

The other day one of my son's asked if we could go to the bookshop, not an entirely surprising request although this particular son has only recently really fallen in love with reading despite his age. My immediate answer was, "Sure, why not!"

Unfortunately, it took another three days before we actually made it to the bookstore. As both of my young adult son's made bee lines for the books they were after, and could be heard a few isles away chuckling and discussing one of Tolkien's many works, a Dune book, and the childlike artwork appearing on many children's books these days, I was found wandering, aimlessly through the entire shop.

My wander began, at first, as I looked for the discount shelf that I often find a few treasures on, but it slowly became something more. You see the local bookshop was undergoing an inventory check as well as rearranging. As I perused up and down isles I dodged piles of books, stepped over others, and found that with each pile I passed my smile grew a little larger.

I'm not one for disorganisation and chaos but there was something unimaginably cozy about this larger chain bookstore feeling far more quaint. It reminded me of our previous home library, where books might be stacked here and there awaiting reshelving. Or the piles of books in someone's "I'm leaving these here because despite my busy schedule I'm sure to read them.." pile.

I found that I'd pause at certain shelves as I stumbled upon good friends hidden between not so familiar ones. There was *Fever*, the book I read to my children on a camping trip almost a decade ago. On the way home one went into a panic because he was feverish and was certain he had *the* fever. That took us a few miles to sort out and assure him he wasn't dying and no blood letting would be occurring.

There was *The Island Of The Blue Dolphins*, a book I've yet to share with my grown children, but one I have distinct memories of my own mother reading to us. So much so that I always feel confused when I hear people complain about the book and wonder how it can be possible that they don't like it.

A few steps more and I find myself face to face with the four March girls, but the cover is all wrong! I remember the first copy I ever read, it was purple, and it was read in short bursts to my mother, sometimes while sitting on her bed, and other times in the kitchen while she cooked. I debated purchasing the book, but now they've squeezed *Little Women* and *The Good Wives* into one, and I can't bring myself to accept this oversight!

I stumble across a copy of *Pinocchio* and I'm reminded of when I read it to my own children, the parts I don't remember hearing when my mother read it to me. How my own children and I giggled after our horror subsided! The boys find me staring at the book and remarked, "Oh, I wonder if Gram found her copy and if it *did* include those extra parts!"

We'd just had a discussion of the history of Pinocchio at Mom's a couple of weekends ago. How it was written as short story instalments for a magazine, and how each time Pinocchio befell trouble it was because the author was so tired of the story he wished to end Pinocchio, yet the readers all wrote him and said it couldn't possibly be the end, and much to his frustration he had to keep writing!

We debated opening this book up, but it's a fancier copy that is covered in cellophane so we slipped it back on the shelf and commented that as beautiful as the exterior is, our illustrated version by Ingpen is prettier.

I moved on, leaving them behind debating all the book cover changes they have spotted, and chuckle as I see another customer listening in to their discussion, but too shy to partake.

I wander through the classics and debate purchasing Frankenstein, one I've yet to read, but slide it back on the shelf because the copy this shop has is not the prettiest or the best quality.

I wander to the Young Adult fiction and am saddened to see the lack of quality books available, before I slide down to adult fiction. I spot Alice on the shelf and chuckle quietly as I remember the day my children greeted their father at the door with our own copy in hand and simply demanded, "Please explain!" He'd told them it was the most amazing book in all the world, so funny and ever so good.

It was a classic tale of over hype and thus, they expected something so much different than an aimless wander through a young girl's strange dream. This situation has happened with a few books and movies that were over-hyped, but Alice was the first and the one they demanded the answers for.

A clerk, seeing my empty hands, and clearly having watched my progress through the store, came to ask if I needed help. I'm distracted, though, by the copy of *Lord Of The Flies* I just spotted on the shelf. I'm reminded of the time we couldn't find ours, so we pulled up an audio version where the author read to us... at breakneck speed. The clerk now thinks I'm a little strange as I start to laugh.

"Sorry," I say when my brain finally caught up with me, "I didn't quite hear you."

"Can I help you find anything?" he repeated.

I debated telling him I'm looking for a good book — no, a great book! A book I don't want to put down because it's so good, a book I don't want to end because it's so delicious, but yet at the same time I wish to charge clear through it in order to know what's going to happen next. The problem is, I haven't found such a book in a long while.

So many modern books that are pushing so many agendas instead of just telling their stories, and it taints me from trying many of the books currently gracing the store shelves.

"No, but thank you," I told him, smiling in hopes he doesn't think I'm too much of a lunatic. I can't quite tell though as the majority of his face is covered in a mask.

He shrugs, "We'll be around if you change your mind."

I nod and moved forward, finding myself in front of a pile of modern day books. I call them, "One hit wonders.." Which is probably not very kind considering those authors have at least finished their books and sent them off into the world. Yet, I can't help but wonder in a year, or two, or ten when things have changed yet again will these books be relics on someone's back shelf? Will they all find their way to the local second hand shop where you'll find 12 of them

lining the shelves and even more in the dumpster out back?

I ponder this as I turn the corner and find myself in the cozy mystery section. It feels a little like home too, having ready far more cozy mystery books than is likely good for anyone's health. I spot the *Murder She Wrote* series, and shake my head as I remember the first one I borrowed from the library. It was, if I'm honest, poorly done.

