

# **The Bookshop**

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OPENING- *Rose is a woman in her late 60's. She is dressed in a skirt and blouse. She is tired, except when she talks about books. Rose is sitting, reading a book She is reading out loud. There is a counter on the left, and a book table on the right. There are books and book ends on the table.*

"Once, in my father's bookshop, I heard a regular customer say that few things leave a deeper mark on a reader than the first book that finds its way into his heart. Those first images, the echo of words we think we have left behind, accompany us throughout our lives and sculpt a palace in our memory to which, sooner or later – no matter how many books we read, how many words we discover, or how much we learn or forget – we will return. For me those enchanted pages will always be the ones I found among the passageways of the Cemetery of Forgotten Books." Ruiz Zafon, Carlos *The Shadow of the Wind*

Oh, pardon me. I didn't hear you come in. Where are my manners? Welcome to the Bookshop. Let me know if I can help you find anything. We have fiction over here, *She proceeds to walk around pointing out the sections.* biographies, science, history, and politics here. The cookbooks are in the back and our children's corner is back here. Our special mystery section is in the center. If you can't find what you are looking for I would be happy to order it for you.... Well, no, I guess I couldn't do that. I, or we, are closing tomorrow. This is my last day. I'm sure though one of the other bookstores in town could help you. I'll just call around if

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you can't find the right title. I know what it is like to not have the right book, at the right time.

It's funny, some people wander in without any book in mind while others know exactly what they want and they won't stray from their goal. I remember a man Sam, who use to do that.

Sam came in looking for a classic of sorts: *Fishing in Oregon* by Madelyne Sheehan. It is a great guide to all of the fishing holes in our beautiful state. Sam had been in before getting books for his kids, then his grandkids but for himself, books about fishing were all that mattered. He didn't talk too much, just spent time browsing through the Oregon fishing books. One day I asked him if he had ever tried fiction himself. He said "No Miss Rose I don't have much need for made up stories. Those are fine for the kiddies but the day is too short to bother with make-believe." I told him about *A River Runs through It* by Norman Maclean. It's a story about a preacher who put fly fishing right up there with God. The minister who lives in Montana brings up his sons with all the education you can glean from fishing. It was a thin book so Sam gave it a try. The next time Sam admitted that the preacher went a bit overboard on fly fishing verses bait fishing but he thought there was a lot of wisdom there, and great fishing tips. Sam went on to try *River Song* by Craig Lesley and *Ricochet River* by Robin Cody. For three years he would only read books with "river" in the title. Sam shared *Ricochet River* with his 16 year old grandson. He thought his grandson could relate to it. Let me show you why. I'll just read you this one section. *She goes to the display on left and picks up copy of Ricochet River. Read page (79).*

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The really amazing part is how salmon know where to go. Some kind of homing instinct – imprinting, they call it – guides a salmon to the very mountain stream where it hatched and awoke to fishdom. Something in the water calls home, to a salmon. One time at a deep green pool below the dam I saw a big old humpback male take a running swim at the concrete base of the dam. He smacked right into it, head on. *Whump*, he hit it. I could hear the silent impact in my own stomach. The fish dropped back dazed. Then he took another run at the base of the dam. *Whump*, again, he butted the concrete with his snout. It was too terrible to watch (113).

Sam brought that grandson in once. It was good to see them looking at books together. Well, OK Sam was looking at the fishing section and his grandson looked at the graphic novels but they were both here. The written word had brought them together. At times I feel I have spent my entire life helping people find the right book. Even as a child I was looking for that special book that would take me away from everything. Childhood isn't easy for anyone, is it? I came from a big Catholic family where responsibility and obligation were more important than love or comfort. I had the responsibility of my ten brothers and sisters so I wouldn't get many chances to steal away and read. We had an unfinished attic and I would take my flashlight up there when I was 8 or 10 and I would lie on an old mattress and read: Nancy Drew, Anne of Green Gables, and Dr. Doolittle. I loved the talking animals. But soon I'd hear "Rosie?" The dinner had to be made or laundry had to be done or a fight among my brothers had to be

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broken up. In school I never did well in science or math, just in English. I thought it was a waste of time dividing numbers when you could be riding through the fields with *Black Beauty* or helping French aristocrats escape like in *Scarlet Pimpernel*. Do you have a favorite children's book from your youth? Then you know what I mean. You can pick up a book you read thirty years ago and it will take you right back to that time. The Catholic Sisters at school told me I would never amount to anything with my nose stuck in a book all the time. I suspect they were right. I never went to college. I've never done anything but sell books. I have been selling books for 50 years in this same shop. 50 years today.

