

In the Company of Books

I recently found myself engaged in rigorous conversation on the subject of books.

“A person no longer has to go to book stores,” my friend says. “With Amazon.com, books can be ordered on the internet.”

I cringe at the thought. Not go to bookstores? The idea is preposterous.

“It’s not the same thing,” I say. “What about the touching - the fondling of books? You can’t bond with a book over the internet.”

He gives me one of those looks so often seen on the faces of people who spend most of their waking hours sitting in front of their computers.

“Amazon.com takes care of everything,” he continues. “You don’t have to bother with all the minutiae.”

“I like minutiae,” I say.

There are two kinds of people: those who can’t be bothered, as my friend suggested, and those who always find the time to personally get the job done without the aid of advanced technology. The latter need book shops. They are direct links to their souls.

I explain this to my friend who tries hard to grasp what I am saying. He acknowledges that, perhaps for me, on-line shopping won’t work. “But,” he adds, “I have to admit it saves time.” And, perhaps that’s the point: saving time is often the beginning of the end of all those experiences that occur only when one is willing to waste time – to linger. Linger has become a lost art, and when it comes to books, lingering goes with the territory.

I remember the first time I entered a library. I was five when my mother and I walked up to a large brick building whose path was framed by parallel rows of blue hydrangeas leading up to two white pillars aligning the stately door.

“You’ll need to be very quiet,” she said. “No one is allowed to talk inside a library.”

I was, at once awed and frightened. I didn’t know what to expect. What I was about to encounter seemed analogous to a religious experience. And, in a way, that’s exactly what it was: walking through those great doors was a rite of passage – a shrine to

all the books I would, ultimately come to know and grow to love through all the years of my childhood and beyond.

The children's library in my small hometown had a librarian, Miss Wildman who was tiny and prim, and who, despite her elfin-like appearance, was quite stern. I once laughed too loudly and she shot me a look that still resonates in my mind. "This library is hallowed ground," she said. Even today, when I am inside a reading room and voices are raised, I think of Miss Wildman and how she would lift her eyebrows, peering above her glasses, ready to pounce.

The libraries of my youth had wooden filing drawers. Books were signed out with a date stamp attached to a pencil, pressed on to an ink blotter and marked on the inside cover. Borrowing a book was a thrill. I brought my selections up to the main desk where I watched as Miss Wildman smiled approvingly, reminding me not to forget to bring them back on time.

The upstairs reading area was a large, airy space where I spent hours reading Babar the Elephant, seated under revolving ceiling lamps with Mother Goose characters and other literary figures circling those lighted domes. It was a magical place - this room where I spent endless amounts of time reading my favorite authors and watching how years of sunlight had faded the covers of "Make Way for Ducklings" and "Little Toot."

Perhaps, it was those early halcyon library days that paved the way to my love of books and my desire to write. Or maybe, it was the smell of the place and the hum of the fans in summer and the radiators banging in winter that made it feel so comfortable and safe. I only know this: even now when I am inside a library or a bookshop, I am at peace. My senses are stirred: the feel, smell, and sounds of pages being turned, inspire me. Plant me in a room filled with books and I have come home.

I have a recurring fantasy: I am locked inside a library overnight with no means of escape. I am surrounded by all the literary figures I have grown to know intimately, for reading, after all, is an intimate experience. All through the night I move among them, prowling the stacks. I share an hour with Agatha Christie and Charles Dickens. I move among the craggy pages of Tolstoy and Kafka. I mingle a while with Saul Bellow, Thomas Wolfe, Irwin Shaw, Hemingway and the rest of the guys. I stop for a read with

Updike and Cheever. I laugh with Calvin Trillin and cry with Annie Dillard. When I am tired, I close my eyes, curl up in a stuffed chair and fall asleep with Shakespeare.

I prefer these time-worn books whose covers are caked with mold, whose characters have long been buried in the dust of history and can only be recaptured through reading. And so, in the company of books, I sniff their pages and am brought back to a time long past and revived through memory. Like buns, hot from the oven, a new book smells fresh. But, give me a less-pristine volume that has stood the test of time - which other hands have caressed long before mine ever held them.

Sadly now, independent bookshops are a dying breed. Large conglomerates have sprouted up like literary McDonald's. Vital information spills out at us in minutes without having to rely on real people to assist us, or, we can find what we need on microfiche. But for me, the reading rooms and small bookshops I keep searching for, hold a certain enchantment. There is still awe in stumbling upon a book long out of print and suddenly rediscovered on somebody's shelf. Literary characters have become my friends. I love the voyeuristic feeling of falling upon annotated margins penciled in on coffee-stained pages. I miss Miss Wildman who ruled her roost of noisy children with: "use your inside voices, please."

My grandchildren, Andrew and Caroline, are growing up in a different time. They are new millennium kids who will reap the rewards of high technological living. Along the way I must take care to teach them what lies inside the hearts of books, the musty smells of old tomes, the secret crannies in libraries where they can hide away and discover wondrous worlds that cannot be found on computer screens. Above all, I must teach them the art of lingering.

On the way home, my friend and I pass a house on Route 7 with a sign that says: "Used Books."

"Let's stop and browse for a minute," I say. "They might have something interesting."

"Nothing you can't order over the internet," he says.