

A Note from the Author's Supervisor

SOTHERAN'S IS VERY OLD. We have been heaving around the world since 1761, so the arrival of something as trivial as the internet was like a fly landing on the hide of a brachiosaur. One afternoon in 2012 we decided to open a Twitter account, and once in a while someone would tweet about the hilarious antics of a Guardsman in 1874, and the rest of the time we forgot about it.

No one really noticed Oliver slowly taking it over. I first became aware that he was tweeting in late 2018 when he said something like, 'Oh, I've sent this tweet, I think we might get a complaint.'

As a new managing director I thought this was something I ought to get to know about, so I accessed our Twitter account. I was instantly agog. We had gone from about four followers to a thousand. There were messages about swords and tuna and demons that apparently lived in our cellars. There were cries from the heart and jokes about owls. There was even some stuff about books.

I don't think we did receive a complaint about the tweet, but I did think I should keep an eye on things, just so I could stay in touch with the parallel universe that was being

created. Oliver has spun a bizarre and extemporized multiverse out of the mundane reality of selling antiquarian books. Every now and then a broken statue of our reality emerges through the dreamscape, and sometimes Oliver engages with an urgent issue that pierces through all fantasy, but mostly he follows his whim and fancy to bring a weirdly augmented Sotheran's to the world. I usually look after the Twitter feed when Oliver is on holiday, and it is like stepping into a fever dream from which I emerge exhilarated and sweaty, as if I have completed a level of Super Mario from within the screen.

My word, it's popular though. We have getting on for forty thousand followers at the time of writing, which is phenomenal for an antiquarian bookseller, and shows not only the level of interest in the world of books but also Oliver's ability to entertain and enlighten a whole load of people we would not otherwise have reached. This book, which came about because of the Twitter feed, is a natural progression, a chance to carve a physical Rushmore from the digital mountain.

This whole crossover between the real and the virtual is, by the way, very uncomfortable for an antique bookseller. I still feel like we should be using quills. But we can't deny that the boundaries are shifting, and turning a bricks-and-mortar bookshop into a digital universe into a physical book feels very modern (but then again, so does the internal combustion engine).

So here you are, dear reader. Delve in, make discoveries, and meet some of the other Sotheranians who occupy our unique space. Not every event occurred exactly as

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described, and some of the characters are confluents and chimeras, and of course in my modesty I had to veto the entire twenty-page section devoted to Oliver's tribute to me as the 'most handsome, musically gifted and inspired boss in any possible universe'. But apart from that, this is all true-ish.

Chris Saunders,
Managing Director, Sotheran's

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Introduction: The Bookseller's Apprentice

IT WAS THE A-BOARD that gave the game away in the end. It had lost one of the stubby legs holding it upright (a victim, no doubt, of some long-forgotten street accident) and so was teetering on three. The paint had peeled off in large strips, but I could still make out most of the name: 'Henry Sotheran Ltd – Fine Books and Prints'. I had walked past twice before I'd found it, quietly tucked away on a side street known for being completely unknown. Sackville Street has a reputation for being a commercial dead-end despite being attached like a vestigial tail to Piccadilly and Regent Street, both of which bustle with umbrellas and car horns from dawn to dusk. People say businesses go to Sackville Street to die, which might explain the slightly unnerving air as I approached on that cold November morning.

I was in Sackville Street that day to interview for a job. People often ask how one gets a job at a bookshop like Sotheran's. Young and adrift in London, like many of my contemporaries I spent my days vainly grasping at shadowy career prospects which always seemed to slip through my fingers at the last minute. In a particularly dark moment,

when I'd drifted into some far corner of the internet on my search, I saw an advertisement for a bookshop seeking an apprentice. It wasn't a particularly good advertisement. The pay was Victorian, the expected duties nebulous, and the whole thing had an air of desperation about it. More comfortingly, however, no prior experience was necessary, and within a day I'd received a call asking me to attend an interview with the manager.

On the day of the interview, I was early – in the days before I became involved in books I frequently was. Striding confidently at the double door, I gave it a hearty push, the kind of push someone might make who you would hire on the spot. It didn't move, instead rattling about noisily. I yanked it. By this point I could see shadowy figures inside staring icily at my abortive entry attempts, but I persevered. Pushing the right-hand door, I stumbled inside, mumbling a half-hearted apology which was swallowed up by the diorama stretching out before me.

It's the smell that hits you first. Vellichor. There's something wistful about old books when they are gathered in one place. They have a faintly unsatisfied smell, as if they're all distantly aware that they've missed their chance to be a worldwide smash hit. I looked around at the colourful shelves of books, tables piled high with suspicious articles, crooked furniture and misplaced literary paraphernalia. You don't think of the word 'colourful' when you envision an old bookshop, but it's true of all the ones I know. The pillars holding the creaking roof aloft blocked out a full view of the shop floor, which only appeared accessible in its furthest reaches by dodging between dangerously stacked piles

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of classic literature. People milled about in the shadows, doors creaking open and closed. The only sounds were the curmudgeonly groaning of cases, the shuffling of feet, and a phone bleeping unanswered somewhere in the dark.

