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# the eye

## GREAT BOOKS

why alternative  
distribution matters

*by Devin Briski*





# *Great Books*

why alternative distribution matters

by Devin Briski  
photos by Samuel Draxler

An encounter 3,000 miles from home reminded Steven Hann of the importance of his job.

“About five years ago, I was in Berkeley visiting a friend. A girl comes up to me and says, ‘You told me to read Hart Crane, and I liked him so much, now I’m doing my Master’s on him!’” says Hann. “That really showed me that I made a difference with somebody. And I think that is important, that you do make a viable connection with the community.”

Far from an inspired recommendation during a professor’s office hours, this grad student’s fateful tip-off took place in front of what is now Milano Market, where Hann has been selling books off and on since 1974. A self-described “area book purveyor and general curmudgeon,” Hann displays a handpicked selection of science fiction and mystery-laden pleasure reading alongside more academic and theoretical books. The set-up is inherently interpersonal; customers inevitably become entangled in conversations about fiction, neighborhood gossip, haggling wars, and contentious debates over Hann’s fold-up table.

In 1999, sociologist Mitchell Duneier published *Sidewalk*, a compelling ethnography of sidewalk book vendors on Sixth Avenue. The book grounds Duneier's own observations and interviews in theory, demonstrating how the actions, personalities, and relationships between these vendors shaped public space in downtown Manhattan. He centers the book around Jane Jacobs' dictum in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*: that public characters offer eyes upon the street to discreetly maintain norms. Duneier's research was conducted 15 years ago, fresh on the heels of New York's crack epidemic and Giuliani's "broken windows" crusade. Today's New York is markedly different: We are witnessing Bloomberg's controversial third term and the public protest of New York's financial sector through the Occupy Wall Street movement.

Late Monday night, the NYPD and the Department of Sanitation cleared the OWS protesters from Zuccotti Park, making 150 arrests. Perhaps one of the more symbolically startling casualties of the eviction: 5,554 donated books the movement had organized into a library that operated on the honor system were taken away in dumpsters. Bloomberg later announced that Occupiers could pick up their "property" from the Department of Sanitation, but volunteers looking to reorganize the library in Foley Square report on their blog a significantly diminished and damaged inventory. Earlier in the weekend, book vendor Fred Woolfolk, who sells and sleeps near Duane Reade on 111th Street, had his property—including the inventory of books he sells for income—seized by the 26th police precinct during the night after a neighborhood resident repeatedly complained about his presence on the street.

As the OWS movement has gained international momentum, questions have arisen about the interplay of capital, power, and access to space and information in this city. This semester, a group of students launched a weekly book swap called the "The Poetics of Exchange" to encourage a more active and participatory information exchange,

reflecting the goals of the OWS people's library. I set out to replicate Duneier's project with a different focus: What role do sidewalk book vendors play in shaping the intellectual life of Morningside Heights? Similarly, what are the implications of disseminating information through an alternate model in the shadow of mammoth Columbia?

**The Poet/Polemicist of 113th Street**

Even before my conversation with Hann began, it had already been interrupted. A man walked up to the table facing Milano and wordlessly set down five books. Hann picked out three, and handed two back. The man looked at me: "You like vampires? This looks like it's up your alley," handing me a large-print book that Hann had just rejected. Ouch.

Meanwhile, I watch Hann display *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and a new bilingual poetry collection entitled *Lebanon: Poems of Love and War*. "Bilingual things are always interesting, and this one especially," he says authoritatively. Forty-six years selling books in Morningside can teach a vendor some tricks of the trade. The man selling to Hann is part of an extensive network of street regulars with whom Hann has cultivated reciprocity over the years. This man brings Hann found books for a few extra bucks, and Hann expands his inventory without leaving his chair. It's a public, grass-roots exchange—one that incorporates candidness, conversation, and a degree of chance.

I quickly learn that more than physical books

**"THAT'S WHEN KNOWLEDGE BECOMES POWERFUL—WHEN IT IS LOCKED UP IN SOME SECRET LOCATION AND USED BY PEOPLE IN POWER."**

are exchanged across this table. Hann's discussion on vending strategies is interrupted when another man hands him a container of fried rice. "We ship food back and forth, because he's got the Chinese place right by him. And I get him stuff from Milano's or Deluxe," Hann explains.

