
David Mason has had printed the talk he gave to the Toronto Centre for the Book at Victoria College, University of Toronto, on 30 November 1999. The booklet, printed in an edition of three hundred copies at the Coach House Press in Toronto, exists in two forms: twenty-six, handbound by Courtland Benson, are lettered and signed by the author; the rest are bound in stiff paper and numbered by hand.

The talk was about what he calls the centre of his life, his education, hobby, passion, and vocation: books and selling books. He deals with today’s market, the death of the small specialist bookseller thanks to the rise of Chapters and Indigo, the disappearance of many antiquarian bookstores, and what bookselling used to be like. Contradicting a competitor whose axiom was that the function of the bookseller was to serve the customer, Mason believes that his true function is to serve the book. In his words, he rescues books. In the trade this is called scouting, a pursuit that leads to endless myths among booksellers of books found in basements, bought for pennies and sold for hundreds of dollars. The thrill of the hunt, the element of gambling and risk, and the hunch are the essence of scouting. Then follows the satisfaction of owning, however briefly until it is sold, a prize find or, as a psychiatrist writing about collecting has labelled it, a magically potent object. He describes a process of osmosis — being surrounded by books is good for you. They offer comfort and security even if, for booksellers, there are few financial rewards. While normal business practice would expect a full turnover of stock three times a year, in antiquarian bookselling it would be more like three times a century. Mason’s buying and selling anecdotes, that he likens to fishing or playing poker, include his services to scholarship by matching books to researchers, with a good hefty personal profit to boot — what he calls the resolution of commerce and scholarship. There’s a book from D.H. Lawrence’s library, signed D.H.L., that Mason bought for $2.50 and in the process uncovered, so he believes, the genesis of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. Like many a book server, Mason tells a good story.