

TIMES ONLINE

COMMENT Columnists Michael Gove

The Times

April 24, 2007

The net: not guilty of grievous harm to bookshops

Michael Gove

Sometimes I can arrange only a few minutes to indulge my vice. Sometimes I get up to an hour. The longer I have the more enjoyable the release, but being a man I can still get satisfaction out of a few snatched moments. I can't say I'm proud, but at least my wife knows all about it now. I can't say she approves, but she knows that boys will be boys. Which is why she's prepared to tolerate me straying. . . into second-hand bookshops. If a week goes by without me spending some time in a bookshop I grow grumpy and agitated, like a cow that hasn't been milked. I will purposely plot travel routes to allow time to visit towns that boast superb secondhand bookshops (Midhurst, Deal, Burford and Folkestone all come to mind). I will truncate lunches and arrive late at parties to allow time for visits to bookshops that happen to be in the area in which I'm being entertained. All of this behaviour is quite horrifically selfish and antisocial. But I'm afraid I can't help it.

If I wanted to defend myself with a degree of vigour I suppose I'd say that my trips to bookshops were the male equivalent of going for a treatment — half an hour spent rifling through the Everyman Classics inducing in me the same state of blissful relaxation as a session with a skilled reflexologist evokes in my wife. But I know that, like most men, I have more control over my timetable than my partner, more flexibility in work schedule and therefore less need for secure oases of relaxation away from the relentless pace of a childcare/ work/childcare routine. And yet I still indulge. I suppose my only real defence is that a trip to a bookshop need clip only five minutes off my day and yet still give me the boost I feel I need to face the rest of my responsibilities.

Given the scale, and intensity, of my addiction (I am to the classics what Pete Doherty was to Class As) you might think that I would have inwardly cheered the words of Margaret Atwood and Kazuo Ishiguro in yesterday's Times . Both of them were lamenting the decline in the number of independent bookshops, and pointing the finger at the internet as the villain. I feel their pain. For me, the loss of an independent bookshop is

like the loss of a single Spartan to Leonidas at Thermopylae — it's not as though we have so many that we can afford to shrug off a single casualty.

But while I don't want to see any small bookshops close (and am indeed euphoric when the best, such as Daunt's in Marylebone, expand by opening another branch, as they have done recently in Holland Park) I think it's wrong to point the finger at the internet. The web has become a catch-all villain for any individual or movement unhappy with trends in modern life, a handy focus for all the discontents of globalisation, up there with Tesco as a disrupter of the settled, the small-scale and human-centred.

But while the jury may be out on Tesco, the internet deserves to be acquitted. Certainly on the count of grievous bodily harm to the book trade. The truth is that the internet now allows many antiquarian and secondhand dealers to flourish even more successfully than before, by allowing them to reach a far larger market than just the passing trade provided by Conservative MPs making time en route to a speaking engagement in Worthing to see if they have any Bulldog Drummond first editions. One of my favourite secondhand bookshops, the Golden Hind in Deal, manages to serve a varied clientele in East Kent, adds lustre to the town's seafront and keeps a very wide stock to suit all tastes, all supported by a healthy online sales presence.

Now, thanks to the wonderful antiquarian bookfinder site, AbeBooks, it's possible for secondhand shops to survive in the sorts of towns that Waterstone's would turn its nose up at, ensuring that the spread of bookstores in this country (the parchment footprint?) is wider than it otherwise would be.

And the web itself is, by its very nature, an environment that encourages browsing, which nudges you from one association to another, which lets you, as you try to find works by one author, see the rest of their output, stimulating new thoughts about fresh avenues to explore.

No, the real revolution altering the balance for independent bookshops is not the web but another bogey of our time — the supermarket.

It's the spread of bookselling by the major grocers that has caused real problems for the margins of smaller bookshops. Now there's a broader argument to be had about the costs and benefits of supermarkets overall, which I shan't get into here now. And it's worth noting that since supermarkets got in on the act, book sales overall have soared. But I've told my wife that some of us, nevertheless, have to make a stand in favour of independent bookstores — which is why I fear I can't, in all conscience join her for the weekly trip to the supermarket and instead have to go off to see if I can find a pristine E. F. Benson in a little place I know in Woking.

I'm sure she'll understand . . .