

I go to thrift stores for the books

I almost always find something good that I didn't know I needed.

by [Matt Fitzgerald](#) in the [May 20, 2020](#) issue



Photo by Matt Fitzgerald

I went to the gigantic Powell's Books in Portland a while back. I could have spent an entire weekend in the poetry section deciding what to buy. Amazon has made it less natural to peruse unfamiliar books or genres. It's so easy just to seize on the exact title I want. After that the site leads me to authors who are similar to authors I already love. It isn't hard to decide when each choice is informed by my favorites. But at the bookstore, I didn't pine for the internet. I wanted to be shopping for books at the Salvation Army.

Powell's hit me with the paralysis of choice. Amazon traps me inside my own taste. The thrift store sets me free. Most of what I read comes from thrift stores. There is no illusion of control, just hope and disappointment.

A couple of months ago, I felt a burst of gratitude when I spotted a late-period Philip Roth novel amidst a heap of microwave cookbooks. And because *Everyman* cost \$1.50, I could keep looking. A few minutes later, I found a tiny book titled *Oriental Rugs in Colour*, by Preben Liebetrau. It is smaller than my hand and full of startling, vibrant photographs of rugs from Iran, Turkey, and Afghanistan. I keep it on my desk for moments when I need a burst of color. It set me back 50 cents. *Everyman* has also resonated. After making phone calls to three old friends, all of whom are dying, the novel's aged protagonist considers his own infirmities and says, "Old age isn't a battle; old age is a massacre." That line has followed me into several nursing home visits.

Between the old cookbooks and the buried treasure, there is a vast field of mediocrity. Most of the books at the thrift store are paperback best sellers. The Salvation Army is no place for snobs. If you cannot imagine yourself reading a book by Gillian Flynn, keep out. It took me a while to surrender. After two successive trips failed to generate anything good, I condescended to the thrift store's democratic offerings and bought *The Enemy*, a squat thriller with a purple cover. The story opens with a soldier found dead in a greasy motel room. A few pages in, we learn he's an AWOL two-star general. I finished the book the day I bought it. Since then, I've found nearly every Lee Child novel, none for more than \$2.

I don't imagine that Lee Child, Janet Evanovich, and their best-selling colleagues mind dominating the thrift store shelves. But if Jonathan Franzen shops at the Salvation Army, it must be humiliating. His books are *everywhere*. If you spent more than two dollars on *Freedom*, you got ripped off. I never would have thought to place Franzen and Barbara Kingsolver in the same category, but the evidence suggests *The Poisonwood Bible* and *The Corrections* hold one thing in common: people do not keep either of these books in their homes. Perhaps they are purging their bookshelves after reading *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* by Marie Kondo. Interestingly, both of Kondo's minimalist manuals show up at the thrift store constantly. Are her readers rejecting her advice or following it to the letter? Either way, it doesn't look like her books spark joy.

The truth is, most books that are widely reviewed wind up at the thrift store. The bad ones arrive a few weeks after Christmas. The good ones show up years after publication. Back in 2017, the *New York Times* was excited about *Manhattan Beach*. I love Jennifer Egan and couldn't wait to read it. There was a month-long wait at the library. The book retailed for \$28. I considered the risk, decided against it, felt

frustrated, and then promptly forgot all about it. Nearly three years later, the title jumped out at me at the New White Elephant. It was good, but I might have thought otherwise if I'd come to Egan's new book in a rush, full of expectation. The market manipulates everything. The arbiters of taste stir up our impatience. But if a book is good, it can wait. Urgency is absurd in the thrift store.

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Sometimes, the wait improves the read. In 1991 my friends were enthralled by Bill Buford's *Among the Thugs*. The backstory was intense. An esteemed British editor immersed himself in the violent world of soccer hooligans and emerged with what one review called, "A grotesque, horrifying, repellent and gorgeous book." I didn't read it back then, but the book lodged itself in my brain. I found it at the Salvation Army last year. It was as good as advertised, made better by the double lens I read it through at 50 years old. I kept wondering why this story about wildly violent soccer fans held such appeal to young men swaddled inside a liberal arts college. Did a subconscious reaction to the first wave of political correctness make my friends identify with the idiot masculinity Buford writes about? Was the book its era's version of the bloody video games my teenage sons enjoy? Did Buford find a subculture at the vanguard of the nihilism that seems to infuse the world 30 years later? Maybe so. What is certain is that none of these questions would have occurred to me when I was 20. When a book steeps for 30 years, its meaning can change and intensify.