*She sits on a tall stool in front and addresses the audience.*

Pardon me, I need to help a customer. *She steps back behind the counter and rings out a sale.*

*She starts dusting, to distract herself.*

I suppose some people feel that I didn't live up to my full potential. Well, you don't go into the book business to make money. My need for books won out over my need for financial security. There were not too many career choices you could have made in 1958, or even today, that you could make less money at than books. I'll be right back.

*She helps another customer behind the counter.*

I suppose you wonder why I have done it for all these years. Have you ever read "*Parnassus on Wheels*" by Christopher Morley? Don't worry. I don't think many people have, in this day and age. It was published in 1917, although an anniversary edition came

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out not too long ago. It is about a man who had a wagon full of books and he would go from farm to farm to sell books. The wagon was like the one in the Wizard of Oz, and it was fitted with shelves on the outside that were filled with books. In Parnassus Mr. Mifflin, the traveling bookseller, had a philosophy about books. "The best of it is I have such a good time....I go loafing along the road on a warm summer day and by and by we'll fetch up alongside some boarding-house and there are the boarders all rocking off their lunch on the veranda. Most of 'em bored to death – nothing good to read, nothing to do but sit and watch the flies bussing in the sun and the chickens rubbing up and down in the dust. First thing you know I'll sell half a dozen books that put the love of life into them, and they don't forget Parnassus in a hurry. Take O. Henry, for instance – There isn't anybody so dog-gone sleepy that he won't enjoy that man's stories. He understood life, you bet, and he could write it down with all its little twists. I've spent an evening reading O. Henry and Wilkie Collins to people and had them buy out all their books I had and clamor for more." (p45)

Now Mr. Mifflin was a true bookseller.

I started my career as a bookseller the day I turned 18 and went to work in this very bookshop. The owner, Thelma Wright, was a wirery feisty woman who would just over power you until you bought a book, and not just any book but the book she thought you needed the most. I learned everything I knew about books from her. She would accost some poor person with "What do you; mean you haven't read, *"To Kill a Mocking Bird?"* How will you ever know what Boo puts in the tree?" But what she meant was how will you ever understand about the respect that Scout, the little girl had for her father? Or that her father, Atticus had for the people who were beat down by the system. I

promise you, live with Scout for a little while and you will understand part of your world a little better. *To Kill a Mockingbird* was written in 1953 but it is still rings true today. I have often thought about the meaning of the title. *She picks up the book*. Atticus had just given his son Jem an air-rifle.

“I’d rather you shoot tin cans in the back yard, but I know you’ll go after birds. Shoot all the blue jays you want, if you can hit em, but remember it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird. That was the only time I ever heard Atticus say it was a sin to do something so I asked Miss Maude. “Your father’s right” she said. “Mockingbirds don’t do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don’t eat up people’s gardens, don’t nest in corn cribs, they don’t do but one thing to sing their hearts out for us. That’s why it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird.” (90)

I have never understood how people could turn their back on this kind of wisdom, everyday useful knowledge. That is what I do here just like Thelma did in the 50’s. I help people seek out the answers that they are looking for, even when sometimes they didn’t know they had asked a question.

