

A Rare Thing Indeed

A veteran New Haven bookseller and the town she calls home

Eva Geertz

“People can’t really believe I’m from here.” I have spent my entire adult life saying that to myself. Nearly every dinner party I’ve ever attended; nearly every person I’ve ever met at any job I ever had; my internist; my hair cutter; almost everyone I’ve met while living here, has been surprised to learn that I grew up here. But for me the here is really here: New Haven, on York Street.

I know there are other people like me around here because I went to elementary and high school with a few people who are still around; our paths cross every few years. Do they constantly feel that they have to explain that they grew up here? I don’t know. Perhaps it doesn’t come up in their day-to-day existence the way it’s always come up in mine. But I know that I am constantly aware that the streets I walk on when I go to work are the same streets I toddled on in the early 1970s. The Clark’s Dairy where I splurge on milkshakes in the summertime is the same Clark’s Dairy where my father taught me to eat an ice cream cone around 1974. My brother was, at the time, at the Neighborhood Music School, attending his weekly guitar lesson. My brother has a good ear but no musical talent, and does not play any musical instruments as an adult, but learning how to eat an ice cream cone proved to be an invaluable and indelible experience for me, a skill that has stayed with me through the years.

There is a class of people like me who grew up in New Haven. It is a multi-faceted class, but one can make generalizations about it: our parents were people who came here from somewhere else (New York or perhaps Chicago?) to take a job at Yale or some other noble institution. They taught, or they made money, or they did Good Works, or they engaged in some combination of the three. Their children were raised to achieve, and trained to go to excellent colleges. After college, they were supposed to leave New Haven and move to a big city (New York; perhaps a renegade would have chosen Chicago) and do something important along the lines of

teaching, making money, or doing Good Works; ideally some combination of the three.

As a result of this upbringing, many of my peers are now distinguished and/or well-to-do something-or-others, and not in New Haven. There are some who are respected or distinguished something-or-others here, having come back to New Haven after completing their doctorate or their medical residency or something like that. I am sure that while their parents are glad they're around, they're also a little mystified: Why would you come back to New Haven once you'd *left*? The whole point of everything we did for you was, you were supposed to *leave*.

I came back to New Haven after college because I had no money to relocate to my city of choice (Chicago, natch). I didn't plan to come back, and it was supposed to be temporary. I took a bookstore job because it was the only job I was offered. My goal was to save money to relocate, but it's awfully hard to save money when you're earning five dollars an hour. New Haven was a much cheaper city then (it was 1993) but even so, I was barely getting by. I got fired from my bookstore job as soon as the winter-course book rush was over, and panicked because I had no idea what I would do next, but I got lucky. Another bookstore owner asked me to work for him: he owned a shop that specialized in out-of-print and rare books. He offered me better pay and better hours. I loved the store, and had been a customer since it first opened. I took the job, even though it meant staying in New Haven, thinking, "How often in life am I going to have the opportunity to work in a store like this? Life will be Skittles and beer."

Life was good for a few years. I lived cheaply and fairly comfortably, in a ratty, grad-student kind of way, and I learned snappy comebacks to the inevitable questions that pissed me off. Customers would unfailingly ask me, "So, what do you really do?" "Are you in grad school?" "Are you thinking about grad school?" "Have you ever considered going to grad school?"

I wasn't a grad student. I was a bookseller with a sub-specialty in the world of used, rare, and out-of-print books. I learned the trade and went to book fairs and had a really good time. I was becoming skilled at something, and it was nice: I was still in New Haven, but I had dug myself a little niche. It was slightly marginal, but I was presentable enough to pass as respectable. I had found my calling: I was a book person.

When I felt blue or frustrated, I re-read books by Laurie Colwin, who seemed to specialize in describing underachieving young women who just wanted to be left alone yet also wanted, simultaneously, to be appreciated for their quirks, their taste in rock music, and their generally bad attitude toward everyone else. I embraced a novel that fell into my hands by chance, Elinor Lipman's *The Way Men Act*, which is set in a college town and is narrated by a woman who returns to her hometown (it's based on Northampton, I believe) after doing a stint in California and finds herself constantly vexed by town-gown social stresses. These books appealed to me because they reflected some better version of myself back at me, or because they gave me a sense of hope for my own future, which seemed hazy and unpredictable. Lipman's heroine was a floral designer on Main Street; I was a bookseller on Audubon Street. I read these novels and told myself everything would be okay.

One day a rare book firm in Portland, Oregon, contacted me to offer me a chance to interview for a position. I was surprised and thrilled, and flew to Oregon to meet the owners and check out the city, which was becoming a trendy place to live. I spent a week out there hoping I'd fall in love with the place, but I didn't. I thought it was fine, but I didn't *like* it. Still, I figured I should go. I was in my mid-twenties, I had no romantic attachment keeping me in New Haven, and it was one of those How Often In Life Will This Happen? things. So I bought a one-way plane ticket and began to plan to have my things shipped west. Another surprise came when the owner of

the bookstore on Audubon made a very nice offer to keep me working for him.

I thought about it. Since I didn't really like Portland; since the money the Portland business had offered wasn't so astounding; and since moving is a pain in the ass, I felt a little sheepish, but I stayed in New Haven and kept my job on Audubon Street.

Shortly thereafter, rents skyrocketed in Portland, and shortly after that, I became involved with the young man I would eventually marry. I was infinitely grateful that I'd stayed in New Haven, and began to see that being here was really a great thing in ways I couldn't have anticipated in 1993. I felt that New Haven may have been unfashionable and uncool, but that in terms of bang for my buck, there wasn't another city where I'd rather live.