The best gifts the thrift store gives are strange books I didn't know existed and wouldn't have sought out if I did. *The Shark: Splendid Savage of the Sea* sits near the top of this list for me. Jacques Cousteau wrote it for middle-school children. The book is full of lurid photos of sharks, paired with happy photos of Cousteau and his colleagues at sea, grinning at each other in matching red hats. Wes Anderson must cherish his copy. But *The Shark's* true charm lies in a letter I found folded in its pages:

Dear Otto and Rachel, I found the enclosed book on sharks among your dad's books in the closet on the third floor, where I was keeping the Archie comics and Ginny dolls. It should be heaps helpful with a school project. The burn pile is down to ashes and a few twigs that I have put on it. We will have a jolly good time this summer cutting logs and burning them.

Thank you super deluxe for the wonderful pictures. I love all of you so smashingly wonderful that my heart flutters. Love, Gramma.

My heart fluttered, too.

Another oddity: the weird aphoristic bursts found in *Rosicrucian Questions and Answers with Complete History* by H. Spencer Lewis. “No 50. Q. Do the Rosicrucians teach that man evolved from an animal and that if he does not live properly he may be born again in some animal form? A. The Rosicrucians teach no strange philosophy of this kind.” The mind races. Who started the rumor? What animal? Why so defensive? The book holds more than 100 of these peculiar exchanges. The best of them read like paragraph-long novels. I found it in a pile of castoffs in the corner of a St. Vincent De Paul store.

A second book from that same pile is even more intense. *The Traditional Games of England, Scotland and Ireland: Volume II* is an encyclopedic list of forgotten games like “Wink Egg: When a nest is found an egg is placed on the ground, and a boy goes back three paces from it, holding a stick in his hand; he is then blindfolded, takes two paces toward the egg and strikes a blow on the ground with the stick—the object being to break the egg. In Cornwall it is called ‘Winky-eye.’ See also ‘Blind Man’s Stan.’” My first thought was gratitude for the fact that we have moved beyond such casual brutality. Progress is real. Wait. “When a nest is found . . .” I haven’t come across a bird’s nest full of eggs in decades. Imagine a time when birds were so abundant, children had incentive to invent a game devoted to destroying their nests. In recent years we have learned how to erase creation with less fun and more efficiency.

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Last April I applied for a sabbatical grant that provides up to \$50,000 for pastoral renewal. I proposed the pursuit of a “second naïveté,” a return to something like the lively faith of my childhood. Two things felt especially important: riding my bicycle and reading Karl Barth, who leaves me helpless, a child before the Lord. I pitched a family trip to the Lake District in the Austrian Alps. We would ride our bicycles in the mountains, playing and resting in the same area Barth spent his vacations. My family could never afford such excess on our own. Just the anticipation felt significant. I started making shopping lists.

My application was rejected without explanation. This failure didn't come as a complete surprise. But it stung. Dream dashed by a curt email, I couldn't concentrate on the work in front of me. I walked out of my office and wandered to the nearest thrift store, the Mount Sinai Resale Shop, then to the bookshelf at the back of the store. Cookbooks, Jackie Collins, an old dictionary, and jammed among them a slim, battered hardcover: *The Shield of Achilles*, by W. H. Auden. I knew the name but had not read him. I took the book and opened it at random to page 17 and the poem "Mountains." In a few short lines reflecting on the very same Lake District I would soon not be visiting, Auden savages mountains, people who live in mountain regions, and anyone ridiculous enough to visit the Alps:

It is curious how often in steep places
You meet someone short who frowns,
A type you catch beheading daisies with a stick:
Small crooks flourish in big towns,
But perfect monsters—remember Dracula—
Are bred on crags in castles.

He goes on like this for five full stanzas and concludes that a mountain visit

. . . would keep me happy for
What? Five minutes? For an uncatlike
Creature who has gone wrong,
Five minutes on even the nicest mountain
Is awfully long.

I felt my disappointment lift the moment Auden hit his happy, mocking conclusion. What grace, to be found by this poem the moment I needed it most. How could the thrift store have known how badly I wanted to see those mountains?

I shouldn't have been incredulous. After all, when I stepped to the thrift store bookshelf I surrendered control. I entered a realm where surprise rules and shopping lists are pointless. To get there takes very little time, and admission is almost free. The only things required are a need for books and a willingness to set your particular desire aside. And some loose change. I bought the Auden book for 95 cents.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "A good and unexpected read."