I’m sorry. I guess I can get off my pedestal now. The reality is that I also carry lots of books that have very little wisdom in them. I even carry .....Rush Limbaugh. There I said it. I am a bookseller. I have an obligation to order any book you may want even if it is about how to make a bomb, or if the book was written by a fool, like the above mentioned. I have to tell you this. Rush Limbaugh has these cult followers who would come into the shop and demand to see his books. They didn’t want to buy the

books. Their mission was to make certain that I carried them. When I went to the back of the store and brought out my only copy, they insisted that I have a huge display of his books on the front table. How silly is that! Of course, I never offer my opinion. (*Look embarrassed*) Alright I may have, on occasion, given an opinion or two. That is what is great about a good bookshop. People do not go into clothing stores and object to the mint green sweater being displayed. They don't accuse the clerk of being a Communist or radical or just plain stupid because she has a lavender blouse on the mannequin. They just don't feel strongly about it, one way or the other. But they do in a bookstore. In a bookshop there are always discussions, disagreements, but also at times, coming together, where you realize that if two so very different people can enjoy the same book they can't be all that bad. There is something about a bookshop that makes it all right for everyone to speak his or her mind. It is sort of like the street corners of the old times. Where someone simply stopped what he or she were doing and put all their energy into convincing you to join their side.

I remember one young mother who was very vocal about 'her side'. She came in one day and declared Harry Potter as being an agent of Satan. She was convinced that every eight year old would start skinning cats and turning their grandmother into a rat. Harry Potter! Can you imagine? She said I had no right to carry the books. She believed that I was not only fostering but promoting witchcraft. I had heard this argument for years and was about to laugh when I stopped and really looked at her. She was frightened, terribly, terribly frightened. She truly believed all children's souls were in peril. Can you imagine being that afraid of a book? Books are powerful but knowledge is even more so. I'm sure she has never even read Harry Potter. Bookshops bring both sides of any

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argument together, in one place. Now, not always offering a solution but at least it is a place for ideas. All ideas.

Bookshops are also a place where you can grieve. The day that Kennedy was killed, many of my regular customers came in because they felt they needed a safe haven. I had Kennedy's book "*Profiles in Courage*" on a display on the front table. That day was too painful. Then there was Bobby, and then Martin. The 1960s were a difficult time. I had friends a few years younger than myself who were hippies. They wanted to walk away from everything, and I suppose they did that with drugs. They thought that I was part of the "Establishment" that I had sold out. Mostly I wanted to be able to pay my rent but I understood why they were angry. There was so much anger then, so much frustration. The Viet Nam war colored everything. But there were some beautiful books that came out at that time, or rediscovered again: *Siddhartha* by Herman Hesse. A book filled with peace and possibilities. And *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*. Now I know there were jokes about the talking seagull, a flying rat in some opinions, but Richard Bach, the author, wrote about reincarnation. That hadn't been done in a way that the every day reader could understand it. Jonathan gave people hope. And speaking of books that will move you, did you ever read *Bridges Of Madison County* by Waller? There isn't a middle-aged woman alive who wouldn't let out a little sigh (*sigh*) when she heard the title. You would have to have a heart of stone to not be moved by the wife's dilemma. Oh I know you have seen the movie but read the book. At that time that book came out, 1992, there were not many middle age love stories. I liked the part when she was remembering her love.

"She could see him clearly also, down the flow of her memory. Each year she ran all of the images through her mind, meticulously, remembering everything,

forgetting nothing, imprinting all of it, forever, like tribesmen passing down an oral history through the generations. He was tall and thin and hard, and he moved like the grass itself, without effort, gracefully. His silver-gray hair hung well below his ears and nearly always looked disheveled, as if he had just come in from a long sea voyage through a stiff wind and had tried to brush it into place with his hands." (24) *She sighs.*

You know, I was in love once. I know it's hard to believe that considering my new withered look, but I did have a love once. Clifton Elliot. Nice name. It was a long time ago, 1972. I was 32 and Clifton was a sales representative from Doubleday Publishers. He was tall, distinguished even at 35. He would take me out to lunch to sell me books. The publishers had money then. Not like now. I was always taken out to lunch and dinner at the best places in Portland: the Genoa, The Ringside, and Jakes Crawfish. I could never afford to go to those places on my own. Anyway, the sales reps from wealthy publishers would wine and dine booksellers. Would you complain? So when Clifton invited me to lunch it wasn't anything out of the ordinary. We talked about books of course. That is how we both made a living. The thing is though the book world is so much more than a way to pay bills. So we were talking about our passion. Soon he was taking me out to lunch more often. I knew how small my orders were so I thought it wasn't always just to show me the spring titles. He lived in Seattle but was down to Portland more frequently. Soon we were seeing other and, well you know. It was wonderful to share my world with someone who understood. Then he got promoted. Why wouldn't he? He was brilliant. But that meant moving to New York City. Can you imagine? We kept up our correspondence. I missed him terribly and when he invited me to go back and attend the

