The Antiquarian

Penguin Folio Edition

The Antiquarian

Julian Thorne is a historian of early print culture and the author of three acclaimed studies on typographical history. He lives with his family in Oxford, England.

Praise for The Antiquarian

A Sunday Times Bestseller
Winner of the Bibliographical Heritage Award

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The Antiquarian

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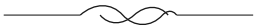

Julian Thorne

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For all the booksellers (especially Amanda)

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Introduction

Three Lives & Company is a 650-square-foot bookshop on a corner in New York City's West Village. Along the hand-carved shelves and glowing under Jolly Rancher–green lamps, there's fiction and non, frontlist and backlist, picture books and cookbooks, history and travel, queer and poetry, art and architecture, *Granta* and graphic novels, *The Paris Review* and all things New York. The dog treats are behind the counter.

Toby, the owner, sports a soft gray beard and beanie, bodysurfs in the morning Atlantic, walks into Manhattan from his Brooklyn brownstone (no wonder he's so skinny), and drinks a Balzacian amount of coffee. Inside the shop (please don't call it a "store," which the booksellers think sounds too commercial), he's constantly layering, pruning, and rearranging. The colors. The scale. The feeling. No stacks too tall or too short or too crooked. Maybe it's all the coffee. Or maybe it's a family thing. His brother, Madison, is among the world's foremost garden designers.

Over on the lone stool, you'll probably see Abel, one of the regulars. You might also spot Camille, who always remembers to ask about ailing grandmothers or soon-to-be-graduating nephews, and Greg, a writer who could be mistaken for a rugby player.

The Manuscript Courier

Every morning before the shop opens on Greenwich Avenue, a familiar rumble heralds the arrival of the parcels. The heavy cardboard cartons, banded with reinforced tape and smelling faintly of transit hubs and damp asphalt, carry the latest printings from printers in Tennessee and Pennsylvania.

To untie these parcels is to participate in an unbroken ceremony five centuries old. Inside each package rests the work of living minds, cast into movable type, pressed onto archival sheets, bound between boards, and transported across oceans and continents to find a solitary reader in an armchair.

1.

Benjamin Franklin

When we think of a bookstore, we tend to imagine rows of books, neatly arranged titles standing in the window, and quiet browsing. It's fair to say that Benjamin Franklin's bookshop wasn't anything of the sort. Inside his teeming brick building were hulking wood-framed printing presses, fat kegs of ink, cases of type (he used Caslon but preferred Baskerville), reams of paper, pages dangling from the ceiling to dry, and heaps of rags. Philadelphians came to check their mail. Boys carried off stacks of newspapers.

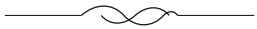
Franklin's shop wasn't called Benjamin Franklin's Bookstore, Ben's Books, or Franklin's Fine Finds. In fact, the word *bookstore* didn't yet exist. The concept of a bookstore—a retail outlet selling primarily books—was still embryonic. Yet Franklin was definitely a bookseller. Teachers bought schoolbooks from him. Ministers picked up religious texts. Almost everyone wanted his famous almanac. He sent Homeric poetry, political tracts, and books and pamphlets on a mind-boggling range of subjects to colonial outposts near and far. His job was never singular—or boring. He was a shopkeeper who sold books (retail and wholesale); a printer who pro-

duced books; an author who wrote books; and a publisher who financed them.

By the time James Franklin opened his printshop in 1717, the Boston book market hadn't matured much. A great fire had swept through the city in 1711, burning down the Towne House and many bookselling businesses along with it. Franklin joined James in 1718 and rather enjoyed printing, reading, editing, delivering his brother's fledgling newspaper, and typesetting—a complicated job that involved arranging the letters backward. The real problem was James. He was ill-tempered. Violent, even.

Living in Boston had its delights, namely "access to better books." Franklin was also writing during this time, and he submitted essays to the very newspaper he helped print, *The New-England Courant*. Since James would never knowingly publish anything penned by his little brother, Franklin pseudonymously slipped his pieces under the printshop door, having altered his handwriting and adopted an alter ego, a minister's widow named Silence Dogood. James was impressed and ultimately published fourteen of "her" essays.

The Fragrance of Paper



There is no smell quite like the interior of an old book repository: vanilla, almond, lignified cellulose, and the dry, powdery dust of two hundred years of undisturbed binding glue. It is the signature aroma of human remembrance.

2.

