

# West Side's Story

by arwulf arwulf

Some of the best books in the world are out of print. You will not find them in new editions. Nobody reviews them anymore. Yes perhaps they receive honorable mention at the bottom of some list on the internet, but as for laying your hands on a copy, why, you'd better start looking. And that's if you already know the book exists. Where do I search for the book I haven't met yet? The mysterious title meant for the likes of me but never mentioned anywhere because it's all but forgotten.

This is why we crawl the independently owned bookstores of Ann Arbor. Each of the used book shops has its own personality: the phantasmagoric clutter of Kaleidoscope at State & Liberty; the frowsy friendliness of David's at Liberty & State; the austere precision of Books in General at State & North University; Dawntreader's quantitative stash at Liberty & Maenad; Wooden Spoon's homey quietude at Fourth & Ann; Aunt Agatha's specific focus on mystery and true crime on Fourth Avenue next door to the politically enlightened Common Language Bookstore, in back of which in fact exists a small section of very inexpensive used books.

Just lately I've been hanging out at West Side Book Shop at 113 West Liberty between Main and Ashley. This is the shop I've mentioned before as it is clearly visible from the alley where I used to proofread my Agenda articles when this paper had its office on Main Street. Finding myself bookless in the alley, I traipsed through the doors of West Side and copped a Modern Library selection of Milton, very affordably priced, and made it back to my roost in the alley near the storm drains for cigar and poetics.

Indeed the alley runs alongside the shop and the books peer out as one peers in. Upon entering, I am greeted by one of three gentlemen who devote themselves to the running of this most dignified and sensible shop. There is a conspicuous lack of trashy literature; for a seasoned bookworm, this generally means that one may browse without that irritation which arises from repeated encounters with stupid, vapid or insipid titles. I honestly believe that time spent among such carefully selected and maintained books can and does act in a positive way upon the nervous system. There's something psychically nourishing about West Side Books.

During the day you are likely to meet Doug Price, a pleasantly serious fellow with refined sensibilities. "I like to see a wide range of books in fine condition, on a lot of different topics. We think good readers deserve careful attention; we try and answer every question as carefully as we can. This is really an extraordinary book town...we feel lucky to be here. The best collectors are people who like to read—we learn a great deal from them. If there's one thing that I feel everyone should carry with them as a resource, it's Curiosity. Don't

stay with one thing; get curious about everything."

The first editions are kept separate from the general stock; Doug opens a glass-enclosed bookcase, extracting a beautiful antique tome. "Here's a small book, bound in calf. And calf is a very smooth leather. This book has raised bands, it has gold panels stamped on the spine. And it's called 'Elements of Pharmacy'—in French is the titling, and I'm reading it off to you in English. It has beautiful decorative marbled paper in the endpapers on the cover and on the free endpaper. This costs 200 dollars: an early French pharmacy from 1784. The paper is linen, made from the rags of the city...feel it. It feels like cloth! I like books as three dimensional objects. If you scanned this electronically you'd have something but it wouldn't be the real thing. I like books not just as vehicles for ideas but also for how they're made, and the craft that makes a good book. It really weighs something! Books need to be taken pretty good care of. A book like this expects something from you."

Doug's other specialty, a passion which greatly beautifies and helps to sustain the shop, consists of antique photographs. There's a back room quite laden with these fascinating entities. Suddenly I am being shown a study in white of egg: "Here's a nice albumen print, an early silver print process. Eggwhite was the adhesive element and there were big factories in France that did nothing but feed hens to lay eggs for the photographic industry. This is a picture of the Photographic Hall at the International Exhibition for the United States' celebration of its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1876. I like to look at that, with its flags fluttering in this long exposure. You can't see the whole outline of the flag—it's moved in the time that the shutter's been open to make this because of the slowness of the film."

I stand in front of a photograph of a Native American of the Sioux nation: "Struck By Crow, Ogalala, by Edward S. Curtis." A gravure from 1907, walnut framing, \$1,150 and worth it. There are beautiful portraits of a certain King family in New Jersey. These platinum prints, dating from March of 1921, are the work of Laura Gilpin. Alfred Stieglitz is here—I can feel his spirit. Now Doug opens a large book and lays it on the table in front of me as he explains that he himself was a volunteer on an aerial photographic expedition during the early-to-mid-1980s which resulted in "the definitive modern mapping project of 46 archaeological sites in Crete up until 1992." This awe-inspiring collection of ancient temple ruins was published by the University of California. Ancient stones in beautiful patterns.

