

## Wilderness House Literary Review 18/2

*Grant Rowbottom*

### **The Unicorn Bookshop: A Legacy of Literature**

I love books. With this statement, I am unsure how many people nowadays can relate to that. Perhaps if I said "I love to *read* books," then I would get more of a "Hurrah!" from the spread of bookworms, but that is not what I said. What I said is "I love books," and more specifically, I must say "I love old books." Now, with that, I might be able to differentiate myself from others, as I can think of no other seventeen-year olds who have a library, a *real* and physical library, with the average age of a book being over one-hundred years old.

Contrastingly, I loathe modern books, especially digital ones. Some of the people I have met read multiple books every week, whether a selection they've gotten from Barnes & Noble, or ones they find online. I find this completely and utterly useless. Over the years of my collecting, I have slowly developed a philosophy that old books are better, and not because they smell or look nice, but because the information, overall, is better. Medically, this is of course not true, and sometimes elements of literature, grammar, or science can be questionable, but overall because of the way the authors were educated, and the periods in which they were written are better than today. Not all old books are good, of course,-old trash is still trash-but many of what are considered classics and great books are old, and still contain good information, and this is what I find a lack of appreciation everywhere I go. There are a few people, though, who share this love of old books with me. The sole exemption I find of this lack-of-appreciation for classics and old books is a special place that I go to find such old books, and is owned by a man named James "Jim" Dawson.



The journey from my house in Salisbury to the Unicorn Bookshop in Trappe is quite long. It's about an hour and a half all together, forty-five minutes to and from. The scenery is almost stereotypically Eastern Shore-budding trees of all different colors line the road, constantly eyeing the long and brown fields that farmers are preparing to put crops in, and the isolated strips of houses or antique shops. The cool breezes are unpolluted by any industry aside from the occasional Perdue chicken plant and the feeling of relief as you realize that the city is long gone. In other words, the ride there is the greatest example of a rural wasteland.

Some people don't appreciate the countryside as much as others, and I pity them for that. I once brought a friend along to the bookshop who desired to get out into the countryside and away from the cruel blue light of a phone screen, but alas, he didn't appreciate it as much as I thought he would. He wasn't a book guy either, so the whole adventure(I could imagine) turned out to be an assertion of values, rather than an enlightening experience. Oh, well, you can't win them all, I suppose. The same thing would've happened if I had taken him to see one of the Smithsonian museums, or a Van Gogh painting, or the pyramids. Some people just aren't chalked up to appreciate anything beyond their little worlds, or branch out into somebody else's at least. I know I am, though, and the world that I am always eager to enter can certainly be enlightening... or at least very interesting.



The Unicorn Bookshop was started in June of 1975 by Jim Dawson and Ken Callahan. "We had read an article in a periodical called *Lifestyle*-you probably don't know what that is-about starting secondhand bookshops, and we thought it was really cool so we decided to start one," Jim had said to me. They proceeded to rent a second story floor above a sport-sy type store that sold clothing and outdoor wear called "Cherry's" on 18 West Dover Street in Easton, but the best part of the location was that they were able to put their sign in such a way so that someone checking out at the Talbot County Library could see it right from the window. "We thought that maybe someone would see it and want to stop in," he added(Dawson).

After a few years, in 1983, Jim and Ken split ways, as Ken wanted to move up to New England. He now owns a mail order catalog business that sells old and rare hunting and fishing books, but still remains a close friend of Jim. I suppose he never wanted to give up that dream of selling books. Jim, however, moved locations to a mostly one-story building that used to be a bank on Route 50, the only exception being a small second floor that he now uses as his map room. It is in this location that he still remains, and the one that I know so well(Dawson).

