

The Book of the Self

Craig Jordan-Baker

Lecturer in Creative Writing, University for the Creative Arts, Faulkner Road, Farnham, GU9 7DS, UK

Those kinds of spines do not show wear and tear. They do not show if the book was opened and left perhaps on an old desk, on a train, upon the grass. So I'm suspicious of that kind of spine, that kind of book, because you don't know who has read it before. Sometimes, you can't even tell if it has been read at all.

I was in some village or other when I found it. It seems appropriate that it should have been in an antiquarian bookstore, but I find that what's appropriate is not always true. But, let us say it was in an antiquarian bookstore. And let us say the village was Stammer. The owner was a middle aged woman with hair like a Turner seascape. There was wood everywhere and the place was pervaded by a sense of learned chaos; this is the primary marketing strategy of the antiquarian and rare book shop, you see. In places such as these, the impression of eccentricity is paramount. The wood is to have that kind of brown lustre, that dirt and oil lacquer, that sheen of tobacco and time. Yes, I've seen this kind of unique place before.

I asked for the philosophy section. The owner nodded at me as if to say, 'That's right, asking for the philosophy section is exactly what you should say'. She gestured up the central spiral staircase and told me that they didn't have much by way of philosophy, but what was there was between religion and the esoteric and occult. So left after self-help and languages. Across to the back of the mezzanine and yes, between religion and the esoteric and occult. The dust comes at no extra cost.

If the woman had been friendlier, I might have done my bit about the arbitrary and unwarranted separation of religion and philosophy. But on looking into her dyspeptic eyes, I imagined she might be the kind to argue that it was just as arbitrary and unwarranted to separate philosophy from the esoteric and occult, and I wouldn't stand for that. I sagely nodded my thanks and mounted the wrought iron steps to the mezzanine.

Remembering now, I believe it was a yellow book. I hate yellow, you know. But it was yellow, in my memory. This is not to say I hated the book, or that I hate the memory, but still, my hatred of the colour attracted me to it. I had been snuffling around

the philosophy/religion/esoteric and occult section for twenty minutes and had cradled in my arms several bold sounding books. I blush to enumerate their titles for fear of pomposity, but needless to say these recondite tomes were cast off when I saw that yellow spine sticking from the corner. I took it. I opened it.

Desperation, need, longing, fascination, erection, nausea, nostalgia, guilt, affection, ecstasy, melancholy, malaise, gravity, sympathy, empathy, awe, hope, happiness, gladness, sadness, suspicion, contrition, ruth. I closed the book shut.

At the counter, I held out a ruddy wrinkled note. The owner nodded toward the book cradled in my arm. She said she had to check the price.

‘I don’t want change. Just keep the note,’ I said. ‘It will be more than enough’. She pulled the note from my outstretched hand. ‘These are going out of circulation,’ she said, holding the paper to the light.

‘Yes.’ I said, ‘I know’.

‘But when do they go out of circulation?’ She jabbed the question at me, and I couldn’t help but feel a little responsible for the fact the note was destined to become non-legal tender.

‘I’m not quite sure,’ I said, ‘Sometime next year I think. I’m not sure.’

She continued to inspect the currency distastefully.

‘Though,’ I hesitated, ‘it is legal tender now though, that much is sure.’

‘And you don’t want change?’

‘No. No I don’t need change.’

‘What’s in the book? You haven’t hidden anything in there, have you?’

‘What could I have hidden in there? It’s just a subject I find interesting. I’m keen to start reading it as soon as possible, so...’ And here, I gestured toward the door.

‘From the esoteric and occult section?’ she said, her seascape bobbing on her head.

I paused, considering a rebuff. ‘Somewhere near there, yes.’

Now, I consider myself a singular sort of person, as singular as the sheen of tobacco and time, perhaps. And it’s consistent with my nature that I’m particularly fond of a pleasure withheld. A pleasure withheld is a pleasure sharpened. So, once I had crossed the threshold into my home, I felt the gnawing glitch of expectation in my bowels.

I would place the book down upon the heavy cardboard box that acted as my living room table. I would leave the light off and let the dim afternoon fizzle into the curtained room. I would make tea and stew it until little islands of tannin rose to the surface. I would be patient. I would enjoy my patience. I would muse on that fact that I was a singular sort of person, like an antiquarian or rare bookstore. I would watch the book from the corner of my eye, unflinching.

In the living room it was darkish, but the book still blazed in the darkishness. From the darkishness came the book, and placed itself into my palms. Its title, eponymous, called out from the stairwell of my mind. The book, with its sickening colour, quivered in my lap. But it was darkish now, turning darker. I opened the book, though there were no words, not yet. So I reached for the light and the light came on. And out came my text.

Reader, it happened again. All of it, again. I shut the book and turned its spine towards me. And I was suspicious then, because I didn’t know who had read it before. I couldn’t even tell if it had been read at all.