

The Good Word: A Recurring Reflection

by Scott Foley

It can happen when any passion becomes a vocation; over the years something has changed in my appreciation of books. Publishers are more generous than ever with free offerings, so I am purchasing fewer and fewer titles for personal use. With books overflowing from my dresser onto my bedside table and in stacks in my office, I still love to read, but sometimes I wonder if I take the privilege for granted these days. Have I lost my appreciation of the intrinsic value of a book, beyond its literal cover price?

I took a trip last week which flew me to a humid 80 degree Miami and on to a snowy Virginia. It was in Virginia, at my parents' house, where I had a little revelation regarding my relationship with books. I had only visited my folks at their Virginia house once, years ago, so my stay began with a tour from fireplace-warmed living room to dimly lit basement. Everywhere, books were neatly displayed on their shelves. Later that first evening, I revisited several rooms. My father uses his books as scrapbooks, with newspaper clippings fluttering from their pages like black and white prayer flags. Opening a few, I found their margins crowded with half-thoughts and connections, my father's recorded revelations.

Later, I trailed my father into the local mall-bound Waldenbooks, the only general bookstore within an hour's drive. Even there, my father amassed an impressive pile of new finds. I imagined the damage he could do at one of my favorite independent stores in other parts of the country.

Throughout my visit, we naturally talked of books we had enjoyed. One evening, my father had sent my mother to bed early then hurried downstairs with another stack of books. He talked enthusiastically of his discoveries, unable to disguise a beatific smile. Turning towards bed, my father told me, "I'm so lucky to have been able to read all these wonderful books."

Arriving home at last, I turned to my bedside table and began organizing what books were there, blowing the dust from each cover, sorting them. It was a start. Even if occupational fortunes were to steer me away from the world of books one day, I don't know that I could ever truly rejoin my father in his humble, innocent appreciation of these treasures. This man made of books.

Scott Foley is the buyer at Grass Roots Books & Music in Corvallis, Oregon, a PNBA board member and a member of ABA's bookseller advisory committee.