The Unicorn Bookshop, when I first went in, felt like an entirely different dimension. Books are everywhere there. You cannot go, literally, one foot without running into a pile of books on the floor, or a bookshelf. The atmosphere is almost surreal, as the sheer quantity of old books-most books hardly younger than fifty years ago at least-is overwhelming. A cacophony of colors and smells and selections and genres invade your senses when you walk in, and there is a sudden hush of the highway as the books act as soundproofing...making the establishment into a literary catacomb. The first sound that is heard when you walk in are clocks-about a dozen antique clocks-that keep time with a steady tempo. For a moment you feel like you are in an episode of the *Twilight Zone*, but you know that this place is much more interesting than that.

A lot of interesting people, also, come into the Unicorn Bookshop. "Everyone who comes in here is a little eccentric-I'm a little eccentric myself of course" Jim was telling me. "Who's the most interesting person that you have met here?" I asked him, but he couldn't answer me. "I never thought about that. I'll have to think about that one"(Dawson). I don't blame him because as I was there examples of some interesting people entered the shop.

A small family came in where the mother was Slavic and had a thick accent(Ukrainian maybe?) and the father had a certain American accent. The son had a perfect bowl cut for hair, was nearly as tall as me(I'm six-foot three inches), and looked like he was twelve to fourteen. A much shorter man with a red USA cap, and a southern drawl, tried selling a Norman Rockwell book he got from a crawl space. He got forty bucks for it. Another seller, one with very thick glasses, came in carrying boxes upon boxes of books and ended up getting twenty-five bucks for some paper backs. He handed me a book with the title of "A Guide To Being Immature" or something like that, which had a picture of the Mona Lisa on the front with a mustache drawn in marker. "I think he might like this" he

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was telling Jim, but I gave it back to him. He should have caught me when I was still reading Ripley's "Believe It Or Not" books about half a decade ago, as that was what the book reminded me of.

During this time I was getting towards the end of my interview with Jim, and he had out on the table an Italian book from 1575, and the seller had a keen interest in it. "It's not for sale," Jim said to him. Jim had gotten it out exclusively for me, as I had asked "How old is your oldest book?" (Dawson). I ended up figuring out that his total book collection spans six centuries, the one I just mentioned was printed sixty-eight years before Isacc Newton was born (Westfall). I myself have gotten a book there that was printed in 1765 just for twenty bucks. The sign out front doesn't lie when it says:

### **Old Books Used & Rare**

An interesting element I found out about the shop is that it essentially had a predecessor. Jim even wrote an article about it called "Raymond's Place," in which he described an old antique shop that was run by the three Mills brothers, Raymond, Henry, and Albert in Cambridge, MD. When I brought this up to Jim he made the point, as he did in his article, to mention the clever business technique that the Mills brothers used. "They would essentially get paid twice for what they had. They ran this business cleaning out attics and taking the stuff back to their shop, getting paid for that, and then they would sell it at the shop, getting paid for that too." He also mentioned that they had almost no expenses, having only a payphone (no phone bill), a few small light bulbs (almost no electric bill), an outhouse with the classic crescent moon hole (no plumbing bill), and finally they bought the land at a really cheap price and didn't pay any tax for it. I don't think they had water either, essentially allowing the brothers to make an almost total profit off of their business (Dawson).

The brother who checked everyone out, and did most of the talking, was Raymond. I was very interested in this sign-in book he had, where anyone who wanted to sign in could, after I read Jim's article. In the article he explained how it was lost and presumed stolen, leaving the reader on a cliffhanger (Dawson). When I was asking about the brothers, however, he said that it was eventually found and he bought it at an auction when all the brothers were dead and everything in the place was being sold off. What was so special about this book, and what Raymond was so proud of, was that he apparently had the book signed by many celebrities. Jim got out the book for me and I flipped through a few pages, seeing signatures like "Ringo Starr Liverpool, Eng." and "Donna Reed Hollywood, Cali." which was very funny, because they looked like they were written in the same handwriting. "Someone was just trying to pull a prank on him," Jim said (Dawson). Nobody ever had the heart to tell him. That was comical and disappointing to me at the same time, as the book would be worth a lot of money if the signatures were real... and also to see Ringo Starr's signature.

