

Blissful Browsing

In my apartment I have arranged all the books I have read in the last two years into three neat piles, just to the right of my battered old sofa. As I finish a book, I add it to one of the piles, and gradually, and satisfyingly, the little towers have grown. I am hoping that within a few months, when I have *ploughed through* (completed) another couple of Penguin Classics, that they will be high enough that I can rest my mid morning malibu mug on them and thus, with typical Scottish thrift, save myself the price of a coffee table.

There is nothing particularly strange about this, for the British are a nation of bibliophiles. We don't just love books though, we love bookshops too and I rarely, and against my better nature, buy a book online. I love to visit bookshops, scan the shelves, run my hands along the bindings, and try each volume out for size and weight before hazarding a purchase. And despite the doomy predictions that the Internet would sound the death knell of the independent bookshop, the species has adapted and survived and even, in a few places, flourished. Hugh Grant's cosily chaotic *Notting Hill* emporium is no romantic invention, such places really do exist, full of dusty tomes, musty odours and charmingly eccentric proprietors.

Britain's most famous bookshop is probably *Foyles* on Charring Cross Road in London. Once notorious for haphazard management and an impossibly chaotic shelf arrangement, it is now thriving; you will be warmly welcomed, decently served and may even be able to find the book you're after. In Hugh Grant's Notting Hill gourmets should pay *Books for Cooks* a visit, while *Tales on Moon Lane* in Herne Hill is the place to head to for children's literature. For travel guides try *Daunt's* in Marleybone and for a manga or comic fix there's *Gosh!* In Bloomsbury.

Outside the capital Britain boasts two bookshop hubs. The more famous is Hay-on-Wye on the Welsh borders, with a hugely popular literary festival ('Woodstock for brains' – Bill Clinton) each summer. This book-lovers paradise offers endless blissful browsing opportunities in the company of literary connoisseurs like self-proclaimed 'King of Wye' Richard Booth. His majesty runs his own bookshop in the town, one of a group of over 30 independent specialist outlets, one of which - The Poetry Bookshop - may be the only one of its kind in the UK. Or anywhere.

The other bookshop mecca is Wigton in Dumfries and Galloway, Scotland's official book town, which now has 14 weird and wonderful examples with delightful names such as *Box of Frogs* (children's books) and *Reading for Lasses* (books for women). Wigton has 6 bookshops on its main street alone for you to dip in and out of and also hosts its own literary festival each September.

These shops hark back to a bygone era of shopkeepers who may not have looked like Hugh Grant but knew about and loved the goods they sold and were not there simply to stuff things into bags and repeat '*arigatou gozaimasu*' 500 times a day. Many owners of the shops mentioned here refuse to sell online at all, as it defeats the object of the exercise – providing the customer with real service, which includes knowledgeable advice, enlightening book related banter and, if you're lucky, chairs and sofas to relax on and a mug of something hot and frothy into the bargain. It's a world away from 1 click shopping. So give Britain's bookshops a try, and start working on that coffee table.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/7598617/Britains-best-independent-bookshops.html>