

SO THROW THE BOOK AT ME

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The way people talk about independent bookstores these days, it seems a moral imperative to support them. The problem is, we don't have a great track record living up to moral imperatives. There's a more self-interested reason in my case, so if you don't mind, I'd like to share it.

Imagine a street in Houston. It's called Bissonet. During grad school, I lived not far from there. More or less across from one another, there are two bookstores. The Brazos Bookstore is one of the hubs of intellectual life, a venue for readings, its shelves stocked with titles equally brilliant and obscure. Whenever a professor mentioned a book in class, you could be sure it sat waiting at the Brazos Bookstore. I loved the place, but I was always a bit in awe of it, too. I entered with a certain amount of trepidation, like it was a museum dedicated to the Book. (There was a great selection of Magazines, too, but that's another story.)

Across the street is a place called Murder by the Book. Where the Brazos Bookstore was white and bright, an airy, modern showplace, Murder by the Book couldn't help being dark inside. Where the characters in a Brazos novel might suffer at length from ennui, at Murder by the Book the ennui found expression in an axe murdering or a shooting. Which is why, after dutifully buying some virtuous literary books at Brazos, I'd head across the street for some fun.

Looking over my bookshelves today, I'm surprised how many authors I first discovered at Murder by the Book. I could probably reconstruct their entire International shelf circa 2001 from what I have on hand. They gave me Georges Simenon, James Lee Burke, Ian Rankin, Reginald Hill and I don't know how many others. While I was traveling on the West Coast, a bookseller tried to turn me onto this "hot new writer" no one had heard about yet. Who was it? Ken Bruen. I'd picked up his *White Trilogy* at Murder by the Book a year prior. (This particular

bookseller actually credited the Murder by the Book newsletter, too, astonishing me with my local bookstore's reach.)

I've never had a relationship with a big box store. I had a relationship with Murder by the Book. Even though I left Houston in 2006, whenever I go back, I make a point of dropping by.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not "against" the bookstore chains. I'm happy books are being sold, just like I'm happy to find a Starbucks when I'm on the road. But if there's a choice I'd prefer local coffee, roasted in house, by people who'd rather be right than rich. I'm the same way with books. Between Amazon and Barnes & Noble, I'm always telling myself I have the genre covered. Then I walk into an independent mystery bookstore and discover something I'd never heard of before. I didn't like Murder by the Book because it was independent. I liked it because it was better. More books, more interesting books, stocked by people who didn't need a checklist to tell them what was good. People who *wrote* the checklists themselves.

The crime genre is fortunate to have stores like this around. As a tribute to all that Murder by the Book has meant to my own reading and writing, I couldn't help including them in *Back on Murder*. A crime novel set in Houston could hardly do otherwise. *

Be sure to read:

Back on Murder

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For more, visit:

www.backonmurder.com