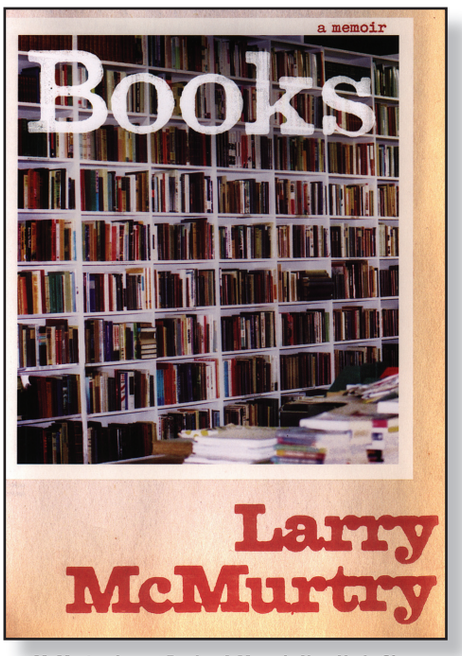
BY WILLIAM L. BUTTS

Snapshots of Larry McMurtry



McMurtry, Larry. *Books: A Memoir.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008. Small 4to. Hardbound, dust jacket. 259pp. $24.

NEARLY 25 YEARS AGO THIS budding bibliophile mailed novelist Larry McMurtry an oddball edition of *The Last Picture Show* for signing—bound in cheesy black paper over boards stamped to resemble tooled leather, published by an outfit named International Collectors Library. McMurtry returned it promptly, graciously inscribed and signed on the front flyleaf, with a baffling note: *"Could you please send me particulars on this edition, such as the address of The International Collectors Library. I have never seen this edition, never heard of it, and don't know but what it's a piracy....."*

I learned that McMurtry is not your garden-variety novelist and knows a thing or three about books. He has for more than four decades been a serious antiquarian bookseller. His shop, Booked Up, was long a mainstay of the Washington, D.C. book scene, and he now owns a large book operation out of the small Texas town of Archer, the setting of *The Last Picture Show* and site of his childhood.

McMurtry is no mere celebrity book dabbler, either. Like any hardcore bibliophile, many delightful signed books, autographs and manuscripts have passed through his hands over the years. *Books: A Memoir* shows a man with a passion for handling books since his early years in a "bookless ranch house." It consists of a series of bookish portraits—more like quick snapshots with 109 chapters squeezed into 258 pages. He charts his progress as a childhood reader—his first attempts at buying and selling books, and describes his career as owner of a bookshop that's bought all or most of about 30 other shops. All this, while cranking out his own bestselling novels.

Autograph collectors will thrill in the volume and variety of autograph material, and the tales behind them. There was the bookshop McMurtry bought in a bad neighborhood in Fort Worth, whose owner put any "really good book" in a paper bag and squirreled it away. "In one of them was a nice copy of Mrs. Calderon de la Barca's *Life in Mexico* inscribed to General William Tecumseh Sherman." One trophy McMurtry kept was "very salable in Hollywood: Mrs. D. W. Griffith's *My Life in Movies*. I bought a lovely, inscribed copy of Mrs. Griffith's book in Mexico City." And considered one of the all-time greatest books he ever handled is the limited edition of Winston Churchill's *Marlborough*—each of the four volumes inscribed by Churchill to the Duke of Windsor, each inscription using a different one of the Duke's noble titles.

From trust fund baby David Dorman at his short-lived Texas shop McMurtry acquired "a signed, limited copy of Dr. Rosenbach's *Early American Children's Books*, for which I paid a pittance." However, "Dorman chased me down and asked for it back—it was supposed to be part of his reference library, though, as far as I could see, there was no reference library." Later, when Dorman fled the country for tax reasons, McMurtry helped Dorman's mother run the shop. "Dorman wandered over with some excellent Texana—letters from Sam Houston, Stephen F. Austin, and the like... Grace herself wouldn't have known a Stephen F. Austin letter from a possum. There was just one catch: according to the reference books the whole lot belonged in the Rosenberg Library in Galveston."

If it sounds like McMurtry bought everything in sight, there are treasures aplenty he couldn't afford or missed out on. A noted Connecticut auction in 1977 featured "Faulkner's copy of *The Portable Faulkner*, in which Faulkner had written in mild rebuke that [Malcolm] Cowley had deprived him of what he had hoped would be the leisurely occupation of his old age. *The Portable Faulkner* brought $5,000." At that same auction appeared "a book I have regretted not competing for ever since: the dedication copy of Arnold Bennett's *The Old Wives' Tale*, simply inscribed: 'From the old man to the old Wife.' I like to read Arnold Bennett and have acquired some 110 volumes of his work."

Eccentricity being practically a prerequisite for antiquarian bookselling (yours truly excluded), eccentrics of all ilk populate *Books: A Memoir*. There was the eccentric Sheri Martinelli, friend of Ezra Pound and other literary figures, who appeared at Booked Up in "the first Winnebago to roll off the line" dressed in black from veil to toe. Her cache of 400-pound letters "stuffed in card boxes" were "way beyond our means," but "some [E.E.] Cummings letters" and lesser gems came his way.

Books: A Memoir shows disrespect toward the reader that I find off-putting. This shows in the form of a surprising number of "I think" and "I believe" statements, such as "George Kennan, a great-uncle, I believe, of recently deceased George Kennan," or "After the initial failure to lay the Atlantic Cable, a number of wealthy men, led, I think, by E.H. Harrian." Similar vagueness takes other forms when McMurtry visits Cannes: "On the way we passed one of Picasso's homes–or perhaps it was one of Charlie Chaplin's." Was it or wasn't it? It wouldn't take much effort to pin down whether George Kennan was in fact great-uncle of the other George Kennan, whether E.H. Harriman was in fact leader of this group of wealthy men, whether Charlie Chaplin in fact owned this house outside Cannes.

But these are petty annoyances in a memoir I enjoyed to the core. *Books: A Memoir*, is like flipping through an album of Polaroids. In its delightful disjointedness, it tells this bookman's story, with a beginning, middle and end, and is filled with many memorable anecdotes.

IMAGE COURTESY THE AUTHOR

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