

## BOOKSHOP CREATES A FELLOWSHIP OF READERS

BY DANNY HEITMAN, *FORUM* EDITOR



Cottonwood Books, my local bookshop, closed a couple of years ago, and life for me hasn't been the same. An errand recently

took me by the vacant building, and in the spirit of a mourner visiting a grave, I pulled into the parking lot to give things a look. Pressing my face to the window, I could see that the books had been carried off – a sight that seemed impossible when the shop was in its prime.

It wasn't a big store when it was open, but like a magician's hat that improbably contained multitudes, Cottonwood seemed to have everything. On one of my first visits nearly four decades ago, I'd sought a copy of "Travels With a Donkey in the Cévennes," a 19th-century travelogue by Robert Louis Stevenson that no one reads much anymore. Cottonwood's owner, Danny Plaisance, casually produced a cheap vintage edition from a far corner, throwing in a weathered collection of Stevenson's letters for good measure. Danny sensibly stocked old and new books, inviting



Danny Heitman stands outside the storefront of Cottonwood Books, which closed a couple of years ago. Like so many neighborhood bookstores, it was a place where readers from many walks of life could find fellowship.

*We were paradoxically alone together, in that peculiar form of fellowship that makes bookstores so special.*

his customers to stay as current as they wanted to be with literary fashion while also indulging the classics. I stayed mostly in the secondhand section, digging up unlikely treasures like Charles Lamb's antiquarian essays or an ancient pocket edition of Thomas Hardy's poems. The shop smelled of dust and must, old paper and dried glue. To live in Cottonwood's air for an hour or so wasn't so much to revisit the past as to inhale it.

So I was saddened, naturally, to peer through Cottonwood's window the other day and see the shelves all bare and pushed to the side, like the ravaged pillars of the Parthenon. But what struck me most deeply about the scene was the absence of the people. Frankly, I hadn't expected to miss Cottonwood's patrons as much as I do. It was a place where I savored the feeling of solitude, lost in thought as I combed the stacks.

I wasn't really alone, of course. Other patrons roamed other shelves, all of us respectfully quiet except for an occasional cough or whisper, congregants in the silent cloister of literature.

We were paradoxically alone together, in that peculiar form of fellowship that makes bookstores so special. Reading itself is that kind of fellowship – an act undertaken individually that connects us to the writers behind the words, to the publishers who spread them wide, to other readers near and far.

Danny Plaisance, a gentle soul who had closed Cottonwood because of ill health, died this summer. I joined the line at the church to comfort his widow.

In death, as in life, Danny had brought a community of readers together, each of us grateful for a gift of fellowship we'll never forget.

---

**DANNY HEITMAN** (Southeastern Louisiana University) is editor of *Forum*. He frequently writes about literature and culture for other national publications, including *The Wall Street Journal* and *Humanities* magazine.