

# The 'real deal' ...

## Long Street's Select Books

real  
deal

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A series of articles on bookshops if you please.  
Will do, dear editor.

I raise the ball emblazoned with the logo '2013' once, and kick off. It bounces this way and that, and comes to rest in Long Street.

But first; a bit of background to provide colour and context: second-hand bookshops, the kind of shops where dog-eared books by Wilbur Smith, James Hadley Chase and Neville Shute rub covers with Herman Melville, Kurt Vonnegut and Graham Greene, are getting rather thin on the ground.

Conversely, shops carrying works by the latter group, the more high-brow echelon, bookended by specific genres such as history/



At his happiest surrounded by his books is co-owner of Select Books, David McLennan

war/sports/travel are seen as not so much the *rara avis*-type any more, but are now actually the whales in the washbasin.

Many dealers in old (read: second-hand) novels and comics have faded away – this 'bleeding-out' process has been going on for at least three decades (I have seen it happening since my own childhood), but not all bookshops closed their doors; not the type where hard covers, low numbers and higher prices are the norm.

One reason for the perseverance of specialised booksellers is their genuine passion for books, but principally for good literature and well-researched works on art, history, geography, and the like. This preference relates to the exceptional and the singular; in most cases rare books, manuscripts and maps – decidedly not what the general public would covet; therefore the epithets 'rare' or 'select'. This requires specialised knowledge and therefore not just anybody will go into, or stay, in this line of business.

One person who is indeed a fish in the water here is David McLennan, ex-archivist and co-owner with his wife Karen, since 1996, and this is where I will commence the series on bookshops: 232 Long Street, where the shingle proclaims simply 'Select Books'. (so I pick up the ball nonchalantly and enter, like Mannetjies Roux stepping on to Newlands ... no, make that Jean de Villiers; I am not that old!)

David is quick on loose balls and customers, and in no time we are chatting about the mysteries of books, booksellers and everything bookish – a conversation of which I will provide a (ho-hum) possibly palatable précis:

To deal with enquiries of a specialised nature the bookdealer has to have adequate knowledge of history and historical tomes; about central roles players like the leading authors in certain fields, historical figures and incidents, et cetera, as well as the availability of such items, and also of realistic price ranges. David also provides valuations for (for instance) the purposes of settling estates.

Having said that, as Select Books' website indicates, the buying and selling of books, both new and out of print, are both the main occupation and the sincere aspiration of the McLennan clan. The website specifies 'Categories of books held include Africana, the

South African War; Cape Town and its environs, botanical fauna, furniture, literature, travel, hunting and sport (especially rugby and cricket). I read more about this in a neat yellow catalogue titled: *Africana Catalogue No 58: September 2012* which David managed to hand to me while dealing with a steady stream of customers.

I palmed the catalogue into my pocket ... and this is what I found, later: aesthetically and professionally impressive, with anticipation of all possible queries, for example, abbreviations used: a.e.g. = all edges gilt; d.w. = dust wrapper; frontis. = frontispiece; approximate exchange rates; contact details such as [www.selectbooks.co.za](http://www.selectbooks.co.za); et cetera. The list of contents includes summaries of books, sometimes with illustrations, such as **The wild sports of Southern Africa** by William Cornwallis Harris (1844) and **Villa at 90** by K Nel and E Villa (2005).

While in the shop I looked at some familiar covers – architectural books by Hans Fransen, art books on Gregoire Boonzaier and JH Pierneef, mostly rare and yes, 'select' books, indeed. David says, 'Prices of books run parallel with art,' referring to overseas collectors buying our art works and then also acquiring reference books to provide context. Owning a painting by Irma Stern would prompt a collector to buy a book on Stern, or a contemporary of Stern, like Maggie Laubser. This in turn causes such books to become popular and to increase their monetary value – a good wicket to be on for all concerned.

While I was there several clients entered the shop to pick up books – rare books they have asked David to obtain for them. In such instances he adds these titles to his list of books on demand and then contacts the clients, who are anxious to lay their hands on these books; always worried someone else will pip them at the post. Some books, like **Prisoner in the garden** (compiled by the Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2006) and a biography of the painter Alexander Rose-Innes (by M Bekker, 1991) become scarce and prove to be good investments. Sometimes biographies of artists pique the interest of collectors, which causes them to buy previously less-desired works by such artists, and thus books repay the interest art generates for books – perhaps the exact opposite of a 'vicious circle!'

David told me that this shop has been a bookshop since 1984, but before that various owners operated a variety of trades at this location, including a haberdashery and a smithy. Difficult to imagine, I thought, looking at the rows upon rows of books, taking in the ambience ... this quintessential image of a traditional bookshop, the kind of milieu all booklovers know so well: the aroma of books, the visual impact of a thousand paperbound entities containing entire worlds of knowledge, experience, exotic sceneries and exquisite sensations between their covers seemingly gazing benignly back at you, the eager explorer of, well, exactly what is on offer; standing slightly intimidated: somewhat like someone surrounded by a packed stadium which suddenly has gone quiet.

So, what is it that evokes this wonder; the Wonder of Books? Frantically I grope around in my little 'memory palace', for if it is true that bad writers try to utter their mediocre ideas in the words of great authors, then one such as I surely should search among the works of the greatest in the hope of finding adequate enunciation. And then, joyfully, I catch a glimmer of a half-hidden jewel in a dark nooky niche, the words of Nancy Byrd Turner: 'The bookshop has a thousand books, all colours, all hues and tinges, and every cover is a door that turns on magic hinges.' Ah, the prose of a proper word-

The welcoming façade of Select Books



smith: as true as Tell's arrow plucking that apple from junior's quivering noggin' ...

And speaking of remembering; that is exactly what booklovers do when they visit establishments like these – the kindness of nostalgia that warms the cockles of the heart (and elsewhere) when the Southeaster rips

with cold clammy fingers at the grey bare surfaces of our Mother City; when we remember the good ol' days, when we were smaller and skyscrapers so much taller; when we still saw magic sparkling in Christmas lights; when colours were more than well-chosen complementary hues and public transport was a mode of adventure - as it still is between the covers of these books. And we know now what we knew then: in places like this we can turn back time. And lose ourselves, but safely in the labyrinths of the mind, not physical mazes with dragons dressed in designer dungarees and sporting AK-47s.

Ironically, someone recently stated that crime novels are popular in South Africa because in those stories the criminals are caught. But David confirms my earlier statement that these days, bookshops specialising in fiction are getting scarce, while those focussing on non-fiction are doing better. And this is my point: besides the investment factor; besides revisiting familiar pathways, people are looking for answers to why we have gotten into this mess: where did our ancestors stray off the path, and can we find our collective way back? (*Here's hoping that cawing cadres of crows have not yet picked little Gretel's crumbs [and bones] off this footpath.*)

As I step out the door; I ask: 'Is this what you want to do for, well, as long as you can?' David looks me in the eye and says: 'Indeed. For as long as I can.'

As I sidestep beggars and other kinds of collectors along St George's Mall, I can still hear him explaining why he and other Long Street merchants regularly meet to discuss ways and means to safeguard the neighbourhood. 'Above all', he said, 'we strive to foster the spirit of Long Street, to preserve the memories of book shops by upholding a fine and respected tradition.'

**Long may this tradition live.**

In the end it is more than the selling of products. It is a most sacred service rendered. After all, it is as Channing put it: 'God be thanked for books. They are the voices of the distant and the dead, and make us theirs of the spiritual life of past ages.'