

SEVEN KINDS OF PEOPLE YOU FIND IN BOOKSHOPS

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For Lena and Freya

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Introduction

In his preface to *Antiquarian Books: An Insider's Account* (David & Charles, 1978) Roy Harley Lewis wrote that 'the role played by antiquarian books in world trade is, financially, quite insignificant'. That is putting a flattering spin on it. If you replace the word 'antiquarian' with 'second-hand', then the financial impact on the global economy shifts from 'quite insignificant' to 'laughably trifling'. It was into that world that I stepped when I bought a bookshop in 2001, just four years after Amazon started selling cut-price books online. I now dream of my business making as much as even a laughably trifling dent in the global economy. In a further sign of appalling business acumen, I'm now responsible for this book, which attempts

to bracket my customers unkindly into broad categories which will undoubtedly offend the very people on whom I depend for a living. This should surely seal my financial fate.

Roy Harley Lewis concludes in his preface that

one might ask why the bookseller should be any more interesting than the shoe salesman. Yet there can be few other careers that offer such satisfaction or that make such demands as the antiquarian-book trade, requiring the dealer to play at different times the roles of detective, scholar, agent, psychologist, and fortune-teller – quite apart from that of conventional buyer and salesman.

He may have a point. Or it may be that those of us who are singularly ill-equipped to deal with the stresses of normal life find ourselves drawn towards the business as a means of escaping from roles of the ‘conventional buyer and salesman’. This isn’t about us, though, the

miserable, unfortunate few who have chosen to try to sell books to make a pitiful living. It is about our customers: those wretched creatures with whom we're forced to interact on a daily basis, and who – as I write this under coronavirus lockdown – I miss like long-lost friends. From the charming and interesting to the rude and offensive, I miss them all. Apart from the fact that without them I have literally no income, to my enormous surprise I have discovered that I miss the human interaction. Yesterday, a man telephoned the shop and asked for a copy of my second book, *Confessions of a Bookseller*. The total, including postage, was £18. As I was taking down his credit card details, he said 'Please add an extra £10.' When I asked him why, he replied, 'Because I know how hard this time must be for businesses like yours, and I want you to still be there when all of this is over, so that I can come and visit the shop again.'

Others have been equally kind; I recently received a cheque from someone I've never met who told me that she'd read an article in *Time*

magazine, written by Margaret Atwood, in which she encouraged people to support small businesses during this difficult time. She asked for nothing other than that I cash the cheque. The kindness of strangers can reduce you to your knees in a sobbing mess faster than a well-aimed punch to the solar plexus. This is why I miss my customers. Despite my objection to many of them, beneath their hoary exteriors there beats a kind, human heart.

The 'bookshops' in the title of this book really only refers to my own shop. I have no wish to tarnish the reputations of others by claiming to speak on their behalf while venting my own spleen. No doubt those booksellers of a more generous disposition would paint far kinder portraits of their customers than those that follow this introduction, but these are drawn from my experiences over the past twenty years of suffering service in the trade, and I am unaware of any booksellers with a generous disposition – towards their customers, at least.

I ought also to apologise for perpetuating

stereotypes, when in reality people are far more nuanced and exist in endless subtle shades of characteristics. Generalisations are unfair, but so is life. Suck it up.

For the purposes of convenience, and of causing further offence, I've attempted to adopt a sort of Linnaean system of taxonomy, which, now that I've finished the book, I've realised doesn't really work.

Genus: *Peritus* (Expert)

If your knowledge of Latin is as woeful as mine, then you could be forgiven for assuming (as I did) that this refers to an unsavoury part of the nether regions. It does not. It means ‘expert’.

This kind of customer is – on the whole – a self-appointed expert who does not have the benefit of a regular audience on which to inflict his or her wisdom. Unlike most academics, or recognised industry commentators, who generally deal in fact-based, well-informed opinion, and who have groups of students and readers keen to hear what they have to say, most of the autodidactic types that follow have

no such eager audience. As always, there are exceptions, and in their ranks can be counted some of the kindest customers I'm fortunate enough to encounter. The rest, though, are eye-wateringly tiresome.

There is nothing that the expert likes more than to use long words where short, simple language would suffice. Stamp-collecting becomes philately, looking at birds becomes ornithology and an unhealthy obsession with insects becomes entomology. It's as though they've dined out and eaten Will Self for main course followed by Jonathan Meades and Stephen Fry for dessert. The difference being that Self and Meades and Fry have all swallowed, digested and understood the full *Oxford English Dictionary* and know precisely how to use the correct word in the right situation to bestow clarity upon their prose, while the expert takes excruciating pains to confound the reluctant listener for nothing more than the sake of obfuscation. They know fewer than five long words, but splash them around with wild abandon for

no other purpose than to create the easily scratched veneer of intellectual superiority. But – as my pharmacist friend Cloda would say – hippopotomonstrosesquipedalianism is no excuse to make someone feel foolish for not knowing that the chemical polyvinylpyrrolidone is a binding agent in most prescription tablets.

