

Scott Meyer, A Writer's Bookseller

By Steven Lewis, *Dutchess Winter 1997*

Regarding the supposed romance of book writing, Samuel Johnson said way back in the enchanted 18th century, "Sir, no man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money."

Well, the same may be said about the equally poetic occupation of bookseller. One would have to be completely daft to open a shop and sell books simply for the love of the printed word. Taking some liberties with Vince Lombardi's famous pronouncement on winning, profit isn't everything in business, it's the only thing.

Yet, I think I speak for many serious writers who would say –beyond the earshot of publishers- that they'd write for free if they weren't getting paid. And, after browsing through the aisles at the Merritt Bookstore in Millbrook for many years, I have no doubt that its proprietor, Scott Meyer, loves the weight of a good book in his hands as much as the texture of the money that passes his way in exchange.

Scott is a writer's bookseller. Like Hemingway's Montoya-the innkeeper from *The Sun Also Rises* who had a passion for bullfighting- Scott is an aficionado of the art of writing. He reveres the language. He adores his loyal customers. He cherishes his staff. He treasures his books. And he loves writers.

All of which is to say that he truly understands the passion that goes into putting words on paper. Just ask him about his writers or his customers or who's done a book signing in the beautiful aerie above the bookshop on Front Street in Millbrook. His eyes light up and the kindly looking proprietor is instantly transformed from a businessman into a slimmed down yet ever jolly red-haired Saint Nick absolutely delighted to be sharing his passion with you. He'll practically sing about the 600 people who lined up in and around the outside of the shop for the Mary Tyler Moore book signing and how the gracious lady shook hands, kissed babies and signed books for two straight hours. He'll croon over Katherine Neville, customer and writer (*The Eight* and *The Calculated Risk*), who lives in Radford, Virginia, but buys her books at Merritt. He'll stop right in the middle of his song to gently tell a child not to run around with a lollipop in his mouth, and then somehow segue into a story about Laura Voght, a community minded soul who brings in bags of bags so he can recycle the paper.

Ask him about special orders and he'll boast that he receives requests from as far away as Israel, Brazil and Australia. He'll let you know how he once located a Ukrainian dictionary for Mike Makar. Then he'll show you a letter from the American Society of Pastoral Psychotherapy: "You obviously suffer from compulsive order filling!-and I hope there's no treatment for it!"

I first met this blur of enthusiasm and charm somewhat serendipitously in 1984. Racing into the Village Department Store on Franklin Avenue in Millbrook looking for a new shirt (after another pen had exploded in my pocket during AP class at the Thorne Building), I came upon what seemed to be a sly-by-night bookshop operating in the front corner by the pajamas and thermal underwear. And behind the various cartons-as-bookshelves, homemade shelf units and makeshift display cases, I spotted the smiling

creator of this misplaced literary fantasy world- and couldn't quite imagine what kind of innocent or con man or lunatic or poet would run a bookstore from the corner of a small town department store.

Of course, I was instantly charmed. I bought one book on my way to the shirts in the back of the department store- and then ordered another on the way out (one incidentally that I couldn't get through the SUNY bookstore). Shaking my head and race-walking back up Franklin Avenue, I wondered if he (and the bookshop) just floated down out of the sky under one of Magritte's umbrellas. I had no idea that this most unusual character (out of a lost Dicken's novel?) had been in business for a year- and had already occupied four equally unusual locations.

Born in 1943 to non-fictionalized parents, Scott grew up in Millbrook with two brothers and two sisters. He attended Millbrook School for Boys, and, later, Franklin Pierce College, where he designed his program in Elementary Education, Archaeology and Biology. (Scott patiently explained the connection between the three disciplines for me, but frankly it was too esoteric for my limited mind.) And when a student teaching position metamorphosed into a real job in Winchendon, Massachusetts, he set forth on a cloistered life of ushering elementary school children into the world of books and ideas.

After five years at Winchedon and two more at the Applewild School, however, he found that while 24 hours a day of teaching, coaching, advising, enthralling and expanding young minds was good for the soul, "it was not good for my social life." And thus, discounting Thomas Wolfe's sage advice about never going home again, in 1983 Scott Meyer packed his bags and returned to Millbrook where the bookstore Odyssey formally begins.

With the ample sum of \$10 in his bank account, no place to do business and absolutely no marketing experience to sully his enthusiasm for the Sisyphean task ahead of him, Scott- aka Norman Vincent Peale II- decided to become a bookseller. Calling the invisible shop Merritt Bookstore- his father's middle name which he officially purchased for the staggering sum of \$1 (a check that was never cashed)- he ordered 1000 books on credit from a remainder house and started selling them through magazine ads from his parents' home. "After thirty days I returned the books that hadn't sold and ordered 500 more."

Bolstered by his unprecedented success, in April he went public: two tables (borrowed from the school) placed right in front of John Kading's Corner News Store on Franklin Avenue. By the end of May, however, with those famous northeast spring storms fluttering pages, dappling pristine book covers and damping enthusiasm, he decided that shelter would make good business sense. And suddenly, Eddie Maggiacomo at his Liquor Store on Front Street appeared like a post-modern *dues ex machine* and rented him space next door where he sold the books directly out of the cartons they arrived in. The rental agreement was that Scott would give Eddie 10% of the profits from the book sales. It was a good deal all around. Eddie must have felt rich the extra \$21 in his packet and Scott was ready again to bring the burgeoning business to new heights. This time to the Taylor Oil building, where homemade bookshelves replaced the cartons.