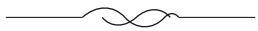
The Old Corner

On the corner of Washington and School Streets in Boston stands a modest two-story brick structure with a pitched gambrel roof. In the nineteenth century, beneath the sign of Ticknor & Fields, this corner became the intellectual parlor of American letters.

Nathaniel Hawthorne would sit by the green baize table near the window, quietly observing visitors while pretending to inspect the latest London imports. Ralph Waldo Emerson frequently dropped in to converse with James T. Fields, the charming publisher who understood that selling poetry required as much entrepreneurial energy as importing West Indian sugar.

Fields cultivated an atmosphere where literature felt like an ongoing conversation rather than a commercial transaction. His authors did not merely deliver manuscripts; they took tea, debated metaphysics, and gossiped about their rivals across the Atlantic.

The Bookstore Book



This is a book about bookshops. It's merely one of many. Fans over at Goodreads have compiled a list of 352 of them. Christopher Morley's novels about Roger and Helen Mifflin are there, as is *84, Charing Cross Road* (my personal favorite). Penguin Random House has an entire webpage devoted to "romances set in bookstores." *The Sentence* is a spooky novel set in a bookstore and written by a woman who owns a bookstore.

When I told people that I was writing this book, the most common response (other than "When will you be finished?") was, in one way or another, about *You've Got Mail*. "Have you seen it?" (Yes.) "Are you going to write about it?" (Yes.) "Maybe you can interview Tom Hanks?" (Maybe.) Aside from Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan, Hugh Grant (*Notting Hill*) and Audrey Hepburn (*Funny Face*) both play memorable (and remarkably good-looking) booksellers. Both find love rather than rare first editions.

To be sure, these films are sappy and tropey. And many of the books about bookstores can easily be dismissed as navel-gazing à la Hollywood's propensity to make movies

about Hollywood. But there's a reason why screenwriters and book writers love setting their stories in bookstores. They can be romantic spaces, places full of discovery, of chance, of wonder. They can be community spaces, activist spaces, political spaces. And they can be refuges, places to lose and find oneself.

Acknowledgments

Everyone on this list really deserves to be here. Thank you:

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Toby Cox (*humble giant*)

James Daunt (*bookselling wizard*)

Joshua Clark Davis (*kindhearted source sharer*)

Marlene and Tom England (*courageous booksellers*)

Alexis Farabaugh (*deft designer*)

Jenny Feder (*the founder*)

Jen Fisher (*sidewalk spirit*)

Amanda Friss (*everything*)

Rose and Mike Friss (*loving parents*)

Notes

Introduction

5 **Americans purchased roughly**: John B. Thompson, *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Plume, 2012), 31.

5 **there were just 5,591**: US Census Bureau, *County Business Patterns 1993* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1995).

6 **Pulitzer Prize–winning novelist**: Michael Cunningham, *The Hours* (New York: Picador, 2000), 227–28.

6 **Sociologists have found**: Joanna Sikora, M. D. R. Evans, and Jonathan Kelley, "Scholarly Culture: How Books in Adolescence Enhance Adult Literacy," *Social Science Research* 77 (January 2019): 1–15.

7 **Three Lives has never**: Jenny Feder, interview by the author, November 2022.

Chapter 1: Benjamin Franklin

15 **Inside his teeming brick building**: J. A. Leo Lemay, *The Life of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 84.

18 **Franklin joined James in 1718**: Walter Isaacson, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 21–24.

19 **Silence Dogood**: Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography and Other Writings*, ed. Ormond Seavey (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1993), 14.

Chapter 2: The Old Corner

37 **Ticknor & Fields**: Warren S. Tryon, *Parnassus Corner: A Life of James T. Fields* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), 55–62.

42 **Nathaniel Hawthorne would sit**: Annie Fields, *Biographical Notes and Personal Sketches* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1881), 102.

A Note on the Type

The body text of this book was set in Fournier MT Pro (rendered here via OpenType fbb and Cormorant Garamond). It is clean, light, and uses greater contrast and vertical emphasis than old-style types. In 1924, Monotype created this font based on the work of Pierre-Simon Fournier (1712–1768), who was a French engraver and typefounder. In 1736, he opened his own typefoundry in Paris and produced many of the earliest known transitional types of the eighteenth century, combining old-style and modern serif elements of typography. He also crafted many decorative typographic ornaments, which were strong examples of the rococo style of the time.