

*Keene Short*

**In the Back Among the Artifacts**

**T**here was a bookstore in my hometown of Flagstaff, Arizona, called Starrlight Books (spelled with two Rs), a hole-in-the-wall on Leroux Street just north of the tracks. Like many used bookstores with small sections, open at the irregular hours the owners feel like being open, Starrlight Books has accumulated a variety of obscure gems. The front of the store is a narrow maze of shelves with sections for philosophy, Arizona history, conservationism, art history, astrology, cults, hippies, the Grateful Dead, and everything else.

In college, I spent my summers crossing the tracks from campus to downtown Flagstaff and back again. I took summer classes to manage two degrees in four years, and sometimes volunteered for the Arizona Dems (six people renting office space across from a closed Italian restaurant). While downtown, usually around dusk in May and June when the town felt soft and vibrant, when the town was not as crowded and the air was warm and breezy and smelled like cherry blossoms and tobacco, I used to wander into Starrlight before it closed for the evening as a way to unwind. During those twilight seasons I crawled between shelves looking at guides for picking wild mushrooms or all the unfamous books by famous authors before they became famous, crabwalking my way to another section, my face inches from the cracked spines no matter where I went.

But in the back of the bookstore is a short hallway, a later renovation with obvious architectural seams and a gate to the alleyway outside. The dimly lit hallway leads into a wide-open room with space enough to pace.

The backroom is where the expensive or otherwise rare books are. The really good stuff. The four walls are lined with vintage science fiction paperbacks, pulp detective serials, rare editions of classic novels or biographies, all on display like prizes. Many of these obscure titles are worth more as historical artifacts than for the engaging characters or compelling plots they often don't have.

Every time I checked the back room, I noticed some books always remained there. Other vintage paperbacks were sold and new vintage paperbacks took their places. When I went to the backroom, I was mesmerized by all those old books, the smell of their 1960s-tan paper under fading black paragraph after paragraph of Courier typefaces, exuding yellow page dust like pollen when I flipped through them to land on a random description of a gunshot or fragment of dialogue.

There were many paperbacks I wanted to buy, sometimes not even to read but for their aesthetic appeal: a first edition of *The Grapes of Wrath* or *The Bell Jar*, or a vintage British copy of *Childhood's End*. I restrained myself for a long time because I had cheaper, newer copies of these books already. Most of the books in the backroom were probably overpriced, their value stemming from prestige more than actual rarity. Most still had their original prices printed on the covers. Two dollars, one dollar, fifty cents, now selling at fifteen, twenty, or thirty dollars.

In addition to these expensive artifacts, there were also quite a few books that were always on sale, books that nobody wanted, the collection's

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throwaways now out of print, and with good reason. These sold for under five dollars, or four, or three or one, because the owner simply wanted to be rid of them. They somehow added to the allure of the expensive books, as if to show that a first edition of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* seems all the more priceless when placed next to a first and only edition of Calgary Smith's *Dr. Karloff* and the *Brainbread Brunch*, as if the expensive book is there by some lucky accident and you should nab it before someone else does.

Years later, I gave in and bought a backroom-of-Starrlight vintage paperback, not a classic novel but one of the throwaways: the 1961 reprint (the Popular Library Edition) of Richard M. Nixon's pre-election 1960 manifesto *The Challenges We Face*. The front cover features Nixon holding up a fist and scowling into the distance beneath a proclamation reading "Here is the first and only book from Mr. Nixon himself—an authorized record in his own words of where he stands on the burning issues of the day." It sold at Starrlight for two dollars, four times the original 50 cents it sold for in 1961.

When I bought it, I was taking a summer class on twentieth century Russia, almost all of which focused on the Cold War, taught by a politically ambiguous professor from Kazakhstan with a sense of humor and a large collection of Lenin pins that he distributed to the class for free because they were economically worthless. It was the summer I started accumulating propaganda.

*The Challenges We Face* became the first in a collection of Cold War-era anti-communist paperbacks. I had no intention of starting a collection when I stumbled upon Mr. Nixon's first book about the flaming issues of his day, but the more books like Mr. Nixon's I stumbled upon, the more I realized that I could cultivate a collection, a functional personal archive. By then, I had started submitting short stories to journals for publication, and received my first encouraging rejection the morning before going to class to listen to a three-hour lecture about why Khrushchev was the life of the communist party until the Hungarians decided to leave early. I was already starting to look at graduate programs in English and history, curious about what I would do with my future. Curious if I would spend my life in archives or lit mags.

I spent two dollars on Mr. Nixon's book for the same reason I spent two dollars to submit one of my first good short stories to a popular journal. I was gambling with my skills to see where I would end up, as if a rejection in one area would point me in the right direction.

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Bookstores like Starrlight are useful for historians because they accumulate recent artifacts that are rare, cheap, and usually out of print. One of my history professors went to a coastal town in Egypt to conduct his research at local book fairs and flea markets, though he eventually found a crucial nineteenth century document in the trunk of someone's car. Bookstores are always worth a wander for the weird possibilities, for the chance encounters. When I travel, I always look for small bookstores, and I always scavenge the history and political science sections for familiar themes.

