



I don't remember the first time I went to a bookstore. I do remember the first time I bought a book. I was in second grade and just got all As on my report card. My mom said, as a reward, I could pick out a book and she would buy it for me. This was a BIG TREAT. My mom, a product of parents who remembered the Great Depression, was very frugal.

A book of my own! That I didn't have to return to the library! I skipped off to the children's section and picked out *Ramona the Brave*, a very wonderful book that I had read before and loved. What a treasure, to have a book that I could read anytime I wanted!

Ever since then, I have been a creature of bookstores. I can spend hours in bookstores. I open those glass doors, smell the familiar scent of newly printed books, and feel a camaraderie with all the others in the store. There's a route that I take, visiting all my current favorite authors in the hope that they've written a new book. Then I look at all the authors I used to love. It's like seeing old friends. I check out the new books, bestsellers, magazines, kids' books, and biographies.

Whenever I see a bookstore, I must go in. It is unnatural and painful for me to pass one without entering. I see a bookstore, therefore I enter. My family is used to this, and they know that if I don't get to visit a bookstore I see, I become very difficult.

Once, when driving slowly through a tiny shabby town in southern Arizona, my mom got nervous because the narrow streets were full of migrant farm workers darting looks at our new car. A crazy-eyed old man started following the car, walking unsteadily and yelling in Spanish at us. We couldn't speed up because the streets were full. My dad, a permanent resident of the sunny side of life, was oblivious to any possible

hazard as he drove along.

I saw a sign that said BOOKS. "Bookstore!" I alerted them. Then I thought I maybe should not have said that.

"This is a dangerous town," my mom said tensely. "Don't stop." Her hands were clenched.

But my dad needed to know who'd won the Republican presidential nomination. He couldn't find it on the radio. "We'll just be a second," Dad said reassuringly.

Dad and I got out of the car, the engine running, all the doors locked and my mom's hand on the unlocking switch in case we needed to get back in quickly. The bookstore consisted of two racks of used romance paperbacks and then a hand-lettered sign on a door which said MUST BE 18 OR OLDER TO VUWE REST OF MERCHENDISSE.

"So, how are you doing?" jovial Dad asked the man behind the counter, who looked at him blankly and did not answer. "We're passing through town. Just spent a week in San Diego!"

The man was silent.

"I was wondering who won the Republican presidential nomination. Have you heard?"

"No," the man said.

"Is that so? I can't find it on the radio myself. Got a newspaper handy?"

"No."

"Know where we can find out?"

"No."

"Well, thanks anyway," Dad said heartily. "It's probably Dole. I just wanted to check."

"Dad, let's go," I said.

I suppose it wasn't a very politically active town, nor a particularly literary one. Not many Margaret Atwood fans.



Everywhere I go, I find a bookstore. In England, I spent my time in W.H. Smith bookstores. English books are interesting to look at. They're very different from American books, with different punctuation, different spellings, and different subject matter. One popular series for teenagers is all about these kids at a boarding school—I guess it's pretty common for English kids to go to boarding schools.

In the airport in Amsterdam, I found a bookstore. I needed something to read on my flight, so I picked out a book and got in line to buy it. The woman rang it up as the equivalent of *twenty dollars!*

"Wait, this can't be right," I protested.

"It is correct. That is the price here," the sales-clerk said.

Well. Would I feel stupider if I put the book back in front of everyone, or if I bought it and then saw it

the next day on sale for six dollars? With an embarrassed smile, I put the book back and slunk away.

I also love used-book stores, since I collect antique Nancy Drews from the 1930s. Once a bookstore owner said I could take a bunch of books and pay for them at his other store.

"How do you know I won't take the books and go home?" I asked.

"Well, those are Nancy Drews, aren't they? You're one of the good guys. We trust you," he said.

Bookstores are places of rectitude. The modern world has not cheapened or corrupted bookstores. They will always be welcoming and friendly and peaceful. Sit on a couch and read a book. Drink coffee or hot chocolate. Smile at people carrying your favorite book.

They're always so calming. As Holly Golightly says about Tiffany's in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*: "The quietness and proud look of it . . . Nothing very bad can happen to you there."

I read and ramble and browse and skim and feel much better. I leave bookstores feeling refreshed, a new person. ★

Friday's Music

The day's rhythm a
lively legato,
the beat is
monotonous staccato.
Morning speeds
afternoon ends
with an incomplete measure.
She died this afternoon.

The melody stops,
a flat note where there
should have been a sharp.
Whole rests
possessing measure by measure
the song—silent
crescendo cries
louder as the word
dead
penetrates
the tears.
The lyrics lengthened
played with damper pedal down
longest hour of dead silent blues
you have ever been through.
Dead—Gone
Fine
Fini.

—Meredith Rappaport,
*Eighth grade, Lebanon Jr. High School,
Lebanon, New Hampshire*



The Lot

When we were young we gave our names to rocks
found in the playground and said, if the rocks
die, we die, and buried them in the earth,
hard as it was to dig with bare hands at recess,
and we gave them gravestones.

Years later, we live apart from ourselves
and hardly comprehend naming rocks.
We feel that our lives are less like solid stone
than powdery ash, and we are more
apt to name our fires.

So when they ask me to describe
who I am, I wonder if it
isn't correct to tell them
that I am a rock, named
in back of an empty playground log,

instead of giving them the story of everything after,
things that don't matter and are painful.

—Alex Ortolani,
*Twelfth grade, Cape Elizabeth High School,
Cape Elizabeth, Maine*

[Another poem by Alex Ortolani appears on page 23.]

