

A Festive Fifty...Of Sorts

by Chris Hagen, Powell's Books, Portland, OR

Like Scrooge I'm visited by "ghosts" at the Holiday season. Among them this year is the ghost of John Peel. For those who don't know Peel, he was one of radio's most influential DJs, working at BBC Radio 1 from 1967 until his death in 2004. He had an open, confessional on-air style, an eclectic, often avant-garde taste in music, and helped to introduce reggae, punk and hip hop to the British public. Peel is credited by bands from David Bowie to The White Stripes with giving their careers a major boost.

Long ago I set a path--or so I thought--to follow Peel, a role model, with a career in radio. Instead I wound up, quite happily, a book-seller. I decided at this year's end to take John as a role model once more. Every November Peel polled listeners for their favorite songs that year. The result was "*The Festive Fifty*," year-end look back at the most popular tracks. To close out 2006 I asked a number of coworkers at Powell's, a similar question: What was the most interesting used book you encountered over the past year and why? Some were out-of-print others in-print. Alas, there's too little space to include our own festive fifty, but here are a few:

Kitchen Confidential was mentioned by a resident thespian with: "It showed me there are other dysfunctional but close-knit communities that are similar to theater. A comforting thought." Also food-related Tucker Shaw's **Everything I Ate**, a book I find amusing too, evoked the comment: "I'd almost use it as a travel guide since he lists restaurant names with the photos.

He ate some really tasty looking Asian food in NYC."

A coworker with a love for battered paperbacks and political theory who called himself the Lord of the Island of Misfit Books, cited Russell Kirk's **The Conservative Mind From Burke to Eliot**, saying: "It's a fabulous book, Smyth-sewn binding, totally thrashed. I got it for a buck and a quarter. It currently retails in paper at around twenty smackers." Mentioned too was a paperback copy of works of Mikhail Bakunin that "...has highlighting... (and) was well-produced, although now it sort of lies open wherever you lay it down."

Books from used book buyers included **Acts and Laws of His Majesty's English Colony of Connecticut in New-England in America** printed in New London in 1750, and **De Danorum Rebus Gestis Secul III & IV; Poema Danicum Dialecto Anglosaxonica; Ex Bibliotheca Cottoniana Britannici**. The latter, from 1815, is the first printed edition of Beowulf. About "Acts and Laws" the buyer added, while wondering about its provenance: "This book gives teeth to our history. It's tangible and real and in my hands." When "Acts" was bought the buyers on the shift immediately looked up how colonists were punished for adultery. As for "De Danorum," we were surprised that Beowulf wasn't printed earlier.

Others were somewhat practical books that carried an amusing outward appearance.

These included **Home Grown Honkers**, an agriculture department book on raising waterfowl and **The Hangover** by Benjamin Karpman MD, an otherwise serious treatment of alcoholism that had to overcome both its title and its bad cover art. **Skunk Culture for Profit** published in 1915 by the Skunk Development Bureau bears a cover photo of a very unhappy looking girl of about three with a skunk in her lap. Then there was **Financial Astrology**, the **Scatological Rites of All Nations** and two issues of **Playboy** -- in Braille.

My contribution is **There's Love All Day, Poems by California's Kenneth Patchen**. This little gem from 1970, bearing psychedelic illustrations by Tom di Grazia, is an inexpensive Hallmark gift book. Having admired Patchen for years, I never saw him as drawing a Hallmark demographic. Amazing and amusing it made a great holiday gift for a Patchen collecting friend.

That's the thing about working with used books. It's a little like getting a present every day. You never know what gifts will appear -- amazing, amusing, possibly meaningful -- from the seller's box, the sorter's cart or on the shelf, waiting to be opened.

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