I had job I loved; a tiny, cheap one-bedroom apartment I adored; and a daily routine that I cherished. I lived alone, worked minimal hours, and lived basically on my own terms. Should I have given this up to move to a bigger city to try to make my name? Plenty of people move to the big city and slink out with their tail between their legs, deeply in debt, miserable, humiliated.

I stayed in New Haven. My time was my own. I wasn't beholden to anyone. I seemed to be happier than many of my peers.

As time marched on, the rare-book business changed, much as new-book bookselling changed. The store I had worked at for seven years was affected by the rise of the internet; I quit before I was let go. I looked for and found other jobs in rare books, but after a few years I found myself in the strange position of being offered the position of book buyer at Atticus, a linchpin for the literary community of New Haven for decades. I took the job at Atticus, though I explained to the owner that while I meant well, I wasn't truly qualified for the position, having focused on rare books for ten years. I wasn't sure that good intentions would be sufficient to equip me for the job. Still, given the opportunity, it was something I ought to do. My husband thought it would be a mistake not to take the job. I would be

contributing to the community, he pointed out, working at Atticus. I would be part of downtown street life again. I would help town and gown find neat things that they wouldn't know about otherwise. I would be part of the new guard of the New Haven bookselling community, since so much of the old guard was closing shop.

I felt a sense of mission in taking that job that I hadn't felt in a long time. And I suspected that being someone who'd grown up in New Haven—around the corner from Atticus—would truly be an asset, not just a parlor trick.

I didn't last very long at the store; taking the job had been a gamble and I realized it wasn't a very good fit. I quit after two years. But, it's funny: during those two years, I had familiar conversations over and over again. It was almost like being on Audubon Street again. No, I hadn't gone to Yale. No, no PhD. The difference was that, as the buyer for Atticus, I would go to dinner parties and always have people telling me what an incredibly cool job I had. (When I worked in rare books, people asked me what I did and then had no response.) And as the buyer at Atticus, no one asked me what I was in real life. In a way, I earned respect being the buyer at Atticus that I'd never previously enjoyed, but I still felt that I was hovering on the edges of too many communities without ever being part of any of them. I maintained my marginal status without trying.

I expanded my repertoire of snappy answers to cover new routine questions, such as "How can I get a book published?" I was often hounded to order a local author's book, which tested my diplomatic skills, of which I have famously few. I hold the fairly unpopular view that being a local author is not automatically sufficient reason for a bookstore to stock your book. Bookselling is hard enough these days and every ordering decision is complicated. The author's place of residence shouldn't be the only reason a book is carried by a store. I never got good at saying no, but I said it a lot. Bookselling in New Haven means saying no to a lot of local writers who may be able to write a book, even a good book, but do not understand

bookselling. I'm sure this is a problem in every college town, in any place where there's a bookstore, even. Whatever: It was a professional challenge I was happy to leave behind when I quit.

I suppose I could have left any of these jobs and entered a graduate program somewhere to try to improve my professional lot, to become qualified in something more than just recommending books to people. But academically, as well as professionally, I'm not an achiever; I'm not even particularly ambitious. Liking to read is not the same thing as liking to be a student. I was a rather mediocre student. I was not interested in sucking up to professors, perhaps because I'd grown up around them and didn't think they were particularly worth sucking up to.

Much as I am not professionally ambitious, I am not even a driven or ambitious reader. I read relatively crappy books and then re-read them, when a better person would be devouring Victorian novels or trying to wrap her brain around Milton. I don't read for self-improvement or for professional betterment. This may have been my downfall as the buyer for Atticus: I never really understood why someone would read with an agenda, rather than just reading for pleasure. I just can't relate to that way of thinking. I tried to cater to the many reading publics that live in New Haven—there are many more than you may realize—but in the end, I left retail bookselling.

I miss jobs where I could browse catalogues, chat with wonderfully batty customers, and leave at the end of the day exhausted but filled with stories—and now I do other stuff. But I still have no plans to go back to school, and I'm still in New Haven. I have not, as is sometimes said of me, worked in every bookstore in town. I never worked at Book World, or Whitlock's, or Elm City Books, or the Yale Co-Op, or the Foundry. But I did work at stores that had big windows at street level and they made me visible and part of New Haven in a way I wouldn't have been had I been more ambitious, gotten a library degree, and thrown myself into librarianship. I didn't achieve, but I did try, in my own perverse way, to do good for my hometown.

My willful New Haven adolescence turned into willful adulthood in New Haven. I never thought I'd be here at this stage of life, but here I am, married, a homeowner. I appreciate New Haven a lot more now than I did when I was eighteen, and I hold it to be an incredibly underrated city, particularly for the Northeast. Sometimes I'm pissed at myself for still living here, but most of the time I'm glad to be around town, glad to know New Haven the way I do, remembering now-defunct bookstores, cafes, restaurants, and clothing stores. There have to be some people here who grew up here, after all. If everyone's an import, a city loses its soul.

Not so long from now I'll be wandering around my neighborhood with a little one in a stroller. We'll probably stay in New Haven for a while yet; at least, my husband and I have no immediate plans to leave. Our child may well eat her first ice cream cone, which I hope will be chocolate chip, like mine, at Clark's Dairy. She'll be like me in some ways, I imagine, maybe she'll have my eyes or hands or whatever. But I'm pretty sure she'll take after me in this regard: she'll be *from here*, just like her mother.