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The Mill's collection of books, though, couldn't match the stock at the Unicorn Bookshop. In newspaper clippings of an article by Hal Jopp in the Talbot County Historical Society Archive, given to me by Historical Society Member Zoë Phillips, it is written "-one of the main problems facing Raymond and Henry Mills is overpopulation - of books...A conservative estimate puts the total number of books somewhere between 10,000 and 12,000 volumes." This is lightweight compared to the Unicorn's 30,000(Dawson). If the Mills had a book overpopulation, then Jim has a book plague.

When I was at the shop I also asked the question "Did Mill's Antiques influence you in making this bookshop?" I asked this because I intended to make some kind of a direct connection between the two shops, other than their mutual interaction. He gave me a very interesting answer. "Consciously, no, but unconsciously... definitely"(Dawson). It certainly wasn't the answer I was expecting. I was expecting him to say "Definitely, this place is a kind of tribute to the Mills brothers." But to bring in the idea of unconscious influence? Disconcerting to me. He was also telling me how when he first got his driver's license, Mill's Antiques was the first place he would go, which was around my age(Dawson). The Unicorn Bookshop was the first place I went to when I first got *my* driver's license. With all of these similarities, perhaps I, too, am destined to start a bookshop by the mythical influence of the unconscious mind. I wouldn't be *opposed*, but perhaps when I am old and gray I'll sell off my library, and the destiny will be fulfilled.



I wish I was alive at the time to be able to experience what it was like going into Mill's Antiques, and other establishments like it, but perhaps the Unicorn Bookshop is the last ambassador of that time. "There used to be secondhand bookshops everywhere when I was younger," he said to me. I replied with "Where did they all go? Where did all the books go?" He said to the first question that they all closed down- sold out or the owner died. As for the second question, he couldn't answer me. He didn't know. Private collectors maybe, libraries, dumpsters. I hope at least not fires. "So you're the 'last of the Old Guard,' so to say, in this kind of business?" I asked. He thought for a moment and said "Well, yeah, I suppose I am in a way"(Dawson).

The decline of the secondhand bookstore is not a new observation. "-even in the mid-90s, the writing was already on the wall concerning secondhand bookshops. Rising real-estate prices and competition on the Internet combined to drive the brick-and-mortar booksellers out of business" Thomas Benton writes in his article "Saving Secondhand Bookshops." The rise of the information age has changed everything, for everyone, especially for many businesses who wish to compete with the instantaneous results of the online web. Despite this, though, Jim still relies on his physical customers for business. "I've tried eBay before, and in the early 2000s it was okay. You would be able to sell a book that nobody would look at in the store for months just weeks or days after you put it up for sale online." However, after they changed their regulations and put more burden on the seller, Jim stopped selling on eBay(Dawson).

Despite the onset of many digital alternatives, there is hope for the

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physical book. “-recent data suggests that younger generations, Gen Z in particular, are actually reading quite a bit more than older generations and, in fact, they prefer physical books over the wide variety of e-readers available to them,” David Eide writes in his article “Physical books vs. digital books.” Hearing that my generation prefers the physical over the digital makes me hopeful that perhaps the secondhand bookshops, or the printing industry at least, won’t go totally extinct one day.

After all of my adventures in the Unicorn Bookshop, and around the area, it encourages me to take up arms about it to make sure they don’t go extinct. It is hard for me to imagine a world that is entirely digital and most of the experiences we would have are digital, as my personal experience shows we are heading towards. Teens and children who are on their phones all day grow up to become adults with the same habits. It is even harder for me to imagine not seeing those rural wastelands and interesting people and collecting all of the old books that I love so much. The experiences I have had at the Bookshop helped to build my character, and I know that I will remember them for the rest of my life. If what it takes to keep that experience going from generation to generation, for it to not end after the Unicorn Bookshop is gone, is starting a secondhand bookshop... then I will start a bookshop, and I hope others do so as well, for the sake of keeping the legacy of literature, the legacy of the Unicorn Bookshop, alive.

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