyes blinking, getting used to the gloom of the store.

"Well, the old guy, once his eyes have adjusted, turns to the bookman and starts over. Then he sees the book there on the counter and stops in his tracks. Slowly, as if in a dream, he walks over and reaches out for the book. His hands are trembling a little and just before he touches the book, he looks up at the bookman and his eyes are a bit moist. He looks back down again, picks up the book, and slowly opens it."

Here John pauses, picks up his water glass, and drinks thirstily.

"And . . .," one of us finally says.

"Well," says John, "there, on the first page, is his mother's name."

John stretched and grinned. "God," he said. "I love this life. There are times that will break your heart, but then something like this happens . . ."

And then we all shuffled in our seats and cleared our throats and tried to pretend that we hadn't felt goose bumps when we heard the story, hadn't been as moved as we were, and the evening ran on and we went back to sell at the convention and Grano and Wilson disappeared into the bowels of Denver and John went on to the bestseller lists and I ended up in southwestern New Mexico, writing about that moment in time, a moment that touched me and pulled me even deeper into a world that people have known as long as they have known language.

I bought and sold rare books and manuscripts for five years in Denver and Boulder before I began writing myself but I've never lost my love for a book signed by someone whose work has deeply touched me.

The wall in front of me is covered by the writers I love and who have given me the gift of their thoughts and their company. Across from me is a signed photograph of John Gardner, black motorcycle jacket half-zipped, white-blond hair down to his shoulders and that stare and set of mouth that seems to be saying, "Did you sell out yet?" (Usually, but not always, I can tell him, "No, not yet.") Just below him is George Bernard Shaw scowling, and in fading yet still-insistent ink is his signature with the comment: "Yours out of all patience." (When I start to sell out, when I start to write only for the money, for some reason my eyes always see that one first.) Over there is an original manuscript leaf from Mark Twain's *The Gilded Age* written in ink in Twain's hand and most wonderfully, his ink-smudged thumb prints on the edges of the page. Just under that are some heavily corrected manuscript pages from George Bird Grinnell's writings about the antelope herds in Yellowstone Park, years before he got Glacier Park protected as wilderness. Here are some of Robert Bly's first tentative translations of Kabir, typed on an old manual typewriter, corrected in his illegible scrawl. There, Walt Whitman stands, peering intently, white beard flowing, aged as old oak, with his card inscribed "from the author." Edward Abbey and R. Crumb stare out at me from the Moab canyonlands in Utah, Crumb in his trademark hat, holding his infamous notebook, looking like a refugee from the nineteen-fifties. Abbey is desert taking on human form, face a craggy expression of stone and sand and sun, of silent places and wilderness, of the battering that all writers suffer if they don't quit. And Ambrose Bierce too, young and handsome, eyes reflecting the horrors of Civil War, not yet the bitter man who would go seeking Pancho Villa.

From them comes some odd, strange current of life force. It spills from the walls, flows into this room, onto this desk, and then back into the past, carrying part of me with it. And it flows into the future, surging outward, from the living touch of their pen to paper, flowing through this moment in time, passing through me during this life (and perhaps now, you), on its way.

All of us writers, living and dead, are caught up in that current, part of some great movement, some strange craft whose magic captured us one day when we weren't consciously looking and pulled us into a world that we might never have found on our own.

Now I look over and see Barry Lopez gazing out at me from a stand of trees and I read the signed typescript . . .

*Those that we revere as our great teachers, from a certain distance, were faithful. They did not break faith with their beliefs, they remained dedicated to something outside the self. As far as we know, they never became the enemies of their souls or memories.*

And as I read it I wonder, as I sometimes do: Will I have the courage to do the same? It is a question that must be answered each day of a writer's life. For there are none of us that are exempt from the pressures that go with writing, none who are not subjected to the siren call of money, or New York, or success, or of our work (or ourselves) being liked, or even the sometimes years-long hope of finally being published . . . someday . . . someday . . . please someday.

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