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Re-Read any good books lately?



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Written by Steven Nester

Jan. 19, 2011 - The answer for many is yes, especially if you're a baby boomer.

Boomers, it appears, are returning to the books of their youth in droves. Unfortunately no hard data is kept on what the vast majority of boomers are buying or reading, either by behemoth online retailers such as Amazon or Barnes and Noble among several, or by the many independent used and antiquarian book shops who get business shunted their way via these big internet sites.

Word on the street, though, where independent retailers deal with customers face-to-face in brick and mortar shops, or on internet sites devoted to boomers who reread and discuss these books, is that boomers are buying and reading the books they enjoyed in their youths.

When tens of thousands of new books are published every year why do grown men and women turn back the hands of time, in some instances to read about talking animals and teenaged sleuths who are smarter than they are? It's too early for the majority of boomers to enter their dotage, so a likely explanation is that they want to reconnect with childhood memories. Sometimes, it's to share a bit of their past with children or grandchildren. There may also be health benefits, as well. There are as many reasons there are books, but some are more apparent than others.

Karen Roberto, Professor & Director of the Center for Gerontology at Virginia Polytech Institute and State University says that it's all quite natural.

"It's pretty normal to 'revisit' the past as we move through the life course. It provides a sense of comfort and often new insight into previous experiences and influences." Most boomers would agree.

So what do the boomers tell us they're reading and why? It seems

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to be just about everything, but there are favorites. Many of the perennials like *A Wrinkle in Time*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Tom Swift*, the *Hardy's*, and *Nancy Drew* among many are still in print and can be picked up at the local chain store. But a large number of the juvenile and young adult fiction boomers seek is out of print, and that's where the internet and used and antiquarian dealers come in. The information presented here comes from querying websites that host chats for boomers to discuss their favorite juvenile and young adult books, and from surveying antiquarian booksellers and large internet booksellers.

A familiar book can be a connection to warm memories or give sustenance to the memories of the stages of personal development from child to young adult. Wendy Lesser, author of *Nothing Remains the Same: Reading and Remembering*, says that rereading books from ones youth is akin to looking into a mirror and seeing "the face of your own youthful self, the original reader, the person you were when you first read the book."

One boomer says she "found something to identify with in the main characters of each book, so rereading them gives me a chance to reconnect with these different parts of myself as I saw myself back then. And then, beyond the stories and characters themselves, these books bring the added value of nostalgia, comfort, feelings of peace and security, and the warmth of a visit with a cherished old friend. They offer a window to a time when my life was simpler."

Many boomers buy books they loved as children in order to make a connection with their children or grandchildren. Sandy Denny, an independent antiquarian bookseller says she's seen this. "The few 'baby boomers' that have purchased a juvenile book and returned information say it's either a book they remember from their childhood or their kid's childhood or it's for a grandchild—or it's a book their spouse had when he or she was young."

To some boomers, returning to the books of their youth can be more than a light-hearted trip down Memory Lane. "I was 50 years old and had never re-read a childhood book," says Suzanne from Lake Forest, California. "When I came across a brief mention of the *Betsy-Tacy* books, written by Maud Hart Lovelace, in *Victoria Magazine* in 1992, I gasped. My immediate action was to rush to my local library, grab every one I could find, and get in line to check them out. The first page I opened had the illustration of the two little girls playing in an old piano box, and the tears started to flow. I have since bought every edition and re-read them a couple of times, along with every copy of *Lois Lenski's* regional series, which were also a childhood favorite."

Suzanne's rereading gave her an unanticipated understanding of her past and how she arrived at the present. She discovered a previously unacknowledged affirmation that her life had a design, and this design was initiated by her reading. She states that "I think much of what brings me to read these books over and over again is the comfort derived from not only the affirmation that they were as good as I thought they were when I was a child, but in recognizing that I had a game plan for my life when I was young that developed from these books."



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It was a very emotional and profound visit. The lessons and examples that the Maude Hart Lovelace series exposed to Suzanne as a young adult were absorbed, stored, and put to practical use later in life.

"Having been the child of divorced parents in the 1940s, never knowing my father, and having been raised by my grandmother, I found a great deal of comfort in reading about the Ray family, their friends, and their traditions. I evidently retained the values and customs of the very traditional Ray family in my subconscious as, upon re-reading the books in 1992, I realized how many of them I had adopted in raising my own family."

Another motivation for boomers is to stay in touch with geographical roots. A listserv member says that "For most of my adult life, I've lived thousands of miles from my home base. I grew up in California, where my parents still live, and I chose to live in New England. Surrounding myself with these beloved books of my youth is a way to maintain that connection with 'home'."

Rebecca, a member of the Maude Lovelace listserv, has an extensive juvenile and young adult reading list, including Thurber, E.B. White, Dodie Smith, series books, and more. She says that rereading to these works, especially *The Wind in the Willows*, returns her to the geography of her past.

"I grew up on a farm and I think because of that *The Wind in the Willows* especially resonates with me in terms of being so strongly about a place and how much can be found and appreciated in one location."

There are, says antiquarian book dealer Dana Richardson, other motivations, and some not too easily divined, like the customers who come from out of the blue, never to return. "I think that most dealers that specialize in children's books realize that a large component of sales is 'nostalgia' books, especially the 'one time' sales. For example, I once sold a book to a sister whose brother used the same book for book reports in both 6th and 7th grade. She wanted it for a graduation present...he was getting his PhD!"

