

A Four for Four Day

Helping you find what you didn't know you were even looking for.

By Bill McGowan

She looked about 22, trim, dark skin, friendly smile. I asked her where she was from. She said she was from England. She saw the look on my face and offered that her parents were from India, but had immigrated to the United Kingdom before she had been born.

She continued browsing around the shelves a bit absentmindedly. People often do that when they don't know what they are looking to read and are maybe just a bit bored and wanting some company. It's slow season in Guatemala and the town is pretty empty. Antigua gets . . . *tranquil* during these months. You have to prepare for it, or it can through off your equilibrium.

After a few minutes at the shelves, she introduced herself as Vera and asked for some suggestions of what to do in town for the few days she'd be here. She said she was leaving for Honduras and Nicaragua in three days.

I suggested visiting the ruins of the convent behind La Iglesia San Francisco just two blocks south of Dyslexia Books, where we were having our conversation. It is one of the oldest convents in Antigua, dating from 1540. I told her how beautiful the ruins were with all of the flowering shrubs. "It's a place of peace amongst the ruin and destruction," I said.

She told me she had gone into the Catedral de Santiago on the *parque central* today. I suggested she go back and visit the ruins *behind* the cathedral. The part she had visited today was merely the original entry hall to a much larger structure, largely destroyed in the great earthquake of 1773. At the time, it was the largest cathedral in Latin America, filling an entire *manzana*, an entire block, of Antigua's rectilinear street plan. The roof was composed of fifty domes aligned five across; one over the central nave, one over each aisle on either side of the nave, and one over each chapel on both sides. She thought she would do that right now.

Vera was halfway out the door when the book she didn't know she was looking for called out to me. It was a beautifully bound book my brother gave to me a few months earlier. I remembered the name, *My Boyhood Days*, but not the author. I often only remember one. Without the author's name, I had to search for it by location, which normally works for me, but I was coming up short. I told her it was a remembrance by a famous Indian poet.

She thought about it and wondered aloud, "Tagore?"

"Yes! That's it!" I said, moving quickly to the T section in non-fiction. There it was. I handed it to her, mentioning that like

much prose written by poets, it was sensuous in its description of India at that moment in time.

Vera thanked me and bought it, saying, "I'll take this home for my father. I think he'll love it."

Then she was out the door.

A couple of long hours went by. Hardly anyone was in the streets, but by mid-afternoon, another lost traveler walked in. She looked lonely, too. It was that kind of day. We exchanged a greeting. I let her browse. I don't like to interrupt the initial moment of exploration. That's too personal to try to direct. I gave her some time. After a while I intervened and had her

take a look at the new arrivals on the workbench display in the middle of the store. We got to talking about books. I told her about my three categories of fiction: contemporary, classics, and quirky. I offered that in my own reading, I was stuck on the latter two.

"I don't read contemporary novels unless someone I trust *really* suggests one." I said. "There's just too many of them, and I often feel like I'm wasting my time when there are so many classics I haven't read."

"Yeah, I get that, but how do you define quirky, exactly?" she asked.

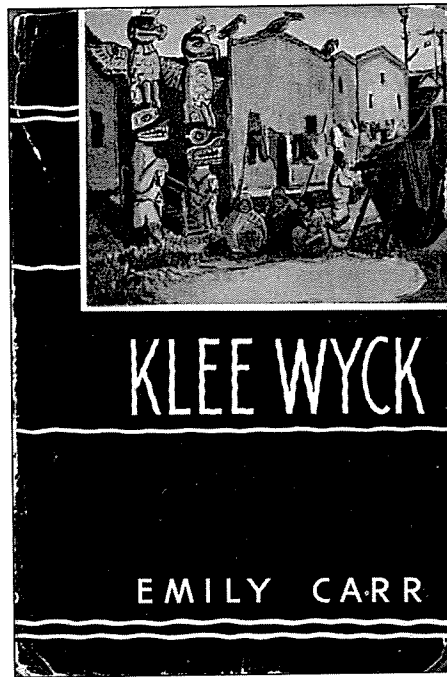
"Good question," I replied. "Unusual, unknown, forgotten, quaint. I think I can only describe that category by examples. It's a little to do with the thrill of finding them too," I said.

I brought out a copy of *Klee Wyck* by Emily Carr, and handed it to her. Carr was a famous Canadian painter from the

early 20th century who wrote about her experiences with the First Nations of the Pacific Coast in that country. I found it in the capital one day about two years ago. It was a small book. The copy I had was an old paperback with lots of character.

Seeing her turning the book over in her hands, I explained, "In the beginning of the paperback era they often didn't write much on the cover or back to describe the book like they do now. Just a title, an author and an image to tempt you."

The book is a series of short stories about Carr's trips among the coastal First Nations. By the time she visited, most of the native population had converted to Christianity and moved to larger population centers, leaving the old villages to decay. She made friends with the people of those First Nations, and asked them to take her when they journeyed to pay their respects to their ancestors. It was on those trips that Carr was given her



nickname, the eponymous Klee Wyck, which means, “the laughing one.”