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American Books Sellers Association annual trade show, I almost fainted. Can you imagine? Can you see me walking through display after display of every kind of book That you can think of? Me, Rose from Portland OREGone. You bet I went. He booked me a room in a four star hotel and he picked me up in a taxi. Then we went to the show and from 9 AM to 7 PM. I got to listen to THE authors speak: Philip Roth, Joyce Carol Oates, John Updike. Clifton asked me if I wanted to meet John Updike. I said "No! What would I say? I would start drooling. I would embarrass myself, I would embarrass you and you could loose your job." But he introduced me anyway. John Updike. Can you imagine? OK when I did meet him I didn't drool, or not so you would notice. I got to meet Taylor Caldwell. I know most academic and literature snobs would let out a groan at hearing her name. But did you think they actually READ any of her books? It has always bothered me that the "Great Readers" put a romantic story down to nothing more than sentimental slop. Not everyone needs to read Beowulf in the original Old English to be well read. Humorous books, mystery titles, even romances may have something to say to the common man and woman. The "intellectually ostentatious" miss the tender, funny and enlightening moments of Garrison Keillor, Dick Frances and Jan Karon. Do you know about Jan Karon? She wrote a series of books about an Episcopal priest in South Carolina. The first of the series "*At Home in Mitford*" introduces the reader to Fr. Tim and his dog, Barnabas. Barnabus is not the most obedient of dogs but he will take commands if they are followed by a Bible quote. This is a series of tales about a charming town called Mitford, where people care about their neighbors. And yes it's OK to read a book with a rosy outlook. Doom and gloom is not a prerequisite for a good story.

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One day one of my regulars, Mrs. Brighton, came in my shop. She specialized in doom and gloom. I had been selling books to her for years but she would only read true crime and Stephen King. You get the picture? She is a big woman who doesn't waste time with small talk. She hollered at me across the store. "Rose I have read every thing Stephen King has written. I need something different." Well, I took a swallow and stepped up to her and said "Mrs. Brighton, I have something here that is defiantly not your usual book." I told her about Mitford and pleaded with her to take a chance. Be brave, break out of your normal reading habits. She glared at me. Then she bought the book. You have to understand something about recommending books. Just because you liked a book doesn't mean your customer will. If you go swaggering up to the customer and assuring them that because you liked it the book it must be brilliant, you are playing with fire. You will loose the customer's trust and that is something you can't get back. Knowing what book to recommend is simply one of the many things that come with time and experience. People, too often move from one job to the next, one occupation to the next and never achieved the comfort level that experience brings... Anyway the next time Mrs. Brighton came roaring into the store I was a bit anxious. She came behind the counter, not always a good sign, and grabbed me up in a big bear hug. She said "Thank you for Fr. Tim. I went out and bought a dog and named him Barnabus!" After she put me down I smiled. Books can make a difference. You know, Fr. Tim in the Mitford books falls in love. Even in his advanced years.

*She grabs a box and starts putting in books.*

Clifton and I were in love but it didn't work out. He was across the country in New York, and I was still in Podunk Portland. Oh, he wanted me to move back there. He

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thought I could work in one of those huge books stores. Some of them were 5 stories high. Can you imagine so many books? But I couldn't do it. Oh, not because I didn't loved Clifton. I did, but what would someone from a small town do in the big city. Too much traffic. I wouldn't know where to catch the right bus. I hear from him from time to time. He's married now. Well of course he is married, it has been over thirty-five years. He has sent me pictures of his children and then his grandchildren. Can you imagine? I've sent his grandchildren copies of *Where the Wild things Are* and *Goodnight Moon*. I never regretted staying in Portland. I have responsibilities here. Who would help these people find the right book? Like that army man.