Hann is affectionately referred to as "Papa Smurf" among the other vendors. The origin of his paternal status is clear: he has successfully developed an extensive network in the immediate area. These connections fuel book vending success, and fund his creative side projects: writing fiction, poetry, and journalistic articles.

He shows me a personal poetry collection titled "Blonde, Blue-Eyed, and Handsome" that he sells for five dollars alongside used books at his vendor table. The collection was published by Fractious Press, a small subset of Seven Story Press, in 2010. He has sold 400 copies, and notes that, "The way I see it, I don't have 400 friends. So I must have sold them because I'm good."

As students, we read required and recommended books, we argue about them in seminars, we compare them in essays, we use them to inform our political views and sense of morality, and some of us decide on our majors—possibly even our life courses—as a result of the books we read. We must be aware of the influences—professors, friends, and media—that direct the ideas we are exposed to, and contribute to how we understand the world.

Media theorist Marshall McLuhan argues that "the medium is the message" in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Any medium embeds itself in the information or commodities it transports, influencing how knowledge is received. On a macro scale, the nuances of a particular technology will determine its impact on society (its "message"), more so than any information or commodities it may transport.

On an individual level, purchasing a \$4 used copy of *Republic* from a sidewalk book vendor versus buying it on Amazon may or may not lead

to a conversation or a chance encounter that shapes the buyer's reading of the text. However, a society that distributes literature primarily through public tables with vendor-curated book selections—versus one that does so via self-directed database searches and algorithm-informed recommendations—will necessarily have different social and epistemological potentials.

The Columbia University Library System houses 10 million volumes, but as CC senior and initiator of Columbia's new book swap Alex Klein points out, the organization of a library determines paths of exposure to certain ideas.

"On the one hand, books are allowed to circulate, but on the other they're all stacked in this one place and they can only circulate to people with this little ID card," he describes. "That's where knowledge becomes powerful... when it is locked up in some secret location and it's used by people in power—they have the privilege and the power to access this sacred knowledge."

Back on 113th Street, another passerby interrupts Hann's discussion on the implicit classism of restaurant selection on Broadway—"Deluxe is part of a chain. So is Le Monde. What they mean is they don't want a Burger King and McDonald's because they attract 'the wrong kind of people,'" he fumes—to alert him that a nearby super may have a collection of architecture and urban planning books to clear out.

Later, Hann is describing a loaded experience where another journalist misquoted him—"Next time I'll sue their ass. I'll get people who can. I know people who can. I'm also a member of PEN—it's a writers union"—before being distracted by two young students professing their love of Terry Pratchett.

It's hard to tell which is more frequent: opinions expressed by Hann that may offend a touchier person, or the number of inquiries from friends and customers, purchasing items, and stopping by to check in. Departing from title scanning in the Butler reserves and algorithm-determined Ama-

zon recommendations, it's Hann's personality that distinguishes this site of exchange. Customers may or may not agree with his opinions, but they definitely cannot avoid them.

His "Mayor Bloomberg's third term is illegal" rant is cut short by a student asking about his progress on a freelance article. He squeezes in a recommendation for an artist called "Viagra and the Hitmen" from a Detroit-based art-collective named "Destroy Our Monsters" for a customer purchasing a Shaggs CD, before launching into a polemic revealing animosity towards Columbia students:

"The only time you'll really know that this Occupy stuff is working is when you wake these kids at Columbia up... These kids will be the last to support this because their mommies and daddies are the 1 percent," he declares. "Most of them will not go below 110th or above 125th the whole time they're here.... They have this air of entitlement that is disgusting."

Some students would beg to differ, at least with regard to Hann's comment about students waking up. Despite Hann's depiction of Columbia as a citadel of unjust wealth, student participation in the Occupy movement is growing, as demonstrated by this week's activist events. In line with Klein's comments about knowledge and power, many of the efforts target the establishment of new models for discourse and dissemination. The recent OWS book confiscation put ideas about free access to knowledge on the radar of even lukewarm sympathizers.

