

A browser's lament

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [Apr 04, 2012](#) issue



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First there was a Barnes and Noble, and then a Borders Bookstore moved into the neighborhood. Then after a while the Barnes and Noble dropped out, and we were left with one bookstore—until last year, when Borders went out of business. Now we are without a full-service bookstore, and life is hard.

My wife and I used to visit a bookstore at least once a week, often browsing for an hour or two after going out to dinner. We would wander the aisles separately, then eventually meet, compare our found treasures and head for the cashier.

When our daughter was younger and at home, she looked forward to these times as much as we did. As a toddler, in fact, she confused a bookstore with church. We attended (and still attend) St. Barnabas, and when someone asked her where she went to church, she answered, "St. Barnes and Noble."

Now we can no longer round out an evening with a bookstore visit—not unless we drive 20 minutes to the now nearest store. And of course we don't do that very often at all. Now most of our book buying is confined to Amazon.com. Amazon has its many advantages. If a title is available at all, you will find it there. The service is fast, so you don't wait long for your book to arrive. The prices are competitive.

What's most missing from Amazon, in comparison to a brick-and-mortar bookstore, is the aspect of adventure. I enter a bookstore holding my breath, not sure what delight I'll find. I go to Amazon to order particular books, ones I've heard about from a friend or read a review of. Amazon can't duplicate the experience of actually browsing the aisles of a physical store. It tries to, of course, but you're confined to lists and a lot of small print on a screen. It doesn't begin to match the pleasure and convenience of walking physical aisles, scanning shelves and displays, collecting an armful of volumes, then retreating to an empty, comfortable chair for a session of looking them over.

There, with ease, you look over a book exactly as you would like. The entire book is available for examination. You can dip into it at any or every point. You can admire the cover in all its full-size, three-dimensional beauty. You can comfortably read a chapter, if you're so inclined, and without any screen fatigue.

I had a rather thorough routine for browsing. I started at the front of the store, with new books, looking over titles I'd heard about and many I hadn't. Then I would move to the mysteries and science fiction sections, looking over display titles. Then to the social sciences, and finally to the religion section.

Browsing is unscientific and associative. I might come across an author in science fiction and be reminded of another author, then check to see if there were books by the second author on the shelves. I would find new (to me) authors, but I also might be reminded about old authors and old books I had never gotten around to. Then it was time to check that out. Every so often, too, I would venture out of my settled sections and spend a half hour in history or psychology or science or whatnot. You never knew what might pop up, how a new favorite author might be discovered. You might say that I miss most the element of serendipity.

Maybe it's a factor of my age, but I don't find online "browsing" comparable. As I mentioned, there's the factor of screen fatigue. And I tire of sitting.

There's another factor I miss, and that's the social element. In the brick-and-mortar store, I often met friends and neighbors. It was pleasant to see familiar faces, to catch up, and of course to compare books each of us might be carrying or seeking. These chance meetings often sent me back to the shelves to check out something else.

It has occurred to me that another store might move in. Maybe Barnes and Noble will return, now that Borders has vacated the field. But another possibility also occurs to me, one readily available: we could regularly visit the local library.

I confess that I neglect the library, lusting after newly published titles that are immediately available and not subject to a waiting list. But with the discipline of learning some patience, I might enjoy browsing the library almost as much as a bookstore. There's some irony there: that an older sort of "bookstore" might return to prominence, one that already stocks treasures in abundance and is just waiting for inveterate browsers like myself to haunt the aisles.