There was a man who use to come in the shop. He was maybe in his 40's and he always dressed in fatigues. I don't think that he just got back from the war but he probably only felt comfortable in his service clothes. Now that would have been the Gulf war. I've lived through so many. There was a time, for a long time, when you said "The war" you meant World War II or the Korean War. Anyway this man would come in often and rarely speak to me. He always bought war stories. Yes, we had a war section. I don't any more. Anyway one day I took a chance and asked him if he had heard of Tim O'Brian? Tim O'Brian is an author from Minnesota. He wrote a book called "*The Things They Carried*" It won the National Book Award. It was about what Viet Nam soldiers carried on their person, in their packs; what things were the most important to each man. I have to read this to you:

"For the most part they carried themselves with poise, a kind of dignity.

Now and then, however, there were times of panic, when they squealed or wanted to squeal but couldn't when they twitched and made moaning

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sounds and covered their heads and said Dear Jesus and flopped around on the earth and fired their weapons blindly and cringed and sobbed and begged for the noise to stop and went wild and made stupid promises to themselves and to God and to their mothers and fathers, hoping not to die. In different ways it happened to all of them. Afterward, when the firing ended, they would blink and peek up. They would touch their bodies feeling shame, and then quickly hiding it. They would force themselves to stand. As if in slow motion, frame by frame, the world would take on the old logic – absolute silence, then the wind, then sunlight, then voices. It was the burden of being alive.” (O’Brian p 19)

I read that to the fatigue man. He bought the book and stopped in later just to say hello. I think it may have helped him to know that he wasn’t alone in all that he carried back with him from the war. *Pause* I know what you’re thinking? Here is another intellectual who thinks books cure all the problems in the world. I know they don’t. Not all the problems. But they couldn’t hurt. Just to show you that I see both sides of the question I’ll tell you one more little story before I take my lunch break. There was a novel “*Bastard Out of Carolina*” written by Dorothy Allison It was about a girl who was abused, terribly, graphically abused. The girl’s mother had a boyfriend that took out his lust and his anger on the little girl. It was horrible. The end of the story, in my opinion, had no hope. The mother runs off with the boyfriend and leaves her battered daughter behind. It was obviously autobiographical and the author had not dealt with her anger. If a customer asked me for recommendations I couldn’t recommend that book. Heavens! Can you imagine! So yes when you buy books in a bookshop AND you ask for

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recommendation you get the opinion and maybe a little of the attitude of the bookseller. If that is a problem for you maybe you would be better going on the computer and buying it. Then you would not have to talk to a human being. I just don't understand why someone who wants to read about people and their lives doesn't want to interact with a real person. Maybe it is something else. I know, I'm set in my ways. I'm so old I remember soda fountains where you could order a milk shake and twirl around on the stool. I can remember drive-in movies where people would have their children in their PJs, eating popcorn in the back seat, while Godzilla was tearing across the screen. Everyone is nostalgic for the things that were, for a way of life that doesn't exist any more. I never thought that people would talk about bookshops in that way "I remember a bookshop that had everything, mysteries, biographies, novels, and science fiction, you name it and they had it. They had a big stuffed chair where you could test read the book before you bought it and the best part was the woman who ran it knew every book in the store. She knew just what book I should read. It was a wonderful place. What ever happened to it?" What happened to it is people stopped coming in. Online shopping and warehouse bookselling took the place of the small unique bookstore. A big box store can't give the personal touch. Sometimes that personal connection is priceless.

I better get ready. The local high school kids will be in looking for graphic novels. Graphic novels! Now don't get me started on those. Have you seen the newest genre of "literature"? The local teenagers will tell you that I refused to carry them for years. I thought they were like the illustrated classics that were around when I was young. Can you imagine telling the story of Heathcliff and Catherine with comic book characters, in 10 pages? But I have to admit that the new graphic novels are different. *Persipolis* by