I'm not sure quite how long I stood there taking it all in. Eventually, I was saved from myself by a gregarious man with a mop of silver hair and a bad back who it transpired was Andrew, the manager. To this day I've never met anyone with quite such a talent for defusing an uncomfortable situation. I've seen people walk in ready to burn the shop to the ground, and three minutes with Andrew had them agreeing to dinner at some later point, buying a book and leaving with a baffled expression as if they couldn't quite remember why they came into the shop in the first place. Sotheran's is a small place, as I would come to find out, and if I'd thought the manager would be a far-off and unapproachable figure I was quickly disabused of that notion.

I was led down the grand stairs in the middle of the shop to the lower floor, and through the Print Gallery filled with posters, illustrations and other maddeningly distracting wonders. We breezed past them into a side room crammed with bibliographic reference books. Andrew gave me a rather apologetic look as he tried, with limited success, to extract two chairs from the debris. The door closed, and everything fell silent. Cramped bookshelves muffle noise from outside, a strange effect which also helps insulate the shop from the traffic on surrounding roads. If you're used to working or living in any large city, and especially one like London, you know that the background hum of cars and engines seeps into your soul – there are very

few places where you can escape from the constant muttering of the streets. But bookshops are one of them.

Perched on chairs in the tiny room, there was barely space for both of us to sit, and Andrew seemed to realize this as he inched a little further back into a stack of old bookselling magazines. This, he explained, was the Catalogue Room. Its purpose, he confessed, roughly translated to ‘this is where we put things when there is nowhere else for them to go’. Several months into my fruitless London job search, this felt oddly apt.

Part of Andrew’s knack for putting people at ease was his eagle eye for reading people from a distance. It’s a prerequisite for any decent bookseller really, but Andrew was, and remains, the expert. After no more than ten seconds sizing me up, he spent the rest of the interview idly chatting about the problems the shop had faced finding reliable new staff in recent years. It transpired – or so he confessed as I sat transfixed by this unexpected frankness – that each year the shop had hired some bright young thing, a star on the rise with degrees and qualifications to match, thinking themselves to have secured the Perfect Bookseller. Alas, in every case the prodigy lasted about six months before buggering off into the stratosphere of the art world where wages (and proximity to daylight) were in greater abundance. Andrew was looking for something different this time. He was looking for someone who wanted to stay, who was in it for the long haul. The staff, he explained, were getting whiplash from learning one new name a year and it was all very inconvenient. He laid out the terms: the hired apprentice would stay on for at least two years under a

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training scheme to transform them into a competent antiquarian bookseller, at which point the company hoped they would become a full-time member of staff.

I'll admit to you, reader, that I nodded like a performing seal. It's true that the wages for an apprentice bookseller seemed to have been frozen around when the Old Curiosity Shop opened for business in 1840, but it was better than the little to which I had become accustomed. More than that, compared to my recurring nightmare of cowering miserably in a cubicle, the job seemed like a lifeline. Even if I couldn't move without threatening to dislodge some precariously situated and priceless relic of company history.

The interview was over almost as soon as it began. I remember thinking I must have botched the whole thing terribly, because we were in and out before I really had time to process what was happening. I was sent home with a cheery smile and a 'we'll be in touch in a few days'. My heart sank.

At three o'clock that afternoon I received a call offering me the job. I will never be sure why. I have a small suspicion that they threw darts at a wheel of fortune, or simply got me confused with someone else and never found a good moment to correct the mistake. Regardless, a few days later I was walking back up to the double doors in a rather battered old suit and with a new sense of purpose.

It's funny, thinking back, that my journey started as simply as this. A half-hearted advertisement stumbled across online. A furtive interview. A quick polish of the shoes (never repeated). And suddenly I was a rare bookseller.



*Antiquarian gourd of nebulous origin, confidently engraved
with the likeness of Queen Victoria. Desirable.*



ANTIQUARIAN & GENERAL

*A primer on the art of bookselling, general occurrences,
confessions and misapprehensions of the literary kind &c.*

IT IS AMAZING how high a proportion of our stock is not actually books. Tradition has it that the literature is lumped in with miscellaneous nonsense and general bric-a-brac on the shelves at Sotheran's under a department called Antiquarian and General – a polite way of saying that no one really knows what else to do with it. As an apprentice with no skills (and later in my career as a bookseller with no skills) I was expected to help out with this sprawling department, which encompasses much of the strangeness Sotheran's has to offer. You never know quite what you'll find in Antiquarian and General. Fortunately for me, it also contains everything which the average person might be looking for. You want an Austen? Wonderful. It's probably over there near the bust of Prince Albert, in the cabinet above some rather ugly Byron we've never been able to shift. In one corner, roosting on a rickety stool and clutching a tankard of tea, is James.

