

Used books

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [May 3, 2000](#) issue

While I was visiting Fort Worth, Texas, recently, I walked into a used bookstore on North 8th Street—the kind of place where you can fall into a time warp, forgetting where you are until you hear the owner locking up for the day. For the first hour I browsed the shelves on my own, collecting a small stack of books with such delectable titles as *What Every Catholic Needs to Know About Fundamentalism* and *Christianity as Mystical Fact*. I even found a hardback copy of the complete works of Spinoza that cost \$9.50, or about \$1.90 a pound.

After I sneezed, the shopkeeper's voice floated across the stacks. "I forgot you were there," she said. "May I help you with anything in particular?"

"I'm interested in literature," I said. "Also religion."

"Then you're in luck," she said, appearing beside me and leading me to an alcove with two floor-to-ceiling bookshelves and two library tables loaded with books. "We just bought a minister's entire collection," she said. "Help yourself." I began reading titles. After one shelf's worth I said, "This guy was an Episcopalian."

"How did you know?" the shopkeeper asked. I could not say for sure. *The History of the English Church* was pretty much a giveaway, along with the books on sacramental theology and liturgy. But it was also the breadth—and occasional kookiness—of the titles. This man had owned a Qur'an that was entirely in Arabic, as well as the complete works of Pope John Paul II. He also had a couple of apocalyptic novels with covers like drugstore westerns on them.

I found plenty of titles I recognized from my own shelves, such as *Soul Friend*, by Kenneth Leech; *The Great Code*, by Northrop Frye; and *Evil and the God of Love*, by John Hick. There were also multiple copies of several titles, including Thomas Merton's *New Seeds of Contemplation* and Robert Farrar Capon's trilogy, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, *The Parables of Grace* and *The Parables of Judgment*. As a former parish minister, I figured that this meant one of two things. Either the owner of this library had liked these books so much that he regularly gave them away as

presents, or else he had offered them to a slightly undersubscribed Sunday school class and ended up with leftover books.

By the time I reached the second bookshelf, I was feeling sad. How could someone let go of an entire lifetime full of books? My own library says more about me than all my photograph albums put together. I still have *A Is for Annabelle*, my first picture book, which I scribbled with crayons when I was two. I also have *The Collected Poems of Eugene Field*, with illustrations by Maxfield Parrish. One picture in that book, of a joyous naked child arching through the sky in front of a celestial city, remains my earliest image of heaven.

I have the white leather-bound miniature New Testament my mother gave me when I was seven, as well as the Scofield Reference Bible my friend Louisa gave me when she was trying to save my soul in college. I have the two books that made me want to be an Anglican before I knew what the word meant—*Till We Have Faces*, by C. S. Lewis, and *The Greater Trumps*, by Lewis's fellow Inkling Charles Williams. I have *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which overturned my tame images of Jesus, and *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, which overturned my tame images of nature. I have a copy of Euell Gibbons's *Stalking the Wild Asparagus*, which my priest gave me when I graduated from seminary. "That you may feast in the wilderness," he wrote inside the front cover.

I could never sell any of these books. What would I do with the dollar and a half I might get for Frederick Buechner's *The Magnificent Defeat* or Elie Wiesel's *Messengers of God*? If I lost any of these volumes I could certainly buy new copies, but to give them up altogether—to pack them in boxes and haul them down to the used bookstore for whatever cash they might bring—that is unthinkable. I might as well sell a lobe of my brain, or a chamber of my heart.

When I bent over far enough to read the titles on the lowest shelf I felt a little flutter of panic beat its wings inside of me. There must have been a dozen Bibles down there, as well as a whole collection of prayer books from England, Scotland and New Zealand. *The Book of Occasional Services* was there, as well as a leather-bound set of Daily Office Books.

"Did this guy die?" I asked the shop owner, full of dread. I felt so knit to this stranger by his books that I cared very much what had happened to him.

“No,” she said, “he didn’t die. All I heard was that he resigned from his church and left town in a hurry.” I ached to know the rest of the story. Was he fired? Did he lose his faith? What would have to happen to a man to make him sell all his books?

I took Karl Barth’s *The Word of God and the Word of Man* from his collection, as well as an old two-volume set of *Kingdom of Christ*, by F. D. Maurice. As the shopkeeper wrapped them at the cash register, a third possibility occurred to me. Maybe the owner of these books experienced a union with God that left him with no further use for his books about God. Maybe he is walking a road somewhere with no sandals on his feet and no staff in his hand, bringing peace to every cluttered household he enters. I hope so. Meanwhile, I thank him for sharing his books with those of us who are yet a little ways behind him.