

20SHORT.DOC 7-20-00

At the friends of the library sale last year in San Angelo, patrons lined up in front of the high school annex half an hour before opening. The people were not the bookish looking group portrayed in plays and movies. Typical of the urban influence in San Angelo, lots of men wore baseball caps and the women chose workout clothes. (Pink and lime aerobic exercise suits, not housework clothes. Most likely had an apron been unfurled, it would have broken up the crowd into a stampede that'd make an Italian soccer mob seem as orderly as the line at Miss Daisy's dance school.)

A youngster wearing a baseball cap backwards stood in front of me. At first, I was talking to the back of a head, thinking he had the bill pulled over a bearded face. We came in contact when he pointed out I was standing on his long shoelaces, trailing from untied white shoes. He was going to buy books for his mother, he said. Her preference being mystery writers, ones a bit hard to find. Plus, as he said, the dollar price on hardbacks and 50 cents on paperbacks made the sale a good time to stock up on a year's supply.

His reaction to my book list was the first indication of the evening how far I was locked in time. His nods of affirmation were shallow indeed, bare dips of the chin to the likes of John Steinbeck or E.B. White. I should have tried harder to fake a response to his mother's choices, but I wasn't sure whether reading was so much out of style that he was using his mother as a front to buy books for himself.

Once the doors opened, we rushed in to tables lined with books that would never be so neat again. At a buck a throw, one lap around the fiction table cost \$6. Paperbacks were in pasteboard boxes on the floor, lined against the wall. Probably by accident, the boxes were close enough together for bifocals to scan one and half boxes at a time. Score me about four books or \$2 for every 10 linear feet of paperbacks. If I had a copy at the ranch, I bought an extra for the office, or for my grandson.

On the third round, I paused and looked up. Three ladies and myself controlled the fiction table. Across the whole room, there were only two familiar faces. Old writers like Elmer Kelton and Ross McSwain weren't over scooping up bargains of the Western genre as they always had before. The kid waved from the mystery table. He was doing a thorough job reviewing his mother's books beforehand.

Pressure was off for the next session. My first selections were mainly new hardback editions the library had been sent as samples and chosen not to place in their stacks. Better not ask why your choice of a brand new 20 some-odd dollar book ends up unopened in a dollar sale. Best defense is to remember that F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Great Gatsby" didn't sell at all until after his death — his penniless death, I must add.

So on the next session I paged through library books marked DISCARD in blotched rude letters in the front leaf. Such a travesty to sentence these fine works to oblivion

because of broken spines and stained covers. Just because the book was coming apart, the works didn't deserve to be junked. Why not use the money from this sale for tape and glue, was what I thought. Furthermore, we don't drum librarians out of the stacks because they are becoming frayed and faded.

Some of the authors of those tattered books had spoken at writers' conferences and workshops I'd attended. All slants-wise in a row stood a copy of John Casey's sea story, "Spartina," in the same dismal shape as a book having ridden out a stay in a sea bag. John Casey suffers the handicap of stuttering, yet he writes as smoothly as a maple syrup tap fills a bucket. "Gol darn," I stormed to no one, "John, I'll spend a buck to keep your hard work from ending up in a trash dump."

The windup left one woman competing for the whole table. The worst part was leaving bargains behind. At home that night, I leafed through my treasures. The discards hadn't been checked out since 1947. No wonder the lad hunting mystery books looked so bewildered at my choices of writers ...