I explained to my new friend in the bookstore that Emily Carr painted the buildings, the totem poles and even the forest in a swirling, vibrant style that reminds me of Georgia O’Keeffe and somehow captures the spirits and energy that are left behind when people depart. She was considered an eccentric in those days. She continued to paint all her life with little recognition, until she was finally welcomed into the prestigious Group of Eight, a famous collective of Canadian artists. The stories in *Klee Wyck* are wonderful descriptions of the people and the villages and I suggested “that’s a perfect example of quirky.”

She nodded her head, but wasn’t entirely sold on *Klee Wyck* as her next book. She continued browsing. I went back to reading, or I should say re-reading, *Lord Jim* by Joseph Conrad. I finished it two days ago. But there was a quote that I remembered and wanted to find again. I knew it was near the beginning so I decided to start with the expectation that I’d have to find it that way. Now I’m half-way through it again, can’t put it down, and still can’t find the damn quote.

After another twenty minutes of browsing, my customer still couldn’t find anything that interested her. After a while, I offered her my system for finding books for people. I told her how it worked and some of the categories I use: historical fiction, neighborhood, short stories, etc.

She asked, “Why not quirky?”

That took me by surprise. Why haven’t I worked that into my system for finding the right book for the right person? I took it as a challenge. “Okay,” I said, “I’ll find you something perfectly quirky.”

I looked at the workbench with the newer titles. I spotted the book for her almost immediately. *Love In The Ruins* by Walker Percy. I picked it up and began telling her about Percy. She’d never heard of him, which was not surprising. I explained that he was a writer from Covington, Louisiana, who wrote about the American South, and about the existential crisis of modern man. Amongst the Southern literati, he was well known, but not so much by the general public.

“Have you ever heard of *Confederacy of Dunces* by John Kennedy Toole,” I asked?

“Oh yes, I love that book.”

“Do you know the story of how it came to be published?”

“I know that it was published after his death. Suicide I think, and that his mother got it published.”

“That’s right. But it was Walker Percy who finally helped her after she had sent the manuscript to many others over a period of ten years. The story goes that she had contacted Percy a couple of times to no avail. Then she tracked him down at his office at Loyola University of New Orleans and handed him the manuscript, begging him to read it. He was too embarrassed to refuse, thinking that he would read a few pages, prove to himself that it was not very good — like so many other manuscripts that came to him — and then he could send it back to her with a clear conscience. He was probably moved to consider the work because of Toole’s suicide as well. Percy was haunted all his life by his parents’ suicides.

He read a few pages. Then a few more. He couldn’t stop and

read it straight through. He found a publisher, and the book won the Pulitzer Prize.

She liked the story enough that she walked out the door with *Love in the Ruins*.

Two for two, I thought. Not bad for a slow day in the heart of the rainy season.

At six o’clock, Peter — one of the few other bookstore employees — came in flush with money from his recently arrived pension check. He had been borrowing books from the store for a few weeks. I think he wanted to return the favor by actually buying one. I showed him the biography of Andrew Jackson which had just come in. He gave me the cash and I marked the sale.

As soon as he left, I closed up the shop. The store had only sold three books for the day, but I had a great time moving them. After work I ran across the street to Y Tu Piña También, the juice bar on the corner also owned by the bossman of the bookstore and Café No Sé. I ordered a coffee.

Luis, a friend who is a talented photographer was there. I overheard him telling someone that he was going home early tonight because he had a couple of movies he wanted to watch. When he was done talking I asked him what movies he had. He told me that one of them was *The Red Baron*.

“I’ve always been fascinated by flying,” he said.

We talked about the era of early flight and I suddenly remembered that I had been rearranging the history section the day before and had pulled out a beat-up 1927, first edition of *The Red Knight of Germany* by Floyd Gibbons, a biography of Baron von Richthofen. It was marked at Q100 and had been down on the bottom shelf for a long time. Though it was a first edition, it was too beat up to be worth much. The spine had been taped and someone had written the title back on with a magic marker many years ago. I reduced the price to Q40 and made a mental note to pull it out for someone when the occasion arose. Here was the occasion.

I told Luis about the book. He was excited and wanted to see it. I took him back over to the bookstore through Café No Sé which was now open. He loved it. He bought it. We went back to the bar and had a beer together.

I only sold four books that whole day, but then again, I only had three customers come into the store. I felt pretty damn good about that. Anyone can sell books in a store stocked with tens of thousands of titles and hundreds of customers passing through every day. But here, in the little shop I call home, Dyslexia Bookstore in Antigua, Guatemala, I’d hit four for four shots from deep. Moreover, in one day I’d been to 19th Century India, the Pacific Coast of Canada, the American deep south and to round it all out I’d taken flight with an old friend and shared a beer with him once we’d landed.

What can I say? I get a real joy from helping a customer or a friend find the book they didn’t even know they were looking for.

Bill McGowan is the manager of Dyslexia Books, located one door north of Café No Sé on 1^a Avenida Sur, #11c in Antigua, Guatemala. Drop by, have a look. Chat with Bill. Find a book.