There was no stopping our Horatio Alger now. From Taylor Oil he moved to that magical corner of the Village Department Store where the late Joe Spagnola schooled him in the art of cash flow; and four years later on a sunny Sunday, using grocery carts borrowed from Marona's Market- he transported the

entire business to its own space on North Front Street, a white (actually grey) weathered structure next to the Post Office that bore little resemblance to the beautiful deep-green renovated clapboard building that stands there now.

If I close my eyes and imagine the kind of bookshop where readers and writers of all shapes and sizes would love to spend some idle hours, the single vision that floats across the sky of my mind is Merritt. Not the impressive but corporate latte of a Barnes & Noble superstore. Not the warehouse-like Borders. Not the theme park that Walden has become. Not even the extravagantly literary but excessively stand-offish Rizzoli in Manhattan or the frayed-at-the-edges City Lights in San Francisco.

From the warm serpentine layout of the aisles (wide enough to sit in) to the overstuffed couch (deep enough to lose yourself in a book) to the art gallery upstairs (knee walls like a secret hideaway) to, of course, the thousands of books (something here that is perfect for aisles, couches, hideaways, subways, thruways, hallways, seekers, teachers, overreachers, beachers, and of course, writers seeking readers), Merritt is the kind of welcoming abode you might expect to find in a rural corner of William Butler Yeats' extravagant Byzantium.

Walking into this magical literary space to do the interview for this article, Scott led me (through a wardrobe was it?) to the remarkable cast of characters in this Dutchess community drama: First, of course, was his wife Alison, Scott's boss and the creative energy behind their two executive vice presidents, Laughton, 1, and Schuyler, 5, both of whom may often be found behind the counter monitoring the old man's work habits. Unpacking some books in the aisles was Scott's brother Alan, Merritt's first full-time employee, who started working there seven years ago. In the cluttered office I met Pauline Cummings, Director of Buildings and Grounds, Mollie Olson, Customer Service Chief, Katie Feeks, Head of Spatial Visualization (and Accounts Receivable) and Lori Bennett, chief of Accounts Payable.

Lori, who recently graduated from Marist College-and Merritt-had worked for Scott since 10th Grade. Seven years. A third of her life! Scott says he's been "so blessed" with the local high school students who have worked for him after school and on weekends. The first was the Amazing Aimee Marlow. Then the Luminous Lori. Now there's Literary Libby (Garofalo) and the Supremes: Jennifer Stransky, Amy Olson, and Erin Spagnola.

In an age where it is often considered prudent and wise to live solely for oneself, Scott Meyer's bookshop seems to be a gift to the local community and, in effect, survives by the good graces and support of its friends and neighbors. He believes in-and, what's more, acts upon-the idea that he must give back to the town that has buoyed and supported him all these years. Scott and Alison have made the upstairs art gallery available for community functions- and it was recently announced that Merritt will donate one percent of all purchases to local charities such as Millbrook Rotary, Millbrook Library, Dutchess Outreach, Town of Washington Recreation, George Bird Grinnell American Indian Children's Fund.

And that's not all: in his "free" time, Scott is Chair of the Millbrook Garden day Committee, President of the Town of Washington Historical Society as well as the Town of Washington Business Association, and

a member of Rotary International- and still somehow find time to read a good Jean Craighead George story (another of his writers) to elementary school children around town, put out a quarterly newsletter called Books of Merritt-and actually read a few of the books on his shelves.

It all seems rather idyllic, a reader's and writer's literary fantasy. But even the most romantic among us know that it's unwise to judge a book solely by its cover. While owning a charming bookshop in a Currier and Ives town like Millbrook might sound like a tranquil life full of bonbons and bon mots, in reality small business owners seem to be forever busy dousing bonfires that threaten to turn their dreams into smoke and ash. The recent UPS strike alone cost the store \$13,000. Ask Scott about chains and megastores and the blond eyebrows crush together, his sparkling St. Nick eyes grow as dark and brooding as Jane Eyre's Edward Rochester out on the moor.

During the last few years as profit margins have been cut in half and big bookstore chains have become no longer totally dependent on sales (because they're paid to display books not necessarily sell them), Scott says there seems to be less interest in great books or serious writing- or good, small, service-oriented bookshops. A book has, in too many instances, simply become a product, not a vision of how a man with a passion sets out with \$10 in his pocket and a desire to share his enthusiasm with his friends and neighbors.

Yet, leaving the bookstore after the interview with 15 pages of notes- and a travel book on Zimbabwe (for my wife), a copy of Larry Waterson's wonderful new novel *White Crosses* (for me) and Scott's distinctive voice trailing me out to the car reminding me of the Jane Goodall signing in September and The New Yorker cartoonists in December- I have little doubt that Merritt Books will survive the brush fires of contemporary life.

Just as Christmas is not really about presents (although they are as necessary to the season as books are to a bookstore), Merritt Books is not simply about selling books. It is a non-fiction novel about an aficionado with a passion for the life of words; a timeless book to be visited and re-visited when our nights need light and our days need magic. •