William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway famously argued about the use of language, with Faulkner quipping that ‘Hemingway has never been known to use a word that might send a reader to the dictionary’. To which Hemingway replied ‘Poor Faulkner. Does he really think that big emotions come from big words? I know all the ten-dollar words as well as he does, but I prefer the older, simpler ones.’ My English teacher at school would have had a great deal more sympathy with Faulkner over Hemingway’s use of the word ‘ones’, arguing that there is no plural of the word ‘one’ other than ‘more than one’ or a higher number. He was also mercilessly pedantic about the word ‘alternative’, which he maintained had its root

in the Latin word 'alter' meaning one of two. It was always a source of enormous pleasure in classes to suggest that there were two alternatives. Or possibly even more.

Type one

SPECIES: *DOCTUS* (*SPECIALIST*)

This is the kind of person who comes into the shop for no other reason than to lecture you about whatever their field of specialist interest is, and derives a singular pleasure when you know absolutely nothing about it, as you almost certainly won't. Over the years, most specialist booksellers acquire considerable knowledge which reflects their stock, but when you have a general bookshop (like mine) it is impossible to know everything. Try telling that, though, to someone who has spent their entire adult life studying the reproductive habits of the Siberian tree snail. They will sneer at you with a supercilious look of undisguised delight and contempt (in equal

measure) when you reveal that no, you haven't heard of Michal Horsák's seminal work on the subject, *Mollusc Assemblages in Palaeoecological Reconstructions: An Investigation of Their Predictive Power Using Transfer Function Models*. While they derive pleasure from your ignorance of their sphere of knowledge, they are incapable of really understanding why you – or everyone else, for that matter – wouldn't want to spend twenty years living in a tent in a forest fifty miles from Omsk with a notebook and a microscope examining snail excrement, and reading nothing other than obscure academic papers on the subject.

The marginally more socially adept members of this species are conscious that other people might not share their obscure interests. This group derives an alternative sort of gratification from the fact that their niche obsession somehow differentiates them from other people, mistakenly assuming that it makes them more interesting. We used to have a regular customer who never failed to startle us by appearing at the counter without

any obvious sign of having even entered the building, and cheerily announcing his presence with the greeting ‘Hello! I’m a bit weird, me. I love reading books about differential calculus.’ The aching reality was that, in fact, he had no interest whatsoever in differential calculus but was so desperately dull that he thought that by telling people he had, it added a new dimension to his character. It didn’t. It should go without saying that anyone who introduces themselves as ‘a bit weird’ is almost certainly not.

Type two

SPECIES: *HOMO ODIOSUS* (*BORE*)

This type of person often considers him- or herself to be a polymath, and will inveterately share their thoughts with you on any subject you choose to mention, or accidentally mention, once you are aware of their proclivity. It is best to maintain complete silence when in their presence, as the slightest thing

can trigger a lengthy tirade on the most unexpected of subjects, although often you don't discover that customers fall into this taxonomic category until it's far, far too late. They are not averse to listening in on conversations between other customers and interjecting with their (often wildly offensive) opinions, and on many occasions I have had to apologise to innocent bystanders who – having been quietly discussing something – have subsequently been subjected to an unsolicited (and possibly racist) rant from a complete stranger who happened to be within earshot.

We have one outstanding example of this type, and the dangers of not knowing how to deal with them are best illustrated by the following account of a day on which one of my friends offered to help in the shop.

My friend Robin appeared at eleven o'clock on a warm summer Saturday morning and took up his position behind the counter in the front of the shop. I was loitering around, pretending to work. After a couple of hours of the usual cut-and-thrust of daily bookshop life,

the legendary local bore, Alfred,* came to the counter with three books. He thumped them down on the wooden surface with an air of serene smugness and, fixing Robin with his eye, announced portentously that they were ‘important books because they are responsible for the way things are now’.

Having suffered sufficiently long and painfully at Alfred’s hands over almost two decades I knew that the only safe response to any leading remark he may make is silence. Unfortunately, I had not had the chance to school Robin in this matter and beyond making frantic signals of negation behind Alfred’s back I could do nothing, but by a stroke of good fortune, he asked if he could leave the books on the counter while he went to get some cash from the bank’s ATM.

The moment he was out of earshot I warned

* For some reason he’s convinced himself that he’s descended from King Alfred the Great, and it has been my grave misfortune to have been exposed to his wildly unlikely and frankly incomprehensible research into his genealogy over far too many years.