I see a few other cozy mystery series I am less familiar with, they seem to have a play on more familiar titles, and spot little dogs on their covers. I consider the artwork for a few minutes, the realistic background and the very cartoonish dog. I try to make a mental note to ask my artistic son if this is something he's familiar with. He's generally up to speed on the latest oddities in the art world, and I am not.

I passed by a series of mystery books that I tried for ages to read while living on an island, but the small library never had book one on the shelves. I move towards sci-fi in order to locate my kids, realising that as the heat of the day pounds down upon the building the temperature inside is rising and I could use a drink. I've given up on finding a good book at this point.

I pass by the *Dune* series and am reminded of when my son asked the island library if they had an audio copy in the system. He was desperate to read the whole series, but, much like his mother, refuses to read a series of books out of order. His message to the librarian had been so specific, including publication dates, I'd taken a photo of it, to share with a few friends and family members.

I found my kids merely a book shelf ahead of me, sitting on the floor debating which version of a particular book was better. It wasn't a loud or heated discussion, but it had attracted, unbeknownst to them, an employee and a couple of customers. I decided not to interrupt them, and was going to slide by, but they spotted me.

"Find something yet?" they inquired, still oblivious to the attention their conversation had garnered as the bystanders slipped back behind shelves.

“No,” I sighed, “I’m beginning to think I’ve read all the good books.”

My youngest jumps up and disappears while I start to make my way towards the checkout. He returns moments later with a *Maisy Dobb’s* mystery, “What about this?”

“Maisy Dobbs..” I rumminute, “I dunno, I’m looking for something a little more *cozy* I guess, and this is a WWII book, I’m not sure if I’m emotionally stable for that this week.”

“Wait, you know this person?”

“What person?”

“Maisy!”

“Oh, she’s the main character in the book. I’ve read *Maisy’s* books before, like when she went to Egypt and solved a mystery inside one of the pyramids.”

“So you *do* know her, I just grabbed a random book off the shelf with a cover I thought you’d like.”

We both start laughing.

“What’s so funny?” the eldest asks, joining us in the middle of the shop.

“Your brother. Put that book back and let’s—” but I am suddenly distracted by books on the buy 2 get 1 free table. There’s *Cinder*, a book I’d decided to give a try to after seeing it recommended in a few places. It’s a post-modern retelling of Cinderella, you know if she was a Chinese cyborg with feelings and emotions. I snatched it up, “Oh this is such a good book!” I cried hugging the book.

The boys glanced at each other with raised eyebrows, “So you found one?”

“Yes, but this is a buy 2 get one free table, I can’t just take one. It’s like robbing myself — Oh my, look it’s *The Night Circus*, I remember the first time I read this. I nearly didn’t make it

through chapter one because the author put a strong word right there, in your face. I was walking around the footy oval and the word was screamed in my ears! I was so taken aback I yanked my headphones out of my ears..."

"Mom, concentrate, you need another book because it's free!"

"Yes, let's see.."

An hour later we'd not only found the free book but another 3 to add to our pile, a tote bag, and two packages of magnetic bookmarks. The young clerk looks familiar, but we've been away for so long I'm not sure if he is who I think he may be. I scan his chest for a name tag but there isn't one. He asks if I have any coupons, which I don't because I've left them all at home- again. He kindly offered me one to bring our total down, I thank him, wish him well and exit for the car

"Wow, wasn't that a trip down memory lane?" I ask as we spill back into the car.

There's no answer though, they've already pulled out their new books and are acquainting themselves with their new friends.



Author's Note:

I recently checked a book out of the library by a well known author. His books have always been highly recommended by various peoples, but I'd yet to read one. However, while perusing my local library shelves I stumbled upon one of his books and pulled it off the shelf to read.

The premise behind it was that he'd lived abroad for a couple of decades and had returned to the land of his birth, a stranger. He'd forgotten, or was completely unaware, or how certain things work. The book, a collection of short articles, is meant to be highly humorous and while many are, the first few made me cry.

You know, that kind of crying that is also laughter because it *is* funny, but it's also crazy close to home and you can completely understand both the funny side of the situation but also understand exactly what the character is going through. So there I sat, in my comfy recliner curled up in a blanket doing this weird laugh-cry thing, pretending that the breeze from our air conditioner was causing me issues.

Yet, the whole premise behind the book is one I can closely relate to. After living 15 years abroad I feel, at times, a stranger in the land of my birth. There have been some downright embarrassing and difficult situations to deal with, as well as some that have made us laugh until we couldn't breathe.

I have spent many days answering strange questions from my grown children with things like, "is this normal?" or "Why is it that color?" or, "Are you sure this is right?" Most of the time a long buried memory kicks in and I assure them, and at other times I stand there in as much bewilderment as they are until one of us shrugs and suggests we ask someone else.

One of the ways I cope best with my emotions is to write them out. (I have several deeply emotional pieces I've written after some very hard or tiring life experience. I'm not quite ready to share those pieces yet.) Which has given me a whole new outlet of writing material, and some I think just might bring a bit of laughter to your inbox as you enjoy some of our exploits of being *Strangers In Our Own Land*.

The Reluctant Author