James

IF I THOUGHT MY INTERVIEW at the shop had given me an idea of what to expect from my colleagues, I was mistaken. Until I turned up at the shop for my first day of work, the manager Andrew was the only colleague I'd met. His calm, sanguine attitude was innately soothing. He remains in my mind the archetype of what it means to work in antiquarian books, inhabiting an effortless serenity in the face of chaos that I have always struggled to emulate. This sublime state of being, I feel, was perhaps cultivated by keeping potential sources of stress (such as a bumbling apprentice) at arm's length. And so it transpired that I was passed on to James for training.

If Andrew was the heart that quietly, patiently kept blood pumping around the shop, then James was the spine that kept it upright. Tall and slightly crooked, he had the air of a scarecrow that had been left out in the sun for too long. From his paper-strewn desk in a dimly lit corner of the shop he watched over the books, guarding them with a suspender-clad perspicacity cultivated over many years to drive away shoplifters, ne'er-do-wells and birds of ill omen. I spent much of my first year under James's tutelage, and in many ways he encapsulated something of an older time; it

might seem impertinent to describe him as a fossil, but his endless, loving repairs on the shop left an imprint on the place, and I suppose eventually it shaped him in return.* Loping around like a grizzled but bookish wolf, he handled all the day-to-day mundane affairs of the shop. Thus my apprenticeship fell into his hands in the same way as anything else no one really wanted to deal with. It came to my attention several years into my role that no one in the shop apart from James knew where the rubbish went, who took it anywhere, or what happened to it. As far as anyone was concerned, it just vanished. (It transpired that James didn't *want* anyone to know, for reasons which will become apparent.)

Supposedly James had been apprenticed as a boat builder (*not* at a dockyard – the distinction was oddly important to him) before he wandered into Henry Sotheran Ltd one day and never left. Either way, everything he knew (and he knew *everything*) was the result of being at the bookshop from mid-morning till dusk each day for decades. In hindsight I am very grateful that I had him looking out for me during those first few months, but I didn't really have time for feelings of gratitude as they placed me at a Munchkin-sized desk in front of the double doors. It was explained to me that the desk had been designed for Victorian ladies,

* I use the word 'repairs' generously, because his well-meaning efforts rarely resulted in the offending door, shelf or case functioning in the same way after he had finished fixing it. James was a handyman of the self-taught variety, and the rest of the staff took the rather sensible position that it is rarely a good idea to argue overlong with a man who uses a hammer to solve most of his problems.

not for the lumbering six feet of clumsiness which now sat behind it, meaning I essentially had to ride the wretched thing side-saddle for years. I have, for various reasons, spent most of my bookselling career behind desks that are far too small for me, but this very first desk I resented most of all.

A few days passed peaceably in the shop, sat at my tiny desk, before I realized I hadn't really done anything. I was used to a busy environment – my previous job was doing paperwork at a legal firm. I was dreadfully bad at that, and fled the situation before they could fire me. But the change of pace was jarring. At Sotheran's, much to my amazement, the phone didn't really ring at all (sometimes for hours). People sat quietly at their desks, working on something peculiar and arcane which I couldn't pretend to understand. Sometimes people wandered in, and James would swoop down from the rafters to direct them to the right shelves. Andrew, the manager, sat at the desk adjacent to me, occasionally kindly asking if I was doing all right. Yes, I was doing all right, I would confirm, too scared to mention that I wasn't sure what I was supposed to be doing. Eventually it dawned on me that if I didn't ask for something to do, my ossified remains might eventually be found cradling the tiny desk in my arms by a team of confused archaeologists. No sooner, however, had the thought entered my mind than James manifested from a shadowy enclave with a box of books. I was to be taught cataloguing.

At the time I was baffled by the events unfolding before me, having no idea at all what was meant by cataloguing, even if I was glad to have something to do. The task seemed

to involve describing the books using odd words, and it was a much better pastime than sitting there twiddling my thumbs.* The books I was being asked to handle were not rare books, but things James had picked up on his many attempts to sneak second-hand books into the shop. As a new recruit in a shop full of mysterious colleagues whose workings I didn't really understand, this was perfect teaching material – stuff I could afford to get vastly wrong without any real consequence. It spoke to a schism among staff, however, about what it means to be an antiquarian bookseller.

Though they might all seem the same at a glance, second-hand books are not always rare books, and rare books are not always antiquarian books. James was a bookseller who, despite his expertise in all things book-related, wanted to sell second-hand books. He enjoyed selling £10 copies of anything he could find in a car boot sale or a cellar, or retrieve from the bin of a publisher's remainder stock, to anyone who walked in off the street. He had no interest in computers, no interest in cataloguing rare books, and he marked up everything in a manner that wasn't technically criminal but probably should have been. It was a bookselling model that harked back to days gone by when people would (I hear) walk in off the street and depart with piles of books loaded on to their carriage. James was very fond of waxing lyrical about the days when people were less picky – he considered the 'modern' and technological

* For an explanation of this dark art, see 5. Cataloguing for Beginners.