A few blocks north of Hann's table on a chilly afternoon, students gather around a guitar case with a bubble lettered sign reading "The Poetics of Exchange," and a sheet listing their personal past course books and pleasure reading. As passersby pick up flyers for local activist events pinned to string hanging from the guitar case, an impromptu saxophone-guitar-harmonica jam session erupts.

Klein describes why facilitating an active exchange (as opposed to maintaining a passive in-

ventory) is important. "It's nice to imagine where they [these books] will go and how they might change someone else's life," he explains. "There's word of mouth and then there's dissemination. I think that's what's really nice about dissemination is the influence these little seeds will bring is totally indeterminate. You never know, but you know something will be shared."

The swap is loosely held from 12 to 2 p.m. on Fridays, and uses gift economy logic to facilitate a more open, participatory forum for recommending books and sharing ideas than is found elsewhere on campus. Its position facing Butler's neoclassical facade lined with preeminent philosophers does not seem accidental.

"It [the book swap] is a way of putting knowledge out in the open, rather than sequestering it away, which is one kind of mission or dream that a lot of people I've been talking to have," says Klein.

**"THIS IS MY MAIN HANG. I'M HERE AS LITTLE AS POSSIBLE: WHEN I NEED THE MONEY OR WHEN THE WEATHER'S NICE."**

"In a lot of departments, knowledge is behind locked doors. And there are a lot of ways to reinscribe the purpose of the intellectual." In the wake of activist movements, lecture halls can seem claustrophobic and critical theory empty without an equally vigorous effort to share the ideas and perspectives cultivated within Columbia outside the gates. Likewise, what's a seminar without a diverse set of experiences to ground and direct the conversation.

And despite his hostility toward the general Columbia student body, Hann wholeheartedly approves of the book swap. "I've heard of that [the book swap]. Good! The more the better."

Meanwhile, Klein is supportive of sidewalk book vendors, tying their public presence to the

**FACES OF A PAST BROADWAY**

*The summer of 1995, Larry took photos of his regular customers, fellow sidewalk vendors, and local business owners. Some of his photographic subjects are still regulars on the street, while other figures have moved on.*

FROM THE LEFT: Steven Hann vends outside Milano; Danny Elias sells records and comic books in front of CitiBank; John is local resident and Broadway regular

TO THE RIGHT: Morning was a book vendor that passed away; Scott was owner of former business Academy Hardware (location of today's Vareli); Alex also worked for Academy Hardware



goals of the Occupy movement. “All these little encampments on the sidewalk, people trading things, people playing chess or selling books, they’re like these little points that create tangles in all the threads of people passing, and that’s where communities gather,” he says. “Any kind of occupation of public space like that encourages discourse and collisions and overhearing and all that kind of stuff is a really positive way to subtly resist this hidden knowledge of the state and those in power.”

### The Unintentional Documentarian Between 111th and 112th

“I’ve been around like a donut.” Dry humor aside, Larry—a vendor who sells sporadically between 112th and Broadway—hints at a striking truth about sidewalk vendors: they run Broadway’s longest lasting businesses. As restaurants like Empanada Joe’s and bars like Campo become dated references in the span of one undergraduate career or even a semester, sidewalk book vendors are here to stay. Larry notes that when he first began vending twenty years ago, only four to five of the businesses on the stretch from 110th to 116th were the same as they are today.

He reveals himself to be somewhat of an unintentional block documentarian when he pulls out a box of photos from the ‘90s, all taken from behind his table. He flips through, relating brief memories and anecdotes about the subjects: vendors, local business owners, and neighborhood regulars, many of whom are still around.

“She works at Columbia; she got her doctorate here; she’s a teacher who lives in the neighborhood,” Larry lists off in a gravelly voice. “I don’t know where he lives, but he works downtown and he comes to the neighborhood with his dog. Here’s a guy who’s in Utah now, he used to own a bookstore around here, his father...”

He periodically calls to passerbys who may recognize the subjects and the era. A number walk over and share a moment of nostalgia. Each photo shows a single person in dated wear standing proximate to Larry’s vending table. To Larry, these photos are “just fun”—he doesn’t consider himself a neighborhood historian by any means, but a guy with a camera who knows a lot of people.