The back room, which acts as the epicenter of Doug's photographic activities, was in fact a photographer's studio long ago. The building itself, I learn, was erected in 1888 by one John Haarrar who, according to Doug, won the Prus-

sian lottery and was thus able to establish a stationary and bookstore for the German community on this side of Ann Arbor. The large windows admit light beautifully, and one can easily envision what transpired here long ago.



Jay Platt positively swims through the business of the day. We see him examining bag after bag of books while discussing local history with a collector of antique maps. Of the three men who operate the store, he is the most given to healthy bursts of laughter. There's more than a little bit of the rambunctious about him. Jay looks through hundreds of books per week: "A lot of the better material comes from estates. Someone died or they're moving, and they have a decent collection, so in that sense they come almost pre-selected. I do turn down a lot. I guess I choose just what strikes my interest. What I know from having done this for 25 years. I guess 'what I would like to have in my library' is a guiding principle. Would I like to own this book? If I didn't sell this book would I still be happy keeping it? Condition is certainly important. That's something that most dealers don't pay as much attention to as they should." Doug states that he admires Jay "as a friend and as an extraordinary book buyer."

Jay opened the shop in September of 1975, and it's been flourishing ever since. It is interesting to learn that in the early '70s the City of Ann Arbor was preparing to knock down not only this building but all the structures from the alley to Ashley Street in order to expand a parking lot! Fortunately, Jay explains, "the Historic commission got on their case and said 'you can't do that, these are prime examples of 19<sup>th</sup> Century mercantile architecture', so they were saved." Joe and Carolyn Arcure invested in extensive renovations, and to my eyes the structure as it stands today is one of the loveliest old buildings in town.

Anyone visiting the water closet at the very back of the shop suddenly meets with a large collection of titles pertaining to Polar Exploration. Invariably I take this as some sort of a surrealist equation. But Jay is known nationally for his handling of books within this category. Just recently he published his 30<sup>th</sup> catalogue; "The Polar Regions" comes out about twice a year. It is recognized internationally but most copies are sent to enthusiasts in the US and Canada.

Jay got his degree in Naval Architecture from UofM in 1968. "I never practiced being a naval architect" he says cheerfully. "Got sidetracked."

And this is part of the magic of West Side Books: each individual who works here has opted for a decidedly non-mainstream career; a definitive stance against conformity is being taken. This is perhaps best illustrated by the absence of a computer in the store. Doug says it's easier to talk to customers without a glowing screen in front of you; there's no room for it in here; and it is better to look at the books themselves rather than a list of titles.

When I broached the subject of computers to Jay he simply said: "I don't like 'em. I don't like what [computerization] does to the business." Most people who have chosen used books as a career have done so in order to get away from technology. The computer, observes Jay, takes away energy from actually running a bookstore. It is his perception that some stores, after computerization, have gone downhill. At least they change in a way that detracts from the real heart of the matter: the books themselves.



Night descends. I am trying to interview the third member of the West Side Book crew, who abhors tape recorders. He does not want his name mentioned here, and asked only to be identified as "Clerk". He works here during the evenings, when everything has quieted down; the clientele after sunset is mostly composed of curiosity seekers and wandering persons in a state of relaxed inquisitiveness. Naturally they are drawn to this focal point for the voraciously bookish.

There's always a *gentleman* working at West Side. "Clerk" is surely gentle, with almost luminescent eyes which indicate some measure of the intensity of his intellectual bearing. He is a veteran bookstore explorer, whose searching took him to San Francisco, New York and Washington DC, where he rented an apartment and lived for 13 years directly behind the Library of Congress. As a government employee, he had the necessary credentials which gained him access to that formidable stash of literature. He estimates he visited the library 3,600 times. But because of the way the place is set up, he found that he wasn't walking the stacks. At the Library of Congress you request a specific title, go away for an hour and a half while they find it for you, then come back and read it there. "Clerk" compares this to using the internet; research is conducted, but there's none of the organic wonderment of browsing, the joy of surprise. And that is what used bookstores are about. "If you rummage around a bookstore, your perspective will change."

"I still have one of the best books...I found it in a little store in Washington. And I claim that book was just waiting for me. For years! I mean no one else would buy it. And it's one of the finest books in my library!" *What is it?* "Oh I never mention what this book is. It's my own. A real find! I never tell anybody about this book. I keep it there. I couldn't believe I found it. So often if a book catches your fancy and you go away and come back, it'll be gone. Maybe you'll never find it anywhere else. I got this book 20 years ago. Never seen another copy, ever." ☑