

LOST IN THE STACKS

David Latham

Musings from the editor's desk.

I consider myself something of a book collector who loves to scan the shelves of bookshops, but to any serious collector my library is small enough to require a more accurate description of me as a “book selector,” since with each new book I come across I indecisively wonder whether or not it is one I will enjoy looking through again a year or two after reading it. I love to read the same edition that the authors first held in their hands, reading the pages typeset as the authors had first arranged the poems or first reread their novel before signing presentation copies to their friends. Though I search for the first editions, I am content when I find one with a worn or torn spine, a reading copy I can use to show students and to consult for typos in manuscripts for the *Journal*.

The art of building a collection involves an odd jumble of emotions. I avoid the national retail chains and the world-wide web, preferring those green-painted, gold-lettered bookshops with their wooden, window-paned doors. But during the past few years one independent bookshop after another has closed after losing business to the chains and the internet.

The retail chains too often have more copies of fewer titles, displaying the front covers of books piled on tables or standing full-faced on wide shelving units like boxes of cereal in the aisles of grocery stores, though grocery clerks know their stock much better than the staff hired to swipe our credit cards for the retail managers. An alternative to shopping at these chains is to turn on the computer at home to search for a book on the internet, which feels to me like cheating, as if I am fishing in a pre-stocked pond. This shift from shopping to shipping has consequences. When we order what we are looking for we get exactly what we want and thus forfeit the opportunity for finding surprises.