Across the street, record vendor Danny Elias blinks when I show him Larry’s photo: “Is that me?” Elias recognizes Morning, a deceased book vendor, and Scott, owner of the former Academy Hardware without prompting. Elias, Larry, and Hann have worked here for over twenty years. Their presence has socialized the space, and these images reflect a shared consciousness that binds the vendors to each other, to these streets, and to the neighborhood regulars. They remember who was there, and what it was like. They also remember what the neighborhood has lost.

Many eyebrows have furrowed over the ability of independent bookstores to stay afloat in the information age, and, with the recent bankruptcy of Borders, the future of even corporate bookstores seems uncertain. In Morningside, we’ve recently witnessed the closing of Morningside Bookshop and Teachers College Bookstore in the past few years.

Hann lists off, “The one used bookstore at 118th

and Amsterdam and Columbia tripled the rent on that so they went under. They were called Last World Books. Now they’re another copy center. It’s like, Borders closed, Barnes and Noble is talking about it...”

Though now an independent business, Book Culture was opened with the support of former Provost Jonathan Cole, and it can count on the semester to semester demand for specific course books. Bank Street Bookstore is affiliated with Bank Street College, while Hue-Man bookstore on 125th and Frederick Douglass Boulevard is Harlem’s stand-alone indie bookstore.

Independent bookstores can uniquely cater to their neighborhoods, serving as a venue for local authors to host readings and sell their merchandise. Book Culture owner Chris Doeblin describes an obligation the store feels to serve Morningside’s diverse constituencies, which he identifies as University affiliates, the local literary scene, and people involved with N+1, Dissent magazine, and other New York-based journals. Hue-Man collaborates with businesses to offer discounts to local residents and free books to neighborhood schools through an initiative named The Power of One. Independent bookstores have also been associated with providing access to underrepresented, controversial or niche literature.

Chief Financial Officer of Hue-Man Kenneth Allen offers insight into the necessity of a physical space: “When you get together people of a lot of different opinions and they manage to find common grounds on areas, it becomes a meeting of the minds. ... That becomes an integral reason why a physical store exists, because people who might not ever sit in the same room manage to cross each others’ paths.”

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Sidewalk vendors may not be able to offer four walls and a temperature-regulated space for conversation to patrons, but they also don’t have to pay rent. While the viability of independent bookstores continues to be in question, the sidewalk vendors on Broadway seem confident that their position is secure.

## THE LANGUAGE OF “CLEANING UP” AND “SANITATION” WAS USED TO JUSTIFY BOTH SEIZURES.

“Everything changes,” Larry comments. “The only thing that doesn’t change is the books. The books have a lifetime. They last. You can buy them and compete with the new published books.”

He sounds poetic, but Larry is speaking literally: The demand for specific books doesn’t change much from year to year compared to the demand for other commodities. Despite tenuous claims about new and improved editions and revamped cover art, used classic books are functionally the same as new ones.

Book vendors can lead comfortable lifestyles if they learn the craft; Hann points to his 26th Street residence as proof of his success.

The flexibility of vending also allows for vary-

ing degrees of participation, and accommodates a spectrum of ambitions. Larry prioritizes less time on the sidewalk. “This is my main hang,” he dryly comments. “I’m here as little as possible—when I need the money, or when the weather is nice.” As far as dividing inventory, he keeps it simple. Scarce antique books are sold online, while “formula books: Fitzgerald for English, and Freud” are sold on the street.

Fred Woolfolk, who sets up in front of Duane Reade on the same block as Larry, takes a different approach. Woolfolk has only been vending a year on Broadway, and he only sells books he finds or books that are donated to him.

He also doesn’t worry that much about his selection or his profit. “Anything I can find, anything I can put out,” he says. He’s not the reader that Hann is, but he doesn’t mind making do with little. “I just take a wild guess on what people would like. Some days I have \$1 days, some days I have \$2 days. ... I’m not a person that needs a lot.”

Woolfolk sleeps on the same block he vends on during the day, making him somewhat of an omnipresence. While Larry and many others vend exclusively when they need money, Woolfolk approaches vending as a way to pass the time, an excuse to interact with people, and a supplementary income.