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While at another, more popular used bookstore in Flagstaff, Bookman's Entertain Exchange, I found a 1961 reprint J. Edgar Hoover's 1958 *Masters of Deceit*. This book does not feature Hoover scowling or making any of the other facial expressions the FBI were known for, but it does feature a red splatter mark next to the heading "What the communist bosses are doing now to bring America to its knees." This, too, sold for 50 cents in 1961, but Bookman's sold it for a dollar.

I found my personal favorite, C. Wright Mills' 1960 *The Causes of World War Three*, at A Novel Idea in Lincoln, Nebraska, for four dollars. My next collector's item, A. J. Liebling's 1964 commentary on bias in journalism, *The Press*, which the New York Times Book Review supposedly claimed "will make a newspaperman wince" according to the pull quotes on the back of the book, sold for \$3.50 at a used bookstore in Moscow, Idaho, called Read It Again. I returned to the same bookstore months later and found, side-by-side, Gary Allen's 1971 *None Dare Call It Conspiracy* and Edward Crankshaw's 1959 *Khrushchev's Russia*. I was greedy that day, spending a total of five dollars for the two books.

Is it really greed, though? It's a compulsion among historians to preserve the past, even parts of that past we can reasonably understand are not worth preserving. The compulsion is not to preserve the value, but the complexity. I want a more nuanced array of access points into the past, but shelving history is more than ownership. It suggests responsibility. The indulgence for me comes in the thought, the possibility, that for a while I might have become a historian.

The summer after I graduated college and was about to move onto a graduate degree in English, I missed the practice, the ritual, of poring over history books in seclusion like a monk, looking for patterns and the breaks in those patterns. The same summer, while visiting my uncle and aunt in Appleton, Wisconsin (the hometown of Joseph McCarthy), I visited Shenandoah Books where I found two fascinating texts: the 1967 *Red Spies in the UN* by Pierre J. Huss and George Carpozi, Jr., and the 1949 *The Road Ahead: America's Creeping Revolution*, by John Flynn. The second text features a cast of Steinbeckian characters staring in bewilderment at a sign reading "To Socialism," while *Red Spies in the UN* features an exaggerated UN building with a gaping red eyeball at the top. I purchased both books impulsively, even desperately. It was a bonus that the cover art was hilarious to me. There is, I think, an obscene but widespread pleasure in the earnest mediocrity of others.

Cold War propaganda isn't quite nostalgic for me. Instead, there's something captivating about its familiar strangeness just shy of *déjà vu*. There's something in me that thinks, how quaint. I think, how surreal, how wonderful, that protestors beat VP Nixon's car with bats and rocks in Caracas on his Latin American tour in 1958, and that he tries to sympathize with the protestors in his book. In the footage, you can see protestors bash sticks against the thin shell of his motorcade, their blows landing a foot from Nixon's skull and cracking the windows. How surreal, how fantastic.

Because it's happening to Nixon, that is. Because he's a punchline, even to my mother's generation who voted him into office in the first place. We let our cultural punchlines take hit after hit from us, sometimes even undeservedly. There is a small subculture among film lovers that en-

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joys watching mediocre movies, to the extent that Tommy Wiseau, director of *The Room*, has become a cult icon. As far as I know, Richard Nixon is most comparable to Wiseau as a cultural punching bag. The problem is that Nixon was the president, and Wiseau is just a bad director.

There's no place for irony in history, and with good reason. One cannot ironically love Nixon for his failings in the same way we ironically pity-love artists who produce comically bad art, taking pleasure in their lack of awareness. And yet I do. Maybe it's a misplaced sense of mercy, or fear. Fear that anything I write will become a throwaway and mercy for those who authored their own throwaways, seeing myself in them. It's a sentiment I have trouble shaking off. Maybe that's why I wasn't accepted into any of the history programs to which I applied, but I have no way of knowing, so without knowing, I project my anxieties into the past with an image of talented, tenured historians chucking my application materials into a pile of throwaways, making faces at my errors, making jokes for years after.

Maybe I have a tendency to treat Cold War scare books the same way I treat paperback science fiction novels. The cover of *The Causes of World War Three*, the words beginning in black but descending into red fiery shades toward the bottom of the cover, might as well be a sci-fi novel from the same year. C. Wright Mills and William Gibson were both talented worriers in their own craft, projecting their anxieties into bleak futures with the worst possibilities. Maybe that's why I sympathize so much with both of them, equally.

What do I owe those whose fear was genuine when I laugh at them to hide my own anxieties? It's easy to find escapism in a past I was not a part of. But maybe there's truth in false alarms and panic, in someone else's view of a diminishing world as an oblique access point into my own sense of worldlessness. I'm stuck, at least, swirling in uncanny discomfort in the backroom of a bookstore trying not to take myself so seriously, struggling to be nonchalant and stoic.

So maybe what I enjoyed was just the prolonged twilight in summer when I felt like my future had so many more possibilities, and the acorn-colored bookshelves and floors, feeling at ease in the backroom among the artifacts. Everything was soft and muffled, or at least faded into tolerable doses, in the backroom. Everything felt locked in suspension, including my future fear and past mercy. It was a filter, not just the content of the books where my projections landed like rovers, but everything: the thin air, the blotted noise, the dissonant colors of old cover art that used to be brighter and louder but faded into bright obscurity with time.