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Marjane Satrapi was a memoir about a girl growing up in Iran when the religious fanatics took power. I question how many 12 or 14 year olds would know about that subject if it weren't for this graphic novel. I suppose that is another sign of how old I am that I can't relate to them. There are many things in today's world that I cannot or choose not to relate to but then again I suppose that many times I would be wrong. There was this girl, Zelda, maybe 16 years old, thin little thing. She polished black hair, heavy black makeup around the eyes and more parts of her face were pierced that I wanted to count. You've probably seen these kids around. She would come in about once a week, after school, and never speak to me. She would grab a graphic novel and sit in the overstuffed chair and read. I would remind her that the books were to be bought first and then read, but she would ignore me. It was a challenge to see how long it would be before she spoke. One day she asked if we had a copy of *Catcher in the Rye* by JD Salinger. She was supposed to read it for school and she had lost her copy. As I got her a copy I asked her if she had read J. D. Salinger before. She said she hadn't so I pulled out my well worn copy of *Franny and Zooey*, my favorite of Salinger's works. I told her that the reason I liked *Franny and Zooey* was that Franny, who was very smart in school, never felt like she fit in. Franny told her big brother Seymour that she hated her school uniform. She thought that it was another way to force everyone to conform. Franny was angry that her individuality was taken from her. With that Zelda made a face. Address Zelda "Zelda, But then Franny figured IF she could keep her independence, her sense of self, EVEN wearing a school uniform, then she would have finally won." Zelda made her face again (*make a face*) and then asked for a copy of that book. She came back in a week and told me she thought it was OK, and if I had anything else like that. She seemed to "tolerate"

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me after that. I didn't see her for the awhile when I asked a classmate of hers if Zelda was in class. The local principle of the high school had expelled Zelda for one thing or another. I guess she was labeled incorrigible. A year later I read in the local paper that she had killed herself. (*Pause, tearfully*) I had hoped that Franny would have helped.

There were so many readers over the years. So many friends. There was a woman, a girl really, who I meet my first year in the business. Mary Barton. She was a few years older than I was but we enjoyed the same authors. Then she became Mrs. Mary Castile. Soon she had children and her list of favorite books included *Winnie the Pooh* and *Peter Pan*. She had a daughter, Cynthia, and then Paul her son. Then the whole family came in and would buy the Hardy Boys and Walt Morey's adventure books. And before I knew it Cynthia got married and soon she was buying *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein and stacks of Dr. Suess for her children. The last few years I have had to order books on tape for Mary. She is loosing her eyesight. It's alright though. Her grandchildren are reading to her.

Yes, this is my last day and the shop's last day. The old girl and I are going out together. She has been good to me over the years and I think I have taken good care of her. Just think of all the time I'll have to read the books that I have been straightening for fifty years. Maybe I'll join a book group. Last week the city librarian said they were always looking for good volunteers. I would work in the downtown Multnomah County Library. It is every book lovers dream. I have heard that they put in a coffee shop in the lobby. Now I've never approved of mixing food and coffee with books but I know it is all the rage. I think it is a disaster waiting to happen. But I've been wrong before. I guess I could be open to new ideas. Maybe. I know that it is time for a change. Sometimes

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change is hard for someone my age. Elizabeth Strout describes in *Olive Kitteridge* her Pulitzer Prize winning novel about a woman facing the most difficult change, the last change. Olive is reviewing her life with joy and regret. Let's see if I can find the quote.

"What young people didn't know, she thought, lying down beside this man, his hand on her shoulder, her arm; oh, what young people did not know. They did not know that lumpy, aged, and wrinkled bodies were as needy as their own young, firm ones, that love was not to be tossed away carelessly, as if it were a tart on a platter with others that got passed around again. No, if love was available, one chose it or didn't choose it. And if her platter had been full with the goodness of Henry and she had found it burdensome, had flicked it off crumbs at a time, it was because she had not known what one should know: that day after day was unconsciously squandered." (Strout p270) So don't squander your days! I'll try not to.

You know, even the *Oregonian* contacted me. They thought I might have the time to write some book reviews for the paper. I'll probably be too busy. Can you imagine me telling people what they should read? Well I guess it's time to go. I'll just box up these books, turn out the light, and lock up. Thanks for stopping by. Remember to order your books at one of the other small local bookshops. I wish for you, what I have had, a life surrounded by good books.

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## **The Bookshop**

### **The books mentioned in The Bookshop**

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