“What else would I be doing right now? Homeless and nowhere else to go. Getting into trouble, going to jail, that’s not me. I’m a lot smarter than that.”

### The New Vendor on the Block

The second time I talked to Fred Woolfolk, he wasn’t having a great week. Woolfolk’s sprawling sheets with his eclectic selection were replaced by two flattened cardboard boxes and a humble inventory. Gone were his vintage theater advertisements and his usual luggage containing his personal belongings.

As I was asking him what happened to his inventory, a late-aged woman with short reddish hair walked by. The two exchanged tense looks and she shook her arm, hand clenched around her cellphone. Woolfolk looked pained.

Apparently, this is Dorothy, bane of the sidewalks. Woolfolk had described her to me in our previous interview: “She’s like 80 years old, and she wants to clean up Broadway.”

According to Woolfolk, the 26th precinct had seized his personal property and his book inventory after continued pressure from this Morningside Heights resident.

“She called the corporate office at Duane Reade and told them that I have all my books out here. They came here Friday morning with a garbage truck and took all my books, my clothes, everything. It’s the second time,” he accuses. “She called sanitation on me, she called police on me, and she called the Parks department.”

He also has a court date scheduled for Nov. 21. “She’s saying I snatched her phone out of her hand and hurt her wrist,” Woolfolk relates, explaining the gesture I had just witnessed.

“She calls up people and tells them that she’s on the board at Columbia University, and that gives her the right to tell them to take the books from where I’m at,” he accuses. I could not locate the Dorothy in question for her side of the story

Steven Hann sells his poetry collection "Blonde, Blue-Eyed and Handsome" for \$5 alongside his usual inventory.

## THE "OH MY GOD" GIRLS

They're always female. Always college students. I've never heard anybody younger than 18 or older than 25 use the phrase so much. Everything is so-so-so "Oh my god!"

—I saw you in class 10 minutes ago.

—Oh my god!

—That's a nice dress you're wearing.

—Oh my god!

—Let's have lunch.

—Oh my god!

—I don't have anything else to say.

—Oh my god!

If Jesus Christ Himself came down to Earth they'd say

—OH SHIT!

And do it.

(and there is no "Dorothy" on Columbia's Board of Trustees), but the manager at Duane Reade confirmed part of Woolfolk's story. "There's a lady that complains from time to time," he confirmed. "We call the cops, that's it," but neglected to give further comment.

Another street vendor that requested anonymity confirmed many of Woolfolk's comments. "Everybody knows about this lady. Supers, handiman, food vendors, the vegetable store, everybody knows. Everybody is tired of this lady, nobody likes her," the vendor says. "She says she's a community member. If she is a community member why doesn't she come during the night time? Why does she come day time and screw up everybody? It's not right."

Duneier narrates the story of young City Council member Edward Wallace aggressively petitioning and successfully passing a bill protecting the right to sell written work in New York City. The bill was inspired by a poet named David Ferguson, who was repeatedly arrested and harassed by police for distributing his literary magazine, *Box 749*.

Signed by Mayor Edward Koch in 1982, the Wallace amendment affirms that "it is consistent with the principles of free speech and freedom of the press to eliminate as many restrictions on the vending of written matter as it is consistent with public health, safety, and welfare." Today, any vendor selling written matter is exempt from the non-essential restrictions placed on general merchandise vendors.

It's interesting to note that this bill does not just protect political or creative not-for-profit books; Snooki's best selling memoir and Fabio-

covered novels are protected alongside the rhetoric of Aristotle and Angela Davis. A literate population is seen as an end in and of itself.

In Western civilization, the written word has been historically associated with critique and knowledge in a way other media are not. To the people who deal with books, this makes sense.

"If you're watching a documentary, you're getting out of it what a film maker and his little trolls decide to put in there," Hann comments. "I'm sure if Philip K. Dick had ever seen *Blade Runner*, he would've puked. ... Film is basically presenting a book or any kind of knowledge—if you can call it that—to the lowest common denominator."

Hann similarly deplores the number of students he sees more interested in movies than books. He notes with disgust that a local librarian said the nearby New York Public Library lends out more DVDs than books.