Aside from listservs, which are specialized and don't necessarily represent the large variety of titles published, common sense would have one believe that used and antiquarian booksellers possess the inside track on boomer trends. With just the click of a mouse a seller can zero in and stock up on what boomers are buying and reading. This is not really the case. The irony of the internet is that while it makes business easier to conduct and opens a vast selection to customers, booksellers can't with total certainty establish who they're selling to, or why.

Whatever information sellers do receive, whether they have a shop

or not, is anecdotal. Not only that, but aside from the series warhorses like Tom Swift, Nancy Drew, the Hardy's and a few others, used and antiquarian booksellers don't really know what specific books customers want. "There are no patterns as to subject matter for these books that I can see," says one bookseller. "If so, I'd be buying all those type books myself for resale."

Roger Cox, who runs an online bookshop from in a Pittsburgh suburb, disagrees. Cox has a list of over fifty authors, most of whom did all their publishing between 1940 and 1965. Their works, according to Cox, "are in constant demand and have sold over and over and over." While this list includes popular authors Maude Hart Lovelace, Robert Heinlein, and Andre Norton, none of the other fifty or so on the list are household names.

Cox also has a novel way of supplying what others label a vague demand, and that is to go straight to the source. He replenishes his stock by purchasing young adult and juvenile books from school libraries that want to thin their shelves for new titles. His warehouse contains over 30,000 books, and while not a traditional open shop, he will allow customers with appointments to visit and browse. Since most of Cox's business comes from one of the large internet book portals, it's impossible for him to see the person behind the order.

Many used and antiquarian book shops are strictly online businesses like Cox's shop, and many have no website to advertise their stock. 100% of their business is referrals coming through the anonymous channels of Amazon, Abebooks, Alibris, Barnes & Noble, TomFolio.com and Biblio.com. Of the several that responded to queries, none kept records of which demographic group is buying what.

The internet has been a boon to business but a bane to getting to know one's customers in order to gather information that could be helpful and profitable. Nialle Sylvan, owner of The Haunted Bookshop in Iowa City, Iowa, says she "can't really evaluate who the buyers are because my orders are mostly online and buyers do not usually disclose their age." Or their motivation.

The motivation for online purchases is difficult to predict, nearly impossible with the anonymity of the internet. Richard Davis, a spokesperson for ABEbooks says ABE keeps some records like the rest of the book portals, but none too specific.

"We have the records of everyone who has purchased from us. We don't know their ages except that they are old enough to have credit cards. We have done research and we know that the average age of our typical customer is 40-65."

But as far as refining that information to see what specific books have been purchased by whom and why, the antiquarian book business will have to step from behind the computer screen, interface with customers, and start recording sales. "This is very much an anecdotal part of our business that we hear from speaking to customers in customer service and when we meet booksellers at book fairs," says Davis.

As for linking a customer to a specific book, there are severe limitations, says Davis, and one is a result of the book business itself. "To an extent, we'd be able to measure people who bought an ISBN (International Standard Book Number) book that is

classified as juvenile or YA by publishers. Books printed before 1970 do not have an ISBN and they are simply impossible to catalog into genres."

Another indication that adults are customers for older out-of-print books is that they're plunking down good money for books that fall into the collectible category.

"There is a big segment of my sales that must be adults because of the cost of some books in the juvenile catalog," says bookseller Bill Horsnell, an online dealer. "Some for as much as \$350, for a Tom Swift Jr. set, or \$250 for a Blyton hard cover of her Adventure series. As for data, no hard facts, but the sales in the industry for early books is still strong with the higher priced books always selling before the cheaper paperback reprints sell. I can sell a \$100 hardcover before I sell the same paperback for \$5.00. Somebody must want the old for some reason, not just to read, but to own the book they had as a kid but at a very high cost."

So why should anyone care about the nostalgic reading habits of baby boomers anyway? Is this merely an indulgence—boomers prolonging their youth—or are boomers trying to tell us—and young readers in particular—something important? Any book that can create change in the world and affect someone on a personal level is the dream of all authors. It's what high school English teachers have tried to beat into their students' heads for years. A book that is remembered and hunted down for its positive qualities is a book that ought to be rescued for new generations. But how does the message of their potential value to others get broadcast to younger readers?

The trick to get them to read these classics won't be easy. Kelly Overton, a middle school and high school librarian in New York City, says getting student to read the juvenile and young adult classics from a generation ago is a "tough sell."

"I can't get kids to read Harriet the Spy, she's dated, even though the lessons kids could learn are totally contemporary."

It's not the book's fault either, says Overton. Readers' tastes move fast in the book world; even the seemingly indomitable Harry Potter is losing readers.

"Because kids change so fast there are very few classics that survive. They don't have a very long shelf life, and if kids can't identify with the characters they won't read it."

This makes perfect sense when letting young readers chose what they want to read. To create renewed interest in older books and perhaps even start a resurgence this position should be turned on its head and used as a marketing tool. A horse can be led to water and made to drink if one is crafty enough, and educators to who wish to get young readers into the world and perhaps mind of their parents when they were kids should perhaps whisper into the ears of publishers to explore reevaluating and reissuing some of the books that have tracked down.

Perhaps this is the real use for ebooks. Consumer spending is down and the publishing industry is in turmoil with dropping sales, book store closings, and layoffs. The fearsome Kindle and its cousins that loom on the horizon like some techno-beast ready to swallow the publishing industry might just work out in the

reader's and publisher's favor, as a cheap way of reissuing classic juvenile and young adult titles. There are plenty of them out there, and the first step in this project would be to have baby boomers stand up and identify these books.

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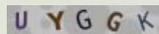
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