

On The Shelf

by Theodore Dalrymple

If I had my time again I'd have less to do with people and even more to do with books than I had the first time around: but I would have to come back in the past rather than the future, because the book as an artefact seems to have ever less importance in our culture.

There are people who deny this, of course. They say that book sales are holding up or even increasing; that the number of titles published is greater than ever; and that if you see fewer people reading books on the train it is because they are all reading on their tablets and Kindles.

I am not convinced, however – perhaps because I don't like good news, which I find so uninteresting by comparison with bad. The book review, for example, used to be very important to our more cerebral newspapers; now it comes a long way behind cookery, to say nothing of football. Even the charity shops that so disfigure our shopping streets, and that used sometimes to have an interesting book or two in the middle of yards of novels by Danielle Steel, have now greatly reduced the space they devote to books.

The downgrading of books is international. There used to be a good bookshop at Charles de Gaulle Airport, for example, but it has been replaced by a pharmacy. It seems that people need moisturising creams on flights these days more than they need something to read. I have not personally observed that the habit of reading printed books on planes has been replaced by that of reading electronic ones, though this might be the consequence of my observer bias.

Libraries and colleges are clearing out books as if they were asbestos. Computer terminals are what are wanted now, in the same way that Mr Gradgrind wanted facts. I am not entirely

technophobic: the internet is a superb instrument and I am very grateful for it, but it is by no means a perfect substitute for books.

When it comes to second-hand bookshops, they have been killed, at least in this country, by the internet, by the odious soi-disant charity Oxfam, and by the loss of interest in browsing other than on a computer. George Orwell, who once served in a second-hand bookshop, wrote disparagingly of the trade; to him “the sweet smell of decaying paper appeals . . . no longer” and “is too closely associated in my mind with paranoiac customers and dead bluebottles”. But for me the bus tickets, annotations, invoices, cigarette cards and silverfish found in old books are an endless source of fascination and reverie.

I have been obsessed by books all my life, and now I feel the melancholy that I suppose old artisans must once have felt when their trade became industrialised. All these years I have been on the wrong, or at least losing, side of history, a dinosaur that did not foresee its extinction.

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