"Reading is much more in depth and involved medium than most of the others," adds Allen. "In our African history section you get at things that can't be covered without volumes."

The news of NYPD confiscating the Zuccotti Park library was so shocking partially because of the association of books with dissenting ideas. The scene was reminiscent of *Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury's politically-charged novel about a dystopic future where the state actively polices the possession and distribution of books. Written during the reign of McCarthyism in Congress, the opening scene describes "firemen" rushing into a to spray an elicit library with flames that destroy period books, but not the house's futuristic flameproof walls. The firemen use hoses to start fires.

With the recent Zuccotti Park evacuation and the seizure of Woolfolk's book inventory, the language of "cleaning up" and "sanitation" was used to justify policing and confiscation efforts. Striking photos of the Department of Sanitation power hosing the park complement the movement's Tweets about thousands of books being hauled out in dumpsters. When Occupiers retrieved the books Wednesday, they reported that between 2,000 and 4,000 books were missing, and much of the inventory had been damaged or destroyed.

All the same, the event has invigorated the movement: ReOccupiers have begun rebuilding a library in Foley Square and attention has lead peoples' libraries—physical and digital—to sprout up nationwide.

Back on Broadway, Woolfolk is also building his found and donated inventory anew.

Despite New York's protection of book vending, Woolfolk could have been cited for breaking several other regulations. Books must be displayed on a fold up table rather than the sidewalk directly, and there are numerous sanitary, fire hazard, and space restrictions that could have justified the seizure. Woolfolk is sure that the seizure was targeted at him: "Everyone knows my stuff is by the phone booth," he says.

This isn't the first time there has been tension between book vendors and businesses. Though Hann cites a general supportive spirit between vendors and Morningside shops, Doeblin de-

scribes Book Culture's relationship with the vendors as "an uneasy one."

"There are several people outside that might sell books stolen from our store," he claims. "That can be challenging." Spectator has previously written on this issue, to the chagrin of Hann, who mistakenly ended up in a photo accompanying an article not about him.

According to Allen, things are different in Harlem with Hue-Man and its nearby vendors. They send customers to each other, and regularly support and facilitate the others' endeavors. "We try and drive business for each other because we're all in the same business, and we're all one community," Allen says. "Simply put, knowledge is our main goal, not just the selling of books but the dissemination of information to better everyone."

## "EVERYTHING CHANGES. THE ONLY THING THAT DOESN'T CHANGE IS THE BOOKS. THE BOOKS HAVE A LIFETIME."

As far as inter-vendor tension, it is clear that Woolfolk is somewhat of an outlier due to his newbie status. He's only been vending a year, and his approach is different from those of veteran sellers Hann and Larry.

Larry describes, "He's the new one—he's more social than booky."

Woolfolk is happy to shed light on this observation. He explains, "Other vendors don't like me because my prices are low and I give away a lot of stuff. ... I'm here for the people; I'm not here for the books."

Woolfolk is forming connections on this block that may ensure his continued station in front of Duane Reade. He has befriended food cart operator Khan. Woolfolk claims that Dorothy has also called the Health Department on Khan's food cart, leading to a fine, but Khan refused to comment on the situation.

Hann explains that the vendors "get along fairly well—nobody really steps on each other's toes." Elias adds, "Sometimes we kick each other's butt, but mostly we get along."

I walk by Woolfolk's stand to confirm a few facts only to find him fast asleep in his chair. A young man attempts to wake him and purchase a book, before a passerby says that he should just leave Woolfolk a dollar.

As I scan his inventory, the buyer in question starts talking to me about the book he was planning to purchase, *LSD and the American Dream*. "The back cover quotes Cary Grant saying he did not know what love is until he tried LSD. Isn't that incredible?" I turn to him. "Huh?" He keeps talking, "If you want it, I can also just buy it on Amazon.com, it costs like a cent there."

Now it's my turn to poke Woolfolk, but, after a gentle tap, I decide to heed the earlier passerby's advice. "I'll come back later anyway," I think as I leave a neat stack of change by his chair.

"It's kind of cool right?" the other customer says as he watches me. "Not a lot of places in New York that still operate on the honor system." ●